

Art Institutions and their mechanisms: What should a gallery be and how should it work?

In this case study it is my intention to form an institutional critique. By making comparisons between two differing institutional frameworks I hope to illustrate how the art institute is becoming a contested space, a contested form of presentation. In using the word 'contested' here I am not referring to the old connotations of the term in institutional theory where the gallery was a contested space in terms of gender and autonomy but I use it to relate to the new issues arising around the notion of the art institute in relation to its role as a producer of culture. Through exploring the functions and mechanisms of two institutions in the same local, Eastside Projects, run by Gavin Wade, Simon Bloor, Tom Bloor, Ruth Claxton, James Langdon and Celine Condorelli. Secondly the Ikon (Director: Jonathan Watkins). I hope to be able to show how important the changing role of the institute is becoming in contemporary art discourse and that we should give more consideration to what, how, and for whom the gallery operates.

How do we define an art institution?

What distinguishes an art institute suggested by J.J. Charlesworth in his essay *Not about institutions, but why we are so unsure of them* is its 'relative distance from a community of practicing artists' (J.J. Charlesworth, undated, [www.ica.org.uk](http://www.ica.org.uk), accessed 6<sup>th</sup> May 2013). This distance between the institution, its administrators and the practicing artists is illustrated through Ikon's current functionality, post-institutionalisation. The previously artist-run space, became commercialised, as a result of this the artists no longer made curatorial decisions about the exhibitions their role was reset as purely producers of art and the traditional mechanisms of the art institute took over.

Ikon was first perceived as a 'gallery without walls' (Watkins 2004: 8) and in 1965 it first took up residence in a glass kiosk in Birmingham's Bullring precinct, where it was accessible to all. Initially Ikon was set up by Angus and Midge Skene who provided four artists - Jesse Bruton, Robert Groves, Sylvani Merilion and David Prentice, considered to be the founders of Ikon - with moral and financial support.

Ikon is intended as an antithesis to exclusive art establishments and galleries ... [it] has been formed because of the need for an accessible place where the exchange of visual ideas can become a familiar reality.' (Watkins 2004: 8)

These words formed part of Ikon's prospectus, published in 1964 but do they ring true for the gallery now since its institutionalisation and re-location? Its functions have been altered over time as the original founders and cooperative of volunteers moved on. In 1968 the Ikon

moved to Swallow Street which was quickly deemed a mistake – the gallery was no longer accessible for the masses as they flocked to the Bullring shopping area. In 1998 Ikon was moved again to Oozells Street in Brindleyplace. The move was a part of the regeneration programme that had been set up for the area, in much the same way as Eastside Projects has been located in Digbeth, next in line for regeneration according to Nick Slater, former Visual Arts Officer of the West Midlands Arts Council; currently the Director of Arts at Loughborough.

Eastside Projects was conceived due to a lack of contemporary and lively artist-led spaces in Birmingham. Unlike places like Manchester with 'Castlefield' and Glasgow with 'Transmission', Birmingham was being left behind; to counteract this Nick Slater founded a program, 'Curatorial Fellowships', which took place in a number of Universities. The aim of the program was to find and support a project that would provide curatorial research. Gavin Wade's proposal for Eastside Projects was chosen and has become a major constituent of Digbeth.

What became clear in the conversation with Nick was his admiration for Eastside Projects however he did discuss his earlier reservations about certain aspects. 'There is always a question I think in what level of support an artist-led space should give to emerging artists and I was a bit concerned when they had artists like Liam Gillick and Mike Nelson.' Nick explained how established artists would be accustomed to exhibiting in the 'white cube' spaces and how he considered Eastside Projects to be an experimental space that could allow emerging artists to learn and develop their skills in curating and exhibiting. He went on to explain 'I don't have a problem with this anymore because there's been places like Grand Union that have been set up as a result of Eastside Projects and they are giving those artists a chance and so there is the opportunity for upcoming artists to exhibit and a chance to see their work.' (Slater, N. 7<sup>th</sup> May 2013)

Another defining mechanism of the art institution can be found in the essays of Brian O'Doherty who formulates an account of the ideology of the gallery space or 'white cube'. This account of the institution relates only to the government funded and privately funded corporate institutes whose aims and objectives are quantifiable and assessed, usually based upon numbers – these institutes turn the visitor into cultural consumers.

The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. . . The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life.' (O'Doherty 1999: 15)

Thus the function of the architecture of the building in this ideology is to prevent connecting art with the outside world, to shut out all knowledge of this world, to protect the works from the flow of time. But how can art address the issues of the outside world when it has been cut off from it? This suggests that the function of the art institute is for display only;

limiting the potential art and the gallery has in the global community. We are also reducing the role of the visitor to that of a passive entity and consumer.

Wade comments on this notion of the 'white cube', 'importance is put on creating a hallowed space for the next exhibition, making a force field of protection around the gallery that distinguishes it from the rest of the world'. He goes on to suggest that this is a perverse way to think of the gallery space and in his opinion the continuation of such would render and produce a gallery of 'fatigue', the gallery no longer has any meaning other than that of a background to arts production. He then goes on to explain 'the question for us would be whether there is also a fatigue of endless possibilities, of change and transformation.' (Wade 2010: 88) This in turn explains why Eastside Projects functions in its continuous evolving fashion, with each artwork existing long past its supposed lifespan, creating a type of archive within the exhibitions themselves (Item A).

criticism of this form of globalised corporatist institutionalism, with its public conceived as consumers, is starting to be formulated: since the mid 1990's, the programmes devised by progressive art galleries, art associations and other contemporary art institutions often mention the need to 'produce' new publics, a counter-thesis to the familiar old concept of 'reaching out for audiences (Montmann 2006: 10)

Through its presentation mechanisms Eastside Projects is producing these new publics which Nina Montmann describes above. By involving the visitors in active movement and interaction about the space they are creating a new public, one of active agents that are able to interact, form discourse and debates around the space. Eastside Projects offers their public a number of different platforms on which they can interact, not only by being active in and around the space but there are also opportunities to form part of the talks and discourses that they run parallel with the artworks (Item B). Their space is a site for sustained critical enquiry, where discourse may build up over time, where the activities of the artists, writers, researchers, directors and public can intersect and where new methods and ideas can be developed in order to address the contemporary issues and possibilities for change as at Casco, office for Art-Design and Theory in Utrecht. Simon Sheikh in his essay *The Trouble with Institutions, or, Art and Its Publics* says that art institutions should reconfigure as public spaces, and insists that the art space is a place in which democracy is the order of the day.

In the above I have attempted to illustrate how the art institute has functioned for many years. The 'white cube' ideology, that we are accustomed to, determines how a number of art institutes' function within the walls of the gallery space. Ikon has shown how even artist-led spaces have been appropriated by the government for purposes of display in their own understanding of it. Eastside Projects and Ikon illustrate how the changing attitudes in the funding bodies have altered how the art institute is able to function; whilst Ikon became

'institutionalised' after it gained funding, beginning as a bottom-up structure founded by artists, Eastside Projects hierarchy was top-down as with the State funded Former West, a contemporary art research, education, publishing and exhibition project set up in 2008 by BAK, highlighting how Arts Councils and private funders have recognised the need for change in how the art institute functions in relation to the surrounding area, and its publics.

Now we must look to these smaller progressive art institutes which are exploring the uses and functions of the gallery; can they alter our preconceptions of how a gallery should function?

What should a gallery be and how should it work?

What better way to begin understanding these questions than by forming a space where we can explore the functions of the art institute, changing and altering them to investigate new ways of working. Eastside Projects uses their space in such a way allowing them to examine and scrutinise the gallery. By using the space to create exhibitions, by changing and altering the space they begin to change the function of the gallery, it enters into the process of display and becomes a mechanism, a medium for presentation, an architectural mechanism that has also been adopted by the Unitednationsplaza project in 2007. Eastside Projects have published manuals to help their public understand how to use this space. They are working business models for the gallery but have been creatively put together making all aspects of the gallery including its collaborators and funding transparent to the public which coincides well with it being a non-profit organisation [Items C, D and E].

Wade explains how the manual 'introduces the space, but can never give it all away.' By suggesting how the space can be used or how it can be traversed and experienced the manual gives visitors and artists working with the space particular insights but at the same time the space encourages even forces people to move round and to 'question what's going on in there.' Wade goes on to explain how the space can make people feel awkward however 'That might be part of our mission here, to try and not compromise the nature of the artworks by offering too many layers of interpretation'. (Wade 2010: 92)

Eastside Projects explicitly evolves and lets the space evolve around them. Artist Lissitzky explains 'If on previous occasions in his march past in front of the picture walls and object rooms, he was lulled by painting into a certain passivity, now the exhibition spaces should make the man active. This should be the purpose of the gallery.' (Lissitzky 2010: 87)

By putting the space in the foreground in this way, the gallery becomes an active space, a space to be active in. The basis of this being that the public takes up an active role as producer, and new social and artistic structures can then emerge from this within civil society. On a number of my research visits to the gallery this active relationship between

the architectural space and the visitor is something that has really stood out and made a dynamic impact on me [Items F and G]. My visits to the space have been more memorable for it and I have felt a connection with the artworks; I've had a part in creating function in the space unlike my visit to the Ikon. Here I was very much aware of passing between paintings but not aware of where I was spatially, my position in the gallery had no correlation between me and the artworks.

The project Unitednationsplaza – both a model and a real building in Berlin (2007) - was designed to address the ambivalent character of the contemporary art institution. Many of the internal structural elements of the space are constructed so that they are easy to move therefore allowing the space the ability to transform to fit the needs of the artists, curators and public. Eastside Projects do this with their space, altering it structurally to fit the needs of the artists, rather than allowing the space to define how the artwork should sit, they change the space to suit the artwork. The gallery space has become a process of display in itself and offers artists a new challenge – to consider and engage with the space they exhibit in.

It is the zone whose width expands and shrinks according to the different functions. Hence the institution grows with its production of texts, documents, videos, and objects. (Hirsch 2008: 6)

In my most recent visit to Eastside Projects [Item G] I was encouraged through the architecture to open doors and sit in fabricated sheds which had been constructed for this exhibition as they were not there on my previous visit, illustrating how the space changes and evolves over time. Each visit becomes an experience through interaction.

Another mechanism that Eastside Projects utilises was very prominent in my visits, the notion of cumulative space, where 'work may remain; exhibitions leave traces and become existing conditions for the next works to take place in' (Condorelli 2010: 85). This cumulative process allows the public to build up a relationship with the space, elements begin to feel familiar and you begin to feel like you are connected; like you are contributing in some way to its evolution. This aspect, the 'exhibition as artwork', creates a context where each show is an invitation to alter the space' (Condorelli 2010: 87-8) in this way the space not only evolves conceptually but it also evolves for the visitor and becomes a part of their lives and experiences, something which a standardised display mechanism fails to do.

I think this is what exhibition making should be really, a challenging of what it means to produce these structures, just as artists challenge ways of making art. (Wade 2010: 94)

Wade explains how challenging the structure of the art institute is difficult as there has been so much examination of institutional set ups as sites for production, from the 1970's to the late 1990's. Since this time there have also been spaces that have tried to break with the

standard flow of the exhibition program, for example Maria Lind at Munich Kunstverein. However I would argue that not many of these sites have been able to sustain their unique and differing institutional set ups and as with the Ikon have either relented to the normality of the 'white cube' monthly cycle of display mechanisms or have been abolished altogether.

if we are going to make exhibitions now, they should reflect the idea of learning things along the way and reclaim display, which is such a key element in our society. I wonder whether art still has a claim on display, outside of the commercialisation of looking, receiving and communicating? (Wade 2010: 94)

The Ikon has however developed another way of branching out, by supporting 'public programmes' outside of the exhibition space where artists are employed to work in the surrounding areas of Birmingham to produce site-specific artworks. This programme runs parallel with the exhibition, working politically and with participation at a local level.

In conclusion to this second half I think we must in the future move away from the art institute format where the work is merely presented as if the institute has had no input in the matter, has made no choices in what to include or exclude and away from the false sense of erasure they produce through their monthly exhibition cycle. To introduce a new institutional format that is argumentative, antagonistic, that openly discusses the choices it has made rather than just presenting its own version of culture in an otherwise dull container. I believe what the art institute must look towards now is becoming a platform for opinion formation, a base for collective thinking and working collaboratively, a place that encourages question. An active space formed by conflicting publics of practitioners and non-practitioners, who are all active in the process of production.

## Conclusion

Maybe it comes down to just trying to make a unique place.

(Wade 2010: 92)

I have highlighted a number of mechanisms that Eastside Projects use which are counter to the traditional strategies that are imposed by the larger more corporate art institutions. 'Eastside Projects was founded with an explicit position in relation to its function within the context of art production and the role art may have in society at large' (Condorelli 2010: 85) and as such it plays with the function and mechanisms of the gallery space, playing with the space to see how the gallery can be used and how it can work in order to understand how it should work. They have produced a gallery space that enquires into and asks questions of the function of the gallery space.

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