

Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World, Pascal Gielen (ed) (2013)

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Pascal Gielen's book *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World* explores the problems produced by what has been termed horizontality, horizontalism or *flatness* within the culture of neoliberalism. In the terms of this book, horizontalism is understood as a social and economic phenomenon linked both to the culture of neoliberalism and post-Fordist labour practices, as well as to the flat, open and non-hierarchical organising networks that arose from the Occupy Movement. (Lorey 2013) For Gielen, horizontality is conjoined with a crisis in the public art institution so that the open, networked and accelerated tropes of horizontalism become interwoven with a pan-European disintegration of governmental (fiscal) support, as well as a crisis in the institution's own direction and purpose. The collected essays in *Institutional Attitudes* therefore unfold around two problems. First is the question of whether horizontality is a crisis or a solution; that is to ask whether horizontality is a tool of neoliberalist control – thus following Mark Fisher's argument in the essay, "Indirect Action: Some Misgivings About Horizontalism" – or, alternatively, whether it offers an ameliorative to this control by countering it with an open and participatory system. (This is exemplified in the non-hierarchical organisational strategy of the Occupy movement, as Isabell Lorey suggests in the essay, "On Democracy and Occupation".) The second problem is the question of how horizontality is linked to the crisis in the art institution; this question also revolves around the twin motifs of opening and closure – of open access and participation on the one hand, and, of necessary protection and refuge, on the other. It is this second question that has precipitated this book, the culmination of a series of meetings and a conference initiated by a group of museum directors working in the Benelux region and facing the erosion of government support for their contemporary art institutions. (!)

Institutional Attitudes contains essays from practising artists, curators, philosophers and cultural theorists that take differing positions around these questions of openness and closure in relation to horizontalism and the institution. These include Mark Fisher who is well known for his work in this field as is set out in his book, *Capitalist Realism* (in which he famously suggests that “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”), political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, the artist Jimmie Durham, museum director Alex Farquharson, and philosopher Gerald Raunig as well as a number of other writers and theorists including Markus Miessen, Isabell Lorey and Sonja Lavaert. Of these contributions, it is Raunig who most clearly both defines horizontality (more often termed horizontalism within the context of the Occupy movement) *and* defines the problem of horizontality. Raunig’s essay, “Flatness Rules” well-articulates flatness through the work of philosophers such as Paolo Virno, as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s work in the book, *Empire* and the earlier foundational work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *Anti Oedipus* (first published in 1972). Similarly, words such as flatness, surface, openness, network, modulation, process, stream, movement, and the common also act to form a territory for horizontality, and are common to the lexicon established across the essays in *Institutional Attitudes*.

Raunig grapples with the relationship between flatness and the decentring and deterritorialising practices of neo-liberalism in order to consider how these horizontal practices might produce a way out of the problem of horizontalism itself. Raunig asks: “If we are really dealing with a ‘communism of capital’ today, as Paolo Virno, Christian Marazzi or Antonio Negri emphasise, how can this perverted form of ‘communism’ be turned into a new ‘commonism’?” (Raunig 2013: 169) In other words, this is to ask: “... how horizontality can assume an emancipatory form again, against the background of the ways in which Post-Fordist production functions.” (Raunig 2013: 169) Unlike others such as Fisher and Mouffe, for example, Raunig argues that the deterritorialisation of the commons might be “reterritorialised” through what he terms, “instituent practice” – the instituting of the common. (Raunig 2013: 170) Therefore Raunig suggests that the processes of horizontalism might be recuperated into an emancipatory form. As such,

Raunig expresses his project most clearly within the philosophical language of immanent philosophy, particularly drawing upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari as described earlier. However, he requires a lot of complex maneuvering in order for Raunig to make a distinction between the neo-liberal art institution's use of horizontalism and his libratory form. If the neo-liberal museum is characterised by the manner in which it modulates between openness (participation) and closure (checks and measures) then surely Raunig's "instituent practice" of reinhabiting the museum through the reterritorialisation of time and the specificity of context are the same actions rebranded.

This action of "reinhabitation" or of "reinstating" is echoed through a number of the essays taking different forms from Blake Stimpson's articulation of "tender spots" to Fisher's call for a reinstating of organisational structures and Mouffe's call for the institution as an agonistic site. Both Fisher and Mouffe call for a form of re-inhabitation of the institution in terms that are much less unequivocally postmodern than Raunig's, however, it is much less certain how all these models might provoke a different kind of institution to those that we know now – that is, the (neo liberal) modulating institution that juggles openness (to participation) and closure (competition, exclusivity, protection of cultural materials and so on). Yet what seems to be missing in all of the essays is a clear outline of art's role in producing a symbolic imaginary realm as a contrary action to the dissipative movement of horizontalism.

In his book *Time For Revolution*, Negri asserts that there must be a separation from the material field in order for reflection to take place. While many of the essays in *Institutional Attitudes* call for a similar action of separation – a movement that is contrary to the expansive terrain of horizontality – they are less explicit regarding the terms of how this separation (or reconstitution) might take place. Negri himself suggests that this would be a form of what he terms "reverse ascesis" – sticking one's head up above the crowd in order to be able to see better. (Negri 2005: 161) Negri's "reverse ascesis" suggests a kind of going against the flow of horizontalism – a vertical movement perhaps. Yet unlike the verticality that Gielen outlines in his introduction to *Institutional Attitudes*, Negri's

“verticality” is constituted through the material field – like a pull against the tide – rather than being contrary to it. (ii) Therefore while there is a common call for a pull against the force of horizontal movement towards a reconstitution of forms of institution or commonality (“re-taking the square” (Lorey 2013: 179, quoting Marta Malo)) what seems much less clear is how this will take place: inside or outside of horizontalism itself? How might we imagine other worlds if we are constantly bound within the immediate experience of the now (and the hungry demand for more experience, more action)? How might we learn from the past and imagine other possible futures if we are confined to a never-ending present of action and actualisation? These questions open up the need for an urgent consideration of philosophies of time, and for the re-institution of a separation that enables a reassertion of the symbolic, imaginary realm – of imagined subjects and their representations rather than their dissipation into the action, movement, modulation of an impossible present. As such *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World* is an important and timely contribution to a much-needed discussion – a discussion that we need to take further in order to think how and on what terms we might begin to re-imagine a different future.

REFERENCES

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ⁱ They are Bart De Baere, Director of MUKHA, Antwerp; Anne Demester, then director of de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam; and Nicolaus Schafhausen, director of Kunsthalle Wien.

ⁱⁱ In his introduction, Gielen suggests that flatness is a side-effect of “today’s networked society” (Gielen 2013: 2) yet as Mark Fisher shows it is in fact integral to it – a kind of degree zero of cultural and economic (dis)organisation, which echoes Negri’s schema.