Conceptualization of institutions within participatory and collaborative artistic practices in Serbia (and the post-Yugoslav region) from 2000 to the present

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This text examines how institutions are positioned and conceptualized in the activities of artists, curators, and collectives operating within the post-Yugoslav cultural space, whose work is characterized by collaboration and participation, while referencing video interviews conducted by KIOSK in 2024 as part of the project *Archive in Progress: Collaborative Art Practices in Serbia (and the Region) from 2000 to the Present*. This project brought to the forefront the self-reflective meta-narrative of its participants regarding their own work; thus, some of the filmed interviews can be considered a comprehensive theoretical articulation as well as a summary of their practices. For this reason, I explore the interconnection across different critical approaches in their art, rather than focusing on a singular example.[1]

Inhabiting the problem as a form of uneventful activism

To map the place of institutions in the work of the interviewees, I will first explain the participatory, collaborative, or cooperative artistic practices involved. The text mostly mentions participatory practices, but they are taken as inherently cooperative. The primary contribution of participatory art to redefining ways of being social is the observation and articulation of new ways of being political, as well as of new political subjects. At the same time, interactions with institutions, from state institutions to specific relationships institutionalized in virtue of their social normativization (to which I will return later), are viewed as crucial for a deeper understanding of participatory art. My approach to this topic is based on the writings of the theorist of international politics and civil activism, Engin Isin, regarding the "activist citizen,"[2] as well as subsequent contributions of other authors on similar topics that employ the terms "everyday activism" or "uneventful activism." The text by Pjotr Goldstein, "Post-Yugoslav Everyday Activism(s): A Different Form of Activist Citizenship?"[3], which expands on Isin's theory, addresses activist citizenship in Novi Sad while focusing on noncommercial bookshop-cafésas sites of social changes, as well as other forms of being social and getting together for the purpose of non-confrontational activist action. Goldstein's text provides insights into this unacknowledged field of resistance and participation. Furthermore, in their text on civil society in Central and Eastern Europe, Kerstin Jacobsson and Elżbieta Korolczuk (Jacobsson,

[1] So far, interviews have been conducted with the following artists and art collectives: Maja Bekan, Branka Cvjetičanin, Mladen Miljanović, the Hop.La! group (Irena Ristić and Anđelka Nikolić), Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremić, the Škart group (Dragan Protić and Đorđe Balzamović), Vahida Ramujkić, Nebojša Milikić (his work and the Rex cultural center), Ana Miljanić (CZKD and her work), ad-hoc collective surrounding the Ostavinska Art Gallery (Jelena Mijić, Luka Knežević Strika, Ana Dimitrijević, and Marko Dimitrijević), Kiosk (Milica Pekić and Ana Adamović), and Remont (Darko Radosavljević, Jelena Mijić, Marija Radoš, Mila Stojanović).

[2] "By contrast to active citizens who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting, activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene." Isin, Engin. "Citizenship in flux: The figure of the activist citizen." *Subjectivity 29*, (2009):381.

[3] Goldstein, Piotr. "Post-Yugoslav Everyday Activism(s): A Different Form of Activist Citizenship?", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69:9, (2017):1455-1472.

Korolczuk, 2020) rely on Goldstein's examples of "everyday activism" and "activist citizenship" to define "uneventful activism." Feminist theorists engaged in postsocialist and postcolonial theory, Maria Mayerchyk and Olga Plakhotnik (Mayerchyk, Plakhotnik, 2021) introduce the concept of an "uneventful feminism," that is of uneventful feminist activism. All these theoretical approaches bring together the question of citizenship and of being political as open concepts with far-reaching consequences beyond the established notions of where the sites of activism and political changes are, thus corresponding to the project *Archive to Come*'s perspective on participatory art.

The vast array of meanings which participatory art may cover, interpreted as partaking or having a share, prompted some of the interviewees in the project *Archive to Come* to distance themselves from the term "participation."[4] There is no art without participation; however, mere participation does not make an artwork or process participatory. This is particularly visible in the use of the concept of participation in the context of national culture, where the participation of visitors, the audience, or other actors does not significantly change the character of the institutional field but rather serves to strengthen existing hierarchies. The difference between these two types of involvement can be observed in Isin's comparison between active and activist citizens. He says: "By contrast to active citizens who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting, activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene"(Isin 2009:381). In other words, unlike participatory art, which points to existing and potential forms of being social as well as all its potential subjects—often almost aligning with the idea of activist citizen—national institutions operate based on established frameworks, addressing the "ideal" and the predominantly "unchangeable" or fixed national subject.

To clarify the relationship between participatory art and institutions, as well as how this relationship produces certain forms of knowledge, I also rely on the writings of art theorist Irit Rogoff (Rogoff 2006), who introduces the notion of "embodied criticality." Rogoff interprets the term "criticality" in relation to two other terms, "criticism" and "critique." The term "criticism," contrasts the existing state of society with the prevailing social consensus on how something should function; "critique" examines what is "behind"—the underlying systems reproducing specific relationships; and "criticality," is inherently embedded in the thing it examines, which is why it cannot be impartially detached from itself. Rogoff explains criticality as "…inhabiting a problem rather than analysing it."[5]

From this perspective of critical thinking and acting, as articulated by Rogoff, devoid of normativity and stable meanings but rather fluid, embracing changing relationships, I analyze participatory art in post-Yugoslav societies. Antagonism toward all existing relationships, toward the normative concepts of space, time, body, subject, and knowledge productions[6], is an anticipated and integral part of emancipatory participatory practices. They rely on the capacity to negotiate participatory conditions from the inside, which combines a desire for participation with a rejection of the normative framework—including the one established by the initiative of participation—as the sole alternative. "Inhabiting" the problem, living within it, can be perceived

[4] In the interview for *Archive to Come*, Irena Ristić notes that it is overused, making it too broad to refer to the referenced practices.
[5] Rogoff, Irit. "Smuggling – an Embodied Criticality." EIPCP. 2006:1.
[6] The ways in which space, time, body, subject, and others have been conceptualized belongs to the anthropocentric logic, but even more importantly: they are part of the coloniality of knowledge (from the syntagm modernity/coloniality) which reproduced various social and (broadly speaking) institutional relationships.

as the intention of the artist-curator-collective to reside in spaces where their actions had not yet been standardized, in virtue of them not being anticipated; such is their operating within state structures, local government, or the municipalitywhere they instigate a change or destabilization through their mere presence.[7] In these processes, artists, curators, and theorists assume the role of initiators in *recognizing* the potential space for *action* and then facilitating or articulating cooperative processes within this space.

The defining feature of participatory art, as I see it, is the capacity to question the existing forms of *knowledge* and *relationships production*, as well as generate new ones.[8] Although the participatory artistic practices gathered in the *Archive* mostly mark the institutions as reference points for articulating and/or redefining the existing relationships, or those which are yet to be established, the incentives and motivations – of institutions on the one hand and participatory art on the other – are entirely different. A primary distinction lies in the fact that, in contrast to participatory art that counts with the uncertainty of outcomes, state institutions of art and culture rely on standardizing results—for without such certainty, they could not attain control over the process of meaning production.[9]

Geopolitical contextualization of the region

In the past twenty-five years, the activities of artists, curators, theorists, and collectives in the post-Yugoslav context—Serbia and the region—occurred in an environment of uncertainty and change. The wars of the 1990s left tragic and traumatic consequences on post-Yugoslav societies, while the transformation of value systems and the way newly established nation-states functioned introduced completely new parameters of work that had to be met, understood, and articulated against the backdrop of a transition from socialist to capitalist society. These changes brought about new problems and new questions.

The rupture between reality before the wars and after the creation of several independent nation-states in place of Yugoslav republics constituted a rupture in narratives within both national and collective contexts, as well as in autobiographical accounts. This was also evident in the selection of topics and formats of artworks.

Understandably, the end of a country manifested differently across different post-Yugoslav contexts, reflecting the nature and extent of wartime destruction in the 1990s and the role of war in emerging national narratives. The discontinuity caused by such abrupt circumstances, although it may occasionally present an opportunity to challenge established normative frameworks of nation-state as such, more often signifies a regression in domains where some level of emancipation has been already achieved. At the same time, there was a discontinuation and disintegration in the economy, means of income, exercise of work, residential, and other rights, as well as in culture and communication. Some initial participatory artwork initiatives arose from the direct observation of changes affecting fundamental aspects of life, from livelihood possibilities to housing conditions (Maja Bekan, the work "Golden Party" created with her

[7] Inhabiting the problem as a description is perfectly appropriate for the formative practices that had a great influence on art workers in the region, primarily the work of Škart group (Dragan Protić-Prota and Đorđe Balmazović-Žole).

[8] Bala, Sruti. *The gestures of participatory art*. Manchester University Press. 2018:7.

[9] This is also the reason that institutionalized project-oriented financing initiatives in art and culture, which have predefined outcomes, are inadequate for emancipatory initiatives that allow for uncertainty in terms of results, which was the subject of numerous conversations with Milica Pekić.

mother and mother's friends; from the conversation for *Archive to Come*). Many were directly affected by the transition to neoliberal capitalism and the privatization of state-held firms and their assets, including the unresolved status of residential properties (Trudbenik Workers' Museum)[10]. A lot of these issues belonged to the grey area between the end of one system and the ambiguous beginning of another system. The invisible processes accompanying the transition from socialism to capitalism, frequently manifested as some form of violence—whether active, or resulting from negligence and neglect, or erasure (as seen in discontinuity of memory and certain cultural practices); on the other hand, the invisible forms of resistance also emerged.

Many participatory models from the 2000s, mentioned by the artists, emerged with the desire to "fix" post-war societies (the work by Mladen Miljanović, who, drawing from his childhood experience of immediacyof war and the subsequent military training, creates profoundly anti-war art[11]; from the conversation for *Archive to Come*), to address the rights of marginalized and neglected parts of society (the work by Branka Cvjetičanin concerning the abandoned coal mine in Istria, created in collaboration with a community that was left stranded on the economic, cultural, and political fringes of this part of Croatia after the mine ceased working; from the conversation for *Archive to Come*), or to ensure memory transfer amid the erasure of referential frameworks meant to support cultural identification with Yugoslav values, now deemed unnecessary or outdated (work by Kiosk, Project Yugoslavia[12]; from the conversation for *Archive to Come*). Artists, curators, theorists, and collectives in independent roles occasionally even assumed functions of intervention, documentation, and representation typically reserved for institutions and the state.

Although these circumstances shed light on the political and social contexts that foster the creation of art in question, its emergence cannot be attributed to these circumstances only. Without this backdrop, nevertheless, some of the art initiatives—including past experiences of social order revisited in the context of a newly developed state and social system—would be difficult, if not impossible, to grasp. The relationship between a nation-state and art in Serbia is characterized by tension between nationalist, simplified, patriarchal, and inconsistent – even self-contradictory – narratives[13], alongside art that seeks to acknowledge—besides the immediate needs and interests of constituents—*different modes of being in the world*.

This last decade has brought about significant demographic changes and shifts in migration in the region, prompting a reevaluation of our own position in the context of global developments. The so-called Migrant Crisis, which betrayed a crisis of the EU, highlighted the militarization of EU borders and the instrumentalization of bordering regions in Southeastern and Eastern Europe as a "defense" against the undesired influx of people. The 2020 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, especially since 2022, and in Gaza since 2023 were all pivotal moments that transformed not just the region's self-perception but also the global context. In a sense, this period opened up the

[10] Trudbenik Workers' Museum opened in 2018 in the former workers' colony of this enterprise in Belgrade. https://www.masina.rs/nekada-radnici-danas-beskucnici-radnicki-muzej-trudbenik/

[11] https://www.mladenmiljanovic.com/

[12] https://kioskngo.net/project/projekat-jugoslavija-2016-2019/

[13] These conclusions were reached together with the artist Jelena Jureša, November 2024.

region towards significant geopolitical questions, necessitating an understanding of synchronicity in "inhabiting problems" ranged from local, over national, to global systems of inequality.[14]

Institutional critique

In the broadest sense, the concept of institutions refers to all social norms governing relationships that determine the social positioning of certain productions. In the framework of Marxist theory, institutions can be understood as part of what Louis Althusser termed ideological state apparatuses, like museums, formal education, etc.[15] In the context of decolonial theory from the perspective of the Latin American modernity/coloniality group, informed, among others, by the ideas of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, institutions can be regarded as proponents of coloniality of knowledge and of being (Quijano 2007). In this text, criticism of institutions primarily refers to the various ways in which hierarchies are established and embraced, as primarily centered on the normative subject of a political life equated with a nation-state subject.[16] However, in some instances, the term "institution" literally refers to state institutions that regulate certain rights and obligations, thereby organizing specific aspects of life at the state, local, or municipal level.

Testimonies from interviews show that the initial impulse for the critical stance toward institutions in the early 2000s, observed among many (at the time) young artists, curators, and theorists, was shaped by engagement with their own practice and self-positioning. This criticism predominantly originated from 20th-century discourse, which challenged modernist canons such as the white cube and the standardized roles in the creation and presentation of art.[17] From these critical perspectives on the arts' system arose critical positions regarding definitions which proscribed not only what was art, but also who was considered an artist, what was the role of the curator, what institutional frameworks were possible, including the models of funding and sustainability.

These immediate insights, which many interviewees acquired early on in their practice, served to create a platform for institutional critique of the field of art as both an ideological and institutional domain as such, including a range of activities with clearly defined methodologies, processes, and outcomes. Aside from this critique established in observing practice derived from their professional training, artists connected such practice to a broader social engagement.

In the 1990s, the circumstances of crisis and wars in the region prompted diverse responses from the artists. Although it is desirable, even necessary, to link these practices with earlier artistic traditions—particularly the contemporary, participatory, and collective art from the second half

[14] The work by Mladen Miljanović *Didactic Wall*, where he uses demilitarized illustrations from military manuals at the height of the so-called Migrant Crisis, aims to convey visual information to people in transit, focusing on overcoming obstacles, avoiding checkpoints and surveillance, and administering first aid, from *Archive to Come*. https://www.mladenmiljanovic.com/The-Didactic-Wall At the same time, the artist Vahida Ramujkić in Belgrade, alongside her involvement in soup kitchens, collaborates with other artists to establish independently made machines for plastic processing, in order to generate revenue and achieve sustainability of this kind of support, also from *Archive to Come*.

[15] Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." "*Lenin and Philosophy" and Other Essays. Monthly Review Press 1971* (First published: in La Pensée, 1970, translated: from the French by Ben Brewster, transcribed: by Andy Blunden)

[16] "These debates have invigorated our understanding of what it means to be a citizen, but nevertheless by and large almost all contributors continue to take 'citizenship' to mean membership of a state." (Isin 2009: 369)

[17] Milica Pekić, from the conversation for *Archive to Come*.

of the 20th century (Vesić 2015), and their engagement with institutional critique— – it is also somewhat incomparable. Namely, in contrast to post-1968 critiques of the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of institutions, characteristic of the 1970s (Pekić 2020), the 1980s witnessed resistance against the proliferation of nationalism; during the 1990s, activist art surpassed sheer distancing from nationalistic institutions and the media, advocating for a more active protest against them and against the wars waged on citizens' behalf[18]; lastly, the practices of the early 2000s and beyond demonstrate a propensity to preserve and adapt the remnants of former state-held assets before the relentless privatization (an occurence that originated earlier, but was further acknowledged and articulated in artistic works during the 2000s).

The attempt to formally redefine the relationship toward institutions—perceived as instruments, techniques, or processes for actualizing certain rights—emerged in the 2000s as artists increasingly embraced the active roles of founding or directing specific institutions. The intertwining of two perspectives—scrutinizing the general functioning of states and societies while understanding their numerous shortcomings on the one hand, and the tangible possibility of working with existing structures in real time to effectuate specific changes *through* them, on the other—is evident in most artistic practices. One perspective is meta-critical, questioning everything, while the other persists in "inhabiting the problem," demonstrating the efficacy of such an approach in the very reality it criticizes, thus allowing for a possibility to generate different relationships. The participatory work model goes beyond the mere expectation that institutions do their job (which would align with the previously mentioned concept of criticism). They inquire about the types of relationships that generate existing structures, which correspond with critique. Most importantly, they ask questions about what that job is, express previously unacknowledged needs, and define the previously unforeseen trajectories of reflecting on institutions, which aligns more with the concept of criticality.

A significant number of interviewees cooperated with institutions of art, culture, the media, or organizations affiliated with the "discontinued" system of the preceding socialist state organization. This "discontinuation" specifically pertained to cessation of self-management practices, suspending workers' rights under neoliberal capitalism that openly promotes exhausting the working subject but also their complete silencing (*Radnički kolektiv* [Workers' Collective], an art intervention in the format of recontextualized re-print of the first issues of the newspaper "Bor collective" from 1947-1948reflects on the significance of the former workers' paper of the mining and smelter basin Bor, currently operating under Serbia Zijing Cooper.[19]from a conversation with Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremić for *Archive*), erasing the history of Yugoslavia as undesirable ("Project Yugoslavia," Kiosk, Museum of History of Yugoslavia/ Museum of Yugoslavia, since 2016), and others. Another example is the long-established professional association with a history of poor leadership, the Association of Fine Arts Artists of Serbia (Udruženje likovnih umetnika Srbije - ULUS), which was revitalized by artists willing to take on managerial roles, making it functional while dealing with the inherited work models that significantly impacted the success, or failure, of the processes involved.

[18] Such as the founding of the Center for cultural decontamination as an *anti-war* center, starting with its public activity on 1 January 1995.

[19] Newspaper, 16 pages. Authors: Vladan Jeremić, Rena Rädle. With a supplement by Saša D. Lović. Realized with the digital archive materials of the Local Department of the National Library of the city of Bor, 2013.

Common to all formal institutions, including museums, sites of memory, associations, enterprises, etc., that welcome participatory artistic practices when interests converge, is that such reflections and criticality are inevitably time-constrained. The openness of state institutions to criticism is incompatible with a nation-state that seeks to control the discourse, as previously mentioned in relation to normativizing the outcome. Thus, it is unsurprising that some of the best collaborative projects along the within-outside institution line arise during periods of institutional redefinition in the context of national culture, while the outcomes remain undefined, i.e., open.

In the collaborative processes between workers in the arts and nation-state institutions, the appropriation of participatory artistic work by institutions, which deviates from the original goals and methods, is not an anomaly but a rule that must be accounted for in every artistic and/or participatory curatorial endeavor. Cultural and heritage institutions, along with educational, professional, and vocational associations, utilize the distinctive characteristics of participatory artistic practices to critically reinterpret the significance of institutions, appropriating these findings and redefining them not to sustain these processes as open and flexible, but to reestablish themselves as normative. In other words, when institutions restore their original role as representatives of a nation-state and its current policies, thus reestablishing their prominence as a site of social power, they seek to integrate the experience of participatory or cooperative work within existing hierarchies. Accounting for failure,[20] particularly regarding cooperation between artists-constituents and the mentioned institutions, is not a matter of pessimism but a way of protecting and safeguarding one's own resources from predatory and devouring institutions and collaborations.[21]

This pertains to several critical demands within the methodologies developed in the works of artists and collectives that Milica Pekić and Ana Adamović talked to as Kiosk, which address the exhaustion of human resources. The position of artists, curators, researchers, and collaborative groups mostly depends on the arbitrariness, in the absence of a framework that would allow for artistic and cultural work without exploitation. Besides efforts to introduce ethical work models and appropriate assessments of invested efforts, an example of which is the establishment of the Association Independent Culture Scene of Serbia[22], new models of resistance to exploitation reveal emerging political subjectivities that effectively challenge established hierarchies.

The imbalance in power relations between embodied criticality and a system that exploits bodies which carry out such criticality, highlights issues of fragility and resilience (Branka Cvjetičanin, for the project *Archive to Come*).Contrary to the conviction that everyone must always show resilience, and that resilience alone can affect oppressive systems, artistic approaches highlight resistance through a specific treatment of time, which pertains to the valorisation of work. Maja Bekan emphasizes feminist approaches in participatory practice such as procrastination and intentional slowness, asserting control over time which entails establishing control over the body, movement, surroundings, and narrative. Such practices relate to the term uneventful activism

[20] The significance of such a failure for further practice was underlined in other interviews, such as with artist Vahida Ramujkić.

[21] Common description of institutions from conversations with Jelena Savić, theorist of racialization and racism against the Roma.

[22] The Association Independent Culture Scene of Serbia is a collaborative platform comprising organizations, initiatives, and individuals that advocate for dignified working conditions in culture and the arts. Nezavisna kulturna scena Srbije

(Jacobsson, Korolczuk, 2020) or uneventful feminist activism (Mayerchyk, Plakhotnik 2021) referenced at the beginning.

Continuity, documenting, and knowledge transfer

Venturing beyond the already paved routes and the relationships that reproduce them is an endeavor that requires time and persistence, conditions that artworks of specific duration, as well as participatory and cooperative practices, seldom manage to meet. The examples presented here, however, indicate the contrary, with many of the interviewees' artistic activities lasting for twenty years or more. Establishing continuity regarding specific values—which is necessary for situating our experience within the conceptual framework of the meaning and purpose of our work or existence, amidst general discontinuity and the mentioned rupture—such efforts depended on a form of shared knowledge recognized by cultural actors as experiential during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, a literal approach to these experiences—in this context, specifically the experience of Yugoslavism and socialism—from a time distance would imply a certain idealization of the state and social system, which is as fair a point of criticism and reflection as any other.

The cessation of the former state, however, does not imply that these experiences have not been solidified as knowledge and practice through alternative trajectories, like art. In her interview, Branka Cvjetičanin describes her upbringing in Zagreb, Croatia (and SFR Yugoslavia) as "a decentralized cultural democracy"[23] that shaped her engagement in culture and art. It is also interesting to compare this cultural heritage, asCvjetičanin refers to it, taken as practice, with the numerous demands that have infiltrated the realms of culture and art due to the field's increasing projectization. Assuming that post-Yugoslav societies are a tabula rasa requiring a fresh start, even the ostensibly emancipatory projects were perpetrating a peculiar kind of violence while disregarding the pre-existing practices and frameworks. In an effort to dismiss the significance of socialism as a pertinent contribution to collective human knowledge, an epistemic injustice, -- as highlighted by theorist Zhivka Valiavicharska (Valiavicharska 2021) -- took place, since predominantly Western European initiatives for project funding have failed to create mechanisms that recognize these experiences as valuable in their own right.[24] Foreign financing in the region, sometimes founded upon contexts of vastly different motives and cultural and social frameworks, in fact lacked such an experience in the decentralization and democratization of art that Cvjetičanin describes as a culture "that involves participation and is not determined by class."[25]

The mutability of participatory practices also raises concerns about knowledge transfer that such an ephemeral, non-institutionalized existence brings. The long existence of some of these practices has further exacerbated the challenge of transferring transgenerational experience, both in terms of the methodologies employed, which are not always amenable to documentation, and the underlying purpose—how, why, and for whom should these practices be documented. Ultimately, this is the question raised by the project *Archive to Come: Collaborative Art Practices in Serbia (and the Region) from 2000 to the Present*, which attempts to map specific phenomena while asking about the value of this knowledge and practices for us today.

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[23] Branka Cvjetičanin, from the conversation for *Archive to Come*.

[24] The regional cultural platform "Kooperativa" is a network that facilitates collaboration across the region, based on collective knowledge, experience, and shared values. Kooperativa

[25] In the same vain, Cvjetičanin highlights the importance of the term neighborhood compared to community. From the conversation for *Archive to Come*.

Nevertheless, knowledge transfer should not be perceived as a linear progression in the sense of the shift *prior knowledge → current practice*. On the contrary, knowledge transfer can occur in all directions, particularly since the experience of the presence actively influences interpretations of the past, which altogether contributes to a better understanding of emerging subjects or subjects to come.

Participatory art is not always or necessarily activism. The outcomes of such efforts, as emphasized by interviewees (Cvjetičanin, Rädle, Jeremić), need not be art, nor necessarily embodied, visible, or presentable. The agency of this art, however, lies at the edges of imagining possible worlds, inhabited and actualized by potential subjects. It is commonly said that such art lasts for the duration of the process to which it contributes, and which, in turn, creates it. Records pertaining to it, however, do not serve to satisfy the institution of normative memories, i.e., documenting or archiving, but rather to establish a reference point for future "inhabiting of the problem."

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