

## ~~Institution~~ does not exist

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Risking a psychoanalytic turn, the title of this essay is a twist on Jacques Lacan's statement that "~~Woman~~ does not exist" (*il n'y a pas La femme*).<sup>i</sup> The notion that there isn't any woman is a Lacanian proposition in typically punning form. His point was not to deny the existence of women but to undo the presumption of 'woman' as a concrete and immutable precept under patriarchy, and Lacan points out the instability of 'woman' as a signifier, assigned to but not simply transferrable to 'woman' as a biological entity. Lacan goes on to argue for a liberated femininity via the transcendence of feminine *jouissance*. In the spirit of enjoyment a little innuendo is apt, and I therefore offer up the rousing image of the institutional art space as the negative and missing object of the phallus.

Now the institution is clearly the big dick.<sup>ii</sup> Its throbbing power is seductive yet it is maligned by those who are unable identify with it or by those who are delimited from its sanctum, for the institution can function as an enclosure and an exclusionary zone. Michel Foucault would argue that this relation dominates all operations of reciprocal power and that hegemonic structures are obliged to behave in this way. But then Foucault was an agonist, sceptical of the capacity of prevailing political and ideological frameworks to deal with society's contradictions, or overcome its deeply scored social and cultural divisions. The ideological grounding that Foucault pinpoints is also impossible to avoid because the struggle for permanency requires the governing body to establish limits, primarily so that the organisation's tenure can be secured. These must be resistant and even impervious to external threats of change, moreover. So the institution resonates with the age of the Empire and the vestiges of colonial power. All large organisations face this

paradox, as do all hegemonic establishments, even if their mission and members are libertarian in their own right.

Consider briefly the divisions that exist beyond cultural organisations, particularly within the contemporary art scene in Australia. It is easy to point out the camps and cliques, and moreover to be constantly beleaguered by complaints along the lines of 'us and them'. Yet the people who comprise "the scene", the artists, theorists and curators, are always moving between these demarcations, even the ones of their own making.<sup>iii</sup> But are we really so bound by this atavistic turn to a polarised, bipolar (psychologically split), dichotomous and dualistic construction? Isabell Lorey would likely concur on the basis that these grooves are 'historical lines of force', to borrow a Foucauldian term. But how do we enact emancipation? And how can we take a line of flight from the line of force?<sup>iv</sup> More than a few suggestions as to the means by which we might escape the deadlock have been raised, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) being chief among the radical propositions. Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva offer an alternative reading, although primarily in the realm of language. Their effort to demolish the dual repression of patriarchal ideology and the supremacy of western linguistic logic (of *Logos*) centres on escaping the subjugation of 'phallogocentric' discourses. But, as this paradigm is inescapable, subversion is arguably the only option, which means effacing both the current logic (thinking) and the language (things said).

Heejin Kim has been emphatic in stating her avoidance and the impracticality of an oppositional mentality in the curatorial and cultural arena (an approach Edward de Bono once proffered somewhat demurely in *Six Thinking Hats*). Kim also addresses the impasse of the 'untranslatable' and the problem of finding the right language for contemporary politics based on past ideological struggles, her example being any call for 'community' in post-dictatorship Korea. As Kim points out, the discursive field and a discourse of

power confine collectivity across diverse cultures so that its attempts at dialogue cannot be translated. In one of the rare 'lines of flight' to emerge from recent discourse, Kim describes her aspirations for a 'soulful institution'. Nina Möntmann offers another positive line when she writes of belonging. She locates this within the counter-model of the Berlin project space United National Plaza (UNP), which privileged participation over consumption, combining this with trans-locality as a way to subvert the global capitalist paradigm proliferating in major institutions, a paradigm that Möntmann aligned to the model of artist-run spaces.

It is also true, however, that belonging is paradoxically formed by otherness, adaptation and diversification. For it is not determined by duality as in 'self and other' but in layered and reciprocal multiplicity, and by what 'is not' embodied by the self. Because, and we must view this as an unrelenting poststructuralist paradigm, binaries are no longer simply opposites; the curator, director and the artist are therefore atomised and liberated. We are transitional, contingent members of the corporation that comprises the scene of cultural production. This is where the endgame is turned on its head: for mobile members of these corporations can be resistant from within, fostering counteractive behaviour that transcends the institution's limits.

Within any hegemonic model the notion of agency within an institutional context is challenging. But if we return to a local context, it has to be remembered that, superficially, Australia is relatively free of reactionary or oppressive political involvement by the state, with obvious exceptions in relation to indigenous communities and asylum seekers.<sup>v</sup> In contrast Ade Darmawan, artist and director of the art space Ruangrupa, Jakarta, refers to the open confrontation with the state faced by artists and curators in certain locales of Indonesia, where every exhibition brings with it the risk of its participants being branded as dissidents and even outlaws by the government. Heejin Kim also relates the recent interference of the

populist Korean government in cultural policy, which has seen the dismissal of a series of senior museum and council directors and the looming closure of Seoul-based art institution Insa Art Space (IAS), where Kim was at the time Curator of International Projects.

Within a peculiarly inverse political paradigm, Vienna-based philosopher and art theorist, Gerald Raunig has deployed the something akin to a notion of 'insurgency' in the context of contemporary art's engagement with politics. His paper in this volume provides an account of the anarchist-style intervention by Universidad Nómada at their own conference (on the systemic crisis of capitalism), held in May 2009 at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid. While military terminology often loses its impetus on arty (and, moreover, 'lefty') audiences, it is pertinent to applications of resistant tactics in the social field, as defined by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980).<sup>vi</sup> Let's try another word, albeit a neologism: *transigence*. It proposes that the limit or the barrier can be transcended at any given moment, and this notion, like transversality, is less aggressive and is particularly relevant to the notion of the border crossing. Returning to the institution, we need to acknowledge that the impenetrable entity or limitation in question is unlikely to be dismantled anytime in the future, and that acts of open resistance or aggression may well bring about more conflict instead of any solution.<sup>vii</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia* of 1972 (and later in 1980, with its second volume, *A Thousand Plateaus*) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari advocate for a dialectical approach (as a continuum) to intervention and the rupture of constituent power in the form of 'deterritorialization'.<sup>viii</sup> This concept entails the constant and multiple incursion of the limit, deconstructing it through the reiteration of the rhizomatic mutability, porosity, as an attack on the hegemony of territories, that produces a dynamic flow of meaning and identities that blurs all boundaries. In a footnote to a discussion of State control of flow and movement of the polis through territories, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate on Paul Virilio's *Speed and Politics*, saying that 'Not only is the "town" unthinkable apart from the exterior flows with which it is in contact, the circulation of which it regulates, but specific architectural aggregates,

the fortress, for example, are veritable transformers, by virtue of their interior spaces, which allow an analysis, prolongation, or restitution of movement. Virilio concludes that the issue is less confinement than the management of the public ways, or the control of movement.<sup>ix</sup> The notion of nomadism that Deleuze and Guattari proffer contrasts with the proposition that resistance must arrest and recruit bodies (in a reversal of biopolitical regulation of the polis) and engage them in violence. Moreover, there are questionable ethics to reactionary tactics being promulgated by those ensconced in nicely furnished offices, like myself, for radical action is not always appropriate for people in the midst of political upheaval, nor is it likely to rally the average member of a harmonious community. Nonetheless, we must avoid rhetoric at all costs, for too much speculation can stifle all excitement. According to Karl Marx—sorry to exhume an old spectre—philosophy is to the world as masturbation is to sex, which he emphasised in his *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, proclaiming, ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it’.

This is where David Pestorius’s elaboration of David Hullfish Bailey’s *City Cat Project* on the Brisbane River is exemplary for its subtle mode of disruption in the realm of ‘institutional rationality’. Working with the ‘institutions’ of the City of Brisbane and its CityCat ferry system, the American artist co-joined with Aboriginal leader, playwright and activist Sam Watson to slip into the public arena of a pre-existing disjunctive space, in a reorganisation of the logic of place that functioned ‘outside the branded space of art and in dialogue with traditional Aboriginal culture’.<sup>x</sup> Pestorius aligned the *City Cat Project* with ‘socially constructive practices of place, relational ecologies’, in correspondence with *One Day Sculpture*, held recently in New Zealand, which according to co-organiser David Cross was an example of an exercise in reflexive engagement within ‘the dynamic social sphere’. Emma Bugden [offers](#) an analogous and intricate elaboration on the dilemma of culture versus community and the productive potential of conflict in the context of her former role as Curatorial Director of the Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Manukau City, New Zealand, asserting that a traumatic rupture in relations sometimes produces a desirable complexity by

way of instability and contingent situations that unsettle the colonial and contemporary corporate impetus to 'place a utopian claim over the place'. Bugden's candid account, along with the other two examples just outlined, makes for a pertinent study of the relationship and responsibility of art (and its oft forgotten producers, artists) to its social context.

The task, [however](#), remains unchanged, for it is futile to cast aspersions at an object or opponent that does not exist. Being members of a living, productive cultural and social body our role as curators, artists, audiences, critics, directors and academics is to participate and to transform the paradigm of social exclusion and manufacture belonging by traversing limitations, and by constantly inhabiting institutional spaces in spite of and sometimes in recalcitrant reaction to the perceived configurations of prestige, power and segregation.<sup>xi</sup> The first challenge is to face oneself and, at this juncture, I must confess that my own effort to relinquish the lure of the big dick is fraught with contradictions (I work at a university). The challenge for the institution is to encourage participation and inclusiveness by taking up an open and collective mode of self-criticism, and relinquishing associated and undue fears of a populist turn, the loss of intellectual rigour or diminished artistic integrity in doing so.

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<sup>i</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XX, 1972-73, Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 68, published in English as *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, Norton, New York, 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> In *The Laugh of the Medusa* Hélène Cixous argues that the 'woman who still allows herself to be threatened by the big dick, who's still impressed by the commotion of the phallic stance, who still leads a loyal master to the beat of the drum: that's the woman of yesterday'. 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975, in the original French) in *Signs*, Summer 1976, p. 245. Brian, the anti-hero in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, runs into a spot of trouble with an empire of another era over a man called Biggus Dickus.

<sup>iii</sup> Anyone who saw Anne Kay and Jane Polkinghorne's *Artist Archive MCA's Situation* exhibition in 2005 will remember the complexity of this network map of Sydney's art community and how it reflected as much on the intransigence of the categories as the segregation of so many people into tiny factions.

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<sup>iv</sup> The phrase ‘Line of force’ is first put into play by Foucault in 1969 in *Archaeology of knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, 2003. This is further elaborated in his final work, the first chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, 1979. In English see Michel Foucault, *The will to knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley, Penguin, London and New York City, 1990. ‘Lines of flight’ is a phrase coined, in response to Foucault’s term, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (vol. 2), trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987.

<sup>v</sup> Most recently exemplified in the case of the Northern Territory intervention and at Redfern where the Redfern-Waterloo Authority were set up on a wholly reactionary and interventionist basis from 2004 (see [www.redfernwaterloo.nsw.gov.au](http://www.redfernwaterloo.nsw.gov.au)).

<sup>vi</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>vii</sup> Particularly when the impetus is based on an ideology that is likely to be misconstrued in its applied context, say with anarchism in Australia.

<sup>viii</sup> See Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. New York: Viking Press, 1977, and *A Thousand Plateaus*, op. cit.

<sup>ix</sup> See *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 386, for the context of footnote 63, and page 558 for the footnote itself. See also Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, Semiotext(e), New York, 1986, pp. 12–13.

<sup>x</sup> Quoted from a statement on the *City Cat Project*, available at <http://www.davidpestorius.com>.

<sup>xi</sup> [In this respect it is a pity that](#), given the topic, many local practitioners seemed not to attend the [Spaces of Art conference](#). And although, to be fair, the rates were perhaps unsavoury, in attitude this clearly demarcates the old ‘us and them’ divide, for this was based on the falsehood that Spaces of Art simply offered a critique from within. Such censure is far less productive than turning up and engaging in a debate, but I also believe that it is the institution’s responsibility to do all that it can to persuade the community that this divide does not exist. So both parties, in my opinion, need to drop the attitude and get on with the task of being the exemplars of open dialogue and other such progressive political practices.