The Natural History Museum, workshop, 2014. The Natural History Museum workshops train participants to take the view of museum anthropologists who are attuned to the social and political forces shaping nature. Photograph by The Natural History Museum.

The Occupation of Institutionality and Institutional Liberation – Interview with Not An Alternative

Steve Lyons, Jason Jones

The Natural History Museum (NHM) was founded to disentangle museums of science and natural history from insidious relationships to the fossil fuel industry. The NHM is anchored in the history of institutional critique: it insists that institutional critique should not be an end unto itself, underlining that public institutions are worth fighting for. Treating institutions as "forms to be seized and connected into a counterpower infrastructure," The Natural History Museum models a path from institutional critique to "institutional liberation."[1]

The NHM was founded by Not An Alternative (NAA), an activist art collective that established a coworking and event space in Brooklyn in 2003. The members come from NGO careers, politicised art school backgrounds, as well as the fields of art history, political theory, geography, and graphic design. In its early years, NAA hosted public programs that integrated conversations occurring in activist circles, where the group developed relationships beyond their immediate community. NAA has always held a relationship to art and artists but has never viewed the art world as its primary or ultimate destination.

As we begin our conversation about the beginnings of NAA and how they developed the Natural HIstory Museum, Jason talks about producing campaigns based on critical theory. Refusing dominant forms of individual studio art

practice, NAA sought a means of translating theoretical practice for a larger social context: "plugging artists and theorists into social movement and community organisation."

cc.cc: What is "Not An Alternative"?

Jason: The name Not An Alternative is a spin on Margaret Thatcher's famous slogan "There is no alternative." The phrase expresses a defining feature of neoliberal doctrine: that there is no exterior to the capitalist system. We wanted to promote a misreading of Thatcher's words, to invert her intention to foreclose alternatives in advance. With a slight twist, we shifted her statement from something in the negative to nothing in the positive. "Not An Alternative" points to the repressed Other of neoliberal capitalism, the outside that is present as an exclusion.

We are interested in a militant practice of political art instead of a practice of art that is standardised and abbreviated – art that is invested in and appreciated for transforming aesthetic and political relations. We are interested in the common, in claiming the position of that which is common. Every subject is a battleground between the interest of a few and the interest of the many. We live in a capitalist context that has much to do with privatizing space, making symbols, creating brands, and using PR to centralise power and control. But capitalism's capture of the commons is only partial. Commodities exist in relation to the commons they have been extracted from; they maintain this common dimension. We imagine that this common dimension can be claimed.

Steve: Most of our work has been about pointing to the limits of given systems. In 2010, we programmed a series of events called "Participationism and the Limits of Collaboration." Around this time much of the art world was going wild about socially engaged and participatory art and it seemed like, for many artists and curators, participation was an end goal in itself. "Participationism" was our neologism for the pervasive belief that participation was inherently political. We wanted to intervene into the emerging discourse on participatory art. We argued that facilitating participation itself was insufficient. For a participatory practice to hold any kind of activist import or political consequence, it would need to be directed towards an end.

cc.cc: I remember those days. The nightmare of participation is real. It even led a few curators to coin the term 'New Institutionalism' to designate a kind of cultural executive practice that considered the exhibition to be a social project.[2]

Steve: The discourse on participation tends to be bound together with the discourse on democracy, universal inclusion and consensus decision-making. What is necessarily excluded when we look through the lens of democracy or through the metaphor of ecology, for example? How does this capture and neutralize the forces of antagonism and struggle internal to any system? Badiou talks about "dislodging the democratic emblem." A lot of our work takes a similar track. We want to identify the limits of a given system by describing what is constitutively excluded by it.

Jason: I recommend reading the text on "The Limits of Collaboration" by Astra Taylor on our website. http://notanalternative.org/2010/05/14/the-limits-of-collaboration/

cc.cc: Can you talk about NAA's trajectory, from its early formation as an artist-run space to its current work with the NHM?

Steve: It could be said that there have been three distinct periods in NAA's history: before Occupy, in which we were running our programming space and collaborating with grassroots organizations on campaigns and direct actions; during Occupy, in which we put all of our resources toward maintaining a rapid-response workshop for movement visuals and props; and after Occupy, when we started The Natural History Museum.

Jason: Around 2008–2009, we started working with the group Picture the Homeless, a homeless-founded grassroots organisation based in New York City. They were working on projects to raise awareness about housing rights by staging occupations on empty lots in the city. We worked with them to build a tent city. Our role in their work was to practically embed our experience with direct action into their campaign, and to think tactically about how Picture the Homeless could pull off unauthorized occupations in broad daylight. They produced the messaging, and we facilitated the communication, helped organize the tent city, and helped establish a visual narrative for their

campaign. We released a <u>video</u> that spoke to their issues and documented the occupation without mentioning our role in the campaign. We told the *New York Times* that we were not part of the story. We kept ourselves anonymous within it. Only three months later, we released another video that included our role in the occupation.

This was around the time of the 2008 economic crash. We felt that one of the best ways to make visible the contradictions that the crash represented was by intervening in the discourse around space. Most visibly, we had luxury condos going up all over the place while many others were foreclosed. Around us, warehouse properties were held empty by landowners while families were kicked out of their homes. We saw so many empty spaces while more and more people were homeless. This spatial contradiction seemed important. With this work, we were beginning to experiment with using the symbols of construction and authority over space to claim a new authority. In New York, construction work tends to point toward the further privatisation and gentrification of the city. But at the same time, there is a public dimension to the signifiers of construction (barricades, caution tape, etc). Just as they can be used to protect private property, they can also be used to claim a public sphere. Our intention was to push this visual language so that it expressed something about the commons.

By 2011 we had created our own little infrastructure and institution that was prepared for Occupy Wall Street. Many meetings were held in our space, and we were very involved from the beginning of OWS. When Zuccotti Park was occupied in September 2011, we opened a 1500 sq. ft. production space for visual materials. Most of our work was produced anonymously. We didn't have a stake in becoming known as OWS artists. We wanted to create a visual language in common that connected OWS to other occupations happening around the world, one that everyone could use and iterate on, and one that could grow from there. We had already built up a visual language that played on the symbols of public authority. OWS presented a context where we could put it into action.

After OWS we started The Natural History Museum.

cc.cc: How was all this funded?

Jason: Until OWS we asked for donations at events. We made everything from cardboard. Our space was a co-working office during the day. Two people also lived there, and we covered the costs ourselves. With OWS we had no interest in being part of the General Assembly (GA). Petitioning the GA for funds was impossible. We put together a portfolio of our previous and ongoing work and sent it to people who knew our practice and our reputation for successfully plugging art strategies into activist work. A segment of the art world became interested in our practice. We would do talks in institutional spaces quite often. This visibility helped legitimize us as an alternative space and an activist art collective. We were supported by private donors, Kickstarter, and our own part-time work. Beka [Economopoulos, co-founder of NAA] was working as consultant, strategist, and organiser. I worked as a designer and did video work as a freelance contractor.

cc.cc: How long was the transition between between NAA's Occupy-related work and the founding of the NHM?

Jason: One year of transition. During that time, we were producing visuals and delivering them to people around the country, to groups at Gezi Park in Istanbul and Occupy Homes, a coalition of activists working to occupy foreclosed properties around the U.S. There was a global infrastructure set up around the name of Occupy, which is not to say that groups identifying with the name Occupy necessarily agreed with each other. We saw a certain power to maintaining and strengthening that Occupy infrastructure for as long as possible. So we tried making NAA our full-time practice. We did freelance contract work for the same groups we had worked with before Occupy but acknowledged our collective identity as Not An Alternative within these collaborations.

The Natural History Museum, *Kick Koch off the Board*, 2015. The Natural History Museum joined forces with 150 of the world's top scientists, including several Nobel laureates, and more than 550,000 members of the public to urge New York's American Museum of Natural History to kick climate denier David Koch off its board. After 23 years on the board, Koch resigned amid controversy in December 2015. Graphic by The Natural History Museum.

After a year, an organization approached us with a proposal for a campaign to pressure the fossil fuel oligarch David Koch to pay for the restoration of New York following Hurricane Sandy. We started working on the project, but quickly felt the limitations of the campaign and decided to step down. However, in the research process, we discovered that Koch, who is a noted science denier and major funder of climate-science disinformation, sat on the board of the American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. The blatant contradiction this exposed between the ideals and practice of two of the largest natural history museums in the country made it a logical target for an NAA-led creative campaign.

We pitched the idea of building a campaign to get Koch kicked off the board of the AMNH. We proposed the establishment of a new institution that would operate both as an actual museum and an institutional foundation for a long-term pressure campaign. The NGO that wanted to hire us didn't like that idea, but we did it anyway. We applied for funding from the Chorus Foundation and Voqal Fund and were successful. This allowed us to buy the infrastructure to launch the NHM. We bought a huge tent which would be the NHM's temporary home base. The tent referenced temporary emergency response infrastructure, but also correlated to the occupations that had been

spreading across public squares around the world in 2009-12. We bought a large format printer. We bought an airport bus and had it custom-wrapped with NHM graphics. We wanted to make it look like the NHM was not just a creative campaign but a real institution. We thought that a campaign directed at a major natural history museum would only work if it harnessed a kind of institutional legitimacy. We opted to strategically "fake it till we made it."

The Natural History Museum, *Expedition Bus*, 2014. 15-passenger bus on site at the People's Climate March, New York, September 21, 2014. Photograph by The Natural History Museum.

Steve: We also staged photographs, bought the domain name thenaturalhistorymuseum.org, and populated our website with programs and workshops that were at that point only ideas—models for future programs. We established a mission and assembled an advisory board of influential actors in the fields of museums and environmental activism, like former director of the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum James Powell, prominent museologist Robert R. Janes, and author Naomi Klein. In developing our advisory board, we wanted to create strategic alliances with people whose work we valued but we also understood that the advisory board could also help legitimise the NHM within the museum sector.

Occupying institutionality is as much a design problem as an administrative one. Our initial solution to that problem was to build this infrastructure (the bus, tent, website, publicity materials), these pieces that could allow us to represent the NHM in the language of the museum

sector, which we knew very little about. We hadn't done much research about the field before we launched the project. We were working on instinct and assumptions. But we quickly learned that the museum sector was networked through a series of national and international museum associations and conventions.

cc.cc: How did the NHM situate itself within the museum sector and work with its networks and codes?

Steve: A few months after our launch, we were approached by one of the directors of the American Alliance of Museums—the world's largest museum association—and we were offered the largest exhibition space at the 2015 AAM convention at the Atlanta Convention Center. It felt like a huge deal, like we had weaseled our way into the sector like a trojan horse. We used this as an opportunity to provoke the sector in a fairly blunt way. We produced an exhibition about the entanglement of museums with fossil fuel industry interests, singling out Koch's position at the AMNH and the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. This corresponded to the launch of our Kick Koch Off the Board campaign, where we released a letter signed by 150 top scientists and a petition that gained 550,000 signatures and media hits around the world. As part of our AAM exhibit, we recreated a series of dioramas from the AMNH, augmenting them to include previously excluded socio-political content—in this case, the fact that a major funder of climate denial held a leadership role in two of the country's largest museums of natural history. One of our reworked dioramas appropriated a display from the AMNH's 2009 climate change exhibit, which featured a polar bear standing on a pile of trash. We reproduced this almost identically but inserted a Koch Industries pipeline into the trash pile. Our exhibition felt like an alien intervention into the exhibition hall of the AAM convention, a blunt provocation within a trade-show environment. We had nothing to sell but an idea. From there we started testing our first hypotheses about how to work within the museum sector. We continue to go to these conventions, not as provocateurs but as researchers and organizers.

The Natural History Museum, *Our Climate, Whose Politics?*, 2015. Diorama in an exhibition at the American Alliance of Museums Annual Convention, Atlanta, Ga., depicting a diorama from a climate change exhibition at New York's American Museum of Natural History with the inclusion of a Koch Industries pipeline. Photograph by The Natural History Museum.

cc.cc: Engaging with mainstream liberal institutions as 'peers' seems like a complicated project for an activist organization invested in advancing left politics. How do you approach this kind of work at the level of theory?

Jason: Institutions are formal and informal constellations and vocabularies that represent power. They are held together by the common understanding that they represent. They have both an official and unofficial status. In their official status, they represent the people from the perspective of dominant power. But the symbolic vocabulary established and ordered by the institution is never total. Institutions and institutional perspectives also have the potential to be struggled over by a larger collective body of people whose knowledge and awareness exceeds the symbolic vocabulary established by power. Between those two factions there is a lot of fluidity, more than people would typically think. Our entry point is in the gap between the official ownership and common ownership of institutional symbols.

Steve: The dominant perception within the anti-institutional left, especially after 1968, has been that institutions are co-opting machines, monoliths, expressions of dominant power. We started the project with a different set of assumptions. We consider cultural institutions not as monolithic

totalities marked by ideological consistency, but rather as collective infrastructures marked by internal divisions, conflicting value systems, and dissatisfaction from within. When Jason discusses the institution as a split subject, I would add that that split manifests in actual ongoing struggles behind closed doors. People who work in cultural institutions don't unilaterally agree, and in fact many are already sympathetic to critique from the outside. Our job is to give our comrades on the inside of institutions an alternative to point to, and to gather up enough popular pressure to force decisions that are sometimes already on the table.

cc.cc: NAA is one of several art collectives pressuring for change at large-scale museums around the world. Do you situate the NHM within this broader tendency in art activism?

Steve: Definitely. In advance of the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, several of us at the NHM were seeing a lot of excitement about what Liberate Tate was accomplishing in the U.K., and began thinking about how our work in the U.S. could be more directly linked to the work they were doing. We wanted to use the Paris Climate Summit as an opportunity to coordinate our efforts with other groups that were leveraging power against fossil fuel sponsors in cultural institutions.

So we raised some money, and we were able to bring together members of Liberate Tate, BP or not BP (U.K.), and Science Unstained (U.K.), Stopp Oljesponssing av Norsk Kulturliv (Norway), G.U.L.F. (Global Ultra Luxury Faction, U.S.), Occupy Museums (U.S.) and other groups invested in museum activism. For two days, we sat around a table discussing commonalities in our tactics, goals and ambitions. We also considered how we might extend and strengthen the common visual language between groups so our localized actions could be more recognizable as part of a global fossil-fuel-free culture movement. We then had a number of meetings with art theorists associated with Liberate Tate and G.U.L.F. to think through the meaning of our collective efforts and how they both converged with and diverged from earlier practices associated with institutional critique. One of the outcomes of that interaction was "Institutional Liberation," an essay published in *e-flux journal*. We describe institutional liberation as a collective practice geared toward liberating institutions from capitalist class interests.

Jason: A documented example of this project was a collective action that took place at the Louvre [which is sponsored by the fossil fuel companies Total and Eni] during the Paris COP.

Steve: The Louvre action was a one-off. Since then, 350.org started a campaign at the Louvre and a group of activists launched the direct action collective Libérons le Louvre, although those projects emerged independently from our action. Our main agenda in Paris was to build connections and think together about how our various projects could be more powerful if they were anchored within a coordinated movement, but also to clarify divisions between groups as well as the approaches, theories and angles taken by each.

Jason: It all related back to the event we did with Hans Haacke, Mark Dion, and Gavin Grindon at Queens Museum in 2014. Hans and Mark have played a role in shaping two generations of institutional critique. While our work has always been informed by their practices, with the NHM we want to consider how the practice of institutional critique can be used as a vehicle to build counterpower. Liberate Tate also holds a strong connection to the history and practice of institutional critique but they are taking it further, not only by pointing out divisions within the institution, but also by seizing on these divisions to force the institution to stand with the people and against the corporations that have used it as a public relations tool for twenty-something years. How can you leverage a critique of institutions to force a division into the open, and then to use that rupture to force a decision?

We did that simply with the Koch campaign. Koch was a low hanging fruit. Here we have an anti-science oligarch on the board of a major science institution. This was an overt contradiction. By bringing that contradiction to the attention of the public, we could create a moment of controversy to pressure the institution to respond. With the Koch campaign, a Haacke-esque gesture of institutional critique became the basis for a campaign. Six months after we launched that campaign, he resigned from the board of the AMNH, a position he had held for twenty-three years. This wasn't our end-goal. We didn't even expect it to happen. We see it as a symbolic gesture, something concrete to point toward as we continue to pressure institutions to align themselves with a more radical

self-understanding.

REFERENCES

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