

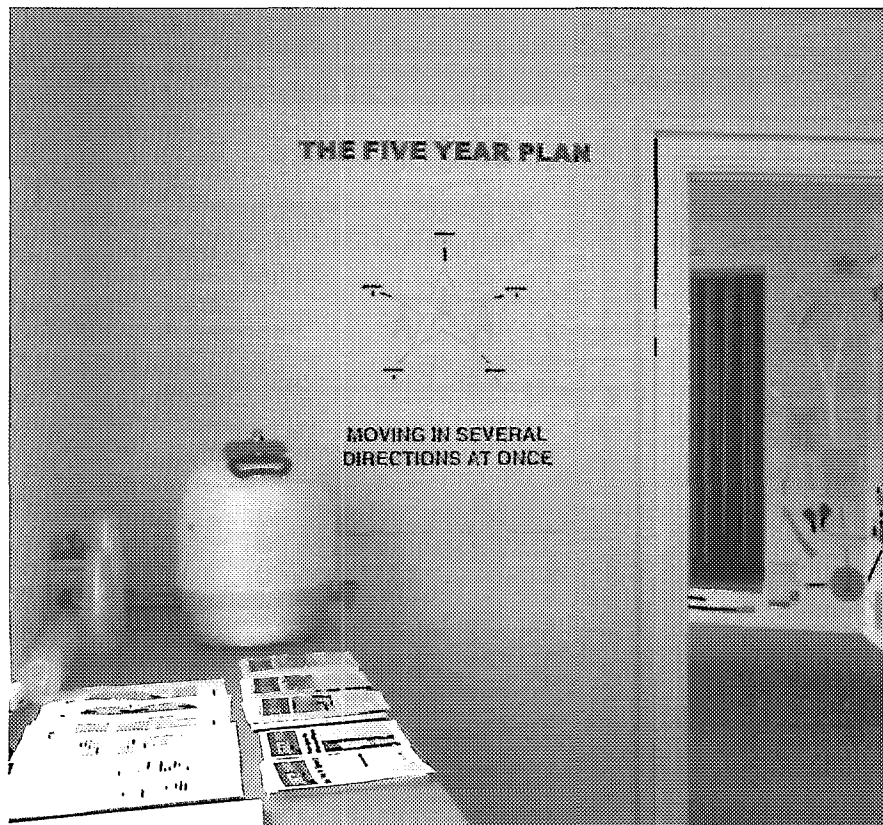
SELF-INSTITUTIONALISATION

For good and ill the process of institutionalisation has become internalised says **Jakob Jakobsen**



Entrance to the Copenhagen Free University which opened in 2001

IN THE 90S LONDON WAS A LABORATORY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESTRUCTURING WITHIN THE ART WORLD AND IN SOCIETY IN GENERAL. THE ADOPTION OF THE FREE MARKET IDEOLOGY WENT HAND IN HAND WITH THE WITHDRAWAL OF STATE CONTROL FROM PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. New modes of sponsorship and collaboration with business were changing the way public institutions worked and were organised, and were changing the values these institutions reproduced. Parallel to this development many of the so-called alternative galleries of the 90s were losing their critical perspective, if they ever had one, and became stepping stones to the market. This changing landscape was raising new questions about the way oppositional and critical practices could be organised in the arts. But outside the overhyped London art scene of the 90s a new social and anti-capitalist movement was fermenting, faced by the Criminal Justice Act of 1994 that was an attempt to criminalise the free party culture and various alternative lifestyles. This situation of state repression spurred the wide array of anti-capitalist protest strategies and DIY cultures engaged in self-publishing, self-teaching, and self-organising in general. The Association of Autonomous Astronauts, the London Psychogeographical Association, Reclaim the Streets and lots of other initiatives built their own social networks and means of production and distribution of culture. Within the art scene the people around Bank and Posterstudio were experimenting in very different ways with new forms of critical practices. In this environment of free market celebration and anti-capitalist mobilisation new modes of self-organised institutional experimentation and projects emerged between the art scene and social movements.



Association of
Autonomous Astronauts
The Five Year Plan
installation view of
associated printed matter,
beer brewing and free beer
at The Info Centre 1999

I began to use the concept of 'self-institutionalisation' during 1998 and 1999 in relation to the establishment with Henriette Heise of a project space, Info Centre, in East London (see review in *AM224*). For us this was the start of a series of practical experiments with the construction and use of institutions. Info Centre was a combined exhibition space, archive and bookshop. The first 'info sheet' of the Info Centre stated: 'We are committed to an understanding of art practice that is not exclusively related to the making of art works, but also includes the establishing of institutions for the experience and use of art and generally the making of institutions for human life.'

Behind this point of view lay an uneasiness with the then pervasive notion of 'institutional critique'. What had began life in the 60s as an interesting new political practice and what had reappeared in the late 80s as an ideological critique, had by the late 90s become ossified into a reflex towards, rather than a passionate refusal of, power. The various modes of institutional critique had outlived any critical function and appeared increasingly blind to its social, historical and political context. The moments of revolution and renewal you find with early Conceptual Art and the Situationist International had disappeared. The institutional critique had lost its force as art institutions adapted to these new forms of critique – as capital and its institutions often do. Those practising institutional critique found themselves dependent upon the very historical bourgeois art institutions they were purporting to critique, and that were, anyway, in the process of disappearing in the course of the neoliberal restructuring of public institutions of the 90s. The critique was irredeemably complicit with art

institutions as they turned critique into new forms of spectacle. When we write 'art institution' we refer to the socio-economic conglomerate of galleries, foundations, museums, institutes, educational facilities, magazines and councils that constitute the basis of the dominating understanding of art in a society. Institutional critique and other anti-institutional practices of the late 90s did not make these institutions more diverse and rich, but instead ensured the consolidation and concentration of power within an ever-narrowing system.

This was the background to our decision actually to 'build' an institution with the construction of the Info Centre. We saw this self-institution as a parallel to other institutions in society, particularly art institutions. But inevitably we soon found that our institution made materially more sense to us in our everyday life than most of the other institutions we encountered. We were not interested in being perceived as an anti-institution, because we had no interest in positioning Info Centre in relation to mainstream institutions or the dominant culture, which are usually so closely tied together. And we did not view mainstream institutions or the dominant culture as necessarily being in opposition to us; we simply refused them in their totality. The construction of an institution was not intended as a critique but instead as a means to take control of both production and distribution. It represented an escape from oppositional institutional critique through the total refusal of the dominant institutions' monopoly of power. From the beginning Info Centre was intended to be a temporary institution and was closed in the summer of 1999 after 16 months of activity. Anthony Davies has described the strategy of temporary formations of

institutions as a 'Starburst strategy', as the temporary self-institution for a period of time gathers and formalises a community of individuals and groups, only subsequently to abolish itself with the intention of the formation of more informal network.¹

Since Info Centre we have continued to work with the concept of self-institutionalisation through Infopool in London and the Copenhagen Free University. Our understanding of institutions continues to develop, especially the nature of their constitution, their practice and their shifting historical role in society. The research we have done at Infopool and Copenhagen Free University has focused on institutional practices in society in general and has focused on art institutions specifically, which are just one category among many in modern capitalist societies.

As part of our research we have examined in detail the breakdown of the Shenley Mental Hospital outside London, and how institutional critique and anti-institutional practices assisted in the demise of both this institution and its own critique and practices. This research looked at institutional forms in relation to the so-called disciplinary society and the slow disintegration of these forms after the Second World War. An omen of this breakdown was the 60s anti-psychiatry movement led by RD Laing and David Cooper in the UK. The anti-psychiatry movement was experimental and based on an existential psychiatry, having as its point of departure the experience and reactions of individuals to the normalising pressures of society. Anti-psychiatry was also closely connected to wider countercultural ideas which, at this time, were particularly pervasive. Emerging from anti-psychiatry came several anti-institutions, including an anti-hospital (Villa 21) and an anti-university (London Anti-University).

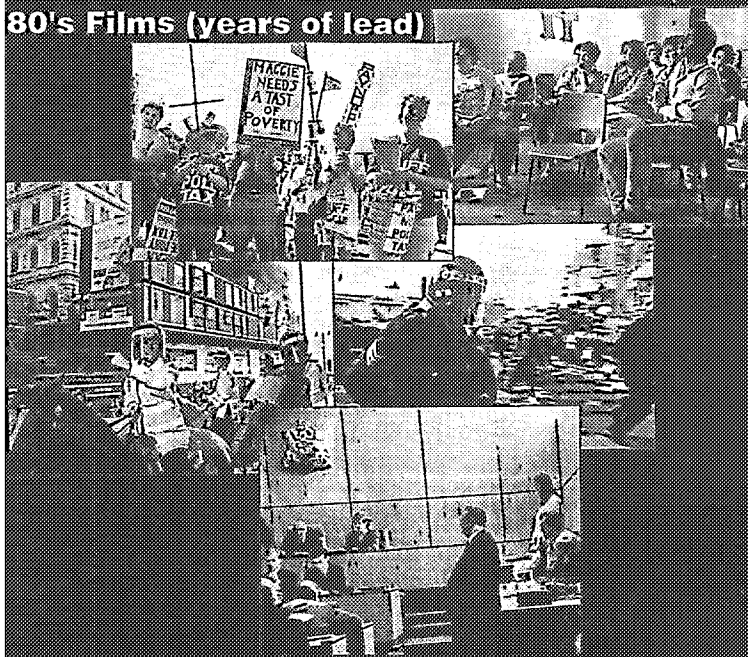
Traditionally institutions deal with confinement or detention, for example, hospitals, prisons, schools, barracks, the family – and the art museum. Michel Foucault described societies characterised by these kinds of closed institutions as disciplinary societies – a form of society that dominated during the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century. Institutions in disciplinary societies operated as closed systems: their primary function was the production of normality: they made everything cohere, they organised time, they organised space and they established a specific public sphere. Thus in the disciplinary society institutions had a normalising function and this operated mainly through physical constraints: they isolated unfit people from the public sphere by means of confinement in mental hospitals and prisons, and likewise they kept art, education, upbringing and work within very specific frameworks. When growing up people move from one closed system to the next: first the family, then the school, the military, the university, and the factory, and so on. In the same way the white cube of the modern art museum represents a similarly closed system. The institutions of disciplinary society had a suitably robust and conservative architecture – they were brick-based institutions.

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After the Second World War discipline started to break down as new powers slowly entered the frame. New systems of dominance came into force, as Gilles Deleuze described in the 1990 text *Postscript to the Control Society*. In this text – which this analysis draws upon – he writes: 'We're in the midst of a general breakdown of all sites of confinement – prisons, hospitals, factories, schools, the family.' Here we would add art museums: 'These institutions are in more or less terminal decline. It's simply a matter of nursing them through their death throes and keeping people busy until the new forces knocking on the door take over.'

Deleuze claimed that the control society was taking over from the disciplinary society. As far as we are concerned the important aspect is not that the institutions based on confinement and detention are disappearing, as he claims they are, but that the institutions of society are in the process of changing structure – they are in the process of changing their mode of production.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st Century, methods of confinement show no sign of being phased out, they continue to be maintained and developed, but within a new framework. This is most apparent in the US and increasingly the UK, where a new privatised prison industry is in charge of the confinement of an

Posterstudio
79-97 No U Turns
1997

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increasing number of their citizens. The aim of this confinement is different from the educational and corrective aims that characterised confinement in disciplinary society. The new mode of production applied by institutions in the control society use all means imaginable in the effort to maintain order.

Closed institutional systems have not been phased out, but have become part of this new much broader production, which involves all aspects of our lives. The continuous motions and shifting demands of the market and capital have succeeded the role of the sovereign state in society's institutional production. The sovereign and enlightened state, its institutions and bourgeois public sphere, have been eroded away and replaced by a society in constant flux. As with society, institutional control is in a state of constant transformation and renewal. When we as consumers move through daily life our behaviour is increasingly being observed and recorded as we take part in electronic transactions: when we use our mobile phones, when we use our credit/debit card, and when we use the internet. An electronic logbook recording many of our activities is gradually being produced. The control is not solely external, existing in the public sphere, it also pervades the body and the mind and unfolds through language, communication and social relations. As Cornelius Castoriadis has described it in *World in Fragments*, 1996: 'Individuals become what they are by absorbing and internalising institutions. This internalisation ... is anything but superficial: modes of thought and action, norms and values, and, ultimately the very identity of the individual as a social being are dependent upon it.' The institutional system is becoming like a gas we inhale.

Some concrete examples of how confinement in the control society has been supplemented and dispersed are electronic tagging and community service. Another example is the treatment of mental illness which has been supplemented and dispersed by means of Care in the Community. Education does not solely take place in schools, but also decentralised via computer networks and television, etc. In similar ways, within the art world, the white cube has been ruptured and the institution is able to sanction, without fear, art in the public sphere, as a social intervention and as networked and open-ended

activities. This takes place at the same time as some artists continue to feed the white cube. As with the booming prison industry, the institution of the art museum is going through a rapid development, and new art museums continue to open in metropolitan centres of the western world. Quite a few of these museums are run as private and multinational enterprises and are in the process of cutting the ties – fully in line with the prison industry – with the state and the bourgeois public sphere. These institutions have increasingly become a privatised capitalist industry that are able to adapt to new needs, including that of institutional critique – eg the demands of ethical and social responsibility that is a well known debate unfolding in the business community. This proves no diversion from their main motive: a return on the capital invested in the business. What is shaping the kind of institutional production unfolding within art oscillates between the demand of innovation and new products on the one hand (new young artists and spectacular projects) and loyalty to and affirmation of the consumer base on the other hand (visitor numbers and online hits). The art institution of the society of control is becoming a very powerful machine of normalisation and the reproduction of a certain social order.

In a situation where it is difficult to distance oneself from the domination of institutions, new means must be applied to construct alternatives. The society of control has, through the dispersal of society's institutions, ultimately reintegrated them into our bodies and minds. The resulting conditioning could be counteracted by a collective organising, a production of a context in connection with the material life lived, through which it would be possible to channel the diverse accumulation of branching desires whose voice is denied in the variable capitalist production of normality. Self-institutionalisation can be viewed as a kind of exorcism, a kind of externalisation of this internalised control. This is perhaps one way to describe the ambitions lying behind many of the new self-organised institutions which continue to emerge in various cultures around the world. At least it was the ambition that encouraged Heise and myself to found the Copenhagen Free University. We did not want to base our institutional building on a direct opposition, but on a refusal of the dominant institutional mode of production, an evacuation of its basis through the construction of an alternative. The construction of this alternative was based on taking power – but also on a refusal to become government. ■

1. Anthony Davies, 'The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy', www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk.

JAKOB JAKOBSEN is a visual artist living and working at the Copenhagen Free University and engaged in the infopool network in London. He will be taking part in the next *Art Monthly* debate 'Worlds Within Worlds: The Institutions of Art' at Cornerhouse, Manchester on July 15.

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