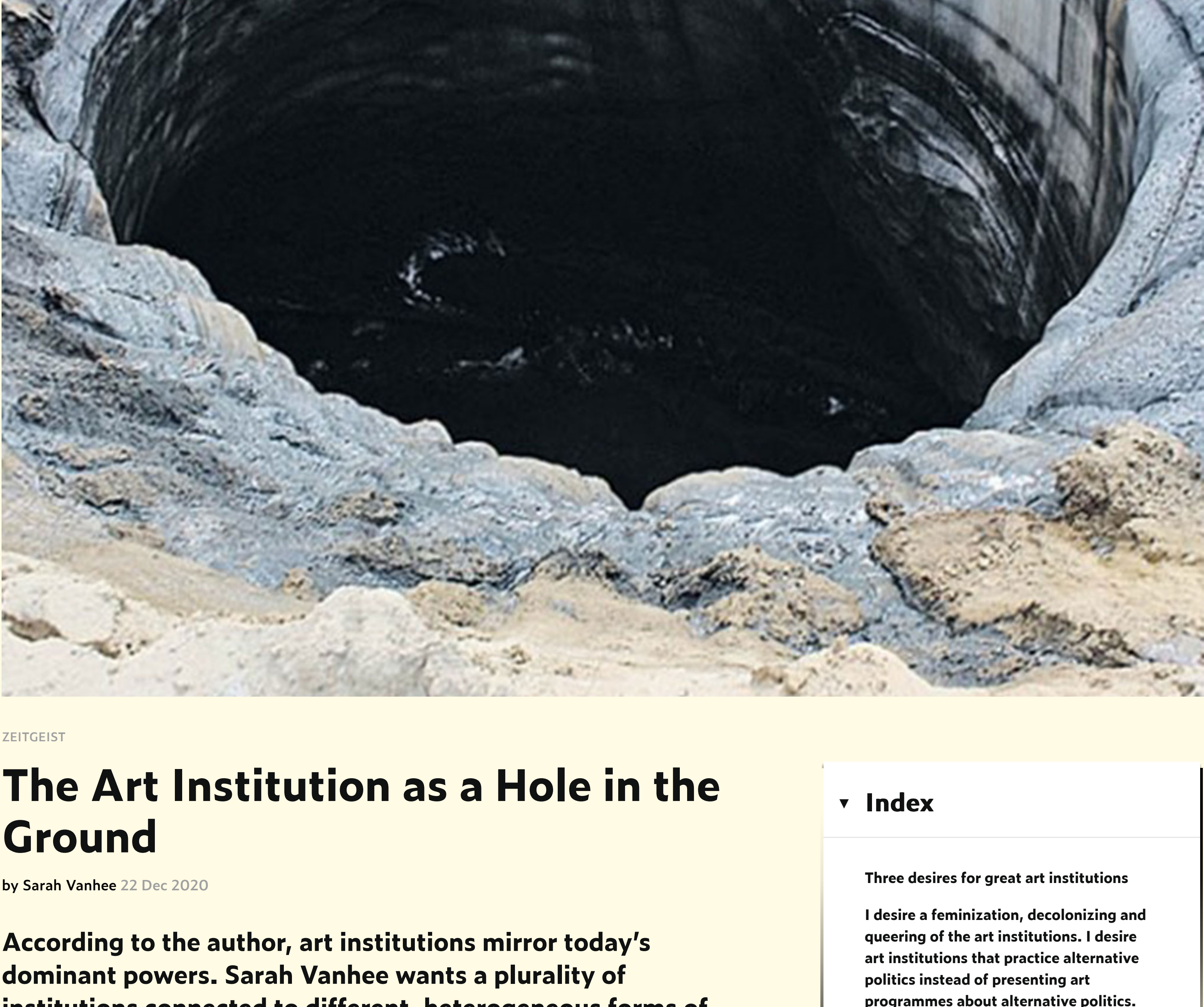




ZEITGEIST

The Art Institution as a Hole in the Ground

by Sarah Vanhee 22 Dec 2020

According to the author, art institutions mirror today's dominant powers. Sarah Vanhee wants a plurality of institutions connected to different, heterogeneous forms of living and being. A longing for a feminization, decolonization and queering of the art institutions. Looking for art institutions that do politics instead of presenting art programmes about politics, that take care of the people who work there and engage with them, support them on the basis of equal dialogue and lend themselves as tools.

One of the reasons why I chose to be an artist is because I don't want to be only one person, I don't want to be confined to only one reality or only to the dominant realities proposed to me. I want to be able to use my intuition, intellect, and power to invent or invite other realities.

I think every person has the right and should have access to the creation and imagination of different realities through art. And every person should have the possibility of being more than one person. Some weeks ago, a study was published that said in Flanders one out of two people who are employed think their job is not workable and that in the near future they will not be able to keep up any longer because of too much stress, not enough motivation, physical or mental exhaustion, the impossibility to combine work and family life, and so on. This means that in one of the richest regions in Europe half of the people with jobs find their job reality unbearable.

In 2013 I started the project [Lecture For Every One](#), a series of surprise interventions into different gatherings where I share a text about the world's state of affairs and how we live together. People were sometimes shocked and angered by my intervention but mostly they were touched, appreciating the cut in their daily reality where there is usually no time to pause, to imagine, to reflect, or to care. One manager at this high-profile insurance company in Tallinn, for instance, gave us as feedback: 'LFO is very different to the life in a corporation and all the bullshit that goes on in corporations. Fake stuff. Fake people. People playing roles they think are necessary to play. LFO makes you think of how far from real life life in a corporation can be. These big glass houses are filled with hypocrisy and boring people. I often think about how Kindergartens, schools, and universities are producing the grey mass, the work force. This society system pushes people to become those who pay taxes, don't do crazy things, don't complain, which is good for the system.'

The most amazing statement for me here is that I, as an artist, bring the real life into the 'fake' life of the corporations, quite contrary to the populist idea that artists live in a bubble, and quite funny in relation to the current demand for art to engage more with real life. The statements of the insurance guy were often echoed in those by other people in various environments.

In another instance I had a talk with a taxi driver in Paris, who was driving me to a theatre. He said: 'It's such a pity people don't go to the theatre anymore; society just wears them out. They don't have the mental space for it anymore.' And he explained to me how, to his memory, twenty years ago more people would go out in the evening (I could not verify this) but that today people are simply too tired to go anywhere, they cannot insert another activity in their dense family planning, and buying tickets to the theatre for two plus hiring a babysitter is too expensive.

There you go then as an art institution trying to reach goal in audience numbers, targeting groups according to race, gender, class, selling the art works as events in the hope that with a nice glass of wine and a catchy image it will all feel a little less demanding. But people are just tired.

We cannot speak of institutions unless we speak of the world.

Etymologically *institution* (from Latin *instituere*) means to establish something long-term, with a clear role in society and culture, with values beyond the now.

An institution is not a business and can never be run as a business.

Now I would first like to address some elements of great art institutions and then share with you a very rough sketch of phantasmagorical institutions.

Three desires for great art institutions

I will mainly refer here to the publicly funded art institutions in Flanders, since that's the situation I know best.

(1) The subsidized art institutions in Flanders today are generally conservative white male hetero patriarchal vertical structures. The progressive politics presented in the programmes on their facades do not even remotely correspond to the interior politics. There seems to be a tacit mutual agreement on this hypocritical attitude by almost all parties involved with the institution: board, directors, employees, artists, audience. Working inside these structures and complying with them takes away most of the potential political capacities of the work. I would suggest the existing institutions – the ones that have a little bit of resistance left towards their own ongoing neoliberalization – could attempt to engage in a process of transformation towards a feminizing, decolonizing, and queering of the institution. Parallel for instance to [what Laura Roth and Kate Shea Baird describe](#) when they argue for a feminization of politics.

They put forward three points. First, gender equality in institutional representation and public participation. Second, a commitment to public policies that challenge gender roles and seek to break down patriarchy. Third, a different way of doing politics, based on values and practices that put an emphasis on everyday life, relationships, the role of the community, and the common good.

We could translate these points into the politics of the art institution.

If we think of feminizing the art institution, the first paradigm to be questioned is 'art' itself. This would mean a de-linking from preconceived ideas, unwritten rules, protectionist policies, and a widening of the understanding of what art is. It would mean shifting focus away from the known aesthetic categories, giving up white privileges, as well as re-defining the meaning, importance, and role of professionalism within the arts.

Concretely, some axes should be re-balanced with regard to feminizing, decolonizing and queering the art institution, such as:

- precarization versus protection
 - consumers versus citizens
 - the individual versus the communal
 - the importance of style versus the question of aesthetics
 - publicity versus communication
 - review versus critique
 - representation versus imagination
 - competition versus support
 - the notion of taste versus the notion of quality
 - an open closure versus a closed openness
 - the fashion of the moment versus a sustainability encompassing past and future etc.
- With the rising of the extreme right and the all-devouring power of corporate capitalism and orchestrated fear, it would be a historical failure by art institutions not to be resilient now. Now is precisely the moment to practice resistance, which means doing things differently, proposing and developing alternatives. This requires an engagement from all of us involved. For if we all remain individuals just doing our jobs, obeying an unquestioned hierarchical structure, we will quickly be blown away. But if we work critically and collectively from a deep trust, in practical collaboration, with radical inclusiveness and real involvement, we will be armed and have better chances to survive. 'We' will then probably also be a different 'we' from 'us' who are sitting here today. How to not just stand by and watch.

I desire a feminization, decolonizing and queering of the art institutions. I desire art institutions that practice alternative politics instead of presenting art programmes about alternative politics.

(2) This is a very brief point and it has to do with precarization versus protection. Or: look for the pain inside your own institution. Of the 50 percent of employees to whom their job is unbearable many are also working at art institutions. This tendency means overproduction by an under(wo)manned team working for underpaid artists. Along with the feminization of the art institution comes the importance of caring for every human being who is in some way connected to the institution.

I desire art institutions that take care of the people who work there, take care of every one who is there, take care of every one involved with the institution.

(3) There is some violence in the relations the art institution produces and we have grown used to it. Staff working for the institution seem to be constantly fighting: fighting for money, fighting to be original, fighting to get things done in time, fighting to defend art's place in society, fighting for audience, fighting for legitimacy – which often means fighting for the pretension of being unique which often means fighting with other institutions. The people working for the institutions feel like they do everything for art and the artists. Meanwhile the artist feels like she's the last one on the ladder. The one who has to hold up her hand and be happy if she gets something. Paradoxically, the main reason why this art institution exists at all and its core function are supposed to be supporting the artists. What if we would pause for a moment and re-think this function: to support artists? How does the institution do that? When I say there is a violence in the relations the institution produces, I don't just mean the abovementioned collective suffering. I also mean there is a fundamental political question about how this support takes place, mostly in the form of 'offering' and 'giving'. Because maybe the artist does not want to 'receive' certain things but could suggest herself how she would like to be supported by the institution. Not only to be able to practice her art in a good way but also how she thinks this art could resonate with the world. Hardly ever has any art institution asked me what I would need. As an open question. Not in the sense of what I need in terms of studio or technical means or budget... No. What do you need as an artist to be able to perform your artistic practice now in this world, and how could we work on this together? How would it be if we stop thinking of the institution as a brand, but consider it as a tool, a device to be put to use?

There are some good examples in that direction and I had the good fortune to experience some. The relations change when projects can develop through an open, eye-level dialogue instead of a giving-and-taking aimed at filling out streamlined formats. But more often, when I challenged the institution to work as a tool it turned out to be very difficult, because most institutions struggle to function outside their usual patterns.

I desire more art in non-violent art institutions.

Now I move to the phantasmagorical side of this story:

It's mainly a rough image, like a dream.

Movements or organizations don't please politicians, buildings do. Our art institutions today mirror the dominant powers. All this uprightness all this straightness all this visibility all this representation all this pride all these facades. When I think of all the exhausted, uninspired, stressed, and demotivated sleepwalking people, when I think of all the fearful, divided, badly informed people with or without jobs, with or without papers, I can imagine they don't feel any need or cannot muster the courage to walk up fancy stairs to find enlightenment in the temples of art.

Maybe it would be nicer for them and for us if we could just fall down, give in to gravity tumble or stumble or jump or slowly sink into a hole in the ground

This hole can be any size large or small to put your head in so you don't have to see for a while to sink your ass in so you can stay steady for a while a hiding place – hiding things or animals or people a protective shelter – a sanctuary a fireplace a cave a trench, a place to shoot from a void to rest in

holes can be there spontaneously or planned long in advanced by one person with a shovel or by an entire construction team

there are very specific holes like

a girls-only hole

a hole for people who want to do things

a hole for people who just want to lie down

a hole for listening

a hole for laughing

a hole for dancing

a hole for healing a hole for painting

a hole for fighting –

a groove

for rapping

a crater for objects – or one object

a furrow for stories

a vacuum for nothing

a nook like a tomb

a chamber that lifts unheard voices – I think I once visited such a hole already, at Teatr.doc in Moscow, I sat in a cellar squeezed together with many other people engaging with a sober play sharing the daily reality of living under repression.

a hollow without people

an abyss with only smoke

a fissure for madness

a crack for failure

a pit for everything that is there already and we don't need anything more

a cavern for how to get the billions from the one percent

a ditch for looking back

many chinks for the unnamed someone

of course there can be cross-holes

You don't have to be seduced to go into a hole

you just fall in there, or maybe you're being gently pushed in there.

It's clear that there is no place in those holes for the artist or the curator as individual stars, there is no individual star artist or curator who hang out in a hole. There are no prizes to win there, no prestige, no decorum. A hole in the ground is not a job opportunity or a career step, it's a commitment.

There are parties, there is celebration.

A hole for what we lost.

A hole for the forgotten.

In the holes the new does not exist.

Holes are run collectively... When you enter the hole – no matter who you are – you are first an apprentice. You learn from every one present in the hole: builders, cleaners, communicators, thinkers, spectators, dancers, writers, translators, and so on – of course every one has more than one role. You observe and you help till you understand the politics of the space, then you can participate. For some holes you need a long apprenticeship, some holes you will understand in ten seconds.

A hole does not always have to be open it can be a 24/7 but maybe some holes only open once a year. When obsolete a hole can be covered or filled and it can also be re-opened. One can be a hole-hopper or a long-term resident.

The holes go more or less deep into the ground. There is the potential to get in contact with other holes through underground corridors, like moles. There is no gallery map however. Moles don't see much; our skills of reception and listening will be strongly developed in the holes.

Since we are in the ground, we will be closer to the dead. We will be close to the past and to our collective memory. The holes in the ground are also holes in time.

If those holes now sound like a sort of subversive escapism, an underworld, disconnected from "reality"; we can maybe think back of the insurance employee I mentioned in the beginning, the one who described corporations as fake and art as the real world.

Sarah Vanhee, 16 February 2017

Performance artist Sarah Vanhee performed this text as a lecture during the discussion platform [The Fantastic Institution](#), organized by arts centre BUDA (Kortrijk), the 16th of February 2017.

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