

Caroline Picard and Lara Schoorl are the curators of [Institutional Garbage, a digital exhibition](#) that is viewable online through December 31, 2016. In *Institutional Garbage*, more than 40 contributors speculate about what forms of garbage or trash a Utopic institution might accumulate and leave behind. We chatted over email about the curation process, the nature of institutions, and revolutionary art.

Wendy Burk: Is there a story that crystallizes how *Institutional Garbage* came into being, or how you worked on curating the exhibit together?

Caroline Picard: Devin King and I were helping some curators, Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quirós, with a film they were working on during a residency at Rebuild Foundation. Part of their work involved asking the question of progress. What does progress look like now?, or something like that. They conducted these interviews in the basement of The Stony Island Bank, literally in this old bank vault that was not yet refurbished and so totally rusted out, dirty, and mesmerizing in a trash-porn kind of way. The site itself made me think about human infrastructure, and how personally difficult it is for me to see a positive way through the future. Statistical projections about global warming, waning resources, reactionary politics, rising nationalism, neoliberalism, and stiffening border controls make the world seem increasingly inhospitable, to such an extent that I find it more and more difficult to imagine what a future looks like. I recently attended at a lecture by Elaine Scarry where she pointed out that the US alone has 14 nuclear warheads; it takes just one warhead to destroy an entire continent and yet there are only seven continents. What's with this excess of potential force? So the question of what does progress look like struck me as quite strange, and I guess from there I thought about the desire for Utopic institutions that would regulate human society, so that we might reach to be our best selves collectively. And then I laughed because those places would also have carbon footprints, and they would also make trash, and people who went to work at those places would probably hate their jobs some (if not most) of the time, and disagree with the hierarchies those same institutions relied upon. But that's a sketch of my footing—I'm also interested in how the idea caught your imagination, Lara, as I get the sense that you tied it into language more directly...

Lara Schoorl: You're right, I did. We sat at the counter at [Sector 2337](#) and you asked if I wanted to help you reach out to several artists with a question that you couldn't quite formulate yet, so you described, in different ways, how you were thinking about a future institution, an ideal or Utopic institution, one that would never exist, perhaps was impossible to exist, and then what its footprint would be, its trash. I couldn't imagine or understand this place you were talking about. Not as a concrete place I or anyone could visit, but I understood the question of it. Perhaps I had difficulty understanding you because English is not my first language, yet I knew all the words you used. Translation has become inherent to how I think and express myself, and now that I speak two languages fluently I often wonder about a deeper meaning of words, their etymologic, visual, and phonetic origins. Do I really understand a certain word? Do I feel their meaning when saying them, do they come out of my mouth in addition to recognizing them on the page? In this case, the word 'institution' kept confusing me. Many things can be an institution, perhaps everything is an institution in the sense that a majority has agreed on what each word and/or thing stands for and/or means (although this differs in different languages, of

course). I took a class once that was called “Art as Institution (and its critique)” and we read different philosophers, such as John Searle, Arthur Danto, Valéry Proust, and Walter Benjamin, who all tried to define or break definitions of art. Of course we never came to an understanding of what the institution of art is; it became clear that it is malleable enough so that everyone could work within a vast field of art and make work that is significantly different from each other.

CP: Somehow that makes me think that you are getting at what an institution is or means with this idea of malleability — like the institution is strong enough to remain unchanged, despite the movements and gestures that happen within it...but that keeps the notion of the institution also quite vague. Institution of what?

LS: The word institution is as malleable as art. When we talked at the counter you didn’t say museum or gallery or project space; those words seem more defined already. You didn’t use those words because you did not know what kind of institution a future institution might be. Thus purposefully you asked for just an institution, and its trash, leaving it malleable and via that vagueness inviting the artists and writers and curators to contribute in shaping a possible impossible institution.

WB: **Would you briefly walk us through what we will find in each the three digital rooms of *Institutional Garbage*?**

CP: It’s more or less divided into the categories of writers (A), curators (B), and artists (C), although there are cases in which the distinctions are a little arbitrary, maybe in the same way that beurocratic—

LS: I remember you saying you always have trouble spelling this word, bureaucratic, and how for some reason it is not difficult for me, perhaps because it has the same spelling in Dutch. Your spelling it incorrectly the same way as before now makes me smile. Also, did you know “bureau” in Dutch means “desk” – maybe next time we can just write deskcratics?

CP: Yes! It’s true, actually, and actually since that conversation I’ve gotten much better at spelling it (though obviously not in this case) because I always think of the French word for desk, bureau, which I’ve never had any trouble spelling. I love how typos are usually private things. They are embarrassing in public and detract from the authority of a given text or writer.

LS: And I wonder always, why are they wrong? And why do we automatically correct them in our minds? What does “beurocratic” mean?

CP: Maybe in this case, the show is funny because I wouldn’t typically curate an exhibit with such a regulated system, defining artists from curators from writers (and maybe it’s especially ironic because I inhabit all of those roles rather promiscuously), and yet in this case we did make a system whose distinctions, or cuts, don’t always make sense. For instance, Sofia Lemos is included in the writers category, although she is a curator whose text proposes an exhibition, and Lise Haller Baggesen is an artist who also writes, and who in this case has included a text. In the B section, the curators all present a unified format, however, and it functions almost like an

institutional retrospective, presenting ephemera from its history—in this case, posters for exhibitions. Except of course none of these exhibitions happened.

LS: The rooms are in a way divided broadly by field. We thought about having those fields mixed throughout each room, but because of the large amount of works and the vines growing in the background, it made sense to create some kind of order to make visible the chaos that drives this project. This division, which actually came forth out of a Google drive that just happened to be divided this way for practical reasons of keeping track how many visual and textual works we received, was copied practically by Pouya Ahmadi, our graphic designer, when moving the works from the Google drive to the website. *Seeing* the show for the first time this way it made sense. It might have been our most curatorial decision to keep it divided.

WB: What was it like designing ‘rooms’ for a digital gallery housed online?

CP: This was so complicated! It really blew my mind. It was interesting to bump into standardized assumptions about webspace—and in doing so, you feel how it also has a specific, purpose-driven architecture with its own customs, mores, languages, and so on. For instance, originally we wanted to have the show start in the middle, in the middle of Gallery B, and viewers would move up and down or left and right from there. After proposing this to a web designer, we discovered that it goes against all industry standards; it ended up being too complicated to enact because we would have had to build a custom site—making that site function equally well on a phone and a computer led to additional complexity. That’s just one example of many, but it felt so alienating—in an interesting way. Because the project demands a digital/programming literacy that neither Lara nor I had, to such an extent that I still don’t exactly have the tools to critique it — for instance, do websites typically start at the top left hand side in favor of Western standards that presuppose that one reads from left to right? Or is there some other reason? In the end we were very lucky to meet Ben Nicholson and get his help, but I loved (and sometimes hated) the feeling of being so estranged from the Internet space, even if I spend most hours of my day in it.

LS: Yes, that is so true, and that makes me wonder if I pay enough attention to how the physical world around me is or is structured. Suddenly I am paradoxically wondering if virtual reality is a hyper reality because it is all about paying attention to your surroundings.

CP: Well, and that ties back to what you were saying about language, maybe—I guess I want to suggest that language is another kind of architecture, like the material architecture that comprises physical space, and then too the virtual architecture that makes up our internet reality... whenever you’re in an unfamiliar architecture, I guess you need a guide of some sort. That is, someone else who *is* proficient or literate.

LS: A medium? Although a medium also has its own architecture, similar perhaps to a translator who also brings in their context. It is as if we live between two mirrors which show us eternal layers from behind us in front of us and we can never turn our heads around fast enough to see that what is behind us, because what is behind when we look at it is in front of us. This perhaps is reflected in the space of *Institutional Garbage* as well, because despite it being online, a

seemingly borderless space with no direction, we were unable to put all works in one room, and like you said before, have the entrance in the middle.

I concur, Ben was amazing! I was moving at the time when the programming took place and would find installation updates in my inbox whenever I found WiFi. Every time I was amazed how a non-existent space was put into words mostly by Caroline and Pouya and how then Ben translated that into the webspace and then back into language to explain to us what he had done and how it worked—

CP: And what was impossible to produce as well — that was also interesting. He constantly used different metaphors to explain limitations—

LS: It was strange because with other shows I, both of us, have always physically helped installing the works, and for *Institutional Garbage* that wasn't necessary, but additionally Caroline and I couldn't. There was one particular aspect of building the website that was very complicated, that of navigating from room to room while having Tina Tahir's work *Growth* grow over time throughout the background of each room that was tricky. This was one case where Ben came up with a metaphor to explain possibilities with us, which I'd like to share because we both liked it so much (he refers to the background as wallpaper):

“...you can imagine that the wallpaper is lining the bottom of three separate desk drawers (websites) and the rooms are each ‘floating’ in one of the drawers; as you move the rooms around (stretch and condense them), the wallpaper stays solid underneath; over time, the wallpaper will change inside the drawers, but the rooms will continue to remain distinct modules and will not have any impact on how the wallpaper changes. Essentially, the wallpaper has no ‘awareness’ of the room on top of it and, further, each set of wallpaper has no ‘awareness’ of the other wallpapers; they will grow in an identical way, but it's good to keep in mind that they are literally three different instances of the same wallpaper.”

We kept this metaphor of the drawers throughout a series of emails as way to talk about the exhibition space in a way that seems visually three dimensional. We only needed to trick ourselves in order to understand what we wanted.

CP: Yes, that's true! I loved how it was easier to maintain the same metaphors in our correspondence. Rather than have to start from scratch, we'd all established that we understood what the drawers meant, and so then it led to additional drawer-related metaphors that paralleled the real potential or limit of digital space. The metaphor provided a way to communicate through our shared confusion.

WB: You have written that *Institutional Garbage* addresses “the sprawling question of what the trash of an ideal, Utopic art or academic institution might be.” One answer you propose is “the time and energy spent on eventually rejected or perhaps even unnoticed application letters or racist and sexist systems within which people have to work.” How did systemic/structural inequalities inform your process, and that of the artists, writers, and curators who are a part of the exhibit?

LS: I can't speak for how the artists were influenced or informed, but feel honored that among the works we received so many are personal and explicitly show that. It is sad, like Caroline said also, that in our contemporary society and political agenda nationalism, exclusivity, violence against humans and nature prevail. And that I really don't know how or if this will be different ever, if it ever was. But art, seeing it, talking about it, making and sharing it, for me has become a way where the idea and thought of an inclusive world, can be imagined and an inspiration to continue to imagine.

CP: This is also something that I loved about the process of the show—we ended up having so many personal and practical conversations behind the scenes; many of them came about because Lara and I were trying to articulate what kind of institutional ephemera we were looking for, and again, looking for metaphors, or examples. In one instance, I remember talking to Anna Martine Whitehead who contributed *Auntie Phyllis Speaks [Interview with Phyllis]*, a text that “imagines the words of a former enslaved woman speaking from the grave to a scribe sent to collect her stories.” In an email, Whitehead wrote, “It actually made me think about the opera George Lewis and Charles Gaines staged at the MCA last year, [*Afterword, The AACM (as) Opera*]... There was what seemed to be an entire act (or perhaps multiple acts) that opera-itized the minutes from the first meeting of the AACM.”

LS: Similarly, Jane Lewty and I talked about the process of finding a job, which directly influenced her contribution, a cut-up piece of a job rejection and application letters. In our email conversation she wrote about becoming the product of an institution to be bought by another institution and how demoralizing that is.

To certain institutions it does not matter who we actually are. We advertise, perhaps even objectify ourselves to tailor to a job description, and play an act in the hopes you can take on your own role when you become part of the production.

WB: Do you think of the work this exhibit does as documentary? revolutionary? perhaps some other descriptor of your choice?

LS: I don't know if I had thought of the word revolutionary before in relation to exhibition. But yes (!) the works in *Institutional Garbage* I think are revolutionary or documentary, and sometimes both. Nam Chi Nguyễn's work is an example of a revolutionary work, it is a manifesto!

Institutional Garbage itself, I think, started out as an experiment and a question, then it became a conceptual framework built from answers contributors provided with their artworks, writing, and imaginary exhibitions. This intangible nature of *Institutional Garbage* has always remained one layer of the exhibition. After the website was built it had a home, albeit temporary. This online location in addition to the many locations the works were made in became a second layer. I think, perhaps very simply, that the work this exhibition does is institutional; it hosts other institutions and is trying to find new places to be accommodated in itself.

Again, I also approach this question through language. Looking at the future of the exhibition I sometimes compare *Institutional Garbage* to words. Words change meaning over time, yet the word (its spelling) remains the same. In that sense both words and *Institutional*

Garbage become allegorical, it is something always representing something else, if not now it will in the future. Can I say that the exhibition is an institution of preposterous allegory?

I am taking the meaning of preposterous very literally here, via Mieke Ball and Patricia Parker, as a way of doing history reversed that I am a little obsessed with: “[t]his reversal [of the past in the present], which puts what came chronologically first (‘pre-’) as an aftereffect behind (‘post’) its later recycling, is what I would like to call [following Patricia Parker] *preposterous history*.”¹

Caroline, I feel like you think about the archive and residue of the *Institutional Garbage* a lot. How do you think of the work *Institutional Garbage* does as documentary? Or which works (if not all)?

CP: I love this idea of *Institutional Garbage* as an Institution of Preposterous Allegory. And maybe also because I was always trying to circle around how this institution could feel *real*, without ever confirming what kind of institution it is. Why would this place collect all of these things? [Kuras and MacKenzie's](#) *Values Values Values* (2008), for instance, includes photos of an art installation they produced that features small letters made from company mission statements. The letters are about as tall as a baseboard and, when installed, line the borders of a gallery with vaguely uplifting statements about value and community that nevertheless say nothing. In this context, the documentation we have in *Institutional Garbage* includes process images, so you don't even have a real sense for what the 2008 installation felt like. But here it is a kind of document... I think also of how Every house has a door curated a performance event featuring the work of Michal Samama and Alberto Aguilar. Those performances took place on the same night the online exhibition launched, and yet their performances happened in real time; the only other material object affiliated with the show is a motion-sensitive paper towel dispenser by David Hall. *Release* (2015) dispenses paper towels printed with the *Institutional Garbage* press release and is on view in Sector 2337's corridor for the duration of the online show. I guess I mention these moments to illustrate how the exhibition is documenting *something* quite earnestly, while trying to disrupt expectation of what is authentic, or real, and maybe even the stability of linear time. How do we create a space that feels like it simultaneously existed/will exist?

LS: Did we create a life/existence, because life/existence is that which has existed and will exist!

CP: Hahahaha—

LS: Institution Frankenstein Monster of Preposterous Allegory!

CP: Yes, I love this! How do we make the exhibitions feel like they really happened? Every house has a door's *Wasted Hours* exhibition *did* happen, so does that add credibility to the rest of the exhibition posters in Gallery B? It's an attempt to achieve a temporal vertigo where the future feels as though it somehow already took place on this site—maybe also the way we see the light from stars that have already died. What would it even mean to document that kind of indeterminate time?

¹ Bal, Mieke. *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999: 7

WB: One of my favorite pieces was Naqeeb Stevens's video *Boomerang*, exhibited in Room C. Would you tell us a little about the artist and his work?

LS: Naqeeb was the first artist who responded to our email and the first who submitted work, so it is nice you mention him. I don't think he understood exactly what we asked him and so we met to continue to talk about this vague question and I think we all three were envisioning very different things as we talked, which made it a not very clear conversation, but the first one that added another understanding to the question. After the conversation Naqeeb sent us *Boomerang*, a video work that he thought fitted our questions. I looked back in my emails to him and wrote this in response to his video: "the feeling of surveillance that the three shots evoke, the taking of the left behind bricks (garbage?) to the other side of the fence/border to be arranged in a typical brick-arrange way spin off in all kinds of thoughts in relation to the show." Explaining the work he wrote later: "The video explores performance art and documentation as well as labor, class and institutional logic. In it, I attempt to build a wall of handmade concrete bricks the same height as the fence I climb over."

I actually think this work reflects progress, too. Though the very slowness of it perhaps it is even an institutional critique of the slowness of progress: the detours and extra steps (which to me characterize bureaucratic systems) that will eventually lead to something, and the slow path that takes us there probably created jobs for people, yet probably those jobs were underpaid. Or that is my experience from working in slightly larger offices in assistant positions.

WB: What will happen to *Institutional Garbage* once the exhibit goes offline on January 1, 2017?

CP: This question dips into what is strange about digital space versus material space. I suppose because I'm not sure that they are different, exactly — why would the show "closing" and thus going offline be any different from a gallery exhibition closing? But it does feel different, somehow, and maybe that's connected to how online space is usually for business and there is maybe a presumption that anything online will be there forever so long as it is successful...I don't know.

LS: Perhaps the closing down is similar to, for example, when a building is demolished and something intangible that formed what was inside that building still exists. The people still exist, and the furniture and the archives are probably stored somewhere or reused. So both the *spirit* and the system that constructed that spirit continue to exist. There is also this demolition company in Chicago that has a billboard near, I believe, Halsted and Lake saying: We Create Space! To which my first reaction was: No, you erase space. But then directly following that thought, I couldn't explain to myself what the difference between those two was other than in language or point of view.

CP: Maybe I think of this because you mentioned billboards and the way that books also collapse space in a way—putting a whole world, for instance, inside of something pocket-size—but we are also making a book. I'm hoping the book will add another layer of estrangement to the material. Like the document (i.e., printed publication) that documents the document (or in

this case, digital exhibition) of an imaginary institution, an institution that wouldn't exist except for the exhibition that collected its artifacts.

WB: What question would you most like to ask visitors to *Institutional Garbage*?

CP: Ha! I'm not sure. Maybe we can go back to the beginning again — what is progress? What do you think, Lara?

LS: I am very curious in what *Institutional Garbage* does to / for visitors. It has given us and the contributors a place to think about, to create things in or for, but I wonder if it is or remains a place for creativity for visiting people unrelated to the exhibition as well? Or, what do you think the residue, trash, perhaps even treasures of the institution *Institutional Garbage* would be if it were to be demolished?

Visit *Institutional Garbage* through December 31, 2016 at <http://institutionalgarbagerooma.com.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/>

Read Caroline Picard and Lara Schoorl's curatorial essay at <http://sector2337.com/sector-daily/#institutional-garbage-curatorial-statement>