

“The term was snapped out of the air”

An Interview with Jonas Ekeberg

Describing the genesis of the term *New Institutionalism* Jonas Ekeberg emphasizes its historical specificity and reflects on conflicts and potentials that arose with the term’s publicity as well as the social condition of experimental institutions in general and the changing characteristics of curating.

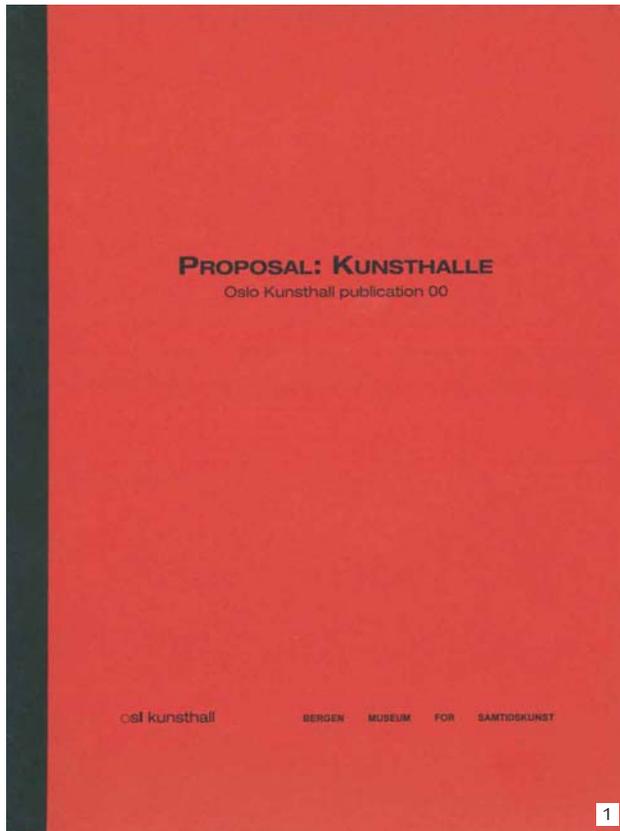
Lucie Kolb & Gabriel Flückiger: Could you mention an example from your own practice, or something that you observed, that was symptomatic for what you called New Institutionalism?

Jonas Ekeberg: First of all, let’s position New Institutionalism historically and try to describe it briefly. Even if the art institution has fostered alternative exhibitions since the Salon des Refusés, it was not until the sixties that the politics of exhibition making and the power of the institution were questioned and discussed on a more systematic and critical level. After the politicized seventies and the return to painting in the eighties, it was the nineties that saw the advent of the curator as a seminal figure in contemporary art. This came out of necessity; new project spaces, biennials and art centers sprung up all over Europe as the attention of the art world darted back and forth across the continent—first it was the YBAs, then it was Glasgow, for a while it was the Nordic Countries, then the Soros centers made an impact in Eastern Europe and so on and so forth. Contemporary art meanwhile was transformed by neo-conceptual and social practices; art, theory and politics were mixed, as were the formerly distinct roles of the artist, the critic and the curator. I would say it was a good moment for contemporary art in Europe. Out of necessity, some of these agents of the art of the nineties took the initiative to establish new art institutions while others were asked to direct programs in already established institutions. The most interesting of these curator-directors saw the possibility of transforming the art institution in the image of the new art. This was only logical. How long could they go on struggling to represent unrepresentable art? Why not simply have the art institution follow the artists? If the artists were doing work in the streets, then the institution should be on the

streets. If the artists were critical of the conservative structure of the institution, why not change that structure? Add to this the political and activist impulse that affected the art scene as the counter-globalization movement grew in visibility and importance. This was another important impetus that spurred the development of New Institutionalism. In fact, out of this grew two different strands of New Institutionalism, one aesthetical and one activist. When it comes to my own engagement with this, it was manifest in four different projects. Firstly, I started the project space Oslo Kunsthall in the year 2000. The name suggests an established institution, but we were situated in a garage and questioned what a Kunsthalle should be in the 21st century. Secondly, I was the first curator at the Office for Contemporary Art Norway in 2002. Together with director Ute Meta Bauer and co-curator Christiane Erhardter I worked on establishing OCA as a new kind of cultural exchange institution, one that was not geared towards promotion but towards engaging in current artistic and societal discourses. It was for OCA I edited the volume on New Institutionalism where the term was introduced. Thirdly, I curated the 50th anniversary exhibition for The National Touring Exhibitions in Norway, an exhibition that set out to deconstruct the institution from within—a typical feature of New Institutionalism. Fourthly, I was appointed director of the Norwegian national museum for photography, Preus Museum, in 2004. I redirected the institution from a traditional object-oriented museum to one invested in re-writing the history of photography, again aided by the insights of post-structuralism and other theories that questioned the way we were writing history.

LK & GF: When you founded the Kunsthall, were you aware of other experimental curatorial strategies?

JE: The most important inspiration came from artists' initiatives and from the flexible mid-sized institutions of Europe, places like Witte de With in Rotterdam and Kunstwerke in Berlin. These were curatorially driven spaces and we wanted to take that further, not just being part of the international art scene but also to question that art scene, both in the way it was functioning and in the way it related to the city.



LK & GF: Did you want to reach a certain public with Oslo Kunsthall, or even constitute a new public?

JE: We certainly had the hopes that we would reach new audiences, and it was backed by this kind of rhetoric. But it functioned more like a model. The actual involvement with the people of Grorudalen—a suburb of Oslo where we established a hub—was very meager. The people that came were from the art community and the people working with urban development in the city. We were perhaps a bit disappointed with this, but we never doubted the validity of the project. In fact, I have come to

realize that creating a model was a great achievement, thinking of the fact that we were only two people working on this, both in 50% positions. Institutions that work more professionally with community involvement, like the Whitechapel in East London, may have a department of ten people to work on community involvement.

LK & GF: What was your intention when you coined the term New Institutionalism in the publication of the same name in 2003?

JE: As I said, this publication came out of the Office of Contemporary Art Norway. We were really involved in exploring new ways in which the cultural exchange institution could operate, and at the same time we observed other institutions that were also questioning the fundamentals of how an art institution should work, places like Bergen Kunsthall, Rooseum in Malmö, Palais de Tokyo in Paris. So we conceived a publication that would both describe and circumscribe this phenomenon. It featured essays about the biennial boom, the legacy of institutional critique and about the relation between artist run spaces and the institutions' desire to co-opt these initiatives. The term itself was snapped out of the air and simple googling made us realize that the term was already in use in social sciences and Christianity. In social sciences it is used to describe a renewed belief in the effectiveness of institutions after the Second World War and in Christianity it describes a belief in the power of the church. We decided however to allow it to acquire a new meaning, that of the reformed and experimental art institution. We also liked the fact that it sounded a bit like other newisms, we thought this carried some critical potential, by way of irony.

LK & GF: How did the term come to operate?

JE: At first it operated like a kind of cultural branding, it created a focus and an attention on the phenomenon of the experimental art institution. Then, rather quickly, the term came to be contested. There were also other terms floating around. Charles Esche of Rooseum had the term 'Institutional Experimentalism' and Jorge Ribalta of MACBA proposed 'Relational Institutionalism.'

LK & GF: Could a parallel be drawn to the argument of Simon Sheikh that institutional critique became more of a tool or a way of working than a historical genre? Would you apply this to New Institutionalism?

JE: Yes, I agree, institutional critique really became operative from within the institution. The term New Institutionalism however should be used specifically and historically rather than as a general term. There were also people who rejected it more directly, especially the ones that were deeply involved in anti-capitalist critique. Theoreticians like Gerald Raunig, who said that it sounded too much like New Public Management or neoliberalism. He proposed in turn his own term, *Instituent Practices*. So in a sense it became a term of conflict, which I find to be productive actually. And I am not sure that New Institutionalism is the term that we want to continue to use. Perhaps we should use them all.

LK & GF: How would you characterize the conflict of New Institutionalism?

JE: The conflict of New Institutionalism is firstly historical and secondly strategic. Historically we need to discuss the relation between New Institutionalism and criticality as such: Was or is New Institutionalism a radical project or does it in some unconscious way carry too much of the ideology of neoliberalism? In my opinion it is definitely a radical project, even though there are some similarities between the figure of the open, creative, flexible and experimental curator of the 1990s and capitalism of the information age. It is characteristic for the nineties that there were these structural similarities between critical and entrepreneurial positions. But this does not mean that New Institutionalism is a neoliberal term nor that the curators that practiced within that paradigm are neoliberals! This construction of alternative and mini-institutions should rather be seen in continuity with alternative and grassroots methods. The strategic conflict follows from this: How should we phrase or position progressive art institutions in order for them to be most effective, artistically and politically? In order to do this I think that we need to think institutional continuity and institutional experiments in tandem in a way that perhaps was not apparent in all the institutions that were labeled New Institutionalism ten years ago, and perhaps not even in the term itself.

LK & GF: How did you decide on the different examples of institutions in the book? Was it a network that already existed with other curators that you were in contact with?

JE: My list in the first publication was not a list that had been made through research. I just took some institutions that I knew of. It was very lightly

written and edited. We did not want to make a fixed list, we just wanted to make a proposal and perhaps that was productive in a sense. At that moment Jens Hoffmann was also making this exhibition *Institution 2* with the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art for KIASMA. Actually it all overlapped. It is not unusual that such ideas come up in many places at the same time. But I think the overview of curatorially driven, experimental art institutions in Europe at the turn of the century is yet to be written.

LK & GF: Going back to a practical level, one point we discussed is that many institutions were closed down and didn't get funding anymore, e.g. NIFCA. What are your thoughts on this narrative that the experiment is not wanted, or criticism is not allowed?

JE: The experiments of New Institutionalism were made at publicly funded institutions. As the phenomenon grew, there was also a political shift in Europe, a turn towards neoliberal or populist cultural policies. This was also apparent in the Nordic countries, most visible at first in Denmark, where Anders Fogh Rasmussen came to power in 2001. For Fogh Rasmussen and other neoliberal politicians, critical and activist art institutions were a thorn in the eye, and they set out to shut down all such "leftist expert institutions." With NIFCA they actually managed to do just that. In Malmö Charles Esche met another kind of conservatism, that of the labor politicians. His idea of a discursive institution, opening up to the community, wasn't approved, not even by the social democrats. They were mostly interested in the quantitative effect: stick to the budget and reach the audience. Later, New Public Management affected many parts of the art institution and limited the creative and political potential of an institution like Iaspis in Stockholm, for example. So in this sense you are right, the space for institutional experimentation has been diminished. However, there are also other cultural and political impulses affecting the legacy of New Institutionalism. We can say that we entered a post-curatorial moment when the art fairs grew in importance towards the middle of the 00s. This put the galleries and dealers back in contemporary art. Not that they had been invisible, but they became less dependent on the curators. A neo-modernist impulse in contemporary art also meant that artist-run, non-curated spaces grew in importance. At this moment, the anti-capitalist lobby of contemporary art also started to cater to the idea that activism was more important than the art institution, and more than one writer discussed the strategy of nega-

tion, e.g. the idea of leaving the art institution altogether. To advocate change, you have to work outside of the institutions—this was the argument. At this point we reach the limits of New Institutionalism. New Institutionalism is all about believing in the institution's ability to change, not about leaving the institution.

LK & GF: We were interested whether you see other 'new institutional' practices today that continue in other institutions, with other instruments and tools. What's its legacy?

JE: On the one hand, you have the negation of the curator and of the institution as you find it in parts of the neo-bohemian and activist art scene. On the other hand you have the professionalization of it, in curatorial programs all over Europe. Neither of this gives me much hope, to be honest. In the 1990s, curators were critics or artists; they were not trained as curators. It was a position that you took and it was a statement. Nowadays people come out as curators, they're trained in project management and they had just enough art history in order to phrase their project almost interestingly. I am very skeptical of this trend. I think a two-year curatorial program is usually not enough to become an interesting curator. On the other hand, I am very impressed with people who, perhaps more traditionally, manage to pull off the double feat of both catering to the legacy of the institution and practice critical curating. Charles Esche's project Picasso in Palestine with the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven is a really good example. In Stockholm, Maria Lind has an interesting program at the Tensta Konsthall and also Konsthall C is doing good work. In Copenhagen I have great hopes for Kunsthall Charlottenborg now that Jacob Fabricius has taken over; he has a light hand with political art, but is very efficient in everything he does. He carries in my mind the spirit of the nineties in the sense that he insists on the correlation between aesthetic and political intervention. In Oslo, I must say that Marta Kuzma did a really good job with the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, continuing to question the role of the cultural exchange institution while at the same time creating some great results for the Norwegian art scene. Will Bradley at Kunsthall Oslo—which is not to be confused with my own project, Oslo Kunsthall—also does a good job at working politically in the least likely of places, which is embedded in a completely commercially driven real estate development project. Tone Hansen does also a good job at the Henie Onstad Art Centre. So there is hope in many parts of the Nordic art world.

As you understand, I am over-informed about the Nordic scene at the moment. My next project will be to turn to Europe.

Jonas Ekeberg is a curator and critic based in Oslo. He was founding director of Oslo Kunsthall in 2000 and a curator at the Office for Contemporary Art Norway from 2002-2004. From 2009 to 2013 he was the chief editor of the Nordic online journal *Kunstkritikk*. Ekeberg is currently working on a book- and exhibition project on the rise and decline of a Nordic art scene.

Captions

1 Oslo Kunsthall publication 00. Proposal: Kunsthalle. With contributions by: Lars Nittve, Gary Bates/Spacegroup and Manuel de Landa. Editors: Gardar Eide Einarsson, Jonas Ekeberg and Matias Fadbakken.