

THE ARTIST'S INSTITUTE by Chris Sharp «

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Early last November, I found an intriguing email my in-box, which warmly began, "This is The Artiste's Institute. Welcome." I had never heard of The Artist's Institute, but I soon learned that it was a new, Lower East Side initiative headed by the curator Anthony Huberman, in conjunction with Hunter College. Soon thereafter, I took a trip to New York, and while there, took the opportunity to attend some of the Institute's events. Located in a modest, basement-level, single room space on Eldridge street, it seemed like a rather untraditional for informal affair. The inaugural artist under consideration happened to be Robert Filliou, and one of the densely-packed events that I had the chance to attend was a lecture by Paul Chan on Charles Fourier, the 19th century utopian, proto-socialist philosopher, whose ideas had influenced both Filliou and Chan. Although I enjoyed the lecture immensely, I was still a little vague about the institute's mission, so I invited Huberman to discuss the project and clarify his intentions in an email conversation, which he generously agreed to do.

Chris Sharp: What is The Artist's Institute?

Anthony Huberman: The Artist's Institute is an artist-centered research institute for contemporary art. It's an institute in both senses of the word. In the academic context, an "institute" is a place not for teaching, but for learning: for hypothetical and speculative research, for long-term and open research inquiries that happen in private. In the artworld context, an "institute" is an ICA, a place for exhibitions, for dynamic programming that happens in public. By bridging both the academic and the art communities, The Artist's Institute involves both of these activities, and puts them on equal footing. It's a place where thinking about

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art matters just as much as showing art. Furthermore, it's a place that places artists at the center, not themes. Each "session" (a 6-month season of exhibitions, events, and public/private discussions and research) is dedicated to thinking about a single artist. This is an Artist's Institute.

CS: So it is less pedagogical than it is investigative.

AH: Yes, that's a nice way to put it.

CS: And yet this institute takes place in the context of Hunter College in New York, which, if I am not mistaken, funds it. Could you say a few words about that?

AH: Yes, the specificity of a university context lies at the heart of the Institute. The project first developed by trying to think differently about the relationship between a university and exhibition-making. Usually, when universities present exhibitions, the curators tend to behave just like museum curators do: they work on preparing a show for a year or two, and then they display the results of their research in the university's galleries, with an exhibition. There have been many great shows done that way, for sure, but I was interested in the fact that a university is not a museum, so why should curators behave as if there were at a museum? Perhaps there was another way to work, curatorially, with exhibitions, that was somehow more in tune with the specificity of the university context, which is a place for thinking and learning about art, not for showing art. The Artist's Institute is born out of trying to think that through and develop another way to work, and another way to think about making exhibitions, in the context of a school. So if a museum curator spends a few years preparing a show, and then displays the "result" in the form of an exhibition, we work in the opposite direction: each exhibition season begins with a curatorial hypothesis that states the importance of a particular artist, or a particular position, in the context of contemporary art and ideas. Our aim and intention, over the subsequent 6 months, is to test this hypothesis...in public. It's a form of learning-by-doing, and an artist will ignite a curatorial research process where one idea leads to another, and each chapter in our thinking will be shared with the general public in the form of an exhibition or event. In a way, it's trying to exhibit how artists learn: they tend to get fascinated by a single idea, which then leads to many others in a series of lateral or tangential jumps, to form a long daisy-chain of almost-related ideas or objects or interests. The exhibition, at the Institute, is not the result of anything...it marks the beginning of a thought-process, and the detours we find ourselves in, as we pursue that thought experiment.

CS: And this is in the context of a course on curating that you teach it would seem, in the spirit, of the ignorant schoolmaster.

AH: Running alongside the Institute is a weekly seminar, at Hunter, with graduate students in studio art and art history. It's a research institute, so the participants in this seminar are simply some of its researchers. The students read texts about our "anchor" artist; they look for other potentially related texts, events, or shows; they visit the artists who are presenting work in the Institute's public exhibition space; some write research papers on topics of their choice, which relate to the season's "anchor"; some propose projects that can take place at the Institute's exhibition space, etc. As a whole, the seminar is working to enact a curatorial approach...it's about the doing, not the teaching. I do teach another graduate seminar at Hunter about curatorial methods, but this is completely separate from the Institute.

CS: The Institute seems to be underpinned by a number of assumptions, a primary one being what I would call the Huebler factor: it seems to assume that there are indeed enough objects (and artistic practices, not to mention legacies) in circulation; rather than generate more, we would do better to pause and seriously consider some of them in greater depth. This assumption, however, is

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inevitably barbed with a certain measure of critique.

AH: I actually don't think it's really possible to pause any objects or practices to examine them in greater depth, because no pre-existing ideas, legacies, or practices are ever static, stuck in time, ready to be put under a microscope. The point of the Institute is to actually "perform" the way knowledge works...in other words, it's a making-manifest of the way ideas, legacies, or practices always already generate other ideas, legacies, or practices, and we can try and live the life of an idea by seeing what it will generate and where it will take us. Crucially, however, you have to give an idea some time to live, if you want to see where it goes. So committing 6 months to a single position gives it the time to go places, to accumulate detours, to cross paths with other positions, to bump into problems, to bump into accidents, to make new friends, and to circle back again, having gained some additional texture or personality along the way. At the end of our first season, Robert Filliou might have become a bit more complicated of a position, after having lived through Gerry Bibby, Lutz Bacher, Paul Chan, Provence Magazine, Andy Kaufman, etc, etc. Of course, 6 months is much much too small of an amount of time to live the life of any idea/practices/legacies, but it's better than 6 weeks (gallery shows) or 3 months (museum shows). But it at least tries to insist that an exhibition—in a university context—is about learning and about establishing a place that allows knowledge to go places, not a place where knowledge is put on display and/or taught.

CS: The assumption to which I was specifically alluding was twofold and regarded artistic production in terms of time and space. By slowing things down (six months) and allowing them to ramify (artistic practice/already extant production as springboard), the Institute would seem to be presenting an alternative to more frenetic modes of artistic, intellectual, and exhibition production.

AH: Yes, certainly.

CS: Of course, this assumption also bears in its wake the legacy of the dematerialization of the art object, which could here be potentially translated or updated into curating as an increasingly discursive discipline. However, in your responses, you make a point of emphasizing this structure's link to a university context, which is essentially already discursive— an aspect of exhibition making in the university that you would like to embrace— which in turn means that no potential break from, say, object to discourse is taking place.

AH: I might even say the opposite break is taking place: from discourse to object...in the sense that we're taking the idea of "research" and "learning" in the context of a university and asking that this involve more than classroom discussion, but involve the process of physically encountering works of art in a space. The Institute tries to create a place where learning is fed by a porous accumulation of experiences with objects, images, and events, which in turn inform discussions, which then inspire other exhibitions or events, and so on, back and forth. It's trying to exhibit the way learning and thinking happens and develops over time, in a way.

CS: But a part of the Institute's activities are open to the general public, which it goes without saying, is not a university context. That said, it would seem that you are trying to at once create and export a certain methodology out into "the everyday (art) world." How would you respond to that? And do you see what you're doing as contributing to the elaboration of a new curatorial model? One which ultimately intends to function outside of a university context?

AH: Yes, absolutely, everything is meant to be shared with a general public. And what's shared with the public is not only actual works of art or events, but the proposition of a distinct curatorial model, whereby the act of exhibition-making marks the beginning of a thinking-process, not the result of one, and is therefore

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allowed to develop and grow over a longer period of time. I also think about it in terms of another term that's been used a lot in recent years, "knowledge production." Take an exhibition institution (aka: a museum). It usually has what is called an education department—I spent almost 5 years directing P.S.1's education department, in fact. This is the department that's traditionally put in charge of "de-coding" or "de-complicating" what's going on in the galleries. Or, going back to your point about the discursive, it's a department that's often in charge of the discursive side of the objects on view...the "talking about" the objects that are in the exhibition. If you flip that around, and think about an education institution (aka: a university) that might have an "exhibition department," then it becomes the reverse: the "de-complicating" is what happens in the classroom, so the job of the "exhibition department" (aka: The Artist's Institute's job) is to make sure that those ideas are tested, re-coded, and re-complicated again. The Institute is about re-complicating knowledge, about taking what we "know" about Robert Filliou's position, for example, and testing it, putting it to work, asking it to bring us elsewhere, so that after 6 months, our understanding of what Filliou's position is all about will have been made even more complicated, not less so. So yes, the goal of The Artist's Institute is very much about bridging the university context with the artworld outside the university, but its tie to a university is crucial. Since the institute is about "re-complicating" knowledge, it needs the contrast of the "de-complicating" process that happens in a school.

So yes, I see The Artist's Institute as proposing a different type of curatorial behavior, a different "way to work" and "how to behave," as a curator, in the contemporary moment. It involves a specific way to think about time, scale, commitment, knowledge, display, learning/unlearning, privacy, care, sharing, and mode-of-address, which is perhaps distinct from the way other contemporary art organizations think, and which I hope can somehow come across. Ultimately, of course, the Institute is about art and artists, not about curatorial method. The way we work (the "how") is only a means to get us towards a more complex appreciation for specific ideas, artists, and art objects (the "what") and their significance in the context of contemporary culture.



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