

Prologue:

to a  
beautiful  
problem

James  
Voorhies

## Building

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA) was completed in 1963 to house Harvard University's visual arts program. It is the only building in North America designed by Le Corbusier who, at the time, believed it would be his entrée into a vast North American market. The visionary qualities of the architecture include hundreds of concrete columns—or *pilotis*—that bear the weight of the building to make way for floor-to-ceiling walls of windows, combined with open floor plans throughout, a façade free of traditional constraints, and topped by a series of roof gardens. Not since his majestic Villa Savoye, completed in 1929 in Poissy, France, had Le Corbusier incorporated every point of his philosophy of a new architecture succinctly into a singular structure. The Carpenter Center is a tour de force of a visionary modernist prowess, demonstrative of Le Corbusier's design principles and, for Harvard, intended to signal the innovative character of its newly initiated visual arts program.

By the late 1960s the pedagogical program had settled into a combination of academic workshops, artist studios, and exhibitions. Founded with a focus on the visual arts, encompassing making, studying, and experimenting freely with a range of materials, the program was essentially conceived as a laboratory for the arts. Situated inside Le Corbusier's architecture, with its transparent walls eschewing the public and private spaces of the institution, these activities combined to expand and indeed challenge what constitutes a liberal arts education, prioritizing a site where creativity and visual literacy could coalesce within the conventional undertakings of the university. Here, students from a range of disciplines—science, design, architecture, philosophy, and literature—came together with leading practitioners to sharpen sensory awareness of the visual world. They studied color theory, light, typography,

design, communication, photography, film, painting, sculpture, and more. This new institution—a building and an academic program—embedded within the traditional institution of Harvard University was a critique to what, at the time, constituted education in the arts.

Today, the Carpenter Center houses the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies (VES) and Harvard Film Archive. Named officially in 1968, Visual and Environmental Studies is an undergraduate program in the visual arts with courses in painting, sculpture, film, photography, and studies in critical theory and contemporary art, enabling students from a variety of disciplinary studies to be aware of their visual environment. Continuing along the lines introduced in the early years, VES is a liberal arts education prioritizing making alongside thinking. The Carpenter Center is also the home of an exhibition program in the contemporary arts tied both to academic curricula and contributing to broader discourses in contemporary art and culture. This is the scenario in which the recently endowed John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Directorship of the Carpenter Center was created, a position I currently hold as the inaugural director.

The architectural and academic legacy of the Carpenter Center continues to deeply influence the institution today. Indeed, while Le Corbusier's design principles of open floor and free façade were visionary, the architecture presents restrictions that could be seen as a kind of beautiful problem for an institution with a multiplicity of activities and functions needing to service a variety of audiences (of both public and private visitors). The primary exhibition spaces, for instance, are located on two separate noncontiguous levels. The lobby-like Level 1 is a semi-public exhibition site accessible on the ground floor. Its only permanent walls are the few spotted along the perimeter; due to rules

imposed by Le Corbusier, the red and dark gray walls cannot be painted another color (e.g., white) or punctured under any circumstances. The floor-to-ceiling windows surrounding the site pose challenges for controlling light, while the abundance of glass and concrete surfaces allow sound to travel easily and far. Studios, classrooms, workshops, and offices are spread over six levels, including the basement where the cinema and Harvard Film Archive offices are found. The Level 3 gallery is accessible from the exterior ramp. Visitors who enter on the ground floor often do not realize they can also walk up steps to Level 3 to the Sert Gallery, and vice-versa. This is the gallery space originally designed by Le Corbusier as the main exhibition site for the Carpenter Center. It was a completely open space until 2000 when a small internal box gallery, designed by Peter Rose + Partners, was commissioned by the Fogg Art Museum and inserted into the space, eliminating the flexible plan envisioned by Le Corbusier but providing security and light control that allow this part of the institution to perform as a “white cube.”

### **A New Institution**

Today, CCVA functions with a new consciousness, intentionality, and strategic agenda. As director, I am entrusted to conceive and produce a unified and consistent program of exhibitions, talks, publications, residencies, performances, and events that contribute to the curricular objectives of Harvard University and VES while inserting CCVA into current discourses in the contemporary arts. The institutional “character” of CCVA is articulated and understood through the totality of its exhibitions, visual identity, online communications, and visitor experiences—in other words, its program. The new program defines CCVA’s behavior and builds relationships with its audiences, seeking to fulfill roles, satisfy needs, and even solve problems that may present

initially in the form of questions: How will the institution act under the leadership of the new John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Directorship? How will it define itself anew in relation to its long and fragmented history, its iconic architecture, its academic position, and in relation to other institutions in the Boston area and beyond? How will this new institution engage its range of audiences, from students, faculty, and regional visitors, to people traveling great distances to visit the famed Le Corbusier building (but may care nothing about the exhibitions), to those who experience CCVA only via digital technology and social media and never set foot in the Carpenter Center? How should this institution behave in the twenty-first century where spectators are insatiable “consumers,” in every meaning of the word? How can CCVA reflect critically on the role of an arts institution, and behave in ways that allow it to expand out of its twentieth-century heritage with the potential to become something else, something different, something more—a new institution? How can CCVA connect disparate content more meaningfully and forge more democratic relationships with audiences and artists, building stronger support structures for each and all? How can it shed the legacy of engrained institutional behavior, acknowledging its illustrious modernist history while leaving it behind?

This is how we arrive at our “beautiful problem.”

### **What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?**

New Institutionalism emerged in the 1990s alongside the relational art promoted by the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud to redefine the art institution and its role in shaping art and culture through expanded notions of the exhibition and social engagement. In 2003 Office for Contemporary Art Norway published



*Verksted #1* in its series of thematically focused journals. This first edition was edited by the Norwegian curator and writer Jonas Ekeberg and dedicated exclusively to New Institutionalism. It examines a selection of exhibitions, institutions, and biennials alongside a history of Conceptual Art and institutional critique in order to assess what is New Institutionalism. Lifting the term from the fields of economics and sociology, Ekeberg applied it to the self-reflexive activity occurring at the time at art institutions, mostly in Europe, such as Rooseum in Malmö, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, and Bergen Kunsthall in Norway. These and others were seeking to redefine the art institution and its use of the exhibition as a critical means to reduce emphasis on the presentation of the singular art object, increase situations for audience involvement, and to place greater onus on a more integrated engagement between art, spectator, and institution. Other

voices emerged through the 2000s. Figures such as Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Jens Hoffmann, Mária Hlavajová, and Francesco Bonami, some of whom contributed to the roaming European biennial Manifesta in the 1990s and whose curatorial impulse aligned with what was loosely read as New Institutionalism, by the 2000s found themselves in leadership positions with museums and institutions such as BAK in Utrecht, Serpentine Gallery in London, ICA London, Kunstverein München in Munich, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and Office for Contemporary Art Norway in Oslo. Here, they would undertake experiments in biennials and smaller exhibition venues with greater intensity and longer-term impact on institution identities. These kinds of inquiries resembled that of Conceptual artists identified with institutional critique from the early 1970s to the 1990s in their scrutiny of the social, economic, and physical structure of the art institution. But,

whereas institutional critique generally pitted the artist against the institution, on a temporary basis often confined to exhibition parameters and catalogues, New Institutionalism absorbed this mode of inquiry as a continuous form of auto-critique from within the very walls of the institution. It sought to demonstrate realizable alternative methods for use by art institutions, where artists and curators themselves took up an extraordinary place in questioning the aims, functions, and methods of the institution, intentionally exploring its impact on shaping knowledge derived from art and exhibitions.

And then what?

By 2006 New Institutionalism had pivoted its focus from the visual to greater emphasis on knowledge production and alternative education strategies in which the spectator is not only subjected to the curatorial technique but contributes to that very mode of address. New Institutionalism had already adopted vernacular of the corporate, media, and scientific spheres, which is something Ekeberg had pointed out in his *Verksted* publication. Such terms as “construction site,” “laboratory,” “discussion platform,” “distribution channel,” and “think tank” punctuate descriptions of this work. Anton Vidokle’s *unitednationsplaza*, which operated from 2006 to 2007 out of a small building on Platz der Vereinten Nationen (United Nations Plaza) in former East Berlin, is one example. A result of the failed Manifesta 6, *unitednationsplaza*, free and open to the public, served as both the name and address of a temporary art school that over the course of one year hosted a series of seminars, lectures, screenings, and performances by dozens of artists, writers, and curators. The following year, in 2008, *unitednationsplaza* transformed into a project called *Night School* by Vidokle at the New Museum in New York.

Today, large museum programs feature variations on alternative modes of exhibi-

tion making. They can sometimes seem like New Institutionalism “lite,” or à la carte, quick to capitalize on the spectator as a consumer and their experience a commodity. While New Institutionalism questioned the general operation of the art institution and its policies, a critique that is initiated by the institution, an imperative arises. If the art institution adopts the challenges and critical voice once held by artists and curators, how do the technical apparatuses of the exhibition and the institution—the outlets of distribution—embody that position of critique? And how does the critique remain alive, relevant, and vocal? That is the predicament of institutional critique in relation to the effects of encroaching capitalism and factors that contribute to the questions posed by this publication as well as the program carried out at CCVA.

### **CCVA Program**

Indeed, the CCVA program is conceived and developing within this climate of thinking about behaviors of art institutions in the twenty-first century, and the desire of consumers to experience art and culture within the muddy spaces of entertainment, cultural tourism, and knowledge production. The program at the Carpenter Center has a number of new components that take into account this climate along with the range of spectators, architecture, history, the university environment, and the multiplicity of functions to which this institution must attend. Anchor Exhibitions, organized during the fall and spring, tend to be either solo exhibitions, one on each level, or a group exhibition spanning both floors. These exhibitions are more traditional in format and run for more than two months, accommodating repeat visits by nearby audiences (i.e., students and faculty) and the occasional visitor who, rightly, seeks to experience something related to art. In this case, the institution behaves as expected. It performs “art institution” for the general public.



Activities such as artist talks are organized in connection with Anchor Exhibitions.

The Interstitial is a program of short-term exhibitions and activities conceived to take advantage of the time and physical space between exhibitions. The Interstitial hosts performances, installations, and other events that transpire over the course of an evening or several days. Often, these connect with nearby artists, architects, or musicians and are produced to cater to university and regional audiences. The intention is to draw audiences to the Carpenter Center on a repeated basis, leveraging more informal, casual engagement with the institution while supporting activity that does not regularly take place in the building, such as music and dance performances.

Focusing even more intentionally on developing audiences and community for CCVA programming, Agency for Critical Inquiry was conceived to give audiences a stake in the institution's activity by provid-

ing opportunities for them to contribute. Agency for Critical Inquiry is a public forum that considers contemporary art as a source of knowledge about the world. This forum hosts informal discussions, slide shows, readings, and performances where students, faculty, and the general public propose programs that intersect the visual arts with other disciplines. The activity can range from a book launch by an art history scholar at a neighboring institution to a multiday theatrical performance by the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club. It is an open invitation to lead and attend events that delve deeper into ideas introduced by exhibitions, visiting artists, or any topic that captures the attention of the community. The intent is to bring audiences closer for more informal, frequent, and intimate engagement with art and ideas at CCVA while creating a site for collective learning in the public realm outside of traditional classroom contexts. It asks

questions about how knowledge production changes when it takes place with and for audiences in the public realm, and offers agency to CCVA publics to forge a connection to the broader framework of the institution. The initiative is also responsive to the extraordinary population of individuals around Harvard University, Cambridge, and Boston who have overlapping knowledge, interests, and experiences in the contemporary arts and desire new ways to contribute to the program.

While Agency for Critical Inquiry focuses on developing audiences, Institution (Building) is an initiative to develop better understanding of the institutional practice of the Carpenter Center and Harvard University in relation to the present moment. It is a biennial invitation to artists to explore in repeated visits over two years various facets related to the archive, architecture, and history of the Carpenter Center. Their work can manifest in any form, from exhibitions, events, and installations to interventions, tours, and publications, taking shape and changing throughout the residency. Institution (Building) seeks to critically recover the history of the institution and situate it within the broader contexts of contemporary art, culture, and the legacy of the Le Corbusier building.

### **Publication**

This publication is also part of the CCVA program. It is the inaugural issue in a series of annual books that will act as readers to capture and expand upon what was, one might say, “on the Carpenter Center’s mind” over the previous year, with commissioned texts and visual works, presentations of archival materials, and facsimile texts in addition to providing a record of the institution’s activity. It extends ideas into printed matter and distributes them beyond the immediate physical surroundings into the hands of new publics. *What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?* is a kind of think-

ing through in real time of the recent history of exhibition making within the context of how institutions behave in the present moment and, indeed, the predicaments and challenges art institutions—large and small—face today in a culture of consumer experience and entertainment.

Two facsimile texts are the historical ground on which the book is organized. Jonas Ekeberg’s “Introduction” to the 2003 *Verksted #1* publication, mentioned above, describes behaviors at art institutions and biennials that precipitated his use of the term New Institutionalism. The second facsimile text is a 2007 conversation between curators Maria Lind and Alex Farquharson titled “Integrative Institutionalism: a Reconsideration” included in the publication *The New Administration of Aesthetics*, edited by Tone Hansen and Trude Iversen and published by Torpedo Press in Oslo. Lind and Farquharson reflect on changing behaviors at institutions in Central and Northern Europe, especially Scandinavia, within the context of changing funding structures and what they perceive as an erosion of the public sphere, thus the varied reactions by curators and artists to rethink institution. They discuss new institutions as critical institutions, and touch upon possible repercussions when criticality is deeply connected to and driven by the vision of a single curator or director who shapes an institution’s priorities. They also consider what happens when those same cultural leaders depart for another institution—then what?

Tone Hansen is curator and director of the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, an art institution outside of Oslo. In her text “New Nordic Critique,” she expands on the history of New Institutionalism through the context of recent activity, including her 2015 exhibition *In Search of Matisse*, a multifaceted project that evolved out of provenance research and eventual repatriation of an 1880 painting by Henri Matisse in the museum’s collection. Under these circumstances, the

museum invited artists to create parallel projects and also produced a related publication. While Hansen describes a specific instance where artists were invited to assume responsibilities typically assigned to an institution, the artist Markus Miessen reflects on the “uninvited outsider.” In his text “Institutional Crossbenching as a Form of Critical Production,” Miessen discusses the concept of agency and ways in which spectators can have more direct involvement in developing an institution’s character. Curator Henriette Huldish, in her text “In-Between Things and Times,” explores the benefits of interstitial spaces in institutions within the context of recent art and relational aesthetics, and the critical potential they have for influencing the character of an institution. Within the spirit of the interstitial, this book includes three commissioned visual works by Fernanda Fragateiro, Eline Mugaas and Elise Storsveen, and Martin Beck that interrupt the book to further extend connections they made with CCVA over the previous year. Then “9 x 9” compiles responses by nine artists, writers, art historians, and landscape architects who intersected with the Carpenter Center to provide brief comments on publications that have been influential in shaping their intellectual pursuits and creative practices.

In a conversation with Simon Fujiwara, the artist looks back at the extraordinary impact institutions have made on the development of his life and practice, such as Tate St Ives, a museum that opened in 1993 in Cornwall, England, as a regional outpost of the Tate Gallery network. The conversation includes a discussion about his recent work titled *New Pompidou*, and the architectural, urban, and social factors surrounding its construction. Further along the lines of architecture and urban planning in relation to art institution, in the text “Nothing Too Good? The Politics of New Buildings for Fine Art in Postwar Britain” the writer Owen Hatherley defines three distinct political

moments in twentieth-century Britain when government programs to build art institutions and cultural centers were used for urban renewal, each with its own particular identity. And the designer James Goggin—who is responsible for the Carpenter Center’s new graphic design, including website, booklets, wayfinding, and online communications—reflects on the importance of program for articulating an identity in his text “Brand New Institutionalism.” Goggin considers the corporatized behavior of contemporary art institutions in their rush to brand themselves at a time when we’ve arguably reached brand saturation. And my text “From Relational Aesthetics to New Institutionalism, and Now?” situates the activity of curators and institutions addressed by other contributors and the publication in general within the context of artistic activity beginning in the 1990s.

In fact, the question “What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?” is more rhetorical than anything else, conceived to provoke discourse and problematize rather than attempt to address the question definitively. We know the answer in a broader sense: critique must perform a constant reworking before it “sets in” to institution and becomes the subject of its original scrutiny. Capital moves forward, and critique must move along. While dispersed and atomized today, the thinking behind New Institutionalism still resonates in various manifestations and degrees of success at institutions small and large, continuing to instigate ever more meaningful connections with its publics.



**What  
Happened**

**Ever  
to**

**New  
Institutionalism?**

**Carpenter Center  
for the Visual Arts**

*SternbergPress* 

## **What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?**

James Voorhies, Editor

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## Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

### Mission

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts is dedicated to the synthesis of art, design, and education through the exhibition of existing works and production of new commissions. It strives to bring people, ideas, and objects together in generative ways that provide unparalleled experiences with contemporary art, ultimately enriching the creative and intellectual lives of our audiences.

### Program

The Carpenter Center program fosters meaningful engagement among artists, art, and our audiences. Exhibitions, lectures, residencies, publications, performances, screenings, and informal gatherings are choreographed to create a place where visual literacy, knowledge production, contemporary art, and critical inquiry seamlessly meet.

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