The Folds of an Institution

a conversation between
Greg Sholette,
Cesare Pietroiusti &
Brett Bloom
Brett:

Let’s start this off with a discussion about working with institutions that can be seen as oppressive as opposed to “dropping out” of the art world. Cesare, an important thing you have mentioned in previous exchanges of ours was working in the “folds” of an institution—finding a way to create autonomy in what could be an oppressive structure. Do you want to recount the story you told us of the exhibition where you used your invitation to in turn invite many others to contribute?

Cesare:

I think that a critical artistic practice doesn’t take any advantage from a frontal confrontation with an oppressive institution. The strategy of complaining of being marginalized, or not considered, is also a losing strategy, because somehow it is too visible, too “declamative.” I am more interested in strategies that are more lateral. A “fold” in a system can be seen as an interruption of its internal order, an irregularity in its rigid functioning. Artists can be flexible (easily moving and restructuring) and hopefully smart enough, to exploit the system’s folds, and work within (or even thanks to) them.

In 1996 I was invited to the XII Quadriennale in Rome, a national survey show of “emerging artists.” The Quadriennale is an old and bureaucratic institution (still working according to the rules established in the 1930s during the fascist period) whose curators are nominated by politicians, and whose cultural references are quite provincial. When I was invited, it seemed to me that the exhibition had no cultural content but the list of the 160 invited artists itself – with all the subsequent polemics about who-is-in-and-who-is-out. At that time I was working with a group of artists from Rome (the “Giochi del Senso e/o Nonsenso”), and together we decided to enlarge my invitation to the show to whoever wanted. Everyone willing to exhibit an image, a text, or anything else, was invited to do so at no charge during the two months of the XII Quadriennale. More than 250 pieces were collected and exhibited. The invitation to participate was passed on by word of mouth, through some newspapers and with a notice posted in the exhibition space itself. Such a project could not be accepted by the institution, but it was possible because of the general disorganization (basically, the day before the opening we “occupied” the space that was supposed to be that of the publisher of the catalogue) and the lack of understanding on the part of the curators – the chief curator realized what was happening a week after the opening, and when she called me and asked me to close the space, it was very difficult for her to exercise what, at that point, would have been evident censorship, because it would only have created more visibility around our project. In other words we exploited the folds of this rigid institution and made our project “evident” when it was, for them, too late to exercise any censorship. A big discussion arose and, in the Italian cultural scene, our project is known for having been an effective challenge to institutional rigidity. Let’s say that refusing aporia to be part of that show would have been in a sense more coherent, but definitely less effective.

Greg:

Institutions are us. They determine our wages, track our debt, and brand our clothing. Still others collate this information and sell it to other institutions that in turn develop marketing strategies to target our “individual” needs all over again. To my way of thinking the standard opposition between institution and individual is no more. Instead I prefer the way Giles Deleuze describes the current state of affairs in his essay “Post-Script on the Societies of Control” - “We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “individuals,” and mass, samples, data, markets, or “banks.” Deleuze goes on to argue that unlike the disciplinary mechanisms of the 19th and 20th centuries - schools, factories, prisons and we might include here the museum in certain instances - the new system of control operates through a generalized form of administration so diffuse that it is difficult to locate or represent. If we accept this depiction, it requires us to re-evaluate not only the shape of institutional boundaries but our potential opposition to them. This revision is especially necessary if, as Deleuze and other theorists indicate, the institutional border runs directly through each of us, penetrating even our cherished sense of autonomy.

None of this implies that these mechanisms of control operate unopposed. For me the difference comes down to accepting the articulation as given or actively producing points of dis-articulation within the terrain. In other words, we can choose to comply or instead to redirect, by hook or by crook so to speak, portions of these larger institutional structures for radically different ends. This re-direction might seek to re-distribute institutional resources as in the Quadriennale action that Cesare describes or it might link artists to issues of economic, legal and social justice. Here I am thinking of some of the work that REPOHistory has produced over the last eleven years. In practical terms however, these sundry actions might be confrontational and have a limited but precise target, or they might infect the “folds” that Cesare has discussed, folds that are inevitably produced by any institutional structure. In the long run it is this latter practice that is potentially most interesting but also one that obligates a state of near blindness by those sent to burrow into the depths of the institution. The down side is that in the dark it is hard to tell the difference between a genuine mole and a mere rodent.

Brett:

I think that if you spend too much time working in opposition to institutions that you always do so according to their rules. They determine what is focussed on and what is important. This isn’t very interesting. The dichotomy just reinforces the power and cultural authority that the institutions have. The tricky thing is to pose a systemic challenge without there being a recognition of what is really happening. There are also a lot of people deciding to work a lot less within institutions and engage things on their own. This can only be a healthy step.
My interest in helping Groups and Space get going was making a place where people who are working in independent and autonomous capacities could get direct information on what others like them were doing around the world - to speed this process up. Mainstream publications do not function in this way at all. They tend to reduce everything to the same flat, one month floor show without really articulating where ideas are coming from and the larger context they exist in.

Cesare, another thing you mentioned in a previous exchange was the "self-confirming" process of institutions. This is a really nice observation. I have never heard it put exactly this way. Could you explain this again?

Cesare:

I think that a good way to define an "institution" is to outline the fact that most of its efforts go in the direction of a self-confirmation of the institution itself. Therefore its activities will be, to a large extent, a "celebration," a continuous effort to give an image of success, of richness, of effectiveness, of power. It's obvious that any critical position will be seen as a menace; and, as I am convinced that the artist's position is basically a critical one, there will be an inevitable contradiction between the artist and the institution. Having said that, I also think that not all the institutions are the same, nor that all their activities have always the same character. It's true that the institution can have the "power," so to say, of accepting and neutralizing even critical positions (making them become "trends" in the art market), but I do think that "institutional critique" is more interesting than neo-expressionist painting or sleek corporate photography, because in any case its content (especially in the beginning) provoke the public to pose questions. And then, when it has become a successful trend, no big drama. I think it just means that time has come, for another critical position to appear.

Greg:

Cesare's definition that a large institution is one that celebrates itself is wonderful and suggests a string of metaphors - since celebration often involves fire works and spectacle. Perhaps we can differentiate between various species of institutional power by the degree of visibility a museum or university or a biennial can achieve and how that is many times more intense than what an Oreste or REPOhistory or Temporary Services can achieve. However, light requires dark. And this requirement is met by the tens of thousands of unrecognized artists, the amateurs and the "Sunday painters" who make up what I call the art world's version of dark matter. Nevertheless, it is the tremendous gravity of this unseen creative effort that prevents the art industry and its hierarchies of value from flying apart. What is different today is the gradual lightening of this dark matter. (According to the 1990 US Census only 24 percent of self-described artists said they could actually make a living at their profession. Naturally a key difference between art and science is that nobody in the art world is actually looking for this "dark matter.")

I think this illumination is occurring for several reasons. One is the erosion of high modernism and its tenant of the artistic genius. This allows more room for other kinds of creative work - but not a lot really. Rather what is most curious is the role that digital technologies are playing in this development. Without assigning an epochal status to this shift, it seems clear that the Internet, email and even cell phone networks are opening up organizational and representational possibilities not previously possible. (Can I suggest that these technologies are helping to gather the folds?) Today, what was in the shadows of large institutional structures is suddenly more visible and not only to these centers of power. Those of us that are working in the folds are emerging into a field of light that is permitting us to see each other. Perhaps this even constitutes a new visualization of politics. Nevertheless, there has already been the development of numerous alternative networks for the distribution of work, of ideas, of strategies. The potential raised by this luminous space is exciting as well as dangerous since visibility means just that: we emerge into the scopic field of full-blow institutional mechanisms. Of course it will be interesting to see how the institutional center with its need for routines and control will respond to the warmth of this "light" this time around.

Cesare:

At the same time I actually see that the art system is in perfect shape, that its traditional ways, including biennials with big prizes (that were mostly abolished, during the 1970s and early 1980s) are expanding all over the globe that, parallel to the diffusion of computers and electronic data, there are more and more contemporary art books and magazines and catalogues in paper, that the star system more and more seems to create an available desire for any area of "dark matter" in the art field... Like Greg, I think it's crucial to work on the channels of communication, and to problematize the generally accepted equivalence between possessing such channels and the power to legitimate a certain artistic production. One of the main goals that Oreste has had - for example in projecting the series of initiatives within the 1999 Venice Biennale - was to create a useful net of communication, of exchange of experiences and of resources among initiatives, groups, individuals. I can't say how successful we were or we will be. After a few years of attempts, however, I think that the "generalist" idea of creating "the" alternative network is beautifully generous (for the ones who really want to try and do it), but also ideological and, in the end, probably bound to fail. I think that the attitude of "replacing" a system we don't like with another one can be dangerous in the sense that one can just end up (beyond any good intention) replicating the same rules, games of power, exclusion etc.

The best things that have come out from the Oreste experience are something, I would say, quite banal: small groups' relationships (on both personal and working level), among people who would have probably had less chance to meet. And most of this is somehow outside of any control, happening outside the boundaries that Oreste has constituted (the web site, the residencies, the public meetings,
the books etc.). I like Greg's point about self-recognition, the possibility of knowing about each other's work, ideas, etc. This is very important; I think that Oreste's contribution has been that of not only exploiting the technologies that makes this easier today, but also of stressing the importance of the actual personal face-to-face meeting, talking, but also eating and living together - the residency as a model for an extended time experience, the attempt to combine existential with poetic positions (the "real" with the "symbolic"), something that usual "restrictions" within the art system do not give as a possibility.

**Brett:**

This is nice. I also agree that it is an abuse trying to replace one set of power relations with another. This won't do us any good. The Internet is often said to be a place where this can really happen... that we can truly challenge abusive power and create democracy. This has happened, but in a really limited capacity.

But, it is important to always point out that the Internet was created by the U.S. military. Its very foundations are not democratic and are meant to insure that the status quo persists (in the case of a global nuclear war). Businesses very quickly colonized cyber-space and made it a part of the mainstream. However, decentralized media groups like the Indy Media Center are a very interesting phenomenon in terms of organizing an alternative, this case, to mainstream global corporate media. The Internet has created a million "folds" in globalized culture in which we can act and build our independence.

**Greg:**

I think it is worth adding that the entire history of art including its many technologies, from frescoes to technology and beyond, were always at the disposal of the church, the state, the police and so forth. The Internet is no different. But, to pick up on something I was saying a few minutes ago... I alluded to past attempts at creating an alternative network that linked groups and individuals who were not central to the art world structure with artists. One of these attempts was the mission of an artist group I was involved with beginning in 1980. Political Art Documentation and Distribution or PAD/D sought to create an archive documenting the scattered and autonomous activities of individual artists and art groups with an explicit interest in social or political change. More than just collecting the work, PAD/D hoped to re-distribute this material using its newsletter and using university galleries and community centers, to inspire and educate other artists and activists. This desire to produce a living archive that would be a tool for visualizing oppositional works was ultimately hampered by the lack of a viable means of distribution and this is what the new technologies appear to offer.

Today, the PAD/D Archive is now part of the Museum of Modern Art's library (in NYC). And while the PAD/D Archive is now being used by scholars to revise the art historical picture of post war art, it is not the activist, organizing tool we in PAD/D once hoped it would be. The groups mission statement as it appeared in its newsletter "Upfront" in February of 1981 stated that "[PAD/D] can not serve as a means of advancement within the art world structure of museums and galleries. Rather, we have to develop new forms of distribution economy as well as art..." One way that PAD/D sought to develop this new form of distribution economy was to seek out actual alliances - often temporary and sometimes contentious - between socially engaged artists on the one hand and organized Left political movements on the other. And not only PAD/D was attempting this, other small art organizations such as Group Material and Carnival Knowledge were making similar connections between themselves and non-art institutions and activists.

What happened in my opinion by the end of the 80s was this: the art world selected a few, individual artists making "political art" or "art with social content" and set about legitimating them within the museum and within the art historical canon. Meanwhile, the broad base of such activity that had led to the very possibility of this recognition was thrust back into darkness, a darkness I should add that made us invisible not just to the institutional center but also each other. It is apparent that today a similar kind of cross-over phenomenon in which artists move away from a strictly art world context and into an activist or autonomous mode, is taking place. This new activism is most visible in the WTO counter-actions in various international cities. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have even described these new activities as "Nomadic Revolutionaries." What one finds is the participation of academically trained artists working beside "non" professionals and political activists all involved in transforming collective dissent into an energetic and pleasurable carnival. Let me repeat that it is invigorating to see this cross-over activity happening and perhaps this time, thanks to the self-awareness and cleverness Cesare describes as well as the increased visibility and networking potential afforded by new technologies, things will go differently.

*This is a reconstruction of a conference call between Greg Sholette (REPoiristory), Cesare Pietrocinii (Nomads + Residents, and Oreste) and Brett Bloom (Temporary Structures and Groups and Spaces): The conversation originally appeared in the Groups and Spaces e-zine in July, 2001.*
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