

## Re: Changing the System

This text was written partly in response to the experience of the *Changing the System?* seminar itself. The greatest difficulty that faced us in the seminar was finding a common platform for discussion, from which we would not only talk about the meaning of the specific terms, but ask the important question of what needs to be done—or what can be done. I am not thinking about a discussion that would accept a single answer, but a talk about strategies and agencies. My experience of the seminar was that the artists did have a lot to talk about on the basis of shared experience, with similar exhibition situations; but when it came down to grappling with strategies for change or other focus areas, our practices were too diverse and our intellectual and critical interests as a group were pretty disparate. The artists assembled spanned most of the contemporary practices, and many personal and local politico-economic situations. And then the discussion was haunted by a classic problem, the problem of distinguishing the roles of the institutions, the artists, the curators and so on—the problem of the boundary between the institution and the artist, etc.

It is symptomatic of the situation today that a large percentage of the artists assembled here had at some point been involved in arranging shows and events by themselves, and had worked in collaborations. The work of the curators had also taken so many different forms that the idea of the curators or the artists as given aggregates—or sources with a given experience of and approach to production—had little weight.

Once all this has been said about the blurring of the roles, we face some problems which in my opinion do represent a crisis in the art world—problems to which we can only relate by using terms like “institution”, “art world” and “artists/curators”. In fact the crisis is only the crisis of the institution. The symptoms are easy enough to see—and they are symptoms that many artists exhibit: disillusionment with the art institutions and the art world, and massive frustration with their mechanisms and the ways one has to negotiate them. Many curators and critics share this sentiment too, and it concerns not only the exhibition process itself, but also the reception apparatus—for example the art press. It is also a crisis of the integrity of the exhibition and funding structures, and the political history they involve. There is clearly a discrepancy between the ideas many artists have of their practice and its goals and the way they confront the mechanisms surrounding their practice at the everyday level. I think this is partly a problem of the relationship between the tradition of “avant-garde” practice, and institutions that are largely defined by parameters that still belong to the 19th century (structurally, economically, nationally, and ideologically), while contemporary art production is trying to grapple with the subjectivities and the cultural and economical models of the late 20th century. It is also a problem of the many variables and unspoken rules in the visual art world compared with other arts like theatre, film and music (without discussing the inherent problems of these arts). Unlike the situation in the theatre world or for those within the museum structure, artists are usually not paid for their work and time they devote to projects. It seems that artists are supposed to live either on grants that you can only really get in a few

countries, or by selling their work, which is only possible with a certain kind of art. Many of the business mechanisms of the art world are unclear, to say the least, and they are often based on notions of trust and unwritten agreements to an extent that is unheard-of in the other arts. One finds oneself dealing with structures which, at the very practical level, just do not seem to be meant for contemporary art production. But as a professional artist or curator one is still dependent on the existing bureaucratic structures in terms of funding. It is significant today that many of the artists I know who have been around for a while and are doing very interesting work, and who in my opinion are significant contributors to the art world, have fantasies of leaving the field and are “secretly” drawing up strategies for how to leave the art world and—most typically—to go into experimental music or film where, if nothing else, the economic or PR structures are clearer. So in relation to the art world’s structures I think there is a problem of a lack of form; and for the artists and curators there is a problem of finding enough different strategies to engage with funding and exhibition structures in a critical or useful way without feeling that one has to limit one’s work to “mirroring” the values of the institution.

As an artist I find it necessary to move among different areas of production and different public settings. My work is found in museums, in galleries, in the “alternative” exhibition venues, on radio and as street actions. There are motives for this in my own practice; one is that I am bored with all these institutional frameworks as such—they all ultimately involve a set of ramifications and spectator situations that are too limited. Naturally I will never get outside the art institution as a wider context as long as I keep bringing things into that context. But this is beside the point. I am only making these points about my own practice to make it clear that I cannot speak of a single approach or position that can handle the structural or economic problems of the art world as a system. However, apart from the particular focus or theme of each work, I am interested in the political and artistic possibilities of the different art arenas, and I have become involved in a dynamic approach to the different aspects of the art institutions: an approach where one can use a critical analysis of the institutions to understand the ramifications and limits/possibilities of the particular exhibition contexts, in order to see how one can use these contexts for one’s own purposes—in my case, purposes other than the actual criticism of the institutions. I am thinking of an approach where none of the different institutional systems is accorded special authority or integrity, and none is seen as capable of making monolithic or confirmatory claims. This is influenced by Simon Sheikh’s “DIY” with its “punk” attitude to the institutions, in which you use the means that suit your own end (like playing a guitar and forming a band without training). Ultimately it is also about continual deviation—even from one’s own strategies. Although highly visible on the so-called “alternative” scene or in local initiative-based art worlds, the DIY approach is a strategy that is not confined to dealing with alternative, independent low-budget projects. It is a strategy applicable to curators, artists and critics. The second step in the DIY approach is not to be afraid of leaving the gallery/museum/art magazine context and their mechanisms of recognition and approval, and to use whichever context seems relevant. Though this may seem a slightly apathetic attitude to the economic issues of the art world, it is a call not for apolitical cynicism, but for awareness of the political possibilities of a whole spectrum of different arenas and audiences, a basis for initiative and action.

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