

Infrastructure as Chewing Gum

Practice-based Reflections on How to Play with Institutional Parameters

RACHEL MADER, *professor*
Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Art

*Starting with the observation that institutions are far beyond the stable and clearly organized structures their representation in respective tools like organigrams, websites or specification booklets suggest, the article is interested in the way the manifold loopholes that are part of each institutional setting can be activated for an emancipatory use. With reference to concepts such as “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, 2016) or strategies of intervention (Mouffe, 2012) it is interested in how this can be done as part of the daily routine within institutional life and, by doing this, in how far there is a potential for changing institutions on a long-term basis. A specific understanding of institution underlies this view, one which states that regulations are far less absolute than is commonly assumed; something often *ex negativo* is asserted in institutional critique as well. In contrast, they depend on acting subjects, routines or even rituals. Therefore the text undertakes a micropolitical viewing of an interplay between actors and structures that is continuously negotiated. My own institution, an art university, and my interaction with it, will serve as a case study of the analysis.*

Institutions are porous constructs prone to malfunction. Despite the initially straightforward appearance of organigrams portraying their workings, it quickly becomes evident to all involved that such depictions are a crude simplification of the facts: complicated internal connections inevitably exist, turning the ostensibly clear assignment of tasks and roles into negotiable and yet controversial factors. A comparable false clarity emerges in the case of so-called ‘specification booklets,’¹ which list the tasks that

1 — *Pflichtenheften* (literally ‘duty booklets’) detail the responsibilities and tasks

make up individual staff members' job profiles. The degree of abstraction in these papers scarcely enables an inference of the actual lived institutional everyday. A similar situation presents itself with regulatory documents: with expense regulations, despite whose detailed division of expenses into refundable items the majority of effective costs still can't be categorized; or the instructions for all kinds of processes, including research proposal submissions, which differentiate the distribution of responsibilities so extensively as to evoke continual insecurity about the extent of the respective application; or in the case of newly software-based forms for annual employee performance reviews with keyword suggestions and an integrated five-point assessment scale, both of which supposedly facilitate the preparation of the reports but in fact simply replace the search for precise designations of individual qualities with an approximate adaptation to standardized and standardizing criteria.²

Neither this kind of bureaucratic absurdity nor its critique are entirely new—the following chapter will go into both of these debates in more detail. Currently, however, the voices of those for whom critique is not to be seen as grounds for a complete rejection of institutional frameworks are becoming more audible. In the sense of an “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, 2016) and by implementing strategies of intervention (Mouffe, 2012), the intention is to reshape institutional frames on the basis of emancipatory, political and ethical principles.³ The considerations that follow here are based on this

of a given position in Swiss enterprises, including universities of applied sciences and arts.

- 2 — Observing these standardizations is the basis of David Graeber's *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (2015, German translation: 2017). He even speaks of the “Era of total bureaucracy,” whose triumph as a social logic (in the western world) he locates in the late 1960s. The totality he claims with this phase separates it from the many other intensive bureaucratization attempts of earlier decades or even centuries. Graeber, 2015.
- 3 — At the 2016 Luma Foundation conference *How Institutions Think*, in Arles, the majority of the invited speakers, who almost exclusively represented the most prominent voices of discussions on current potentials of and challenges for (cultural) institutions, emphasized that the goal can't be deciding for or

perspective: my focus is on those moments of the institutional everyday in which regulations fall short, in which the appearance of gaps, shortcomings or insecurities provides an opportunity for action, and in which instabilities can be used to one's own ends. A specific understanding of the institution underlies this view, one which takes seriously the regulatory pursuit of structuring valid commitments while nonetheless maintaining that regulations are far less absolute than is commonly assumed—or is asserted *ex negativo* by their critique. I contend that they are, comparable to the judiciary, subject to estimation and interpretation, and in this sense necessarily of a decidedly limited precision. This means that institutions are not only structures, organizational forms and constructs oriented towards representational forms, but that they depend on acting subjects, actions and routines, or even rituals, for their existence and functioning. The following is thus a micropolitical viewing of an interplay of actors and structures, based on the assumption that institutions are not static but dynamic frameworks whose states are the result of continuous negotiation.⁴

This conception can be applied productively to 'my own' institution, an art school, in multiple regards; for example, in that it asserts its striving for a dynamic self-understanding as its DNA, yet stumbles time and again on the—in part self-imposed—necessity of standardized regulations. I'll refer to my school again throughout the text. At this point I've been directing the research department at the school for many years. Depending on whom I communicate with about this position, I emphasize my tasks differently: in communicating externally I underline my responsibility to develop,

against them. The focus on possibilities for action within and in relation to them is much more the focus; considering, for example, strategies and tactics. This understanding is explicitly contrary to a technocratic vision of institutions which sees structural and organizational factors as static procedures.

4 — With this understanding I build on Oliver Marchart's descriptions of institutions as "dynamic constellations," wherein he observes a constant struggle for domination (hegemony) "between the rival forces." He develops this thesis based on the documenta exhibitions dX, d11 and d12, whose content-based development he describes as a "tectonic shift" for questions of politization, the decentralization of the west, and communication and theorizing. Marchart 2008, p. 10.

accompany, and carry out research in the specific setting of a university of applied sciences and arts, and, in so doing, portray an agile and innovative field. Meanwhile, discussions within the institution often focus on external funding, which we restlessly try to acquire because we must—it's both our assignment positions and the guarantee of continuing to have them. A so-called 'self-financing ratio,' determined by an organizational entity barely aware of what makes up our day-to-day business, regulates the portion of funding which my institution makes available in addition to successfully obtained external funds. Put another way, all of my activities and those of my colleagues are paid in half by the finances we bring in and in half by a so-called institutional 'basic funding.' In other words, 50 % of my job is to carry and manage the economic risk, and that within the other 50 %, which is framed with the logic of a university structure and thus a structurally intensive institution rich in tradition. It is hardly surprising that my position is also subject to these terms and that my workload grows with the successful procurement of funding for projects but can be reduced in cases of rejection. This inherently paradoxical constellation is further aggravated by the fact that my institutional job description obliges me to 'innovate': to initiate or investigate content-related innovation (as research is often apostrophized in use-inspired settings). At the same time, the structures which frame this task insist on pursuing generally applicable and long-term reliable regulations. In one case, following the approval of a larger research project by the national research grant agency, which could only grant funding for promotion candidates, a new employee category had to be created in order to integrate the project into the structural logic of the school and realize it.

Nor will it be of much surprise when I emphasize that all of these structural adjustments are the results of content-related decisions within respective research themes. As self-explanatory as this might first appear, it contradicts the logic of organizational processes from a management perspective, which today has gained entry to nearly all institutions. While the latter creates and postulates organizational clarity with great proficiency and an imposing number of English expressions and sovereign-looking diagrams, the volatile forms of content-derived suggestions for the organization of structures or groups often seem unconvincing, leaving them vulnerable to attack. As director of the research group, mediating between

content-driven self-structuring and a framework which upholds standards of general management is a central component of my work—one which naturally can't be found in the specification booklet. This differentiation is important because it describes an additional difference to many existing approaches that are critical towards the institution, the focus of which rests respectively on the question of power or a critique thereof. This text does not primarily intend to carry out a critique of institutional structures as being supposedly immobile and impermeable; rather, a complex perspective is taken on the continuous friction between attempts at institutional consolidation—of which I am certainly aware—and its inherent sabotage in the realm of the everyday. Or, put another way, I'm interested in the incredible paradox that despite diligent administrative regulatory efforts, a plethora of unresolved issues remain. At times it even seems as though the increase in administrative rules produces an equal amount of gaps and invisibilities which can again be occupied and reinterpreted in their own right.⁵

On the purity of processes and structures and their inconsistency on the level of content

In the Dictionary of Sociology, the term 'institution' is differentiated into a characterization which matches its colloquial use and a more broad sketch of what the term expresses:

5 — With this approach I strongly sympathize with what Mark Fisher called 'accelerated manangement'. By this term he suggests not that there is too much management, but rather not enough. He argues: "The systemic anti-productive inefficiency engendered by neo-liberal managerialism is neither a mistake nor a failure: it has precisely succeeded in its aim of producing a generalised resubordination of workers, and a disabling of former 'red bases' such as universities and art colleges. The route to overcoming this consists neither in the (capitalist) realist accommodation to managerialism nor in the fantasy of exit from institutions. Democratic socialism has always been about the promise of a better *managed* society (where management is precisely not synonymous with top-down control). In order to assert democratic control over our lives and work, we must therefore reclaim management from managerialism." <http://parsejournal.com/article/accelerate-management/> (accessed March 22, 2020)

Based on general colloquial use, i. describes an establishment (organization, agency, enterprise) per se, which, following specific rules for work routines and the distribution of functions to cooperating employees (within the frame of a larger organizational system), fulfills a particular assignment. In a more fundamental sense and as a sociological term, i. describes any form of consciously designed or accidentally occurring stabile, continuous pattern of human relationships which are demanded by a society or which are borne by the political and social orders generally perceived as legitimate and therefore actually 'lived.' (Dictionary of Sociology 1994, p. 375)

The differences between these two descriptions are revealing in that they name—accidentally, in fact—what could be considered two oppositional positions of current debates. While the first characterization is kept more general with terms like 'establishment,' 'specific rules' or 'function,' intending objectivity and listing parameters which suggest rigidity, the markedly different choice of words in the second case indicates a fundamentally different understanding of institution: instead of 'establishment,' 'form' is mentioned noncommittally; 'specific rules' is echoed in the more organic-sounding phrase 'consciously designed or accidentally occurring stabile, continuous pattern'; and 'function' finds its counterpart in the informally established 'political and social orders generally perceived as legitimate.' Although certainly unintended, the first description reveals distinct overlaps with the vocabulary used in management discourses, while the second, more broadly phrased sketch, likely stems from a way of thinking and arguing rooted in the social sciences. The consequences of these differences are decisive, not only for determining a conception of the institutional but for the scientific and political debates surrounding it. 'Establishment,' 'rules' and 'function' are factors that are defined and filled with specifications, but not really pinpointed. 'Functions' are then professional designations like 'professor' or 'artistic assistant,' which other documents define more closely in terms of qualifications and responsibilities. Such standardizations should enable equal treatment. In the example mentioned, maximally heterogenous biographies can thus be placed in a job category, entrusted with comparable work and allocated to a wage group. Yet just referring to the apparently ineradicable gender-specific wage gap in every branch and at every career stage demonstrates that these standardizations are interspersed with social values, even if this is consistently denied. In

another no less problematic way, the negative consequences of this standardization emerge in what has meanwhile gained footing in every larger institution under the term ‘process management’ and contributes to the production of such impressively complex graphics.

Process management (...) deals with the identification, design, documentation, implementation, control and improvement of business processes. Holistic approaches to business process management not only address technical questions but also put particular emphasis on organizational aspects like strategic orientation, organizational culture or the inclusion and direction of those involved in the process. ‘Who does what, when, how and with what?’ are central questions. Key figures are used for improvement and control. These numerical indicators can be found, for example, in a Balanced Scorecard. (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prozessmanagement> (accessed August 9, 2020))

Even if this description refers to soft factors like organizational culture, the fact that key figures are nevertheless demanded indicates that the aim is to unify recurring procedures and deal with them simply, objectively and also impersonally; a tendency which David Graeber identifies as having become greatly increased since the use of computers in the work place has become ubiquitous (Graeber 2017, p. 172). A glance at the graphics frequently used shows that the abstractions implemented are devoid of any context whatsoever, operating instead with generalized, almost universally applicable terms and formulas, as for example in the case of the often-used SWOT analysis.⁶ The belief in the potential and reliability of such administrative activities—which Graeber refers to in his title with a negative connotation of the term *utopia*—has led in recent years to an enormous increase in bureaucratic measures worldwide, including at art schools. This development can also be credited to the so-called Bologna Reform, in the wake of which achievements in tertiary education should be aligned worldwide. What supposedly should have aided in the mobility of students and the exchange of knowledge has in fact led to a “reorganizational craze,” as a colleague

6— SWOT stands for Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats and describes a technique often implemented to systematically and coherently estimate risks to be taken or possible chances of success when planning processes.

from another art school recently described it. The project *reformpause* (reform pause) already thematized this unintentional consequence of the development when it was carried out in Kunstraum Lüneburg in 2006. In addition, it identified economic factors, which critics see as stemming from a neoliberal logic, as relevant driving forces.⁷

In the case of my institutional constellation, the above-mentioned diagnosis applies: not only are research departments alimented financially based on their success, as sketched above, but also courses of study (the ‘success’ of the latter is measured in student enrollment numbers). The very high regulatory density is a result of what a recent peer review by external experts termed ‘administrative over-structuring.’ This refers, not least, to the fact that every activity of research must be booked hourly with the software SAP, requiring each of these hours to be designated a cost center, which exists when a so-called ‘project’ is opened and which, in turn, can only be done when the project is financed via third-party funding. Radically thinking this situation through to its logical conclusion, the consequence is that employees may only think about something when an externally funded cost center exists for it. It follows that new ideas must be developed and prepared for their own financing outside of working hours. Although in actuality this doesn’t occur to such a radical extent, it remains that the logic of the system would, in fact, demand it.

It’s these and similar phenomena of the enormous regulatory density in institutions that have led in recent years to an intense critical debate and even to strikes and protests at the institutions themselves; for example, in 2009/10 in Vienna.⁸ This actionist resistance was intended to defend the

7 — <http://kunstraum.leuphana.de/projekte/e-reformpause.html> (accessed July 5, 2019). As editors of the anthology *Teaching Art in the Neoliberal Realm. Realism versus Cynicism*, Pascale Gielen and Paul De Bruyne build on these observations as their primary assumptions. The texts collected therein provide insight into the numerous different consequences this development, in their opinion, would have; for example, that students would become clients. Gielen/de Bruyne 2012.

8 — These protests were apparently so incisive that they resulted in a detailed Wikipedia article: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Studierendenproteste_in_%C3%96sterreich_2009/2010 (accessed July 5, 2019).

university's structures, denouncing their physical and metaphorical occupation. However, a large part of the theoretical institutional critique of the past years, which hasn't specifically targeted universities of applied sciences in every case but still provides an important frame of reference for this debate, formulated very fundamental reservations about the institutional structures themselves. In large part, the critique formulated is directed at the predominately rigid and anonymous constructs which it sees as being determined by overarching political processes and ideologies and which don't allow for any possibility of resistance or even self-reflection from within.⁹ In contrast, during the last two decades many theoreticians have begun developing concepts which reflect a dynamic understanding of institutions. Often with recourse to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, institutions are understood as places within which dominance and power are contended, yet within which "tectonic shifts" (Marchart 2008, p. 10) can occur.

These different conceptions have many consequences for questions of how action can be taken within institutions.¹⁰ Furthermore, they're revealing about which parameters and categories are underlying references for this action, albeit much less explicitly. While advocates of a definition of the institution as a static and dominant power structure usually principally re-

9 — Many of these theoretical positions relate directly or indirectly to Louis Althusser's essay on the institutional disposition of the state (first published in 1977), in which he allocates cultural institutions to the so-called ideological state apparatus. In contrast to the latter, they don't act via repression but through educational undertakings. This implicit or explicit affair is taken up in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's text *Empire* (2000), Tony Bennet's *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) and by Maria Lind in her foreword to a 2005 account of the cultural landscape in Europe as projected into the future, among others. She uses the phrase "completely instrumentalised" to describe this total dominance: "It is 2015. Art is almost completely instrumentalised – regardless of whether its financing is private or public. Art services either national or European interests, where it is especially useful on the construction or reinforcement of specific identities. Lind/Minichbauer 2005.

10 — In the text *How to move in/an institution* I examine the different understandings of institutions and the resultant consequences for possibilities to act within them in more detail. Mader 2013.

ject it,¹¹ apologists of a dynamic understanding of institutions are interested in possibilities of intervention, of structural subversion or of molecular-political processes in which a provisionally counter-hegemonial position is shaped step by step with an emancipatory intention.¹² The perspective of the first group, focused as it is on a critique of power, concerns itself with overarching processes and structures and regulated relations, similar to management discourse. Its critique thus argues strictly along the lines of the structural moments of an institution which keep it planning, organizing and working, with apparently no regard for content-related issues. In contrast, the modest progression of institutional critique is almost always motivated by—and based on—content and resists generalizing processes and standardizations for reasons of thematic consistency or in striving for precision. In a similar vein, I recently refused to complete a co-worker's reference with a newly-introduced software which not only pre-selected keywords for my evaluation but also implemented a five-point assessment scale. I was bothered by the implication that the possibilities of individual employees' qualifications are reducible to a tidy amount which can be clearly defined in advance and registered after the fact. It forces the great variety of possible individual competences into a frame which, although it might enable its being cross-referenced with overarching strategy processes, specification sheets or employee development concepts, doesn't account

11 — Stefan Nowotny and Gerald Raunig's conception of "instituent practices," from the publication of the same name (*Instituierenden Praxen* in German), is thereby of ambivalent character: on the one hand it accepts the need of critically interacting with institutions, and on the other hand it pleads for a constant flight path as altitude in order to avoid institutional encrustation always linked with power relations. The basis for this gesture, which they refer to in other places as an emancipatory transformation, is their aspiration to stretch the critique beyond the borders of the field; e.g. to direct an artistic institutional critique at something other than the art world, wherein it can only become a representation of itself and thus loses its critical potential. Nowotny/Raunig 2008, pp. 21–27.

12 — In addition to the aforementioned exponents Chantal Mouffe and Oliver Marchart, the England-based curator Alex Farquharson (Farquharson 2007) and most of the presenters at the conference *Institutional Attitude* (viewable at <https://vimeo.com/12206073>, accessed July 5, 2019) stand for this approach.

for the roles of individuals, who influence and shape every hierarchical level of an enterprise. In response to my message that I kindly refused to use these templates, the supervising personnel manager informed me that I had really better use them, seeing as references have to follow certain guidelines. Without responding, I resolved that if she should contact me again, I would send her all of the references I had authored as a basis for further discussions on whether the comprehensiveness and personal scope of my version could be matched by the standardization of the software.

Performative institutions, their actors, power and the space for action within them

To counter the assumption, inherent to both institutional critique and management logic, that institutions and the behavior of their members is primarily determined by abstract processes and regulations, I contrast it with an understanding of institutions which asserts the ability of everyone within them to act. I propose that even in strictly regulated structures, numerous parameters can be varied and modified. The terminology informed by social sciences that was introduced in the previous chapter, terms and phrases like ‘form,’ ‘consciously designed or accidentally occurring stable, continuous pattern’ and the ‘political and social orders generally perceived as legitimate,’ indicate moments of negotiation, of design, of consent or refusal. All of these are moments in which actors can assume active roles. In her text *How Institutions Think*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests considering social conventions to be institutions, hence indicating the mutually determining and constitutive effect of institutional frames and actors. Furthermore, she aims to deconstruct the subject function of institutions suggested in the title of her publication on the basis of the aforementioned interdependence of institutions and actors, in such a way as to regard it neither as an abstracted nor a rigid constellation, nor to deem it the result of a collective expression of will (Douglas, 1986, pp. 26–41). The Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis argues in a comparable manner that institutions are the result of social processes of negotiation, during which the idea or rather imagination of the respective institution is constituted (Seyfert, 2011). Douglas and Castoriadis describe

the institutional disposition as a convoluted process in the frame of which a common understanding of what the institution should be is itself constituted. These fundamental considerations are important for thinking about institutions in that they counter the oft-denounced rigidity of structures with a dynamic process of interacting parameters, thus assuming constant change and the existence of possibilities for action. I suggest describing this conception as a performative understanding, based on the observation that every action evokes institutional effects.

Such an understanding can rarely be found in institutions or with the actors themselves, nor in the institution-critical debate. My thesis is that this oversight has fatal consequences. While there are numerous texts to be found on how structures, rules and norms limit the acting within and shaping of institutional structures, far less is published on the acting and shaping itself; for example, on how and when people bypass or ignore guidelines or even force the institution to adapt itself to them. This blind spot represents not only a reflective gap, but also a common institutional practice, such as when institutional functionaries communicate in the third-person plural and not with the first person singular ‘I,’ beginning their sentences with phrases like ‘the department director has decided that...’. In the same way that such gestures should shield individual persons from exposure, they mask accountabilities and thus solidify the anonymous power of the responsibilities divided up in organigrams. The same mechanism takes effect when supervisors cling to abstractly defined processes and assert them despite strong content-based arguments for adaptation. David Graeber describes this phenomenon—and I call it a phenomenon because there is in fact no rational basis for it—as “structural stupidity” (Graeber, 2017, p. 57ff), meaning those moments in which individuals insist on existing regulations and guidelines while disregarding the existence of good and pragmatic reasons to abolish them—or, at least, to bypass or ignore them. The aforementioned rejection of standardized references is an attempt, despite being reprimanded, to resist complying with what in my opinion amounts to completely illogical demands. A similar mechanism reveals itself when actors take regulations to heart so much that despite rejecting their content, they resist pushing their boundaries and frustratedly try to squeeze themselves into the rules as best they can. When, for example,

they don't use the expense regulation's convoluted formulations, which hardly enable inference about their actual financial goings-on, instead making lists as precise as possible and attempting to validate them against the regulations in arduous negotiations. And this sheer over-obedience can also be found when people refuse to think beyond the tasks listed in their specification booklets, without having negotiated the tasks or the raise in salary it contains. Thus, even for the critics of overly structured systems, a striking, paradoxical belief in rules reveals itself, which by way of circular argument inherently grants more power to those whom they intend to criticize. This effect is widespread and is, in Graeber's terms, the 'structural violence' which follows 'structural idiocy' (Graeber, 2017, p. 100ff). His strong terminology (violence) is a conscious choice, meant to indicate that protesting structural guidelines generally results in sanctions being threatened. He also emphasizes that a hierarchy is embedded in constellations which ensure that the subordinate must constantly think in terms of the power bearer's logic:

Structural inequalities constantly evoke something that I call 'one-sided structures of imagination'. That means, a division between a class of people who carry out a majority of the imaginative work and a class which doesn't. (Graeber, 2017, p. 115/6)

The conception of institutions as dynamic constructions in which structures and hierarchies are produced and cemented with actions, often of a critical nature, forms the background of my institutional understanding and my acting within the given parameters. Concretely, it's the borders and deficits of regulations in my institutional everyday that interest me, and the possibilities to bypass them or reinterpret them to reflect the intentions and ideas of our research team.

"...to act as though one were already free" (Graeber, 2017, p. 119). Organizing as political and creative action

Such an approach can be applied in countless moments: in renaming a meeting 'event with practice partners' so that drinks and food can be covered by the expense regulations; in that all mails are viewed as and

answered with the same priority; when ideas and projects are developed and stubbornly pursued, even when neither a cost center nor the explicit compliance of those in charge, nor the assignment itself is named in the specification booklet; or when I interpret the tasks in my specification booklet—so obviously in need of explanation—in such a way that content-based decisions fall outside of their governance and I can, for the most part, decide independently on thematic orientations; such a stance also reveals itself when I divulge background information to my team about, and the motivations for, my own actions, opening them to debate; it shows itself when para-institutional structures are being established on the website as if they would be conventional projects, even though in fact they are nothing but statements of interests of people in a loosely knit working constellation, by doing this ideas that are not institutionally sanctified behave as if they would be; and it's evident in a mode, not of naivety, but of feigning attempting things unknowingly and in acting "...as though one were already free." I could easily continue with this list—the gaps in institutional structures and regulations and the spaces for interpreting them are enormous and plentiful. Nonetheless, the possibilities for action are embedded in a matrix with coordinates of a different order: they call for an awareness of power, or at least the powerful moments that an individual can occupy by virtue of his or her position in an institution, and which vary enormously based on hierarchical and organizational integration. Moments of acting powerfully are everywhere. Shaping them actively, revealing the background factors that one feels obligated to abide by, is a question of responsibility and transparency which could, in a modification of Pascal Gielen's assertion of a growing "non-engagement" in institutions be called 'institutional engagement.'¹³ Gielen's claim—based on observations of art institutions and biennials—that the temporary mandates which currently form the basis of most careers in the art world are carried out at the expense of institutional responsibility, is only valid for a small, albeit visible elite of curators. Parallel thereto, a plethora of actors at work in smaller and larger

13 — Pascal Gielen in his contribution to the conference *Institutional Attitudes*, (Recordings of the conference on Vimeo, viewable at <https://vimeo.com/12206073>, last accessed: 9.7.2019).

institutions have thematized their acting within and with these structures in recent years. By now, a modest but nonetheless illuminating selection of texts, speeches and recorded conversations exist in which people in institutional positions tell about how they try to perceive engagement and responsibility in their roles. Alex Farquharson, for example, director of Tate Britain, among other things, suggests making ‘hospitality’ the foundational principle of collaboration between institutions and invited actors, and thus leveling the power constellation between organizer and guest as much as possible. In order to make this possible he continues to plead for a culture of dialogue with all the actors involved: with artists, of course, but also with audiences, politics and the public at large. The art theorist Simon Sheikh, on the other hand, argues for reflected operating on all levels of institutional action: in addition to curating following less canonized rules and art education being granted a central role, he demands of experts a less hermetic use of language and an architecture which is adaptable and goes beyond self-representation.¹⁴ The art critic Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt underlines the importance of naming and giving accounts of these different ways of acting in order to establish an alternative narrative of possible ways of acting (Gordon-Nesbitt, 2012). Although the aspects described apply to highly diverse levels of institutional action, they share in their wanting to work within existing institutions and their parameters. The implication is that resistance is indeed generally accepted as part of institutional culture, just as coming to terms with counter-positions is also considered to be. Such a perspective is the mark of the quintessentially “political,” according to Chantal Mouffe in her theory of agonistics. For the principle of a “contention with” instead of a “retreat from” strives for the kind of productive destabilization of institutions from the inside which the “exodus theoreticians” would avoid (Mouffe, 2006, p. 18).

The fact is, I see my institutional everyday as interspersed with productive destabilizations that I generally don’t criticize as such because I’m not usually concerned with the irritation of the institution itself. It’s merely

14 — Alex Farquharson and Simon Sheikh in their lectures at the conference *Institutional Attitude*, viewable on Vimeo, Alex Farquharson: <https://vimeo.com/12206073>; Simon Sheikh: <https://vimeo.com/12433857> (last accessed: 9.7.2019).

a side effect—albeit thoroughly welcome—of content-based decisions. Yet this text should thematize precisely this accompanying effect which, I contend, goes with a paradigm shift in the conception of institutional action. If institutions are grasped as performatively-generated permeable constructions with space for interpretation, acting within them is a constructive and political activity: constructive in that structures and regulations are not meant primarily to be obeyed, rather to be interpreted and shaped as much as possible; political in that such a way of acting reflects an institution-critical way of thinking which recognizes hierarchies and potential consolidations, and works toward destabilizing them. *

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