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Serving Communities
Clegg & Guttmann, BüroBert (Renate Lorenz/Jochen Becker), Stephan Dillemuth

Much project-oriented activity has been motivated by a critique of the institutions and market relations that object production often seems limited to. This critique has resulted in the formation of alternative organizations and structures within artistic communities, as well as projects within communities not traditionally served by specialized artistic production. Can the anarchist and radical democratic basis of many alternative artists' organizations be reconciled with the professionalization implied by expert/client models? Can non-art communities be served through art institutions? What happens when the interests of artists and the non-art communities they attempt to serve are found to be in conflict?

Dillemuth: Friesenwall 120 opened in Cologne in January 1990. I was looking for a studio space, but when I found a storefront in the vicinity of the gallery district, I started using the space itself rather than continue to produce and show objects. In the beginning I played with possible definitions of this space. By inviting non-artistic entities, such as "Firestone" and the Gray Panther organization, and generating projects which reflected on art phenomena, I tried two different approaches to exhibitions. When I began to collaborate with the artists Josef Strau and later with Merlin Carpenter and Kiron Khosla, Friesenwall increasingly became more of a space for a part of the art community, for showing film and video, developing the function of an archive, and hanging out, as well as continuing to experiment with exhibition practice. When this led to being positioned—and marginalized—as an alternative space, we tried to work against all-too-easy-acceptance by doing one-artist shows as well as "historical" and "issue-oriented" exhibitions. At the same time, we responded to invitiations from spaces such as Pat Hearn Gallery in New York, Forum Stadtpark in Graz, and the K-Raum in Munich, by trying to translate our way of working to those other sites and thus making Friesenwall 120 into a model rather than just a Cologne phenomenon. We also started to link up with other groups that take distribution into their own hands. We got together with a number of these different groups, from spaces to fanzines and video and computer activists, for the first time in a "frame-program" at the UNFAIR 1992 in Cologne, and have been developing common activities since then.

What seems to me to be important about all of these activities is the tendency to build up self-organized structures at the margins of the institutionalized field of art, in order to change it, as well as to dodge the disciplinary boundaries and mechanisms of control that define dominant culture and seem to be reproduced by and in the art market.

To incorporate artists within curatorial functions or critical functions, to incorporate audience participation and critique, to incorporate marginal positions, pirate radio stations and discos can all be considered as new strategies to keep the power structure in place. They may be good services, but for whom? The built-in audience participation Susan described yesterday may function to stabilize the system. The pirate radio station on the rooftop of the museum still takes power away from the people who use it and strengthens the museum. No wonder the curators of the Whitney Biennial agreed to Andrea's third proposal: guilt over their own authority and the wish for transparency always, and in this case, leads to a pseudotransparency and self-legitimation—it was just screwed up by the editing of the tape.

Now, a short conclusion. From my perspective, there are only a few possibilities in this vicious circle. Serving institutions in general must mean breaking them down into smaller spaces or self-organized groups. For artists, I think the best thing is to use the institutions to the extent possible. Be aware they use you, you use them. We haven't yet talked about financial problems, fees, honorariums, blah blah blah. For curators and educators, I would say, use the museum as a middle-class shell with a split personality. Build up the second personality—the one based in radical politics, sexual extremes, terrorism, suicide. About serving audiences, serving communities: actually, they serve you. Don't forget it. About serving art and artists: it's like a good relationship. You're estranged, you fight, you love each other. I'm looking forward to the concluding discussions.

Renate Lorenz: Instead of presenting one of our projects with BüroBert, I have some notes about the discussions yesterday which I would like to relate to the description of this session in the working-group schedule.

I don't think that the expert/client model is appropriate to the projects I am interested in. I don't feel like an expert. That is why I try to realize coalitions, in order to gather knowledge, critiques, experience, and ideas. The next Shedhalle project, "Game Girl," which is based in a critique of technology, even attacks experts like gene technologists because such self-proclaimed experts transform others into nonexperts. For me, it is important to describe the model of the human body, for example, from different points of view—to use textual analysis or feminist critique as part of natural science.

Just as I don't consider myself an expert, I don't want to call myself an artist. I am and I do other things which are not well described by that category, like being a woman and writing, for example. And, because I'm not comfortable with the idea or position of an expert, I didn't like the situation yesterday where the students were hidden behind the video cameras. I would have preferred it if the students who worked on the event and the exhibition were here, not as an audience but as participants. (And moreover, it is the infrastructure of their study program which is used for this event.) I don't

think that additional participants would have changed the situation or
influenced what is discussed any more than the cameras and microphones.
Students who work on exhibitions like this, and research groups such as the
Art Workers Coalition, may be able to change something.

My third point is that, for me, "institution" is a very unclear term.
What makes a situation an institution? What an institution is has to do with
concrete things like people, space, how much money there is and where it
comes from. The decision to work within a particular context is a question of
whether is it possible to realize a coalition in that context that can engage a
given issue or project.

To make this discussion more concrete, I propose that we talk about
the exhibition that opens here tomorrow. How can the visitors gain access to
the material collected here? How can we deal with the language problem—
also in these discussions now? Is it possible to address audiences other than
art audiences? How can this event be used on an academic level? How can
the students work with it?

Clegg: We want to start with a short description of a project. The project was to
establish three small lending libraries, in three economically and socially
diverse parts of the city of Hamburg, each consisting of books we collected
in those neighborhoods. The libraries were essentially bookcases, without
guardians or librarians, made of old electrical boxes. After an elaborate
procedure of announcing the project, conducting interviews, and getting
feedback from residents, the libraries were established and open for three
months. People were encouraged to bring in books as well as to borrow
them. We can speak later on, if anyone is interested, about the different
results in the different neighborhoods.

The project also included an installation in the Kunstverein that was
part of the "Backstage" show there. That area functioned as a documentation
center where material about the current state of the libraries was brought in
by students from the university here who researched the project. There was
also a questionnaire prepared for the visitors of the Kunstverein. The goal
was to establish a relationship between the institute here at the university,
the Kunstverein, and the communities.

Guttmann: On a more theoretical level, what we want to propose today is to
expand the model of portraiture and to think about this project as portraits
of communities. This is a heuristic idea. It takes something from its proper
context and expands it, but it allows one to transfer some guidelines—
especially ethical guidelines—from the realm of portraiture to work with a
community. Our definition of the portrait, in a very abstract sense, is that a
portrait is a device to elicit reactions. The device is placed in a particular
location, reactions are elicited, recorded, and made available to the group of
persons who reacted. Portraiture is about providing a representation. It has
a cognitive value because a portrait can become a basis for organizing

thought about identity and subjectivity. It might be especially valuable for bodies that do not have such representations because they are marginal or don't present themselves as entities. The whole mechanism of portrayal can really benefit the portrayed. The idea is to give something that can actually be used.

At the same time, portraiture is a model that does not construct the artist as a social worker or as someone who has an expert knowledge about the portrayed. The artist's job is to present a device, but that device is only a work of art if it is completed by the person portrayed. It is not a question of doing anyone a favor, but more about understanding the symbiosis between the person working in the context, and the context. This is a point worth emphasizing because the self-presentation of artists as the helpers of communities is full of false consciousness. People who come out of the tradition of Conceptual art, especially, should appreciate that work on context is not a luxury but the bread and butter of an art that is not escapist.

Clegg: The community could interrupt the project. They didn't have to cooperate in using the libraries, and in one of the locations everything was gone after the first day. There was an initial press conference where people could say that they didn't want the project. We made an intervention in the community, and there were a variety of interests that emanated from that—as well as different uses to which that intervention could be put.

Guttmann: This kind of project also has to do with our own transformation from producing gallery- or museum-based work to work that does not rely solely on those kinds of institutions. With that, we would like to pose a very simple question about the structure of the institution of art: Suppose the recession continues for ten years and cultural organizations lose all of their funding. Does that mean that art would stop? What form of art would not be subsumed under the paradigm of the bourgeoisie presenting themselves to themselves through cultural institutions? Any search for alternative ways for showing art must be conducted as a conceptual analysis of what constitutes an art context or an art institution. Which aspects of the presentation of art are really necessary? How can one distinguish between those and the epiphenomena of art for the bourgeoisie? These should really be some of the most basic questions about relations to institutions, simply because we can no longer take the existence of such institutions for granted. How could we translate the tradition of institutional critique to a world without art institutions?

Draxler: I would just like to mention, in response to what Renate said, that this Kunstraum is not funded by the university or the students but mostly by the Foundation of Lower Saxony, and thus has a certain kind of independence. In addition, this project is going to other spaces and will be connected to different kinds of communities and different kinds of discussions.

Fraser: One of the main things that Helmut and I wanted to focus on in this session relates to Renate's point about the community here: How effectively and

in what way is this event serving a community, and what community does it serve? This is also a question that I would like to put to the group. As organizers, we conceived of "Services" primarily as an event that would serve people involved in practical work—as opposed to the general audience that many art-presenting organizations propose to address, and also opposed to serving as material for academic study.

Cahan: I would like to discuss the question Martin raised in his presentation: What would we do if there were no arts organizations? Clearly there are many forms of cultural production that exist outside of those contexts which may or may not be identified as fine art practices. I'm sure we can all think of what they are. But one thing that museums do that other kinds of institutions don't do is collect art and hold on to it. One of the things I'm interested in is whether the idea of collecting needs to be rethought, and in what ways. In the U.S., museums are struggling to keep up with other organizations that are dealing with more service-oriented art and really questioning whether their permanent collection should be the primary focus.

Guttmann: I think documenting, nurturing, keeping the residues, is clearly something that needs to be done, but what I'm thinking about is the question that comes out of the twentieth-century avant-garde tradition: What allows you to take an object and put it on a pedestal and call it art? The question was posed as a theoretical issue for a long time, but in the background of the question there was always a strong sense of security with respect to the basic existence of art institutions. The idea that there can be a radical shift in the objective conditions also necessitates that we pose the question in different terms. For us, the idea of working with a community relates to the question of how to expand the frame of twentieth-century art to other areas and not, primarily, to the question of addressing communities. We are artists. We are not social workers.

Fraser: Well, that may be a question.

Müller: Who might be the link between communities and artists if not the institution? Who would commission the work? Who would represent it to the community?

Lorenz: But I'm not outside of the communities I work in. The important question is what links me to those communities.

Wilson: I'm feeling very much outside of this conversation because I spent the majority of my art-making life, like most African-American artists, outside of the mainstream art community—and not by design. As a result, most African-American art practices have had nothing to do with the art community and everything to do with issues of importance to local communities. Except for The New Museum and a couple of other institutions which took their own initiatives, it was only recently that the nonprofit, government-funded art spaces were forced to accept art work by others in the U.S. When this occurred, commerial galleries followed suit and that facilitated the more

open and inclusive art community we have now. In my mind, the basis for connecting communities is to withdraw from or hold suspect the hierarchical art-market star system.

Green: We're all coming from different backgrounds, and I don't think we can define art as being something that is necessarily isolated from other activities. Histories of exclusion, among other things, have made it necessary to create other channels or work with other institutions that have developed out of community structures. There are so many different ways people communicate. It depends on what your goals are.

Lorenz: It is also a question of whether you are part of just one community. As I said, my work or my psyche or my personality is not limited to "being an artist." It is possible to work on feminist demands, plus to be part of different political initiatives, plus to relate to what happens inside the art context, in a positive or negative way. As Renée said, I would prefer to talk about political demands or goals. It's a problem of identification. You shouldn't have to identify yourself with just one community, one label, and so on.

Fraser: But that's what institutions do to you. I think that was part of Christian's point.

Müller: Right. For example, I'm gay, but I don't want to raise my voice in the New York gay community. As an artist I am not known for the gay content of my work.

Bauer: Another distinction to be made here is between situations in which an institution, such as a museum or a university, asks artists to do projects for a community, and artists who undertake projects because they have an interest in working with people on a long-term basis. There is a big difference. In the first case one has to ask, "How does that institution want to pay for that specific service? How do they constitute the status of cultural work and of artists who see themselves as cultural workers?"

Bischoff: But in either case I think there's still a difference between social workers and artists. Artists still work for themselves and make their own decisions.

Fraser: That's one of the questions that motivated this event, at least for me. If I were truly working for myself, I probably wouldn't have so many questions about the equity of my dealings with institutions. But because I'm working at the invitation of organizations almost exclusively and my activity is contingent upon that context, it's a very different story.

Jochen Becker: Perhaps the distinction Ute was drawing with respect to institutional invitations can be made with the terms "project" versus "initiative." Institutions aren't the only places to find support and infrastructure. It is possible to find those things elsewhere and, at the same time, determine who you address very specifically in a way that may not be possible in a museum. Working in that way, on the basis of initiatives, might make it easier to connect with the social field.

Guttmann: I want to respond to what Jochen and Renate have said and try to

contrast between belonging to different contexts simultaneously and the idea of erasing boundaries between different contexts. Should we prefer the model of blurring boundaries and calling ourselves cultural producers, or the model of doing various things at the same time because we are not unified individuals and at various moments various aspects of ourselves are given voice? This may also relate to the distinction between a situation where someone is working in one context which necessitates various functions— and where you may have a strong sense of identity but not a lot of control over what you do—as opposed to a situation in which your circumstances make you go from one part of the world to another. In the latter case, you don't lose your sense of context, you just become much more aware of the fact that you have to address each context in its own terms.

Bauer: I think what Fritz Rahmann practiced with Raimund Kummer and Hermann Pitz as Büro Berlin in the late seventies was very interesting. Büro Berlin created its own structure and did not wait for invitations. They self-organized exhibitions, out- and indoor events, symposiums, publications, etc., with artist friends and other guests and financed these with resources they managed themselves. Artists are not so disabled that they do not know how to organize projects, raise money, or create a larger field to introduce their work and bring their issues into discussion.

Dillemuth: I don't think there is any such thing as serving communities. A community together can, to a certain extent, create something out of itself. With Friesenwald, I don't have the feeling that I serve the community. Rather, I feel that the community is participating in building something. But if we try to take that model to another level, it becomes institutionalized. Maybe once I raise money for a special event. Then it's every year. Then I need more money, and I get it, and then maybe the space becomes something like a Kunstverein. It becomes an institution. If that institution has a mission to serve something, if it works for artists, then those artists also have to work for it, to fulfill the need or mission of the institution. They then become indebted to its function within a kind of economy of service.

Draxler: But what you did with Friesenwald was exactly to offer the Cologne art world a lot of services, like an archive of very specific videotapes, etc. They came and made use of it, of course, but more or less as clients of institutions do. I think in your case it was very clear how this relation was set up in contrast to the commercial galleries.

Blazwick: Do you think that the process of specialization and institutionalization is endemic to setting up any kind of initiative? That just by virtue of negotiating a site, paying the bills, devising some kind of platform, program, or schedule and a way of communicating it that you end up with a kind of expertise within what is, essentially, the infrastructure of an institution?

Lorenz: I don't know if the difference between an institution and a non-institution is

so great. The question is, What are the specific structures? How are decisions made and who is making them?

Green: I think that the idea of a community is something we have to question—and I think expertise and services come into this, as well as the question about the role of the artist. A community is something that is created. It does not necessarily preexist an initiative. If a person has an idea and presents it and figures out how to disseminate it, it's like a message in bottle. It's not necessarily known who will respond, but it's the reaction that will make something come together. Friesenwald was not that definite. It was a flexible structure. I would like to examine the idea of how communities are formed on the basis of that kind of initiative.

Fraser: I think there are three different models here. Stephan and Renate are talking about creating a situation through which a community might come together through its own collective agency. Renée is talking about the formation of a community around an initiative. Martin and Michael talked about serving a community that already exists.

Guttmann: It's an interesting set of distinctions. Our idea is that an artist has the capacity to contribute to self-presentation. If it's set up right, then it gives something back and there is an aspect of service. It does seem to me that some people know how to do that better than others, even if they don't really know the community well. But as long as artists are not working in a fixed context, what we are doing at a particular location is a big question. How can we justify our activity? Our answer has less to do with expertise than with setting up something that can be used and has validity in its own terms. So the question is, Can that compensate for, or at least give a counterpoint to, not really knowing the particular community? I think very few people can claim to really understand the communities they work in.

Wilson: In the communities that I've worked in, expertise, or someone having different experiences that they bring to the community, is respected as an important aspect of involvement in a particular community. Having a certain way of seeing the world that is new or considered valuable or becomes valuable through your interaction with the community is not a problem.

Clegg: Very often, we're asked to do something very specific. If someone says, I know that you do a certain type of work and I want you do something in that direction, we're constituted as specialists in that. But because we can do a number of different things, there is always a question: How do we establish what is really needed here? To what extent do we want to think about those needs as the primary motivating condition?

Cahan: I think that it's important to recognize that there are multiple forms of expertise and not just the ones an artist might bring into a familiar or unfamiliar geographical location. There are also forms of expertise that are based on lived experience.

Fraser: Okay, on the one hand we have a critique of expertise and the ways that

specialized skills are deployed within nonspecialized communities which may or may not exist and you may or may not be constructing. On the other hand, we have the question of whether one can create participatory, democratic structures in communities that avoid the kinds of divisions that expertise represents.

Wilson: In my experiences with artists in different communities, I have seen how value can be placed on artists by the community even if the members of that community are not familiar with the form of what they're doing. Sometimes, just interacting with artists can enlarge a community's view of the world and become a value to a community. If such a relationship develops, whatever you produce becomes more important.

Guttmann: In one of the locations in which a library was installed, people actually started a petition to keep it open permanently. They even produced posters. It became very clear that they wanted to own it and that it had become something that defined their identity as a community. The community accepted it—and rejected us.

Clegg: At that point the project's connection to us was severed. It became something different: not art but just a library there.

Wilson: I sometimes feel that way with my projects. The museum becomes my community. When they decide the piece is theirs because it has become of use to them, that use may differ from my intentions. But it's still functioning for me in a funny way; I know it's changed the way they look at the subject or situation, even though I'm no longer involved.

Right: Judith Barry and Ken Saylor. "From Receiver to Remote Control." 1990.

Below: Announcement for "The Contact Zone," a symposium organized by Renée Green at the Drawing Center. 1994.

Negotiations in

The Contact Zone

A Symposium Organized by Renée Green

Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent.
– Pierre Bourdieu

The "contact zone" is an inescapable place which we all inhabit. This topic will be addressed by those who have crossed the borders of their disciplines to establish interdependent cultural fields.

Participants:
Karim Aïnouz
Judith Barry
James Clifford
Manthia Diawara
Diedrich Diederichsen
Miwon Kwon
Sowon Kwon
Simon Leung
Lynne Tillman
Joe Wood

Saturday
April 9, 1994

The Drawing Center
35 Wooster Street

Full-day admission is $10.
Half-day admission is $5.
Reservations may be made
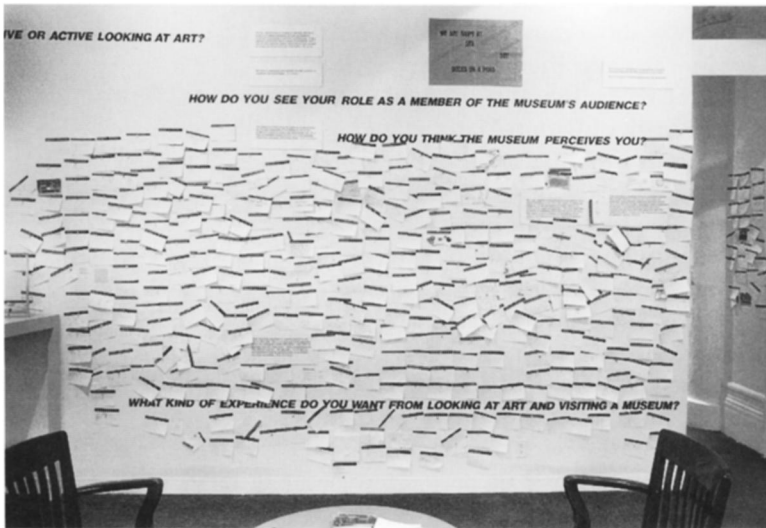in advance by calling
The Drawing Center 212-219-2166.

Clegg & Guttmann. The Open Public Library, Graz—Location number 1. *1991.*

Andrea Fraser. Untitled
(An Introduction to the 1993
Whitney Biennial). *1992–93.*
(Photo: George Hirose.)

Below: Freisenwald 120. Cologne.

From "Rhetorical Image." 1991.
Organized by Susan Cahan and
Julie Ault.