

Michael Baers  
**Inside the Box:  
Notes From  
Within the  
European  
Artistic  
Research  
Debate**

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e-flux journal #26 — June 2011 Michael Baers  
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### 1. Setting the Stage

December 4, 2010, Murcia, Spain. The lights had come on in the auditorium following a screening of *As the Academy Turns*, Tion Ang's telenovela-style exposé of machinations in the contemporary art academy, and it was time for the obligatory Q&A. The audience, professors of art and their PhD students, cautiously assayed questions concerning methodology and budget, but Ang, in the grips of an apparent somnambulism, hazarded vaguely mechanical answers and disavowed conscious intent, privileging instead notions of embodiment in producing artwork. It was his hands that wrote the script, his body that set up shots, blocked his actors, and so forth. This might have been a passable response for a sculptor, but for an artist working in video such a line of thought was oddly disconcerting. Occasionally, I glanced at the empty seat to my right, vacated some time earlier by one of my colleagues from the Center for Art Knowledge (CAK), a PhD-in-Practice program housed at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna, who had left shortly before the screening ended, muttering darkly that she couldn't take any more. And indeed, having sat through thirty minutes of strangely non-reflexive portrayals of lesbian professors, conniving Asian temptresses, sympathetic older-lady secretaries, arrogant and professionally preoccupied male professors, and finally, a murderous Latino exchange student, I shared her desire to exit the premises. But at the same time, I was transfixed by the audience's puzzling indifference to the glaring questions of representation the work provoked, let alone the fact that its ostensible critique of the contemporary art academy focused on racial stereotypes while the structure of the institution itself was portrayed as the natural and naturalizing frame for the enactment of their respective passions.

I was pondering this gap when my colleague – let's call her "A" – returned, marching to the front of the lecture hall bearing a full rubbish bin. The video was rubbish, she proclaimed; the panelists too were rubbish. And with that, she deposited the bin's contents ceremoniously on the plywood tables behind which the discussants were seated and marched out, the auditorium's heavy doors swinging shut on a stunned audience.

Though the garbage was swiftly cleared away, the pall lingered over the following two days of presentations. This pall might even have been salutary, for it might have cast into sharp relief the deficits in a discourse that at times floundered in search of its discipline. Meanwhile, consensus had formed that we as a group were bent on purposefully disrupting the normative



David Ryckaert, the Younger, *Painters Studio*, 1630. Oil on wood. The Louvre Museum, Paris.

*habitus* of academic discourse. During the intermission periods between presentations, I would regularly be approached as I sipped my coffee and after a moment or two of polite conversation, my new acquaintance would say, “You’re part of that *radical* Vienna group, aren’t you?” After acknowledging this affiliation, I would receive a pitying smile, and then my interlocutor would wander off to speak with someone more pragmatically attuned to the academic game.



International Symposium *As the Academy Turns* at Manifesta 2010.

Two days later, after the second presentation of the morning, the topic of A’s trash can intervention was finally broached in public. The discussion commenced with an airing of certain deficits in the symposium’s organization, but soon devolved into an exchange between partisans of a postcolonial position – who asserted A’s action represented an act of aggression against difference – and the gender/queer theory faction arguing for a re-evaluation of what kind of violence had been perpetrated over the past two days and by whom. A well-known German filmmaker accused my colleague in the queer faction of using fascist terror tactics. Dissatisfied with the reaction this line of argument received, she appealed in exasperation to another equally well-known theorist of South-Asian ethnicity: “\_\_\_\_\_, say something!”

The latter’s contribution to this debate was measured up to the point where he stated that he had mistaken A, whose appearance is androgynous, for a man, alluding to his own experience as victim of casual racist violence. With this, the discussion descended to a new level of rancor. As the vituperations continued, my attention was drawn to the Swedish contingent in gray suits, who sat rigidly face-forward, smiling enigmatically. Clearly, their strategy was to pretend they were attending a

different symposium altogether.

Later, when I had the time to ponder it, I was unsure of what this exchange had meant. Was it symptomatic of a continuing struggle over who is the real subject of history after the intellectual health of its grand meta-narratives – the nation-state, the worker, the West or the East – had received the bleak prognosis meted out years ago by theoreticians like Lyotard, Baudrillard, and the like? Perhaps it wasn’t that these narratives had expired so much as they had gone underground, exerting, in the words of Frederic Jameson, a “continuing but now *unconscious* effectivity as a way of ‘thinking about’ and acting in our current situation.”<sup>1</sup> This “thinking about” our current situation appeared to have consequences for the debate over the artists’ PhD, not only concerning how it envisioned its objectives, but also the development of its methodology and its discourse – a discourse apparently still mesmerized by the legitimating “myths” Lyotard addressed in 1979 in *The Postmodern Condition* concerning the narrative of science as a story either of commitment – “that of the liberation of humanity” – or of contemplation – “that of the speculative unity of all knowledge (qua ‘philosophical system’).”<sup>2</sup>

With these thoughts, I began to wonder: What exactly had I gotten involved in by deciding to pursue a PhD in art practice? What kind of institutional and discursive constructions was I becoming the subject of? Was the discourse and its situation within academia a positive development, or was there something more insidious at work? How might acceptance of the PhD in art practice come to alter the broader workings of the art world, and if I were to be involved, was it to be as a willing subject or marginalized dissident? And aside from the question of how I might be personally implicated or affected by my position within this emergent field, what kind of broader implications did it have for art’s relationship to the discourse of science, to capital, to nationalism and the EU as a political body, and to art’s conception of and relationship to itself – its own procedures, itineraries, competencies, and sense of political or cultural efficacy.

The latter is not without consequence, for the ongoing discourse created around the PhD enacts certain exclusions and risks a certain inanition in establishing a new kind of relationship to the institution/university as such, when, as Pierre Bourdieu writes: “position-taking changes, even when the position remains identical, whenever there is change in the universe of options that are simultaneously offered for producers and consumers to choose from.”<sup>3</sup> This re-situation could, in a worst-case scenario, render “critical” art practices even

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more academic, less prone to engaged debate, and further divorced from the lay public than the present situation.

## 2. Confessions of a Reluctant Academic

Like the discourse of the artistic PhD itself, the following text is a bit of a Frankenstein monster – a creature comprised of bits and pieces culled from other disciplines and institutional configurations – and like the monster itself, the product passes as the outcome of reason and unreason, inhabiting a linguistic labyrinth (“whose words enclose me while I use them, nonetheless to transgress the closure they build”<sup>4</sup>) within academic institutional space, an invisible partitioning system in which it is easy to lose one’s way. And as with the misadventures of Dr. Frankenstein, who in the filmed version is returned to the human community through recrimination, a confession is in order.

My decision to re-enter academia was not dictated exclusively by altruistic considerations. I had taught for the last two years at a Danish art academy, and when it became clear that my position would not be renewed, surveying the bleak economic landscape, I began to consider my options. Among these was the option to embark on the slew of applications that might secure me a position – possibly funded – in one of the new artistic PhD programs proliferating like mushrooms after a rain shower. This possibility, without being *purely* mercenary, was not without pragmatic calculations – calculations reflecting my position within the European art-world, as an artist with a precarious relationship both to the market and, as an American citizen, to the European state funding bodies that support non-commercial practices. But as I read the online prospectuses of the various programs, I hesitated. While one could argue the impossibility of adequately representing institutional aims in a paragraph or two, this does not mean prospectuses cannot be read as being symptomatic of the transformations art is likely to undergo in entering the university context. Accordingly, one could infer a positivist slant in their formulation of what constitutes an artistic PhD – revealing an attitude proximate to other disciplines based on the incremental accumulation of knowledge.

As I continued reading, my irritation grew. Institutional language creates a horizon of expectations, and a yardstick by which to judge methodologies and outcomes, a ghostly rationalizing superego proposing bureaucratic objectives by inference (accumulation of cultural capital, promulgation of applied forms of artistic production) that so easily can diverge from or co-opt one’s own intentions. Although the underlying aims remain markedly consistent, the way PhD

programs describe themselves is not rhetorically uniform, but assumes specific national orientations, postulating different attitudes toward art and the parameters envisioned for its broader communicability. For instance, the Kuvataideakatemia in Helsinki presents the aims of its doctoral program in fairly benign terms, offering to provide students with “a profound understanding of their own field,” further modified by uncontroversial words and phrases like “maturity,” “innovative,” and “high-quality artistic work.” In neighboring Sweden on the other hand, Gothenburg’s Valands academy avoids the ideological trap of “quality,” spinning its formulation of artistic research in a more neutral, scientific language. Its department is formulated as being “partly organized as an interdisciplinary faculty research school, where theoretical and methodological issues with a particular focus on artistic research are treated.” The Royal Academy in Stockholm, by contrast, eschews scientific nature, cleaving in general to humanist aspirations for personal enrichment, leavened with the tautologically positivist assertion that “the outcomes of the research project will contribute to existing discourses surrounding *artistic* (my emphasis) approaches to art-making”; a description that paradoxically retains a scientific attitude to art as an activity amenable to incremental advancement, so that artists “open up ways in which artistic knowledge can be articulated within its own field, and to examine its own conditions upon which creative work is made.”<sup>5</sup> The PhD-in-Practice program at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste Wien, however, took a more critical position. “Contemporary art,” its prospectus stated, “is directly confronted with issues of localizing, accessing, and materializing reserves and forms of social knowledge ... informed by critical epistemologies as they have been developed in recent times by feminist theories, gender and queer studies, postcolonial theories, and black and subaltern studies, among others.” While the exclusion of older forms of Marxist-oriented cultural critique from this list made me pause, the program still appeared closest to what I thought of as my personal artistic goals. True, the course description’s second paragraph, titled “Practices and Perspectives,” *did* propose an art-knowledge formulation echoing the other descriptions I had read, but this time the “new combination” of artistic and academic research were defined in terms of a “transdisciplinarity,” in which “a *fundamental transformation* (my emphasis) of the art/knowledge relationship ... counters a dichotomous order of knowledge (theory/practice, science/art) and makes different dimensions of knowledge production available.”

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Pablo Bronstein, *Interim Performance*, 2010.

Despite my reservations, I submitted several applications and was ultimately accepted in Vienna. But the thought remained: When had this transformation in the art/knowledge relationship stated in the prospectus taken place? What was new, it seemed to me, was not interdisciplinary work, or even artistic research as such (which has long been a feature of Western art), but art's situation within the research university, reconfigured as a species of knowledge that is cumulative, socially beneficial, and subject to qualitative analysis. In the process of legitimating an area of speculative knowledge, Lyotard claimed in *The Postmodern Condition* that a discipline must first undertake a process of "expounding for itself what it knows," and second, incorporate these statements into "the metanarrative of a subject that guarantees its legitimacy."<sup>6</sup> This legitimating discourse, however, is not singular but bifurcates into at least two different sorts of language games: one viewing research as a form of speculative knowledge production, and another – where the discourse at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste Wien may be located – with roots in the French Revolution, in which knowledge comprises a form of emancipation. This idea finds expression in what Kant called the imperative and what Lyotard terms "prescriptive" utterances: "not the self-legitimation of knowledge, but the self-grounding of freedom."<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Research University as Shepherd, the Artist as (Lost) Sheep

The first doctoral program in artistic practice was founded in 1997, as part of an overall restructuring of Helsinki's Kuvataideakatemia – some two years before the Bologna Process was inaugurated. Since that time, and despite prodigious efforts expended in the service of its clarification, the term "artistic research" remains vague; an ideological sinkhole in which, by virtue of its placement within broader political and social formations, its definition can be endlessly recalibrated, neutralized, and recuperated. The writers I have recently revisited in an effort to discern what is at stake admit as much, bracketing their asseverations with admissions that the field is still "unclear," is "in the process of being formulated," or is "characterized by a continuous search for a current and convincing definition."<sup>8</sup> Nor is there consensus over what actually constitutes artistic research, or how to distinguish its protocols from those of other academic disciplines.<sup>9</sup>

Since a review of the literature on the artistic PhD could easily comprise a separate article, the following must be considered as a by-no-means comprehensive sampling of the constructions and orientations currently jostling

with each other in the artistic research marketplace. Besides several book-length offerings on the subject, several journals emanate from, or are affiliated with, PhD programs. These display an editorial policy apparently as bent on dis-articulating artistic research as it is on establishing its norms. Websites such as that of the EARN network (European Artistic Research Network) provide links to several different websites including – besides the present publication – *Art Monitor*, *Art & Research*, *MAHKUzine Journal of Artistic Research*, and the soon-to-be-launched *JAR: Journal for Artistic Research*, the first peer-review periodical devoted to the topic, and an indication that efforts to creatively integrate the term "artistic research" into journal titles has reached its terminus.<sup>10</sup>

While the journals are diverse in theoretical orientation and scope, the book-length studies to have appeared still seem to labor under the perceived need to provide a comprehensive methodological itinerary in order to produce the "useful regularities" that would ensure the normative status of artistic research. Thus, in the introductory chapter of *Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices*, Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, Tere Vaden specify a conception of artistic research as inherently inter-subjective and scientific, linking the epistemological and ontological in a framework emphasizing "coherent communicativity." As guideposts, the authors suggest two metaphors – a "democracy of experiences" and "methodological diversity." The former is defined as a "view where no area of experience is in principle outside the critical reach of any other area," suggesting the relative transparency of different epistemological bodies, while "methodological diversity" – or "methodological anarchy" – borrows heavily from Paul Feyerabend's concept of a plurality of methodologies, each relatively equal in both limitations and capacities to "achieve richness and simplify things."<sup>11</sup> Artistic research itself is posited as a set of characteristics and goals scrutinized within a "research group situation" where "artistic experientiality," self-reflexivity, and historical and disciplinary contextualization are the discursive ingredients, "producing information that serves practices." More prescriptions follow. Artistic researchers should employ communicative methods linked to "defining criteria for making evaluations or modeling ... increasing understanding" of art's link to its social and pedagogical context, along with a critical analysis of art's relation to its constituent fields – technology, economic development, power relations, and so forth.

All of this sounds eminently reasonable, but are areas of experience really equally qualified to



Alexandre Singh, slide from *Assembly Instructions Lecture* (Ikea, Manzoni, Klein, et al), 2009.

judge other areas of experience? Doesn't contemporary experience redound upon the way different professions have developed their own "private code or idiolect" where linguistic norms can no longer be appealed to as a basis for "coherent communicativity"?<sup>12</sup> Further, when the authors state that artistic research is a necessary pedagogical development, because it provides researchers with "intellectual challenges" and "learning experiences" while also participating in developing the field's theoretical basis, doesn't this somewhat condescending formulation precisely duplicate Lyotard's assertion that "knowledge is only worthy of that name to the extent that it reduplicates itself ... by citing its own statements in a second-level discourse (autonomy) that functions to legitimate them"?<sup>13</sup> I also had to take issue with this conception's de-ontologization of artistic work. It grounds it in a rather bloodless strain of rationalism where both the real economic precariousness of the artist and that line of philosophizing in which Kant's disinterested idea of beauty was rejected in favor of a view of aesthetics as inherently invested – Stendhal's conception of the beautiful as *la promesse du bonheur* reformulated by Nietzsche as an experience of "divine terror" where the former's promise "becomes the poison that contaminates and destroys [the artist's] existence" – is nowhere in evidence.<sup>14</sup> Nor could I agree with their basing the argument for a re-scientized art on a supposedly classical fissure between science and art. The actual development of this fissure is far more complicated than a casual one-sentence assertion can do justice.<sup>15</sup>

Further in Hannula, Suoranta, and Vaden's book, my reservations began to increase. In the chapter titled "Artistic Research in Practice," the authors write, "The basic requirement for any research is that it has a clear objective and approach." They follow this prescription by emphasizing the necessity to *clearly* present research objectives and aims. At this point I was seized by the urge to yank what little hair I possess out by its roots. In my own modest experience, the artistic process is grounded in intuition and the inchoate, no matter how rational the eventual outcome may be. Clarifying one's intentions is a process often realized through praxis, not antecedent to it. "The plan is the prison," Georges Bataille once wrote, and a significant portion of his oeuvre can be read as an attack on the habit of architectonic thinking which eradicates everything the plan fails to anticipate – desire, contingency, chance. This nihilistic trace, a self-imposed corrosiveness that delimits the work of art, upsetting its relations to its own presuppositions and

undermining its interior integrity – the work of art's death drive, if you will – is a supplement I doubt any theory of artistic research can assimilate. As a concept it places transgression at the heart of praxis.<sup>16</sup>

Per Nilsson, a teacher at the Umeå Academy of Fine Arts, has also contributed a book-length study to the question of artistic research. In some respects a reply to Hannula et al, *Amphibian Stand* takes the view that artistic research is not explicitly scientific, but "a form of knowledge in its own right," an "amphibian" discipline in a littoral landscape – occupying or traversing the liminal space between plural disciplinary formations, discursively constituted.<sup>17</sup> At hand is also the familiar call to an "open exchange" upon which artistic research should be predicated resoundingly echoes. Nilsson disagrees with the authors of *Artistic Research* in terms similar to my own objections – that they seem to imply the need for a methodological structure which specifies aims prior to undertaking research – but both Nilsson and the aforementioned authors advocate the escalation of a collection of research practices "from which inspiration and experience can be drawn,"<sup>18</sup> which leaves me unsure as to whether the ultimate aim of either book is to advocate on behalf of research-based art or an institutional imperative to produce positivist knowledge: research on the research processes of research-based artistic work as it were. In general, this shift in emphasis haunts both works. Since each understandably hesitates before the pointless task of defining art, what practices might *not* be research-based is left equally vague.

But after further thought, it is the homilies to cooperative and pluralistic platforms for inquiry present in both tomes that triggers my unease. Their conception of a collegial research situation is a little *too* cozy for my taste, as if my discomfort stemmed from an unconscious resistance to conceiving of artistic practice in line with their particular model of Scandinavian-style sociability. And that no formulation exists of how different artistic practices might possibly be antagonistic – even inimical – to one another implies that artistic position-taking is of little consequence in this happy world of the research university. (A quick look at both books' bibliographies confirms this suspicion: Pierre Bourdieu, and with him, a critical-sociological formulation of the art world, is conspicuously absent.) Where is there room in this Ikea of socialized art practice for upsetting the apple cart? Their model marginalizes or even excludes practices based on transgression, aggression, and antagonism, but also those that might view the legitimate authority of the university with circumspection.

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#### 4. Blinded Me with Science

The debate over artistic research, particularly its appeal to scientificity, often rests on defining one's terms. Thus, an examination of some of the keywords deployed might be instructive, especially when their circulation is grounded on an imprecision inherent in language. The connotative meaning of a word, if I may be forgiven for stating the obvious, can diverge greatly from what are often contradictory origins, allowing ideology to reify itself on a lexical level. Let's examine the word science itself. It derives both from the Latin, *scientia*, "to know" – but also from the Greek, *sciencia*, "to split, rend or cleave." That art can be "experimental" or follow a rational set of procedures in the creation of a work clearly denotes "scientificity," but the modern (restricted) sense of science as a body of regular or methodical observations or propositions concerning any subject or speculation would, by any account, limit what one might consider as "art," even "research-based art," the understanding of which, for whatever other imprecision inheres, still derives from a definition of it as both an area of study, acquired skill, and a thing of beauty.

To take a concrete instance of how linguistic polyvalence effects argumentation: in issue 8 of *MAHKUzine*, Hito Steyerl, in the course of addressing how artistic research is currently being constituted within academia, defines "discipline" as something that "normalizes, generalizes and regulates," that "may be oppressive, but this is also precisely why it points to the issue it keeps under control."<sup>19</sup> To push her point further, what is suppressed in her argument, as in most, is polysemy itself, the inherent indeterminacy of language. Examining the origin of the word "discipline," one finds it derives both from medieval French, *descepline*, meaning "physical punishment, teaching, suffering, martyrdom," and the Latin *disciplina* ("instruction given, teaching, learning, knowledge") and *discipulus*, ("object of instruction, knowledge, science, military discipline"). In its current usage, "discipline" also derives from the archaic English, *beodscipe*, which first meant "branch of instruction or education," later morphing into "military training" and "orderly conduct as a result of training." Discipline, in its ambivalent definition as both a regimen of regulation and punishment and pedagogic method might be thought of in terms analogous to those Foucault used to define power – as a force "that traverses and produces things ... forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than a negative

instance whose function is repression."<sup>20</sup>

An effect of considering discipline in its ambiguity might be to transform the debate over artistic research as a normative academic discipline from a black-or-white proposition into something more ambiguous. Many academies that took on the Bologna Accords have in fact demurred from instituting PhD programs, favoring doctoral programs or research stipends, which are roughly equivalent in terms of expectation but without the onus of the PhD. Anecdotally, the avoidance of this nomination has been attributed precisely to a skepticism about turning art practice into a "normative academic discipline"; although this has not stopped such programs from adopting its preferred forms of academic discourse – journals, symposia, and colloquia – where the language games of academia are currently being given the chance to harden into arteriosclerotic forms of comportment. My point is not that this demurrer represents an instance of plurality within the field, but rather that the Bologna Process and the appeal to scientificity attending much of the rhetoric around instantiation of the artistic PhD might be considered as a Bourdieuan retransformation of the field that all institutions are impelled to respond to. Secondly (the conspiratorial hypothesis), the stripping of resources from universities' humanities departments (witness the recent closure of Middlesex University's philosophy department) has led art departments to defensively emphasize art's relation to science. Like the changes in coloration an octopus effects to hide itself on a varicolored sea floor, art departments promote a conception of artistic knowledge as something quantifiable and socially beneficial in response to a perceived threat from national budgeting authorities.

There is a final reason why the regular invocation of scientificity in the artistic research debate is dubious, and it has to do with time. Bourdieu has stated that science has a time that is different from practice, a scientific time "so 'detemporalized' that it tends to exclude even the idea of what it excludes."<sup>21</sup> Whether one considers artistic research in relation to science (systematic knowledge gained through observation and experimentation or knowledge gained by systematic study) or "knowledge production," what is often lost sight of is an ontological idea of art that predates *sciencia* (as separation) as essentially different from it. As Giorgio Agamben has noted, the Greeks thought of art (considered here as equivalent with poetry) as an uncanny mixture of *poesis* and production:

Only because in the poetic  $\xi\pi\omicron\chi\eta$  [rhythm] he [mankind] experiences his being-in-the-

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world as his essential condition ... Only because he is capable of the uncanny power, the power of pro-duction into presence, is he also capable of praxis of willed and free activity.<sup>22</sup>

This view of art as a paradoxically bounded temporality enabling access to an experience of unbounded time situates it as irrevocably other from science and related epistemological formations – and hence intractable to the sort of disciplinary and departmental border-constructing endemic in universities:

By opening to man his authentic temporal dimension, the work of art also opens for him the space of belonging to the world, only within which he can take the original measure of his dwelling on earth and find again his present truth in the unstoppable flow of linear time.<sup>23</sup>

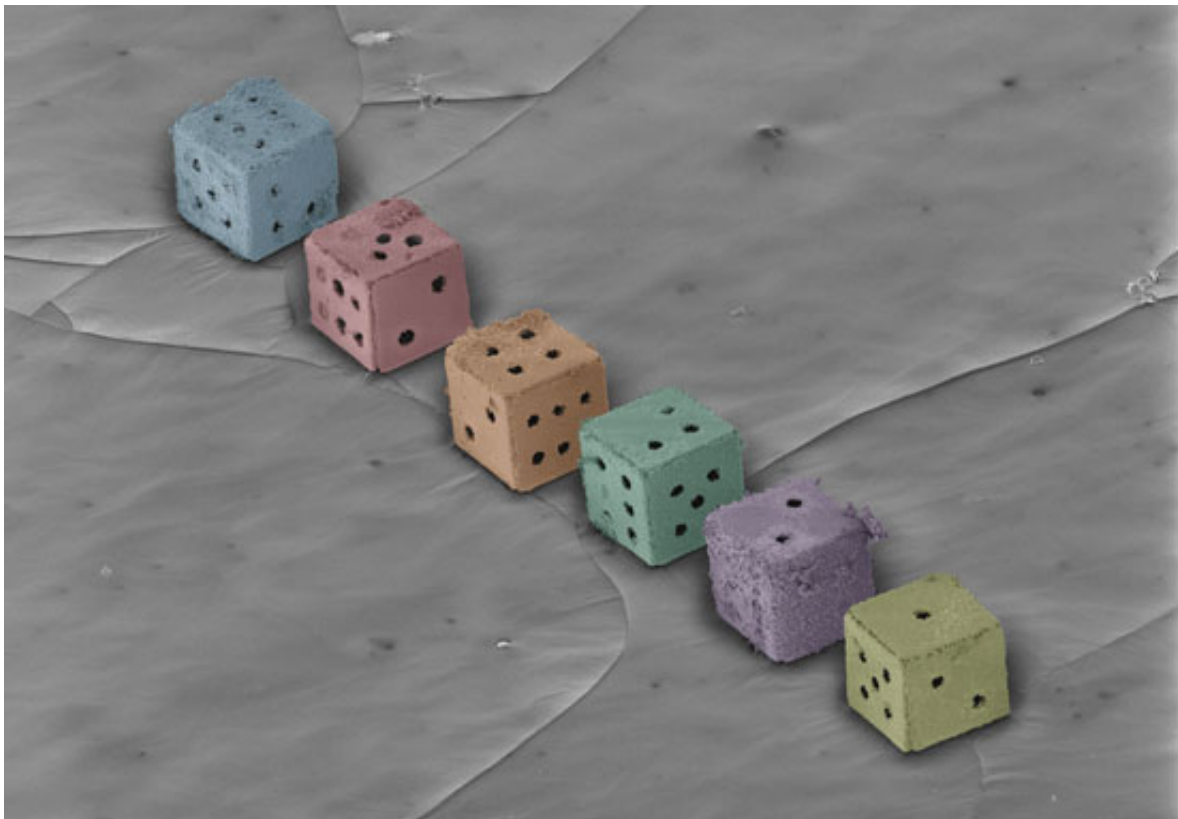
In other words, if one justifiably demurs from offering a definition of what art is, one can still suggest, following Agamben, what art performs as its most elemental task: offer access to the unceasing passage of time by ambivalently referring it to temporal boundedness. This is an

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ontological question that does not resolve itself into a question of truth or of recapturing a lost totality, but of forever having to negotiate the fissure between sensation and language, finitude and infinity, being human and being animal.

### 5. Continental Drifting

Since my art education took place in the US, where the MFA has long been considered a terminal degree, my understanding of what an art education should consist of is informed by a different set of reference points than an artist educated in Europe. Free from the constraints of accreditation existing in American institutions, the structure of most European art academies remains based on two lingering historical models – the French *Académie des beaux-arts* with its long tradition of aesthetic gate-keeping in the service of a centralized nation-state and the German *Meisterschule*, where art students study with a single professor: a transposition, perhaps, of the model that once predominated the medieval guilds, where long apprenticeships and clear distinctions of rank between master and neophyte fulfilled social, economic, and political regulatory functions (although in the German academy this relationship has been transformed from learning a craft to absorbing the master's



First prize in the Science as Art 2007 competition. Scientist Timothy Leong of Johns Hopkins University created six 200 micron dice, photographed them with a scanning electron microscope, and then used Adobe Photoshop to add pastel colors.

artistic oeuvre). Whatever their advantages or deficits, neither model possesses the same relationship to knowledge production or discourse of the American art school. If we were to look for proximate causes, this is one reason why European efforts at formalizing a discourse of art-as-research has been so fractious, idiosyncratic, and, at times, so divorced from a legacy of artistic production taken for granted in the US.

By contrast, the evolution of arts pedagogy in North America has for many decades been informed by the art academy's integration into a research university model, where after World War II, as Howard Singerman notes in *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, higher education became "dedicated to the production of theory, and founded on the primacy of theory over practice" – a development that coincided with the burgeoning knowledge economy's re-orientation towards information-over-production.<sup>24</sup> A second result of this introduction was art education's infection by a sort of "spread of language" into places where artists had previously been "imagined as incapable of, and even damaged by, the 'the abstract reasoning and manipulation of words and symbols demanded by the usual academic tests of aptitude and achievement.'"<sup>25</sup>

In personal terms, this meant that by the time I entered art school in the late-1980s, the constitution of arts education had undergone a theory-oriented transformation many years back, adhering to the dictates of a national accrediting body responsible for deciding what kind of non-studio coursework was a necessary complement to studio instruction. Being blissfully ignorant at the time of this disciplinary realignment, I experienced art education as one privileging historical consciousness over the acquisition of manual skill or conceptual competence. The predictable result was that I came to view creation as necessarily dialectic, abiding under the shadow of Thomas Crow's admonition that "Consciousness of precedent has become very nearly the condition and definition of major artistic ambition."<sup>26</sup> Not long after entering CalArts in 2000, I had also accepted Singerman's second point regarding the transformation of arts education – the professional imperative to speak (and to speak well), since in the contemporary art world articulation has become a metonym for valuation, a point of distinction coextensive with artwork itself. So thoroughly did I absorb this conceit that at some point I no longer considered it a separate capacity from artistic practice: an incoherent artist was, by definition, an inferior artist.<sup>27</sup>

How did these extra-artistic exigencies emerge? One answer Singerman gives concerns

the instability of what the MFA bestows in terms of professional credibility. Since art schools don't control the right to a title as in other professions, within the art field a degree is a marker of educability rather than talent. Holders of an MFA, as Singerman notes, do not control training in or a market for artistic skill since any number of people can draw or paint, and can learn to do so outside the art academy. Without the ability to definitively stabilize significations surrounding its academic title, art schools have focused on discursive competence, participating in a broader postmodern movement encompassing the economic and cultural spheres in equal measure. In fact, Singerman attributes the emergence of performative and conceptual practices to this shift, arguing the inception of video and performance art was coextensive both with this cultural transformation and a re-situation of cultural production within the sphere of higher education – since art departments were one place that could offer material support for practices that were immaterial or dependent on a once prohibitively expensive technological armature by providing equipment, paying salaries to non-commercial artists, or providing them with a place to exhibit.

## 6. Tough Little Tricks

Clearly, the respective legacies of American and European artistic pedagogy have had an impact on one another. But in this to-ing and fro-ing across the Atlantic, traditions have hardened into economic, political, social, and cultural agendas that are contextually far removed. So, if one narrative of the transatlantic cross-fertilization of the arts traces the assimilation of the European avant-gardes into American artistic production, the narrative concerning the export of American-style educational standardization to Europe has often been ascribed as proximate cause for broader transformations in European art education and the commencement of a PhD track in art. But the changes wrought by Bologna cannot be solely attributed to a malignant American influence. They also reflect propinquity between the project of European integration and the neoliberal reform of European educational institutions. Slating the art academy into the framework of the research university has been one consequence. Considering how fraught the terms of the debate have become, how amnesiac the institutional arguments over constituting the artistic PhD as a new discipline, one is justified in asking whether the outpouring of so many spoken and written words, and the accumulation of so many frequent flyer miles in the process of attending the dozens of symposia now crowding the academic calendar are not symptoms of the

same sorts of disciplinary instabilities that Singerman argues accounted for the formulation of the MFA in America. Another answer applies directly to the European context: money – state money, EU money, academic appointments, fellowships, and the legitimacy accompanying them. But if indicating that economic considerations motivate processes of academic legitimation is considered a cynical line of argument, a more accurate answer might posit a kind of fatal synergy between legitimacy-as-money and money-as-legitimacy.

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academia is really another inside. Having become interpolated within the field, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to tally up the advantages and disadvantages accrued, not from some remote vantage of comfortable objectivity, but from within the horizonless terrain of the debate itself. OK, finding a vantage isn't possible, but a principle problem I have with what I've witnessed and read thus far has to do with Crow's dialectical imperative. To quote Steyerl's essay again: "It simply does not make any sense to continue the discussion as if practices of artistic research do not have a long and extensive history." The a-historicism I have seen is perhaps the most bewildering aspect of the debate, the two-ton elephant in the room.

Why? Would emphasizing that art is already inter-disciplinary, contextual, and employs diverse sorts of research methodologies detract from establishing it within the research university? Is denying this concomitant with the cynicism that accompanies any effort to bestow something common with a special new name? Clearly, the dangerous projects produced under the auspices of artistic PhD or doctorate programs adhere not so much to a standardized methodology but have to be justified by appealing to a standardized logic. The effect upon nascent artist-researchers being, as I have tried to demonstrate, reification of a kind of means-ends logic familiar to anyone who has ever applied for a grant. Because, and this is my main point, art cannot be a normative academic discipline when the hermeneutics for judging research-based art do not exist and are beyond formulation; such a project would inevitably be oriented toward a set of aesthetic biases privileging "knowledge production"<sup>28</sup> (in the reflective tradition) or "contestatory practice" ("a tradition in which philosophy is already politics"<sup>29</sup>) instead of any number of alternative conceptions of artistic practice.<sup>30</sup>

I am not suggesting that romantic regression is an appropriate means to escape the straightjacket of Modernism or modernity, but I *am* advocating for a pressing need to view art in terms other than a comparison to science, and to pose our "inert and disinterested idea of art" that is "violently egoistic and magical, i.e., *interested* idea."<sup>31</sup> As Joseph Beuys, that other proponent for the efficacy of sympathetic-magic-as-grassroots-politics put it: "When I do something shamanistic, I make use of the shamanistic element ... in order to express something about a *future* [my italics] possibility."<sup>32</sup> What the research university model presents us with instead is a situation where art becomes progressively more entrenched within a regime of bi-univocal utterances that suppress



Unidentified image of a project found in the *European Art Research Network* website, <http://www.artresearch.eu/index.php/2011/05/29/art-as-a-thinking-process-venice-5-6-june-2011/>.

Setting cynicism aside for the time being, if I initially (naïvely) thought that by entering a program I could participate in reorienting the discourse to reflect some of the tensions, oppositions, and points of irresolution that motivated this article, as I near the end of my first year in a PhD program, I am reminded of the dangers of the incremental approach. Attempts to reform the system from the inside always end in re-forming the reformer: the outside of

polyvocality (“By aligning itself on the voice, graphism supplants the voice and induces a fictitious voice”),<sup>33</sup> creating a cynical situation where, as Sande Cohen writes in *Academia and the Luster of Capitalism*, “the impossible future [is] made impossible to publicly discuss.”<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, I’ve talked myself away from the ledge. Let me resume my earlier art-historical line of argument. Given that one of the central projects of both modernism and postmodernism has been to interrogate the conditions of art’s appearance, the intercalation of the artistic PhD into artistic pedagogy means artists must necessarily interrogate this situation, questioning the presuppositions and multiple outcomes of academic confinement. One place where the legacy and implications of institutional critique might still be of some consequence is exactly this site where, it could be construed, those with a vested interest in PhD programs would prefer it not to appear, the place where they themselves situate artistic research physically and discursively – that is, in the research university. Maze and labyrinth: here a formal equivalence leads science out of its restricted field of competency, back into the dominion of myth. As Robert Smithson wrote in 1972, “It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom.”<sup>35</sup>

The construction of *habitus*-as-edifice is, in retrospect, what I witnessed at the EARN conference in Murcia: PhD students and professors preoccupied with playing to the gallery of national and supranational regulators and funding bodies, busily working (albeit at times self-critically) to concretize and legitimate an emergent university discipline as a going concern. As Sande Cohen writes, the danger in this preoccupation is that art, like criticism, loses site of itself as a field of activity where “it is not a question of taking sides, but of ambiguating a relentless unfolding of knowledge.”<sup>36</sup> Another way of phrasing this problematic is to say that despite the presumption that artistic research, by virtue of its situation within academia, lies outside the purview of market valuation, the legitimization game being played in artistic PhD departments throughout Europe displays a strong conceptual linkage with the affirmative products of the art market, introducing a different sort of reifying threat. As Cohen writes, “Criticism of inertial continuities ... or of mythic conjunctions ... does not prevent criticism from becoming another link in the labyrinth of chains. Indeed, not only does criticism [or art-as-research] not transfer to inventing existences independent of the system of Capital, but it is increasingly another commodity, whose book forms [or art forms]

signifies a nonbreak with forms...”<sup>37</sup>

## 7. Footsteps Down the Corridor

As for my *actual* experience in a PhD program, I think it best to pass over the matter in silence, save for one or two observations reflecting in a different register the gist of what I have written.

Passing through the halls of the academy’s Schillerplatz building on the first day of classes, what I recall most vividly is the distinct impression of becoming somehow physically changed, made diminutive. It was as if at the moment I entered the academy building as a student, I reverted to an earlier student incarnation – like the young novelist Kowalski in Witold Gombrowicz’s 1937 novel *Ferdydurke* who is remanded to gymnasium after being transformed into a pimple-faced student by his former professor. In its opening scene, the freshly-minted adolescent Kowalski attempts to flee, and in failing to do so, precisely describes institutional interpellation as a condition which runs from placement in architectural space to attitudes of bodily comportment to the gradual paralysis of independent thought, ending finally with meek submission to an institutionally determined identity:

I jumped up to run away, but something caught me from behind, a kind of hook which dragged me back, and there I was, caught by my childish, schoolboy’s little behind. It was my little behind that stopped me from moving, because of it I could not budge, and the master still sat there, and such an overwhelmingly, schoolmasterly spirit emanated from his posture that instead of crying out I raised my arm like a schoolboy in class.<sup>38</sup>

After my first week in Vienna, I had an intimation that this was also to be my predicament, positioned again as a student, bearing all the ignominy of a studenthood in which, deprived of a certain authority in speech, one lapses into a docile, almost unconscious passivity. It was pointless to argue or fight against this subject-position. Doing so would only make me look vain and querulous in front of my newfound peers. I could only sit quietly, with feigned attentiveness while being advised as to the importance of using correctly and consistently formatted footnotes.

On my second trip, I carried a portable futon purchased at Ikea with me, since, knowing only a few people in Vienna, I had received tacit permission to sleep in the seminar room – a secluded suite of classrooms on the school’s attic floor. The night of my arrival, I had quickly fallen into a deep sleep when I awoke to the

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sound of a key turning in a lock, followed by the beam of a flashlight sweeping the room. In a voice that brooked no argument, the night watchman advised me that I had five minutes to vacate the premises. I fumbled for my cell phone: it was just after 2:00 in the morning. Now, not only did I feel like a student, but like a disobedient student in the bargain. Having established that I was unprepared to spend the rest of the night wandering the streets of Vienna, I checked into a hotel, but the shame of my summary expulsion kept me awake for a long time.

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1  
Frederic Jameson, foreword to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, by Jean-François Lyotard, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xii.

2  
Ibid., ix.

3  
Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press), 30.

4  
Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press), 61.

5  
The most baldly instrumental prospectus I read came, naturally, from England – the country where cultural tourism policies have been pursued with the most vehemence. A call issued by the University of Northampton sought applicants for a praxis-based PhD analyzing public behavior to curated sites, one aim of which is “to investigate how experience and understanding of particular public spaces in Northamptonshire >might be enhanced through interdisciplinary arts research.” How can we read this aim other than as another palliative in countering the degradation of the English hinterlands by decades of neoliberal public policy, which have consistently championed cultural tourism and other forms of service-based remediation as a solution?

6  
Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 35.

7  
Ibid., 35. The issue for Lyotard is that the passage from the denotative to the prescriptive is unintelligible: it does not necessarily follow that statements describing real situations of social iniquity are remedied by prescriptions based on those statements, or that such remedies will be just. If their combination is a type of linguistic operation, which “is also that of liberalism,” it is also one that conceals its difference, since plugged into the theoretical ordering of a denotative statement “there are some implied discursive orderings that determine the measure to be taken in social reality to bring it into conformity with the representation of justice that was worked out in the theoretical discourse...” See Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 21.

8  
See Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén,

*Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs Universitet/Art Monitor, 2005), 19. A presumably academic boilerplate that admits the impossibility of defining artistic research – or at least complicating the possible definition through recourse to its impossibility – would not be an acceptable premise for comprising an academic discipline. Admitting this impossibility, however, might be one way of modulating the search for an adequate definition, since, as Derrida writes, “impossibility is not the simple contrary of the possible. It supposes and also gives itself over to possibility, traverses it, and leaves in it the trace of its removal. There is nothing fortuitous about the fact that this discourse on the conditions of possibility ... can spread to all the places where performativity ... would be at work: the event, invention, the gift, the pardon, hospitality, friendship, the promise, the experience of death, et cetera.”

9  
From my parsing of the discussion, despite the imperative of Bologna, the European construction of the artistic PhD has failed to establish a uniform conception of theory, praxis, and methodology. By way of anecdote, a Romanian friend compelled to enter a PhD program in order to keep the teaching position she has held for the last nine years, related how in Bucharest, the department overseeing her PhD did not even consider the PhD-in-art as necessitating any special formulation whatsoever. Accordingly, it has been constructed in line with the standard requirements for disciplines in the humanities – namely art history.

10  
See <http://www.konst.gu.se/english/ArtMonitor/>, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/v2n2editorial.html>, and <http://www.mahku.nl/research/mahkuzine9.html>. An indication of the editorial line of these journals – the *Journal of Artistic Research* has published seven thematic issues devoted to the following topics: critical methodologies, the politics of design, spatial practice, and the issue of the MA degree.

11  
Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, *Artistic Research*, 38.

12  
Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998), 131.

13  
Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, *Artistic Research*, 114; Lyotard,

*The Postmodern Condition*, 38.

14

Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5.

15

A cursory glance into the history of Western culture, in fact, reveals the quattrocento transformations of science and art were driven, on the one hand, by the Spanish Inquisition, which dispersed Jewish scholars of the Kabbalist tradition into the centers of Western European commerce, and, on the other, this strand of theosophical thought was immediately linked by Christian scholars to a nascent Neoplatonic tradition. In both philosophies, one finds a conceptualization of the unity of human endeavors – arithmetic, geometry, harmonics, and architecture – wedded to a mystical notion of a divine correspondences between man, God, and nature. Historical research indicates both Kabbalist and Neoplatonic traditions influenced the gradual development of autonomy within the different disciplines (architecture, music, representational art, technology, the sciences) – although from the fourteenth up to the eighteenth century these were not seen as separate disciplines but as different expressions of an underlying unity. (See the work of British historian Frances Yates who has written extensively on this topic.)

16

Denis Hollier writes: “Transgression does not belong to the same space as the idea, except as something that subverts it. That is why transgression is a matter not for theory but for practice.”

17

Nilsson quotes Arthur C. Danto to the effect that “art objects need discourse in order to become one.”

18

Per Nilsson, *The Amphibian Stand: A Philosophical Essay Concerning Research Processes in Fine Art* (Umeå: h:ström Texte & Kultur, 2009), 165.

19

Hito Steyerl, “Aesthetics of Resistance? Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict,” *MaHKUzine Journal of Artistic Research* #8 (Utrecht, winter 2010).

20

Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 118.

21

Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.

22

Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 101.

23

*Ibid.*, 101.

24

Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), 181.

25

*Ibid.*, 155. Here he quotes Henry S. Dyer, “College Testing and the Arts,” in eds. Lawrence E. Dennis and Renate M Jacobs, *The Arts and Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1968), 89.

36

Thomas Crow, “Unwritten Histories of Conceptual,” in eds. Aleader Alberro and Blake Stimson *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2000), 564.

27

I still recall how when I arrived at CalArts in the fall of 2000, students still mythologized the attitude prevalent in the late 1990s, when graduate students had become so discursive they ceased producing objects altogether. We who came later, arriving with at least one eye on the burgeoning art market, did not participate in the ideological purity of this *habitus*. Nevertheless, we could still feel its absence as something that had passed.

28

The term “knowledge production” is generally associated with the cultural transformations that coincided with the emergence of a “knowledge economy” (a term first coined by Austrian-born economist Fritz Machlup in the early 1960s), and as such, reflect the conflicts arising in a society where knowledge, in the words of Tom Holert, “has become the source of social and economic value production, that is, the object of exploitation and class struggle.” My own familiarity with the term stems from its employment by Marxist-oriented artists who considered the appropriate *telos* of artistic work as fundamentally rooted in an investigation of existence under capitalism. I once asked Michael Asher, my mentor at CalArts, if he considered art to have a function *other* than knowledge production. His response was “no.”

29

Jameson, foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, ix.

30

Examples of such alternative practices could be based on the deployment of symbol systems to heal the social wound, or a Neoplatonism governed by the correspondence between

number, architectonics, music, and the natural sciences, or a pre-Colombian ideology of expenditure – a world without art where things are made for use.

31

*Ibid.*, 10–11.

32

Heiner Bastian and Jeannot Simmen, *Joseph Beuys: Zeichnungen/ Tekeningen/ Drawings* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1980), 46.

33

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 188.

34

Sande Cohen, *Academia and the Luster of Capitalism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 2.

35

Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 281.

36

Cohen, *Academia and the Luster of Capitalism*, 11.

37

*Ibid.*, 3.

38

Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 24.

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