Process, Protest, Rainforest

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On Returning
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Process, Protest, Rainforest
by Chus Martínez

Published in the months leading up to the reopening of SFMOMA, "On Returning" has surveyed a selection of progressive "turns" in existing museums. In our final post, Chus Martínez maps out three case studies in which new forms of art made possible new sorts of institutions, institutions that in turn made possible new arrangements of the social world. She considers below the exhibition Visualisierten Denkprozesse *(Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1970), the workshops* Las Agencias *(Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2001), and the remarkable beginnings of the Museo del Barrio (founded in 1969 in New York).*

1 — Thought-Process Museum

The question of mapping out radical turns in institutions of art sends me back to the moment of the late 1960s, when curators and museums aimed to reshape themselves in the aftermath of the worldwide protests in 1968. And in the wake of his recent passing, in 2015, it calls up in particular the work done by the pioneering Swiss art historian and curator Jean-Christophe Ammann, who became director of Kunstmuseum Luzern in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1968, at the age of 29.

Recent considerations in the wake of Ammann's death map out his many achievements. Here I wish to discuss just one exhibition from his long career, the 1970 exhibition *Visualisierten Denkprozesse*, which I argue proposed a powerful model for radical turns that followed. The exhibition's title is hard to translate; though below I will use a rather literal translation, "Visualized Thought Processes," it is worth bearing in mind the variation "The Process of Visualizing Thought."

The exhibition was staged in winter 1970 as part of a series of exhibitions curated by Ammann that aimed to establish Lucerne as *the* place for new art in Europe. It drew on the model established by the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann in his landmark 1969 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, *When Attitudes Become Form: Works – Concepts –*

Processes – Situations – Information. "New art," in both cases, referred not to an art grounded in the art market of that moment, but one that took as its vital context both the media and the social world.

The catalogue for *Visualisierten Denkprozesse*, a big book of thick brown pages full of diagrams and typewritten texts, starts with Ammann's statement in which "visualizing thought" is imagined as a sort of "searching," and which new categories — "attitudes" for Szeemann, "thought-processes" for Ammann — would include a whole range of the new art forms of that moment: Anti-Form, Micro-emotive Art, Possible Art, Impossible Art, Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Earth Art, all of them still insufficient to describe the massive transformations in art practice happening at the time.

The exhibition had a dual aim. The first was social: to position Lucerne's community of "new artists" as equal to the most dynamic art scenes around Europe at the time, and one capable of understanding the fundamental turn in language, aesthetics, and politics that their work introduced. But also, and more importantly, it aimed to introduce a new logic of the institution itself. This institution would revolve around a will that had originated in the new art but that was, in the most modern sense, dedicated to reshaping the institution itself, in parallel with the developments in art.

That is, "the new art" was not only about a new sort of contents for old-model museums. It also transformed the institutions that hosted it and the curators who would deal with it. (Szeemann recognized this when, discussing his impressions of Ammann's program in Lucerne, he wrote that, "a museum lives on good art, whereas an exhibition-institute (like Lucerne) is only alive when one says to oneself 'We are not going to this or that museum, but to this or that person.' Artists quickly sense if a museum seats a worm or a weasel…") They had in common the idea that the process of producing art goes hand in hand with that of inventing an institution capable of dealing with its energy and "thinking-logic." The projects were bound together.

This moment had certain limitations. Though it was international in nature, grounded in a strong axis between German and Swiss artists on the one hand and Arte Povera artists in Italy on the other, the idea of a "world art" would only be completed at *documenta 5* in 1972, if not later, with the rise of the so-called "global contemporary" after 1989. And the artists presented by *Visualized Thought Processes* were, moreover, all men: Balthasar Burkhard, Gianfredo Camesi, Luciano Castelli, H. Huber, Herbert Lienhard, Urs Lüthi, Dieter Meier, Gérald Minkoff, Markus Raetz, P.B. Stähli, and Aldo Walker. They may have been searching for a new logic of art and institution, but there was no optic yet in place that could recognize that female artists were an essential part of this exercise.

And if the institutional model introduced by Szeemann and Ammann was new, its lifespan was foreshortened. Szeemann left Kunsthalle Bern in the wake of *When Attitudes*, and indeed the entire institutional experiment seems to have lasted for only three years, from '68 to the oil crisis in the early 1970s, perhaps. I am not saying the institutions disappeared, exactly; on the contrary, they started popping up all over Europe, and then the world. But their radical moment was brief.

Even so, their gesture, of reinventing the institutional structure through the power of artistic agency, persisted as a radical example — a belief in the combined transformation of art and institution, that would be engaged again only after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This was a moment of dynamic transformation, not unlike the late 1960s, in which the "opening up" of geography helped to visualize the world in a bigger, more expansive way.

Though I am only now coming to think of it in these terms, the political and cultural debate in the aftermath of the fall of the communist bloc revolved around the nature of institutions. Discussions about the status of the nation-state, and about democracy as the way individuals find themselves represented in power structures, also occasioned a new conversation about art institutions. And in this moment, exhibitions and museums started, again, to "visualize thinking processes." Institutions of art were once more imagined as a place for transferring values — not all values, but those of a well-formed democratic society, for example.

2 — Protest-Museum

The stake of the new art, this is to say, would rest not only on art remaking art institutions, but institutions in turn remaking the social and political world. This dynamic played out in multiple places and institutions. At the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Swedish curator Maria Lind collaborated with English conceptual artist Liam Gillick to produce *What If: Art at the Verge of Architecture and Design* (2000), which displayed judgment and consciousness not only as the province of artists but of the institution and the viewer. *What If* imagined itself as a training space for an affirmative and collective action, towards a certain understanding of democracy and social design.

A similar project was engaged by Zdenka Badinovac at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in a sequence of exhibitions that, over the course of the late 1990s and early 2000s, to re-constellate the history of art in Eastern and Western Europe, traditions that until then had been almost completely siloed off from one another, at least conceptually. A new transnational approach came into view, distinct from the happy blockbuster-driven institutional life in most major U.S. and European museums, and drawing on the counter-thread that Ammann and others set out post-'68.

These thought-processes were dedicated to the construction of art as an institutional entity that could play a role in the construction of a democratic near future. A somewhat different situation was happening in Spain, where the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) was also taking up some of the ideas pioneered by Ammann's generation, of linking art, institution, and social world. This was, however, a distinct situation from the Scandinavian and Slovenian contexts, where the end of the Soviet Bloc occasioned an urge to convey better notions of the social to an international context, so to speak. Spain, which had emerged from Franco's dictatorship in the early 1980s, at that point really didn't have much room to talk about models of being together. The long years of socially obtuse and aesthetically blind dictatorship had effectively disabled the possibility of imagining a future based on aesthetic values or judgments.

Nevertheless the fall of the Wall created a similar hype around artists as pillars for a new institutional landscape; it was particularly important in this young democratic society to think of artists and museums as central figures in their new present. And rather than reinstate some aesthetic norms, knowing through feeling could be reconstituted only through a collective exercise of remembering — remembering not only our national past, but the pasts that new events made visible, indeed the entire social and political construction of the Western world itself, and the workers and artists that made that world possible.

This "thought-process" did not immediately crystallize in exhibitions, but instead in a hunger for what I might call the "Scandinavian" perspective. Spanish institutions, however, replaced the Scandinavians' implicit trust in design and well-made objects with labor. Labor was imagined as the "agency" that might re-link and rearticulate the institution of art with the social world.

A key example of this was carried out at MACBA in 2001, in a series of workshops titled *Las Agencias* (Agencies). Here I will paraphrase a well-researched description of those workshops written in 2013 by the Spanish art historian Alba Benevent. *Las Agencias* was led by Jordi Claramonte who was a member of the collective La Fiambrera Obrera, and Jorge Ribalta, then the head of Public Programs for MACBA; it took place just prior to the World Bank's summit in Barcelona. Working with collectives active in art and social movements, Claramonte and Ribalta reached out to independent spaces that the museum otherwise could not have accessed, offering them the resources of the museum to establish a broad collaborative network; at the same time the project served, dialectically, as a self-critical exercise for MACBA itself, shaking up its rigid hierarchical structure.

Benevent describes disagreements from the beginning of the workshops. One collective, Contrainformaciones (Counter-Information) was blocked from staging a debate on the subject of gentrification at MACBA — itself perceived as a symbol of gentrification. The museum was seen to be stingy with funding and spatial provisions, and was paranoid about participants sharing keys to workshop spaces and computer equipment, which they said was being used "for activities that could be defined as illegal."

The final manifestation resulting from the workshops was not an exhibition, but a public display of projects in the form of a demonstration in the city center. This, however, and perhaps predictably, resulted in police repression. Charged by police, participants took refuge in MACBA's café, which ended up getting totally destroyed as a result, while many members of the *Las Agencias* workshops were arrested. The city called for MACBA director Manuel Borja-Villel to cancel future workshops in the program and to fire Ribalta. (As Benevent tells it, Ribalta and Borja-Villel were somewhat protected by the fact that city agencies had previously approved the curators' plans, which limited their ability to come down on the curators too hard.)

This story indicates both the value and challenges of museums binding themselves to (collective) thought-processes. On the one hand it reinvents the institution as such, bringing it into direct contact with the strongest forces at play in the social field. Still,

placing the museum at the center of such struggles also exerts strong demands on the institution, which may unravel the museum as such. But this may not be a bad thing. Despite the big claims and communiqués of that era, it became clear that critique is in itself insufficient, and that the institutions we were envisioning were still only able to *represent* multiple realities — and not to enact them.

3 — Rainforest-Museum

This line of thinking, though, sends me back again to the late 1960s, to a model perhaps distinct in some ways from the one drawn out above between Ammann's moment and that of *Las Agencias*. In conversation with the artist and founder of El Museo del Barrio, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, I realized that this gap, or asynchrony, was in some ways embedded in race and social difference. I was at the time myself the director of the museum he invented. (The writing below includes some paraphrasing from my essay "The Octopus in Love," published in *e-flux journal* 55, May 2014.)

When he first conceived of the museum, Ortiz thought that all visitors en route to view exhibitions, should "pass through a rainforest." And he did collaborate with the American Museum of Natural History to create a rainforest room, though unfortunately no images of it are known have survived. This idea was grounded in his growing interest, from the late-'60s on, in psychic healing therapies and rebirthing. His term for this was "Physio-Psycho-Alchemy," by which he meant a physical reversal that can be carried out by means of the mind and its alchemical power.

The rainforest was just such a reversal at the core of the institution, which had to become a living organism in order that it might later host artworks and artifacts. I continued to think about this idea — reversal — in terms of the concept of chiasmus: a reversal that produces a total confusion of identity that aims, later on, to reestablish that identity under a renewed contract, so to speak.

The Museo del Barrio, which Ortiz had invented under the historical conditions of the struggle for civil rights in America, had to be disguised as a rainforest before it was able to emerge as an institution at all. How else could a museum for a still-forthcoming community be possible? Disguised as a rainforest, the new organism could convey both the monumental importance of the project and the futility of presenting itself as alternative.

I think Ortiz was a visionary — and I mean this in the old sense of the word, not its current usage in so-called "creative industries." Within the historical horizon of the museum-as-artwork that he proposed, it makes sense to believe that the rainforest provokes the institution to take ritual as its structure. He perceived even then the need for art institutions to move not only beyond (or before) the modern state, but beyond class and identity as such. The thought-process that both Ammann and Ortiz were hoping to visualize, therefore, may imply not only a critical rethinking of the institution and its functions, but its becoming something completely other: an otherness that is, like in the case of Ortiz's rainforest-image, impossible and possible at the same time.

And so it is perhaps not strange that many curators and professionals are moving away from art institutions, and even from curating as it was understood ten or fifteen years ago. From art schools to theaters, other spaces may be better suited to reinvent not just the institution, but the whole social and cultural contract of a society that still very much depends on discursive models of the past — and knows still too little about arguments able to shed light onto the future.

Artwork by Dana DeGiulio