Peripheral Proposals

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Small-scale art institutions usually operate on a shoestring, and the institutions of the mainly European Cluster network, are no exception to this. Yet, their role within a wider artistic field is influential on many levels. According to a publication by another, London-based group of small-scale institutions, called Common Practice, "it would seem that small organizations act as an unofficial support mechanism for larger organizations, by investing in risk-taking and the development of work," as well as "developing new delivery formats and implementing highly participatory educational strategies."[i] Acknowledging these facts, it becomes apparent that the cultural value production of these institutions exceeds their precarious economic circumstances. The underpaying of highly educated staff, the disadvantaged position of smaller institutions in the competition for appropriate funding, and the less comfortable working conditions in smaller organizations all contribute to the resource gap between such organizations and large-scale institutions that are run like a company, with all the benefits and rewards offered to this style of managerial governance.

What potential does a cluster of small-scale institutions have in this context? It obviously doesn't change these institutions into a big one, but perhaps it can offer a platform of a larger scale, where smaller organizations can acquire some of the benefits usually reserved for larger institutions, while at the same time retaining a relative independence and flexibility. According to Nikos Papastergiadis the notions of a cluster unfold alternative ideas to exactly the kind of Frontex-guarded unity that Europe stands for: "In contrast to the formations associated with the nation state clusters are formed without the institutional mechanisms that conferred unity and cohesion. For instance, there need not be an appeal to a master narrative that established the roots of a common genealogy."[ii] While Papastergiadis is pointing to the capability of a cluster as a social formation, he realizes its potential impotence: "Will such collectives be rendered impotent in a political landscape where recognition is dependent on discrete structures of belongings and representation?" There is also the problem of neo-liberalism's well-known capacity to adopt all kinds of critical, progressive, subversive practices and twist them so that they end up supporting the system of which they initially were critical: a process exemplified by the way in which the cultural field already served as model for the emergence of the flexible and precarious worker in the New Economy of the 1990s. One way of dealing with this phenomenon is not to let go of previous achievements, but to insist on

the definatory power of your own working structures. This could include for example to use the advantages of being flexible in a self-chosen way and organize your work according to your own needs, pace, and in relation to other areas of life like family and friends, while refusing the reinterpreted modalities of being flexible as always being available whenever and wherever is required within the organized working processes of neoliberal economies.

These issues inevitably raise the political potentials of art institutions as such. "Should critical artistic practices engage with current institutions with the aim of transforming them or should they desert them altogether?" The question was posed by Chantal Mouffe, in "Strategies of Radical Politics and Aesthetic Resistance," an important piece written for "the marathon camp on artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art" held in Graz in September 2012, as part of the Steirischer Herbst festival. At a time when institutions — and not only those in the art world — have been put into crisis by the austerity programme, Mouffe's question is crucial. She rightly associates the refusal of institutions with post-autonomist theorists such as Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Franco "Bifo" Berardi who believe "that the multitude can ignore the existing power structures and concentrate its efforts in constructing alternative social forms outside the state power network. Any collaboration with the traditional channels of politics, like parties and trade unions, are to be avoided." By contrast with this strategy of "exodus," Mouffe recommends not "deserting the institutional terrain but . . . engaging with it, with the aim of fostering dissent and creating a multiplicity of agonistic spaces where the dominant consensus is challenged and where new modes of identification are made available."[iii] The crucial concept for Mouffe is of course Antonio Gramsci's idea of "hegemony."

Mouffe's intervention is valuable for two reasons. The first is that the vulgar autonomist rejection of the state, trade unions, etc., is highly influential in the fields of art and culture. The work of Hardt and Negri has explicitly made this case, consigning both the nation state and the institutions of working class organization to the past, a position that has been echoed by many who participated in the Occupy movement. Ironically, the idea that there is no such thing as hegemony is itself now hegemonic. The favouring of networks over "top-down," "hierarchical" structures; the belief that the state is both inefficient and corrupt: these "horizontalist" ideas are pushed as much by neoliberals as by autonomists. This is not to make the crass claim that autonomism and neoliberalism are identical. But, in line with Mouffe's analysis, it is essential to recognize that no idea or strategy possesses a guaranteed and inherent emancipatory potential; what matters is how ideas and strategies are "articulated," or connected up with, different discourses and practices in a particular context. Autonomist thinking played an important role in the struggle to escape the

oppressive over-centralization of the Stalinist Communist Party, and the question autonomism was organized around — what form should leftism take in the face of the so-called post-Fordist reconstruction of society, culture, and economy — remains fundamental, and unanswered. But ideas that contributed to the breaking of a certain mode of left-wing hegemony in the 1970s do not function in the same way now that the international Communist Party is a distant memory and there are few significant left-wing political parties in the western world. In the context of neoliberal domination of parliaments and media, the call to further withdraw from party politics and mainstream media could only be welcomed by the neoliberals, who must be delighted to see horizontalist ideas so popular on the left at the moment.

The second reason Mouffe's essay is important is its timing. From the mid-1990s up until 2008, there really was little point in engaging with parliamentary democracy or trade unions in any serious way. Neoliberalism's dominance was assured because of a constellation of factors, which made it effectively the case that "there was no alternative" to its capitalist realism. It's no coincidence that it was during this time of leftist defeat that horizontalist concepts became highly influential. And, to be brutally honest, the horizontalist revolts — from Seattle to Occupy — have not caused capital any serious perturbation any more than they have presaged a widespread withdrawal from capitalist social relations. But since the financial crisis of 2008, the ideological field is radically open in a way that has not been the case for at least thirty years. Political parties are confused and rudderless, peddling watered-down neoliberalism (or watered-down critiques of neoliberalism) in a world that is hungry for a new vision. In other words, the ground is for the taking. How do we take it? Well, here, some of the insights of autonomism and Mouffe's hegemony-based approach might be synthesized. How do we shift hegemony? How do we put ourselves in the position to define the "new normal"? Not by attempting to do it from the top, through the parliamentary process alone — Britain's New Labour Party is an object lesson in what happens when you try to do that. What is required in the first instance is the formation of cultural hubs which can exert influence from below and outside the currently decadent parliamentary machine. The art world possesses a transnational network which — often uncomfortably — mirrors global capital. But what if this network was used *organizationally* as well as aesthetically, as an international infrastructure which could do for a twenty-first century leftism what the Communist Party did for its twentieth century equivalent?

This might seem like a mischievous, even facetious question, but it touches on the most pressing questions concerning political agency in the current moment… And here we can see the role that a cluster of small art institutions could play. In part, this is because the very idea of a loosely affiliated

network of institutions combines the autonomist emphasis on the network with the Gramscian emphasis on institutions. By this it builds on experiences art institutions made in more or less successfully aligning themselves with political movements in the last decade, while at the same time it includes ideas of intra-institutional critical practices developed by artists in "institutional critique" since the 1970s as well as by those curators and artists in the early 2000s, whose self-critical and transgressive institutional practice was labelled as "new institutionalism." Those new structural and operative configurations initiated by curators often in collaboration with artists were based on a self-reflexive critique of institutional organization and curatorial action that aimed at jettisoning the functions and organizational forms of the traditional modernist exhibiting institution as well as the market and image-orientated exigencies of museums that had corporatized within the context of neoliberal social developments. Although many of these approaches were affected by strong political headwinds, this institutionally political, organizational, and curatorial method has also successfully established a critical vocabulary, which can be built upon.

The "cluster" can offer a translocal alternative to capitalist globalization. The appeal to the local is often (unintentionally) reactionary and defensive, or at least ambiguous, in that it risks conceding the international or the transnational to capital, rather than imagining an alternative internationalism. The debate on "critical regionalism" offers a good example to rethink the political potential of localism/regionalism in relation to internationalism. In his famous essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism" Kenneth Frampton investigates the potential of architecture in the regional process of "place-making."[iv] He, however, presupposes that a region has a natural unity, contrasting the local and regional as pure, self-determined, and authentic, by contrast with the abstract universalism of the metropolis, and arguing that regional particularities should be preserved and furthered as a matter of responsibility towards nature and society. Anticipating possible interpretations of his ideas, Frampton explicitly resists the concepts of the vernacular and of populism, but by this was rather drawing attention to these contentious areas of his thesis. Of particular interest about the debate sparked by Frampton's text are the opposing political perspectives lodged in the idea of critical regionalism. If, on the one hand, it idealizes the local with the dubious aim of authenticizing and glorifying the particular, it is also opens up the possibility of an architecture "from below," dedicated to the values of participatory democracy. But a potentially emancipatory idea of the local has to be thought of in close connection to a decentralized internationalism and a pluralism of different narratives.

In a world of satellite/cable TV and supermarkets, the idea of a local that can be definitively detached from the global is in any case dubious — who lives in such a local world? Even

supposing that such a withdrawal is possible, it is not clear why this would in itself enable agency. There is a further danger in assuming that a public or a collectivity emerges ready-made once the "local" is de-linked from capitalist globalization. Small institutions can become hubs of activation by taking on the constructive task of building publics and collectivities, which can in turn be linked to the publics constructed by other institutions, in contrast to the current situation of an overwriting of public-engendering institutional and artistic practices with market interests, which is what marks the given social positioning of an art institution. Here, the specific qualities of a particular location do not become essentialized as the properties of a "local" which is defined by opposition to the outside.

There are and have been translocal and transnational institutional networks with different interests and born out of different necessities: for example "Arts Collaboratory" to connect south global inititiatives, "Triangel" or "RAIN" to connect initiatives in the global south to Western institutions or the "L'Internationale,"[v] a "new European museum confederation," which shares some of the ideas mentioned above and is operating on the level of mainly large-scale museums.

The "cluster" combines aspects of exchange and mutual support of small-scale, peripheral institutions with a debate on a decentralized internationalism. The peripheral location of the cluster institutions frees these institutions from the mandate to become entertainment centres. Since they cannot count on tourists and casual visitors they are not expected to cater to these kinds of publics. What they are facing instead is either a dubious political idea of integration connected to essentialist notions of "communities" they have to attract with "local" art projects and/or to increase the value of residential areas on the frontline of gentrification. A neighbourhood with a museum is more likely to attract cafés and hipster boutiques. But operating within a cluster of institutions in different locations and placing visions of a decentralizsed internationalism in these peripheral contexts on the one hand takes the immediate neighbourhood more serious in its diversity and puts it in relation to publics in other places. Mouffe writes that "the success of counterhegemonic practices depends on an adequate understanding of the relations of forces structuring the key institutions in which the political antagonist is going to intervene. With respect to artistic and cultural practices, then, counterhegemonic interventions must first and foremost recognize the role of the culture industry in capitalism's transition to post-Fordism."[v] When "cultural production plays a central role in the process of valorizing capital" the role ascribed to art institutions is to expose their publics to the corporate interest as well as the political interest in city marketing. In its peripheral setting the "cluster" is sort of a participant-observer in this context of valorizing capital in the art field: It can use the advantages it accrues from not being under the microscope of public attention, while

collectively imagining different models of identification from the margins, models that oppose the currently hegemonic ideals and demands of consumption and image production. It has already started with a focus on research and exchange, with closed workshops and public presentations of the discussions and lectures by invited speakers relating to topics of institutional self-reflection.

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[i] Sara Thelwell, *Size Matters* (London: Common Practice, 2011), 6.

[ii] Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 21.

[iii] Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Strategies in Politicsand Politcal Strategies in Art" (paper presented at the 24/7 marathon camp "Truth is Concrete , "Graz, September 21-28, 2012), http://truthisconcrete.org/texts/?p=19

[iv] Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 16–30.

[v] Chantal Mouffe, *Artforum* (Summer 2010).