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## What will art institutions be like in the future?

*by Dr Deborah Jackson*

**Image:** Embassy Gallery. Alexis Milne performance (part of Ugly Clean Up exhibition). Photo credit Stephen McGarry.

*This article was commissioned by SCAN as a follow up to the event 'Artist as Curator' held at Glasgow International, April 2014. Video documentation of that discussion can be found [here \(http://sca-net.org/events/view/scan-networking-breakfast-curatorial-conversation\)](http://sca-net.org/events/view/scan-networking-breakfast-curatorial-conversation)*

Reflexive inquiry into alternative models of art institutions has reemerged in the past ten years, ranging from analyses of Institutions by Artists (Khonsary, J. 2012) to the emergence of 'open art schools'. These developments provide an opportunity to assess the present trajectory of art institutions and to reimagine them with a view to shaping their future construction.

Fundamental to these discussions is an awareness of the distribution of power and the relationships between differing scales of institutions, specifically between established art institutions and artist-run initiatives (ARIs). Whilst established art institutions and ARIs have evolved at different rates and in different directions the challenges faced by reimagining the future of art institutions provokes the dilemma of how, with their differing principles and vocabularies, they could co-generate more equitable, creative and critical institutions to support artistic production.



In the first instance it is necessary to distinguish and explore the shifting definitions of what constitutes an art institution. The term art institution has come to be defined as an organisation that participates in the discourse of contemporary art. It refers to the socio-economic conglomerate including, but not restricted to, galleries, foundations, museums, educational facilities, magazines, funders and ARIs, which constitute the basis of the dominant understanding of art in a society (Jakobsen, J. 2006). In order to produce the consent of society in the legitimacy of their authority to do so, the primary function of art institutions is to participate in constructing, defining, validating, maintaining, and reproducing the cultural category of art. Larger museums and galleries – established institutions – are typically described this way, though smaller organisations, such as ARIs, can also be described as institutions.

Speculating on the future of art institutions is instigated by rethinking the existing relations between established institutions and ARIs and by acknowledging that associations are not stable or fixed. For instance, whilst definitions of ARIs acknowledge that they operate as alternative models to the mainstream commercial or established institutional art world, in actuality it is hard to pinpoint where the alternative ends and the mainstream begins. This is because of the complex and tangled causal hierarchies involved in the existing frameworks of reciprocal exchange between ARIs and established institutions. From a contemporary perspective of ARIs it is useful to consider that they are not

necessarily opposed to established institutions. Rather, their method is often to work within existing structures in order to enhance their chances to be artistically, socially and economically relevant. Whilst the underpinning factor is a commitment based not on personal gain, but on ensuring the continued growth of art infrastructures, it is undeniable that ARIs are also stepping-stones back to established institutions. For example, as artists have taken on the creation of ARIs or have turned themselves or their practices into institutions, their roles have expanded to encompass the work of a curator, administrator, critic, educator, publicist and so forth. In this sense ARIs are fertile training grounds for many young artists, with a spell on a committee serving as serious work experience for visual arts professionals. This does not inherently undermine the ideological basis of ARIs. However, the alignment of ARIs with established institutions forces us to rethink previous analyses about the impacts, possibilities, and contours of alternative structures. From a contemporary perspective ARIs are not necessarily engaged in institutional critique and as such do not automatically situate themselves as a radical alternative. To do so would be to misrepresent ARIs' principled practices as having no content other than the negation of the established institutions.

**Image:**  
Embassy Gallery.  
The Executioner  
Executes Himself  
installation  
view (Alfie  
Strong). Photo  
credit Ross  
Fraser Maclean.



Furthermore, many ARIs now occupy the contradictory position of being professionalized, fully-incorporated institutions, which, despite their small scale physical size and budget and their voluntary committee members, often significantly resemble the established institutions they were developed to provide an alternative to. Significantly, established institutions increasingly face uncertainty, since they are no longer the privileged arenas for the display of art. Taking into account the current financial and political climate, it is necessary for all art institutions to find alternate means of establishing the grounds for more lasting forms of cultural production, display, education, and research. Faced with cross-partisan concerns of sustainability, a more open, co-operative and reciprocal cultural infrastructure is required. Such

transformation could not be isolated in any one sphere of the art world and so it would be necessary to explore the possibilities of combining the actions of ARIs with established, institutions. In essence this refers to a reciprocal relationship that is neither limited to discussions of a co-option by the established institutions, nor to a simple redistribution of resources. Fundamentally, interconnectivity must be facilitated across the different scales, that is from ARIs to established institutions. This feedback creates a circular system of dynamics where resources and relations become locked in reciprocal exchange. By extension it follows that where this mutual relationship between the actions of the ARIs and established institutions exists, that the conditions for new phenomena can emerge, in other words deterritorialisation creates its own cultural space.

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