

A CONSTITUENT EDUCATION

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Yaiza Hernández

It's been a while since the 'pedagogical turn' became a curatorial label and despite the variety of the practices it served to encompass, they all shared the functional premise that art institutions were adequate sites from which to launch emancipatory pedagogical projects that, while urgently needed, were not being advanced elsewhere.

As has been pointed out, this required a certain degree of institutional blindness, however strategic it was deemed to be. Hence, linking a 'pedagogy of the encounter'—described as one that 'takes into account the contradictions, resistances, failures and conditions' of the relations it establishes—to the project of a 'constituent museum'—described as one that 'puts relationships at the centre of their operation'—might provide a salutary antidote.

It is important, however, that we don't lose sight of the speculative, rather than descriptive character of this task. Existing museums are not just part of the institutional framework of a constituted power, but instituted in such a manner that they work in myriad ways to reproduce it. While normally camouflaged, this power can make itself forcibly present if this dynamic is sufficiently threatened. Those institutions whose programmes have aligned themselves with emancipatory projects (including those within L'Internationale network) have often done so in complex contradiction with their institutional mechanics. The once useful call to put 'discourse first' must now be radicalized, avoiding the thematic understanding that has been the norm and recognizing that the normativity of our institutions provides the first order of that discourse.

Hence, a constituent museum cannot be imagined as an institution that simply develops out of the gradual reform of existing ones, however well-meaning these reformist drives might be. Needless to say, it is also not to be achieved by sheer representation—a million symposia about constituent museums do not make a constituent museum. It requires instead a wholesale exercise of radical instituting imagination for which, I would like to suggest, two questions are crucial. The first

pertains the primacy of the constituents, the second the primacy of autonomy.

We can only start from the constituents, so the first task of a pedagogy of the encounter might be, indeed, to facilitate their encounter. This may sound like too literal a reading of that new institutional call to turn museums (at least partly) into 'community centres'. Not only was this call the one that new institutionalism most glaringly failed to live up to, but for those museums still in a position to do so, the task is now urgent. We cannot continue to accept the false choice between keeping it exclusive and paternalistically embracing inclusivity agendas that leave that into which one is to be included untouched. We are being bombarded with the idea that society has become polarized (with the art world finding itself on the wrong side—the metropolitan, liberal, privileged side—of 'the people'). This reductive dualism can and must be refused in both imagination and action, and creating the spaces in which to meet will require both. Paradox, clash, dissent, disagreements, the unscripted... all this will be a starting point, not be celebrated, but endlessly worked through. But alongside all this, there will also be shared desires, resentments, aspirations, and needs.

A pedagogy of the encounter might then become the collective task of committing to a constituent process without claiming any authority over it, an assembly from below that slowly undoes the one that stands above. A project that will necessarily be slow, trans-generational and liable to produce only the most underwhelming kind of press-releases. But any rhetoric that turns radical intentions into epic narratives will not just be superfluous, but counterproductive. If actually existing museums want to engage in this

project, they will need to radically let go. Quite possibly let go of their sponsors and trustees, of their simultaneous commitments to 'public service' and public relations, but also let go of their fidelity to well-laid plans and projects, of their vertical authorial and authoritative structures, of their 'missions' to preserve and display a given version of art, and certainly to let go of the idea that, somehow, they are already engaged in working towards our collective emancipation and only our willingness to take part in their programmes is still found wanting.

In other words, a pedagogy of the encounter aligned to this project must also shed the autonomy it believes it already has. As we know, the museum in its current shape emerged alongside an emancipatory project that allowed aesthetic judgement to stand as a marker of the universality and equality of all subjects, one that underwrote their ability to self-legislate. But once that autonomy was offloaded onto the artworks themselves, they quickly became a testing-ground for those who would be deemed less than equal; the museum became complicit with a civilizing project, and self-legislation turned into self-disciplining and pre-emptive subordination. If museums deserve to be salvaged at all today it is on the basis of the promises they have broken and not those they have kept. We have to learn anew how to imagine our autonomy as something more than the culmination of a project of self-cultivation. The promise of freedom achieved at an individual level has lost its credibility and much of its appeal. A pedagogy of the encounter refuses the individual epic of the *Bildung* in favour of an autonomy that works collectively to imagine its norms; the constituent museum, by refusing those norms any sovereignty might offer itself as its training ground.

