

New Institutionalism in Contemporary Curatorial Practice: Disappearing Term, Fragmented Legacy

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ABSTRACT

Some of the challenging experiences and methods that arose in the 'Petri dish' of New Institutionalism can still be extended and affect contemporary curatorial practice. Based on the historical process, this thesis argues that New Institutionalism has a limited influence on curatorial discourse, and some of its ideas have become unattainable utopias. However, some of the questions and discussions raised by the proponents of New Institutionalism have taken a new turn in response to contemporary art practice.

Keywords: *New Institutionalism, curator, exhibition.*

1. INTRODUCTION

New Institutionalism is an umbrella term in the curatorial field that was first coined by Jonas Ekeberg in 2003. The concept has led to a rethinking of institutional identity and the function of curatorial practice. Claire Doherty argues that the 'institution' in New institutionalist discourse is a democratic place of open-mindedness.[1] Moreover, as New Institutionalism is a generalisation and historicisation of some of the curatorial notions and discourse of which emerged from post-1990s art practice, its discursive space, therefore, contains some meaningful discussions of artistic practice. At the same time, New Institutionalism was developed with particular geographical relevance. Initially, it was based on the political context of neo-liberalism in Northern Europe. In Britain, it emerged from the commercialisation and corporatisation of art museums under the slogan of 'urban regeneration', which had led to the function of the institution being questioned and critiqued.[1] As Ekeberg suggests, the creation and practice of New Institutionalism had to take place within publicly-funded institutions.[2] However, in the aftermath of the European welfare state, these experimental institutions lacked sufficient financial support. In this context, New Institutionalism progressively faded from the public view.

Even though New Institutionalism no longer appears as frequently in curatorial discourse as jargon, its legacy lives on in contemporary art practice through 'deconstructed' or 'deformed' shards. How are these

fragmented elements of New Institutionalism to be examined? How are its validity and limitations reflected in contemporary curatorial practice? To explore these questions, it is vital to refine and integrate the specific manifestations and utility of New Institutionalism's legacy. The former aims to break down certain identity stereotypes within the institution (e.g., the 'public audience'). Meanwhile, the art institution is no longer just passive, the object of the 'gaze', but has become an autonomous discursive producer. In addition, as Alex Farquharson argues, in contrast to the centrality of exhibitions in traditional galleries, the exhibition is no longer dominant in the context of New Institutionalism.[3] This suggests an equalisation of art projects.

2. BEYOND THE EXHIBITION: DIVERSE PROJECTS

New Institutionalism acts as a 'Petri dish' in which democratic forms of expression can be constructed to create an alternative to the traditional museum paradigm. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the 'new', as opposed to the 'old', institution is that the exhibition no longer acts as the dominant producer of art-related content in the art space, but instead acts as a co-creative, intersectional structure with multiple subjects as producers; art is no longer diffused merely through exhibitions. As regards the art project in curatorial practice, Chantal Mouffe points out that the didactic nature of the exhibition leads it to constrain the nascent nature of other practices, and that a diverse art practice is a counter-hegemonic intervention.[4] When a curatorial

practice is reflected in counter-hegemonic notions, the exhibition becomes more of a 'means of expression' or a narrative language, rather than just a visual representation. This does not imply a reduction in the exhibition's content. On the contrary, the practical way to equalise the project is to enrich the form and scope of the other activities carried out—for example, the development of art residencies.

Farquharson argues that the development of the art residency has facilitated the interaction of artists, curators, and scholars from different regions at this meeting point.[3] While the art residency seems like a tool of interaction and information transfer within the art industry, in practical terms it is a knowledge exchange which is not confined to a community of professionals, but rather has the potential to spread and extend the possibilities of these different projects and modules. The organisation and results of residency projects can be studied in detail and presented in various ways, thus reaching out to the public. For instance, the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart is an art institution founded by artists, and was one of the spaces that promoted the discourse of New Institutionalism in the 1990s. During this period, a dedicated interdisciplinary studio was established to facilitate communication and collaboration amongst artists, critics, and other creators across geographical borders. The residency outcomes were not only presented in the form of exhibitions but also in the form of events, lectures, or publications, depending on the nature and scope of the project. The effects of New Institutionalism still linger in the ideas and goals of some contemporary art initiatives. From the beginning of the twenty-first century and throughout the following two decades, the residency at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart has continued to grow in terms of participants and forms of activity. This implies that some of the institutional activities that relate to the vision of New Institutionalism have not ceased to function, but in fact continue to promote a more 'open' dialogue space.

For both creators of residencies and the public, a favourable trend can be observed in the growing activity of residency art. The institution acts as a 'supplier' in this process, offering backup resources and access, rather than taking a didactic or imposing stance on artists' work. Hence, unlike the monologues of the White Cube, these 'new' institutions promote art spaces where the creators are encouraged to portray a dialogical and dynamic debate. The residual warmth of the New Institutionalism is evident in this regard. More than that, the discourse of New Institutionalism is composed of many reflexive questions that examine contemporary curatorial practice and are reciprocated by it. For instance, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart offers a problem-solving practice that addresses a universal question of New Institutionalism: 'What can art institutions offer the public?' [5] The studio used by the artist-in-residence is a vast space. Transfer of institutional autonomy is not limited to the realm of

professional art practitioners, but is also available to the public. Participants can rent equipment and space in the workshop, and the institution offers public art classes that break away from top-down, preachy aesthetic education.

3. THE DILEMMA OF THE 'NEW' MODEL

This pattern of 'parallel' exhibitions and other programs stems from New Institutionalism's desire for an autonomous, democratic representation of the art space. Lind and Farquharson have argued that, while there is a chance that these New and existing institutions function in a radically democratic way, the main reason the idea of democratic art space remains an unattainable utopia is a lack of financial resources.[5] Nevertheless, the absence of funding is not simply a historically or geographically limited issue in the development of New Institutionalism; the funding dilemma in contemporary curation is still chronic. Whether through foundations, financial support or, in a broader sense, direct funding from society at large, the institution must be 'exposed', and its existence must be recognised. Methodologically, the growth of cultural industries and the public's demand for cultural experiences mean that cultural products offer the potential to increase the income generated by the operation of arts organisations. On a broader global scale, however, the problem remains unsolved. According to a 2021 survey by the American Alliance of Museums, more than 260 art museums are at risk of closure due to a lack of federal funding and the impact of epidemics on the cultural industry.[6] However, this survey was about museums, rather than an 'exodus' of arts organisations or institutions. In the long run, this is perhaps the aspect of New Institutionalism that has been silenced. Even though art groups such as W139 claim to be 'unstructured', they are still not mainstream due to clichés, a lack of funding, difficulties in accessing resources, etc.

Today, some large-scale art institutions are engaging in a 'gentle evolution'. James Goggin notes that Tate has built the fluidity inherent in New Institutionalism on a stable structure within the institution, effectively giving birth to a complete cultural brand.[5] In other words, some institutions, such as Tate, have retained traditional institutional models while advocating innovative or diverse, curatorial and collaborative models, and the role of the curator has gradually been transformed as a result. It is noted here that some other terms or doctrines are symbiotic with New Institutionalism and are frequently discussed in relation to it. Relational aesthetics, for instance, as a description of artistic styles or trends, was articulated by Nicolas Bourriaud, who emphasises concern for participants in art and the co-creative relationship that the public forms with the artist.[7] This 'co-creation' requires the art institution as an open stage. According to Tone Hansen, the art institution in relational aesthetics is a complex concept, but is ultimately seen as a place of knowledge production. In addition to making

statements through their institutions, curators should also establish communities based on platforms. Relational art is supported in principle by the context of New Institutionalism, as this strategy of openness and interaction engages with the concepts underlying New Institutionalism. Given this, although New Institutionalism does not exhaustively redefine the function of the curator, its parallel—the curatorial model in the context of relational art—has become a practical legacy.

As a notable example, the performative method of curating is a practice-oriented approach designed to regulate the relationship between different subjects, such as the artist and the curator and the artist and the viewer.[8] It echoes the focus of relational aesthetics on building relationships and collaborations. In the historical process of developing New Institutionalism, it has shown itself to be feasible and effective. The co-curatorial project 'Sputniks' organised in Kunstverein München is an example of how the performative approach to curating can be put into practice. Linde, in collaboration with external curators from other institutions, divided the project's content over two years, presented it in a multi-layered presentation format which included publications, screenings, workshops and exhibitions, documented its stages and explained them to the public.

Sputniks attempt extends beyond the paradigm of the 'white cube'. Firstly, the curatorial structure of this long-term project involves co-creation between curators and artists, creating a 'complicity' in the process. As a result, an open space for conversation is created in which a rigid authority is replaced by a plurality of discourses and creative content. Furthermore, unlike the 'tree-like' model of curatorship, any creator can expand the project, creating a parallel network of relationships and, therefore, enabling greater diversity and flexibility. *Sputniks* is a testament to the emphasis placed by proponents of New Institutionalism on shared experience and the questioning of conventional modes of exhibition attendance. Intending to create a free and open space, Linde considered the need for a design that emphasised the pavilion's purpose as a public space. She therefore redesigned the layout of the room in partnership with other designers with the aim of creating a connection between the building and the visitor, as well as activating some of the unexplored areas. Because of this re-imagining of the pavilion, the viewer's aesthetic experience is not limited to the works on display but is also projected into the space itself and into a dialogue with the artworks. James Voorhies argues that *Sputniks* realises the ideal of New Institutionalism by transforming the relationship between the public and the exhibition.[5] In other words, by regarding the exhibition space as an immersive, multifunctional, and complex space, this new attempt breaks with the stereotypical paradigm of the 'white cube'.

When revisiting New Institutionalism, it becomes evident that it seems to have disappeared as a term in contemporary curatorial discourse. Nonetheless, open-ended curatorial formats, the development of diverse art projects and further research into public engagement continue to refine the art space and widen its boundaries. However, this legacy is also somewhat finite. In some forms of New Institutionalism, the curatorial model that came about after the mid-2000s was considered impractical or unattainable. For example, the success of Linde's experiments in Kunstverein München confirms the high standards required for the curatorial practice of such a project, which requires institutions to have adequate project budgets, resources, and time. As a result, this kind of practice may still be widely unavailable in today's art institutions. However, the reflective, associative, and discursive patterns of curatorial practice have not entirely vanished with the demise of New Institutionalism.

4. DISAPPEARING WORDS, NEW POSSIBILITIES

These refined experiences remain flexible and adaptable in the contemporary curatorial sphere. An impressive example of this is BMAG's 2018 exhibition 'The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire'. As the exhibition dealt with colonial history, the institution invited six co-curators and designers from former colonies in an attempt to objectify the narrative and circumvent colonial residuals. It is imperative that such exhibitions do not become didactic or tedious vehicles, given that the exhibits are mainly specific historical artefacts. The independent curators curated the exhibition in sections defined on the basis of its narrative content, working in small groups in communication with each other and through plenary sessions, circulating their reflections upwards and discussing them. In addition, the exhibition provided a space for the public to interact, reflect and create. In the exhibition hall, a whiteboard for writing public feedback was installed in the centre of the gallery, not as a formalism unrelated to creation but as part of the dialogue space built by the curators.

It is evident that some of the aspects of New Institutionalism that were not concretised in the 20th century are now being practiced on a methodological level. The decolonial dialogue displayed in the exhibition space of *The Past is Now* was an example of this. The initial vague questions about New Institutionalism can thus be addressed: how can artistic practice hold opinions without limiting the imagination and views of visitors? How can public discourse be heard? What is the function of institutions in understanding politics?[9] On the one hand, current practice seems to go beyond the limits of the New Institutionalism described by Doherty: it is difficult not to prescribe the outcome of participation when the public responds.[10] *The Past is Now*

reconstructed as an autonomous narrative within the exhibition, which also offers a place for public participation and reflection. In this scene, audience perceptions are no longer a simple piece of data on a questionnaire, but a discursive collection of complexity. However, this does not represent a widespread phenomenon, although it may still exist in particular cases. Even if there is a shift of epistemology, the realisation of the 'validity' of public participation requires, alongside what Doherty points out, a curatorial understanding of the aesthetics of interaction.[10] It also depends on the audience's attitudes towards participation, which may transition over time.

Moreover, despite the commonalities of the discourse, the current curating practice seeks a more ethical and egalitarian world view and has relatively firmly opted for a narrative framework over the ambiguous definitions of New Institutionalism. Museums are not constructed as institutions that solely serve politics, and the institution's dominance is hidden in the curatorial process. Instead, the exhibition expresses a political view through the process and results of curatorial practice, the objectivity of the collection, the interpretation of the curator, and the feedback received from the public about their aesthetic experience of the exhibition. While constant inspirations from New Institutionalism remain, the contemporary curatorial practice has also developed some new traits under the influence of globalisation.

The museum is criticised as an 'institutionalised' and hegemonic space in the new institutionalist discourse. Due to the application of this discourse, however, the organisational, mainstream museum still has the potential to carry forward the legacy of New Institutionalism, which may be superficial due to its fragmentation and might be perceived as opportunistic. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the deformation and application of New Institutionalism constitute a positive attempt at public orientation. Although this phenomenon may not be widespread, it demonstrates that the museum can work as a polyphonic place. Furthermore, it is perhaps also a testament to the potential of New Institutionalism: a broader range of subjects, or rather, large scale mainstream art institutions, may delay discussing or practising the discourses and methods of New Institutionalism.

It is critical to note that some of the potential explored above is a result of the loose nature of the New Institutionalism dialogue. The roots and branches of this dialogue are complex, and in them one can witness the wide range of questions and opportunities contained within contemporary curatorial practice. Furthermore, when discussing the practical value of New Institutionalism, there is a need to situate its influence in the context of globalisation and examine where the boundaries of its impact of it lie. This may be an immature line of reasoning. However, I would argue that

the legacy of New Institutionalism can be deconstructed and applied beyond geographical limits when discussing its impact on contemporary curatorial practice. What does it mean in countries such as China that have not experienced neoliberal economic systems? What is the significance of its vision in such a context? This is a question that has plagued advocates of New Institutionalism.[5] It is true that the 'authority' of 'traditional art institutions' is held by a completely different set of institutions in the Chinese social context. Nonetheless, there are similarities in the paradigms of even very different institutions in curatorial practice. Li refers to financial difficulties in the development of contemporary Chinese museums and the need to build a freer and broader 'community' with the public. At the same time, Yongfeng Ma also advocates the notion of 'self-institutionalisation', in which interdisciplinary experimentation is combined with external collaboration, and based on the self-reflexivity of the institution.[11] Evidently, despite the differences in political contexts, some of the contradictions in the development of artistic practice are similar. This idea reflects the role of New Institutionalism in the epistemic shift towards a highly dynamic art space – the institutional forms of critique from the inside out have proven to be flexible and adaptable. Although this 'introspective' method of institutional transformation may not be used in isolation, as it is constrained to some extent by the institution's self-proclaimed 'brand' and so may find it challenging to break out of its own framework. Therefore, it is essential to continue investigating how contemporary curatorial strategies can be blended with a synthetic review approach integrating external criticism so that allow the risk of formalism to be minimised.

New Institutionalism is evident in the presentation and results of projects within the institution and its partnerships with external organisations. Kunststituut Melly (formerly the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art) in the Netherlands is a pioneer in New Institutionalism that continues to engage in the practice of imagination in relational aesthetics through public programs. Kunststituut Melly's long-term project *Melly's Neighbours* explores the relationship between art institutions and the surrounding community by engaging the work and experiments of various creators. The creators go out into the community to collect materials for 'moving' a specific 'neighbourhood', as represented by a shop or community member, into Melly. The curators and artists incorporate interdisciplinary means of artistic expression to respond to the question 'Who are the neighbours of an arts organisation?' The active exploration of the community by artists has contributed to the transformation of institutional identity, and the gallery has become a platform for multiple voices.

Melly's interpretive approach to public projects emphasises the portrayal of a state of 'harmony' between art

and community, rather than the presentation of contradictions. Claire Bishop criticised 'hypocritical symbiosis' in 2005 by pointing out that it is still necessary to depict art's encounters and relationships with other subjects to provoke a confrontation based on the practical realities of separation and contradiction between art and life.[12] In this regard, does *Melly's Neighbours* portray a virtual utopia? However, it could also be seen as a visible and positive trend. New Institutionalism does not exist in isolation, and it is crucial to consider its intersection with other canons or conditions when discussing its function in contemporary curation – for example, the communicative nature of digital media or the redefinition of institutional public cultural services by the New Museology. Therefore, in this case, not only is the unilateral influence of New Institutionalisation evident, but also the convergence and integration of various factors. Besides, this can, in turn, pose new questions regarding art practice. Such as, are engagement strategies that bring the public back to the gallery effective? Why is 'community' establishment always associated with art spaces? Art may be denied direct admission into living situations if it interferes with public work and everyday life. This also provokes discussion of new issues in curatorial practice: can we create art spaces without borders?

5. CONCLUSION

This study was intended to explore the function and role of New Institutionalism in contemporary curatorial practice, and the impact of its legacy on contemporary curatorial practice. By analysing examples of new institutionalist curatorial practice and comparing them to art practice after its decline, it has been found that New Institutionalism intended the art institution to become a democratic, autonomous, and flexible space. New institutionalist discourse acts as a 'Petri dish' for contemporary curatorial practice and has bred some approaches that are still relevant and viable in contemporary curatorial practice. For example, in terms of the structure of relationships both within and outside the institution, today the co-curatorial model (the collaboration between independent curators and other creators) is still alive and well and traces of it can be found in practice, such as performativity in curation. In the specific projects undertaken by institutions, the New Institutionalist objective of 'de-centring' the exhibition is also the orientation that art museums currently promote in other projects like residencies and workshops.

On the one hand, the dilemmas that arise in the development of Institutionalism are not limited to phased art practice, lack of funding and the questioning of the possibility of effective public participation. On the other hand, this paper raises the possibility that, in reflecting on these existential limitations, the legacy of New Institutionalism has also been reconciled with some of the new approaches and ideas of the contemporary era,

thereby producing new images of integration: utilisation of new institutionalist discourse has been delayed in traditional museums, and the new institutional discourse can be 'refined' for use as a tool to transcend geographic borders and contextualised in the context of globalisation.

Finally, this research has also touched on some of the responses to New Institutionalism in contemporary curatorial practice, such as the differences between Institutionalism and the construction of images of the relationship between community and art that is evident in relational art today. And it attempts to make the point that, when thinking about the role of New Institutionalism for contemporary curation, it is important to realise that its role does not exist in isolation, as its combination with other doctrines facilitates a critique of artistic practice from a new perspective. However, because New Institutionalism itself is generally regarded as an 'old' generalisation, it is not currently covered well by primary or secondary documentation. Therefore, it is critical to explore how the various doctrines comprising New Institutionalism have been updated in today's world.

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