Lindsey Sharman: We would like to talk about New Institutionalism, a term borrowed from economics and sociology, that became popular during the last decade to classify a certain type of curatorial practice, institutional reform and critical debate concerned with challenging the art institutions. It was a response to artistic practices that have questioned the institutional, programming and staffing structures; it’s distribution mechanism and marketing strategies and even the need of the institutions existence to be a mediator for the visual arts. With that in mind, what kind of curatorial projects’ have you seen lately, that you consider interesting examples of this idea of New Institutionalism?

Paul O’Neill: Well, the problem with the New Institutionalism as a paradigm, if you are setting up that there is a paradigm shift in the last, say, 10, 15 years, with people like Maria Lind, Charles Esche, Katrin David, in relatively small institutions, is that they all have left. So as a paradigm it only existed for a very, very short period of time in relation to the specific individual curators who were responsible for coming up with that term, but also rethinking what the institution could look like. So, for Charles Esche, in Rooseum in Malmo, thinking about the institution as a laboratory, as much as an educational institution, as much as an exhibiting space. Maria Lind - at the Kunstverein in Munich - was thinking about the kind of everyday nature of the institution, so it became continually activated with the presence of different and divergent publics, and making the archive more overtly public, in the entrance of the museum for example. And then, someone like Katrin David, that only lasted a year in Witte de With, where she was curating primarily a contemporary Arab artists’ program.

I think the notion of the institutional critique, from the position of the curator, is a by product of that internalization of the modus operandi of the institutional critique; self-reflectivity, self-critique, and becoming part of the way in which the institution in itself promotes itself externally. And I see that drive towards New Institutionalism, from the curatorial perspective, as being because of that, or continu-
These curators have now moved into larger institutions. How do you react to this flow toward the institution or toward bureaucracies?

PO: I think any self-organization is also a self-institution, so I think that the possibility of being outside. Somehow you know the Dadaists really didn't exist outside, they thought they were existing outside and that they ultimately could break down the walls of the institution, the museum without walls for example. But they never really existed outside, because, in order to exist and to acquire, gather and facilitate political agency, they have to rely on certain figures within the art world that would be managed within the more dominant cultural institution of the time – critics and writers. Anyway that doesn't really answer your question, and to go back to what I was saying any self organization is in itself, a self institution but it is about how it institutes itself, and how it constitutes itself at a particular moment without becoming completely bogged down in the administrative mechanisms that enable it to sustain itself and continue etc.

There was a moment, again fairly recently I'd say within the last 10 years, where the notion of the self organization as a kind of counter organization, or a counter institution, was quite popular, and you know even looking at many publications such as the SUPERFLEX publication on self organization or Maria Lind's book Taking the Matter Into Common Hands. There is a certain ubiquity of certain collectives that are represented by a particular discursive shift, such as Raqs Media Collective or 16 Beaver (Studio) in New York or the Copenhagen Free University. Some self organizations I believe employ the idea of self organization as an alternative conduit to a particular art market, and you could call it the “curatorial art market” for example, or the “biennial art market”, or the “discursive art market.” Meaning that they are facilitated and accommodated within an art discourse, if not within art markets, where exchange value is based on capital or how a piece of art may be sold. That is one of the most paradigmatic shifts for me in the 1990; is that to acquire value within the art world, is not necessarily to acquire monetary value, but to acquire cultural representation, representational economies. I think that self organizations were certainly apart of that. I mean how many cultural discourses were created in the 1990’s? It was endless, and this is certainly along side the proliferation of biennials, and the proliferation of smaller biennials, the proliferation of smaller institutions, the emergence of larger institutions; I mean Tate Modern only...
opened in 2000 which is only 10 years ago, yet it seems like it’s been there forever. Other institutions, which have had difficulty in accommodating that shift, that discursive shift, the shift from practice to discourse. Many institutions have been left behind, such as MOMA, the Guggenheim; they look lazy, boring, kind of like dead institutions.

**LS:** In reference to your exhibition, Coalesce (2005), London. How did the decision of creating 3 years: foreground, underground and background have an impact on or changed the demographics of the public who visited the exhibition? Did this make it more accessible?

**PO:** I think that they are all very different projects, they all came with their own concrete publics and their own abstract publics. There were certain people who attended the gallery program at Redux, (London) or attended the gallery program at Smart Project Space (in Amsterdam), or the gallery program at Sligo (The Model Project Space in Sligo, Ireland) so that’s kind of a concrete public. Then there is an abstract public, which is the idea of publicity that you’re trying to produce, enable or sustain, within the exhibition form; and maybe speculating on what that could look like. So for me there are these two tracks, there would be a fast track and slow track, it’s important to think about, “is it possible to have a populist exhibition?” But a populist exhibition that’s not actually curtailed by it’s own popularity. For example, Coalesce at Smart was a really popular show, it was full of kids all the time, and had all that kind of vibrancy to it. But, at the same time there were very serious moments within it, in terms of discussions we had, performances that we had, and also some work was very serious. It plays off that, because of its dichotomies, in a sense. I would be very resistant to the desire to really think through the generation of new audiences, and to evaluate who they might be. I’ve been very resistant to the “social engineering drive” within the cultural sector, particularly within the private and public section in the UK.

**Captions**


2 Paul O’Neil describing Coalesce to students of the Postgraduate Program in Curating during his November 2010 talk at White Space: Office for Curating

**Notes**


boundaries. This exploration may take a number of media, approaches and forms, from curatorial projects and art-making, to discursive events, writing or lecture presentations. Paul explores notions of exhibition-making as a form of collaborative artistic practice with multiple actors and agencies at work together.

**Marina Lopes** Coelho was born in São Paulo. She lives, studies and works in Zurich. Trained as a graphic designer at the Faculdade de Belas Artes de São Paulo, she has worked several years in design studios and publishers. Focusing later in photography, Marina has developed her career showing her work in some exhibitions in Brazil and has published the book Atrevida with DBA-Dorea Books and Art. Her interest in art goes beyond her photographic production, having staged in Venice Peggy Guggenheim Collection and worked as a producer of exhibitions at Galeria Leme, in São Paulo. She has graduated with a Master of Advanced Studies in Curating. Currently she is director of the Kunsthalle Sao Paolo.

**Lindsey V. Sharman** was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (CA). Sharman has studied art history and curating in Canada, England, Austria and Switzerland (ZHdK, www.curating.org). Most recently, Sharman was appointed to a research position with the University of Calgary as curator of art for The Founders Gallery at The Military Museums where she explores contemporary issues surrounding art and conflict.

**Corinne Isabelle** Rinaldis grew up in Italy and the Italian part of Switzerland. She has studied sculpture, acting and interior design and is now living in Zürich, she graduated in Master of Advanced Studies in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK and is currently working at Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.