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Aesthetics of Resistance?

Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict

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What is artistic research today? At present no one seems to know an answer to this question. Artistic research is treated as one of the multiple practices which are defined by indefinition, constantly in flux, lacking coherence and identity. But what if this view were indeed misleading? What if we actually knew more about it than we thought? In order to discuss this proposition, let's first have a look at current debates around artistic research. It seems as if one of their most important concerns is the transformation of artistic research into an academic discipline. There are discussions about curriculum, degrees, method, practical application, pedagogy. On the other hand, there is also substantial criticism of this approach. It addresses the institutionalization of artistic research as being complicit with new modes of production within cognitive capitalism: commodified education, creative and affective industries, administrative aesthetics, and so on. Both perspectives agree on one point: artistic research is at present being constituted as a more or less normative, academic discipline.

A discipline is of course disciplinarian; it normalizes, generalizes and regulates; it rehearses a set of responses, and in this case, trains people to function in an environment of symbolic labor, permanent

design and streamlined creativity. But then again, what is a discipline apart from all of this? A discipline may be oppressive, but this is also precisely why it points to the issue it keeps under control. It indexes a suppressed, an avoided or potential conflict. A discipline hints at a conflict immobilized. It is a practice to channel and exploit its energies and to incorporate them into the powers that be. Why would one need a discipline if it wasn't to discipline somebody or something? Any discipline can thus also be seen from the point of view of conflict.

Let me give an example: a project I recently realized, called *The Building*. It deals with the construction history of a Nazi building on the main square in Linz, Austria; it investigates its background, the stories of the people who actually built it, and also looks at the materials used in the building. The construction was performed by partly foreign forced laborers and some of the former inhabitants of the site were persecuted, dispossessed and murdered. During the research it also actually turned out that some of the building stones were produced in the notorious quarry of concentration camp Mauthausen, where thousands of people were killed.

There are at least two different ways of describing this building. One and the same stone used for the building can be said to have gained its shape according to the paradigm of neoclassicist architecture, which would be the official description given on the building itself. Or it can be described as having probably been shaped by a stone mason in concentration camp Mauthausen, who was likely a former Spanish Republican fighter. The conclusion is obvious: the same stone can be described from the point of view of a discipline, which classifies and names. But it can also be read as a trace of a suppressed conflict.

But why would this very local project be relevant for a reflection about artistic research as such? Because parts of this building also coincidentally house the Linz Art Academy. This building is a location, where artistic research is currently being integrated into academic structures: there is a department for artistic research inside this building. Thus, any investigation of the building might turn out as a sort of institutional metareflection on the contemporary conditions of artistic research as such.

In this sense: where is the conflict, or rather what are the extensive sets of conflicts underlying this new academic discipline? Who is currently building its walls, using which materials, produced by whom? Who are the builders of the discipline and where are their traces?

Discipline and Conflict

So, what are the conflicts, and where are the boundaries then? Seen from the point of view of many current contributions, artistic research seems more or less confined to the contemporary metropolitan art academy. Actual artistic research looks like a set of art practices by predominantly metropolitan artists acting as ethnographers, sociologists, product or social designers. It gives the impression of being an asset of technologically and conceptually advanced First World capitalism, trying to upgrade its population to efficiently function in a knowledge economy, and as a by-product, casually surveying the rest of the world as well. But if we look at artistic research from the perspective of conflict or more precisely of social struggles, a map of practices emerges that spans most of the 20th century and also most of the globe. It becomes obvious that the current debates do not fully acknowledge the legacy of the long, varied and truly international history of artistic

research which has been understood in terms of an aesthetics of resistance.

Aesthetics of Resistance is the title of Peter Weiss' seminal novel, released in the early 1980s, which presents an alternative reading of art history as well as an account of the history of anti-fascist resistance from 1933 to 1945. Throughout the novel Weiss explicitly uses the term "artistic research (künstlerische Forschung)" to refer to practices such as Brecht's writing factory in exile. He also points to the factographic and partly also productivist practices in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union, mentioning the documentary work of Sergei Tretjakov, among many others. Thus he establishes a genealogy of aesthetic research, which is related to the
history of emancipatory struggles throughout the 20th century.

Since the 1920s, extremely sophisticated debates about artistic epistemologies were waged on terms like fact, reality, objectivity, inquiry within the circles of Soviet factographers, cinematographers and artists. For factographers, a fact is an outcome of a process of production. Fact comes from *facere*, to make or to do. So in this sense the fact is made or even made up. This should not come as a surprise to us in the age of poststructuralist, metaphysical skepticism. But the range of aesthetic approaches which were developed as research tools almost 100 years ago is stupefying.

Authors like Vertov, Stepanova, Tretjakov, Popova and Rodchenko invent complex procedures of investigation, such as the cine-eye, the cine-truth, the biography of the object or photomontage. They work on human perception and practice and actively try to integrate scientific attitudes into their work. And scientific creation is flowing as a result of many of these developments. In his autobiography, Roman Jakobson describes in detail how avantgarde

art practices inspired him to develop his specific ideas on linguistics.

Of course throughout history many different approaches of this type of research have existed. We could also mention the efforts of the artists employed by the FSA (Farm Security Administration) of creating essayistic photojournalistic inquiries during the Great Depression in the US. In all these cases, the artistic research is ambivalently co-opted into state policies – although to a different extent and with completely different consequences. Around the same time Tretyakov got shot during the Stalinist terror, Walker Evans had a solo show at the MoMa.

Another method of artistic inquiry, which is based on several related sets of conflict and crisis is the essayistic approach. In 1940, Hans Richter coins the term film essay or essay film as capable of visualizing theoretical ideas. He refers to one of his own works already made in 1927 called *Inflation*, an extremely interesting experimental film about capitalism running amok. Richter argues that a new filmic language has to be developed in order to deal with abstract processes such as the capitalist economy. How does one show these abstractions, how does one visualize the immaterial? These questions are reactualized in contemporary art practices, but they have a long history.

The essay as filmic approach also embraces the perspective of anticolonial resistance. One of the first so-called essay films is the anticolonial film-essay *Les statues meurent aussi,* by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, about racism in dealing with African art. The film is commissioned by a magazine called *Presence africaine* which counts as its editors people like Aimé Césaire or Leopold Senghor, main theoreticians of the so-called negritude movement in the 1930s. Only a few years later Theodor Adorno's text, *The Essay as*

Form, appears in which he ponders on the resistant characteristics of the essay as subversive method of thought. To Adorno the essay means the reshuffling of the realms of the aesthetic and epistemological, which undermines the dominant division of labor.

And then we enter the whole period of the 1960s with their international struggles, tricontinentalism and so on. Frantz Fanon's slogan: "...we must discuss, we must invent..." is the motto of the manifesto *Towards a Third Cinema,* written by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in 1969, in a context of dictatorship in Argentina. The relation of art and science is again explicitly mentioned in Julio Garcia Espinosa's manifesto *For an Imperfect Cinema* (1969). Other methods of artistic research include situationist derive and workers inquiries, constructivist montage, cut ups, biomechanics, oral history, deconstructive or surrealist anthropology, the diffusion of counterinformation as well as aesthetic journalism. Some of these methods are more easily absorbed into the art mainstream than others. Especially strongly dematerialized practices with pronounced modernist features are quickly absorbed into information capitalism because they are compressed, quick to absorb and easily transmitted.

It is no coincidence that many of the practices mentioned here have been dealing with classical problems of documentary representation from very different perspectives: its function as power/knowledge, its epistemological problems, its relation to reality and the challenge of creating a new one. Documentary styles and forms have forever grappled with the uneven mix of rationality and creativity, between subjectivity and objectivity, between the power of creation and the power of conservation.

It is no coincidence either that many of the historical methods of artistic research are tied to social or revolutionary movements, or to

moments of crisis and reform. In this perspective, the outline of a global network of struggles is revealed, which spans almost the whole 20th century, which is transversal, relational, and (in many, though far from all cases) emancipatory.

It is a coincidence, however, that Peter Weiss' *Aesthetics of Resistance* also mentions the main square of Linz: the site of *The Building*. He describes a scene in which members of the International Brigades in Spain listen to a broadcast of the enthusiastic reception for Hitler and the German troops on Linz's main square in March 1938. But Weiss' protagonist notices a very small (and entirely hypothetical) moment in resistance pointed out by the radio journalist: some of the windows on the square remain unlit, and the journalist is quick to point out that the flats of the Jews are located there. Actually during the research it turned out that one of the Jewish families living there had dispersed to three different continents and two members of the family had been murdered. One of the latter was a person called Ernst Samuely who was supposedly a communist. After many ordeals, he joined a Jewish partisan group on the Polish border before disappearing. So, if we look at the Linz building from this point of view, we see that it dissolves into a network of international routes and relations, which relate to oppression but also to resistance: it relates to what Walter Benjamin once called "the tradition of the oppressed."

The Perspective of Conflict

If we keep applying the global and transversal perspective to the debate around artistic research, the temporal and spatial limitations of contemporary metropolitan debates are revealed. 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 well

beyond conceptual art practices – which is one of the very few historical examples to be mentioned, although very rarely. From the point of view of social struggles, the discontinuous genealogy of artistic research becomes an almost global one, with a long and frequently interrupted history. The geographical distribution of artistic research practices also dramatically changes in this perspective. Since some locations were particularly affected by the conjunction of power and knowledge, which arose with the formation of capitalism and colonialism, strategies of epistemic disobedience had to be invented.

A power/knowledge/art, which reduced whole populations to objects of knowledge, domination and representation, had to be countered not only by social struggle and revolt, but also by epistemological and aesthetic innovation. Thus reversing the perspective and focusing on discipline as an index of conflict also reverses the direction in which art history has been written as an account of peripheral artists copying and catching up with Western art trends. We could just as well say that many contemporary metropolitan artists are only now catching up with the complexity of debates around reality and representation that Soviet factographers had already developed in the 1920s.

Specific and Singular

In all these methods, two elements collide: a claim to specificity clashes with a claim to singularity. What does this mean? One aspect of the work claims to participate in a general paradigm, within a discourse that can be shared and which is manufactured according to certain criteria. More often than not, scientific, legalistic or journalistic truth procedures underly this method of

research. These methodologies are pervaded by power relations as many theorists have demonstrated.

On the other hand, artistic research projects in many cases also lay claim to singularity. They create a certain artistic set up, which claims to be relatively unique and produces its own field of reference and logic. This provides it with a certain autonomy, in some cases an edge of resistance against dominant modes of knowledge production. In other cases, this assumed singularity just sexes up a quantitative survey, or to use a famous expression by Benjamin Buchloh, creates an aesthetic of administration.[1]"

While specific methods generate a shared terrain of knowledge – which is consequently pervaded by power structures – singular methods follow their own logic. While this may avoid the replication of existing structures of power/knowledge, it also creates the problem of the proliferation of parallel universes, which each speak their own, untranslatable language. Practices of artistic research usually partake in both registers, the singular as well as the specific; they speak several languages at once.

Thus, one could imagine a semiotic square*, which would roughly map the tensions which become apparent during the transformation of artistic research into an academic and/or economic discipline. Of course, this scheme is misleading, since one would have to draw a new one for every singular point of view which is investigated. But it shows the tensions which both frame and undermine the institutionalization of artistic research.

Artistic Research as Translation

The multilinguality of artistic research implies that artistic research is an act of translation. It takes part in at least two languages and

can in some cases create new ones. It speaks the language of quality as well as of quantity, the language of the singular as well as the language of the specific, use value as well as exchange value or spectacle value, discipline as well as conflict; and it translates between all of these. This does not mean that it translates correctly – but it translates, nevertheless.

At this point, one should emphasize that this is also the case with so-called autonomous artworks, which have no pretense whatsoever to partake in any kind of research. This does not mean they cannot be quantified or become part of disciplinary practices, because they are routinely quantified on the art market in the form of pricing and integrated into art histories and other systems of value. Thus, most art practices exist in one or another type of translation, but this type of translation does not jeopardize the division of labor established between art historians and gallerists, between artists and researchers, between the mind and senses. In fact, a lot of the conservative animosity towards artistic research stems from a feeling of threat, because of the dissolution of these boundaries, and this is why artistic research is often dismissed in everyday practice as neither art nor research.

But the quantification processes involved in the evaluation or valorization of artistic research are slightly different than the traditional procedures of quantification. Artistic research as a discipline not only sets and enforces certain standards but also presents an attempt to extract or produce a different type of value in art. Apart from the art market, a secondary market develops for those practices which lack in fetish value. This secondary value is established by quantification and integration into (increasingly) commodified education systems. Additionally, a sort of social surplus embedded into a pedagogical understanding of art comes into play. Both combined create a pull towards the production of

applied or applicable knowledge/art, which can be used for entrepreneurial innovation, social cohesion, city marketing, and thousands of other aspects of cultural capitalism. From this perspective, artistic research indeed looks like a new version of the applied arts, a new and largely immaterial craft, which is being instituted as a discipline in many different places.

Radiators

At the end, let me come back to the beginning: we know more about artistic research than we think. And this concerns the most disquieting findings of the project around *The Building* in Linz. It is more than likely, that after the war, radiators were taken from the now abandoned concentration camp Mauthausen and reinstalled into the building. If this plan documented in the historical files was executed, then the radiators are still there and have quietly been heating the building ever since. A visit with an expert confirmed that the radiators have never been exchanged in the Eastern part of the building and that, moreover, some of the radiators had already been used, when they had been installed around 1948. The make of those radiators corresponds to the few radiators seen in contemporary photos of concentration camp Mauthausen. Now, of course, radiators were not in use in the prisoners barracks. They were in use in some work rooms, like the laundry room. They were in use in the prisoners office and the prisoners brothel, where female inmates from another concentration camp had to work.

But what do we make of the fact that the Department for Artistic Research (its coordination office is located in *The Building*, according to the website) could soon find itself being heated by the same radiators, which were mute witnesses of the plight of female

inmates in the concentration camp brothel? To quote the website of the Linz art academy, “artistic-scientific research belongs to the core tasks of the Art University Linz, and artistic practice and scientific research are combined under one roof. The confrontation and/or combination of science and art require intense research and artistic development in a methodological perspective, in the areas of knowledge transfers and questions of mediation. Cultural Studies, art history, media theory, several strategies of mediation as well as art and Gender Studies in the context of concrete art production are essential elements of the profile of the university.” What are the conditions of this research? What is the biography of its historical infrastructure and how can reflecting on it help us to break through the infatuation with discipline and institutionalization and to sharpen a historical focus in thinking about artistic research? Obviously not every building will turn out to house such a surprising infrastructure. But the general question remains: what do we do with an ambivalent discipline, which is institutionalized and disciplined under this type of conditions? How can we emphasize the historical and global dimension of artistic research and underline the perspective of conflict? And when is it time to turn off the lights?

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SPECIFIC

SCIENCE /

PUBLIC DEBATE /

ART HISTORY
COUNTERINFORMATION

DISCIPLINE
RESISTANCE

ART MARKET /
AESTHETIC AUTONOMY
CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

SINGULAR

This text appeared first in mahkuzine 8, winter 2010,
http://www.mahku.nl/download/maHKUzine08_web.pdf

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[1] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", in: *October*, Vol. 55. (Winter, 1990), pp. 105-143.