

Conviviality: Persons, Tools, Collectives

Tags

#conviviality

#artivism

#Ivan Illich

#institutional critique

The notion of conviviality, or the adjective 'convivial' in common parlance, designates something or someone, who is friendly, enjoyable, warm and social. This unpretentious word can, however, be a powerful request to transform existing institutions through which art-making, ways of collaboration and presentation, activist practices and artworks themselves come into being. With its softness and non-radicality, it can signify a radical leftist alternative to precarious working conditions, exhausting process of fundraising, shady curatorial decisions, cheap deals of artist in residency programs, and other institutional rules and practices that alienate and precarize us.

This seemingly simple notion has a strong political-theoretical background in the writing of Austrian-Croatian social theorist Ivan Illich, who critically discussed the process of institutionalization in modern Western society and its effects on how we live, socialize and understand ourselves. Illich's notion of conviviality refers, in essence, to "the freedom to create things among people live" instead of only consuming the things standardized and imposed on us by the system of institutions. Furthermore, in his book *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) he explains why such freedom is important and at the same time hindered in our society. Departing from the Marxist idea that 'human nature' is per definition externalized and socialized by labor and its products, Illich understands institutions and tools - hand tools, devices, machines, conceptual constructs - as our crucial environment. But how that environment created, on which basis, with which means and ends – must be critically revisited, in order to achieve an environment which will offer a more participative and caring ambience for living and working. With that aim, Illich not only criticized contemporary society for its manipulative institutionalization and thereby alienation of various human practices (learning, healing, moving and transporting, selling and buying, etc.), he also projected alternative tools, those which are more accessible, more shareable or even perhaps more friendly.

That the institutional system of our world is experienced as oppressive and unfriendly is already common place. So much so that in times of pandemic and the measures that governments have issued in order to protect our lives, we must deal with the question of “How to suddenly trust the states and their institutions, when they have been manipulative for such a long time?” As Illich claimed, in our institutionalized society institutions don’t only serve people but above all serve further institutionalizations. As such, they manipulate our needs, practices and daily lives. How can we then believe that the government, the pharmaceutical industry, institutions of health care, customs and education are not now just working for their own sake, for the sake of protecting the flow of capital and feeding their own bureaucracy, rather than working for us, for the sake of the people’s lives? How to be sure that what we have adopted is not a prelude to a grand-scale biometric fascism? How to deal with the fact that much of the knowledge and patent rights to the vaccines that can save millions of lives are still in the hands of private companies? How to not see that vaccination of immigrants without documents is, in the EU, treated as an administrative issue, which takes a certain time – based on administrative demands and not ‘a sense of humanity’?

The problem wouldn’t be so deep if we can get rid of institutions all together. But it seems, we cannot. So, soon after the first wave of the pandemic and passionate critiques of anti-COVID 19 measures – e.g. by Paul Preciado and especially Giorgio Agamben – we heard voices of those who attempted who tried to consider the very contradictions of the pandemic situation. Roberto Esposito, although he shares the concern about desocialization with Agamben, insisted that without social institutions we would not have been able to resist the virus. He repeated his theses from *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (2002) about the aporic character of immunity, where the immunitary function of law is also based on saving individuals from violence by using violence. For him, therefore the lockdown is a violent institutional measure that attacks individuals’ freedom in attempt to protect their lives.

I introduce here conviviality to shift the institutional critique towards prefiguration of more desired alternatives. And to stimulate an art-curatorial appetite for the convivial, I’d propose the following observations based on Illich’s analysis:

Observation 1: Our lives are to a large degree institutionalized, and institutions articulate the triadic relationship between persons, tools, and types of collectivity. Institutions and tools are thus intrinsic to social relationships. The way we create and use the school, as the key example of institutionalized knowledge production and sharing, defines the individual’s subjectivity as the pupil, which determines the way in which these subjectivities form the collective, and vice versa – since the process is

transversal, rather than linear.

Observation 2: Most of our institutions passed two watersheds during the 20th century: medicine, education, the mail, social work, transportation, civil engineering etc. The first watershed meant that new knowledge was applied to find the solution of a clearly stated problem, leading to the new efficiency, which could be scientifically measured. The year 1913, for instance, marks a watershed in the history of Western medicine, since at that moment a patient began to have more than a fifty percent chance that a graduate of a medical school would provide them with an effective treatment (in the case of one of the diseases recognized by the medical science). The second watershed, however, refers to the point where the previously demonstrated progress starts to be used as an argument for institutional exploitation in the service of a value which is determined and justified by professional élites. In the mid-fifties, therefore, it became evident that medicine had itself created new kinds of disease, those which are *iatrogenic* (medically induced). The exclusion of mothers, aunts, herbalists, and other nonprofessionals from the care of their pregnant, hurt, sick, or dying relatives and friends resulted in unprecedented demands for medical services. As Illich wrote, hospital-born, formula-fed, antibiotic-stuffed children grow into adults who can breathe the air, eat the food, and survive the lifelessness of a modern city, who will breed and raise, at almost any cost, a generation even more dependent on medicine.

This is the typical evolution from a service to a manipulative institution. Any institution that moves toward its second watershed tends to become highly manipulative. For instance, today it costs more to make teaching possible than to teach.

Think about the Artworld.

Think about the COVID-19 pandemic.

The goal of a manipulative institution is a radical monopoly over its products and services, where people become dependent on the institutional standardization and its experts.

Think about the Artworld.

Think about the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a sort of detour I would like to share Illich's succinct story from Mexico:

Since 1945 the money spent on roads has increased every year.

It has been used to build highways between a few major centers. Fragile cars now move at high speeds over smooth roads. Large, specialized trucks connect factories.

The old, all-purpose tramp truck has been pushed back into the mountains or swamps.

In most areas either the peasant must take a bus to go to the market to buy industrially packaged commodities, or he sells his pig to the trucker in the employ of the meat merchant.

He can no longer go to town with his pig.

He pays taxes for the roads which serve the owners of various specialized monopolies and does so under the illusion that the benefits will ultimately spread to him.

Obviously, we live in a manipulatively institutionalized world, but still, we need institutions to facilitate, preserve and transmit certain practices between social groups, regions and generations.

What we should do is transform these institutions into more common frameworks, whose shape is in accordance with our own tastes and needs “and to put them to use in caring for and about others”. As such, they are candidates for convivial tools and institutions, which Illich envisaged as:

- Easily used
- Used by anybody (Does not require previous certification of the user)
- As often as desired (Does not impose an obligation to use)
- For the purpose to a large extent chosen by the user
- Does not restrain others from using it equally
- User expresses meaning through action.

Although these standards don't look unachievable, monopoly is hard to fight when it has frozen both the physical world and our behavior and imagination. Most tools today cannot be used in a convivial fashion, although it is not their intrinsic limitation. The same goes even for art, which is supposed to be a practice of experimentation, speculation, and imagination. In general, we can say, conviviality is possible; technology does not demand that tools not be convivial, so most of them are artificially restricted through institutional arrangements. It is usually a political decision.

Conviviality can be a tool of curating or its end. Or, there shouldn't be the 'or' at all.

Convivial schools, cinemas, medical care facilities, libraries and other organizations, practices, and policies are not a dream, although they now occupy mostly marginal positions.

Think about free software, open source movements, cooperative organic gardening, pirate online libraries such as Aaarg and Library Genesis, open universities and other DIY educational projects, give-away shops, freeshops and food swaps, Occupy, Right to the city, Precarias a la deriva, illegal_cinema Belgrade / Paris / Bilbao, pirate cinema Berlin, Teatro Valle in Rome, Embros theatre and Green Park / Pedion tou Areos in Athens, and the skill-exchange principle of Solidarity movement in Greece.

In conclusion, let me infer that curating art is a way of institutionalizing art. Institutionalization, however, doesn't necessarily need to be manipulative. Conviviality is also a direction to go in. It is at hand and waiting for the political decision.

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curating
in
context



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