

The Magmas: On Institutions and Instituting

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The institution of society is in each case the institution of a magma of social imaginary significations, which we can and must call a world of significations. For it is one and the same thing to say that society institutes the world in each case as its world or its world as the world, and to say that it institutes a world of significations that is its own, in correlation to which, alone, a world can and does exist for it.

—Cornelius Castoriadis, 1974¹

I propose that instead of treating the interminable question of the capacity to act in terms of 'possible versus impossible,' we examine what it might mean to institute 'otherwise,' politically and performatively, 'as if it were possible.'

—Athena Athanasiou, 2016²

In her recent essay “Performing the Institution,” Athena Athanasiou asks how we can think of institutions, and ways of instituting, after the widespread dispossession of public infrastructures known as neoliberal reform and privatization. For Athanasiou, the task is not to save traditional liberal institutions under siege, but rather to institute *as if it were possible*; with an in-built ambivalence of Derridean im-possibility, heightened by the three-pronged onslaught of austerity, security, and post-coloniality. The institution is thus something to be *performed* rather than reclaimed, which has a particular resonance in the context of contemporary Greece, and the hollowing out of all its institutions per decree of the European Union, in response to the credit crunch of 2008. But enforced austerity and privatization, against the policies of a democratically elected government, is not the only post-institutional fault line to be witnessed in Greece, as the country is also at the center of the current European refugee crisis. The informal and unauthorized response in Greece itself, as opposed to the official policies of policing of the EU, attests to new ways of performing the institution, of instituting despite impossibility, such as in the self-organized refugee camps of Lesbos. Indeed, in the realm of contemporary art, rather than asking what we can learn from Athens—as is currently fashionable—should we not ask what we can also learn from Lesbos? Changing this line of questioning is not merely rhetorical, but has to do with instituting, with institutional form, such as the large scale of recurrent exhibitions and biennales.

Instituting and the Imaginary

Now, if our institutions are somewhat wanting, and even failing—due to defunding and delegitimizing, privatization and austerity—or seen as failing us in terms of representation and inclusion, for that matter, the notion of performing the institution as if it were possible, in spite of, rather than due to, the status of our current institutions and societies—thus embodying conditions of impossibility as the very conditions of possibility—brings to mind Cornelius Castoriadis’s ontological claim for the historical instituting of society: that we always institute, and, therefore, can always institute *differently*. Indeed, the act of *instituting*, and thus with it institutions, is integral to the establishing of *any* society, of *a* society as such:

That which holds society together is, of course, its institution, the whole complex of its particular institutions, what I call ‘the institution of a society as a whole’—the word ‘institution’ being taken here in the broadest and most radical sense: norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things, and, of course, the individual itself both in general and in the particular type and form (and their differentiations: e.g. man/woman) given to it by the society considered.³

Institutions are here, then, not just organizational forms within society, and within modern societies in particular, but also the way in which societies are constituted through instituting and the imagination. This is a very expanded use of the notion of institution, encompassing language, social codes, and even relations and definitions of gender, but which nonetheless includes the particular institution in a given society that produces, performs, and maintain these norms and normative functions. The question, for a thinker like Castoriadis, is thus not so much of how institutions *think*, that is how they perform socially, but rather how they *institute*: what forms and what norms are being upheld, and practiced? Even when a society is specific, and if it is highly traditional, it is nonetheless instituted. And it is this very institution of society that makes a society, and a social order that thrives on tradition, or for that matter, social change and notions of progress and evolution, that are always merely social–historical institutions—no more, and no less.

Moreover, societies are wholly imaginary institutions, instituted through what Castoriadis calls both “social imaginary significations” and “instituted social

imaginaries.” “It is the instituting social imaginary that creates institution in general (the institution as form) as well as the particular institutions of each specific society, and the radical imagination of the singular human being.”⁴ Instituting is thus an act of the imagination, but with very real effects, as it is through institutions of society that our reality is both produced and reproduced. That is, institutions not only create social relations, but through repetitions also constantly attempt to reproduce this instituted social imaginary, this version of reality. Hence not only the institution of, say, the church as a discourse and physical space, but also its repeated rituals of sermons and prayers, reproduces its power and grip on reality, which is then further enhanced by its juridical entanglements through registering births, marriages and deaths. As an institution, the church has architecture that frames and validates its discourse, rituals that sediment its discourse into the social and keep the discourse actual, and, finally, through its discourse and rituals an institutional entanglement with the social in terms of not only the laws it propagates and preaches, but also legislates. Traditions that are upheld in both so-called secular and so-called religious societies, and in this sense there is no principal difference between a Lutheran and an Islamist state. Indeed both of them could be described in Castoriadis’s terms of a heteronomous society, more of which later. For now it suffices to note what a neat little world this produces, with very few conceptual creases in it, and a fairly consistent and certainly constant reproducible instituted social imaginary, but also that this is, of course, just *a* society, one possible social-historical model of world-making, not equal to worlding as such: “Neither is what is given an ensemble or a hierarchy of ensembles, an essence or a system of essences.”⁵ If there is an ensemblist logic at play, this also means that other ensembles and assemblages can be imagined—it is always possible to institute *another world*.

However, it is needed to go further, as Castoriadis conceives of the imaginary as not only that which institutes society in general, its beliefs, languages, social norms, and so on, and its particular institutions of instituting, so to say, from nation-states to armies, from courthouses to art galleries, etc., but also the imagination of the singular human being, as stated above. What is instituted are not only subjects—of the state, of various institutional spaces—but also subjectivity itself. Our sense of self, and how our imagination works, as individuals, and thus including our dreams and dream worlds, are always part and parcel of a social-historical situation, or social imaginary significations, even when we try to break with our background, our roots, traditions, and desires. On the other hand, our imagination is not limited to the social-historical, and can indeed surpass it, imaginatively, which is why Castoriadis uses the term *radical imagination*,

and why he privileges art among the major modern forms of the imagination he identifies, which also include philosophy, science and politics. Art is precisely, in this view, that which epitomizes "... creation ex nihilo, bringing into being a form that was not here before, the creation of new forms of being,"⁶ which was, naturally, one of the declared goals of modern art, and perhaps modernism in general, and aligns Castoriadis squarely with modernist thought rather than postmodernism. Nonetheless, Castoriadis departs radically from two of the most dominant modes of thinking about the subject and history in modernity, namely psychoanalysis and Marxism. As should be obvious from the above, Castoriadis's use of the term the Imaginary has nothing in common with the famous Lacanian term, and even though he had a background as a psychoanalyst, the imagination of the individual, albeit social-historical, was not fully caught in a cruel double-bind between the real and the imaginary, the ego and the unconscious, but had the capability for radical imagination, and thus radical break with the perceived real, and psychoanalysis is, as such, merely a way of instituting the social. Similarly, Castoriadis, who was also trained as an economist, broke with determinist Marxism, and its orthodoxies of base and superstructure, and how economic changes in the base lead to political changes in the superstructure. Instead, he attributed social and political changes, particularly radical and revolutionary ones, purely to the (radical) imagination. The supersession of contemporary capitalist society will not occur "[...] because such are the laws of history, the interests of the proletariat or the destiny of being," but, rather, "[...] because we will it and because we know that others will it as well," as he famously wrote toward the conclusion of his magnum opus, aptly titled *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.⁷

In this theory of the imaginary, and politics of the imagination, any radical social, political, or indeed aesthetic change cannot be predicted or prescribed, and occurs through discontinuity rather than continuity, either in the form of radical innovation and creativity, in art or in science, or in the shape of symbolic and political revolutions that can never be truly predicted or understood in terms of determinate causes and effects, or an inevitable historical sequence of events. Rather, change emerges through the projecting, positing, and implementation, without predeterminations, of other imaginaries of the present, and of the future, than the already socially instituted and repeated political imaginaries. This requires a radical break with the past, though, in terms of language and symbolization, and thus of ways of doing, practicing other ways of instituting, and thus other institutional forms. As institutions, also those of artistic production and circulation of discourse, are part of symbolic significations, and as such

they are not fixed or stable, but constantly articulated through praxis. Any society must be instituted as symbolic constructions, held together by specific social imaginaries and institutions, which solidifies social imaginary signification into instituted social imaginaries. If a particular institution of society, specific or historical, thus comes to be viewed as inaccurate or obsolete, false even, it will mean the collapse of that given institution or even society, the way in which historical empires have crumbled and fallen, only to be replaced, in turn, by another wholly imaginary, but instituted order of society. Social imaginaries can thus be actively redefined through other instituting practices, and existing ones collapsed when no longer viewed as adequate, just or true. Why is this so? What makes radical change possible, if not historical conditions and social causes? The answer lies, partly, in the paradoxes and aporias involved in any identitarian logic, no matter how institutionally solidified it appears, and no matter how deep its roots seem, and how strong its pillars of tradition look, as these are, ontologically speaking, wholly imaginary. Moreover, no matter how far and long a particular imaginary has been socially instituted, there is always a *before*, as well as a *beyond*. This is the element that Castoriadis names, perhaps somewhat unwieldy, a *magma*: "What we seek to understand is the mode of being of what gives itself *before* identitary or ensemblist logic is imposed,"⁸ [my italics], to be understood at the level of both history and subjectivity. Indeed Castoriadis goes on to write that the term magma is chosen in order to avoid a formal definition in an already received language, as it precedes and exceeds it, and is thus not only before, but also beyond: "A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations."⁹

Again, this points to the always possible, if unexpected and implausible, radical break with the past and the present, and that the elements of society (as a set) can be configured and reconfigured indefinitely, but also, and crucially, not only that things can be recomposed, and instituted differently, but no imaginary institution of society can ever be complete, neither historically nor actually. It can never be eternal, and it can never be total, despite its stronghold, or stranglehold for that matter, on our reality. Ironically, what then escapes any instituted social imaginary "is the very being of society as instituting, that is to say, ultimately, society as the source and origin of otherness or perpetual self-alteration."¹⁰

To put it more concretely in terms of art, politics, and the politics of art institutions, the aim is not anti-institutional, indeed it never could be, but about of self-instituting. There are different ways of instituting, and any alternative culture, groundbreaking science, or political rupture must do precisely that: institute differently—on the level of discourse and history, as well as in the intricacies of actual institutional forms, and in the radical imagination of both the singular human being and how we signify and define the subject anew. In effect, it is about creating a new language with which to say things, not just saying the same things with new words. Castoriadis thus distinguishes between two very different forms of imaginary institutions of society, *the heteronymous* and *the autonomous*, both of which are instructive in a conversation about the institution of art, and how art's institutions think, and indeed institute.

The Heteronymous and the Autonomous

The distinction between opposing ways of instituting is crucial, partly in differentiating the concept of the institution from ideas more common to the art world— of discursive formations or of hegemony—but more importantly in moving from an ontological proposition for understanding societies toward a political position for changing them. While all societies make their own imaginaries—institutions, laws, traditions, beliefs, behaviors, and so on, autonomous societies are for Castoriadis those in which the members of that specific society are aware of its imaginary institution and thus explicitly *self-institute*. Again, autonomy does here not imply anti-institutionalization, but self-institutionalization as a continuous project of self-alteration, which accounts for an autonomous society's temporality, and thus encompassing its historicity, contemporaneity and futurity, but without conflating them, or having one cancel out the other.¹¹ In contrast, the members of heteronymous societies do not think of their societies as self-instituted, and thus necessarily as perpetually self-altering, but rather attribute their imaginary order to something outside society itself: to some extra-social authority, be it deity, tradition, progress, historical necessity or the like.

The distinction between the autonomous and the heteronymous can also be employed in thinking about how the institutions of art think, and, indeed, institute. It will be necessary, though, to create a formal distinction between art as an institution, in the abstract sense, but as an instituted social imaginary on the one hand, and then the specific institutions of the art world, in the concrete sense of academies, galleries, museums etc., as the places that institute in a specific way, be it repetitively or altering, autonomously or heteronymously, on the other hand. Now, to the extent that

Art, with a capital A, is referred to as an essential and a-historical category, it is at once autonomous and heteronymous. It is autonomous as it is separate from its social-historical existence in the sense of economic structures, educational spaces, etc., creating, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu “relatively autonomous social universes where economic necessities are (partially) suspended,” which requires willful self-institutionalization of this sphere or universe, or social imaginary, if you will.¹² And it is heteronymous in the sense that it is claimed to be constant, a force of human nature, existing outside of any social-historical institution of society. It is this dualism and contradiction that haunts art and its ways of instituting today, and it is most likely what made Bourdieu supply his theory of the avant-garde and its strive toward artistic autonomy with a number of caveats, by making autonomy relative, and economics (i.e. the social-historical in Castoriadis’s terms) only partially suspended in the equation!

Indeed, artistic autonomy has long been a treasured and contested concept within art, particularly as it has been introduced with the advent of modernity, and the relationship of modern art as a style to the period of modernism and the politico-aesthetic project of modernization on a global scale. The ways in which it has been instituted have tended toward a neat, if ultimately false parceling out of autonomy and heteronomy into artistic practice as preferably autonomous, and the exhibiting, circulation, and collecting of art as predominantly heteronymous. In a way, this was precisely the critique posited by institutional critique, which did not so much criticize artistic practice, but rather its cultural consecration and confinement in the museum, that is, its institutionalization. Art was free in its making, but became unfree in its circulation, a line of thinking that was, historically speaking, an attempt at gaining control over at least the radical imagination of the singular human being, and thus of being autonomous in a heteronymous society. For the historical avant-gardes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, artistic autonomy walked hand in hand with political autonomy, at least in principle.

Historically, the institutions of art had the role of presenting and protecting artistic autonomy, while themselves being heteronymous, both in a philosophical and a political sense. If artists were autonomous, institutions were not, or at least not wholly so. Rather, the museum was seen as either elitist, catering only to the upper classes and their values, as in the first wave of institutional critique, or, ironically, as populist, in its condescending and consumerist pandering to a mass public in the postmodern era, as in the second wave of institutional critique. The contemporary institutions of art are

positively haunted—to paraphrase art historian Frazer Ward—as witnessed by the relatively short-lived phenomena that was New Institutionalism at the beginning of the 2000s...¹³ But where there is haunting there is also futurity, even after things have crossed over, ended even, as in the notion of performing the institution as if it was still possible, after the defunding and closure of the institution, as invoked by Athanasiou. This also implies, of course, that the way in which to institute is not merely repetitive of what was seemingly lost, but rather perpetually self-altering. This is a matter of inventing a new language, and not just saying the same old things with new words. This is thus not only a question of changing institutions, but of changing *how* we institute; how subjectivity and imagination can be instituted in a different way.

The distinction between autonomy and heteronomy thus also has bearings on the makings and workings of cultural institutions, whether they are state institutions or non-governmental organizations, and their particular ways of instituting. Does an institution, for example, only adhere to the logics and demands of the state and its governmentality, austerity, and benchmarking, does it therefore sheepishly follow the trends of the market or of academia, or does it seek another, more autonomous path? Obviously this has not only to do with funding structures, but also with articulation of one's perceived public role, and with which social relations are instituted through spectatorship, participation, or even commonality: an institution institutes through more than its programming, but does so also in its spatial production, social relations within the workplace, production of subjectivity as spectatorship, and thus, in general, its instituted social imaginaries. But instituting is obviously not merely a theoretical proposition, and even though an essay such as the present one is engaged with the questions theoretically, by nature and by necessity, what is required are institutional practices—practices that are aware of their imaginary institution, and that institute not only on the level of representation and social signification, but also at the level of the magma, and thus in terms of the possibility for the radical imagination of difference.

1. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987 [1974]) p. 359.
2. Athena Athanasiou, "Performing the Institution, 'as if it were Possible,'" in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016) p. 679.

3. Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) p. 6.
4. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) p. 71.
5. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 342.
6. Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*, p. 73.
7. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 373.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 343.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 371.
11. In this line of enquiry it would thus be impossible to conceive of an end of history like Francis Fukuyama's neoliberalist philosophy, or of an end to the future as in Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's post-apocalyptic theories.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996 [1992]) p. 132.
13. Frazer Ward, "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity," *October*, No. 73, Summer 1995, pp. 71-89.