

## Experimenting with Institutional Formats.

Interview with Laurence Rassel by Cornelia Sollfrank

<http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/experimenting-with-institutional-formats/>

Sunday, 4 March 2018, House for Electronic Arts (HeK), Basel.

The interview was conducted during the workshop 'Commoning the Institution' which was part of the research project Creating Commons, based at ZHdK, Zürich: [creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/](http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/)

LR: 00:20 **introduction**

**Open source:** We are going to make an open source institution that means that the people can have access to the way it works. **Feminism:** how can we build, construct an art school that is conscious about the conditions of production, conscious about gender. **Institutional psychotherapy:** it is the self-consciousness of the institution at work, and that's something that it's important for me, to have a tool to think through, what are we doing and how we do what we do? So, my current position is director of an art school, École de Recherche Graphique. It's an "école supérieur des arts." I don't know how to translate that into English. It is the equivalent of an university degree. And so I'm employed by a board to be director. I have a contract for five years that can be renewed indefinitely.

LR: 01:17 **personal background (subheading)**

LR: 01:21 Telling this story is ... making storytelling. So it's like a fiction that I will tell you now. It's a summary of more than 20 years. When I left art school, I was not very interested by the art world that was depicted to me through the school. I wanted art to be useful, with a purpose. I was trying to find somehow some meaning of why and how I should stay in the art world or will become an artist or whatever that means. So, it happened, different issues, things, people ... I'm a product of the circumstances of the year 1997, one could say. So my way of finding meaning or looking for meaning was to go to see a lot of movies and go to the film museum and in the field museum there were provided seminars on film history and

critique of cinema. I was a cinema fan and was going a lot to see films, and I was reading a lot about cinema, and this is how I encountered the work of Chris Marker.

I went to a Marxist feminist film analysis seminar, organized by the museum, and I also I met people, e.g. Dirk de Wit from Constant (a media art organization based in Brussels), who was handling an exhibition about Chris Marker and needed help. This is how I began to work with Constant. It was more that I was looking for meaningful critique or space for going on in the art world. (...) Suddenly, it was a hands-on-experience of an exhibition space, the money, the economy, the communication. And I discovered artists working with new media, and so on, so forth. At the same time, I had this Marxist feminist input by this seminar on Marxist and feminist film analysis. So I began to read theory about the conditions of production, analysis of cinema, but I could also expand it to the art world. Suddenly, there was this theory or deconstructive practice of what I was saying and doing; of who I was as a female artist and the possibility of experimenting with this in an exhibition space working with Constant, and 1997, as you know, it was also the year of *documenta*.

LR: 04:14

So, I encountered cyberfeminism and net art, and it made sense to go deeper into the conditions of production, perception, theory, and media. I mean, media like Internet or computers looked like a place that would welcome the female artist that I could be. When Dirk de Wit left Constant and asked me and another artist, Anouk de Clercq, if we wanted to take over, we said yes, but Anouk decided to work as an artist and not as an organizer. And I kept going on. So, the fact of going deeper and deeper in the structural organization of the art world, made me suddenly – I mean not suddenly, it took 10 years – but then they called me from the Fondació Tàpies, which is a contemporary art center and partly museum in Barcelona, to become director there. And then, I left that position, for various reasons and we were back in Brussels, when the position opened to be director of an art school. Different people from the school and outside the school told me, it would be good if I would apply. I applied and became director, but the engine of all of this was curiosity, the question of how does it work, and also how can it be a more welcoming space for “people like me” – me being outside of the art world, female, working class background and so on, so forth. So it was really by this curiosity, the desire and also a necessity that I arrived where I am now. Sometimes I wonder, how I arrived at that position... It was like opening a door and following the rabbit, and here I am ,in front of you.

06:14            **institutional formats (subheading)**

LR:      06:40      Constant, the fundació and the art school, I have the impression, I'm exploring the different actors somehow [laughs]. With Constant, the first projects I was doing, were exhibitions, and slowly it transformed into how can we empower, transmit the knowledge about technology or theory, that we have, or we want to have, to other people? So, it was more workshops, and collective learning situations. Meanwhile, in the fundació I was back in the exhibition space, which is a format, norm, economy that is dominated by the bourgeoisie, I mean so-called bourgeoisie, i.e. people with the money and the power to decide. And there, trying to explore again how you can affect the space and work with space differently.

LR:      07:09      I was tempted to try out a school, because it's publicly funded and it has a public mission, so the transparency, the responsibility can be shared with others. How can we build, construct an art school that is conscious about the conditions of production, conscious about gender, I mean the narrative needed (...)? It was really to imagine a space that exists and has its own rules, but how can we build something together? And also, you see, there are 400 students per year, how can I affect 400 people per year? [laughs] It's interesting, when you have an exhibition space or a school, how many human beings you can touch. Meanwhile, in Constant, when I was there, I have the impression, it was by the intimacy, that the relationship was based on intimacy.

LR:      08:11      Meanwhile, in the school, it's something that – I'm not saying to build an army, but how you can work with different people. So, for me that was this, yeah, this possibility of an enclosed space, almost, like an ecosystem; it's a biotope, an island, whatever metaphor, spaceship, that we are in...

08:41            **open source (subheading)**

LR:      08:44      We are going to make an open source institution that means that the people can have access to the way how it works, how the budget is decided, how the law is working and effecting, the decision on the program, on the schedule, the employment contracts and so forth, and try that together, to decide which institution they are, and which institution they are means what pedagogical mission they have. The mission of erg that was transdisciplinary and based on the project student, okay, how do you do that on the level of the structure, how the structure can sustain this open, transdisciplinary (setting), and [support] self-respect and other ways of ...

LR: 09:35 I mean, how can we help to develop the project of each person inside the school? So, it was to find a way of transforming the structure so it will sustain art, but art that is conscious about the conditions of production, the social economic system that they're in, and the different players, actors that are in play, and to make this as art, because the impression is that in the different institutions that belong to the art world that they are working as opaque or as black box; the "institution" is a big name for so different players and actors. So, for me what was always interesting in free and open source software was the GPL (Gnu General Public License), the fact that you open the source code and give the authorization to transform, copy, modify and redistribute under the same open access (condition), and also that you document properly (what you are doing) so other people can make use of that, and you cannot predetermine the use of the software somehow. So for me, it's my brain saying, it's interesting for an institution to imagine it as a machine or as a structure that you can open, a software or a dispositive that is, at least, you give access to the way it works. And that means that the people who participate in that machine can transform it, copy or use it for any purpose. And also this idea that it is self-sustainable, that the machine can repair and take care of herself, because the participant has the possibility of repairing the software, find the bugs, be protected from the viruses. So this idea that you are not alone taking care of the machine that allows the machine to live longer somehow [laughs].

12:03 **école de recherché graphique (subheading)**

LR: 12:07 When I arrived, I reactivated different collective and negotiation moments, I mean organizations and groups in the school, like you have what is called "journées pedagogique" are the educational days that gather all the teachers together. What can we do with that? The first thing was to think about the mission of the school and decide, okay, we want that mission, and this became really practical working groups. So we have a group working on the admission process, how do you enter the school, we have a working group on the jury, the diploma, how do you do that? And we have a group on the employment politics in the school, also one about the food, the garbage... Some groups consist of teachers and students and administration, some groups are teachers and administration, and the students will come after, because of the temporality. It's not that the students are less knowledgeable or less to be trusted. It's just that their time in the school is different; it could be a year, two years, five years, while the teachers can be there forever or for one year. To have a projection for the future, we work with these different layers of time. And what we do is to reread all the rules and say, how can the mission or our

desire for the school match or respect the rules? and how do we interpret and apply this? It can be the privilege of the director, the director position to do that, but I have decided that the director function is collective that means that together we can decide what the school will be. Also there are different working groups, a lot of different encounters and sometimes it can be really chaotic, because everyone has can say something – to me; can gather and come with an idea [laughs]. Then we try to analyse how sustainable the idea is financially, ecologically, but also as a human, because sometimes the students come and say we want to do that, and I say yes, and then they don't do it, because it was just an impulse of energy...

LR: 14:42 And also what I did, was to make the budget transparent. It's a school that belongs to a board; you have one board and five institutions, and erg is one of the institutions. So some part of the money is collective, for maintenance of the building, for bookkeeping, the computer science guys etc., and I asked the board and it was no problem at all, if we could explain to everyone how the budget works, how the money is spent, how the distribution is working, and this year, a part of the money is decided together with the students.

To go back again, for example, to the jury or the admission process, asking what is compulsory by decree from the state or the government, and what is the own decision of the school. Because sometimes we forget that; we have the impression that things are written in stone, but no, it is something that we at the school can work on, to give them back the agency. Yes, to be able to act and decide and think, and if they don't want to, well... The process that I try is to invite people to imagine the institution without them. And, this is a difficult process, not thinking of their own employment, but what kind of institution they think we are, or we will be, and what that needs. To detach themselves from thinking, yes, I want more hours, I want to be paid more, but to say, for the school to be what she needs to be, she needs this kind of people to be employed or such status and so on, so forth.

16:45 **institutional psychotherapy (subheading)**

LR: 16:48 Institutional psychotherapy I discovered through a seminar that took place in Barcelona, on Francesc Tosquelles, and Francesc Tosquelles was a Catalan psychotherapist who was active before the Republican war in Spain. During the war, he was a psychotherapist inside the Republican Army and he created a caring group for soldiers, and he said it was necessary to have different competencies and knowledge about the entire

body and mind. So, there were artists, nurses, sex workers, other soldiers – I mean, whatever was necessary to take care of a person. So the basic idea, to be short, is that institutional psychotherapy was based on the idea that if you want to take care of a person, you have to take care of the institution, which means, when the institution is sick, so the people who are patients there will be sick as the institution is.

- 17:51 And also that everything counts, the way the garden is done, the cleaning is done, the cooking is done, is affecting how the people live or are. And also this idea that then the nurse, the cleaning person, the gardening person have their say, have their part in the care function or the cure function, because one of the principles that is important is that the patients are actively related to their cure; so they participate in their own cure. So, this idea that the people working inside the institution are active, to give them the agency, the power to act and not to be told what to do, how to do and so on, so forth. Basically, you think that the institution is done by the people who are in – also basic stuff, right? But it's like ... [shakes her head].
- 18:48 So, for me, it was one night that I realized the way how the cultural institutions, the museums were affected by the change in politics, the push that they should raise more private funding, get more public. I mean the push to quantification, to numbers, and how it was told, that there was no alternative, and you have to learn that, you have to raise more money, you have to attract more audience, you have to be nice with the nationalists and whatever, otherwise ... [laughs]. But there must be an alternative. And so I don't know, don't ask me why, say, okay, we are under attack, I mean symbolically or not symbolically, for some people. How can we think that? And I think, but during the war, those people were able to imagine something else. So, it's not that I can apply institutional psychotherapy directly to the school, but it can affect me, and the way I can act as director.
- 19:57 Guattari, when someone asked him, what do you bring to people, he said, it's not so much what we bring, but the fact that we try to be as less toxic as possible, less “nuisible,” that we are not reproducing the alienation that is outside in the world. Because this is also what we ask for and what the patients can ask for. That there is not someone to tell you how to behave and tell you what you have to do. So, it's the self-consciousness also of the institution at work, and that's something that it's important for me, thinking of it as a tool for asking, what are we doing a, how do we do that?

20:40

## **feminism**

20:43

Feminism for me, it was really when I became a feminist and cyberfeminist in 1997, and I can tell you the day [laughs]. So, it was at this seminar of Marxist and feminist analysis of cinema. It was like, you know, your eyes open, you are not blind to the system anymore. It's really to the condition of who, whom, under which condition and what for. And to be careful of how the systemic machine is working. And so, for me, it's totally connected, embedded ... and to be careful, to be full of care, about who and how, and the representation, identity, sometimes not, and feminism becoming more complex, but this idea of questioning the authority, the hierarchy, the nature, the system, the power structure. Feminism, for me, was really a tool and it has been a reading companionship. So it's just one of my tools. Maybe I'm becoming more complex or they are numerous, but I have the impression, I have similar tool to deconstruct...

22:04

## **care**

22:08

I use hospitality a lot, the atmosphere, how you give access... So, for me care is *l'attention*, it can be *l'attention*, *le soin*, the care or to be careful or to be attentive or ... So it's something that, for me, relates to the invisibility of the institution, to make it disappear, so you are not responsible, or it's appearing and taking care in your place. So, I don't attach it to ..., it's important, I think, to make visible, tangible and I'm sensitive to the relationships and what is needed so the work is done.

23:00

## **commoning**

23:03

What we try to do is to multiply the different forms of encounters and the different questions that we address to find slowly, and it really takes time, to find what is in common between the different desires, the different people or the different ways of thinking art or pedagogy or the ways into the world. Something that I tried to do is to be patient enough to see what will emerge as what is common and what then we can create as a collective, because for the moment, it is by default that we are together, because we work there or we study there, but what will become collective, I can not say yet. I'm interested in going deeper into this, to see what kind of production is created by the collective work or giving access to what will be a common somehow.

24:12

## **production**

24:15

I believe that how the structure works will affect the art that is being produced and the artists who are out in the world, who don't have to produce art, but as a citizen, a human being in relation to the world, the way the school works will affect, transform or sustain them somehow; now some of the students are working collectively. How does it affect the grades or the forms and what can we bring to them so they are conscious about their choice in terms of form and production and so forth.

I mean, it's amazing what they have. I mean, Donna Haraway is like known for them, normal stuff, or queer, gay, trans... I mean, there are trans people, Paul Gilroy came... They have access and can decide for themselves and have the choice and this knowledge about the conditions of production and distribution. And this is why I'm interested in art, it's really the possibility of a hybrid workspace somehow, or the possibility where in the world can I say that I'm working from feminism, free software, institutional psychotherapy and science fiction, and be a director of an art school? I mean, this kind of possibility of hybridity, for me is the privilege of what could be called art. If I imagine, I'm somewhere else, I would not be the director of anything, I think...