

# Inhabiting the language of the Institution; How artists, teachers and students are occupying the institutional rhetoric which surrounds them

## For ELIA Porto

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Taking what could be described as a very short sabbatical out of my University role at that time, I undertook an ACE funded residency, as part of my collaboration Dutton and Swindells, at Ssamzie Contemporary Art Space in Seoul, South Korea through January to April 2008. During the course of this residency our collaborative practice, which already prioritised nebulous and ambiguous processes of production was thrown into even ever more chaotic territory by finding ourselves in this entirely new environment.

Nevertheless, in time, not only did we soon feel we had little to lose, we also recognised that we had little to hand and that our only resources were our *ourselves*.

In the midst of this precarious situation the 'studio' became a site for the production of an output/body of what seemed like a series of random manifestations and eruptions, the driving force of which, looking back, was probably no more or less than the lack of centre and the subsequent proliferation of 'selves' we were experiencing at the time.

Our entire project then became the production of a form of self-curation, a project possibly more akin to an on-going performance than a workshop or production line of artefacts. In other words, our work, which was already a rather obtuse and ambiguous form of practice ( geared towards problematizing itself and its reception rather than formal resolution, pointed towards the presence of contradictions, of potency and impotency for example, and towards the manifestation of 'incomprehension') was veering ever further into what for us was an unknown, leaping from one form, strategy, trope, material, idea or method to another in an unruly gathering of multiple appearances and disappearances.

Rather than try to rein that in, our choice was to give that unpredictable process some room to flourish and grow. In short we wanted to allow the unpredictable, the chaotic and the contrary back into the work in the spirit of negating our own recent institutionalising experience within our respective 'day jobs' and the puncturing of the symbolic power those 'day jobs' held over us, our practices and indeed our 'lives'.

It would seem, however, that you can take the artist out of the institution but not the institution out the artist, as within a month of our residency we had given our project the working title of, 'The Institute of Beasts'.

The naming of work in progress can be intended initially as no more than this means of identification, a pet-name, as any intuitive title may be, but it soon became clear, that even if it was not exactly pre-planned, it was also no accident that this 'name'

contained a contradictory rhetorical conflation of the 'ruly' in the form of the Institute and the 'unruly' in the form of the Beasts.

Here was an 'Institutional' model as a structural mechanism trying to accommodate what we considered to be increasingly errant and divergent processes which were developed both prior to and during the residency period which were, frankly, proving impossible to house.

Later, I would go on to suggest that we were attempting a failure, perhaps willing our own internal institutionalisation to collapse. We were as Emma Cocker has pointed out 'tilting at windmills', attempting and knowingly failing to establish an impossible taxonomy of unruly ideas and forms which could ( not ) be housed, or at the very least, managed, under the auspices of said faux Institute as we considered these thoughts and actions, rightly or wrongly, to be 'animal', in the simple sense that what we were trying to work with was an encounter with a 'subject' which was unpredictable and to a large extent, 'unknowable'.

The whole project then could be described, possibly somewhat depressingly, as a critical exercise in Institutional futility, which of course doesn't preclude succeeding as something else, indeed possibly quite the opposite.

To put it bluntly, 'The Institute of Beasts' came about from sitting at a table, in a space, in a city, wondering what the hell we were going to do with ourselves and with our time, in much the same way as many studio based 'scenarios' might appear in art schools across the world at that point of entering what Jon Thompson describes as " the mysterious ontological terrain within which all art must find itself".<sup>1</sup>

Of course, institutions are by their nature habitual and habit forming. It should have come as no surprise to us that we were feeling our way around and attempting to subvert or at least divert some of the institutional rhetoric and structures we had come to inhabit and be inhabited by and which we were subsequently 'aping'. Perhaps it was inevitable that we would start to play with the very forms and structures from which we had felt we had temporarily been liberated, namely the educational institution, in what could probably be rightfully thought of as a semi-cathartic process.

Through the course of our project which continued over the next few years we developed various notions of sub-departments of folk art, celestial mechanics, love birds and music, and we enlisted faculty members in the form of birds, chickens, hamsters and dogs, which inhabited the studio with us in a continued attempt to create the conditions within which *something might happen*.

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It is not my intention here to dig into that body of work, things have to move on anyway, but it may be useful as a way of thinking again about the institutions we *currently* inhabit.

Suffice it to say that after coming back to the UK following such a productive time and to quickly once again becoming ensnared in academic frameworks, enmeshed in research excellence frameworks, and engulfed the cataclysmic austerity project

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<sup>1</sup> The Collected Writings of Jon Thomson. Ed. Akerman and Daly. Ridinghouse. p.407

resulting in fees being nearly tripled within the English Art Schools it didn't go unnoticed to me that there were a number of other artists' projects around which were also employing the nomenclature of the educational Institution appearing variously as Institutes, Faculties, Departments or even a University and there was the inevitable question of what might this proliferation of artists' 'institutes' and 'departments' mean for those of us who teach and work in the more conventional ones?

I was thinking specifically of such projects as our own but also for example Inga Zingbrich's Faculty of Invisibility for example, or Wysing Art Centre's The Department of Wrong Answers, or The University of Incidental knowledge.

It seems doubtful that these projects are created by artists who are wishing for some sense of institutionalisation, or that there is a fetish for the institution which is not unlike the child who is drawn to his or her parents stationary cupboard searching for a semblance of order and organisation.

More likely I would guess might be the suggestion of an act of appropriation of the institution by these artists, a form of insinuation into institutional language and rhetoric of these institutions in an attempt to get back some form of ownership and control. A form of rhetorical occupation.<sup>2</sup>

For example, founded in 2006 Inga Zingbrich's Faculty of Invisibility describes itself as follows,

'The Faculty of Invisibility composes itself of a group of artists, practitioners, designers, theorists and teachers who mutually carry out an *emerging* institute. ....The Faculty does not stage events and does not take public appearances, besides issuing its communications. As such the Faculty of Invisibility appears to be in disengagement, a context in *withdrawal*.' ( my italics )

And

"The Faculty invites practices which .....reside in the shade of the visual arts, explore the virtual, explore the invisible, address the border between vision and imagination, explore the usage of language both as a tool of poetry and as tool of definition, dealing with psychic phenomena, address other invisible dynamics and phenomena."

Originally the Faculty of Invisibility housed departments, such as the Department of *Uncertainty*, the Department of *Haunting* and the Department of *Doubt*.

Later in 2008 The Faculty of Invisibility described itself for their project 'Dark Light' at Transmission Gallery in Glasgow in 2008 as

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<sup>2</sup> Educational projects which are seeking to democratise knowledge production are nothing new and I would also make a distinction here between such projects as 'The University of Strategic Optimism' coming out of Goldsmiths, 'the Free University of Liverpool', 'The Social Science Centre in Lincoln' or The Alternative Art College network, all of which could be said to be attempting to provide real alternatives in Higher Education and are actively developing a practice of cooperative spaces and practices with a priority of a foregrounding of non-credentialised experience of knowledge. The question here is to think in terms of how the artist/student/teacher 'produces' the institution within which they are themselves being 'produced'

“engaging itself with the processes of institutionalisation. Exposing the mechanisms of these processes by means of quotation, the Faculty of Invisibility tries to put them at play” and “suggested a place situated in the realm of memory rather than offering an attendable exhibition”.

Since 2008 then, “the Faculty of Invisibility has been less an institution that establishes itself in terms of chronology, continuity and a definite place or position of speech, than a gesture of constituting and withdrawing itself at once”

And finally

“the Faculty of Invisibility has dedicated its work to a practice of instituting that attempts to assemble, quote and execute moments of institutionalisation *without giving in to them.*”

Likewise, in its own descriptions of ‘The Department of Wrong Answers’, an exhibition as sub Dept of a broader series of exhibitions under the collective title of the “Institute of Beyond” at Wysing Art Centre in spring 2012 revealed in the paradoxical rhetoric and etiquette of the educational institute;

THE INSTITUTE OF BEYOND is a series of twelve artists’ residencies based within *3 research departments* .....The institute is an informal educational model, experimenting with methods of *artistic research* and production. Three departments have been created within the institute focusing on *wrong answers, psychedelic studies and overlooked histories.*

Some descriptions of the work are

“Laure Prouvost & Francesco Pedraglio work *humorously depicts a fictitious department’s desperate work environment; an obscure camp dedicated to search for unrecognizable objects and dig abstract ideas from muddy meadows.*

Rob Filby borrowed the mood board’s impropriety as the artwork to example the *laughable* aspect of invention and the desolation of ideas against their regular application in creative industry and the pretence of communication and evocation.

Cally Spooner writes in dialogue to perform absurd collisions of arguing characters, looping narratives, *miscommunications, mis-readings and interruptions.*”

Another UK based project, The University of *Incidental Knowledge* describe itself as ‘a collaboration based on a higher education model, incorporating self-directed and peer-to-peer learning.

Incidental Knowledge is acquired by chance; through the process of doing something else such as a journey, a day job, a holiday, watching a film or overhearing a conversation. It is unexpected, unintentional, extraneous, random, accidental or found, discovered in connection with or resulting from a primary activity”

and runs programmes such as

BA (Hons) Avant Garde, BA (Hons) Comedy, BA (Hons) Cut 'n' Paste, Diploma in

Artwank , MPhil Mistakes, NVQ Pedantics<sup>3</sup>

Even these projects differ from each other enormously in terms of scale, humour, poetics, seriousness and wit they share a common sense of disruption in their use of antithetical terms.

All of them could be said to be deliberately attempting to play with the impossibility of the housing their subjects. Despite the rigidity of the Faculty, Institute, and Department, they are all in fact aligned to the opposite. It is this process of managing and 'executing' moments of institutionalization without giving in to them that is key. Time and again we are reminded that the faculty is '*emerging*' yet '*in withdrawal*'. Faculties are working with the *invisible, the animal the incidental, with haunting, uncertainty, doubt and psychedelia*, in which various practices are described as '*humorous*', '*abstract*', '*muddy*', '*obscure*', '*improper*', '*laughable*', '*desolate*', '*absurd*', '*mis-readable*', and '*mis-interpretable*'.

The educational institutional structure here is consistently represented as a site of impossibility, a site in conflict with itself. Despite an aim to organize, its production is one of the invisible, the immeasurable, and the improper. These 'artists institutes' embody a state of play which may echo what Chantal Mouffe describes as an 'agonistic struggle', where 'hegemonic structures are contested in conceptual and physical spaces within which they can never be fully resolved'.<sup>4</sup>

All of us who are familiar with working within our Universities will know that there are systems within them which are entirely dedicated to re-inscribing their own internal and external realities and appearances. For a Faculty of Invisibility to exist however, the Institution must begin to partly disappear.

These Artists Institutes produce that which cannot be seen and measured, yet they still produce. By prioritising the production of the invisible, or the stupid, the laughable or the animal, they subvert the 'real-world' language of the institutions proper. The 'Real' is inhabited by the immeasurable and as a consequence begins to dissolve into its inversion

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The disruptive play of the naming of contradictory and conflicting forces in the Artists Institute are significant but what then of the artist/student/teacher in this territory?

For Charles Esche, "*the art academy is a paradox that can be reconciled only if we keep contrary objective and ideals in sight*"<sup>5</sup>

If the roles of art and institution of art can become 'agonised' then so too can the roles of teacher, student, artist, writer, professor, researcher.

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<sup>3</sup> Louise Atkinson (BA Hons Comedy & Bsc Social Media), Fundada (BA Hons Foreign Language), Vanessa Haley (BA Hons Film), Debi Holbrook (BA Hons Avant Garde), Duncan Lister (NVQ Pedantics), Bob Milner (BA Hons Cut 'n' Paste & Diploma in Artwank) and Sparrow+Castice (MPhil Mistakes).

<sup>4</sup> Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces, Chantal Mouffe, *Art&Research A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Volume 1. No. 2. Summer 2007 ISSN 1752-6388

<sup>5</sup> C.Esche. Include me out. P101-112, *Art School ( Propositions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century )*

In order to look at what all this means in relation to teaching within an art school we may need to consider again the matter of paradoxical nature of much artistic practice.

Those of us who are artists and teachers of art, are also students of art. We open ourselves into the 'mysterious ontological territory'<sup>6</sup> of art on a regular basis and we learn from it, and we often learn that all that is to be learnt cannot be 'taught' and this is the contradictory and paradoxical lesson that art teaches us and cannot teach us.

The Artists Institute is a site of movement as withdrawal, fragmentation and disruption but above all it is a site of expansion, existing to prevent foreclosure. It must therefore understand contradiction.

If the Artists Institute can accommodate its own appropriation of the educational model by means of the ironic use of its own organizing rhetoric, and by insinuating its contradictions into the certainties of 'knowledge' and 'credit' then so too may the educational model appropriate the artists institute.

The Artists Institute inhabits what they the RAQS Media Collective term 'a double life' in which, contradictory tendencies are laid bare for all too see and manage.

They suggest that in the real world of art and education,

"the no-collar worker by day is at war with the artists by night. The lives of contemporary art practitioners are scarred over this battle----the question of what constitutes an education that can adequately prepare a practitioner for a vocation in the contemporary arts is primarily a matter of identifying the means to cultivate an attitude of negotiation with and around this kind of pressure. Learning the ropes is learning to do what it takes to maintain a semblance of the life of the praxis of artistic autonomy"<sup>7</sup>

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Sara Ahmed, writing around Affect theory suggests that

'Affect is what sticks', that affect is sticky, it is what 'sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects'<sup>8</sup>.

Here is an articulation of affect as being something which 'touches' something else. How we are touched by what we are near? And how is what we are near touched by us?

It may be only a slight exaggeration to suggest that many of our Institutions are now so far removed from a conception of non-instrumental practices that are not 'touched' by the practices they house and attempt to produce. Indeed many institutions may positively recoil in abject disgust at the unpredictability and immeasurability of some

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<sup>6</sup> The Collected Writings of Jon Thomson. Ed. Akerman and Daly. Ridinghouse. p.407

<sup>7</sup> Art School ( Propositions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century )ed S. Madoff. P.73. "How to be an Artist by Night " Raqs Media Collective.

<sup>8</sup> Happy Objects

Sara Ahmed. The Affect theory reader, p 29 ed m.gregg and g.j seigworth duke university press

aspects of art practice ( by which I mean, physical, temporal and the conceptually unpredictable ).

It could also be suggested that the Institute distances itself from its contents by housing them. Housing may not always bring always things , but merely frame them temporarily, sometimes in concealment, in what Sara Ahmed describes as 'awayness'.

In the UK where students are having to face up to huge fee increases consequently the drive by the Universities towards instrumental practices is becoming ever more intense, from basic professionalization and career strategies through to 'applied' research. The prospect of practices being housed within these institutions which could be described as non-instrumental and to an extent un-teachable in the truest sense of the word, in that we are, always learning, become more and more problematized.

What the artist/teacher/student may need to develop is the recognition that they are neither being housed by the institute nor or they giving the institute a house. Instead they are occupying it, they are living within it, appropriating the *idea* of it through the very words they use and the practices they undertake.

To paraphrase Randolph Bourne's statement that

"if you want to change minds you must first change the words that people use" it could be said that one way the artist can affect the institute is to 'occupy it' , by changing its words in order to change its mind.<sup>9</sup>

The Artists Institute can tell us that for an institute of art education to flourish it must be able, like its participants to inhabit a form of schizophrenia, to inhabit this dual life rather than be controlled by it, or attempting to control it. In short, an institution must go against its implicit 'natural/progressive' drive in order to refuse foreclosure and completeness.

It is here that the conventional institutes of art can learn from the ironized practices of artists. To paraphrase the RAQs media collective once again, if the 'work of art is never done', then neither is the work of the institute. If the institute can itself manifest some of the behaviours of its participants in its organization and terms of reference it may begin to *become* a project rather than housing one. If it allows itself to get near to its "sticky" subjects, as opposed to away from them, then what it houses will be able to affect what it becomes.

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Perhaps the relationship of the art to the art institution is like the relationship of speech to text as described by Jon Thompson on his essay on Richard Deacon

" texts are self evidently additive, unitised assemblages of a linear kind, subject to the syntactical closure which meaningful sentences demand, and with a locus in the abstract space of the printed or written page.

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<sup>9</sup> Randolph Bourne from Jon Thompson p 479

Speech, by contrast, is more in the order of the 'incarnation' expanding and moving within the social space. Certainly it is not 'manufactured.....speaking tends to reveal what writing purposefully seeks to hide: the complex and genuinely mysterious ontological terrain out of which all meaning emerges- the place of language itself" <sup>10</sup>

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As an attempt to try to bring my thinking back down to earth I want begin to close by drawing attention to a series of exchanges within the pages of Art Monthly involving Peter Suchin, Elizabeth Wright and J.J. Charlesworth.

In his article "Rebel without a Course" <sup>11</sup> Peter Suchin expressed considerable doubt about the validity of practice based PhD in Art and was taken to task in series of exchanges by Elizabeth Wright. After around three months of back and forward argument it appeared to have come to an end. However, JJ Charlesworth's contribution in AM 353 expanded the field further in his conclusion that the challenge lay in "reclaiming the academic context in order to remake it".

For me this crystallised the situation and this concerns all of us who teach or manage within the 'academic context'.

What these split between the artist-critic and artist-academic suggested was that while it might be generally acknowledged that some of the divisions between what would traditionally be understood as an art practice on the one hand and research/knowledge on the other may have become more permeable, in the last decade or so, what is frequently revealed in this more open environment is the lack of academic and institutional capability to respond effectively to these se new complexities, dynamics and paradoxes which are ushered in as consequence.

The co-existent, yet distinctly uncomfortable relationship, between the 'cultures' of research-as-knowledge, art in education and art-as-practice still often provokes s debate, sometimes in the pages of the art press, often in the seminar room and in the studio but, I suspect, perhaps not often enough within the higher echelons of the Higher Education sector. It is this lack of impact of the complexity and fluidity of some cultural practices at policy and management level which leaves s art, education, knowledge and research the poorer.

Despite these difficulties however I'm not convinced that our students are as fixated on institutional validation as Suchin suggests. My bet is they still want to be artists.

When Suchin illustrates his position by citing Patricia Bickers' comment, "I am not opposed to a PhD in Fine Art per se", but that "in order to fulfil the criteria for a research-degree in any meaningful way, the fine art researcher will almost inevitably be drawn away from meaningful practice," there is a suggestion of a lack of a nuanced understanding of what is really going on within practice-based PhDs in many art schools in the UK.

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<sup>10</sup> p184 Jon Thompson collected writings.

<sup>11</sup> Rebel without a course. Peter Suchin AM 345



Many students/artists/teachers work in or across areas which may be unhelpfully termed as art, art research, criticism, teaching, creative practice, writing and/or curation in some way or another.

This is surely a fertile environment; to imply that artists occupying multiple roles and positions automatically risks a dilution of meaningful practice is plainly odd. These interstitial operations and blurrings of positions may have come to the fore precisely because they provide a more complex and rich ground from which to work in whatever form or method that is, in the context of a response to increasingly limiting and reductive instrumentalisation: a response which occupies a place or places where such work becomes a field of operations, critical positions, strategies and subjectivities which prove harder to gather, or master, than any one method, position or discipline.

While Suchin rightly points out that there is a “danger of submitting one’s practice to the bureaucratic and critical scrutiny of an academic institution” which may “distort or radically re-inscribe the candidate’s practice” he perhaps misses the crucial point that *the institutions may also have to accept the ‘danger’ of submitting their bureaucracies and formulaic methodologies to the candidate’s practice.*

In other words, perhaps in an engaged art school it would be a two-way street. To some extent what might be at stake, for example, in a PhD via art practice could be seen more as a collaborative and continual re-thinking through practice of what might constitute knowledge and artistic research in the first place, rather than a weak (or optimistic) desire on the part of the candidate for institutional validation.

What seems to be missing from much of the discussion around art/PhD/research anxieties is the question of the capability of the institutions to work with art’s work, in which it might be possible to tangle with the question of how an art practice can affect a relationship to knowledge as well as the other way round.

Realistically speaking, I suspect many artists who also work within art schools may not consider the PhD as the most appropriate vehicle for the purpose of a highly advanced art practice. However, as it stands, if artists inhabit the PhD and in much the same way as artists are inhabiting the institutions, if they get inside language so to speak, rather than submit to its institutional force, then perhaps something will emerge which can accommodate and do justice to the multifarious and inter-connected forms of practice and knowledge production which surround us.

The implications of positively encouraging or even insisting on active institutional engagement with art practice as an on-going, yet productive, series of predicaments rather than as a progressive drive towards knowledge, might result in a re-thinking of what artists and art educators mean by the conceptual and practical frameworks of art practice, research and knowledge in the first place.

Seen in this light, perhaps an artist’s intention when approaching a PhD is often less a means of achieving some form of academic validation, as Peter Suchin suggested, than of contributing to the increasingly amorphous, awkward and fluid practices which might constitute an art-practice in the first place. One might even go as far as to suggest that such a contribution has significant implications for how we understand and work with, in, without, and/or against the institutions and cultures which produce us and are produced by us.

In effect, in the past where artist-teachers may have rubbed up against the institution from within and encouraged students to do the same, in the age of extreme

institutionalization and hyper-instrumentalisation this approach, this stance of being both within yet against, may no longer be possible. Instead the artist- student-teachers are taking the 'mantle' of the institution and occupying its linguistical and rhetorical frameworks instead of its architecture, and by doing so, are attempting to unravel and explore what might be meant by an institution in the first place.

This may have profound possibilities within the 'walls' and traditions of the art school where, the power of the institution becomes not only something 'lessened' but also something existing 'in quotes', thus empowering both staff and students to occupy and produce the 'institution' on their own terms. By creating and inhabiting these equivalents, in effect by inhabiting institutional terminology, change may take place from within. Students and staff no longer attend the institution, but attend *to* it by inhabiting it and creating it, and re-creating it in a constant process of expansion.

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