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Renee Green

HAIL THE INVISIBLE:

REASON'S SENSE OF HUMOR

Dieter Lesage

ON SUPPLEMENTALITY

Irit Rogoff

PRACTICING RESEARCH:

SINGULARISING KNOWLEDGE

Tim Stott

RESEARCH REPORT:

CRITIQUE OF ARCHIVAL REASON



Utrecht School of the Arts

Faculty of Visual Arts and Design

4	<i>Henk Slager</i>
	EDITORIAL
	DOING DISSEMINATION
6	<i>Nicolas Bourriaud</i>
	ARTISTIC DELAY
10	<i>Annette W. Balkema</i>
	DOING RESEARCH IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CLOUDS
	THE ACADEMY STRIKES BACK
16	<i>Renee Green</i>
	HAIL THE INVISIBLE: REASON'S SENSE OF HUMOR
25	<i>Dieter Lesage</i>
	ON SUPPLEMENTALITY
37	<i>Irit Rogoff</i>
	PRACTICING RESEARCH: SINGULARISING KNOWLEDGE
43	<i>Tim Stott</i>
	RESEARCH REPORT: CRITIQUE OF ARCHIVAL REASON
48	COLOPHON

Irit Rogoff

PRACTICING RESEARCH:

SINGULARISING KNOWLEDGE

For the presentation at “The Academy Strikes Back” conference I have been forwarded various questions by the organizers. These questions have mainly had to do with education and research within neo liberal cognitive capitalism and most specifically to me, about the relations between research and curating – but I have to confess that such questions are not really conducive for me as a way of entering into the problematics we are trying to address here today.

To some degrees these questions cannot be my entry point because I do not have great faith in the productivity of entering a discussion through a set of prescribed conditions which I might then need to negate, to lament and to resist. Of course we are all grappling with a set of conditions that affect both our institutional practices as well as the horizon limits of what we might want knowledge to be and how we might want it to operate. For myself I am less concerned with whether artistic research is a new paradigm or not, or with the bureaucratic protocols that are trying to domesticate it, but far more with the drive of those individuals and collectives, initiatives within institutions and stealth operations at its margins who seem determined to pursue it, no matter what strictures are set up for them. What does artistic research have to offer and if it does have something to offer, how can that possibility be protected rather than mainstreamed?

My reluctance is equally because I have in the past four years written so much about education, research and the curatorial that I am getting quite frustrated with the limits of what I have to say on the subject and therefore need to be something other than repeating. And in the meantime both the conditions of our work have shifted in the wake of both the financial downturn and the escalation of implementing the Bologna accord and equally my concerns and my thinking have shifted having become somewhat less interested in educational formats and more interested in modes of knowledge that inhabit these – and I want to use the occasion of this conference to begin understanding these shifts.

Recently, the annual lecture series known as the Reith Lectures, commemorating John Reith the founder of the broadcasting company, began on the BBC. This year the lecturer was Martin Reese the president of the Royal Society of Astronomy. He began by looking back to the 17th century emergence of aristocratic, self taught, scientific amateurs, who gathered out of passionate curiosity about the natural world – formed societies, exchanged books, reviewed each others experiments and theorems, and formed the first professional, learned associations devoted to uncovering radical new knowledge such as the Royal Society in 1660 – when a dozen men gathered to hear the young Christopher Wren give a lecture on astronomy. In the discussion that followed, they decided to



07 | 09 Aorta: Subtle Revolutions

form a society for the study of the new and still controversial “Experimental Philosophy”. The motto they decided on for their new association was “take nothing on authority”, a motto that still resonates with me today as I try and think about academic protocols and the academic authority of “truth regimes” and how these are constantly challenged by creative practices of knowledge.

Later that same day a rather brilliant, practice-based researcher at Goldsmiths underwent what we call the “upgrade”, which is the passage from the preliminary to the final phase of the PhD. On this occasion three professors sat in a room trying to convince this brilliant young man that he could do whatever he wanted, since he was clearly both serious in his research and passionate about his subject. We went on saying he could invent a narrative, de-contextualize his objects, speak in any kind of voice, and in general take as many liberties with his work as served his purpose. He, on the other hand, clung to the conventional academic protocols like a drowning man to a raft – his concerns were with how could he prove this, and how could he ground that, and what did he need to do to be taken seriously by a professional/academic community that held him up he felt to higher standards of knowledge. There was something both comic and confusing about our trying to liberate him from scholasticism and from his belief that it was some mysterious realm that he needed to crack in order to enter formal bastions of knowledge, and in his refusal of our emancipatory rhetoric.

The first story, of the Royal Society in the 17th century, refers to knowledge pre signification, and the second story, of the anxious researcher, refers to knowledge trying to be liberated from over signification and somewhere between these two is the dilemma I am trying to get at. Now I am neither naïve not romantic, I do not hark back nostalgically to the 17th century; to privileged amateur men sustained by colonial adventures, indentured laborers, vast estates, and arrogant entitlement – but I do want to keep a hold of two of their formulations; the value of “experimental philosophy” and the edict to “take nothing on authority”. And I think that “practice-based research” or as I prefer to think of it “creative practices of knowledge” are some of the ways in which we might grasp these and ensure that they do not cede to the endless pragmatic demands of knowledge protocols: outcomes, outputs, impact, constant monitoring of the exact usefulness of a particular knowledge or of its ability to follow the demands and the imperatives of cognitive capitalism – demands to be portable, to be transferable, to be useful, to be flexible, to be applied, to be entrepreneurial and generally integrated within market economies at every level.

But my question is whether constantly dealing critically with the structures and with the protocols and with their concomitant demands is actually going to get us to where we might need to be? Because my concern is with the actual knowledge and my belief is in its potential power for change.

I should say that I come from an institution that has had some fifteen years of post-graduate degrees in practice-based research work – and not only in the arts but also in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, media and communications, visual culture, and many others. In addition, I have recently began the work of establishing a national association called “Forum – Creative Practices of Knowledge” to ensure that this work has advocacy at the level of funding and assessment; that this is done on terms that we



08 / 09 Aorta: Subtle Revolutions

value and that ensure that the work is not held up to prescriptive models. Over these past years, with about forty practice-based PhD students currently in three programs in my department and with another 200 or so across our university – we have been adamant in refusing a uniform model for practice-based research and on insisting that each project needs to develop its own methodology and its own structure. This does not mean to claim that substantively we are more advanced, experienced or know better than elsewhere that is grappling with such questions. It does certainly mean that we have created far more work for ourselves by refusing such prescriptive uniformity, as each project needs to be excavated in detail until its subject and its methodology emerge organically from its concerns and its position. On the other hand we are working within a situation in which UK IHES have vigorously marketed this experience of practice-based research as a market advantage for overseas recruitment of students – but regardless of its instrumentalisation by various dominant market strategies, it does provide an effective model for a resistance (one of the few instances) to a normative mainstreaming of academic research at the level of knowledge. Issues of a-signification, of not adhering to a single level of meaning, and of singularisation of the new relational mode of both subjects and of knowledges are central to such a resistance.

Important as these institutional issues are, it seems to me that one of the limitations of the critical discussion we are having at present is that if we focus the discussion on the strictures and bureaucratic limits being imposed, we do not actually talk about knowledge. Equally, if we pose the question through the so called “educational turn” in curating, we are talking about protocols and we do not actually talk about the knowledge that is either circulating or informing or being put on display within these enterprises. When we focus on new formats such as gatherings and conversations and open access sites of learning and teaching as modes of artistic activity that supplant the putting of objects on display, we recognize that market forces are as much countered by discursive practices across our field as the art world capitalizing on some of its flexibilities and the ability to turn its infrastructures. And so the art world became the site of extensive talking – talking emerged as a practice, as a mode of gathering, as a way of getting access to some knowledge and to some questions, as networking and organizing, and articulating some necessary questions. But did we put any value on what was actually being said? Or, did we privilege the coming-together of people in space and trust that formats and substances would somehow osmotically emerge from these?

Instead of fighting for alternatives I want at this moment to pose questions about the circuits of knowledge that went from amateur to professional, from general to discipline based, and to currently understanding themselves, at a progressive level at least, as being “undisciplined”. Obviously the vast body of thought that Michel Foucault put in to play with his historical analysis of knowledge formations and the assumptions they have been based on has been a key here.¹ But we have also been through a decade in which activist initiatives at countering institutional dominance of knowledge production and dissemination have shifted the ground in terms of expanding the range of the possible formats available for learning. In this instance, I want to pay as much attention to the *knowledges themselves*, as we do to the *demands put on them*: the structures that house them, the strictures that police them, and the rhetorics that



09 / 09 Aorta: Subtle Revolutions

¹ Primarily in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), *The Order of Things* (1966) and the later collection *Language, Counter Memory, Practice* (1980) *Cornell U.P.*

they are embedded in. In a series of papers published over the past two years, my increasing focus, I now realize, has been the move from the formats to the substances of knowledge. There is an argument forming here, I think, that we should not be arguing formats with counter formats, structures with counter structures, protocols with counter protocols – but rather with emergent knowledge formations that have the ability to undo the ground on which they stand.

To advocate for creative practices of knowledge is to advocate for its undisciplining. It is to argue that it needs to be viewed as an a-signifying practice that produces ruptures and affects within the map of knowledge. This is difficult since the legacy of knowledge we have inherited from the Enlightenment has viewed knowledge as teleological, linear, cumulative, consequent, and verifiable either through experimentation or through orders of logic and sequential argumentation.

It is slippery to try and talk about knowledge itself, slippery to avoid essentialism or notions of autonomy and equally awkward to avoid the heroics that attach themselves to the declaration of “the new”. In this context, Foucault’s “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” comes to mind. But not necessarily as I think he meant it in terms of repressed knowledges that come from less normative or less hegemonic positions of class, sexuality or epistemology. Instead perhaps a contemporary notion of such an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” has to do with their pursuit of “unfitting” bodies of knowledge from their accepted frames, leaving their place within the chain of argumentation and drawing to themselves unexpected companions; company whose attachment and proximity can provide paradigmatic challenge rather than arguing and supplying affirmation.

A-SIGNIFICATION AND SINGULARISATION This is the process by which knowledge becomes A-signifying knowledge. As Simon O’Sullivan has argued “For Deleuze and Guattari, an a-signifying rupture is a process by which the rhizome resists territorialization, or attempts to signify, or name it by an overcoding power. It is the process by which the rhizome breaks out of its boundaries (deterritorializes) and then reassembles or re-collects itself elsewhere and else-when (reterritorializes), often assuming a new or shifted identity. In the classroom, a-signifying ruptures are those processes students employ to avoid being just students, that classrooms use to avoid being just classrooms, that content uses to avoid being just subject matters, and that teachers use to avoid being just teachers. A-signifying ruptures are those various processes by which rhizomes proliferate, wallow, accrete, spread, shatter and reform, disrupt into play, seeming chaos, or anarchy”.² So the process by which knowledge assumes a-significatory forms is one that destabilizes its relation to other fixed knowledges and acquires an affective surplus.

Elsewhere recently I have argued that education needs to engage with the notion of “Free”, in the context of a special issue of *e-flux journal* entitled “Education Actualized”.³ Obviously it is not the romance of liberation that I have in mind here in relation to “free”. The kind of knowledge that interested me in this proposal to the university was one that was not framed by disciplinary and thematic orders, a knowledge that would instead be presented in relation to an urgent issue, and not an issue as defined by knowledge conventions, but by the pressures and

² Simon O’Sullivan *Academy: The Production of Subjectivity*, in: *Academy* (2006) : 238-44, ed. Irit Rogoff, Angelika Nollert et al, Frankfurt:

Revolver

³ www.e-flux.com/journal/view/127

struggles of contemporaneity. When knowledge is unframed it is less grounded genealogically and can navigate forwards rather than backwards. This kind of “unframed” knowledge obviously had a great deal to do with what I had acquired during my experiences in the art world, largely a set of permissions with regard to knowledge and a recognition of its performative faculties – that knowledge *does* rather than *is*. But the permissions I encountered in the art world came with their own set of limitations, a tendency to reduce the complex operations of speculation to either illustration or to a genre that would visually exemplify “study” or “research”. Could there be, I wondered, another mode in which knowledge might be set free without having to perform such generic mannerisms, without becoming an aesthetic trope in the hands of curators hungry for the latest “turn”?

Knowledge cannot be “liberated” as it is endlessly embedded in long lines of transformation which link in inexplicable ways to produce new conjunctions. Nor do I have in mind the romance of “avant garde” knowledge with its oppositional modes of “innovation” as departure and breach. Nor am I particularly interested in what has been termed “interdisciplinarity” with its intimation of movement between disciplines and which *de facto* leaves in tact those membranes of division and logics of separation and containment, through illusions of *sharing*. Finally, and I say this with some qualification, neither is my main issue here to undo the disciplinary and professional categories that have divided and isolated bodies of knowledge from one another with the aim of having a heterogeneous field populated by “bodies” of knowledge akin to the marketing strategies that ensure choice and multiplicity and dignify the practices of epistemological segregation by producing endless new sub-categories for inherited bodies of named and contained knowledge.

There is a vexed relation between freedom, individuality, and sovereignty that has a particular relevance for the arena being discussed here, as knowledge and education have a foot hold both in processes of individuation and in processes of socialization. Hannah Arendt expressed this succinctly when she warned that “Politically, this identification of freedom with sovereignty is perhaps the most pernicious and dangerous consequence of the philosophical equation of freedom and free will. For it leads either to a denial of human freedom – namely as it realized that whatever men may be, they are never sovereign – or to the insight that the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic can only be purchased at the price of the freedom i.e. the sovereignty, of all others. Within the conceptual framework of traditional philosophy, it is indeed very difficult to understand how freedom and non-sovereignty can exist together or, put it another way, how freedom could have been given to men under conditions of non-sovereignty.”⁴

And in the final analysis it is my interest to get around both concepts, freedom and sovereignty, through the operations of “singularisation”. Perhaps it is knowledge de-individuated, de-radicalized in the conventional sense of the radical as breach and yet operating within the circuits of singularity – of “the new relational mode of the subject”, which is preoccupying me in this instance.

And so, the task to hand seems to me to be *not one of liberation from confinement*, but rather one of undoing the very possibilities of *containment*. While an unbounded circulation of capital, goods, information, hegemonic

⁴ Hannah Arendt What is Freedom? Chapter VI

'Revolution and Preservation in The Portable'

Hannah Arendt (ed. Peter Baehr) (2000) : 455

London: Penguin

alliances, populist fears, newly globalized uniform standards of excellence etc. are some of the hallmarks of a late neo-liberal phase of capitalism – nevertheless we cannot simply equate every form of the unbounded and judge them all as equally insidious. “Free” in relation to knowledge it seems to me, has its power in a centripetal movement outwards that is not a process of penetrating and colonizing everywhere and everything in the relentless mode of capital, but in reaching unexpected entities and then drawing them back, mapping them onto the field of perception.

While knowledge in the process of a-signification produces a spatial and located detachment from its moorings, knowledge in the process of singularisation is relational but not necessarily aligned. As Suley Rolnik argues “processes of singularisation – a way of rejecting all these modes of pre-established encoding, all these modes of manipulation and remote control rejecting them in order to construct modes of sensibility, modes of relation with the other, modes of production, modes of creativity that produce a singular subjectivity.”⁵

⁵ *Suley Rolnik* *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*

Semiotexte (2008) : 51

Viewing notions of singularity “the new relational mode of the subject” and of processes of singularisation as modes of coming together and producing relations and agendas that do not emanate from shared identities, shared ideologies, shared belief systems (or as Giorgio Agamben says so succinctly “*of Being Red, Being French, Being Muslim*”) – seems acutely relevant as much for knowledge as it is for political agency. Here knowledge would exist in a relation but not one of telos; its framing would be its urgency in the world and not its epistemological legacy, and it would have the ability to form new and unexpected alliances in numerous directions or in other words to undergo processes of “singularisation”.

So the potential is that practice-based research might singularize knowledge rather than be neatly placed within its structures. That materials, associations, narratives, methodologies would pursue one another in unconventional modes, invite each other to dance as it were – art history and astro physics for example might develop some conversation, not just as bodies of knowledge but as the narrative structures they are recounted in, as drives, impulses, personal histories, modes of curiosity, conceits of intelligence, etc. Practice-based research, then, is a permission for knowledge that is tangential and contingent and whose sociability as it were, its search for companionship, is based not on linearity and centrality but on dispersal and on consistent efforts at re-singularisation.