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*Floating Institutionalality and Para-Institutions
in Contemporary Russian Art: Premises and Forms*

FLOATING INSTITUTIONALITY AND PARA-INSTITUTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN ART: PREMISES AND FORMS

Allakhverdiev T.

Student of Doctoral Programme «Art and Design»
at the National Research University
Higher School of Economics
(Moscow, Russia)
tallakhverdiev@hse.ru

Abstract:

The article examines artistic practices in Russia and the Soviet Union that, according to the author, are somehow connected to the international movement of institutional critique; the notion of "floating institutionalality" is proposed to denote the special nature of the existence of the phenomenon of "institution" in the designated periods and the corresponding local contexts. The question of the connection between early Soviet avant-garde museum projects and unofficial Soviet art of the second half of the twentieth century is raised. Much attention is paid to the question of defining institutional critique with an eye to modern time and the Russian experience.

Keywords: institutional critique, conceptual art, soviet unofficial art

Introduction

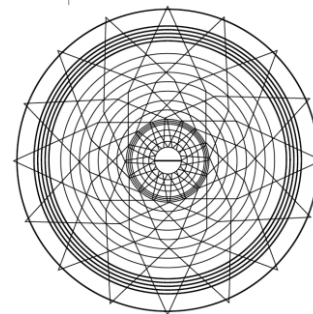
Contemporary discussions of art tend, as a rule, to assume a connection between institutional critique and the developed capitalist situation (Möntmann, 2012, p. 105). At first glance, this correlation seems evident and justified, however, a deeper look into the heart of the problem allows one to discover hidden languages of institutional existence and, *from these*, to form a new optic through which to consider what an institution can be in the context of art. In this study, I seek to outline a possible framework for discussion of *artistic* practices that do not fall into the conventional approaches to institutional critique, and, with an eye to unofficial Soviet art, to draw attention to the modes of artistic operation with "institutions" and "institutionality" that exist in Russia. To achieve this goal, I propose the concept of "floating institutionalality" as a broader way of conceiving of an "institution" which goes beyond a public or non-public establishment or organisation (museum, gallery, etc.). The peculiarities of its history meant Russian art of the twentieth century became a platform for the mastery of such experimental forms of institutionalality.

As noted above, the discussion of institutional critique in Russia is highly nuanced. Many of my interlocutors, those in the academic sphere as much as those directly within

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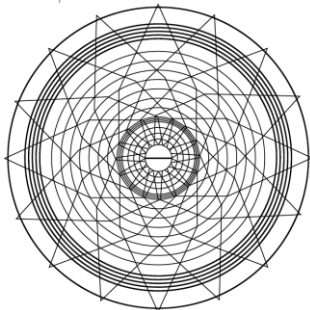
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the artistic community, consider this term inapplicable either to the Russian context or to the experience of artists working in this field. Firstly, discussion of institutional critique in Russia is difficult from the point of view of historical process and its significant counterpoints in the context of art: planned economy, official state ideology, and the hegemony of authority in the formation of the artistic agenda in the Soviet period and its aesthetic canon; the first independent galleries and chaotic life of emerging new Russian art in the 1990s, the movement towards confident institutionalism in the 2000s and 2010s; the formation of the “Four Museums” in 2021 marking the first super-institutional organisation uniting Moscow’s four largest cultural institutions, and 2022, when Russian art was found itself separated from the rest of the world as a consequence of the refusal of both domestic and foreign artists to cooperate with Russian institutions. It is also difficult to ignore the rapidly narrowing space for critical expression which has become an axiomatic constant in contemporary Russia. The absence of a language through which to discuss the painfully changing present brings one to a point where it becomes necessary to turn to the past, to attempt to delineate the limits of the legitimacy of conversations about institutional critique in the context of the history of contemporary Russian art.

On the fragile limits of institutional critique

Institutional critique emerged as an artistic movement in the 1970s, and has gone through at least four incarnations since then (Castellano, 2017, p. 4). The objects of critique can be highly varied—traditionally, institutions associated with art (museums, galleries, foundations) are among them, along with phenomena of sociocultural existence—interrelations of the artist and authorities, existing ethical conditions of cooperation within artistic society, dimensions of the values of cost, “the art world,” artistic discourse, the ideologies through which art constitutes itself. This heterogeneity brings one in the end to a curious result: artists, curators, and theorists often speak of “institutional critique” without meaning by this a corresponding artistic practice, extrapolating the term to all kinds of critical intentions in relation to artistic institutions. The critic in this case can, in their understanding, be not just the artist, but also the curator, the journalist, the art critic, the collector, and so on. Hito Steyerl defined institutional critique as “one of the new social movements in the cultural field,” and in doing so transposed critique from the artistic to the political field (Steyerl, 2015). This, to my mind, once more highlights the need for a rethinking of the concept of an institution and, consequently, of the framework according to which an institution can be criticised. And, most importantly, by who. The problem of the canon and a clear notion of a work “in the genre” of institutional critique was raised by Isabelle Graw in 2005, when the researcher became doubtful of the necessity of considering the institution a defined place rather than a “closed systems of convictions,”



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of the mediums of institutional critique being strictly limited—painting, for example, cannot be critique. Rejecting this dogma, Graw proposed instead to include artists such Jörg Immendorff and Martin Kippenberger in the canon of institutional critique (Graw, 2005).

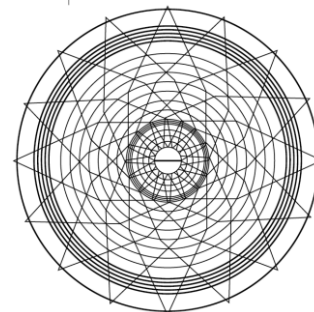
The tradition of the Russian avant-garde illustrates the turn to new forms of museum activity and, more broadly, to a new understanding of museums and institutions in general. One of the important experiments of the beginning of the previous century in this respect was the Museum of Pictorial Culture, opened in Moscow in 1919 by a group of enthusiasts numbering Wassily Kandinsky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Robert Falk. Analysing this unique experiment, the researcher Alessandra Franetovich notes that the appearance of the Museum of Pictorial Culture “challenged the status of the museum as a ‘dead’ institution, bound by established canons, and applied different critical principles to its historical collection in a process that [one could] call ‘institutional self-critique’ ” (Franetovich, 2020). The term “institutional self-critique” refers to a trend in which a number of institutions attempt to comprehend their own collections and practices with the aim of decolonisation, deconstruction, and self-criticism of their approach and history. Can it really be said that the appearance of a new progressive institution, whose activities were in part controlled by prominent artists of their time, was an act of criticism in relation to the state system of the exhibition of art? If yes, can we call such criticism institutional? Franetovich also notes that the inclusion of administrative tasks in artistic practice was a reflection of the influence on the art-world of bureaucratic processes characteristic of the twentieth century, which was underlined by artists of the classical period of institutional critique, for example, by Michael Asher’s dismantling of the wall separating the exhibition space of a gallery and its office area. The appearance of the Museum of Pictorial Culture and its untransparent approach to the formation of its collection can be considered a modernist gesture, rooted in conceptions of taste, of what constitutes good and bad art. In other words, the foundation of the Museum’s programme was the unquestionable authority of its artistic college. In this sense, the activities of the museum were conventional, the inherited Enlightenment logic of progress.

Franetovich, as we have already noted, identifies the demand for an artistic environment for the formation of new institutional tonalities as having emerged at least in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Theses about the necessity of the emergence of institutional formations working in accordance with new rules arose sporadically over the next decades in academic and artistic contexts. And, from time to time, corresponding institutions appeared. Often, they found themselves in positions in which they had to turn to big capital for support, which had a detrimental effect on their subversive potential. Suffice to recall Claire Bishop’s *Radical Museology*, in which she describes the experience of alternative institutions—the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, the Reina Sofia Museum

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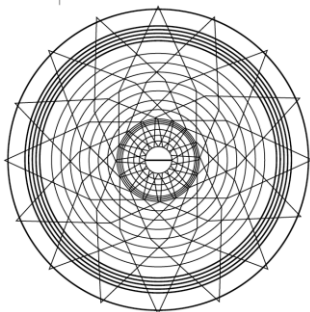
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in Madrid and the Metelkova Museum of Contemporary Art in Ljubljana (Bishop, 2013). These museums can also be considered brands (Stallabrass, 2014). Isabelle Graw sees Depot in Vienna and the German Kunstraum Lüneburg as new types of artistic institutions that as it were “react” to institutional critique. Other institutions sometimes referred to as “alternative” are the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ljubljana, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, and the SALT space in Istanbul. Graw points out that the “choice of these institutions in favour of such methods as research, attachment to a concrete place, documentation, teamwork/group work, info-aesthetics, flat hierarchy, transparency or discussion, turns out to be entirely in line with neoliberal values.” This is also confirmed by Hito Steyerl in the conclusion of her essay “The Institution of Critique”: “there seems to have hardly ever been more need for institutions which could cater to the new needs and desires that this constituency will create.” This new subject, in Steyerl’s opinion, is ambivalent, using a variety of strategies to cope with delocalisation, and precarious, vulnerable living conditions.

The disharmony around the use of the term “institutional critique” is so pronounced that Steyerl alternatively uses “institutional critique,” a well-established term in the field of art and the far less frequently encountered “institutional criticism”. It would seem that “institutional critique” has a clearly articulated connection with the history of “contemporary art” (Breitwieser, 2006, p. 10). All the same, Steyerl writes about institutional critique in the context of Marxist theory, and in the context of the formation of classes and the establishment of a critical bourgeois subjectivity. Steyerl deliberately does not distinguish institutional critique as a separate movement in art, considering it instead a special case in a global crisis of the institution of criticism as such. On the one hand, such an optics levels the achievements of the classics of institutional critique, depriving them of their historical identity in the context of art, on the other, it is a fruitful strategy in the search for new institutional solutions, for removing limitations on artistic expression, for bringing or returning their meaning to within the bounds of the political. Isabelle Graw, recognising the obvious inadequacy of the term, suggests terminological disagreement, the problem of the formation of the canon of institutional critique, as well as the problem of neutralisation (that is, the neutralisation of critical intentions given the widespread assertion of a trend towards criticality) be put to one side, in order to attempt to give a new definition to what “institutions” and “critique” can mean today.

Graw states clearly that the term “institutional critique” is inherently problematic and passionately contested. In her view, the conception of institutional critique is founded on the basic premise that “art can change the situation.” The term itself, according to Graw, first appeared in a 1985 text by Andrea Fraser on Louise Lawler. Taking into account the



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particularities of the Soviet context, one can say that in this regard the variety of strategies for overcoming an overwhelming reality were subversive acts but acts that did not change the existing “consensus”—rather, they created alternative modes of institutional or extra-institutional existence. Looking ahead, it should be noted that it was precisely “floating institutional” that practically speaking became the main factor in the establishment of the post-perestroika “institutional vacuum,” about which the artist Andrey Shental argues in the context of the loss of government support by institutions.

Soviet institutional reality and its opponents

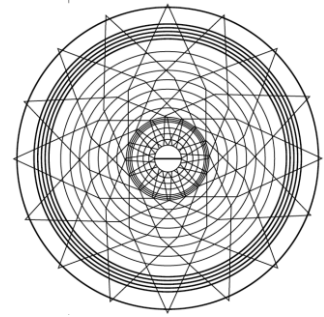
Following lines drawn by Steyerl, we can take the first steps towards outlining the path taken by this specific model of institutional critique (both in the sense of “institutional critique” and “institutional criticism”) in the USSR and in the Russian Federation. The Museum of Pictorial Culture, a rare example of cooperation between artists and the emerging Soviet state, was the first alternative institution on the territory of modern Russia. The future museum’s theoretic and practical principles of work were set down following collegial discussion in the “Report on the Museum of Contemporary Art,” where it was proposed that works be selected based on the knowledge of the established Art College rather than on “personal taste”. The new art required new modes selection, exhibition, and interaction with the viewer (Miessen, 2016, p. 53). These were meant to free it from the established traditional criteria imposed upon it by the conservative museum nomenklatura. This said, the rootedness of this initiative in experiments with the institutional function of art did not align with the avant-garde project, the intentions of which Peter Burger defined as the “destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life” (Burger, 1974, p. 11). It would seem then that none of the described modes of working with the status quo have, in this sense, the right to be called precursors of institutional critique in Russia. Precisely the corresponding multi directionality of explicit or implicit critical strategies bring about the difficulty of clearly locating it.

The critical programme of the early-Soviet art critic Boris Arvatov proposed the dissolution of bourgeois aesthetics and its institutional machinery in the interaction and ultimate merging of art and production. Arvatov proposed that the artist become a special kind of proletarian—the creator of human life. However, this large-scale revolutionary project of the merging of art and life would only ever exist on paper, and in the homages, re-enactments, and reconsiderations of contemporary artists, while complex, non-linear institutional strategies not aimed at immediate results continued to take shape. In this regard it seems fair to propose the direct dependence of critical practices in the world of art on the current social-historical configuration within the reality of one or another national state. This said, the concept of the “art world” is subject to constant rethinking, from the

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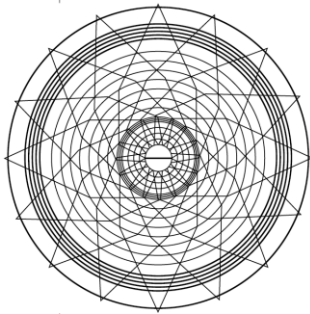
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era of Fordist “technical reproducibility” to our times of “surveillance capitalism” disorienting and skilfully suppressing insufficiently skilful attempts to peer into its iridescent and epileptic face, like “Scramble Suit” by Philip K. Dick from “A Scanner Darkly” (Zuboff, 2018).

There is nothing surprising in the fact that the theory of art put forward by Arthur Danto in his article “The Artworld” and later developed by George Dickie has been termed “institutional.” According to this theory, the ontological status of art is determined through the inclusion of a work in an artistic context. Boris Groys would go on to write the same thing half a century later: “Indeed, at least since Duchamp’s ready-mades, artworks that only exist if they are exhibited have emerged. To produce an artwork means precisely to exhibit something as art—there is no production beyond exhibition” (Groys, 2011). This said, it is precisely Duchamp’s ready-mades that Isabelle Graw calls “the primordial scene of institutional critique.” If we assume this theory to be true, then actors practicing institutional critique attack the very heart of the “Artworld,” which could hypothetically either blur the already ephemeral boundaries of art or push them beyond the bounds of the corresponding discourse, to where collectives and authors trying from the very first to avoid this world are working: “Groups such as [®]ark, RepoHistory, the Yes Men, subRosa, Raqs Media Collective, and the Electronic Disturbance Theatre develop tactical media strategies to intervene effectively in an array of fields that are far removed from the institution of art.” The ability to institutionalise artefacts provides art with power and outlines political horizons. David Joselit has written about this in his description of the logic of networks that emerge after art (Joselit, 2012, p. 92). For the artist Andrey Shental¹, art is not just endowed with power, rather, based on Weber’s definition of the state, it is critically read as a social institution and speculatively compared with “a quasi- or para-state formation, based, according to the classical definition, on the monopolisation of the right to use violence” (Shental, 2020, p. 63). Such an “institutionalising” understanding of art and its component relationships fits with the trend of sociological interpretation of art. This said, the problem of violence, in Shental’s opinion, is “laid at the very foundation of the institution of art and its cornerstone—the art museum.” Physical, mental, colonial violence, class-based violence. If we assume that capitalism is violence against human nature, then perhaps the institutional system is violence against art? A maxim as actual for museums of the “first world” states as it was for any major museum in the USSR. In this regard one can conclude that the experimental practices of artists of the Soviet period were attempts to consider art outside of violence, to create a horizontal network uniting artists who associated themselves with neither prevailing state ideology nor with other imposed

¹ Shental’s texts refer to the classic conceptualist and institutional critique model of the artist-theorist as affirmed by Robert Smithson, Marcel Broodthaers, Lawrence Weiner, Andrea Fraser, and others.



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standards. This is testified to by the existence in the 1970s and 1980s of the Moscow Archive of New Art (MANI), a group of artists engaged in non-official art which was one of the main cells of Moscow Conceptualism. The presence of the word “archive” in the name of the group points to the quasi-institutional character of the association, however, the institutionality of MANI was, of course, a “floating” one, lacking any element of power.

The self-critique discussed by Alexandra Franetovich exists alongside the self-institutionalisation practiced by some unofficial Soviet artists, who were probably aware of their own practice in quite different registers, as well as the self-historicisation described by Zdenka Badovinac as a process by which an artist introduces himself into certain historical contexts (Badovinac, 2019). In the words of Ketī Chukhrov, “this is why the artist himself has to be an institution, and a malign, omnipotent bureaucrat” (Chukhrov, 2020). Beginning from the 1960s, Franetovich writes, artists have practiced “self-archivisation” and “self-historicisation”. This said, regardless of their own desires, the artists themselves were located in a particular regime of creativity characteristic of capitalist artists of institutional critique, who fought the system of spectacle through fanatical work in the studio, disregard for public statements and travels “denying the spectacle principle direct access to its intellectual and emotional competencies.” Andrey Kovalev named the chapter of his *Unfinished story: Modern Russian art in faces* dedicated to Vadim Zakharov, one of the most well-known representatives of Moscow Conceptualism, “The Artist as Institution”, going on to explain that at the beginning of the 1980s “the community of artists replaced all possible institutions” (Kovalev, 2021, p. 39).

Para-institution as medium and actor

The turn to experimental practices in institutional building of the twentieth century continues to inspire figures in contemporary Russian art. Held at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in 2020, Arseny Zhilyaev’s exhibition *The Monotony of the Pattern Recogniser* — or, as he called it, “an exhibition of an exhibition”—was materialised using various semantic-discursive patterns. These patterns functioned, among other things, as expressive means, partly associated with institutions: the universal museum, the art strike, the white cube, overcoming and, as Zhilyaev put it “and so on, and so on, and so on.”² The central figure of Zhilyaev’s topology was the “Institute for the Mastery of Time,” a para-institutional agent endowed with an archival-historiographical function.

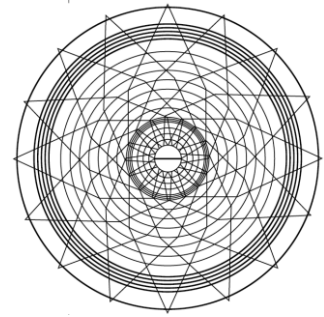
These patterns appeared through “mystification in the genre of non-fiction, acting as a total simulation” in the halls of the museum an exposition was shown which had been, according to Zhilyaev’s idea, found on a spaceship that had drifted through outer space for more than ten thousand years due to a loss of communication with the Earth. The

² From the official exhibition brochure.

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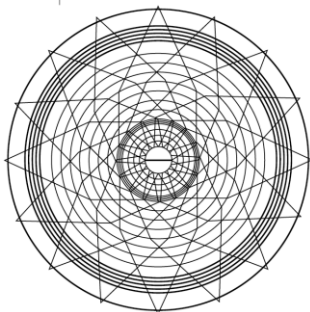
artificial intelligence piloting the spaceship simulated various versions of reality in search of one in which the loss of communication would not happen. The ontological basis of the desired operations was the history of art, which AI, apparently, mistook for a substantial concentrate of human essence. At the same time, we can, following the logic of the artist, assume that the existing institutional framework was not sufficient for the representation of different versions of reality (and their corresponding histories of art). The “Institute for the Mastery of Time” functions/operates exclusively within the creative mythologies of the artist. This said, the artist does not attempt to think through means of overcoming institutions, but through the institutions themselves, embedding their figurative component in the logic of “expositional blocks”.

Alexey Maslyaev’s curatorial text expresses the project’s intentions, one of which was to function as a commentary on a decades-long discussion about medium. Speaking of the subversive potential of Zhilyaev’s experiment (in a conversation with Keti Chukrov, the artists stated clearly: “this is my laboratory experiment on alternative organisation of the narrative of art”), it would be hard not to mention Zhilyaev’s activities as one of the leaders of the Centre for Experimental Museology, a para-institutional formation within the structure of V–A–C foundation. Indeed, discussion of para-institutions is extremely relevant to the concept of floating institutional—it can be seen as its ideal manifestation. Zhilyaev does not practice institutional critique in its canonical version, but rather articulates its potentialities in an accelerationist way. “We ... advocate a policy of maximum institutionalisation and musification” he said on the Centre for Experimental Museology.

Founded in 2017, the Centre for Experimental Museology (CEM) is an independent structure within the V-A-C Foundation. The CEM does belong to a department of the institution, and has its own logo, website, and a clear set of goals. The activities of the CEM are focused on research of alternative institutions, in particular Soviet institutions of the first half of the twentieth century. This close attention to the experiences of the past is a symbol of the recognition of the consistent nature of the genealogy of Russian institutional critique, its roots at once solid and “floating.” CEM runs its own publishing programme alongside an Internet portal with articles by Russian and foreign researchers.

CONCLUSION

On a final note, I would like to attempt to understand the essence of the “para-institutions” discussed above. Many thinkers have addressed the issue of institutions as the dominant unit in global and local artistic contexts. Today, we see many institutions with varying degrees of dependence on external sponsors. However, hidden elements of the cultural mise-en-scène often remain unnoticed, even to the researcher’s attentive eye—among these are the formations called “para-institutions.” Tracing the emergence and use of this term in the context of art is a somewhat difficult task. According to the artist Tom Holert, the term “para-institutional” was coined in 2012 by Victoria Sobel and Casey Gollan, two founders of the student activist group Free Cooper Union (Holert, 2020, p. 109). Holert also refers to Marina Wishmidt, who thought of para-institutionality in conjunction with her concept of “infrastructural criticism,” which she described as an active mode of institutional criticism, but one located “within or next to existing institutions,” that is, in essence, possessing a para-institutional character. In his 2018 article for the *e-flux* platform, the



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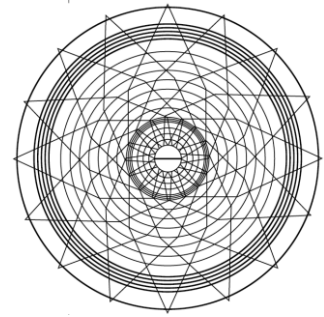
Italian activist, curator, and researcher Marco Baravalle noted that in 2015, independently of each other, Sven Lütticken and Ekaterina Degot identified an “alter-institutional turn” (Baravalle, 2018), (Lütticken, 2015, p. 8), (Degot, 2015, p. 200). This turn, in their opinion, was an interest in the artistic environment on the production of special non-institutional practices: “para-institutions,” “alter-institutions,” and “general institutions,” *all of which* are in opposition to “monster institutions” (Gerald Raunig’s term). Their articles covered projects such as *The Silent University* by Ahmet Ogut, *New World Summit* and *New World Academy* by Jonas Staal, and *Immigrant Movement International* by Tanya Brugera. Most importantly for our study, Staal seeks to fit his practice in the avant-garde canon, which “attempts to fully actualise the political potential of the aesthetic by fusing art and activism.” Lütticken argued that the relevant practices fit within a current institutional critique that has shifted its focus from critique of institutions to alternative institutional buildings and that is no longer interested in either immanence or transgression. Baravalle does not just note the existence of the mentioned turn, but also analyses the problems faced by “alternative institutions.” He attributes their rise to the impasse he believes the long-dominated “relational aesthetic” has reached. Despite this, they are often deprived of the ability to really influence the global situation, given that they are usually the art projects of individual artists or groups (for example, Zhilyaev’s *Institute for the Mastery of Time*), and are therefore completely dependent on artists’ ability and desire to support the para-institutional project for their existence.

Traditionally, the prefix “para” is taken to refer to the principle of being near, just outside of something, even sometimes to deviate or violate. From the first, it seemed to me that the para-institution ought to be understood as a dependent institution, located on the edges of influence and control of a main institution. However, I subsequently understood that this was not entirely correct. A para-institution can be constructed with the foundational institution unaware as it were of its existence. A para-institution can depend on a given institution, will, or capability of an artist, a curator, an economic or social association. And if, as was said at the beginning of this study, the experience of the Museum of Pictorial Culture was determined by modernist attitudes, then the para-institution, in this sense, rather inherits the postmodern traditions as they were understood by Frederic Jameson—the creation of a para-institution is an act that falls into the logic of the pastiche, “parody that has lost its sense of humour,” its sense of the “normal” original that was directly ridiculed (Jameson, 1988). Para-institutional construction, one can propose based on Jameson, is the creation of an idiolect, a particular artistic or quasi-artistic language of expression of the most radical critics of institutional hegemony. The survival of a para-institution often depends on a mode of behaviour in which there are no “actual/real” institutions. Postmodern para-institutional strategy runs an obvious risk: the absorption, assimilation, and incorporation of the para-institution into the body of the parent institution. A para-institution that does not want to play out this scenario has resort to several forms of alternative self-organisation, which do not prevent it from mimicking the nearby “real” institution or directly within their organism, remaining an alien element, a horizontally acting parasite of the multitude within the imperial sovereignty of the

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institutional subjectivity, to borrow the theoretical apparatus of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt³.

The essence of a para-institution is not limited to a strictly defined set of applied functions, it is diversified and heterogenous. If we are talking of para-institutions within an institution, then the composition of an institution can include an almost unlimited number of para-institutions. This said, para-institutions can have a short-lived character, be tied to projects and be withdrawn almost immediately after their completion. At the same time, they can act as the subjects of long-term activities and, depending on the availability of enough factors for this, even outlive their foundational/main institution. However, more and more often para-institutions are striving towards self-sufficiency adapting, translating, or broadcasting the typical strategy of a floating institution of avoiding authority both in the general/wide sense of the word and in the sense of any disciplinary totalities. In Russia, para-institutions have a particular significance as a kind of *détournement*, registering the slowness of the institutional conjuncture, the inability to look today in the face, its exclusively palliative role in everyday life, gripped by the deepest of crises⁴ (Preston, 2012, p. 90).

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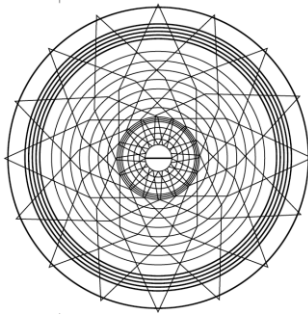
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³ In A. Negri and M. Hardt's books "Empire" and "Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire" theorists interpret the structure of the modern world as a global "Empire", which is opposed by the "multitude" - the set of people outside the identity of the nation-state, acting in scenarios of network power.

⁴ The Situationist International's methodology of reappropriating the phenomena of the capitalist continuum, according to which their danger is redirected, releasing their subversive underside.



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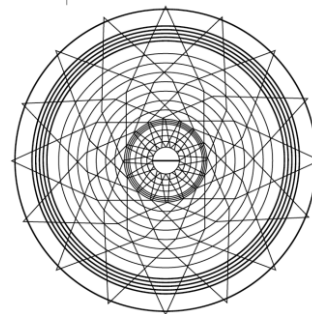
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ПЛАВАЮЩАЯ ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНОСТЬ И ПАРАИНСТИТУЦИИ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ИСКУССТВЕ РОССИИ: ПРЕДПОСЫЛКИ И ОБРАЗЫ

Аллахвердиев Т. К.

аспирант программы «Искусство и дизайн»

Национального исследовательского университета
«Высшая школа экономики»

(Москва, Россия)

tallakhverdiev@hse.ru

Аннотация:

В статье рассматриваются художественные практики России и СССР, по мнению автора, тем или иным образом связанные с течением институциональной критики; предлагается понятие «плавающей институциональности» для обозначения особого характера существования феномена «институции» в обозначенные периоды и в соответствующих локальных контекстах. Поднимается вопрос о связи раннесоветских авангардистских музейных проектов и неофициальным советским искусством второй половины двадцатого века. Большое внимание уделяется вопросу об определении институциональной критики с оглядкой на современность, а также российский опыт.

Ключевые слова: институциональная критика, концептуальное искусство, советское неофициальное искусство