

AESTHETIC OF RESISTANCE?¹

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Artistic research as discipline and conflict

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 many practices which are defined by their absence of definition, constantly in flux, lacking coherence or identity. But what if this view were indeed misleading? What if we actually knew more about it than we think?

In order to discuss this proposition, let's first have a look at current debates around artistic research. It seems as if one of the 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 towards this approach. Basically, it addresses the institutionalisation 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 normalises, generalises, and regulates; it rehearses a set of responses, and in this case trains people to function in an environment of symbolic labour, permanent design, and streamlined creativity. But then again, what is a discipline apart from all of this? A discipline may seem oppressive, but this is also precisely its purpose: to keep something under control. It circumscribes a suppressed, avoided, or potential conflict. A discipline hints at a conflict immobilised. It is a practice that channels and exploits that conflict's energies, and incorporates 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 as a response to conflict.

Let me give an example: a project I recently completed, 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 built it, and the materials used in the building. The construction was partly done by foreign, forced labourers; and some of the former inhabitants of the site were persecuted, dispossessed, and even murdered. During

the research, we also learned that some of the building stones were actually 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. The stone used for the building can be seen as having been shaped to fit the paradigm of neoclassicist architecture; this would be the official description given on the building itself. Or, it could be described as having been most likely shaped in concentration camp Mauthausen by a stone mason 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; or read as evidence of a suppressed conflict.

But why would this very local project be relevant for a reflection about artistic research in general? 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 meta-reflection on the contemporary conditions of artistic research.

56 Questions arise: 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 what are their associations?

Discipline and conflicts

So, what are the conflicts, and where are the boundaries? 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 the technologically and conceptually advanced First World capitalist, trying to upgrade his population to function efficiently in a knowledge economy, and as a by-product casually surveying the rest of the world. But if we look at artistic research from the perspective of conflict, or more precisely of social struggles, a map of practices emerges, which 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 can be 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 through 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 '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—over terms such as 'fact', 'reality', 'objectivity', and inquiry—within the circles of Soviet factographers, cinematographers, and artists. For factographers, a fact is an outcome of a process of production. The word 'fact' comes from *facere*, to make or to do. So in this sense, a fact is made or even made up. This should not come as a surprise, in this age of post-structuralist, metaphysical scepticism. But the range of aesthetic approaches which were developed as research tools almost 100 years ago is stupefying.

Authors such as Vertov, Stepanova, Tretjakov, Popova, and Rodchenko invent complex procedures of investigation, such as the 'cine-eye', the 'cine-truth', and the biography of the object—'photomontage'. They work on human perception and practice, and actively try to integrate scientific attitudes into their work. And scientific creation still flows as a result of many of their inventions. In his autobiography, Roman Jakobson describes in detail how such avant garde art practices inspired him to develop his specific ideas on linguistics.

Of course, throughout history many different approaches to this type of research have existed. We could also mention the efforts of the artists employed by the FSA (Farm Security Administration), in creating essayistic, photojournalistic inquiries during the Great Depression in the US. In these sorts of cases, the artistic researcher must ambivalently let their work be co-opted by state policies, to varying degrees and with unique consequences: around the time Tretjakov got shot during the Stalinist terror, Walker Evans had a solo show at the MoMa.

Another method of artistic inquiry, which is based on related views of conflict and crisis, is the essayistic approach. In 1940, Hans Richter coined the term 'film essay' or 'essay film', as a means of visualising theoretical ideas. He refers to one of his own works, from as early as 1927, called *Inflation*—an extremely interesting experimental film about capitalism running amok. Richter argues that a new filmic language must be developed to deal with abstract processes such as the capitalist economy. How does one show such abstractions—how does one visualise the immaterial? These questions have been reactualised in contemporary art practice; but they have a long history.

The 'essay as filmic' approach also embraces the perspective of anti-colonial resistance. One of the first so-called 'essay films' is the anti-colonial film-essay *Les statues meurent aussi* by Marker and Alain Resnais, about racism in dealing with African art. The film was commissioned by a magazine called *Presence africaine* that includes as its editors people like Aime Cesaire 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* appeared, in which he ponders the revolutionary characteristics of the essay as a subversive method of thought. To Adorno, the essay means the reshuffling of the realms of the aesthetic and epistemological, undermining the dominant division of labour.

And then we enter the whole period of the 1960s, with its international struggles, tri-continentalism, 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 Getina in 1968 in the context of dictatorship in Argentina. The relationship between art and science is also explicitly mentioned in Juan Garcia Espinosa's manifesto *For an Imperfect Cinema*. Other methods of artistic research include situationist derivation, worker inquiries, constructivist montage, cut ups, biomechanics, oral history, deconstructive or surrealist anthropology, the diffusion of counter-information, and aesthetic journalism. Some of these methods are more easily absorbed into the art mainstream than others. Especially strongly dematerialised 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; and 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, subjectivity and objectivity, and 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. From this perspective, the outline of a global network of struggles is revealed, spanning almost the whole 20th century—a network 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 in

Linz' main square in March 1938. But Weiss' protagonist notices a very small (and entirely hypothetical) moment of resistance, pointed out by a 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, research showed that one of the Jewish families living there had already dispersed to three different continents, and two members of the family had been murdered. One of the latter was a person named Ernst Samuely who supposedly was 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 reveal oppression but also resistance: it exemplifies 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—one of the few historical examples ever mentioned (albeit 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 from 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.

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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, 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 debate around reality and representation that Soviet factographers had already developed in the 1920s.

Specific and singular

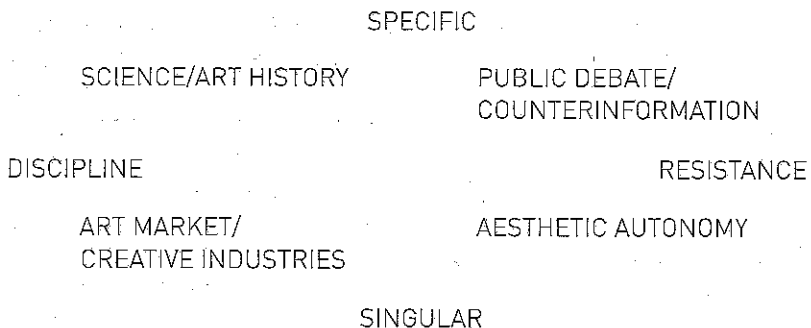
In all these methods, two elements collide: a claim to specificity, clashing with a claim to singularity. What does this mean? One aspect of the work claims to participate in a general paradigm, within a discourse that can be shared

and which is manufactured according to certain criteria. More often than not, scientific, legalistic, or journalistic truth procedures underlie these methods of research. Their 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 setup, 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 aesthetics of administration'.

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 that 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 representation for every singular point of view investigated. But it shows the tensions that both frame and undermine the institutionalisation of artistic research.

Artistic research as translation

The multi-linguality 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 quantity, the language of the singular as well as 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 nevertheless translates.

At this point, one should emphasise that this is also the case with so-called 'autonomous' artworks, which have no pretence whatsoever of partaking 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 some mode of translation, but one that does not jeopardise the division of labour established between art historians and gallerists, between artists and researchers, between mind and senses. In fact, a lot of the conservative animosity towards artistic research stems from a feeling of threat due to the dissolution of these boundaries; and this is why often in everyday practice artistic research is dismissed as neither art nor research.

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But the quantification processes involved in the evaluation or valorisation of artistic research are slightly different than 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 that lack 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. Combined, they 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

Let me at the end come back to the beginning: we know more about artistic research than we think. And this concerns the most disquieting finding 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 in fact 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, moreover, that some of the radiators were used when installed around 1948. Also, their make corresponds to that of the few radiators visible in photos of KZ Mauthausen. Of course, radiators were not in use in the prisoners' barracks; but they were in some work rooms like the laundry, the prisoners' office, and the prisoners' brothel where female inmates from another concentration camp were forced to work.

What do we make of the fact that the department for artistic research (its administrative office located in *The Building*, according to the website) might find itself being heated by the same radiators that were mute witnesses of the plight of female inmates in the concentration camp brothel? To quote from 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.'

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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 institutionalisation and to sharpen a historical focus in thinking about artistic research? Obviously not every building will turn out to house such surprising infrastructure. But the general question remains: what do we do with an ambivalent discipline, which is institutionalised and disciplined under such conditions? How can we emphasise the historical and global dimension of artistic research, and highlight the framework of conflict? And when is it time to shut down the lights?

INTELLECTUAL BIRDHOUSE

OSBORNE SELLITTE

Artistic Practice as Research



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