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Revisions of experimental institutionalism in the context of socio-economic transformations after 2000 (a case study of the project *Once Is Nothing* by Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova)

In the first part of the article, the author presents a short history of curatorial and organizational activities under “experimental” or “new” institutionalism, pointing to their links with the socio-cultural movements that emerged in Western and Northern Europe at the turn of the 1970s. Analysing the essay *The Making of ‘Once Is Nothing’* by Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova, two prominent representatives of experimental institutionalism, the author points to the reasons for this reevaluation (such as the shrinkage of the public sector) and selected directions of evolution of engaged curating (e.g.: emphasis on the continuity of activities, reflection on sovereignty and autonomy of creative actions in public institutions and revision of socialist strategies in engaged art and curating).

The awakening of critical reflection on curating in recent decades can be directly linked to the development of exhibition, animation and management activities known as experimental institutionalism. As American researcher James Voorhies notes, the term is used to describe a variety of activities developed at the turn of the twenty-first century under the influence of the experiments of Harald Szeeman and related minds¹. Fun-

» 1 See James Voorhies, *Beyond Objecthood. The Exhibition as a Critical Form Since 1968*, Cambridge (MA) 2017, p. 74.

damentally, the uniqueness of these practices consists in the departure from the traditional exhibition format and the constant efforts to expand the field of art, most often manifested through the organization of projects spanning art, curating and educational activity or activism. However, they are not only about “disarming the form”, as the name of the trend under discussion indicates, since the aforementioned struggles are accompanied by attempts at reorientation of thinking about the artistic obligations of institutions. According to the “experimenters”, these obligations are not limited to the presentation of art *per se*. Equally important from their perspective is a conscious interaction with the other stakeholders of modern institutional ecology and support for grassroots social and cultural activities oriented towards emancipatory goals and compensation for modernization’s *faux frais* negative effects of modernization. Importantly, experimental institutionalism is based on the conviction that effective implementation of such tasks is not possible within the framework of well-established conventions that the art world has inherited from nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic formations. Therefore, the activity of the representatives of the current may contribute to the debate about the value of innovation understood in a hermeneutical way, as an attempt to deviate from the tradition of culture, but also as a problem from the political order of the economy of institutions. Although for a long time innovation was a peculiar “fetish” of experimental institutionalism, among the representatives of the trend in recent years one could hear urging to re-evaluate the innovative attitude. To me, this urging deserves to be discussed in the context of current social and economic phenomena.

Adopting the position of James Voorhies, who sees the origins of experimental institutionalism in the activities of Harald Szeeman (in particular in the 1969 exhibition *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form* and the 1972 *documenta*), the late 1960s may be seen as a symbolic onset of the formation or rather a variety of interrelated tendencies in curatorship and the “art of management” of institutions. However, a real “outburst” of curatorial experiments began two decades later, when representatives of two or three generations following Szeeman’s gained the opportunity to develop strategies initiated by *documenta 5* or Pontus Hulten under new circumstances of cultural production (taking advantage of the “dense” networking of global creative environments or the positive valorisation of creativity in the late modern economy, yet being simultaneously critical of the above)². The renaissance of experimental

» 2 It is worth noting the ambivalent importance of slogans such as “institutional creativity” or “art as the production of knowledge”, which are crucial for new institutionalism. References of the representatives of the trend to “creative economy” or “knowledge economy” prove, on the one hand, their attempts to adapt to bureaucratic discourses (arising e.g. from entanglement in government grant systems); on the other hand, they indicate the attempts to tactically subvert

institutionalism in Western and Northern Europe took place in the late 1990s and early first decade of the current century. It was then that new institutions such as the Tensta konsthall in Stockholm (1998), the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (an institution which in its present form has been operating since 1999, when the French Ministry of Culture entrusted the task of building a new contemporary art institute at the Trocadéro to Nicholas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans) or the BAK basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht (2000) were created on the initiative of curators associated with this trend. Others, already existing, gained international renown under the leadership of their colleagues (among them, the Rooseum in Malmö, an institution run between 2000 and 2006 by the Brit Charles Esche)³. In spite of a wide range of activities from the order of experimental institutionalism, one can attempt some generalisations concerning their ideological background. It is easy to prove the links between practices characteristic of this trend and poststructuralist and neo-Marxist philosophy from the last three decades of the twentieth century as interdisciplinary projects initiated by curators associated with it often concern colonial or gender issues. They refer to the concept of radical pedagogy (developed, among others, by Henri Giroux) or hegemonic criticism (drawing on the output of Michel Foucault or Chantal Mouffe and Ernest Laclau). On the other hand, while reflecting on the forms of institutional organisation in the field of art, many of Szeeman's successors believed that "cultural extravagance", understood primarily as a search for unusual alliances with representatives of areas of life other than art, could become the yardstick of political effectiveness. This trust distinguished their activity especially in the "heroic" stage of evolution of the tendencies in question, i.e. in the first few

the new-speak and a kind of detournement. See: Ute Meta Bauer (ed.), *Education, Information, Entertainment – Current Approaches to Higher Artistic Education*, Vienna 2001; Maria Hlavajova, Annie Fletcher (ed.), *Becoming Oneself. Four Conversations on Art and Institutional Creativity*, Utrecht 2003; Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder, Binna Choi (ed.), *On Knowledge Production. A Critical Reader on Contemporary Art*, Utrecht 2008; Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray (ed.), *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice. Reinventing Institutional Critique*, London 2009.

- » 3 In Poland, activities of experimental institutionalism were more dispersed. Worth remembering among local examples are Aneta Szyłak's projects or "post-artistic" initiatives of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (importantly, since 2018 the institution has been a member of the L'Internationale consortium, which brings together, among others, museums run by curators associated with experimental institutionalism – such as Van Abbemuseum, currently run by Charles Esche). This trend can also be associated with the activities of smaller institutions, such as the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin or the Bunkier Sztuki in Krakow, known for their experimental educational and performative programmes (in the last decade Aneta Rostkowska and Magdalena Ziółkowska, two graduates of the educational programme for curators at the Amsterdam De Appel Institute, which since 1995 has been an important centre of curatorial studies related to experimental institutionalism, were associated with the latter institution). Other worthwhile Polish contexts of experimental institutionalism include the founding moment of the Avant-garde Institute in Warsaw; in 2007, Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova (the founder and director of the BAK in Utrecht) were invited to take part in the conference inaugurating the institution's operation. See: Gabriela Świtek (ed.), *Awangarda w bloku*, Warszawa 2010.

years of the new millennium⁴. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the term “experimental institutionalism” is used interchangeably with the term “new institutionalism”; for many representatives of the trend innovation has in fact become a superior value. As Charles Esche assessed in one of the interviews, in the 1990s and 2000s their ambitions focused on “building separate [new] institutions, separating them from the rest and doing in them the things you believe in”. According to the curator, such laboratory activities were to “undermine and transform North European [institutional] ecology” and while the experimenting directors of museums and public galleries wanted to “learn from other institutions [outside the field of art, e.g. from science; note – AP]”, at the same time they wanted to preserve “the right to a free space for experimentation, which was the legacy of the artistic avant-garde”⁵. The attitude characterized by the curator can be understood as a reflection of postmodernism, which privileged thinking in terms of “virtuality” over pastiche and historical bricolage.

The experiments of institutions and curators mentioned in the interview with Charles Esche began to lose their impetus at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. It is no coincidence that the loss of momentum occurred precisely when the new Left suffered a major defeat on the European political scene (this new Left saw its ideological origin – similarly to the harbingers of new institutionalism – in the contesting social and cultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, while at the same time attempting to adapt its social programmes to the conditions dictated by the global hegemony of capitalism). The moment of re-evaluation in the realm of culture, a formative moment for curators, two or three generations Harald Szeeman’s juniors, occurred simultaneously with the re-evaluation of the alliance between social democratic factions in European parliaments and agents of neoliberal globalization implemented in the neoliberal style⁶. The year 2008 proved a symbolic moment; it was then that the global financial crisis substantially affected the economies of European states. In the Netherlands, Sweden and France, where representatives of central parties and so-called New Left were in power at the start of the 2000s, the recession led to an overhaul of social policy as well as to budget cuts in the cultural sector. As a result, many of the public institutions that had been established or upgraded over the past decade on the wave of enthusiasm for the experimental rhetoric of curators, ta-

» 4 I borrow the term “cultural extravagance” from Ryszard Nycz – see idem, “Bruno Schulz: sztuka jako kulturowa ekstrawagancja”, *Teksty Drugie* 2016, No. 5.

» 5 All quotations after: Charles Esche, “We were learning by doing”, an interview by Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flueckiger, *On Curating* 2013, No. 21.

» 6 See Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias. The Political Journey of the Generation 1968*, New York-London 1997; Piotr P. Plucienniczak, “Od Nowej Lewicy do Nowej Prawicy? Droga przez mękę pokolenia ‘68””, *Kultura i społeczeństwo* 2011, No. 1.

king advantage of state funding during the then prosperity period, were liquidated, restructured or absorbed by larger organisations. These events forced some representatives of experimental institutionalism to rethink their participation in the capitalist “industry of experience” and to re-evaluate the policy of innovation, which in the 1990s became the hallmark of the curatorial practices following Szeeman’s legacy.

One of the sharpest documents of the influence that the repercussions of the 2008 crisis had on thinking about contemporary art and the activity of artistic institutions is an essay by Maria Hlavajova and Charles Esche entitled *The Making of ‘Once Is Nothing’. How to Say No While Still Saying Yes*⁷. Esche, the current director of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven needs no introduction. Hlavajova, a Slovak who settled down in the Netherlands, has since 2000 been the director of BAK, a quasi-artistic and quasi-academic institution in Utrecht. Back in the 1990s, like Esche, she rose to prominence e.g. as a critic and curator of international biennials of contemporary art. The above text is a kind of report on their joint work on an exhibition accompanying the 2009 Brussels Biennale, itself a recreation of an earlier collective show called *Individual Systems*, prepared by Igor Zabel for the 2003 Venice Biennale. The discursive angle of *The Making of ‘Once Is Nothing’* is not limited, however, to an account of the above project, as the authors constantly move between Zabel’s exhibition, their own recreation of it and its political and economic context. The context is marked precisely by the 2008 crisis, which Hlavajova and Esche saw as a dialectic moment calling for a revision of future projects and events and a re-evaluation of the “here and now”. According to the authors, the most urgent task for the post-crisis years was to separate the “operational” episteme in cultural management from the episteme of global capitalism agents, which the New Left had previously tried to adapt to. The strategies of intrinsic criticism of the system, characteristic of this formation, proved to be inefficient both in political thought and in political and cultural practice.

The Making of ‘Once Is Nothing’ starts with the sentence “Just say yes”⁸. According to Esche and Hlavajova, this sentence can be seen as the motto of the generation that underwent professional, intellectual and political formation in the 1990s and early 2000s. The authors refer

» 7 The text has come out in three significantly differing versions – first in the catalogue Brussels Biennial 1. Re-Used Modernity (ed. Barbara Vanderlinden, Cologne 2008); second in a pamphlet accompanying an exhibition of Artur Żmijewski *The Social Studio* w BAK in Utrecht; the third, most extensive version was published in *Open* magazine. In this article I quote the last version; in successive quotes I apply to it the abbreviation MOIN. See Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova, “The Making of ‘Once Is Nothing’. How to Say No While Still Saying Yes”, *Open* 2009, No. 16; access online: <https://www.onlineopen.org/the-making-of-once-is-nothing> [access: 1.02.2019].

» 8 MOIN.

here to the socio-political background of their own practices; although from the beginning of the 1990s they criticised hegemonic concepts of modernisation, they themselves were under the impression that the apparent permanence of the social democratic order in countries such as the Netherlands guaranteed the continuity of emancipation efforts in the era of late capitalism. As they further write, pointing to the fact that the European revolutionary social and cultural movements were losing momentum after 1968: “After the neoconservative declaration of the end of history, the angry young dogs didn’t have the same bite; it just seemed easier [at the turn of the millennium – note AP] to agree and try to make the system work in the best way for those with whom it engaged”⁹. The authors remind us in the text that according to Fukuyama’s *historiosophy*, the relative prosperity that allowed the developed countries to incorporate the inclusive “bending of the system” was to last literally forever. They note, however, that in the 21st century History began to point to itself in a violent way. According to many commentators, the collapse of the New York World Trade Center towers in 2001 was supposed to shake the conformist worldview of the Western political class; according to Hlavajova and Esche, however, the consequences of the long-term influence of this formation on contemporary political culture became clear and thoroughly criticized only after the financial crisis in 2008. In their view, it was that year that can be considered the end of the “long 1990s,” the manifestation of which can be described in terms of a “state of shock”:

Suddenly in autumn 2008, political economy burst back onto the world stage as if it had never really been away. The downturn had arrived, proving that the pattern of free market boom and bust was not broken but just dormant for a while, only to return with a more aggressive vengeance than we thought possible¹⁰.

It is worth to pay attention to the discourse to which the essay authors refer in a caustic manner. As Hlavajova and Esche point out, the aggressive “revenge” of political economy was unexpectedly cruel, but it was hard to consider it as an unprecedented situation. In fact, it is quite easy to see it as part of the sinusoidal pattern of economic fluctuations, the variability of economic boom and downturn, so well-known to neoclassical economics. According to the authors, the ease of this operation is proven by the broad support for austerity policies in European parliaments after 2008 (however, the support was oblivious to those protesting in the streets, e.g. under the banners of Occupy). As they recall, “Amid the

» 9 *Ibidem.*

» 10 *Ibidem.*

rapid deflation of bank credit and overblown management egos, we could suddenly perceive with a new clarity the manoeuvring of our democratic representatives busy holding up a system they told us obeyed the laws of natural selection”¹¹. According to Hlavajova and Esche, the crisis was not a moment of a radical departure and paradigmatic shift of thinking about economy, but rather a moment of *anagnorisis*, which despite a delay remains the precondition for a systemic transformation.

As sociologists Bernard Stiegler and Naomi Klein point out, the discourse of shock states serves both the description – or apology – of crises as well as moments of global capital expansion¹². Financial sector actors and liberal politicians mobilized it both during the global collapse in 2008, Hurricane Katrina in the United States or the Fukushima power plant crash, as well as during the liberal revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 (Leszek Balcerowicz’s “shock therapy” is probably the best example of this mobilization). Both in the moments of collapse and affirmed expansion of capital, the “state of shock” is a representation of the crisis, in which the impression of instability is metaphorically inscribed in the general picture of the social order. Such a totalizing representation of the message obscures the real sources of economic instability and – justifying budget cuts in the social welfare or cultural sector, as well as legislation that serves to insulate global capital – presents the public sphere as “merged” with capital. Reconstructing such a scenario after the 2008 crisis became the starting point for Esche and Hlavajova, as they carefully observed the consequences of the “merger” of artistic institutions with the art market over the course of several decades of their activity. As the essay points out, during the first two decades after 1989 “The commodification of art objects had reached an unprecedented level of effectiveness, with biennials often being the test sites for developing new market products”¹³. As the authors indicate, seconding another representative of experimental institutionalism, Maria Lind, who in 2015 came up with a report on public financing of art, commissioned by the European Institute of Progressive Cultural Policy¹⁴, under those conditions the rhetoric of avant-garde experiments was degraded to marketing new-speak, while public institutions became in an unprecedented manner hostages of the private sector (including private sponsors and the international network of commercial galleries). In the face of the shrinking of European institutional ecology and

» 11 *Ibidem*.

» 12 See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York 2007; Bernard Stiegler, *States of Shock. Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, transl. Daniel Ross, Cambridge 2015.

» 13 MOIN.

» 14 See Maria Lind, Raimund Minichbauer (ed.), *European Cultural Policies, 2015: A Report with Scenarios on the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in Europe*, Vienna 2015.

its progressive privatisation after 2008, it became clear to the authors that curatorial experiments needed stronger legitimacy than the established references to the historical avant-garde. The crisis in the financial markets led to a profound legitimacy crisis in the art world.

The search for legitimacy for experimental activities in the field of art, which would enable a strong response to their depreciation in the eyes of the organisers (i.e. public authorities), made Esche and Hlavajova reach back into the past and remind at the Brussels Biennale of a project which, in their opinion, raised burning issues for the art world after the crisis. The authors explain in detail in this essay why in 2009 they had decided not to prepare a new show from scratch. To them, Igor Zabel's reconstructed show *Individual Systems*, although unnoticed by the critics, was "one of the most precise curatorial statements on the issue of modernity in recent years", a profit and loss account that the modern fetishization of autonomy had brought to contemporary art¹⁵. In their essay *The Making of Once Is Nothing* the authors attempt to actively redefine the notion and take many of its twentieth-century conceptualisations, to which Igor Zabel dedicated his essay-show in 2003, as the negative reference point. They argue that the discussed category should not be understood as an absolute separation of the aesthetic order from "the social", nor in the categories of "an exception" or "poetic license", which allows artists to take up provocative actions. From Hlavajova and Esche's point of view, autonomy becomes rather a synonym of sovereignty, understood in a specific way: as a possibility to act within an episteme which significantly differs from the calculative rationality of capitalist agents. According to the authors, one of the key differences concerns the attitude towards neo-avant-garde novelty – although the affirmation of novelty was a distinguishing feature of experimental institutionalism in its "heroic" phase, the curators of the *Once Is Nothing* exhibition emphasize that the freedom of experiment per se is not a shield against cooptation. What is more, the fetishizing of difference and innovation makes art more sensitive to commodification and subordination to the contemporary economy of creativity.

The Dictionary of the Polish Language defines sovereignty as "the ability to exercise control over a particular territory, group of persons or oneself independently of other entities". Hlavajova and Esche place great emphasis on the territorial, or spatial aspect of sovereignty, which comes to the fore in the dictionary definition; they propose that thinking about the autonomy and sovereignty of art should be conducted not from the subjective perspective (i.e. from the perspective of the alleged separation of aesthetic experience), but from the perspective of "infrastructure and its

conventions, drawing on the familiar spaces of art”¹⁶. In the spirit of new institutionalism, the authors ask questions about “the importance of these familiar conventions for the conceptualization of the institutional status of art” and to what extent they can be a differentiating point of reference for other models of cultural production. Importantly, autonomy or sovereignty, however, in the view of the two curators also means the distinctiveness of the temporal order of action, established not by continuous innovation but by repetition. According to Hlavajova and Esche, the possibility of an active constitution of “what is public” depends on the possibility of acting on a *longue durée* scale; when public institutions give up such activity, their programs make “little more sense than every other phenomenon of our transient spectacular event culture, where each production tries to outdo or erase its predecessor”¹⁷. The urge for the continuity of institutional activities differentiates the approach of the authors of *The Making of ‘Once Is Nothing’* from the postmodern “policy of innovation”. From the perspective of Hlavajova and Esche, cultivating novelty, understood as a strategy of resistance against modern universalism and paired with the affirmation of difference, proved to be an inadequate response to the organisation of late capitalism. Distancing themselves from the neo-avant-garde rhetoric of experiment and transgression, Hlavajova and Esche seem to draw conclusions from the poststructuralist and neo-Marxist criticism of thought proposed in the preceding decade by authors such as Benjamin Noys, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello¹⁸. These conclusions do not encourage the curators to radically abandon their previous occupations and change the intentions behind their involvement in activities spanning art, scientific research or activism; just as in the 1990s and 2000s, they cultivate an emancipatory vision of cultural activity. The text of *The Making of ‘Once Is Nothing’* proves, however, that their thinking about the pragmatics of institutional activities has been reoriented; to assign them a political character, it is not enough to rely on the concreteness of local differences and criticism of universalisms. In this light, their recreation of Zabel’s 2009 exhibition can be interpreted as a form of institutional performance that reflects the critical attitude of curators to their own political and cultural formation.

The essay by Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova challenges some of broadly accepted ideas within the field of contemporary art and among new institutionalism’s proponents specifically. It is worth noting, however, that it did not emerge “in a vacuum” as in the last ten or even twenty years


» 16 *Ibidem*.

» 17 *Ibidem*.

» 18 See Benjamin Noys, *Persistence of the Negative*, Edinburgh 2010; Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. Gregory Elliott, London – New York 2005.

we can point to many related concretisations of thinking about long-term cultivation of culture and mobilisation of repetitive, long-term activities for the benefit of social activity. Many institutions or “quasi-institutions”, especially those that have developed a long-standing tradition of cooperation with activists (from such art institutes as De Appel in Amsterdam to festivals like Berlin’s transmediale) currently rummage in their archives. Yet we do not deal here with the resurrection of the “archival turn”, occurring in the visual arts in the wake of postmodernism (i.e. “pastiche bricolage” which usually helps visualise the past in isolation from social totalities), but about the organized work of commemoration, critical analysis and “preposterous” reading of history, taking as its starting point the social problems specific to the “here and now”¹⁹. Importantly, these projects can be seen as strategic in that they cement certain networks of interinstitutional and inter-disciplinary cooperation, and thus confirm their reproducibility. I believe that this aspect is of considerable importance in the context of the discussion on the sovereignty or autonomy of art. It confirms the possibility of their conception not in terms of an absolute difference, but in terms of specific conditions for integration with other areas of life. ●

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» 19 I borrow the term “preposterous” – defining a reading of history and texts of culture in which interpretation and evaluation is done from the current perspective of the reader, taking contemporary problems and phenomena as a starting point – from Mieke Bal. See eadem, *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago 1999; eadem, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto 2002.

