

# Institutions by Artists: Resistance or Retreat?

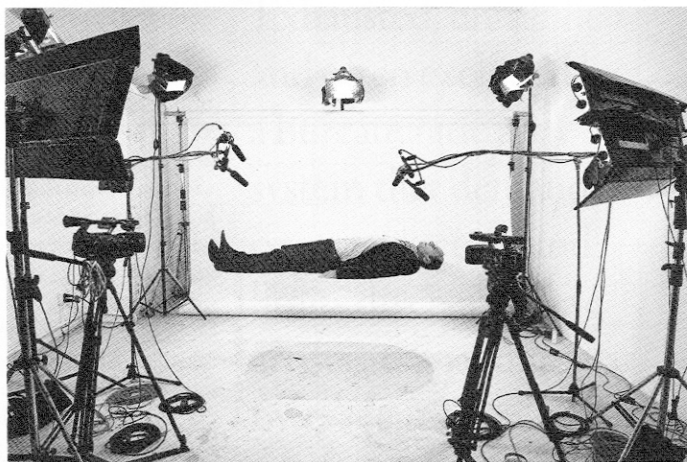
by Diana Sherlock

Perhaps fittingly, Institutions by Artists (IBA), which was held at Simon Fraser University's Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, Vancouver, from October 12–14, 2012, started and ended with AA Bronson. Not literally, of course, but Bronson's keynote address presented an impressive roster of institutions *by* artists in outlining his work with General Idea (with Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz, 1968–1994), including *FILE* magazine (1972–89), Art Metropole (1974–present), the early stores, pavilions and boutiques, and now with the New York Art Book Fair, healing practice and the Institute for Art, Religion and Social Justice at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. A key figure in Canada's artist-run culture, Bronson's practice epitomizes "the innovative, critical, and irreverent spirit of artist-run cultures and initiatives" key to the convention.<sup>1</sup> He identified himself as a "maker of institutions" who interrogates "the politics of decision-making" and approaches his life/artistic practice with a "spirit of collaboration."<sup>2</sup> Unlike many participants who were too contrite to recognize their inevitable complicity in the market, Bronson quipped all the way through his talk about the commodification of *his* art. This was not an arrogant affectation, but rather a demonstration of his "insiderness," a demonstration of how he has used the market and the media as his medium, and pushed their limits from the inside out. General Idea's "we want to stretch it" is still an apt motto for today's institutions by artists that want to expand the limits of what it means to make art and be an artist in the face of neoliberalism.

In his introduction to Bronson's keynote address, which was titled "The Transfiguration of the Bureaucrat," Keith Wallace, Associate Director/Curator of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, noted the continued relevance of Bronson's project *From Sea to Shining Sea*, which traced a postwar chronology of artist-initiated activity in Canada up to 1987, and extended the research about artists' relationships to museums that Bronson and Peggy Gale had started in the book *Museums by Artists* (1983). Borrowing from this chronology, Wallace summarized the oft-repeated tale of the institutionalization and professionalization of artists' practices in Canada over the past 45 years. To start, the artist-run network of the 60s ran parallel to mainstream commercial galleries or museums, and could have been characterized as an "art scene." In the 70s, with increased government support and arts infrastructure, this art scene rapidly changed into an "art system." Now we participate, willingly or not, in an "art industry," while the radical and self-determined gestures of the 60s seem almost nostalgic.

The process through which artists' practices become institutionalized, and in many cases, increasingly instrumentalized, is not easy to interrupt. Yet, there seemed to be a conflicted desire to do so at IBA. Building on the history of InFest: International Artist-Run Culture, the 2004 Vancouver gathering of international networks of artist-led initiatives, IBA's organizers—The Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres (PAARC), Artist Run Centres and Collectives (ARCA) and *Fillip*—brought together more than 450 delegates and 60 presenters representing every continent, plus dozens of funders and presenting partners, to interrogate the artist-run network and its ongoing relations in an effort to expand and complicate the idea of "institutions by artists." The convention rode waves of optimism—IBA reaffirmed art as a radical, social force with critical, emancipatory potential. But it was not without pessimism, too: IBA also called for the end of an art and artist-run culture that is overdetermined by a culture of professionalization and overproduction accelerated by the art market. During his presentation, Or Gallery's Director/Curator and IBA organizer, Jonathan Middleton suggested IBA was furthering the debate initiated in Reid Shier's *Vancouver Art & Economics* (2007) essay "Do Artists Need Artist-Run Centres?," to query "What do artists need from artist-run centres?"<sup>3</sup>

IBA's ambitious simultaneous program included five themes in ten sessions over three days: Institutional Time: Facts & Fictions; Intimate Institutions; States & Markets; Promises & Practices; and EREHWON/NOWHERE. In addition to these main panels and Bronson's keynote address, there were also two evening debates framed by deliberately contentious questions: *Is there space for art outside of the market and the state?* and *Should artists professionalize?* IBA also foregrounded a diverse array of limited-edition printed matter in the Motto Books Print Centre, and two new commissions: *Call to Order* (2012), an eloquent lament derived from an interpretation of the organizing institutions' meeting minutes by Kathleen Ritter and James B. Maxwell, and a participant survey by the Artifact Institute (Tim Dallett and Adam Kelly).



Anton Vidokle, Vidokle suspended in 2084 film set, photo taken July 2012 at Or Gallery, Berlin. PHOTO: LAURYN YOUNG; IMAGE COURTESY OF OR GALLERY

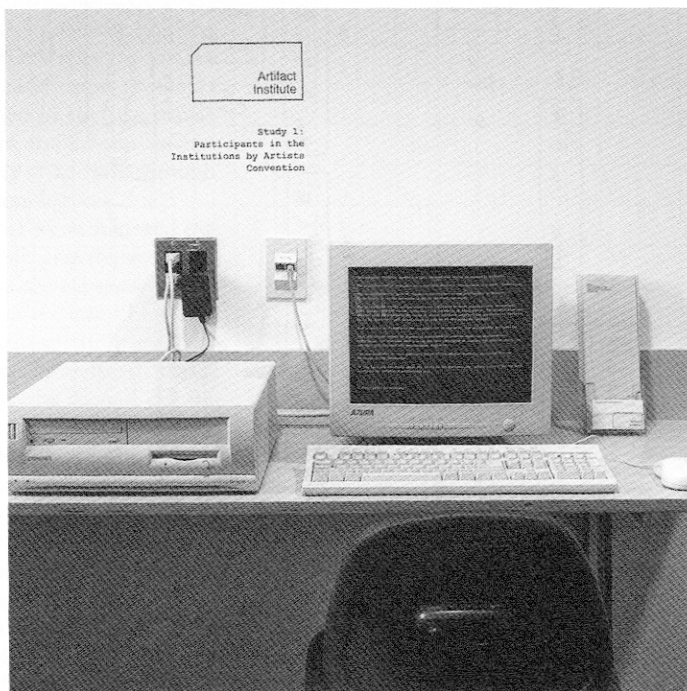


Heather and Ivan Morison, The J.G. Ballard Sausage grilled and served Thursday evening, 2010 International Chilliwack Biennial. IMAGE COURTESY OF OR GALLERY

IBA was an important convention because it looked to the future, but not without historical context. Conference organizers were self-reflexive about their role in furthering artist-run discourse and recording this history. University of California - Berkeley art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson passionately cautioned that to not record one's own history is to risk total erasure. Both Bryan-Wilson and New York artist and writer Gregory Sholette recuperate unknown or forgotten histories about progressive, mainly leftist, artist-led activities that have been buried by the "culture industries," leaving little or

no trace of them. Wilson's presentations revealed queer histories and counter-hegemonic distribution networks from the 80s and the 90s—Miranda July's *Big Miss Moviola* indie women's film network (1996–now Joanie4Jackie.com) and West Hollywood's EZTV (1979–ongoing). Sholette's projects *Political Art Documentation and Distribution* (1980–1988) and *REPOhistory* (1989–2000) address the process of historicization itself. Drawing on his book *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (2010), Sholette analyzed counter-institutional and anti-capitalist acts of resistance

Artifact Institute, *Study 1: Participants in the Institutions by Artists Convention*, October 12–14, 2012, Media Lounge Mezzanine, 3rd Floor, Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC. Detail of one of three computer terminals and associated installation elements. PHOTO: MATHIEU LÉGER





and economic power of the state (in Cuba and Romania, respectively). These projects highlight the inherent conflict—contradiction and compromise—between an artist's self-determined practice and the economic and infrastructural support required either from the state or the market to complete the work.

In lieu of support from the state, poet Jeff Derksen noted, somewhat ironically, that the market itself has become a space for imagination. Yet, a criticism of IBA might be that the idea of the market, although ill defined, was cast as a pejorative throughout the convention. This resulted in an ideological blindspot, with very few presentations addressing economically viable models of institutions by artists. FAG's micro-financing program and German artist Dirk Fleischmann's entrepreneurial [www.my-forestfarm.com](http://www.my-forestfarm.com), which appropriates the financial model for carbon emission trading and uses it for the production of art, were exceptions that adopt ethical, sustainable economic models that work within, but also pose challenges to, the state and market. If, as Eva Weinmayr suggests, "capitalism eats everything," can counter-hegemonic organizational models be sustainable and still help artists make a living? This unaddressed question remained the elephant in the room at IBA, usually only entering the debate via a question from the audience. Often when the questions got too hard to answer, participants admitted privilege, or, as was heard more than once, retreated to the academy.

Promises & Practices widened the gap between the reality and the fiction of artist-run culture. The Claire Fontaine collective suggests, "there can be no art under capitalism," and proposes a "human strike" or the "transformation of the informal social relations on which domination is founded."<sup>7</sup> Here, the argument returns to the consequences of affective labour. Responding to Claire Fontaine, critic Jaleh Mansoor argued passionately for artists to step off the treadmill of capitalist art production, suggesting that to stop or to strike might be the only way to interrupt the constant reproduction and recirculation of the conditions of capitalist oppression and exploitation, which perpetuate a culture of immiseration. Her presentation asked how artists could use art to combat—not retreat from—the exhausting cynicism of endlessly reproducing a system they are trying to defeat. This is not a call for the end of art, however, as Jean Baudrillard reminds us, "Art does not die because there is no more art. It dies because there is too much."<sup>8</sup>

So, after 45 years, and several artist-run conferences, we know the problems, but are short on solutions, particularly when it comes to the relationship between art and the economy. On the final day, after Bronson's keynote address, Bruguera accused Vidokle of leveraging his A-list network to increase the cultural capital of his projects. Here, one assumes the assessment of the art object is not in the object itself, but in the cultural capital that surrounds it.<sup>9</sup> Vidokle was dismissive, but I wondered "Why not?" One asset artist-run culture has in surplus is cultural capital, which is, for the most part, exclusive and valuable precisely because it is determined by artists. So, if artists can lever cultural capital to their benefit, why not? Perhaps unspoken, but it seems to me that this is exactly what Institutions by Artists did: it programmed



Gareth Moore and Jacob Gleeson, *St. George Marsh*, June 2005–August 2006  
IMAGE COURTESY OF CATRIONA JEFFRIES, VANCOUVER

a sold-out event of "insiders" who have learned to lever their histories, intimate networks, and state and private supporters, to envision more promises and practices for the future and a yet undiscovered EREHWON/NOWHERE. At the same time, Bronson questioned whether arts councils were still (or ever) driven by artists, implying that one string pulls as hard as another. Perhaps the thread between these two points in the conversation is an impetus for the next artist-run conference, one that might address, head on, the relationship between art and the economy. ×

#### BIO

Diana Sherlock is a Canadian independent curator, writer and educator based in Calgary, Alberta. Since 1995, she has published numerous texts in gallery catalogues and contemporary art journals, including *Canadian Art*, *fuse*, *Blackflash*, *Ceramics Art and Perception*, *BorderCrossings* and *The Calgary Herald*. Folly: Chateau Mathieu is her most recent exhibition and publication project (*Esplanade Art Gallery, Medicine Hat, 2012*). Last year, Sherlock was the Curator-in-Residence at the Alberta College of Art + Design in Calgary, where she teaches critical theory and professional practice in the School of Creative and Critical Studies.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Institutions by Artists Program, <http://arcpost.ca/> (October 12, 2012). For another take, see Bryne McLaughlin, "AA Bronson, Anton Vidokle Challenge Canada's Artist-Run Culture at Institutions by Artists in Vancouver," *Canadian Art* <http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2012/10/17/institutions-by-artists/> (October 17, 2012).
- 2 AA Bronson, "The Transfiguration of the Bureaucrat," *Institutions by Artists* (Vancouver, BC), October 14, 2012.
- 3 Reid Shier, "Do Artists Need Artist-Run Centres?," *Vancouver Art & Economics*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press/Artspeak, 2007), 189–201.
- 4 Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (Pluto Press, 2009). [http://www.gregorysholette.com/books/darkmatter\\_books.html](http://www.gregorysholette.com/books/darkmatter_books.html) (October 21, 2012). "The premise of this book is that the formal economy of contemporary art is dependent upon a previously suppressed sphere of informal, non-market, social production involving systems of gift exchange, cooperative networks, distributed knowledge, and collective activities, which is becoming increasingly visible and potentially threatening to the symbolic and fiscal cohesion of high culture, especially in its most politicized form as interventionist art."
- 5 IBA Program, <http://arcpost.ca/> (October 12, 2012).
- 6 Kristina Lee Podesva, *Institutions by Artists* (Vancouver, BC), October 13, 2012.
- 7 Jaleh Mansoor, *Institutions by Artists, Session Seven* (Vancouver, BC), October 13, 2012.
- 8 Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art* (New York/LA: Semiotext(e), 2005).
- 9 Jeff Derksen, *Institutions by Artists, Session Six* (Vancouver, BC), October 13, 2012.