

Institution for the Future is an archive of ideas bringing together reflections by artists, curators and other cultural workers on what an institution for the future should and needs to look like.

Through pondering what an institution for the future might look like the contributors explore a rich array of questions including what the relationship between an institution and artists should be, the possibilities for institutions and activism, an institution's frame of reference and how should it connect to local and international contexts, the role of an institution in research and knowledge production, an institution's relationship to the temporal as well as spatial and an institution as a way of being.

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Co-edited by Biljana Ciric and Sally Lai

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Toward a Certain Smallness

Over the last decades art institutions have been engaged in battles on multiple fronts. During their supposed golden years they held almost absolute power on the cultures in which they were situated. They were the arbiters of power, history, money and taste. These areas would be challenged by the emergence of marginalized voices demanding acknowledgement and then representation. The feminist, gender, and civil rights movements in the US alongside postmodern and postcolonial schools of thought worldwide gave fuel for what would later be known as Institutional Critique. Institutions were forced to re-evaluate their influence and practice. Art would soon be found conceived, produced and exhibited outside of the institution during the expansion of artist-run spaces. Institutions would increasingly depend on industry and government funding to keep afloat, while being rapidly outpaced and out maneuvered by an art market whose major players were galleries, dealers, publishers and independent curators. Did institutions grow too large and too complacent to be able to respond the new speed of contemporaneity? The institution was an empire in decline, its claim to vast territories legitimized by canon and history were being eroded by multiple and simultaneous ideological insurgencies.

Tom Hill writes in *Local Knowledge/New Internationalism* the demise of modernisms utopic claim of universality went hand in hand with the rise of the local. Local knowledge looked towards the regional, those marginalized groups that before had leveled the first institutional critiques, the non-western. The modernist dream of an International Style would be usurped by a New Internationalism which sought to providing a global cultural balance.¹

Institutions, notably the museums, bruised and battered would reinvent themselves, at least on the surface. Perhaps taking cues from the corporations, adapting institutions would commodify the dissent, reformulating the criticism into a product that they would control, reissue and repackage. Museums took an educational turn, becoming audience and community oriented, collections were negotiated rather than pilfered. The symposium in 2003, *Museums for Tomorrow*, identified five areas that the future museums would have to carefully consider: The Corporate Museum, The Politics of Collecting, Museums and Their Audience, The Museum as Gatekeeper, and Museum Education and Pedagogy.²

The smaller artist run spaces in turn would also need to adapt to the changing ecologies. The appetite for local knowledge and regional expertise would require cooperation with reinvented institutions. For example, the Queensland Art Museum in Brisbane, Australia has for years partnered its curators with “local experts” in developing some its flagship exhibitions, notably the Asia Pacific Triennial. I was able to contribute to one of these partnerships in 2009 where curator Russell Storer and I co-developed a platform on the Mekong region. Other curatorial strategies included the short lived “New Institutionalism” which “was recognized in a curatorial intention to create ‘an active space’ that is ‘part community center, part laboratory and part academy’³ folding into itself many of those very concerns laid out in the *Museums for Tomorrow*

¹ Tom Hill. *Local Knowledge/New Internationalism in Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future*. Edited by Peter White. Banff: Banff Centre Press. 1996. p.29

² Maurice Berger (ed.) *Museums of Tomorrow: A Virtual Discussion*. Issues in Cultural Theory 8. Baltimore: Centre for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County. 2004.

³ Nina Montmann. The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism. EIPCP Multilingual Web Journal. 2007

symposium, now as one coherent, multi-layered strategy. It was no surprise that many of the exhibitions that typified this curatorial turn was reflected in the critical packaging of the artist's practice as a "situational aesthetic." But as Simon Sheikh pointed out in his presentation, *Exhibition as a Medium*, at the Times Museum in 2012, that these "activities" may have not belonged in museums. Museums were museums for a reason and the hydra approach left museums and audiences alike bewildered.⁴

Perhaps the art experimentation was better left to smaller spaces and initiatives and it was the role of the institution to present it rather than produce it.

Yet many of the smaller spaces were still maligned by the same ailment of the larger institution - mainly a lack of personality. Both still had identities, often defined by their mission statements, history of engagements and communities of practice, but they were still governed by committees and consensus. In other words, they were still too big.

Recently, I've been attracted to a certain type of organization. Small, agile, and most importantly identified with an individual driver and therefore a face or personality, each of these organizations might be called para-institutions, having inherited a trajectory that began with Institutional Critique and followed through New Internationalism and New Institutionalism. Multi-faceted, these organizations work alongside the institutions and have adopted many of their domains: research, publishing, art production, curatorial and criticism. Importantly, they have been free to engage as equal partners in other systems of knowledge and enquiry such as philosophy and sciences and other institutions such as academia. They are not necessarily defined by their medium or their political alignments (such as new media organizations and community art organizations) but rather their ideas and personal contribution to the investigation.

One such organization that I've been following is Urbanomic, led by Robin Mackay in the United Kingdom. Publishers of *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, Urbanomic was instrumental in gathering some of the leading contemporary thinkers in what would later be labeled as the Speculative Realism movement in philosophy. Urbanomic also engages with institutions such as the "Tate Britain with contemporary sound, video and sculptural work, and other interventions exploring the emerging philosophical paradigm of Speculative Realism and its impact on contemporary art practice."⁵ In the United States, The Public School "is a school with no curriculum. At the moment, it operates as follows: first, classes are proposed by the public; then, people have the opportunity to sign up for the classes; finally, when enough people have expressed interest, the school finds a teacher and offers the class to those who signed up." From the Public School, Alexander Galloway proposed and published *French Theory Today: An Introduction to Possible Futures*, which were the transcripts of the classes alongside essays.⁶

In Asia, Michael Lee, also here contributing to *Institutions for the Future*, has put on the hat of artist, curator and publisher through his one-man para-institution, Studio Biblioteque. Based in Singapore, Michael's practice has been able to maintain his unique personal signature while helping to develop a particular sort of expanded community of like-minded artists in Southeast

⁴ Simon Sheikh. *Exhibition as a Medium*. Presentation at *No Ground Underneath: Curating on the Nexus of Changes*. Times Museum. Guangzhou, China. July 2- 4, 2012.

⁵ Urbanomic. The Real Thing. <http://www.urbanomic.com/event-uf12-details.php>

⁶ Alexander Galloway. *French Theory Today: An Introduction to Possible Futures*. The Public School. <http://nyc.thepublicschool.org/class/2706>

Asia. Marina Abramovic, also in this book, has established the Marina Abramovic Institute. These are individual mandates. Personalities are driving the new institution for the future and as such provide the human connection that is often lacking in the hierarchical organizations of large institutions and the noble but faceless engagement of community arts.

“To talk about small institutions is to talk about a way of working rather than a question of scale, be it physical or institutional” begins the essay, *Smallness*, in the book *Circular Facts* looking at case studies of small institutions as differentiated from museums or artist-run spaces.⁷ It is the direction that I believe will be the new para-institutions for the future. Driven by singularities, relying upon and contributing to institutional knowledge yet remaining adamantly individual rather than community focused. This is not in any way to negate the work being done by community based arts spaces and in fact the para-institution with its singular focus when paired with other spaces in a community of information exchange creates a fuller ecology.

Dia/Projects

Dia/Projects is an arts initiative I established in 2010 focused on Artistic Research and largely a one-person operation that I run near the RMIT University Vietnam, where I teach. Since its inception we’ve collaborated with a number of local and international organizations and spaces, yet our primary interests and ways of working set us apart in many ways from our collaborators.

Unlike some spaces, Dia/Projects does not have programming nor does it receive any external funding. The space and its activities are financed directly by my university teaching salary. Not relying on external funding and the obligations that go with it, I’ve been able to be selective about the types of projects we engage in. Very often the projects involve direct conversation and it is inevitable that these sorts of investigations need to be personally rewarding.

The original intent was to create an entity that was part studio and part project planning space. Dia/Projects would serve as an umbrella for collaborative projects in art, design, architecture, and urban design. Importantly, it would remain distinct from my individual arts practice. This structure would also allow us to submit proposals that might not be accessible to individual artists. I’ve often joked that dia/projects is the alter-ego of an arts match-making service, as much of the work we do emerges from introducing people to networks and opportunities, and in many instances our involvement stops after such introductions. Examples of organization-to-organization projects that we’ve completed include several design projects with partners such as the International Centre for Art and New Technologies (CIANT), in Prague; the University of Applied Science in Munich, Germany; The Japan Society; and the Japan Foundation. Through these partnerships, we’ve been able to send young artists and architects abroad, for some it being their first time traveling overseas.

A part of maintaining an active discussion is bringing in new ideas, and we have had three researchers-in-residence over two years: Thai art historian Vipash Purichanont, then a MA candidate at the School of the Art Institute Chicago researching contemporary art production in the Mekong subregion; Manila-based Mervin Espina, from Green Papaya arts space researching micro-cinema and video art in Vietnam; and New York-based Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, after the completion of her residency at the Whitney Independent Study Program, researching traditional rituals as she prepared new work. Researchers are offered use of the space, archives, media, and library during their residency. We have collaborated with local and

⁷ Mai Abu Eidahab, Binna Choi, Emily Pethick. *Smallness*. *Circular Facts*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011. p. 87

international spaces such as the Asia Art Archive, in Hong Kong, and Art Sonje/SAMUSO, in Seoul, on research related projects.

In December 2011, we helped to organize the *Small Spaces in the Mekong Region* panel discussion that took place at Art Sonje in Seoul that included the New Zero Art Space, from Yangon; Sa Sa Bassac, from Phnom Penh; and Dia/Projects, looking closely at the unique conditions under which each of our mainland Southeast Asian spaces operate. The New Zero Art Space and Sa Sa Bassac have largely a community development oriented focus, while The Reading Room (a Bangkok-based art space invited but unable to attend to the panel discussion) and Dia/Projects tend to be more research directed. The co-curator of the *Institutions for the Future* exhibition at the Chinese Arts Centre as a part of the Asia Triennial Manchester, Biljana Ciric, further details alternative spaces in the Mekong in an essay published in Apexart's *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces*.⁸

In late 2010, I formed an artistic collaboration with Le Tuong Vi, working together under the moniker of VILE/RATS under Dia/Projects umbrella. Each of the projects through this collaboration have emerged from extended discussions at the space and included the co-development of text and installations for the *Moved, Mutated and Disturbed Identities* symposium at the Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai (2010); the *Institutions for the Future* exhibition (2011); with artist Michael Lee and his one-man operation, Studio Biblioteque (2011); and the *No Ground Underneath: Curating on the Nexus of Changes* symposium at the Guangdong Times Museum (2012).

Investigations that we're engaged in include philosophy and the history of science, technology, economics, ancient engineering and materials. We are put off by the expectation to position ourselves in essentialist discourse of national identity. They are very interested in publishing and producing object-based work for exhibitions. Our choice exhibition venues tend to be institutions and institutionally organized exhibitions as opposed to commercially-driven galleries and art fairs.

The research often occurs through conversations and collaborations that happen online, and we maintain an archive of Google documents that are accessed and edited by collaborators in their own time, thereby eliminating time zone and scheduling conflicts. Because of our research orientation, Dia/Projects maintains a strong connection to education, and we have spoken to art schools in Asia and the United States as well as advised and lectured at various curatorial initiatives, including the Sotheby's Institute for Art, in Singapore, and the Parasite Curatorial Training Program, in Hong Kong. Student and professional interaction has been an early cornerstone of Dia/Projects, and many of the students from the university where I lecture have participated in nearly all the events hosted at Dia/Projects. By expanding their networks early in their careers, we have been able to recommend students and recent graduates to Hong Kong, Prague, Norway, Singapore, and China, for various projects.

My intuition is that smaller spaces will increasingly enter the global conversation and art exchange and these para-institutions will directly contribute to the development and evolution of the contemporary art practice as it is shaped by the future artists, curators, critics and markets.

⁸ Biljana Ciric, "Searching for Tomorrow's Alternative China, Vietnam and Cambodia," in [Steven Rand and Heather Kouris, eds., *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces* \(New York: apexart, 2010\), 47-59.](#)

The para-institutions are highly adaptable and are likely to often be in a state of schizophrenia, shifting between producers and distributors, advocates and critics, enablers and destroyers.

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