

**FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS
AND THEORIES OF ART**

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**FEMINIST ART INSTITUTION. A CODE OF
PRACTICE**



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Introduction

In January 2017 I have initiated a seminar in the course of which a group of curators, art critics, artists and representatives of other Prague-based institutions has been discussing what a feminist art institution could be.

What had brought us together was something like a new feminist consciousness we have acquired as a result of discrimination and sexism we had experienced in academic institutions and in activist and art circles. Feminist art institution became a safe space where we could imagine a place where we would like to live and work without feeling abused, frustrated, neglected. It was a safe space where we could articulate the change we would like to come about. We shared a desire to change our way of working and build an alliance that would be powerful enough to demand change and intervene in the institutional context.

In the course of the seminar we invited feminist philosophers whom we asked to conceptualize a feminist art institution: e.g.: Ewa Majewska and Luba Kobová. We have invited Giovanna Zapperi to teach us about radical Italian feminism and its legacy of building autonomous feminist spaces. We have invited Xabier Arakistain who attempted to build a feminist art institution in practice. In the meantime, we were working on a code of practice. Our ideas concerning feminist art institution are indebted to the experience and thought of the above mentioned individuals. As many of us were representatives of small or mid-scale non-profit art institutions, we have agreed to build an alliance of feminist art institutions that follow this code of practice. We hope to initiate a discussion in the local and broader context about the ethics of art institutions.

Stimuli

One of the strongest impulses to initiate and develop this program came from the local context. In Zlín, a city in the Eastern part of the Czech Republic, a triennial titled *What is Contemporary Image?* showing the work of contemporary Czech and Slovak artists took place in May 2017. However, among 33 artists there was only one woman. This caused quite an uproar - especially because it was claiming to represent the whole of the Czech and Slovak art scene with more than half of the art students being women. On Facebook I became involved in a discussion with a middle-aged influential Czech curator. He believed that while its gender imbalance was certainly unfortunate, the exhibition only reflected the general situation of women in our society who leave their careers when they have children and often do not come back. In his opinion, we could not talk about discrimination on the part of the institutions for the gender imbalance in the case of this particular exhibition only reflected the general situation of the society. I realized that his (quite common) understanding of art institutions and my own understanding are radically different. For, naturally, art institutions are not neutral sites that only passively reflect social conditions. No; art institutions have agency. Art institutions are agents which contribute to a positive change, or, on the contrary, reproduce the existing social conditions. However, in such a case they are naturally complicit with these conditions.

The problem of a feminist art institution was initially brought to my attention during a forum of progressive art initiatives *To All the Contributing Factors* during Gwangju Biennale in 2016. During the discussion about what agenda unites all the very diverse mid-scale, often artist-run, non-profit institutions present, the moderator Andrea Philips suggested that all of us represented feminist institutions. Being interested in feminism for already some time, it stuck in my mind. I had to ask myself: do I work in a feminist institution? What exactly is a feminist institution? I realized that if we do not arrive at a precise understanding what it actually is, it is just a label that we can proudly show off but which really has no meaning.



Radicals and Reformists

When dealing with feminist art institutions, one is immediately confronted with the question:

Why haven't there been almost any attempts at defining what a feminist art institution is despite the history of feminist art and feminist institutional critique? Is it because of the fear of institutional cooptation or the limitedness of political imagination? While the fear of institutional cooptation is usually expressed by the feminist radical who is reluctant to be involved in what she deems to be irredeemable patriarchal institutions, most feminists are simply not ambitious enough. What they would wish at best are more feminist shows or more women (feminists) working in art institutions. However, when we lack the ambition to transform the institutions we work in, we experience the all-too-familiar discrepancy between the realm of programming and the actual functioning of the institution. While art institutions can very well have radical (feminist) program, the institution itself remains untouched by it.

The so-called new institutions, which have existed since 1990s, tried to learn from artists' institutional critique and have grown critical toward the standard presentation of the art object in the „white cube“ for the middle class. The new institutions tried to initiate a debate over various social problems, in which they tried to involve the people concerned and create their own public (while re-negotiating the meaning of the term) by using various more discursive formats. Interestingly, this tradition was taken up by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski who tried to apply this model to Eastern European institutions. He was working on the concept of a critical museum - a dissenting institution critical of power, one involved in a public debate regarding issues that can be traumatic or painful to that society. Such an institution had to be self-critical - critical of its own history and its own involvement in oppression and exploitation. Importantly, he understood the museum as a useful tool to intervene in the public debate.¹ In this tradition of institutional thought and praxis, the art institution is not viewed primarily as a monster who can eliminate radical agenda (which it certainly can) but rather as a tool to make use of, a chance to contribute to social change and social transformation.

At the same time, the fear of cooptation expressed by the feminist radical is a very legitimate objection. „One cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools,“ to quote Audre Lorde. The crucial question is: How is it possible not to repeat the institutionalized violence: exclusion, marginalization, oppression, abuse, harassment? This question lies at the heart of thinking about a feminist art institution. It is necessary to stop thinking only in terms of making of exhibitions and events. There must be a feminist analysis of the way the institution itself functions, the way it is organized, the different kind of relationships people have to their work, to each other, and to the audience.

Examples

Are there any ideas and examples of such art institutions? An inspiring text recently published on e-flux by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez call on us to slow down our institutions, to slow down our ways of working and being and place thought, care and support in the center of our endeavors. She calls for a sentient, porous and slow institution that is more sensitive to what is going on inside and outside of it. This opening up and, simultaneously, slowing down of the cultural institution creates spaces for more genuine cooperation and reflection. Importantly, this very much entails turning attention to the way the institution functions - its internal organizational matters, its infrastructure and the relationships in the institution and of the institution towards its public, a fact that Petrešin-Bachelez unfortunately mentions only briefly in her conclusion: “The most important priorities seem to be developing practical solutions that relate to the actual buildings and their infrastructure, and to the production of the exhibitions themselves; working on the content of exhibitions collectively

¹ Tereza Stejskalová, „Kritické muzeum. S Piotrem Piotrowským o jeho pojetí výstavních institucí,“ A2, no. 26, 2012, <https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2012/26/kriticke-muzeum>.



with the staff of institutions; creating opportunities for staff members to share competences; and including staff in discussions about sustainability and resilience.”²

Another concept that might be helpful when conceptualizing and envisioning feminist art institution is a concept of weak resistance, a notion discussed by Ewa Majewska, the Polish feminist philosopher. Weak resistance is a resistance that stems from a place of fear and uncertainty, not of power, it is a sort of non-heroic disobedience. Majewska talks about failure as a strategy of resistance and differentiates between a strong, heroic, masculine subjectivity versus the weak one. It is failure, weakness, fatigue that takes a central place in weak resistance instead of mastery and heroic will. A feminist art institution does not play the game of the competitive art world and exposes the weaknesses we all share but hide in order to succeed. A feminist art institution is a tired, slow, weak institution where it is not about numbers of visitors or quantity of events. A feminist art institution is inspired by the character of Bartleby from a short story by Herman Melville „Bartleby the Scrivener“. In it an elderly lawyer employs a young scrivener who is at first extremely diligent but later stops working and to every order, demand or plea answers that he would prefer not to. In this way he disrupts the naturalness of the status quo and confuses everyone around. Could a feminist art institution be compared to such a clog in the machine?

The discrepancy between a radical program and institutional governance became a topic during the 2015 Berlin Biennale, a fact that has not been paid much attention to. Its Polish curators Artur Zmijewski and Joanna Warsza have given up their curatorial position and claimed that the curatorial decisions would be made by consensus-based general assemblies consisting of themselves, the staff of the biennale and other activists - some of them involved with the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. I believe for anyone to give up his or her very powerful position in the art world in order to intervene into such a rigid and pyramidal institutional structure like a biennale and to have crucial decisions made by a very heterogeneous collective body rather than an individual star curator is unprecedented. This group of activists later went to Poland and became involved in the protest against the corrupt management of Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw, an action they have called Winter Holiday Camp. Also here they organized assemblies and tried to involve as many people as possible in the decision-making processes regarding the future of Zamek Ujazdowski and the protest against the director. I believe we should follow the example of these activists and initiate a movement to abolish the pyramidal hierarchy and division of labor that is characteristic of many of art institutions and embrace other, more ethical, caring and considerate ways of working.

Code of practice

It is important to note that when we were working on the code of practice what we had in mind was the small to mid-scale non-profit art organizations — as these are institutions we ourselves are working in. Moreover, we believe such organizations have more room to experiment because of their flexibility and relative independence. Because of this flexibility, they could present a challenge and question the larger forms of institution building and governance. The code is however dedicated to every feminist who suddenly finds herself working in an art organization and ponders how to make it feminist.

1. Feminist Art Institution is a critical and self-critical agent.

It subjects its structure and programme to review in order to reflect changing social conditions. It recognizes that it cannot be separated from the social context, and selects its methods of social engagement accordingly. A feminist art institution seeks to develop new types of institutional environment. It redefines what it means to be a *public* institution and embraces groups that are otherwise marginalized or discriminated against within the concept of *public*. It deems art (hence culture) to be a universally shared asset (the commons), to which everyone has an inalienable right.

² Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, „For Slow Institutions,“ e-flux no. 85, October 2017, <http://www.eflux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/>



Feminist art institutions are steadfastly opposed to all manifestations of intolerance, e.g. racism, homophobia or sexism. They formulate strategies for dealing with such situations should they arise.

Feminist art institutions champion the viewpoint of the oppressed, and this is reflected in their programme, their relationship with the public, and their own internal organisation.

2. The ethics of its own internal operations are as important to a feminist art institution as the programme by which it presents itself to the public.

On the one hand, it works towards the objectives it wishes to see enshrined in society, and on the other ensures that those who work for it are happy and feel that their opinion counts. An organisational structure must be created that is capable of developing a meaningful programme while taking into account the needs of those who are part of it.

A feminist art institution is based on the mutual respect of those who work in it. The quality of their relationships, irrespective of what position they occupy, is considered to be of equal importance as the quality of the programme.

The operations of a feminist art institution are the outcome of collective discussion and decision-making, and not a 'one wo/man show'. The distribution of power is clearly articulated. It is subject to debate on the part of all interested parties and can be changed.

3. A feminist art institution is based on a feminist understanding of work.

It is inspired by the importance feminist theory attributes to care (for children, the elderly, sick and handicapped) and other activities that cannot be monetised but are crucial for the wellbeing of society. One of the aims of a feminist art institution is to raise the profile of activities that are essential to the existence of any organisation yet are taken for granted and financially unremunerated. Different types of care (and art can be deemed a type of care) are of crucial concern to a feminist art institution.

A feminist art institution is receptive to caregivers and adapts its programme so that they are able to participate.

Example: It is barrier-free, offers childminding services and the appropriate space, organises its events at times that suit parents with children, and ensures its events are accessible to people with physical or mental health issues.

A feminist art institution is receptive to those of its workers who have responsibilities as carers. It makes every attempt to create a working environment that includes space for care activities.

Example: Employees have the opportunity to work from home. It offers childminding services during working hours. It factors in the presence of small children on its premises.

The work of production managers, accountants and all those who contribute to the upkeep and maintenance of the institution is recognised and respected.

Example: A feminist art institution's programme lists all those involved. There is no difference between the fee paid production managers and curators.

A feminist art institution pays a fee to everyone who participates directly in its running or programme. (An exception to this rule involves institutions operating on a DIY basis where nobody is paid.) Gender has no influence on the level of the fee whatsoever.



4. A feminist art institution promotes quotas as a temporary solution to gender imbalance and discrimination.

A feminist art institution takes it as an article of faith that contemporary society is patriarchal, as is the contemporary art world. The aim of the institution is to participate in the struggle to change this situation.

A feminist art institution promotes a 50% minimum representation of women in its annual programme, whether this involve exhibitions, festivals, conferences or panel discussions.

At least 50% of all managerial, creative and other positions of responsibility are occupied by women in a feminist (art) institution.

A feminist art institution refuses to abide by the unwritten criteria of the culture industry as we know it today. The art world is based on a system of competition, in which only those who demonstrate the requisite endurance, ambition, strength, assertiveness succeed. A feminist art institution advocates other values and virtues. It takes into account human weakness, frailty and fatigue, and prioritizes human relationships over 'performance'. It sets itself different rules within the framework of its possibilities.

All institutions should be feminist

Can art institutions be a kind of vanguard of a more profound revolution? We certainly cannot think of them as isolated from the more general social praxis. That is why we should demand that not only art institutions but all institutions be feminist. The word demand is not incidental for it refers to the concept of utopian demand by Kathi Weeks. She conceptualizes the notion of utopian demand based on the history of what at the time seemed as extravagant demands by the second-wave feminists. A demand is not just a demand for a goal to be achieved but a social intervention - the act of demanding it as important as the achievement of the goal. For if we demand that all institutions be feminist this will have to be explained, justified, argued for and debated. If we demand that all institutions be feminist this will itself productive of critical awareness and political desires. It is by demanding what seems impossible at the moment that we make it possible.

“‘Utopian demand’ as I use the phrase is a political demand that takes the form not of a narrowly pragmatic reform but of a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of social relations; it is a demand that raises eye- brows, one for which we would probably not expect immediate success. These are demands that would be difficult though not impossible to realize in the present institutional and ideological context; to be considered feasible, a number of shifts in the terrain of political discourse must be effected. In this sense, a utopian demand prefigures again in fragmentary form a different world, a world in which the program or policy that the demand promotes would be considered as a matter of course both practical and reasonable.”³

³ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work* (London & Durham: Duke University Press): 2011, p. 176.

