

# What's On? An Ethology of Public Programming

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**What's On: an ethology of public programming.  
Notes on an emergent form of social organization.**

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When a new term appears in discourse, it signals that society is busy developing a new set of preoccupations, to revisit an old problem, or both. Thus, when a semantic shift takes place, we might take it as a symptom that something more significant happened than a simple refresh of vocabulary. Some values will have shifted; some power relations will have become undone; some ecologies of practices and institutions will have become unhinged; some social functions and modes of productions will have drifted; and the inhabitants of all of these will have been mutating along as well. A new term is proposed, begins to circulate, takes root and makes space for such event to take space in grammar.

In the last decade, a new term begun to circulate with increasing insistence in the context of contemporary art: public programming. This expression suddenly begun to appear alongside other commonly used words in the realm of cultural institutions, suddenly overlapping with them, words such as parallel event, gallery education, museum pedagogy, mediation, outreach, community empowerment, event planning, the lecture series, the public talk, and so on.

Embracing a wide range of conversational practices - practices that have always accompanied art-making and art-showing institutions from the side - the expression 'public programming' has called attention to the importance of the production and display of discourse for the circuits of contemporary arts.

This newfound relevance pertains not only to the topics of the discussions, but also concerns their aesthetic characteristics and organizational procedures, the formats that they adopt. In this sense, the notion of public programming articulates the value of public and collective knowledge not only in regard to content and topic, but importantly, also in the light of the affective and relational consequences afforded by the "thinking-feeling" that can take place while gathering with others. According to Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi, a thinking-feeling arises when confronting the style or appearance of things in both their singularity and repetition, accounting for what they can produce in terms of living potential and affordance of new postures; it is the capacity of assessing situations as "life drops" (Massumi 2008: 12); it is "a thinking-further fused with a feeling of what is. But the fusion is asymmetrical, because the feeling of what is zeroes in on what can be settled in the present, while the thinking-further pulls off-centre and away toward more, so that together they make a dynamic, never quite at equilibrium" (Massumi 2008: 11).

Borrowing from Massumi's proposition of 'thinking –feeling' in public allows me to focus on public programming as an institutional exercise in forging and sustaining relations. This is different from looking at public programming as an instance of education or knowledge production - because I want to bring to the fore the potential of public programming to sustain a different kind of politics of discourse. Whom speaks publicly and who is invited to publicly listen never ceased to be highly politically questions. Indeed, even if much of the most popular formats currently in use are directly imported from academia – for instance: conferences, symposia,

guest lectures, seminars, workshops, labs, to name but a few -, when these are transposed in the different setting of the art centre or festival, they already begin to operate in a different manner, making the production of relations and the collective modulation of affects indissolubly linked to the kinds of knowledges produced and explored.

If 'public programming' then alerts us that a shift has occurred in the valuation and role of such discursive events within contemporary arts and culture, what remains to be grasped is the significance of this emergent phenomenon in relation to shifting preoccupations, fascinations and terrains of struggle today.

In *Difference and Repetition*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze thought that the question "which one?" carries much greater political stakes than the Socratic question "what is...?". In what follows, I'd like to take on his recommendation as a methodological cue to guide a first exploration of the stakes of "public programming". I will therefore not ask "what is cultural programming?" but "which cultural programming" can we desire, imagine and assemble. Rather than trying to define its exact contours, I am more interested in survey what this emergent field of practice can do if put to use to articulate a political horizon for public thinking in encounters. This will be, in short, an ethology, a study of the behaviours and their conditions, speculating on what cultural public programming can do in the present time.

### **Which cultural institution?**

Public programming activities could be understood as informed by two major realms of discourse production within the arts. On the one hand, pedagogical practices in contemporary art institutions have for a long time come into being as "interstitial spaces" (Bhabha 1994: 19), where dominant and normalised narratives could be questioned, subverted and become undone. The legacies of institutional critique, feminism, postcolonial struggles, and alternative education have all informed this trajectory prior to the recent educational turn in curating (see Graham, Graziano, Kelly 2016). This is a genealogy of public programming that directly invites the scrutiny of the specific responsibilities of cultural workers vis-à-vis the broader political questions faced by society.

On the other hand, the rise of discursive events within cultural institutions has accompanied a trajectory that saw the increasing pressure towards professionalization for artists and curators alike. In the context of neoliberal governance, married to an unquestionable ideology of constant rankings, a pivotal condition of this professionalization requires to manage the discourse framing one's work, a discourse that must both convince funders that nothing fundamentally different is about to take place and entice audiences with the promise that something completely radical can happen. In this respect, the public talks, seminars and other forms of collective thinking that are organized as public programming are enmeshed within conflicting sets of demands.

According to the set of demands shaping neoliberal cultural institutions, public programming thus delivers an extra service for cultural consumers, adding a sense of transparency to otherwise barely noticeable artistic phenomena perhaps (taking care of that anxious question "what does this mean?"), or offering condensed interpretative frameworks that can be reused for describing the present. This approach casts public programming in a supplementary function, the production of an internationally shared canon of set of references and authors. However, public programming simultaneously stands as the realm where another orientation can be

supported, one that, rather than seeking to extend the transparency of the institution, holds space for opacity instead, a term first developed by Edouard Glissant (1990) to describe the core of his non-fascist and non-racist philosophy of relations. For Glissant, spaces of opacity allow the irreducible difference with others to be preserved unreduced and unadulcorated, so that it can seep into relations without causing an immediate identitarian reaction and generate further differences. As Paul Goodwin suggested in a recent talk on the matter, a commitment to opacity within cultural programming can produce a safe space for articulating progressive politics outside of the limitations of cultural identity (Goodwin 2016).

At the moment, it remains unclear whether public programming will protect and enhance such political responsibility, continuing the more radical legacy of alternative gallery education and taking it in a new direction; or whether it will represent the exhaustion of this potentiality. Will public programming become more or less effective (and affective) that curating or educating as one of the modes of action of cultural organizing? And how will public programming impact the exhibitionary and archival functions of cultural institutions?

### **Which Public?**

The term public programming contains also an ambivalent idea of publicness. Not only is the public clearly used as a qualifier in the expression, underscoring if not the actual conditions of ownership and organizations of these programmes, at least their mode of address. Less readily noticeable might be the fact that the public is simultaneously present in the word programme. The ancient Greek verb *prographein*, from which this word derives, means indeed “to write publicly”. Significantly, the content of such public writing was not of just any kind. According to historians, *prographein* had two main purposes: it was used to notify the citizens about the new laws promulgated by the council and it was used to keep track of debts and debtors. Archeological studies revealed that reminders of the amounts owed would be placed in the vicinities of the debtor’s house, until the notice would be eventually substituted with a “cleared” sign once the repayment was completed, thus restoring the reputation of those involved.

This root takes us immediately to one of the core meanings of the cultural programming, one that is perhaps too often understated within this field of practice. The programme is not only the public performance of the cultural institution, but it is also the site of its accountability, the mark of its indebtedness to the social life from which it generates (or extracts) cultural meaning and values. As such, public programming can be seen as an immediately political act, implicated in the same interplay of forces that are codified through legal and economic systems.

The repetition of the public in “public programming” stands therefore not as a redundancy, but as a signal to a duplicitous commitment to that which is still excluded, marginalized or undetected from the operational standards of art and culture proper as both a subject it wants to address and a subject it is indebted to. This relation of debt is not a financial one that could be repaid through the establishment of a given agreed currency. Rather, public programming as a public staging of a debt should be understood as a process of “incommensurable obligation of people to each other”<sup>1</sup>, which is the common base of sociability itself. This notion of incommensurable obligation could perhaps allow us to bridge the gap between the

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<sup>1</sup> Beggs, 2012

cherished autonomous artistic and intellectual freedom and the social and political commitment of cultural organizations.

Public programming emerged as a function of cultural institutions at a moment when they were being restructured according to neoliberal protocols and managerial techniques. And in some sense public programming has been providing a space for the very subjects impacted and implicated in such restructuring to reflect on the forces that were at work reshaping the field. Public programming provided a shelter to debates that in the course of the neoliberal restructuring of civic institutions were made homeless. Yet, all too often the very mode of inviting, hosting, and formatting these conversations depotentiated their political charge, making them very much inconsequential even for the artistic scenes themselves.

In the context of the hollowing of public welfare infrastructures, if the commitment to critical analysis and democratic cosmopolitanism performed by public programming remains confined only at the level of theory production, without taking on the further risk of a deep institutional reorganizations at the level of social reproduction, then it ends up functioning as a reinforcement of reactionary processes.

Today we know that ideas of the public as state supported welfare (in the expanded sense of health and happiness for citizens) and democratic provisions (a commitment to social justice) are no longer compatible with the relations required to secure continued capital growth in the current political impasse. It is important however to cultivate a living memory of the previous rationales framing the public role of cultural debates from which the present social order is breaking.

Within the European context, from the post war period, when the majority of Ministries of Culture were first introduced, until the 1970s, a major discussion unfolded between the proponents of a 'democratization of culture' and those in favour of a 'cultural democracy' framework. The 'democratization of culture' approach held the view that cultural institutions should promote and facilitate a wider access to what was the accepted canon of high arts, a repertoire largely comprising of aesthetic and expressive traditions identified with national and regional identities, Works included in the canon needed to be democratically made accessible to all citizens as the basis for a shared belonging; an approach that avoids confronting the problem of how the canon expresses an idea of 'excellence' that has already been modelled upon the tastes and values of an elite, who then feels legitimated to bring this knowledge to the uneducated masses of the not initiated. In contrast, the discourse of 'cultural democracy' saw the role of cultural institutions as one aimed "to offer each individual the means and the incentive to become the active agent of his own development and of the qualitative development of the community to which he belongs" (Grosjean & Ingberg 1974: 4). It is easy to see how such approaches would translate in very different priorities in the allocation of resources, pitting for instance the funding of major opera productions against that of community libraries. This debate informed much of the early policies of the European Union, such as in the Council of Cultural Cooperation's study of 1964; in the "14 Towns Project" of 1971 or the Oslo Conference of 1976. The EU was a political entity still in formation at the time, which was exploring for ways of responding to the instances of social justice movements and attempting to build a shared political imaginary around what could a democratic transnational public culture look like.

### **Which Programme?**

In the context of cultural organizations, programming corresponds to the seasonal

rhythm of successive deadlines. In a mundane sense thus programming is what punctuates the daily grind for many cultural workers, project after project, with their cyclical textures of temporality, from the pre-event rush when no one can take a break to the post-event lull when temps and interns suddenly disappear.

Public programming is a kind of administrative function that, unlike bureaucracy, is geared towards conjuring up the contingent rather than regularity.

Although programming bears a similarity with planning, the two concepts remain dissimilar for one important aspect. While a plan casts a direct linear relationship with a future, a programme reveals a preoccupation with the way heterogeneous elements can be brought to interact in order to produce a certain future. In other words, a plan requires executioners, while a programme needs actors who will determine their own course of action autonomously and yet in accordance to preferred and prearranged guidelines. If one turns to the cultural history of the meaning of the “programme”, it is possible to discern three important ways in which (public) programming can be grasped as a form of “conduct of conducts” (Foucault 2002: 337), to borrow from Michel Foucault’s famous definition of governmentality.

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First, the programme as it is used in politics describes the strategies deployed by a party to actualize its vision. If we consider contemporary public programming as a proxy of this kind of production of political discourse, this new function of cultural institutions then presents us with yet another plane of ambivalences, as activities undertaken in the name of public programming risk to often produce little in the way of durable political accountability. Rather than stemming from a sustained engagement with a given constituency and issue, contemporary public programming is much more often aligned with the fast pace production of news cycles, privileging the valorization of variety and novelty over the slower endurance of a public pedagogy of change. Which might not be an issue per se wasn’t it the case that with the crisis of parties and unions, together with the shrinking of the cohort of informal working class spaces such as working man clubs, people’s houses and youth clubs, public political conversations are at a loss for proper ambiances where they can literally *take place* at different paces. Some of the political discursive practices recreated and hosted by public programming used to happen elsewhere: on doorsteps, in libraries, in community centres, in local cafes, in squats, in parks, around free universities, all physical and social spaces that have been systematically disappearing from urban centres (Evans 2015).

Thus, when public programming is thought in relation to the previous social role of political programmes, which used to produce discourses able to orient the attention and actions of many, it is necessary to ask: which public programmes intensify the extraction of value from the social and which can instead become sites of refuge for some of those dislodged conversations that must continue even while they are being evicted from public cultural provisions?

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The second way in which the idea of programme contributed to shape contemporary social relations in the sense of a “list of pieces at a concert, playbill”, a meaning first recorded in 1805. Programme in this sense then points to a different genealogy altogether, one that looks at the meaning attributed to that the arrangement of the component-parts within a given cultural event through history. In this second genealogy, the importance of programming begins to function as the staging and producing of “the public” in a way that find its apex in that bourgeois, liberal modality

famously described by Habermas in his account of the public sphere and his formation in Europe since the 17<sup>th</sup> century through salons, clubs and café culture. This individually-seated public, a gathering of private individuals, who are literate, mannered, interested, can come together and congregate only under the auspices of the modern nation state and its colonial project. What this legacy brings to contemporary public programming is evidently riddled with political thresholds, as its universalist, humanist claims were never developed through inclusive practices to begin with, but stand forever tainted by their colonialist and gendered violence.

Out of this tradition, contemporary public programming has been unfolding negotiating the demands of an ever increasing spectacularization of the aesthetics of gatherings, a tendency also captured by the idea of 'festivalization' of culture (Delanty, Giorgi, Sasselli 2011: 190). For instance, one could recall in this sense the phenomena of the *Nuit Blanche* format, popular in so many European cities around ten years ago; or the "marathons" of speakers that are the signature project of curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, among many other examples..

Yet public programming partakes also in genealogies of practices set up against this very idea of the production of public discourse as elitist endeavour. The critique of postcolonial, feminist and queer theory deconstructed claims to universality; cultural studies begun to undo its predicament of excellence; artistic practices themselves continued to challenge accepted conversational formats. However even in this second sense the field is full of ambivalences and contradictions.

For instance, a recent trend has seen international cultural institutions producing discursive events following aesthetic formats directly lifted from the realm of social movements. Recent examples include the "free school", transposed from a long tradition of popular education initiatives and the "camp", reminiscent of protest movements such as Arab Springs, 15M and Occupy; Both these event formats have recently enjoyed a great deal of popularity within major festivals and art organizations, including Manifesta 6 in 2006; The Summit of Non Aligned Initiatives in Education Culture in 2007; Pirate Camp – The Stateless Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2011; and Berlin Biennale, which hosted an Occupy camp on its premises, and the Truth is Concrete camp at Steirischer Herbst, both in 2012.

It is crucial for a study of public programming to pose the difficult question as to whether such occasions managed to generate a smooth synthesis between their programmed and the self-organized drives, and to negotiate successfully the kiasm between the demands of spectacle and a commitment to the political stakes represented by such formats. The difficulty of creating fruitful alignments between cultural institutions and social movements when this are predicated at the level of aesthetics is indicative, not so much of the professional qualities of the organizers themselves, but more of a more substantial conflict between heterodirected and autonomous processes of social morphogenesis. To put it differently, similar rhythms and forms of facilitations can produce radically different subjects and modes of political agency for those involved.

While the interest in militant-inspired formats has been on the rise in the art sector, within social movements themselves, cultural programming is becoming an increasingly important locus of action, organization and reflection. Recent experiences worth mentioning in these sense might include the #occupyartists network in the US, the mobilization of the Tunisian cultural workers during the Arab

Spring, and the phenomenon of the “occupied cultural centres”<sup>2</sup> in Italy and also Greece. A common concern of all of these instances has been to articulate a proposal for the role of cultural practices within progressive politics, and to intervene in the production of discourse outside of academia and mass media.

In the case of the occupied cultural centres in Italy, these efforts have also a generative use of public programming to sustain experimentations with different organizational forms, division of labour and regimes of ownership. For instance, the occupation of the Teatro Valle in Rome initiated a dialogue with jurists to develop the legal case of a “Foundation of the Common” while the governing assembly of Macao in Milan has been developing various tools for administering their collective wealth, such as a common currency and a basic income.

Here we can see how in the case of social movements, the impulse towards becoming more like cultural institutions has not unfolded primarily on the level of aesthetics mirroring, but took root at the more foundational level of organizational logics. These efforts could be seen as constituting a concrete, performative implementation of notions such as “new institutional critique”, “instituent practices” (Raunig 2006: 3) and “monstrous institutions”<sup>3</sup>, all topics that have featured prominently in the recent public programmes of international cultural organizations.

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Finally, the third use of the programme it is important to include for mapping the contours of contemporary public programming dates back to 1923, when this term was first picked up in media production to describe a “broadcasting presentation”, opening the doors, merely 20 years later, for the same idea to be then applied to the realm of computing for the first time. Today, media formats and digital technologies are a key element of the ambiances in which public discourse is produced, valorised, circulated, although within the realm of cultural institutions actors have just recently begun to reflect on the impact of such infrastructure in a proactive, rather than reactive, manner.

Leaving aside the more immediate remarks around the importance of digital media for the dissemination of lectures and events that take place in public programmes then, I would like to conclude this excursus by highlighting how the ubiquitous presence of coded environments impacts the kind of tasks contemporary public programming will set for itself at the intersection between the digital sense of the word “programme” and the “common” (public) function of cultural institutions. The first one revolves around the capacity to create new meaning simply by recombining sequences of knowledge in new or different ways. Since around a decade ago, one of the “hot topics” in the realm of Internet has been the rise of online tools for ‘content curation,’ such as Youtube Channels; Pinterest; Goodreads, Delicious. There has been an exponential raise of increasingly sophisticated aggregator softwares that allow the research for specific information from multiple online sources, the selection of ad hoc materials (videos, news, images, books, etc.) and their subsequent arrangement and display. Such curation platforms afford the complexity of veritable virtual cultural centres, hence reconfiguring (challenging? expanding?) the function

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<sup>2</sup> These include, but are not limited to: Asilo della Conoscenza, La Balena, M.A.C.A.O., Nuovo Cinema Palazzo, Sala Vittorio Arrigoni, Teatro Coppola, Asilo Filangieri, Teatro Garibaldi, Teatro Marinoni, Teatro Rossi Occupato, Teatro Valle Occupato, Cavallerizza Irreale in various cities in Italy and Embros Theatre in Athens, Greece.

<sup>3</sup> On the concepts of “new institutional analysis” and “monster institution”, see the work of eipcp (European Institute of Progressive Cultural Politics) and Universidad Nómada, Spain, among others.



and aims of actual ones. In relationship to cultural programming, this translates into a shift from a distributive mode in an environment of scarcity to a modality of appropriation in a climate of superabundance, a shift that problematically set cultural organizations on the path of becoming extractivist operations. In this scenario, instead of turning the attention towards marketing techniques (increasingly a core component of master programmes that form specialized cultural managers, art administrators and curators), I want to suggest that a more generative possibility may be to look in the direction of autonomous politics precisely not at the level of aesthetics or content selection, but for reconfiguring cultural organizations as sites where it might be possible to articulate the public uses and consequences of all these different knowledges. They may become sites of speculative affirmation, where abstractly interesting topics are allowed to sustain idiosyncratic relations with specific sets of local constraint.

A second way in which digital formats are interrogating the culture of public programming has to do with the way in which they offer tools for coordinating face-to-face encounters. Examples abound here, ranging from dating apps to digital tools supporting online and offline communities of practice, such as meet-ups. Through these social media channels, corporations are now fully equipped to make frequent incursions in the re-configuration of the “free” time of sociality, stepping in new territories that were formerly the turf of cultural organizations and informal urban dwelling. As art centres increasingly plan laboratories, workshops and special events, the way in which such moments are conceived in relation to the meta programming of the life of locales made possible by digital media becomes important and worthy of further discussion. Within the social media mentioned above, programming operates directly at the level of just-in-time synchronization of actors in time and space, but does not necessarily support the creation of common public experiences and discourses. This trait may be regarded as an advantage over the capacity of invitation of cultural organizations, raising question of whether top-down scheduling might become a liability when it comes to public programming.

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In conclusion, this brief excursus through the dense constellation of practices and interventions conjured up by the neologism “public programming” signals this field’s extreme dynamism in the present moment. When it manages to resist the pressure of becoming a stage for performance-enhanced spectacles of erudite interaction, based on smooth (ana)aesthetic protocols, public programming can become a collective practice able to sustain an urgently needed emancipation of public discourse and public feeling in a post-democratic society. As sites of transversal and partisan expression of thoughts and emotions, public programmes can offer models for rethinking the public function of cultural institutions away from the sterile notion of their supposed neutrality in relation to what happens, allowing much needed experimentations in recombining what is important to think and talk about, with how it is important to do it, and with whom. Admittedly an ambitious task, a worthwhile gamble nonetheless.

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