

Conference presentation for ‘Undoing The Institution’ session at ‘On Transversality’ digital conference (9th-11th Dec 2020)

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1)

Hi, I’m Paul Hughes. You should be able to hear my voice. And also see a video. The video doesn’t have any sound. So it’s just me speaking. And I’m speaking today from my home in Nottingham, in England.

The video is of me making a wreath yesterday afternoon. And when you make a wreath, you need to start with a long bendy flexible branch, because it needs to make a circle.

So hi, I’m a PhD student at the University of Roehampton. My research is in dance, and it’s about freelance choreographers taking on curatorial roles in institutions, and the possibility and limits of that in shifting those institutional structures. And this was what I proposed to the conference team to talk about today. But I’m not going to be doing that.

Because actually, as I was starting this PhD in October, the University of Roehampton was announcing that it was cutting £3.2 million from the schools of Arts and Humanities. Which would cut a huge proportion of the staff, which would devastate the departments and their capacity for research and teaching. And that is what I’ve been busy with this semester; protesting these cuts with a student group called Roehampton Students Saving Arts and Humanities.

And it feels important for me to recognize that, and to pivot away from what I was going to talk about, and to instead speak from this activity, this practice, this thinking. Because if we’re talking about ‘Undoing the Institution’ – the intense title of this session – than I’m thinking about the institution of academia, and what I’m practicing at this conference. To paraphrase Andrea Fraser: the institution is not just some big bad organisation out there. We are the institution, we make up the institution, and it’s up to us to decide the values with which we work.

So what are these values? Today I will be speaking from roughness, from provisionality and uncertainty, from being in the thick of it; but in the hope that it goes some way towards saying the things that actually need to be said.

2)

So what is an institution? I like Mick Wilson’s definition of the institution as a ‘trans-

generational project'. It's a way that we can collaborate with those in the past, and in the future; people who we can't directly meet. And this leads me to think about the people who run and govern our institutions as stewards. Stewards who are liaising between – and responsible to – these different generations of necessarily absent stakeholders. These roles of office are something more abstract and more long-term than them as individuals.

So. Management at the university are trying to undertake these cuts. And we as students and staff are saying to them in every forum available to us that we think this is awful and that we reject this. And management don't care, they don't want to listen. And so we say: ok. You're not upholding your responsibilities as stewards. You're not acting in our interests, and we don't think you're acting in the interests of those who came before, or who are coming after, either. So we step outside of the agreed governance structures around how we work together and behave, to collectively challenge these stewards. The staff union UCU takes a vote of no confidence in senior management, and a vote on industrial action. Students come together in protest: we make new spaces for discussion, we speak in public condemnation in newspapers and social media; and we try to rally the wider student body.

3)

So, remotely, and in the situation of Covid, we're been trying to meet and engage students. Trying to bring clarity to a situation that management are trying very hard to keep quiet and secret; and saying to our peers that we, as students, absolutely have the right and the power to question these cuts.

And as part of this, we're constantly trying to synthesise a complex and rapidly changing situation into clear communications and actions. And because staff are very vulnerable in speaking out individually in all this, we end up holding some very confidential and sensitive information, that by its nature needs to be kept to a select few. And so a core group forms, a centre, which has a better sense of the overall picture, and is therefore better placed to identify and keep track of different actions. People fall into different roles due to their particular interests and availability; informal positions of leadership emerge. Some end up feeling stuck, unable to let go, and become exhausted; and others feel themselves perpetually at the edges, ill-equipped or otherwise unable to take part.

It's unsustainable. And the very real urgency of the context means there is no time to reflect on how we are working together, and figure out something else. And this isn't anything new; it's what Jo Freeman named as 'the tyranny of structurelessness' in grassroots organising of the feminist movement in the 60s, and a familiar dilemma to most collectives and activist groups. Freeman is sympathetic to this kind of informal semi-organisation; but is pretty clear in expressing her sense of the limits of what it can achieve.

And I want to note the ethical question of talking about this here. These are all things that the group is trying to work through. So while it feels totally urgent for be speaking about this work here today, and to speak to my very genuine questions; some of these questions are embedded in a group conversation that is alive and uncertain. To speak here to you today, is to speak to, and with the group, with all my blindspots. And that brings a profound sense of vulnerability, and risk.

Which is also to say: hi guys. I love you guys.

Onwards.

4)

What kind of commitment is needed to organise, scrutinise and challenge these institutions? It's not just energy and time; Andrew X's essay 'Give Up Activism' points to the deep social and psychological investment too. We are uncertain, afraid, full of doubt. In order to assure ourselves of our purpose, we bind ourselves to things, and this becomes part of how we end becoming bound up with each other. How tight are this weave, and how do we keep 'room for manoeuvre'? We are tired and unsure; we speak gratitude and admiration for one another's work. I think of Byung Chul-Han: "The violence of positivity does not deprive, it saturates; it does not exclude, it exhausts". I wonder how and when this stream of affirmation becomes another bind.

One of the risks of being 'in resistance' is becoming fully absorbed or defined by the thing you oppose. My friend Sara was telling me about the 'MeToo' movement's influence on some big dance companies in Europe, with dancers challenging their sexist and exploitative working conditions. And she mentioned a dancer she knew who actually retrained as a lawyer in order to fight this. And I'm so struck by that gesture. When do we need to give up the thing we came here to do – the role, the identity, the labour – in order to defend it? [And in a much much smaller way, this is happening here, right?]

And in a weird flipped way, it makes me think again about these roles of institutional governance. Because traditionally universities were led by people who had been career academics. And when vacancies came up in senior leadership positions, someone – who had gone into academia to teach or research – had to bite the bullet and put themselves forward for these roles, and give up their research career. Of course, things are a bit different now, and the people who run our universities are mostly career managers. But I'm just struck by that parallel sense of becoming absorbed by institution – either in upholding it or protesting it – and how each of us are continually making very personal decisions in relation to all that.

5)

I'm thinking about where some of my incredible artist and activist-friends have ended up, who never got included in the archive. How do we hold onto these figures and their work? I'm not saying that the institutions that we have now are doing a good job – and maybe I just need to really fundamentally shift how I think of loss and death – but I still hope for ways that we can continue to draw from and feel the force of these people's work. Structures such that people can move on, and their efforts don't die with them. How do we ensure that all this work isn't consigned to merely an individual solution – that we can situate ourselves in a legacy of resistance – that we're not constantly reinventing the wheel?

I was thinking about the line from Yeats, 'things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'. I'm thinking about the stewards at the centre of the institution. And the centre of this student group. And I'm thinking: what it would mean to organise without a centre? And then I remembered that recently I have been making loads of wreaths! Wreaths don't have a centre. So I wondered what that could tell us.

And before I go on I just want to name a debt in my wreath-making, which is a very new practice, to Benny Némerofsky Ramsay, and his incredible floral arrangements. And also to note that what I'm about to say will really risk generalising between short-term resistance groups and massive institutions like the University; but I'm really thinking about trans-generationality, and that the duration of a generation – as in, how long individuals participate in a project – across these different contexts might be very very different.

Back to wreaths: I am so struck by the fact that the force that actually holds the wreath together – and makes it cohere as a sculptural form – is everything trying to push toward the outside. Yeats again: the falcon "Turning and turning in the widening gyre", spiralling outwards. When you start a wreath, you need that initial branch to go the whole way round. I'm not sure if we can have a structure – that we can have these kinds of organisational projects – without those initial figures. At the start, you need some people, some group, that go around the whole way; that have an overview, and can initiate the structures that Jo Freeman calls for. But later, we can have these things that are just going three-quarters of the way around the wreath. And that doesn't compromise its structural integrity. So we get to this point where the form is being held together by all these things that don't go the full way around. Those first branches are not doing that work of holding it all together. And if necessary, they could melt or dissolve or whatever, and structurally the thing as a whole would still be totally fine. They are there simply to enable the other things to gather; to initiate, but not sustain, a structure that can outlive them.

So, thinking about Transversality, thinking about this conference, I guess I'm not really talking about 'undoing the institution', but actually speaking in favour of some kind of

institutionality. Seeking ways in which we resist consolidating, or becoming beholden to, or trapped in a centre, by specifically seeking out that very transgenerational nature of institutions that allows individual figures to arrive and depart.

And I might leave it there. Thanks.

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