

Resisting institutionalisation, by Emily Pethick

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One of the described intentions of the *Nought to Sixty* programme is to focus on practices that are rarely represented in the institution, usually because they are *conversational* and more closely linked to self-organised activity. This notion of conversation is closely related to some of the projects realised at Casco - Office for Art, Design and Theory, in Utrecht - during the time I worked there; these projects functioned as a way of thinking through different models of interaction, participation and collaboration.

Conversation generates forms of exchange that are not fixed or static but rather sustain ongoing processes of engagement, responsiveness and change. As Brazilian artist Ricardo Basbaum (who realised the project *Re-projecting (Utrecht)* with Casco in April 2008) describes:

Conversations are a way of thinking, where the self opens to the outside, producing a special social space where no single language of truth is prevalent. It enables the transformation of the voice of the other... *Conversations* are a sort of dialogue that have their own dynamics, always surprising the participants... *Conversations* succeed as a play-like situation, and involve a certain practice on how to keep yourself in a permanent state of awareness and change (flexibility). There's nothing specific to be achieved in a conversation, except that when the participants feel they are out of it - that is, when they finish a particular dialogue - they just cannot go back to the same places they left before (some transformation might have happened). Therefore, *conversation* is a modality of movement.¹

On the international cultural landscape there are a number of small - to medium-scale contemporary art institutions whose emphasis lies in discourse and exchange rather than presentation. Artist-led organisations such as Sarai², New Delhi, the recently closed Copenhagen Free University³, and 16 Beaver⁴, New York, are all examples of progressive models for small organisations. These spaces are sites for sustained critical inquiry, where the activities of artists, writers, researchers and other cultural practitioners can intersect, where discourse may build up over time and where new reflexive practices, methods and ideas can be developed in order to address the contemporary condition and to think about (or sometimes even enact) the possibilities for change, if only on a micro-level. Perhaps the main qualities that distinguish these spaces - and other artist-led or grassroots organisations and small institutions - from more mainstream institutions is their commitment, sustainability and flexibility. These are also qualities that are fundamental to the makeup of Casco, both as I inherited it and continued to run it - and which I will continue to pursue with my new directorship at The Showroom in London.

Nina Möntmann has written about these types of organisations in relation to opacity, where the institution is a site of research and analysis that does not have to be immediately visible but is continuously at work in the background. As an attempt to work between engagement and autonomy, we tried at Casco to combine this kind of opacity with forms of openness by realising projects with artists that had multiple points of entry and layers of resonance. A number of projects had very public moments, or direct forms of activity that were often embedded in the city, or were formed through collective processes that mixed publics. These sometimes began with a theoretical proposal or led to critical reflection, creating forms of feedback between practice and theory.

Copenhagen Free University described their activity as working with "forms of knowledge that are fleeting, fluid, schizophrenic, uncompromising, subjective, uneconomic, acapitalist, produced in the kitchen, produced when asleep or arisen on a social excursion - collectively." This approach is close to that of a number of Casco's projects that employed experimental or collective research processes and produced what might be described as unstable forms of knowledge. In particular, works produced through the involvement of many voices or forms of input - as opposed to the singular voice of the artist - were open to conflict, forms of disagreement and uncertainty, wherein conversation becomes a way of preventing a fixed representation.

Wendelien van Oldenborgh's *Maurits Script* (2006), produced by Casco, examined Dutch colonial history in North East Brazil and the often contradictory stories that surround the period. Van Oldenborgh's script comprises conflicting historical accounts of Maurits' governorship, and the film was shot in the renowned Dutch museum Mauritshuis, the house of Johann Maurits, Governor of North East Brazil in the early 1600s. The actors, who each had a different relationship to the history of colonisation, read their scripted roles. However, during the screening of the film, which also occurred in Mauritshuis, these same actors appeared on the other side of the room, engaging in a live conversation about their own relationships to the legacies of colonial history. Participation in this discussion was open to the museum's public and, during this second staging, a new script was written. With the input of multiple voices, this second script was, at times, a contradictory reflection on the personal experiences of a multicultural society - it did not produce one single truth or perspective. In some respects this project performed what Irit Rogoff describes as smuggling - an embodied criticality,⁵ where critical practice shifts away from a distanced, analytical mode and moves towards an inhabitation of a problem that is open to participation - in this case entering into the museum and destabilising its official narrative from within through conversation.

This sense of inhabiting a problem and opening it up through a conversational process also informed Annette Krauss' *Hidden Curriculum* (2007), produced by Casco. The project looked at forms of school-based learning generated outside the official curricula. During the three-month collaboration, two groups of teenagers critically addressed their own behaviour in the school

environment. The outcomes of their investigations were then used to develop actions and interventions in the school and in public spaces. These actions sought to counter the normal routines of both environments, expose the hidden rule structures that exist in public and institutional spaces, and reveal codes of conduct of which students were previously unaware. In one example the students looked for a space in the school that was previously unacknowledged in their habitual use of the building. The students then entered the space and documented what they found, thus finding a parallel to the grey areas and holes in the forms of knowledge that they were investigating. This was extended to actions in public space, where students used their bodies to create barriers. Sometimes without realising it, members of the public were forced to alter their routines, sometimes in an imperceptible way that had an effect on others' movements. In this resistance to normalisation processes, *Hidden Curriculum* explored and exposed the boundaries of received ideas, both in terms of knowledge and common behaviour. What was important was not only the critical process of unpicking these codes, through a collective process within the school in order to find these unexpected spaces of learning, but also the way that the project emphasised the potential of challenging and changing the rules.

Dave Hullfish Bailey's project *What's Left to its own Devices (On Reclamation)* (2007), produced by Casco, also attempted to unravel conventional patterns in the way we read spaces and places. Bailey researched the manner in which public spaces are formed and the relations between the public and private spheres. The project drew comparisons between the highly structured city centre of Utrecht and Slab City, an ad hoc squatters' camp in the California desert. Bailey's experimental geography initially examined the role of hydrological processes in creating specific spaces of sociability and private retreat. This approach led him to find similarities between the narratives of individual freedom and communal living associated with Slab City, and the historical development of Utrecht, a city that arose from the collective task of managing a system of canals, and which has also been cited as an early model of democratic political organisation.

In Utrecht, Bailey discovered instances of people creating individual ways of inhabiting or occupying space. He discovered that an old man had been living in a van and a boat around the corner from Casco for over 30 years. Gerrit Rietveld's infamous Schröder House, meanwhile, was built on the outskirts of the city centre in the 1920s, in the style of de Stijl. The product of a collaboration between Rietveld and his commissioner Mrs Schröder, the ground floor was structured according to planning regulations, but Rietveld and Schröder designated the second floor as an 'attic', giving themselves freedom to experiment with utopian ideas of how to live.

Bailey focused on such micro-sites in both Utrecht and Slab City, drawing them together using non-linear heuristic methods to forge links across a range of subjects, both social and geographical, that were as varied as forms of sedimentation and accumulation, water diversion structures, barricades as

tools of spatial control, DIY culture, and the social functions of books and libraries. The project highlighted the way in which things collect or gravitate towards one another, be they people, detritus or books, as well as ways in which people realise their individual freedoms within existing structures. Bailey's findings were tested in *Manual Intuition* and *Makeshift Fashion*, a group workshop that experimented with constructing devices that altered existing relations between public and private space, and examined what other ambiguous or unstable positions might be opened up. Not only did this challenge how the structure of public space is understood, it initiated a collective, speculative thinking-by-doing. As a consequence the project formed an activity-driven process, generating alternative ways of conducting research in opposition to purely cerebral, analytical or planned approaches.

These three aforementioned projects each negotiate institutional structures - whether those of the museum, an official history, the school or public space - rethinking existing relations and acknowledging that nothing is stable or fixed. Bailey describes his practice as an approach in which he disorganises and reorganises information in order to find new connection points. This activity of creating non-standard links between art and other fields is common in art practice, yet many art institutions have remained relatively isolated. Simon Sheikh describes the art institution as the in-between, the mediator, interlocutor, translator and meeting place between art production and the conception of its 'public'.⁶ Sheikh writes further, I would suggest that we take our point of departure in precisely the unhinging of stable categories and subject positions, in the interdisciplinary and intermediary, in the conflictual and dividing, in the fragmented and permissive - in different spaces of experience, as it were. We should begin to think of this contradictory and non-unitary notion of a public sphere, and of the art institution as the embodiment of this sphere.

A definitive feature of Casco is that it is not conceived of as a gallery but as an open space, where many different kinds of activities and forms of work can happen both in and outside of the space - each changing the organisation and lending it a different character. At the beginning of a project there was no directive as to what form it might take, where it would resonate or its duration. In this sense we resisted any form of standardisation that might close down the possibility of what we could do. The funding situation in the Netherlands - where one has a starting budget for the programme - made this process much easier. In the UK institutions have to fundraise for a much larger percentage of their income, as well as to satisfy the different demands of public funding bodies, private patrons and marketing departments. In some cases this has led to organisations becoming less flexible and more institutional. However, I believe there are ways to work within these circumstances creatively. It is possible to learn from artistic practices and self-organised, socially-based networks, as well as other types of practices and debates. One is able to generate different types of relationships and forms of engagement with artists, publics and other collaborators, avoiding habit and routine through constant rethinking and reinvention. Certainly this is something that The Showroom will

take as a challenge. With an imminent change of space, a move to a new area and many new sets of relations to explore - let us see what is possible.

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Notes

¹ Ricardo Basbaum, *Re-projecting (Utrecht)*. Utrecht, Casco, 2008.

² Sarai - a space for research, practice and conversation about the contemporary media and urban constellations.

³ The Copenhagen Free University opened in May 2001 in the flat of Jakob Jakobsen and Henriette Heise in Copenhagen. It was an artist-run institution dedicated to the production of critical consciousness and poetic language.

⁴ 16 Beaver Street - a network of artists, curators, writers, thinkers and activists who converge on a regular basis at a space in Lower Manhattan to discuss issues, exchange ideas and raise questions.

⁵ Irit Rogoff, 'Smuggling - An Embodied Criticality', 2006, www.ejpcp.net

⁶ Simon Sheikh, 'Public Spheres and Functions of Progressive Art Institutions', 2004, www.republicart.net