

THE HEART In the seminal text from 2005, 'There is no alternative: the future is self-organised, part 1' (TINA), co-authored by Anthony Davies, Stephen Dilemuth and Jakob Jakobsen, the argument is put forward for the revolutionary potential of a future of self-organisation. This manifesto criticises existing institutional structures for operating by principles instigated by private corporations and for losing sight of their public obligation. The authors thereby claim self-organisation as the only way to proceed from this point of departure. In the years passing from when this text was written, the financial crisis impacted as a global phenomenon and caused a total collapse of many large institutions. Following these dramatic changes in society, the trio has felt compelled to revise their text for this anthology and TINA2 speaks of self-organisation as a radical process that continuously challenges the fixed relationships our society is built upon - between the self, the individual and the institution.

ARE WE THERE YET? As curators and educators ourselves, working both independently and institutionally, we are actively involved in questioning the complicated relationships that underpin our work. The experience of moving between different platforms and operating with multiple voices has made the need to reassess conventionally fixed positions in the art world imperative at this time. The problem of how to position the self-organised within this paradoxical and changing environment has therefore informed the analysis within this book.

THE HEART In asking writers, artists, art historians, curators, and critics as well as museum directors to present a singular take on self-organisation based on their own experiences, we have sought to analyse the topic using both empirical and theoretical tools. The diversity of this approach is intended to mirror the pluralism of the scene. We therefore begin with a group of contextual readings of the self-organised: this is followed by a series of case studies written by people who reflect upon their own activities over varying distances and times; and we conclude with more polemic statements that speculate about the future. Instead of getting bogged down by semantics this volume does not then attempt to map the territory and its historical development in the art world, but rather, it hopes to question and reorient an understanding of what it means to be 'self-organised'.

ON DE-ORGANISATION

Barnaby Drabble

OR, WHAT ONE CAN DO, WHAT ONE DOES, WHAT ONE AIMS TO DO, WHAT ONE ALLOWS TO BE DONE, HOW PRECISE AND DEFINED ONE'S AIMS ARE AT THE OUTSET, WHAT ONE REFUSES TO DO, WHO ONE REFUSES TO DO IT WITH, WHO ONE, IDEALLY, WOULD LIKE TO DO IT WITH, WHO ONE ENDS UP DOING IT WITH, WHY ONE DOES IT, WHY ONE IS TEMPTED NOT TO DO IT, WHY ONE THINKS ONE IS DOING IT, WHY OTHERS THINK ONE IS DOING IT, HOW, IN THE END, IT GETS DONE.

(1)

If, like myself, you are a fan of polemics, it doesn't get much better than Anthony Davies, Stephan Dilemuth and Jakob Jakobsen's freely distributed rant 'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED'.¹ Neoliberal politics, corporations, managerial elites, the art market, and ultimately the museum and anyone who works within it, are kicked off here like a surgeon listing malignant tumours for urgent removal. At the heart of the text is the authors' call for the abolition of all art institutions on the grounds that they are socially and morally corrupt, and that they, like the governments that support them, are incapable of imagination, and deliberately ignorant of any forms of social organisation outside those prescribed by the demands of capital. In their eyes, even those critical souls who have collaborated with the institutions in the hope of changing them (and here they include themselves) are deluded, and should cease such collaborations immediately. The future, they proclaim, is self-organised.

But, if the future is self-organised, which definition of self-organisation are we talking about? At first glance this ever more popular term appears to have a broad range of connotations, even within the relatively refined context of the arts. Without overly getting into semantics, it is worth considering how these two words sit together in relation to any imagined future production. The 'self' in self-organised can be seen as operative in two ways: firstly it denotes the individual subject (him or herself), and, secondly, an idea of reflexivity (where the subject and object of an activity are identical). Similarly, the word 'organisation' has two applications: on the one hand as a process of bringing things into

1. Anthony Davies, Stephan Dilemuth and Jakob Jakobsen, 'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED', Part 1, in *How Information and Art and the Institutions*, Curated by David, Chicago and London Editions, Akash Books, 2008, pp. 179-8.

order, and on the other as a group of subjects engaged in a common endeavour. In the light of these dual meanings, self-organisation in the arts has come to mean both a process of self-determined organising (as opposed to being organised by someone else) and an entity, an organisation of subjects created by the participants on their own terms (as opposed to one created for them to operate within).

Although radical in its call for an absolute takeover, 'There is No Alternative' upholds the traditional point of view that self-organisation is predominantly a tool for the little man with which to work in spite of, or in opposition to, the predominant system. In the arts the 'self' in question is frequently the artist, and for the most part the 'someone else' that commonly plays the organising role or provides the predetermined context for labour, can be identified as the institution, the museum, the market or the academy. In addition, a cloud of related terms hangs around the term self-organisation, referring to processes and structures that undermine, circumnavigate or critique the domination of culture by institutional and commercial agendas: 'Artist-run', 'independent curator', 'alternative space', 'bottom up', 'DIY', 'no-budget', 'open source', 'free school', 'counter public' and 'project-based', are just a few of these. Yet, if the departure point in the arts is frequently an 'us versus them' stance, the diversity of ideas in this small cloud of terms alone reminds us just how broad a spectrum of activities the term self-organisation has come to be applied to, a premise perhaps for the overall discussion of this publication about whether, taken together, these activities may constitute an institution in and of themselves.

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Davies, Dilemuth and Jakobsen are fully aware of the looseness of the term they discuss and are quick to point out that self-organisation is too frequently, and, in their view incorrectly, equated with the plethora of home-grown initiatives that adopt the logics of creative entrepreneurship. As part of a lengthy passage, in which the authors point at the ways in which the term is misunderstood and misapplied, they argue that self-organisation 'should not be confused with self-enterprise or self-help, it is not an alternative or a conduit into the market. It isn't a label, logo, brand or flag under which to sail in the waters of neoliberalism.' Similarly, they dismiss established socially engaged artistic positions,

and institutionally critical positions that none the less use the institution as an arena, deciding that these serve only to portray the 'sad farce, the surreal charade that passes for political action and engagement in the art system'. Whether we agree with their prognosis or not, it is interesting to see the authors placing issues of marketing and credibility at the heart of what they see as the problem with institutions. We might talk here of a crisis in the representative function of the traditional art institution, with 'representation' here to be understood not only in its socio-political, but also in its aesthetic sense. By noting the undeniable tendency towards brand building by the larger institutions and arguing that the politics within them have become a 'charade', the focus is brought to bear on the question whether these institutions have become so tied up in the 'business' of representation, and the expediency this entails, that they have forgotten to pay attention to the nature of the practices they are tasked to look after.

Today we are often told that institutional production constitutes a cultural 'offer', of which we can consider whether we wish to take it up or ignore. This idea of culture as an offer from the state is undermined by the 'use them or lose them' logic with which right-wing politicians are dismantling funding for many publicly funded arts organisations in Europe these days. Conveniently, this discourse is forgetful of the fact that it has been the citizens, by way of their tax and (in some countries) lottery tickets, who have indirectly given many of these structures life in the first place. Unconnected to this spend is the fact that culture is not something the state offers to us: quite the opposite, culture is inherently 'ours', emerging as it does through a creative process of interaction and collaboration between citizens, in relation to their environment. Those institutions that increasingly seek to crowd-please are at fault when they forget the fact that they are tasked with providing a space for public culture, in all its discursive complexity, and instead seek to represent culture 'to the public', in an easily consumable fashion. For such institutions, content (and here read 'arts practices') is required per se to reciprocate the agendas written up in their 'mission' statement. Only that which can be argued as compatible with their marketing strategy is given space. This back-to-front situation is a 'charade' indeed, a moment at which culture becomes a game of silently acting out trivial things, in order to pass the time.

In the light of this, the precise difference between self-organisation, self-enterprise, self-help and any number of other self-words

(including self-interest) remains, in practice, remarkably hard to hold on to. At the heart of this problem is the fact that oddly similar individualistic ideas of the 'self' find themselves at the centre of radically different views of social reality, be it the discerning consumer self at the heart of the capitalist dream (because you're worth it) or empowered revolutionary selves pitching their individual expression against the power of the state and the corporations (because I won't fall for their lies). To put it another way, the nature of self-organised activity often depends more on which particular self is doing the organising than on the activity itself. Human beings, inevitably, have a habit of screwing up the best laid of plans.

So, when the authors envisage 'an organisation of deregulated selves', which is 'at its core a non-identity' we should recognise, acutely at this moment, the clear need for art and its institutions to step outside the representational economic space that is increasingly prescribed for it within the political arena; the need to stop representing culture and actively provide a space for its production. Similarly, in suggesting that opposing what is happening is an 'organisational' task, we should identify that such an endeavour can only be undertaken when we do it together. Yet, at the same moment, the very term 'deregulated' reminds us of the double bind of the post-Fordist predicament. Only the deregulated stand a chance of imagining an 'outside', but while doing so they embrace a precariousness that makes them ever more reliant on, or at least at the mercy of, centralised, regulated systems. This is the paradox at the heart of the endeavour of self-organisation: in its truest form it is not only non-commercial but actively anti-profit in capitalist terms, and as such intensely incompatible with the current context of a growing cultural economy and move to immaterial labour.

Davies, Dilemuth and Jakobson note this incompatibility and deal with it head on by entirely discounting the possibility of constructive work in any relation to the current seat of power, be that through diversifying the scope of the institutional frame or critiquing this frame from the inside. Instead they repeatedly argue for self-organisation as the tool for creating an 'outside' position: not as an alternative but as a successor to the institutional and commercial. This impresses, but also proves disingenuous. For both the brilliance and weakness of their text lies in its side-stepping of the paradoxical position of self-organised structures in the present moment, with their predicament of representing a phantom alternative to the all-encompassing effects of capital, while demanding

public money. In what essentially resembles a revolutionary tract with state-managed footnotes, the authors imagine a future in which the institutions dissolve, but don't evaporate. Instead they rather handily leave a pool of public money for 're-distribution' to these self-organised bodies; a cultural utopia, this post-institutional world dispenses with the old order of publicly funded organisations while retaining plenty of no-strings-attached funding for the true and worthy in the arts community. Organisation, and the power position it denotes, is to be devolved to a set of people (and here they include themselves) who have other ideas about power and another way of organising themselves.

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I am a curator, and, in keeping with this activity, have a congenital compulsion towards organising things. Over the years of working on exhibitions and associated cultural projects, I have become aware of just how much of my life I have spent working on funding applications, workflow diagrams, spending forecasts and strategy documents. Although, in practice, the production of these abstract constructions is only a part of my work, they play a defining role in what follows by literally prescribing my daily activities. It is these plans and the tasks they outline, which fill my diary with deadlines, my inbox with emails, my phone with new numbers and my to-do list with boxes to tick. All of this entirely underlines my existence as an exemplary post-Fordist, immaterial labourer (of the kind Davies, Dilemuth and Jakobson so bemoan). Paradoxically, however, it is precisely these administrative trappings (the world of plans and meetings), albeit in the service of a kind of counter-bureaucracy, that are still to be found at work in successful self-organised structures. So in addition to any analysis of existent connotations of self-organisation in the arts, we might need to step beyond a debate about which 'self' is legitimately allowed to do the organising and into a critique of the role of the 'organisation of the self'. By this I mean the increasing application of time and resource management methods to our personal lives, and the impact of this development upon culture as a whole.

Thinking of the readers of this publication, I am guessing that you, like myself, have been brought up to believe that planning, setting goals, making the 'right' decisions and putting in the hard work is the way adults should behave in the real world. Similarly, I am sure many of you have had

that experience of being creatively booked-out, which I allude to above: a situation in which the problem has become one of displacement. The focus we have to give these days to the correct management of money, time and space, supplants other, indefinably valuable qualities that might live in the space between a project's conception and its completion. Despite their power to define, control, assure and persuade, ultimately the plan, the strategy and the budget in themselves seem to offer no greater promise to us than the pleasure of at some point being able to say: 'Well, we did what we said we'd do.' It is maybe this strong suspicion that something important is being lost in this process, that draws me to an appreciation of the kind of absolutist views expressed by Davies, Dilemuth and Jakobson, because here too, in a supposedly 'creative' endeavour there is increasingly 'no alternative' to a stifling self-imposed bureaucratic approach. So, I currently find myself questioning what it might mean to simply lay down the tools one day and say: 'It's over, all of this is over, from now on, no more organizing stuff.'

I am not suggesting that we stop working. After all, I chose this job and I know that as a curator I am expected to organise things: objects, people, ideas, resources and whatever else I can get my hands on. What I am contemplating is whether it is possible to reconsider the legitimacy of this expectation and its promise, in my context, of simply 'yet another exhibition'. Maybe the idea begins with a wish to start working from a sense of necessity rather than provision, and to replace planning with initiating and to start providing an impulse or starting point without claim to ongoing control. In many incidences experience tells us that the plan is most interesting when we allow ourselves to deviate from or ditch it, at best quite unexpectedly, for something different entirely. This is particularly the case when the plan was not ours in the first place. To enter into a polemic of my own, right now, I would argue that we need to call into being contexts for producing culture based on the ad hoc, the last minute and the improvised, with which we could adequately respond to the necessary. Although many would argue that self-organised initiatives can provide such contexts, I am not convinced they often do, precisely because they are not questioning the internal logics of organisation itself.

We live in a time of excessive organisation, in which the idea of 'order' has become overvalued, and in which conflict, in its political sense, is repeatedly circumnavigated in favour of consensus. In the light of this, all of us involved in the field of the arts might best invest in the dissolution of the concept of organisation altogether; both in the sense of 'putting

things in order' with its administrative and systematic connections, and of the 'group engaged in a common endeavour' with its suggestion of agreed aims and goals. We need to have the courage to stop organising things and to see what emerges, and the first step in this process for freelancers is to stop staking up our craft in a rational and managerial way and to consider our own contribution to the institutional sector (whether state or self-organised) as exemplary of a different mode of production - which I will call de-organisation. To imagine the characteristics of this approach at the current time is difficult, because unlike other takes on organisation, it argues for the production of less rather than more. Less organisation for sure, but also less of everything else: less doing, less talking, less making, less thinking. De-organisation begins with switching off the overheated machine and relaxing to the sound of the decreasing hum as it slowly grinds to a halt. In the silence that follows, faith in the de-organised approach involves embracing those 'indefinably valuable qualities' latent within the process of working together on our culture that were mentioned before. We need to develop a sensibility and patience in the face of these abstract qualities, listen to them and let them guide our actions. It is only at this level that 'more' comes in: de-organisation involves more waiting.

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To recap, any debate on whether the self-organised has become synonymous with the institutional cannot help but recognise the history of differentiation and antagonism between the two sides. This can be observed, as a fairly simple 'us' and 'them' logic based on who the 'selves' are, coupled with a ground-level incompatibility in relation to an idea of how power should be distributed. It is in this sense that the term self-organisation has become a rallying call for anti-institutional projects, often with little analysis of whether any real, operational differences exist between the structures developed by artists and those developed by the state or the market. In their rejection of institutions whose compulsion to 'repress' has effectively hollowed out their purpose, Davies, Dilemuth and Jakobsen intelligently point out the poverty of ambition of these spaces where our culture is essentially sold back to us in a 'like' form. Their critique raises the question of what form or non-form we might find for initiatives that genuinely refuse to represent, avoid filling precon-

ceived roles and refrain from standing in for any prescribed sets of social relations. Despite harkening after an 'organised' solution, the authors also point to the possibility that what they are trying to promote may be more 'spirit' than 'structure'. [...] a tool that doesn't require a cohesive identity or voice to enter into negotiation with others. It may reside within social forms but doesn't need to take on an identifiable social form itself.

What they appear to be alluding to is a power that is distributed and ambient, alive within forms, rather than busy authoring them, and due to its heterogeneous and continually changing character, irreducible to any singular agreed upon statement of identity. Here is the germ of de-organisation in their imagined future, a subtle suggestion of what might arise from the dissolution of organisational hegemony, which appears at odds to their wish to 'take control'. In place of the organised it evokes a moment of trust in the ongoing life of something, without assuming responsibility for its planning. This also points to one aspect of the term self-organisation that is frequently overlooked in the arts and that complicates any overly simplistic reading of it as a tool for self-determination among artists. This is not the simple idea that artists can 'do it themselves', but instead, the more abstract idea that, left to their own devices, structures, including culture, may begin to organise themselves. To explain what this might entail, the definition of self-organisation used in the natural sciences is useful. In those fields the term describes the way in which particular natural systems have a tendency to develop, and take new and more complex forms, in a seemingly unplanned fashion, without the influence of an external or central authority. In such cases, changes in the nature of the whole system occur on account of numerous actions at a low level, with the smallest parts interacting locally without the need of an overall view of the whole. This is what scientists who analyse systems have come to call 'emergence'.

It may appear disparaging to suggest that we should communally place more trust in the intangible and unfathomable aspects of 'how things come to be'. Practically speaking it would be, in so far that these are things that we cannot preconceive, which therefore lie outside the realm of the organised. But, meditations of this kind are important, because, on the face of it, the cult of professionalisation and the resulting equations of better organisation, quality and transparency have had an increasingly stultifying effect on our museums and academics in recent years. This is having the same effect as excessive performance feedback and employee monitoring in business and our own stress-inducing

prediction to remotely steer all aspects of our lives from our laptops and iPhones. Even if I am inclined to worry about a future art world that is self-organised by the likes of Davies, Dillamuth and Jakobson, in which I am quite sure I would be led to the guillotine for my long years of collusion with the enemy, I have to agree in part with their diagnosis of today's institutions: most are "falling in their task". But, the truth of the matter is that there is simply no time or space in our organised lives to look again at what this task might be, or ask sensibly whether cultural work is really about tasks at all. Equally, it is time to face the fact that there is no neoliberal bogymen forcing us to do things this way and no cabal to overthrow. In fact, if we draw from a comparison of the institution, the organisation and the individual today, we see, more disturbingly, that we are doing this to ourselves; we are willingly ushering in an era of self-imposed micro-management that borders on the institutionalisation of the self. Maybe, in the spirit of dissenters, it is time to reassess the benefits of a life less organised.

THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE: THE FUTURE IS (SELF-) ORGANISED PART 2

Anthony Davies, Stephan Dillamuth
& Jakob Jakobson