

Daniel Blanga Gubbay

*The Möbius Strip.*

*On Fictional Institutions*

This text was first delivered in February 2017 at *The Fantastic Institution*<sup>1</sup>, a three-day arts programme organised by Buda in Kortrijk, Belgium. The oral nature of this text has been kept in the current published version. The passages on the intervention come from *Fictional Institutions. On Radical Imagination*, co-written with Livia Andrea Piazza and published in November 2016 in *Turn Turtle! Reenacting the Institute*<sup>2</sup>, edited by Elke van Campenhout, Florian Malzacher, and Lilia Mestre.

1.

“Today I wrote a detailed critique of a non-existing movie.

I described the three characters in a plot somehow violent,  
a peculiar form of acting and the precise movements of the camera.

Maybe somebody will find my writing.

Maybe somebody will look for the movie.

Maybe not finding it, somebody might decide to do a remake.

Or perhaps just the sequel: a place on the second floor,  
that ignores the absence of the floor below,  
and yet remains up, suspended in the air.”

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1 <http://www.budakortrijk.be/en/the-fantastic-institution>

2 Elke van Campenhout, Florian Malzacher, Lilia Mestre, *TURN, TURTLE!: REENACTING THE INSTITUTE, Performing Urgency #2*, Berlin 2016.

Last year this sentence accompanied a booklet conceived by the Aleppo project for *How To Build a Manifesto for the Future of a Festival*<sup>3</sup>, a series of publications edited by the Festival of Santarcangelo in Italy. This sentence was part of the fourth and last issue, conceived in July 2015 as an experiment of radical imagination: what does it mean – together with a group of students – to imagine a fictional festival that never took place, and yet to print its brochure, including its programme, with the description of all projects, and a reader, gathering and producing reflections around it. Back then the question was: what are the possible consequences of a festival that never took place, or that took place in fiction?

This experiment was inspired by a project that Koen Brams and Krist Gruijthuijsen published at the beginning of the 2000s, compiling the *Encyclopedia of Fictional Artists*<sup>4</sup>, and gathering characters of artists, from 1605 until today, living inside novels and movies. These are artists living in the realm of fiction, and so do their productions, which are fictional artworks – such as sculptures, films or performances – that were never created, or are continuously created by each reader through the literal description of their shape, colours or movement. These are fictional artworks created by fictional artists of the novels, transporting us into a second level of fiction: a fiction inside fiction.

And yet, sometimes what is created in fiction does not remain in fiction: while compiling the *Encyclopedia*, Brams reminds, for example, that a canvas of Frenhofer – the character of Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* – inspired Picasso. It did not inspire him metaphorically, but rather in the technique of Frenhofer, whose canvas never existed, and yet whose influence is present.

Starting from this example, I would like to trace here a reflection on the potentiality of fiction, and its role as a tool to rethink the institution. The first part of this talk discusses the concept of fictional institution – a topic explored in a recent article in *TURN, TURTLE!* that I wrote together with Livia Piazza, and whom I would like to thank here; while the second part opens up to the use of fiction as a tool in reflecting inclusiveness within institutions.

2.

To investigate the possibility of fictional institutions I propose to start from a first short point on the notion of the institution itself. In an article titled *Il cosiddetto 'male' e la critica dello Stato*<sup>5</sup> (2005) Italian operaist thinker Paola Virno, suggests that “institutions offer real protection only and exclusively if they

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3 Daniel Blanga Gubbay, Daniel, Livia Andrea Piazza, *How to Build a Manifesto for the Future of a Festival*, Santarcangelo di Romagna, 2016.

4 Koen Brams, Krist Gruijthuijsen, *Encyclopedia of Fictional Artists (1605–today)*, Zurich 2010.

5 Paolo Virno, *Il cosiddetto 'male' e la critica dello stato*, [in:] *Forme di vita* n° 4, *L'animale pericoloso: natura umana e istituzioni politiche*, Rome, 2005.

demonstrate at all times that they belong to the domain of that which can also be something other than it is.”

I would like to start from this sentence – whose metamorphic agenda seems to have the ability to transport us already in a fantasy plot – and more precisely from the idea of real protection that exists at its core: it seems to imply that the institution has an established frame – hence an inside and an outside – an inside which might be identified and characterised by the share some rules, and a common understanding of them.

In order to proceed this morning, I would propose to start proceeding from this model, taking a paper strip to represent a scale model of the institution as a frame, in which to recognize its inside and outside.

3.

The further point is to add the word *fiction* to the word *institution* so as to explore the possible meaning of their neighbouring. One might say that the art institution is that which often hosts also fiction within its frame and border; the question that I would like to raise is more: what is the possibility for the institution not to host fiction, but rather to be fictional? What do we have to intend for fictional institution? Indeed, while speaking about fictional institution we are in front of several possibilities.

On the one hand – exactly as we encountered fictional artists in the realm of fiction – the possibility of encountering a fictional institution in the realm of fiction, as there might be institutions (scholarly societies, companies, museum, schools) that we might meet inside a sci-fi book by Octavia Butler or Ursula Le Guin. Each of these institutions has a frame and is characterised by a share of rules and a common understanding of them. However, I am referring here to the possibility of investigating something else, namely, fictional institutions that we do not encounter in fiction, but rather that appear directly in front of us, camouflaging themselves as real ones.

In 2011, Jozef Wouters – alongside a group of scientists and activists – set up the Zoological Institute for Recently Extinct Species, adding a new wing to the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences in Brussels. The new institution provided this wing with a collection of images and comments that tried to illustrate the position of the human race on Earth. The temporary extension could be accessed by museum visitors during the day simply by passing through a corridor from the old wing to the new one. This artistic project is very specific: it is not only a fictional institution, it also stands contiguous to the real one, opening a reflection on this meeting and interference. What are the consequences of this direct confrontation? Jozef Wouters said once that through fictionalizing themselves as institutions artists scale themselves to the size of the institutions with which they want to bargain. Hence, once the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Science asked the new Zoological Institute to put a sign in the corridor clarifying the entrance in a fictional area of the the museum—where the term's use no longer referred to its meaning of *imaginary*, rather to

*made-up, constructed* and almost *fake* – immediately its question bounced back: is not the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Science fictional as well?

4.

The Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Science presents itself as non-constructed. As if it was devoid of fiction or as it were *natural* (and I would like to focus now on the latter term).

In September 2008, at the beginning of the financial crisis in the United States, American journalist Jerry Monaco wrote on his blog an article titled *The Fiction of Institutions: The Institution of Fiction*, in which he stated:

As far as we know, humans are the only life form evolved on our planet who have developed flexible and changeable institutional structures, such as states, bureaucratic entities, organized religion, voluntary associations, and, most importantly today, business institutions, such as the modern corporation. Such institutional entities are always a “fiction.” They are not “fictional” in a trivial way, but “fictional” to some important extent that says something about human society, history, and how we come to understand and misunderstand the world we have created for ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Further in the text Monaco explains that the use of the word *fiction* in quotes is exactly to underline that these institutional entities are not un-real social structures, but that they are social structures created by human beings and treated by us *as if* they were natural. *Nature* is here used by him as opposed to *fiction* (made-up), and Monaco says that the semantics of *nature* is used by institutions to remove the (suspect of) fiction that always lies at the origins of their foundation: an attempt to remove the suspect of fiction, to legitimate its existence and naturalise it as the only possible reality.

The following year, in 2009, Mark Fisher analysed this mechanism in *Capitalist Realism*, remarking how capitalism presents itself exactly as “a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief”:<sup>7</sup> it says that if it is not the optimal world; it is certainly the most desirable one, imposing only a little price to pay, before the risks of terrorism and totalitarianism, which are accused of thriving in the false belief and fiction. On the contrary, rejecting fiction on the others, capitalism sells itself as a system devoid of fiction, and while doing so it weaves its own fiction until the point it “is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>8</sup> If the notion of fiction reminds us the possibility of being different, everything is made to make us forget the *fiction* at the core of the institution; the absence of fiction and the semantic of nature become a tool to defend itself from critique.

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6 Jerry Monaco, *The Fiction of Institutions: The Institution of Fiction*, 2008, <http://monacojerry.livejournal.com/86462.html>.

7 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, London 2009, p. 5.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 2, 16.

Hence, this is exactly the purpose of fictional institutions, as the one of Wouters: reminding the fictional aspect lying at the core of the same idea of the institution. The institution is always made up, and hence it could have been made up differently. The fictional institution is that which blurs the solidity of the existing one: it does not claim its realness, rather transports the same idea of institution in the realm of fiction. Facing the small model of the institution I just constructed with a paper strip, it would be suddenly being reminded of the deliberate gesture of its construction, and that – eventually – it could have also been a different one.

5.

Jerry Monaco raises another point, while analysing in the same article the use of *nature* in the semantics of the institution: while presenting itself as *natural*, the institution does not simply defend itself from critique, but also provokes a misattribution of agency:

The way ancient humans misattributed personality and agency to natural phenomena, we misattribute personality and agency to institutions. Ancient humans did not understand and could not control natural phenomena; yet we act in relation to our own historically developed institutions, “as if” they were a phenomena of nature that we do not understand and cannot control. Institutions do not act. People act. A corporation does not “do” anything. People do things, individually and collectively in the name of the corporation [...] The institutions we have created have become as Gods and Monsters to our own eyes.<sup>9</sup>

According to Monaco, the natural presumption of the institution is not simply ontological (in the self-definition of naturalness that avoids critique), but also phenomenological (hence, modifying the way of perceiving it and its agency).

I personally think it is more complex than this, and that institutions are layers of antecedent behaviours that have been accumulated – or a third entity filled with pre-given missions that exceed the will of the people working in it – and it would be maybe too easy to imagine it as a pure contingency that is equal to the sum of individual behaviours, since somehow the third entity is more than the sum of the parts. Still, following Monaco, it is important to unveil the misattribution of agency, as a starting point to release awareness on the possibility of changing the institution.

Indeed, this investigation of fiction in institutions does not look much at the past of the institution itself, to simply unveil the construction, or as an archaeological tool to deconstruct the past genealogy; rather it might be a tool projected towards its future. This is where I would like to proceed to the second part of this lecture, raise a question on the use of fiction not as a deconstructive tool looking at the past of the institution, but rather as an instrument for its future. Furthermore, I would like to see the possibility of fiction to appear not only as a tool that can be used from the outside to challenge the institution, but also what are the possibilities for an institution, from the inside, to use fiction as a tool?

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9 Jerry Monaco, *The Fiction of Institutions: The Institution of Fiction*, op. cit.

6.

For this second part I would like to start from another perspective where this dichotomy *fiction / nature* is present, yet with a different use.

Two years ago the feminist collective Labora Cuboniks released a manifesto, titled *Xeno-feminism: A Politics for Alienation*, constructed as an interplay to rethink nature through fiction. Fiction appears in it without the negative aura that seemed to still have been present recently, and affirms fiction as an act of freedom from the fixity of nature, in its modern construction as something immutable. The first page of the manifesto proclaims:

Nothing should be accepted as fixed, permanent, or “given” – neither material conditions nor social forms. XF mutates, navigates and probes every horizon. Anyone who’s been deemed “unnatural” in the face of reigning biological norms, anyone who’s experienced injustices wrought in the name of natural order, will realize that the glorification of “nature” has nothing to offer us – the queer and trans among us, the differently-abled, as well as those who have suffered discrimination [...] XF seizes alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds. We are all alienated – but have we ever been otherwise? It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy.<sup>10</sup>

Coming from the tradition of sci-fi feminism, Labora Cuboniks sees fiction as an alienating tool from assigned and fixed identities; a form of liberation from an assigned image. Fiction is not a tool to unveil our construction, but rather a liberating gesture from assigned positions. While doing this, Labora Cuboniks endorses the idea of fiction as a subversive tool, not unlike Arab and Afro-futurisms of the last twenty years, which utilise fictional and sci-fi elements to perturb and liberate identities from the iconography of primitivism still existing in the colonial gaze upon the Middle East and the African continent: dressing oneself with fiction as a subversive tool.

Hence, flirting with its fictionality, opens something more than simply deconstructing the genealogy. The fiction is not simply something that might be discovered; it is rather a cover – hence something that might operate from the inside – under which one can proceed for the sake of the future.

Here is a shift in the operation: from the outside to the inside; and from *discovering* to *undercovering*.

7.

By going back to the question about the institution, and investigating the Xeno-feminist tools in the construction of institutions, what does it mean to dress up the institution with fiction? Jerry Monaco was speaking about the misattribution of personality and agency to institutions, with the risk of being treated as

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<sup>10</sup> Labora Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*, 2015, <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/>.

natural phenomena: what if one could free institution from this determinism, and try to give it the pace of a character inhabiting the pages of a novel? Once discovered that fiction is at the core of the same idea of the institution, what does it mean to push it forward, to reclaim it then as a liberating tool, as an alienating tool from assigned and fixed identities? More than a goal, this has to be perceived as a – still important – exercise. To work under cover of fiction, or to pretend to be something else. (A series of potential tasks: act *as if* your institution were in another place; act *as if* your scale were different; act *as if* your audience were composed of human and non-human). It would be easy to see this as a game, or an empty exercise; yet is it not about fiction, but rather what it produces: a generative fiction. What is it not simply in itself, but in its possibility to create further possibilities?

In a recent book about market volatility, Franco-Lebanese thinker Elie Ayache stated that “[e]vents that are really unexpected create their own possibilities. Only *by* occurring – and not before they occur or regardless of whether they occur – do they create the path that [one] can retrace in order to see how they possibly occurred.”<sup>11</sup> Fiction might be the cover under which some impossible events pretend to happen. And yet, after it, we will retrace how this was possible to happen. Pretending to be something else might create the possibility for this something to appear. The fictionalised appearance of the possible creates its possibility to appear. Eventually, the institution does not simply host fiction, but is hosted by it, inviting in a circular mechanism.

It is here that, while going back to the small model I started with, I would like to propose to shift the paper circle into the figure of the Möbius strip, a figure discovered by Möbius in 1858. It is enough to disconnect the band and link it once more, turning one of the two sides. What does this gesture produce? The Möbius strip is a band producing a continuous surface that has one side and one border, and in which one can no longer distinguish the differences between the inside and the outside. I was looking at the band as the image of an institution, having defined limits, protecting and creating an inside and an outside, and sometimes hosting fiction. With Möbius, while following its wall with the finger, we are vertiginously transported into the inside, without understanding when this exactly happens. The limits are blurred, I find myself transported into fiction, and discover fiction as part of each institution, and discover the pleasure of fiction as a tool beyond assigned identity.

And yet – while losing the boundaries – the band still has a precise shape: the small model does not dissolve in a flexible and liquid one, infiltrating qualities that often imply precariousness and vulnerability. It reclaims its solidity: yet it hosts and is hosted by fiction, suggesting to welcome and produce events that are really unexpected, in order to create their own possibilities.

8.

While having this model in front of me, a last question emerges: what kind of consequences might the fact of setting fiction as a tool have in regard to inclusiveness and discrimination in today's institutions. I would

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11 Elie Ayache, *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability*, Chichester, 2010.

like to end opening a question on fiction as a tool in the struggle for inclusiveness.

In her lecture titled *The Future Was Collective*<sup>12</sup>, young African-American thinker Adrienne Maree Brown informed the audience last April in Dubai that she started working on a feminist sci-fi, as she could no longer identify herself in a world imagined by others and was haunted by the acute impression of living *inside* the imagination of someone else.

The art institution is a place to exercise imagination; and in recent years the first question that very often emerged was: who is concerned by the imaginary that is proposed? Who is not represented by the imaginary that is proposed? Who is not concerned by the questions that it suggests? (A set of questions that sometimes are reduced to the idea of reaching new audiences, or boil down to the political push toward social practices that might allow other political structure to disengage from some sectors).

Yet, during the same speech, Brown proposed a turn. Addressing directly the audience, she loudly asked: “Imagine if only people in this room were responsible for the future. How does this feel for you? What kind of level of responsibility would this imply?”

If we claim that the institution is a place where to exercise imagination, the question is not simply “who is concerned by the imaginary that is proposed” but rather “who is concerned by imagine the institution itself?” What Brown raises is the awareness of the fact that putting efforts only on the first level – hence thinking that one can work only on the content in engaging with people that are not close to the institution – preserves the risk of a patronising model. Brown seems to be proposing an attempt to engage the people indifferent to the institution, rather than addressing them as mere consumers of the content produced by the institution. What is suggested here by Brown is the possibility of shifting between the content and the structure, the inside and the outside, as shown by Möbius.

What does it mean to suggest that the character is to be written? What about hiring someone that is unfit for the job? This might mean that the institution has – so far – been unfit for her or him. If the institution is a character inhabiting the pages of a novel, what would ensue if one gave up the idea of bringing it closer to the people and left it unfinished and undeveloped? The institution turns out not only to be feeding the imagination of the other, but to be releasing her or his imagination to write (construct) the same institution as well.

9.

As a direct result of connecting the two sides of the Möbius band, something new is produced. Besides the possibility of losing the distinction between the inside and the outside, a hole is produced. The fictional institution communicates its fictionality, and by doing so opens up its incompleteness, its possibility to be written.

The Möbius strip produces a gap, something that remains open and cannot be closed. Maybe this

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12 Adrienne Maree Brown, *The Future Was Collective*, Dubai 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qiFPEWDDDAc>.

hole, this entry door, is not a collateral effect of the band; maybe it is the point around which the institution is very carefully constructed. This is the point that belongs to “the domain of that which can also be something other than it is”, and the institution hosts real protection, only in being unprotected, with a collective and speculative exercise of imagination that, more than keeping itself in the realm of fiction, explores the creation of possibilities, and the possibility of bringing the institution elsewhere.

Finally, with regard to the Möbius band, I would like to evoke the point that is often remarked in geometry. The Möbius strip cannot continuously touch the surface on which it lies: it has to be suspended. This might be my closing remark, as a wish for the institution. May the institution be a house at the second floor, that ignores the absence of the floor below, and yet remains suspended, up in the air.

**Daniel Blanga Gubbay is a Brussels-based researcher and curator of public programs. He graduated in Italy with Giorgio Agamben at the Architecture University of Venice, and got a PhD in Cultural Studies and a postdoc in Düsseldorf on the transformation of the concept of possible in Modernity. He teaches Political Philosophy of the Arts, lectures regularly in Beirut, and currently holds the position of head of the performance and choreography department at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels. He works as dramaturge for the Kunstenfestivaldesarts and is part of the curatorial board for LiveWorks. He is the initiator and curator of Aleppo, a research platform engaged in public programs in performance and political theory, appearing as open and free Imaginary Schools.**