

Hopefully we can collaborate soon. On cure and curatorship

by Veridiana Zurita

This text was supposed to start with “once upon an time”. It was supposed to turn a contemporary case into a little story from a long time ago, almost like a fairy tale with its archetypical relations, monsters, creatures and heroes. In it an artist and two curators would become the folkloric characters of the art world. The artist would wake up in the morning and while checking her emails before anything else be wiped-away by curators. A personal case would be generalized as the cliché of a power dynamic between curators and artists where the first pick and the latter is picked, invested in, discharged and replaced.

By calling out names I aim to look at this personal -and yet quite common- case outside of the realm of gossip. I hope this story can lead to a broader reflection on the often troubling collaborations among institutions, curators and artists. It might awaken the different parties from their naturalized hierarchies and generate an imagination of more horizontal alliances.

A story

In 2015 I got introduced by Matthieu Goeury to Maarten Soete who back then was the main curator of the STADSRESIDENTEN in Vooruit. The project *Don't Eat The Microphone* (DETM), which was initiated in 2014 by me and the psychoanalyst Petra Van Dyck, would continue in collaboration with the Ghent art centre. At the time, this institution was in a major crisis which shook the ground of those working for it. People were sent away, others left frustrated, and some got replaced. Our residency happened during the season 2015/2016 which was the period when Matthieu and Maarten left Vooruit. Marieke de Munck got the role to curate and coordinate the residency and with it inherited a program not entirely chosen by her and under precarious financial possibilities. The season passed by, the residency happened and Marieke invited us to continue the project during the next season. A series of meetings happened in order to put things into perspective. We seemed to be all on the same track.

On the 29th of January 2017 I got a casual email from Marieke abruptly ending the residency of DETM. With few words and an uncompromising tone she wiped away a project as if there was no shared history. Her move exposed a fragile ground where artists, curators and institutions don't seem to nourish a 'shared endeavor'. In dialogue with Matthieu, whom got back to Vooruit somewhere in 2017, they decided that the project could no longer be continued under their care.

Afterwards, different reasons were given for the sudden rupture. Marieke mentioned “we have less budget than we thought”, while Matthieu continued “we are doing a radical change in the program and want to bring in new artists.” We were left with the omnipotent tone “unfortunately, *we* decided that the residency could not be continued” and the rather wry message “hopefully we can collaborate soon”.

Such justifications are not only a symptom of how dischargeable and replaceable artistic practices seem to be but mostly of the discrepancy between the institutional discourse and practice. Vooruit promotes itself as a progressive organization, capitalizing concepts like *horizontality*, *durability*, *participation*, *research*, *social engagement* and *responsibility* in order to brand the STADSRESIDENTEN-residency we were in. A residency that aimed to support artists working in the city, with its inhabitants and specific locations.

Management and resistance

DETM is an artistic project happening in the garden of the psychiatric hospital Dr. Guislain in Ghent. Since the beginning, it was never supposed to be a show and until now it's not a project easy to program. During our residency period in Vooruit it was clear that there was nothing to watch but rather a situation to take part in. The publicity about the project was rather soft since the scale of participation could compromise the intensity of the work. No tickets could be sold but rather scheduled visits made for those interested to engage. Those could be the real reasons why the project lost support.

Why would an institution such as Vooruit keep supporting a project that gives very little visibility to its investment? I wonder if this isn't a wrong question to start with. Moreover, Vooruit's new institutional status could also mean more commitment with the continuity of artistic projects, especially those having responsibilities towards specific social contexts. The Ghent art centre got officially recognized as a Flemish Art Institute (Vlaamse Kunstinstituut), which means it has more budget to spend, the continuity of its institutional existence is assured, and -last but not least- it is expected to realize all of the institutional functions mentioned in the Arts Decree, namely Production, Presentation, Reflection, Participation and Development.

It's very likely curators of big institutions are drawn into structures far more complex than artists could ever understand. However, in the wider arts field, the pressure to develop an entrepreneurial self, which has to transform and adapt continuously, run an impossibly busy agenda and engage often only superficially with a variety of arts practices it's a common ground between curators and artists. Within the institution, both, artists and curators, have to find their way in the organizational complexity of that machine of cultural production. It's a shared battle.

Yet, what became clear to me is that there was very little effort in resisting the alienated working conditions and production values both artists and curators are subjected to in times of neoliberal precarisation. When curators are the ones entitled to end a collaboration and artists are left out of such a decision, an opaque hierarchy overshadows negotiation, dialogue and mutual agency. Self-management then remains as the only survival weapon. Artists are expected to swiftly find support elsewhere while these dominant protocols of cultural production exclude those kinds of artistic work, those ways of working and subjectivities that can't meet its measures.

The institution is ill

One afternoon, while we were setting up DETM in the garden of the psychiatric hospital Dr. Guislain, a patient arrived. There were microphones, wires, coffee, birds, vinyls, cigarettes, keyboards, a dog, patients, trees, texts, artists, therapists, a rusty guitar, psychotics, neurotics, plastic, stones and a few typewriters. He had a restless face as if waking up from a bad dream. That morning, he told us, he got the uncanny news that his cure now had a deadline. Back then, psychiatric hospitals started to implement an agenda in which cure has to be sped up in order to guarantee a more rotational routine of entries and exits of patients in the institution. One might receive this news as positive since being locked-in is no one's desire.

However, when the parameters for the acceleration of cure are measured by what psychiatric hospitals started calling as “empty beds”, such news might be not positive as it seems to be. Since neoliberal policies were being sharpened everywhere in the Belgium social system “empty beds” starts appearing as an expression together with the mantra “measuring is knowing” echoing in the corridors of psychiatric institutions. “Empty beds” would guarantee efficacy in the turnover inside psychiatric hospitals by speeding up processes of cure. Beds had to be empty in order to be occupied as soon as possible. In order for such a machine to work systems of measuring cure had to become more efficient according to the economic parameters of the health system.

The patient, troubled with the new agenda of the hospital, entered the session of DETM and was asked “Is the institution ill?” He grabbed a mic and gave us the following diagnosis: “There is a big, omnipotent head. It works from the top down. No matter how those below it engage with the process inside the institution, its decision is absolute. It has the power to deal with money but no time to engage with the place where the money is invested. It is the boss. It doesn't matter if doctors or nurses try to inform him about the process of the patients, his decision making won't change in regards to such processes. Everyone is isolated from one another, the boss from the staff, the staff from the patients, the patients from other patients. We lock ourselves inside the room. Isolated and individualized. Everyone surveils one another. Everyone denounces what's deviant in order to please power. The boss surveils the doctors, the doctors surveil the therapists, the therapists surveil the nurses, the nurses surveil the patients, the patients surveil one another. Everybody is gossiping. I feel hollow, I can't feel the other, and when I want to hug the other I fear vulnerability.”

The narrative given by the patient seemed to diagnose the illness of institutions co-opted by neoliberal discourses. When economic efficacy becomes the ultimate goal, care is subjected to a certain regime of measurement where the managerial segmentation of individual skills within an institutional framework lead to social alienation. In periods of instability, the other becomes a threat. The fear of the other, the fear of vulnerability is the trigger for institutions to invest in measures that guarantee surveillance, protection and isolation

What's programmable in the cultural institution can become the equivalent measure of what's curable in the psychiatric one. To curate and to cure can both become instruments of measurement instead of practices of relation. The notion of cure as the unilateral care of the other (be it the patient or the artist) needs to be reimagined.

What Vooruit could learn from La Borde

Institutional Psychotherapy (IP) has been a significant practice challenging the hierarchies and social segmentation within psychiatric institutions. One cannot re-imagine an institution without knowing what IP has been experimenting with since the 1950s. IP was a psychiatric reform that began in a small town in central France called Saint-Alban. By experimenting with forms of conviviality in the psychiatric hospital, François Tosquelles resisted the tendencies of that time when homogenisation and segregation would always characterize the treatment of the mentally ill. In 1953 Jean Oury (who was one of the first residents at Saint-Alban) founded the Clinic of La Borde in Cour-Cheverny where IP was highly practiced.

Since the very start of DETM, IP and La Borde are strong references for us to put the project at work. One of the main structural changes initiated by Oury at La Borde was that it welcomed philosophers, artists, writers, and filmmakers, in addition to medical personnel. The hospital was no longer an institution of social segregation where authoritarian, oppressive, and stagnant structures would take place but rather a place to 'imagine a philosophy, a social theory, and a practice of everyday life' (Robcis 2017). Responsibilities were shared and social structures constantly rethought, reworked and remapped by doctors, nurses and patients. Cooking, cleaning, answering the phone or organizing medicaments were practices of common effort. According to Oury, the hospital with its accumulations of regulations was ill. It had to be treated in order to treat. La Borde thus became a place of invention for a new horizontal institutional politics.

Despite the fact that La Borde wasn't immune to the effects of neoliberal policies itself and has fundamentally changed in the last years by the French health system, it still challenges the common notion that institutions can't be thought of outside of centralized power, stagnated hierarchies and social segmentations. The (differing) efforts of Tosquelles and Oury keep on opening up a whole understanding of how people can do politics through the practices of everyday life. Healthy institutions are eternal works-in-progress, which need the participation, agency and responsibility of all those involved.

Politics as a practice of daily life is continuously threatened by the co-optation of economic efficacy. According to the philosopher and activist Felix Guattari, who was strongly involved in La Borde, "we are all always more or less co-opted. Ultimately, it's about politics and micropolitics, not purity." Following his words, there is probably no such a thing as the "liberation" from a system of co-optation but rather zones of action where communication among social roles can happen. It's as if one could make holes in the materiality of social segmentation, ally and resist to the hegemonic discourses, its production of values, subjectivities and ways of relating.

Alienated from each other's processes, socially isolated by the systems of artistic production, anxious by the fear of losing their job and under the pressure of institutional measurability, curators and artists seem to neglect practices of conversation, immersing themselves into the inertia of self-sufficiency while becoming islands of productivity. In order to dis-alienate such a work system curators and artists should put efforts together for thinking and doing a project in common. A project which can overcome the paradigms of selection and production (illness and cure). For that sort of alliances to happen a practice of mutual care, in which the curator curates the artist's project as much as the artist curates the curator's reading of the project, is needed.

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