

What should Art Institutions do now?

READING GROUP

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

What?

We proposed a reading group about the book: *As Radical, As Mother, As Salad, As Shelter: What Should Art Institutions Do Now?* The objective was to consider collectively how the survey questions can continue to challenge institutional thinking today and to discuss the key ideas put forward in our own contexts. The outcome of the reading group came from our own series of survey questions.



The journey

ZEMOS98 mediated the 6 sessions and facilitated the discussions, ensuring listening and diverse participation and trying to help the group to achieve the proposed outcome.

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Participants

This programme has been initiated to connect, share and learn with colleagues who work in art institutions across Europe.

Presented as a series of exchanges, the aim is to support an engaging, open, dynamic and collaborative exchange of ideas on the question of *'what should institutions do now?'* in the wake of the still unfolding COVID19 global pandemic.

Coordinator:

Jane Wells

Mediator:

ZEMOS98

Graphical Report:

Athanasia Panagiotidi

Participants:

Ali Akbar Mehta

Anna Larissa Araz

Sara Buraya Boned

Irene Calabuch Mirón

Joselyne Contreras Cerda

Lara Garcia Diaz

Hudda Khaireh

Lebriz Ísvan

Neslihan Koyuncu Bali

Natalie Mitchell

Leire San Martin Goikoetxea

Yolande van der Heide

Hassan Vawda



Session 1: Preparing the trip and packing

In the first session we took the opportunity to get to know each other. Each participant introduced him/herself and presented the quotes that had inspired them the most from the book.

Here are some of the quotes that were highlighted:

- Laura Raicovich (page 79): *Part of the challenge is that many institutions are committed to the myth of neutrality. Power relies on the myth of neutrality in order to have its way. Neutrality reflects the needs, desires, and values of the dominant culture. We can talk about diversity all we want but until we dismantle this fictional neutrality, change will only be made on the surface.*
- Pablo Helguera (page 54): I believe that museums can't just be neutral in the political discourse. (...) they need to acknowledge very transparently where their political leanings lie.
- Zachary Cahill (page 13): *Criticism can be painful. No one really likes to admit they are wrong; especially as it pertains to questions of how we are treating our audiences and/or including/excluding them.*
- Anuradha Vikram (page 103): (...) *art institutions want to downplay and deflect critique of their own operations and funding sources by opening their spaces to outside organizers for fundamentally nonthreatening purposes. This performance of organizing without decolonizing is reflective of the larger problems at play in the institutional left.*

Participants used these quotes to generate a debate around the institution's speeches emphasising on the need to recognise the institution as a political actor, in other words, as an entity that is engaged with its community, that tries to generate critical thinking and that recognises that there is no such thing as institutional neutrality. They called attention to the role that art institutions potentially play as perpetuators of discrimination on minority groups. The final thought was: How to believe in an Art institution? What kind of institutions we want to have? How to break bad habits? How to represent minority voices?

#1 WHAT SHOULD ART INSTITUTIONS DO NOW? PREPARING THE TRIP & PACKING



FIND TIME TO CONNECT!
no matter the language you speak.

WHAT IS MODERN?
multiple modernity

MAKE ALIANCES

for more accessible cultural institutions

FIND THE starting POINT in Europe

FREE public COMMONS

WHAT KIND OF networks ARE THERE?



HOW CAN WE feel as A PART OF THE INSTITUTION?

RELATIONSHIPS
affecting being affected
MUSEUMS & EDITORIAL voice



MEANING OF institution?

COLLECTIONS
DO NOT RECREATE the same DAMAGE
How can we create different spaces?

"No one likes to admit they are wrong"

NEW value SYSTEMS ORGANIZATION

Session 2: Flying away in our eco-spaceship

In the second session we started by playing a game so that the participants could get to know each other better and make the subsequent conversation easier. Each person had to tell two truths and one lie about themselves and let the rest of the participants guess which one was the lie. The discussion then began with the question left off from the previous session: *What do we mean when we say institution?*

Below are some of the reflections made by the participants:

- Difference between institutionality and institution. *Institution as a body as a space and institutionality as a kind of thinking that creates this body.*
- *When I think in an institution, I think in the systems that perpetuate the system. Guardians of legitimacy. What is legit and what is not? What is culture, what is not? Institutions consolidate people and power. Can or not institutions change? I think they are there to prevent change.*
- *Athena Athanasiou (Performing the Institution "As If It Were Possible"): I want to do well on the institution as a condition of possibility for un/common space in the "former West" in light of present conditions of impossibility—capitalist crisis, securitization, and the post-colony. I see the institution as a way to claim having things in common (beyond unity and closure). I also see it as a way to trace the possibilities of countering the mainstream discourse of "there is no alternative".*
- *I see the institution as a way to claim having things in common (beyond unity and closure). I also see it as a way to trace the possibilities of countering the mainstream discourse of "there is no alternative".*
- *We always look at institutions as something negative but how can we evolve? Think in an institution as a common space.*
- *How the institution operates as a mirror of our society. In order to change the institutions, we need to change society.*
- *Neutrality does not exist*

The participants made a distinction between institution and institutionality. The focus of the dialogue was about the power that institutions have and how they can use it. Some participants emphasised the idea that an art institution is a place that preserves order, while others saw an art institution is a common and public place that can challenge dominant narratives and create community. They talked about the responsibility of the stakeholders who work within the institutions, especially when it comes to assuming possible risks, highlighting the idea that blame cannot be the driving force for change.

#2

WHAT SHOULD ART INSTITUTIONS DO NOW?

FLY AWAY IN OUR ECO SPACESHIP

ECOSYSTEM

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SAYING INSTITUTION?

MISSION

SELF-PRESERVATION

HYDRA

CONSOLIDATION

people & power

COMMON space? public use

USES THE POWER it has in various ways

CULTURAL institutions DISCIPLINARY

STRUCTURE ACTORS change?

FLOURISH

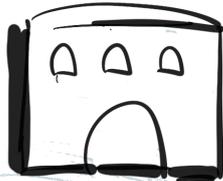
PEOPLE

KEY DIRECTION on your side

SCALEABILITY

MIRROR SOCIETY

APPLY knowledge



CREATE SPACES TO GIVE VOICE

CREATE SIMILAR inside & outside SPACES

Resource Strategy

FIND

"DOES NEUTRALITY EXIST?"

REPRODUCTIVE WORK

"COME ALONG WITH ME"

Session 3: Landing, unpacking and exploring the place

In the third session we started talking about important events related to the cultural sector that had happened that week. After that we asked the following question to the participants: *In light of recent political shifts across the globe, have you sensed a change in the position of the art institution vis-a-vis political activism?*

Below are some of the thoughts that the participants had:

- *How can an institution go beyond its own limits? Where does the institution end and begins?*
- *How can an institution be preemptive? And think forwardly about a situation that might arise in the future? How can we prevent this from happening?*
- *Hierarchies are embedded in institutions. Ineffective policies and institutions of dealing with incidences of racial violence.*
- *Regina Basha (page 5): Can the art institution go from being an object of critique to a site of organizing? How? In small initiatives. Smaller groups are usually more nimble and more effective.*
- *There is a really productive tension in knowing what the institution can't do. Let people know that they are unsafe places. Teach each other how we can navigate these unsafe spaces together and find confidence in our own capacity to navigate the unknown, as opposed to trying to create a terrain.*
- *Institutional critique is in the presence of problematic working methodologies. Infrastructural critique would be in the absence of, say, good governance.*

In this session, participants questioned the existence of a safe space within art institutions. They mentioned a quote from the book that pointed out one of the solutions could be to create smaller and independent initiatives. One participant said that the best thing to do is to recognise that institutions are not safe spaces (using the [Barbican Stories](#) as an example) and to learn to live with and work from that insecurity. Turning art institutions into safer places means giving a voice to those who do not normally have one and creating networks between the different stakeholders.

#3

WHAT SHOULD ART INSTITUTIONS DO NOW?

LANDING · UNPACKING · EXPLORING THE PLACE.

POLITICAL SHIFTS | DO YOU SENSE A CHANGE IN THE POSITION OF THE ART INSTITUTION VIS-A-VIS POLITICAL ACTIVISM?

PRACTICES & INSTITUTIONAL THINKING

CRITICALLY

ARCHIVES?
??????

COMMUNITY



INDEPENDENCY



DEMOCRACY museum

institutionality

CARE ♥ POWER



institutional RACISM is real

"mythology"

image
CONTEXT
culture
CLASS dynamics

COLLECTIVE voice



NAVIGATE the UNKNOWN!

RISK

WHO TAKES IT?
WHO IS ALLOWED TO TAKE IT?

confidence

PARADOX

SOCIAL movements

UNDERSTAND How we WORK

INFRASTRUCTURE & ERRORS

ABSTRACT ENTITY

TAKE POSITION

ETHNICITY AS COUNTERCULTURE

INHABIT EXPERIENCES

"I TAKE YOUR MONEY BUT YOU DON'T OWN ME"

FINANCIAL CREDIBILITY
• trust •

BIG BANKS DO NOT distribute money DIRECTLY TO COMMUNITIES

INSTITUTIONS ARE

GATE KEEPERS

Do's and DON'TS

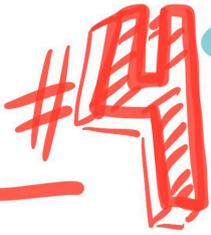
Session 4: The Drift

We started the fourth session by summarising what had happened in the previous session. As on the other days, we continued with a dynamic to encourage participation, in this case, each participant had to explain to the rest a work of art that had been transformative for them. After that we asked the following question to the participants: *Can an art institution go from being an object of critique to a site for organizing? How? Should the art institution play this kind of role? What other roles can or should it play?*

Below are some of the thoughts that the participants had:

- *I don't think that the object of critique and the institutional and the organizational approach wouldn't be separated.*
- *For me, it's also about not perpetuating the normativity of the institution.*
- *Art has this capacity to elaborate on this a space where we can elaborate on our imagination. If we're custodians of anything that's maybe that imaginary space, and we're holding space for that kind of radical imagination for political change.*
- *Zachary Cahill: "the only social function of art is to fuck things up". Dena Beard: "when I dream of better art institutions I dream of a kind of free, public commons. A place where we gather to provoke actions rather than proscribe conversations, to tell jokes, to panhandle, to collect anecdotes, and to perform deviant acts, to lose ourselves in front of art. Basically, I dream of seizing institutional space simply so that we can act weird in public." Zachary Cahill and Dena Beard understand art as a place where weirdness can be something against hegemonic discourses.*
- *How can art institutions be more useful? To the, to their local context, and to the people who visit them?*
- *Hierarchies of knowledge. Every sort of knowledge is knowledge. Anyhow, it's relevant and important, but it seems that the institution's there's a lot of these kinds of hierarchies.*
- *Leaving the boundaries of the institution.*

The first question participants considered was if criticism and organising can be separate issues inside art institutions, or if they should coexist together. All participants agreed that both aspects should coexist. The key is the questions we ask the institution and how we give voice to the different stakeholders, one of the necessary ways to do this is breaking with the hierarchies of knowledge. The topic of needing to recognise the institution as a political and meeting place for the community was raised again and they named the [Performance Space New York](#) as an example of a critical institution. As in the previous sessions, there were still some issues to be addressed and we decided that they would be discussed in the breakout groups the following week.



WHAT SHOULD ART INSTITUTIONS DO NOW?

THE DRIFT

• THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS •



TRANSFORMATIVE artworks

We are alive!

We learn!
↓
THROUGH ART & POLITICS



GIVE VOICE
inspire

CRITIQUE AND ORGANIZING
CO-EXIST

HOW?

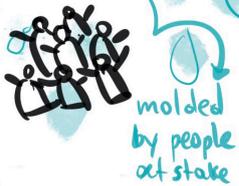
WHAT KIND OF QUESTIONS DO WE ASK?

DIFFERENT BODIES...

OPERATION SPHERE
faith
imagination
caring

INSTITUTIONS that TAKE RISKS and LISTEN

ARE NOT NECESSARILY neutral SPACES



UNDERSTAND weirdness
VISUALISE absence through imagination

diverse
BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

FESTIVALS ORGANISE ALTERNATIVELY

DO WE REALLY need art?

MANAGEMENT curation
Public POLITICS

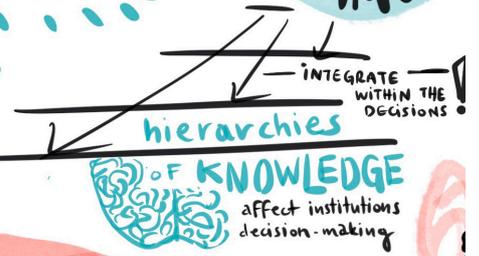
"useful ART"

HOW DO WE ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY?



within the problematic spaces

DANCE WITH the DEVIL
"guerilla"



SYSTEMS

CREATE SPACE WITHIN THE LARGER MONSTERS

Session 5: Last day packing

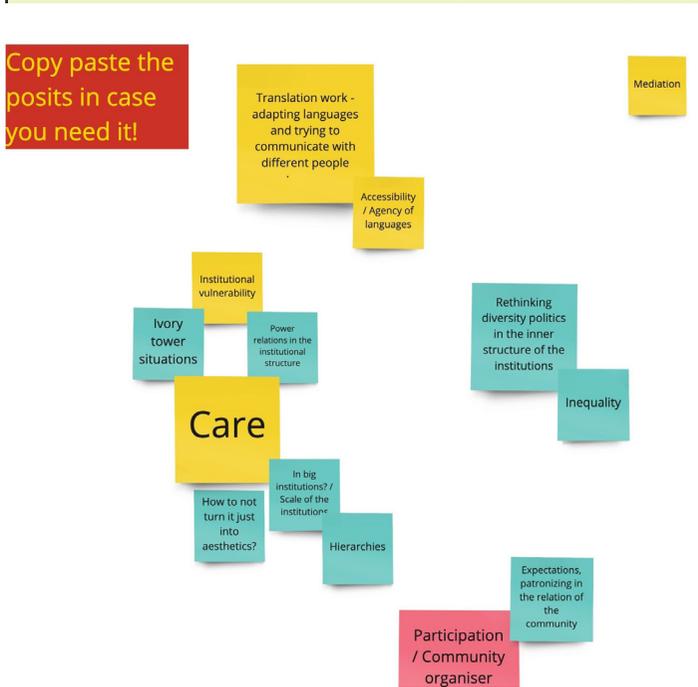
For the penultimate session we decided to create smaller groups in zoom (Pineapple, Mango and Coconut), in which there were four of us. By reducing the group, we were able to generate a more productive discussion. The idea was to point out on [Miro](#) those issues that the participants had identified as important and those that had not yet been touched upon. Each breakout group worked for forty minutes together and then we went back to the main room where we shared the reflections we had made.

Below are some of the conclusions that the participants had in the breakout rooms:

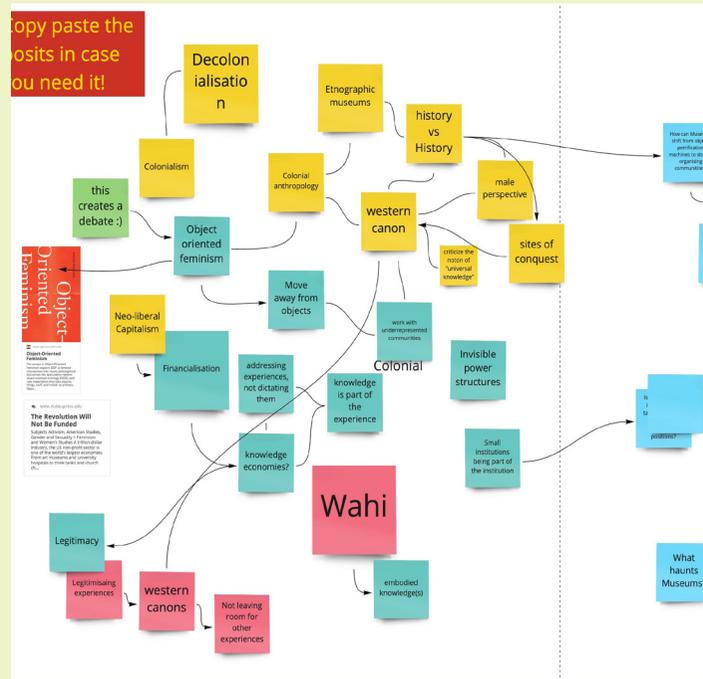
- **Pineapple group:** In this group they began the conversation by asking how cultural institutions can produce processes and projects that put the care of visitors and workers at the centre of their work. It was from this question that they began to reflect on the role of mediation. The participants distinguished between mediation and language accessibility, which for them were not the same thing. They understood that accessibility and agency of languages had to go together. They also reflected about the permeability of institutions to changing audiences. This involved a reflection on how to open up the structures of the institution to the community and how to make them more interactive.
- **Mango group:** In this group they made a reflection about the history of museums in terms of who sees and who wants to be seen. This led to anthropological reflection on the institution as a place of knowledge production and transmission. The Arabic term “Wahy” was highlighted during the session. It means “revelation” and it was used to speak about knowledge that transcends practice. It was a metaphor that was meant to challenge the Western understanding of theoretical knowledge, rationality and objectivity as means to access a universal truth. They questioned the critical practice of museums and how this should influence changing dominant narratives and rethinking those structures that are normally reproduced in art institutions.
- **Coconut Group:** In this group they thought about how economies, ideology and finance are connected. And how the idea of power and labor are related. They debated the porosity of an institution whether it can allow things to run through it, or whether it’s just going to put big blocks in people’s way. Finally, they talked about the concept of neutrality and how it changes from one place to another and from one institution to another. They understood that the best way to create structures of care is through practice and that it is in practice itself that the institution can confront the limits of neutrality.

In this session, even though we were divided into three groups, we were able to see how some themes and concerns were repeated. The participants questioned the dominant narratives and raised the limits of the institution when looking for new audiences. The permeability and neutrality of an institution to new changes proved to be one of the most important points for the participants.

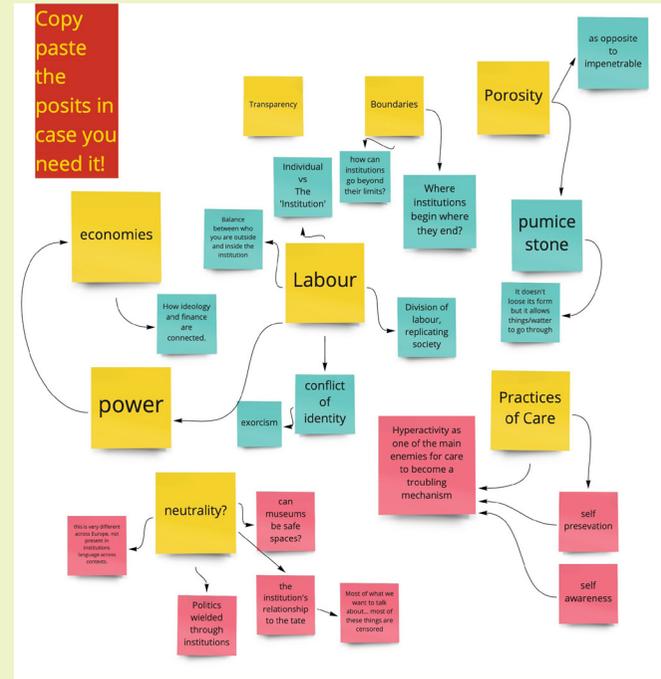
Pineapple Group



Mango Group



Coconut Group



WHAT SHOULD ART INSTITUTIONS DO NOW?

#5

LAST DAY: PACKING

pineapple



CARE

diversity
AGENCY OF LANGUAGES
accessibility

REFLECT!

SCALE

WHAT DOES THE COMMUNITY NEED?

MYTHOLOGICAL ORGANISING

Different structures

PROCESSES matter

mango



MUSEUMS

descolonisation

ETHNOGRAPHY

KNOWLEDGE

how is it displayed?

ADDRESS

the UNKNOWN

how?

embody knowledge

TRANSMIT

ORGANISE COMMUNITY

How DOES THE INSTITUTION shift from objectivity to subjectivity?

INSTITUTIONAL & ARTISTIC INDIVIDUAL

legal entity?



THINKING

DENIAL CULTURE

"the dark side of the moon"
CONTRADICTIONS TO LIVE WITH

Coconut



ECONOMIES

LABOUR

POROSITY

HYPERACTIVITY

"NEUTRALITY"

Different structure in IDEOLOGIES

CARE = POWER



HOLD DIVERSE perspectives

PUBLICATION a space for encounter

RETHINK terms

FIND THE GAPS

We are connected to each other

Session 6: Landing back

For the last session, we wanted to give the participants some time to write down on [Miro](#) the questions that they had been asking themselves during the previous sessions and that they thought could be asked to people working in art institutions. After this individual workspace, we commented on the questions they had written.

Below are some of the thoughts that the participants had:

- *Can there be a network of connections in solidarity with all of these places where it's art institutions are at stake in a way?*
- *What does risk mean? How do we address that? And actually, is that something that we address?*
- *I'm taking for granted that we understand that things like tastes are construction, right? That race is a construction, and there are all these oppressive systems that we want to somehow transcend. And the place of transcendence, at least as far as this conversation is on the sights of transcendence, at least as far as this conversation is concerned is within the institution. What does your day to day look like toward that? how do you remain vigilant to the terms of inclusion then?*
- *I think it's so important that we're able to talk about this from our specific locality, because global capital homogenizes everything.*
- *How do you feel about your institution at this specific moment? And and and I think if you start a conversation from that point all the issues about politics, the relationship with the state, the relationship with other institutions and etcetera are there. So I think it's a way also of changing the way in which we are a community communicating between each other. The relationship between institutions and the state, which I think is, is key.*

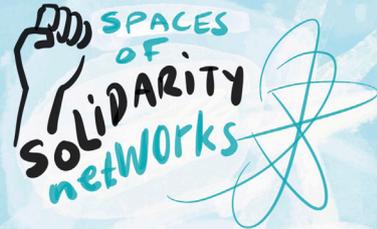
In this session the participants returned to many of the issues that had been discussed previously: neutrality, community networks and the risks faced by the institution. One of the participants asked whether, given their employment contracts, the other participants would feel free to respond to the questions they had written, which highlighted the lack of freedom that employees of art institutions must be critical about the institution. Just before the end, the participants decided to give each other contacts to preserve the network of contacts created in this reading group.

#6 WHAT SHOULD ART INSTITUTIONS DO NOW? LANDING BACK

with Questions!



How CAN WE change the Approach?



STATE Policies

is INSTITUTION LEGALISED AS IN STATE?

CONTRACTS
NDA
Affect our ability to speak FREELY?

WHAT DOES **risk** mean?
reputational

VARIETY OF QUESTIONS

Guard against the same Violences

How DO YOU imagine to MOVE DIFFERENTLY?



HUMAN DIFFERENCE

Context
Taste
Race
construction

How DO YOU REMAIN inclusive?

LANGUAGE INCLUDE other type of institution!

Racism
How CAN WE UNDERSTAND IT AS A Structuring Logic?

DIFFERENCE

"Think about a different way of Being Together"

How DO YOU feel ABOUT YOUR INSTITUTION?

PLURALITY



A LIFE CONVERSATION

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

General

- How can Museums shift from object-petrification machines to sites of organising communities?
- What can the Museum teach us beyond what it shows us?
- What practical steps can institutions take to initiate, for itself, sustainable counter-hegemonic positions?
- What reparative practices can Museums undertake to ensure an equity of power, knowledge and being?
- How to break homogeneity in cultural institutions without exoticizing the difference?
- How to combat the apparent neutrality of a cultural institution?
- How can Museums decentralise productivity and center 'being'?

Responsibilities

- What are the responsibilities of an institution to society?
- Do institutions have a responsibility to the local and global art/culture ecosystem?
- What are the responsibilities of an institution to society?

Risk

- What does it mean to be open to risk? What are the limits?
- How can an institution go beyond its own limits?
- Who should be holding the risk?

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Care

- Can care function as a principle of organization in cultural institutions? What this may mean?
- What are the specific policies related to care you have implemented?
- How to create spaces of care inside the institution, to share conflicts and be able to support other colleagues and stop internal violences?
- Is the so-called “affective turn” changing the power relations of the institution? (internally but also with the external collaborators, constituencies, audiences?)
- How to create a common ethic for institutional work?

Funding

- To what extent should a patron influence an institution?
- with institutions facing a bleak economic future, is patronage still important? How can we address the economic models of institutions?

Personal

- How do you feel about your institution?
- Can you share with us your list of ‘things to do’ and ‘things to feel’ when thinking about your work?
- What do you understand from neutrality in institutions?
- Where do you end and the institution begin?
- How do you think art institutions will change in a post-lockdown era?
- How is your art institution funded? How do you understand the consequences of this funding structure?

QUESTIONS

MIRO QUESTIONS

- How can institutions facilitate postdemocratic encounters of equals?
- What reparative practices can Museums undertake to ensure an equity of power, knowledge and being?
- How can Museums shift from object-petrification machines to sites of organising communities?
- what practical steps can institutions take to initiate, for itself, sustainable counter-hegemonic positions?
- How can Museums decentralise productivity and center 'being'?
- What can the Museum teach us beyond what it shows us?
- How can institutions defortify institutional knowledges to make room for other situated / embodied / tacit knowledges?
- How can Museums be decolonial, queer, intersectional and norm-critical sites of transgression?
- If the primary condition of the 21st century can be defined by the term 'management', how can institutions disrupt the management of histories, identities, risk and data?
- who should be holding the risk?
- What does it mean to be open to risk? what are the limits?
- How to believe and HOLD the belief? How do you sustain yourself and your work?
- Do you implement social indicators as well as quantitative ones?
- How do we create new institutions which are both public and community based?
- Can we avoid security controls at cultural institutions?
- security; should it mean policing or safety? what needs security? our visitors or the work?
- How can an institution go beyond its own limits?
- how/ when will you know an institution is better? what does success look like for you?
- How do you measure the success of the institution?
- Can artists have other roles than creating artworks to exhibit and share, but change the institutions from inside by becoming active in the decision making of programs and the operations?
How?
- How do you guard against becoming the ready token; and guard against tokenising?
- How do you feel about your institution?

QUESTIONS

- Can institutions develop strategies to make visible and to face the different labour division inside of them? (racial, gender, ableism, class division of labour)
- How to create a common ethics for institutional work?
- How is your art institution funded? How do you understand the consequences of this funding structure?
- What are the specific policies related to care you have implemented?
- Is the so called “affective turn” changing the power relations of the institution? (internally but also with the external collaborators, constituencies, audiences?)
- How to create spaces of care inside the institution, to share conflicts and be able to support other colleagues and stop internal violences?
- How is your art institution funded? How do you understand the consequences of this funding structure?
- Can care function as a principle of organization in cultural institutions? What this may mean?
- Do institutions have a responsibility to the local and global art/culture ecosystem?
- Does an institution have a potential to help a small group to become a community with its resources? How?
- What does it mean to be an institution?
- Can you share with us your list of ‘things to do’ and ‘things to feel’ when thinking about your work?
- How do you understand the function of the art institution and how would you like it to function?
- What are the major challenges to culture and society today and is the art institution placed to address these challenges? If so, how?
- For the institutions who have a certain value system, how should they act in a conflicting situation which forces them to disregard their value system in order to exist?
- How to become places that embrace the planetary condition of being in relation, without verticality?
- What are the good examples for the behavior of institutions even outside of art world?
- what are your priorities right now?
- what are the barriers to speaking freely? are there things we want to say but can’t because of contract clauses or risk of funding being withdrawn/ censorship?
- Can an institution be objective? neutral? a-political?