

Interviews with the Swamp Thing, the Poacher and the Healer

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Interactions with and within institutions have characteristic qualities, styles, personalities, and tone. These aspects of institutional life are difficult to capture through formal description or professional obligation. Institutions comprise performed characters, each activating infrastructural scenography in their way, infusing physical, procedural architectures with particular tonalities. How might we trace these performers? What are these performances, and for whom are they enacted?

Transcribed here are conversations with essential practitioners. These are the characters of art institutions, tracing outlines of who they are and what they do, and how they perform it. Necessarily veiled and anonymized, these personnel profiles have monikers following their ways of life within the institution: Swamp Thing, Poacher, and Healer. They recount and refract dimensions of the critically indivisible person-professional-practitioner entities that people in arts and cultural institutions find themselves impelled or compelled to become. Such exchanges about practices in institutions reveal how these contexts demand that we enact reactionary and curative roles, composed within the constraints and affordances of the scenographic infrastructure of buildings and publications, policies and procedures, presumption, and tradition.

1: The Interviewers

We are researchers in a project titled *Institutions as a Way of Life* that focuses on instituting practices in the art field. The project is based on the observation that institutional critique and many other currently pervasive theories of the institution are a dead end when it comes to productive

strategies of institutional study, whose aim is to contribute to the infrastructure they analyze. Against this backdrop, we look for other ways to talk about institutional strategies, ways that won't limit us to the roles of observers, but instead turn us into co-creators. We're interested in strategies of speculative performativity, in fiction that manages to change the way we talk about institutions and its actors, that points to the ways in which the institution works, and how it forms artistic practices.

We have started looking into the ways that people perform in institutions, much like the way in which actors prepare to play characters by differentiating between their function and their role. In the context of the clinic La Borde, the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Paul Oury saw the need for an analysis of not only the patients but also the institution. As a method he distinguishes between status, role and function. He proposed to do an exercise every morning to distinguish between these three aspects. Status for him is related to the payroll; the role is something that has been assigned to you; whereas the function develops itself in a community—it is shared. We would like to take a similar approach when looking at art institutions.

This is why we are now here to talk about Institutions to a Swamp Thing, a Poacher and a Healer. We've not scheduled dates for the conversations, though, because they are purely fictional. They are composed assemblages of encounters and imaginaries, of people we met and characters we would like to meet. A more comprehensive list of the various characters we encounter in institutional life—past, present and future—would include many more examples than this trio. There we would also meet the Artist, who treats institutions and their processes as a medium to be modulated as a creative practice. Also, the Martyr, whose prostrate suffering transmutes into guilty pain-pleasures, the satisfying confirmation of expectations and presumptions of the inefficiency and confusion of institutional cultures. The Trickster, joking and jibing, obfuscates with a field of passive aggressivity, remarks and giggling—everyone takes everything too seriously. Others, like Ho Tzu Nyen, in the volume *Institutions for the Future*, have identified the Chief, Prophets, Warriors, Enemies and Allies, in similar ways, but for the future. So why do we talk to the Swamp Thing, Poacher and Healer? They find themselves at opposing ends, but have quite a lot of things in common too. They are all in charge, you could say. They try

their best, in different ways. They are affiliated with specific institutions, but we're sure you'd find them in every Institution.

2: The Swamp Thing

In the back office of a hipster art institution, 6th floor.

Noon, lunch break, eating a self-made sandwich.

A new show is currently prepared. It is dusty.

Who are you and why are we here?

I thought we wanted to talk about institutions and infrastructures. Not my favorite topic in the first place. I tend to not think about them too much. I prefer to just work through them, with them, alongside them. You have to pick your battles. There's only so much energy you can put into changing places, the rest of the time you just have to get on with it. I have realized that it's best to transform yourself into whatever the system or institution needs from you; a kind of chameleonic curation of self, I don't know. In the end, I suppose I'm not really for or against particularities, I'm just for getting on with it. This means I have to be all things to all people. I have cultivated an ability to be many things at once. With every decision, interaction, every move I make, I think, "what does this convoluted infrastructure need from me?" I just try to give it what it needs. Why waste time trying to resist, change or be overly critical about something that cares so little about me, or about you? I kind of let the politics of the place wash over me, and sometimes I catch a decent wave that I can swim in, or surf on.

What inspires you?

These worlds of arts, culture, media, they are worlds full of contradictions, gives and takes, things that seem on the surface to make very little or normal sense; incongruous relationships between medium and message. I am not sure we need to resist, be averse to these contradictions all the time—I mean, contradictions are interesting, and we're pretty much in the business of being interesting. Deleuze called contradictions "the phenomenal and anthropological aspect of difference," or something like that. And we're all into heterogeneity and difference these days, aren't we?

Adapting, bending, making room, accommodating, being inclusive and accessible. Letting go of the singular self relieves us from the demands of a singularizing meritocracy. Of course, the world we've constructed in the arts and cultures is probably the most elaborated and conservative of singularized meritocracies.

The identities of arts and cultural institutions are likewise multiple and variable. One such central issue seems to be what the Americans call selling out—corporatism, corporate sponsorship, all that sort of stuff. There was a Beck's Futures award exhibition in the early 2000s in the UK that had a promotional poster I always think of. The tag line was, "If corporate sponsorship is the death of art, welcome to a funeral," or something like that. It was an M&C Saatchi advertising campaign. You've got to ask yourself, what kind of monstrosity is that? It's at least two-headed, anyway—contemporary art and corporatism. It's the kind of seemingly contradictory monster that gives the artworld what it really wants and needs, which is not just money, but something against which to assert a set of ambiguous, shifting liberal values. Opportunities for humanizing, liberatory and emancipative rhetoric are what people really seem to love. Contradictions also fuel a kind of parallel need for sponsoring entities to brand themselves and so associate themselves with such progressivism—it's not just about tax breaks.

I was recently in Milano for a show by Bea Schlingelhoff. The show was fantastic. It looked at the role of Swiss mercenaries in the Vatican and asked whether women are also mercenaries, as long as they 'serve' under patriarchy. She displayed a contract of some sorts, outlining different ethics and criteria to consider when running an institution. These contracts or, rather, this one contract, accompanies every single show of hers, and the curators/directors of the institutions are asked to sign it, with it being displayed whether it is signed or not. She uses it like a certificate of authenticity of some kind. She talks about the need for a separatist thinking—this sounds very '80s to me. I immediately have to think of Marilyn Frye's essay on "separatism and power" from 1983. Frye talks about the need to withdraw, break out, regroup, transcend, shove aside, step outside, migrate, say no. She believes that by actually doing that, one gains control on access and defining. It's funny to see the term reappear in the context of a female artist trying to

regain power when it comes to institutional access and defining. But I really don't believe that such a separatist action makes any difference. I don't even believe that the artist herself believes in it. In the end, it doesn't matter if the curators, who may or may not sign it, live up to the task. I might be cynical. I play with the worst-case scenario and use it as a buffer, a mechanism of self-defense, to either explain away pain or try to avoid it. It is idealism gone sour; it is hidden and at the same time obvious disappointment; and it is a way for people to make sure they are not taken for fools. I feel it is an act of protection that does not allow for any vulnerability.

What are you doing?

There is only so much you can do. What I believe in is performance, and that performed utterances have the ability to create worlds. But my worlds don't reach the institution.

It's like when Annette Krauss and Ferdiansyah Thajib talked about the need to think about the space in between institutions rather than the institutions themselves. I attended a weird workshop by them at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. They asked us to sketch out the institutions we're involved in and the restraints we face. We wrote them down on paper and made mappings of our collective institutions. The interesting thing was that we then tried to connect the different institutions we go through, are affiliated with, and which made visible the kind of footsteps necessary to walk the walk. We have to care for the space between the art institutions, not the institutions themselves. We achieve that by poaching their lands, by stealing from their territories, rather than battling them head-on as protests and picket lines. There's plenty we can trim from the excesses, plenty of interiorities and corners to occupy. We can take little bits here, little bits there, from the reserves, and cumulatively make it available to other kinds of consensual agreement.

3. The Poacher

Well established, traditional institution with jobs for life.

The biggest room of the institution, the aula, they are preparing an event.

Textile floors and elaborate ceiling, built for perfect acoustics.

We meet around five on the stage of the aula. No drinks are offered. Spirits are high.

Who are you and why are we here?

Why am I here? I seem to keep getting myself into these weird, bound-up situations. I'd have no problem in a corrupt or anachronistic structure—which is what most arts institutions are—doing things that I might otherwise think were pretty unethical. I've used public opinion and pressure, for example, to blackmail my bosses into paying me more. I have no problem rerouting resources and then fiddling around with paperwork, if needed—no problem at all. What some might call stealing can also be a way of rerouting or liberating assets. Resource allocation tactics for creative re-appropriation. I'm no petty thief, but I don't mind recasting or interrupting standard procedures and interpretations. I know my way around these institutions, I've been around a while, and I know how to manipulate these places—hit 'em where it hurts. Public opinion, projections of transparency and democratic socialism—if you question how well an art institution is enacting these kind of things, you pretty much always get what you want. But what I want you to understand is that these behaviors are contextual, and I'm trying to be corrective in my antagonism. I want to see institutional politics that walk the walk while they talk the talk.

What inspires you?

I figured you'd ask me something like that. Look, I'm not interested in standard forms of recognition or in climbing ladders, so careerist questions like “what inspires you?” aren't going to get you straightforward answers. I guess I tend to be inspired by people and practices that redistribute and deconstruct. Even when they destroy and dissolve, when necessary. Doing unsanctioned things in a system that has lost direction or its moral compass, in an institution that has forgotten why it exists in the first place, are ethical acts, as necessary as they are appropriate. It reminds me a bit of poaching. Presumed illegal poaching in real wildernesses is sometimes a resistance to managerial blindness. ‘Illegal’ hunters are often much more aware of on-the-ground realities, they don't pretend to know how to regulate complex, wild or unruly ecosystems. There are those amongst the

old guard of Institutional Critique who are going to want to liberate art institutions of their insidious and messy power dynamics. I don't believe in that. Every form of criticism only optimizes those dynamics further. But I don't want to optimize it; I just want to take what I can get. Power comes in many forms, too, and there's a lot of ritual, animism and esoteric thinking in the magic of the poacher. I was recently listening to a podcast by Erik Davis on cultures of consciousness: "Art is magic, in the most broad and poetic sense of the term. But rather than the arresting magic of authoritarian social institutions, the poacher performs creative magic, a critical rebellion of the grassroots imagination against the symbolic and social frameworks of consensus reality." This seems to me a pretty good description of what I'd like to do in my role, in the world, and in these institutions.

What are you doing?

I recently put together a site-specific exhibition project for a new museum. I installed a five-meter-tall mural, intended as a background for selfies, reflecting the slick style of the museum, which was conceived to be a national landmark. It is the kind of thing that a corporate sponsor at an exhibition might have designed into the show... or asked for as a commission. Next to the selfie screen was a bunch of branding messages—banners and posters—for an arts-service brand, in the context of this new, national, contemporary art museum in Europe.

While installing the show, the invigilation staff told me that the Director of the museum never spoke to them directly, ever. It struck me that while the project addresses the role of the institution, various players and beneficiaries of cultural capital and experiences of art, it did not address the apparent precarity and unhappiness of laborers and volunteers in the museum. They were in a rather immediate struggle to be recognized by the institution and its leadership. I thought, "how could I also get them what they need, or want?" Inspired and urged by these encounters, I did try to help organize their demands, to see about giving them a little bit of recognition or visibility. But it wasn't easy, and it kind of made me step out of my role as a commissioned artist. Plus, I mean, what do I care, really? This is just how these places are. And the jobs of these invigilators are so

precarious that they're also not really around very long, so how would they ever get themselves organized? They all have other jobs, too, as museum gigs don't pay very well, consistently or, at times, at all. Also, all the lines of sight got kind of confused by institutional interfaces and communications bottlenecks. 'Talking' to a group of invigilators involved having to address them via a centralized and centralizing coordinator. Modes of address and communication were rendered immediately difficult, confused and cumbersome, but no one seemed particularly interested in talking about how to be more clear, direct or personal. Everyone instead seemed pretty worried about keeping their jobs, and keeping up appearances, keeping up the well-meaning performance politics.

When I have conversations like this one, I always feel like people are going to understand that I'm kind of morally corrupt, or something. I guess with these things I'm advocating—stealing, poaching, pinching, appropriating—a lot of people think these things are just categorically wrong to do from inside an institution. It's pretty clear, I hope, that I don't go around trying to disrupt things just for the sake of it, nor am I trying to destroy everything around me—I suppose I need the institution in order to get what I want. By the way, it's good that we're talking, getting to know each other. You can see I'm not such a bad person, right? Make sure to warn me if it looks like I'm going to get caught, ok? I need friends, compatriots, comrades who know me because it's not always clear from my actions what my motivations are. You can only bite, or nibble, the hand that feeds you for so long before that hand turns into a fist. So, if you think someone is going to find me out, let me know. I can always move on, work somewhere else, get a new gig. Maybe one day I'll find or set up an institution that I won't need to fight against. Maybe one day everyone will emerge from the shadows.

4. The Healer

We meet in the recently renovated cafeteria. The leaseholder gave up, it is now run by students. They always leave a window open. A table near the entrance. We share a cup of maté tea.

Who are you and why are we here?

I have been running the library for a while now. Not only do I love books, but I love the social space of the library, the moments it creates between people. Libraries are not just places to find books but they're organizations in which people work together to develop practices, together. To think, together. Running a library gives me the opportunity to think about what kind of practices I long for or think are missing in other communities, other places, the city where I live. I think you're asking me about this because you want to know how I choose to act with and within institutions. I'm really flattered you asked, and super happy to help... not so many people are interested in the librarian.

I spend most of my time setting up institutional frameworks. I'm a maintainer. I feel like I'm in resonance with these frameworks, somehow symbiotic with the library itself and its ways of working. I'm really part of this institution, and it's part of me. I am, most genuinely, here to help. Are there things I don't like about this place?—sure. But we have protocols for change and it's my goal to make things different, better, from the inside. It's ok if things move slowly, that's how institutions are. You just need to be patient, move in the right direction, slowly, steadily, giving as much of yourself as you can until things get better. I just genuinely feel like my interests and energies are part of the fabric of my workplace. I care for these people, things, rules and rubrics, and I feel they sort of care for me. I don't see the point of trying to tear it all down like some kind of impetuous child.

I would love to see the care that I put into these people, places and things come back to me as part of real, instantiated and realized institutional infrastructures. All the energy, concern, worry, affection and protection I put into this place, if it could just be reflected back in some concrete way, that'd be nice.

What inspires you?

The writer and teacher Mark Fisher pointed out that we all need to become better managers; that this idea of running away, or being completely ambiguous and ambivalent isn't a viable strategy against hegemonic power anymore, if it ever was. Mark said that the issue with neoliberal culture isn't that there's too much management, but that there's not enough of the right

kind of systematic attention. This might sound kind of polemical for people steeped in institutional critique and the deconstruction of political and scientific institutions, which goes for most of the cultural studies and arts set.

But in fact, he was just trying to reclaim management from neoliberal managerialism. While managerialism for him was this massive control apparatus born in part from the social experiments of the late 1960s and early 1970s, management is itself something that can come with the promise of better democratic socialism. What could be more socialist than a better managed society?

But how do we do this? By imagining ways of working with people, ways of understanding institutional practices, which don't inundate people with micro-demands or tasks. Instead we can see management and oversight as a means of providing umbrellas—space, time and openness. Holding ground for some new thing to emerge into. This kind of space holding is management as Mark sketches it, and it's really about care. He argued for positions in institutions of art and culture that would be loyal to and attached to it, in the service of providing hiatuses, in which to be and relate and think.

Sorry for going on like this... But I just remembered something Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote that has inspired me for some time. It's from the late 1960s. 1969, I think... called the *Maintenance Manifesto*. It likewise asks how a space to think, or a space to produce work can be provided by the physical and social infrastructures of institutions. The manifesto outlines how Ukeles, a mother and an artist, is always doing twice the work of her male colleagues. What she does, just like her male colleagues, is make art, which is based on forms of symbolic capital. What she does otherwise as a cleaner, a cook, a domestic laborer, has no such symbolic value. This latter type of work is pure maintenance. It produces nothing new, it's completely invisible because it produces nothing recognizably new—it makes no difference. And capitalist machinery only values things that are new, novel, different. Maintenance provides for frameworks in which to continue life, making places liveable, places to live in. And it is work that is associated mostly with conservation, protection, and repetition. Art, on the other hand, is supposed to be a creative process, which implies novelty. Ukeles decided to move this maintenance work, the work that “takes all

the fucking time,” into the gallery space. She made maintenance visible, as a kind of creative process, otherwise conceived. What the Maintenance Manifesto makes clear is that there is always a space ‘outside’ the institution that constitutes it; there’s always an externality that allows for the internality to exist. Most commonly, these are externalities that haven’t been accounted for. It’s never enough to just change these little internal bubbles, these enclaves and institutions—universities, museums or temporary art spaces—we have to think about how externalities need to change to enable different kinds of creation. We have to account for maintenance and care.

What are you doing?

I am currently moving on from the library and find myself in the process of founding a new research institute in an art university. It’s a typically problematic kind of place, where people are working too much for too little money, and are being managed by people who have no view, or seem to care little for what is happening on the ground.

An institution is like an umbrella: something people choose to get underneath, or not. I choose to do so. I want to imagine a research facility, a team, a lab, or even a single person (me, for example) that is aware of itself and its own structuring. I want to imagine how these styles and characters effect and influence the work being done and one another. This might be difficult to do, practically, because it can be a bit schizophrenic, I guess, as a kind of oscillation between foreground and background, form and content. Maybe a membranous, replicating amoeba is a better metaphor—an internality that is permeable, refusing the demand to be one thing. An institution where we can start to think about imaginative and creative administration and management: a kind of bridging of motivation/possibility and structure/limitation. These ideas of freedom and constraint should not be seen as things in conflict, but as a kind of transfer, flux or play.

The idea isn’t to set up systems in order to prevent disorder or chaos, or even to ensure that work gets done, but to create a kind of institute of maintenance, perhaps. The kind of care between and within what I am looking to energize, the kind of management I am trying to articulate, is not a kind of modernist-humanist project. I don’t really believe in the institution’s responsibility to produce subjectivity, to educate or produce

particular kinds of subjects. We don't need universities and museums, or churches and governments, to be good people. Someone who really believes in the possibility of administrative fairness and systematized humanism—really and truly believes—understands these rules wholly differently to someone who understands these very same things as taciturn and capricious frameworks descended from abstracted national, provincial and historical arbitrariness.

Institutions and their infrastructures are not easily changed, but they are reiterated and re-fitted as variations on a really beautiful human impulse—that is, the human will-to-organize, to interact, to forge relations, professions, identities, and to collaborate. Structures that can warn us, annotating our attempts and failures, tell us how we might better care for ourselves and others the next time around. Institutions may exist in order to help us transform them—to love them into submissive humility—to generate systems, architectures and relations that are less arbitrary, less barbaric. *

GLOSSARY

— *Patainstitutional (personnel)*

The notion of patainstitutionalism is a neologism based on the fictional discipline *pataphysics* expressed by the french writer Alfred Jarry in his surrealist novel *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien: Roman néo-scientifique suivi de Spéculations* written in 1898. Jarry defines pataphysics as the science concerning the virtual or imaginary nature of things, and furthermore the development of imaginary solutions to fictional problems. At the conference *First Warsaw Patainstitutional Convention*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw on April 2, 2016, the term patainstitution was used to describe institutions

“[...] formed by collectives of people disillusioned by the inertia of traditional institutions in the fields of art, science, economics, and politics. They are characterized by organizational irony, an aversion to bureaucracy, a need for self-definition, and a desire to transgress the accepted schemata. They often display progressive political inclinations and take part in movements aimed at real democratization of public space.” (Poirier, Rossi & Spinelli, *First Warsaw Patainstitutional Convention*, 2016¹)

1 — See: <http://isolartcenter.org/blog/2016/03/11/first-warsaw-patainstitutional-convention/>, accessed 24.08.2020.

Like pataphysics and patainstitutions, patainstitutional personnel are a product of our imagination.

— *La Borde*

La Borde is a psychiatric clinic located near Cour-Cheverny in France. It is a model for institutional psychotherapy, where patients participate in the operation of the clinic. La Borde uses Guattari's Assemblage theory, which breaks with the notion of the subject as a fixed individual. Instead the subject is perceived as a component of different parts interchanging within the subject and between the subject and other subjects.

— *Neoliberal managerialism*

In his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (2009) the English academic Mark Fisher describes the difficulties we can have in regards to understanding the role that managerialism plays in neoliberal culture, because we're living out a cognitive dissonance. We have internalized the idea that it was social democracy, socialism and Stalinism that were bureaucratic and that neoliberalism was against all kinds of bureaucracy, even though workers, in particular workers in public services, find themselves doing more bureaucracy than ever. This increase in bureaucratic tasks in neoliberal culture is, in part, what he defines as neoliberal managerialism. Furthermore, Fisher uses this term to describe the decentralized bureaucracy, as something we're required to actively produce ourselves, as some kind of self-surveillance. Rather than an elimination of bureaucracy, what we've seen under neoliberalism is just the reverse. What this neoliberal managerialism measures is not the worker's ability to perform their job, but their ability to perform bureaucratic tasks effectively.

