



Opacity and the art institution

An interview with Nina Möntmann

Opacity, the exhibition presented at UKS in Oslo and produced by Nifca the spring of 2005, explored in what way today's art institutions are used and challenged within artistic processes. Artists working with ideas related to the concept of the institution, the community or how the presentation artistic space works, are part of this exhibition.

Curated by Nina Möntmann in collaboration with Trude Iversen.

With: Kaja Dahlberg, Danger Museum, Marcus Degerman, Stephan Dilleuth, Gardar Eide Einarsson, and Sofie Thorsen.

Question: The exhibition explores different ideas of how to interact with the institution as a space of presentation. The Danger Museum works (playing with the same space of presentation but with modified photographs), and the Markus Degerman work (with a "new" ceiling at the reception room and the pre-painted white base boards around the wall) show the assumptions that the audience has about what a presentation space is (or should have).

Can we believe in other uses for the institutional spaces? Is it possible to avoid the long history that leads us, as users, to understand these spaces under a concrete idea of what are they offering?

Nina Möntmann: The history of the art space as we know it today is connected to the history of modernism and to a bourgeois idea of what an exhibition and an artwork in general should offer, and what the perfect conditions are to present and receive it. Since the bourgeoisie was also the peer group of these spaces and institutions, predominantly the museum, the use of these spaces was pretty much connected to a bourgeois lifestyle and education. The project of the "White Cube" wanted to disconnect the artwork from any "disturbing" worldly influence, and give it its full due in terms of an autonomous object. Today artists have deconstructed the white cube on many levels, first physically with Gordon Matta-Clark's Cuttings and Michael Asher scratching the white paint off the gallery walls. Broodthaers and Haacke were questioning the power, hierarchy of art institutions and their ways to determine art history. Then, in 89, Martha Rosler opened the DIA Art Foundation for homeless artists and activists, and in the 90s artists like for example Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson or Renée Green worked site-specifically within the institution and were analysing the space and its social implications on a more conceptual level. Even it isn't such a clear genealogy as I described it here, you can see a clear development: the white cube is still the normative exhibition space for contemporary art, but it has lost its decontextualising power. It is just standard.

So, to get back to your question, this space is open for several different uses, and i think this is what many curators are working on at the moment. To produce an agonistic space that resembles the public sphere "outside", in order to create a model situation that is open for imaginary politics.

Question: Markus Degerman's work can be "not seen" if we have not visited UKS before. What do you think about it? Is it necessary to recognize the work or is it part of this idea of opacity?

NM: I think, when you have a look around you will probably notice that there is "something wrong" with the space, which means something is very unusual for a space that is exhibiting contemporary art and is also a meeting point for discussions and for a specific social scene. There are certain codes in the appearance and design of these kind of spaces, which were also considered, when uks moved into this new space, consciously or not. Baseboards and a suspended ceiling are these elements, you would immediately remove, when you move into a space and want to redesign for contemporary art. As I mentioned, there is still the "white cube" obligatory, but also the industrial warehouse style, derived from the Soho artspaces in the 80s, and, in bigger dimensions, the new galleries in Chelsea. The idea of "Opacity" doesn't mean that we were planning to hide the art from the visitors. Opaque strategies, which are part of the daily business of almost every institution and company, are questioned in this project. It is a question of power and the abuse of power: it makes a huge difference, if a big, powerful and public institution is working with opaque strategies or if a smaller initiative is employing internal processes and decides, when it is time to surface with a certain information or project. A bigger institution has a public mandate that is calling for transparency.

Question: Kajsa Dahlberg's video (presenting the need for separatist spaces, in this case the lesbian one) is a good example to talk about the paradox of the utopias for this society. Do we want to communicate between each other or do we need to find our own groups? In one way, the contemporary art sector has been acting as one of these separate rooms with its own codes. Do you think than art cannot be effective outside its boundaries?

NM: The question of the effectiveness of art is a huge thing at the moment. I have just seen a project at Santa Monica in Barcelona, curated by Montse Badia, which was asking the same question. The title was "Mind the Gap", which is telling. The reason, why many "community based" art projects of the early 90s were so counterproductive in the end, is that they were employing strategies, communities, collaborators and audiences from outside the artfield. That is why this questionable dictum of the artist as a social worker came about. They wanted to effect real politics in a direct way, but they were dilettants in the field they were working in -- and that was very ineffective. Art can adapt strategies or involve diverse people as co-producers, but to my mind the experimental and imaginary potential of art is where the resource of "effectiveness" lies, if you will. What is real? The project "Park Fiction" in Hamburg succeeded in reclaiming a city-owned areal, extremely sought-after by investors - by proposing wavelike gardens and "pirate-fountains" designed by children, which are realized in the meantime. It looks great. As for the "boundaries", since the cultural worker has become the role model for the neo-liberal subject, I don't think the boundaries are very high, if there are any.

Question: Can art be the platform for a new way to understand politics? Can the proactive creation of platforms, and its definition, create a new context with more interaction and communication?

NM: I like your formulation of art as a way or platform of understanding politics. I think it is about producing politics that are related to real politics, but function differently. In that sense many of the art projects that seem relevant to me are working on the level of symbolic politics. I understand one important task of Institutions to function as a mediator between symbolic and real politics.