

## The Institution is Ubiquitous

by John Ros

August 2021

During a recent job interview a search committee member from a prestigious mid-western school asked me why someone so critical of the institution wished to join it. In order to gain more time my interview-fatigued brain replied, "That's a good question." But in reality, it was a good question and maybe something I took for granted inasmuch as I was not prepared with a ready response. After a moment's pause I answered directly: in my view, as citizens it is our duty to be critical of our local and national governments. It is our duty as caring and passionate faculty to be critical of the very institutions we work for. Is that not what, in part, recent DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) institutional challenges have been about?

I think they were satisfied with my answer but I was not offered the position.

Much like "community engagement" of the aughts and "global mindedness" of the teens, DEI has become the academic buzzword to fulfill obligation and seem in tune with the zeitgeist. Unfortunately, many are complying with these social demands through mere optic campaigns. Can we ever really shift our thinking if we do not confront the overarching, systemic effects of our country's history as settler colonialist, where genocide and slavery set the tone for wealth

advancement and class division? Or, for that matter, how capitalism's reliance on reaping resources and workers to this day still infects our national (and global) consciousness in regards to how we value profit over people? Systemic violence penetrates so deeply that well-meaning attempts often become quickly co-opted and any real benefit becomes muted and ineffectual.

Though the work ahead is difficult, many are stepping up to expose not just the ubiquity and insistence of the institution as a means to an end, but also the more elusive effects and connections systemic violence has on us all. Enter: the institutionally critical artist. Kester Messan explains it this way:

In my observations of time and its repetition, I've discovered a world at war — one in which tactics of control are deployed by institutions of abuse, such as The Church, The School, The Prison, and The Cell Tower. These institutions have imagined the sleep we get, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the words we speak, the rooms we enter, the pictures we take, the stories we tell, and what we look and feel like in them. The institution is ubiquitous. There remains no place, relationship, or object that is neutral.<sup>01</sup>

Our artistic ancestral roots and artist siblings provide support. The Guerrilla Girls and Fred Wilson are two examples of folx taking the reins and leading the way. The Guerrilla Girls work so hard to expose discrepancies

throughout many institutions of cultural capital. Since 1985 they have been exposing systemic violence throughout art, film, culture and politics through varied interventions, advertisements, posters and projects. One of their most infamous poster projects asks if “women need to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?”<sup>02</sup> These acts of opposition create voice. They demark. They create bookends of thought so that we may better understand and recognize systemic violence where it hides in plain sight. These moments often fall through the cracks waiting to be taken up by the next act of disobedience against the institution.

In 1992, Fred Wilson created the intervention, *Mining the Museum*, 1992-93, at the Maryland Historical Society. Objects throughout the collection were presented in ways to disrupt the white, upper-class narrative, pulling out objects from storage to draw attention to local histories of traditionally marginalized, BIPOC folx. Of this work Wilson stated, “I like the notion of surprise, especially in a museum setting in which you don’t expect surprise.” Surprise comes in forms of action and reaction, but also as objects reflect moments uncovered, awareness inescapable. In working intimately with the objects housed at the Historical Society as well as its staff, Wilson collaborated, creating in-between moments of mystery, anxiety and fracture. Almost 30 years ago this project exposed legacies of violence, exclusion and selective story-telling. This seminal work reminds us how much more work is yet to be done.<sup>03</sup>

In March 2020, Rose Van Miero and I started a conversation around building a new space for critical thought and discussion among artists. Creating a platform, for and by artists, that would allow for the development of new ideas and further discussions on what we do best as creatives—ask questions and find answers that ultimately lead to new questions. The time was ripe for artists, as it seemed we needed a new moment to ask ourselves difficult questions while maintaining a critical tone on the institutional ways of thinking, especially within and throughout the artwork.

The world was entering a new chapter. The WHO officially declared a new pandemic on 11 March 2020.<sup>04</sup> The global response, especially that of the world's richest nations, was relatively slow, especially amid what would become the final year of the forty-fifth president's hobbling administration.<sup>05</sup> Defiance, neglect and dismissiveness was finally buttressed by Operation Warp Speed, however the administration's dismissiveness continued, a different type of contagion that has spread far and wide, sowing confusion and ignorance against the global effort to eradicate the newest viral threat.<sup>06</sup>

Conversations with Rose quickly turned to what we wanted this thing to become. What would prop it up as far as a standard, or mantra. Perhaps instinctually, we both landed in a space that felt correct and yet quite difficult to fully discern. Using past ideas around institutional critique, as well as a preference to process over product, we mulled over words to outline the following:

[The] name references the question as open space...gaps in the pavement, performance interludes, tv-commercials, coffee breaks and silent pauses; all moments of unpoliced disruption that are typically un-institutional. at its core, ima therefore proposes the museum as a site of uncertainty; a building without walls; a non-hierarchical collection of interdisciplinary narratives and voices; both a guest and a host; and an exercise in cross-pollination.<sup>07</sup>

This in-betweenness—intermissions or breaks or sighs—these collaborative moments of pause and realization are what most interest me. Magical moments of reprieve that set off countless next steps inside and outside the studio. These moments of process may show us the way to co-opt institutional systems of government, finance, education and tech, including the non-profit industrial complex. Power comes from the ground up. We must maintain that swell if we hope to have any effect on institutional systems meant to isolate and divide—conquer and subdue. Creative process can lead the way.

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