

AN INSTITUTION FOR THE YET UNKNOWN

In 2015, nearly a year after the upheaval of the Euromaidan protests and urgent self-organized civic effort to defend Ukraine from Russian invasion began yielding to previous, never really abandoned Soviet modes of social and political organization, TanzLaboratorium staged a series of solo performances titled *Institution* at the Les Kurbas National Theater Arts Center in Kyiv. The group has been working there almost continuously since 2006 as long-term artists-in-residence and exerting influence on the institution's overall structure as a place for experimental performing arts research through art-making and scholarship. In 2014–2015, together with other arts and cultural workers, the artists (and this author) were involved in attempting to restructure Ukraine's cultural policy. The direct encounter between individual citizens-art workers and the Soviet-formed, hierarchical state apparatus revealed a missing link that usually mediates between official and individual interests in a functioning democracy—institutions.

While TL's *Institution* is an artwork, free of responsibility for producing direct political or social effects, it creates a situation where certain approaches that facilitate autonomous coexistence are enacted, suggesting new possibilities for understanding and imagining what an experimental institution could be.

Each iteration of *Institution* consisted of seven consecutive evening dance performances, each one accompanied by the same recording of Glenn Gould playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The artists put forth an idea of the Institution as as something guided by a certain principle, "thus letting the artist be absolutely irresponsible, to be a philosopher who doesn't care about benefits or results, nor about the production of content or meanings." What is important is visibility: an institution organizes the encounter between the artist's work and its audience. Introducing their performative work, the artists posed the questions: "What are you interested in, and how could someone else see this interest? How does one establish the conditions for the very possibility of that seeing? How do you convey not 'what you want to say' but 'how you think about it'?"

Visible – from Latin *visibilis* "that may be seen," from *visus*, past participle of *videre* "to see". This is from the productive PIE root **weid-* "to know, to see," which is also the root of the Russian *vedat* "to know".

An institution is a means of visibility. The performative project *Institution* has essentially reduced its function to visibility—seeing (looking, attending, coming to know) and being seen. It has instigated an ongoing process of

returning to its principles in the present moment, with no end in sight. Publicly visible only during the scheduled evening performances, there is nothing solid or stable about this institution. It exists through individual bodies that make themselves publicly available to view in the theater without existing as an independent political subject (like an organization). Yet it does so while maintaining structural autonomy; it is neither an accumulation of its participants, nor a freestanding structure. Perhaps it is the dual position of each performer as artist and institution that gives this institution the flexibility to both accommodate and withstand differences, whether between people or their positions or even between times. Securing its future form or existence at all is not one of its evident concerns.

Institution – the act of instituting. From the Latin *instituere* “to set up, put in place; arrange; found, establish; appoint, designate; govern, administer; teach, instruct” (from *in-* + *statuere* “establish, to cause to stand”). Imagine an institution as a continuous process rather than a stable construction; it stands on principles and appears when the act of returning to these principles is performed through dance.

Let’s consider the idea of an institution—as a structure that one can return to, that stands on certain principles, that is usually meant to endure beyond the lifespan of any individual person—that exists through dance and music. Here, the music, a recording of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* performed by Glenn Gould, is a structural constant. But each dance takes form in its performance, as the response of the dancer’s thinking body to the conditions of the present moment, inspired by certain principles. Its choreography, without prescribing form, consists in organizing the encounter between performer and audience. The form that each dance or solo takes lets me see (know) something, perhaps for the first time.

Principle – can be traced to the Latin *principium* “a beginning, commencement, origin, first part” (plural *principia* “foundation, elements”), from *princeps*, literally “he who takes first” or “he who occupies the first place,” from *primus* “first” + root of *capere* “to grasp, take, catch; undertake; take in, hold; be large enough for; comprehend”. Its Greek equivalent *archê* signifies both the beginning (principle, point of departure) and command (responsibility, authority, power). Interestingly, *archê* stands in opposition to *telos* (achievement of an end, goal or purpose) and *teleutê* (cessation or conclusion, in particular—death), which resemble the Ukrainian word for “body”—*tilo*.

The (thinking, perceiving, acting, remembering) body is the site of experience. Proust reminds us, “But often one hears nothing when one listens for the first time to a piece of music that is at all complicated. And yet when, later on, this sonata had been played to me two or three times I found that I knew it perfectly well. And so it’s not wrong to speak of hearing a thing for the first time. If one had indeed, as one supposes, received no impression from the first hearing, the second, the third would be equally ‘first hearings’ and there

would be no reason why one should understand it any better after the tenth. Probably what is wanting, the first time, is not comprehension but memory. For our memory, relative to the complexity of the impressions which it has to face while we are listening, is infinitesimal..." Yet memory serves as something to return to with each subsequent experience, and the most new and strange impressions—inaccessible at first—can be remembered before being understood. In order to experience something truly new (what cannot be recognized as new, since the mind does not yet have any categories or mechanisms for dealing with it) one has to experience it—lost and uncertain, perhaps even unaware of it at all.

Experiment – an operation or procedure carried out under controlled conditions in order to discover an unknown effect or law, to test or establish a hypothesis, or to illustrate a known law. From Old French *esperment* "practical knowledge, cunning; enchantment, magic spell; trial, proof, example; lesson, sign, indication," from Latin *experimentum* "a trial, test, proof, experiment," from *ex-* "out of" + *peritus* "experienced, tested," from PIE **per-yo-*, suffixed form of root **per-* (3) "to try, risk," an extended sense from root **per-* (1) "forward," via the notion of "to lead across, press forward." This root forms all or part of words like empirical, experience, fear, peril, pirate.

The fact that this Institution manifests itself through dance makes it possible for it to deal with the new, not only with what looks unfamiliar, but with what till this moment has never happened before. **What if what this institution carries forward, what it preserves, is not a material object or form of behavior but a set of conditions or approaches—principles—that safeguard the possibility for the emergence of something new and unpredictable, something that I today cannot even imagine?** This *Institution* has set up a space where people gather to experience what nobody can predict. Each evening performance is an experiment, where artist (as choreographer and dancer) and audience are both the observers and subjects being observed. Everyone present is a witness of the potential event or appearance of the new. It may not even be noticed or recognized, but it may be perceived by the bodies present and remembered. And when the *Institution* has receded from view, this memory remains as something to which one can return (perhaps even compelling new actions or inspiring new thoughts).

Common – from Latin *communis* "in common, public, shared by all or many; general, not specific; familiar, not pretentious," from PIE **ko-moin-i-* "held in common," compound adjective formed from **ko-* "together" + **moi-n-*, suffixed form of root **mei-* (1) "change, exchange; go, move," hence literally "shared by all." Second element of the compound also is the source of Latin *munia* "duties, public duties, functions," those related to *munia* "office."

On the one hand, there is no *Institution* without the individual efforts of the performers and organizers and attending audience. It gives generously,

but nothing that can be consumed or possessed. What remains is my body that lived through something together with other people-bodies; perhaps something happened and its sensation stays in my memory; whether I notice it or not, how I deal with it, whether or not I change, depends on me. On the other hand, with its proposition to attend to a common that does not belong to anybody but for which everybody is responsible, this institution lessens the importance of me. It returns to the principle that the common is something that I cannot not be a part of, but whose (ultimate) form is beyond my control or grasp. I am the one who attends.

Attention – from Latin *attendere*, literally “to stretch toward;” from *ad* “to, toward” (in space or time) + *tendere* “stretch”. Understood as the act or state of applying the mind to something, attention can be imagined as a stretching in (at least) two directions - toward what is outside one’s body and toward one’s own sensations, thus producing (enlarging) a space for thought to enter. Despite its power, attention itself is invisible, although its effects become manifest in action.

What I attend to is at once a deeply personal matter, but one that cannot remain hidden away in private by virtue of the institution’s call to visibility. For even my attention (like that of all the others who are present) can be sensed by other bodies in the space. Here I am denied the illusion that I can somehow isolate myself from the world, that there is some secure space where my (in) action is not affecting the world. Could we say that *Institution* proposes a way of living, where each person dances/listens/watches autonomously, without trying to control the situation or isolate oneself from it? Those who attend the performances can possibly learn to perceive and to think about this new form, about the complexity in perception and thinking that contemporary art can demand, even if they (think they) don’t know how to do it yet.

A performative institution is a playground and a training ground for thinking in multiple directions at the same time: it is a register of the present moment; it returns through memory and principles to a beginning (or beginnings); it is a structured set of conditions for observing the potential appearance of the new. It begins from the premise that a person does not need to be taught or trained in advance to be able to navigate a situation, but that if the situation is clear, the individual (who enters into it with his/her own experience, memories, history, will) can, through attention and action, produce the situation and at the same time learn from being in it. At a time when post-Soviet Ukrainian institutions are in desperate need of reform, TanzLaboratorium’s *Institution* suggests a way for actual change: neither through a hasty (and illusory) denial of one’s formative past nor by adopting unfamiliar institutional traditions developed over centuries abroad, but by performing one’s own observed existence in the present moment and making it publicly visible, by sharing this process(dance) with others as potential witnesses and agents of subtle changes in the common space.