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INTER/MULTI/CROSS/TRANS.
THE UNCERTAIN TERRITORY
OF ART THEORY IN THE AGE
OF ACADEMIC CAPITALISM

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THE UNCERTAIN TERRITORY
OF ART THEORY IN THE AGE
OF ACADEMIC CAPITALISM

Director:

Yaiza Hernández Velázquez

This book is a part of the project “Proceedings”, publications collecting the different seminars and courses developed within Montehermoso’s programming. This is a compilation of the different lectures that took place as part of the course *Inter/Multi/Cross/Trans. The Uncertain Territory of Art Theory in the Age of Academic Capitalism*, held in the Center on 3 and 4 December 2010.

1. Among several publications dealing with “artistic research” that came out around the time are M. A. Holly and M. Smith (eds.), *What is Research in the Visual Arts?*, 2009; J. Reardon (ed.), *Ch-changes*, 2009; S. H. Madoff (ed.), *The Art School*, 2009; J. Elkins, *Artists with PhDs*, 2009; K. MacLeod and L. Holdridge (eds.), *Thinking Through Art*, (2005) 2009 and G. Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, 2009. Not to mention the countless seminars, conferences, symposia and online journals dealing with the same.

2. See www.ehea.info for the heroic border-busting version. A more pedestrian account of the EHEA appears in L. Alegre and V. Moreno (eds.), *Bolonia no existe*, Gipúzcoa: Hiru, 2009. Great Britain is today second only to the United States in terms “global education” market share, although its composition is rapidly being reconfigured (it remains to be seen, for example, whether China will continue to send its students abroad or will opt instead for securing degree-granting powers from foreign universities). See Andrew Ross, “The Rise of the Global University” in *The Edu-factory Collective* (eds.), *Toward a Global Autonomous University*, New York: Autonomedia, 2009, pp. 18-31. An analysis of the U.S. model, where the miseries of the Bologna process can be more clearly fathomed, is offered in Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy. Markets, state and higher education*, 2004 and (with Larry L. Leslie) *Academic Capitalism. Politics, policy and the entrepreneurial University*, 1997, both published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

3. Needless to say the preoccupation of schools and faculties of Fine Art with quantifying academic credits in art education predates 2009. It is worth exploring some of the earlier documents produced by networks such as ELIA (European League of Institutes of the Arts), EARN (European Artistic Research Network), UFRAD (European Forum for Research Degrees in Art and Design) and the network of networks SHARE (Step-Change for Higher Arts Research and Education).

4. This is posited as a requirement for doctoral research despite how often research results fail to live up to this requirement. I am not attempting to describe the actual results of each model, but rather to compare their contrasting horizons.

5. Andrew McGettigan “Art Practice and the Doctoral Degree” originally published in *Afterall online* www.afterall.org/online/art-practice-and-the-doctoral-degree (retrieved on 21st September 2011). It is also available on McGettigan’s excellent blog where he provides an ongoing rigorous analysis of University “reforms” in the UK, see <http://andrewmcgettigan.org>

In the spring of 2009, Xabier Arakistain and Beatriz Herráez invited me to be a member of the jury that had to assign the yearly awards for “Art and Research” they had set up in Montehermoso. Already at that point we exchanged some puzzled conversations on the sudden interest of everyone for a problem that, up until then, was seemingly non-existent: that of defining what something called “artistic research” could possibly consist of.¹ A little over a year later, we met again for the event that would eventually give rise to this publication. By then, we had worse things to worry about. The “green shoots” of a zombie capitalism were failing to respond to their repeated invocations. The scale of the systemic fraud was starting to sink in in the West as social cuts became more bitter, making themselves felt in hardly anticipated ways. After the collapse of the Soviet block, we knew that our fragile welfare state had outlived its pacifying function and nothing pointed towards its continuing endurance. But the opportunism with which “austerity” measures were embraced caught all of us unawares.

The University was not spared. In the countries belonging to that ineffable European Higher Education Area, designed to promote the free movement of student-customers within its borders, the idea that universities should deploy its energies “competing” in a phantasmatic global educational market has become dogma in a very short time.² In this context, as Marina Vishmidt points out, the idea that our elusive artistic research must be defined (that is to say, turned into something quantifiable and sellable) ceased to be puzzling and became merely symptomatic.³

However novel a PhD in Fine Arts might appear in some contexts, they have existed for a long time in some countries belonging to the EHEA (such as Spain) without causing much of a stir. The problem is not determining whether artists should be granted PhDs or not, the gesture in itself is pretty banal. An artist with a doctorate is not necessarily a better (or worse) artist than one without one. She is simply an artist who has spent a longer time dealing with university structures. The University is—at least putatively—a system for the standardised and universally objectifiable certification of knowledge and skills. Needless to say that is where its restrictive and conservative core lies (the PhD as the legitimisation of the emergent by the already extant). But in this universalising ambition lies also the demand that research contributes to a collectively held knowledge, that it feeds a common project that goes beyond the individual trajectory of the student and enriches a wider community of scholars.⁴ As José Díaz Cuyás points out in his contribution to this volume, the kind of knowledge that is gained in a Fine Art School (from the Foundation to the PhD degree) can hardly be objectified and standardised (this is where the demand to keep an exceptional status for art within the university stems from). But moreover, as Andrew McGettigan has observed elsewhere, in more recent PhD programmes that attempt to fit into a more standard process of evaluation, “the individual’s research project sets the test it is to undergo and effectively determines the specific criteria which are brought into play at final assessment”.⁵ This comes dangerously close to solipsism and takes the doctorate in Fine Art away from traditional academic research, while engaging in a dubious kind of client-led behaviour.

Nevertheless, the term “research” in artistic research is not particularly problematic if understood in an everyday, non-administrative sense, to refer to whatever it is that artists do in the course of devel-

oping their working processes—working processes that, in keeping with the wider conditions of labour in the capitalist West, have become increasingly immaterial. The attempts to define it answer to a non-problem but a real demand, a demand that is extended from the managerial layers of academic life. If up until now art has functioned as a somewhat singular case within the university, now it must step into line. The Fine Art Faculty loses autonomy and authority to certify on its own the student's ability to reach an abstract standard (this was, needless to say, an imperfect system, vulnerable to abuse, but one that at least allowed for a certain variety of standards).

However much university managers insist on forcing faculty to play along with their bureaucratic fictions to produce fruitless reports (a mild form of ritual humiliation), artistic research in this everyday sense will probably not be magically transfigured into anything closer to academic research. I don't think that is where the danger lies.

There is something untimely about the endlessly repeated idea that the main problem with the Bologna Process has to do with its attempt to make an "undisciplined" artistic education fit within the restrictive parameters of the University.⁶ This is not just because this idea could lead us to believe that an operation like Bologna, whose organising logic is turning public goods into private resources, poses an exclusively pedagogical or curricular problem. It also appears to suggest that, while artistic education undergoes a massive transformation, the rest of the university remains immutable; an idea that in the current scenario could sound reassuring.

Hence, in a recent exchange, Eva Egerman laments the fact that "University curricula are designed to introduce students to the methodologies and habits of specific disciplines, rather than provide skills with practical applicability", while Marion von Osten points out that "social mobility is the *de facto* privilege of those who submit to the sanctioned certifications; all other necessary knowledge that could be acquired in everyday life or at the workplace remains without social recognition, leaving the division of labor and the class hierarchy unchallenged."⁷ Both positions are disconcerting to say the least, in a context where the university is undergoing reforms that are geared towards excluding those kinds of knowledge that have no "practical application", understood to mean some direct value for employers or an ability to generate surplus value by the selling of patents and the like. The point about knowledge gained at the workplace remaining without social recognition, sounds even more obsolete in the age of work-based learning.⁸ Needless to say, there are still many practices that neither submit to nor receive academic certification, but given the qualitative blurring of lines between those which do and those which don't (lines which nowadays are not so clearly traced upon class divisions), the arguments used in the 1970s to defend polytechnic education cannot simply be rehashed today.⁹

In his contribution to this volume, Dieter Lesage proposes another possibility. Instead of falling under the strictures of rigid and prefixed university criteria, artistic research might serve as the motor of a transformation of the university *tout court*. In his reading, it might well be possible for the new formats and networks of dissemination and collaboration that have become acceptable in academia thanks to the efforts made to accommodate artistic research to provoke "the end of the hegemony of the natural sciences"

6. I take the term from Irit Rogoff, who likes to talk of her practice as belonging to "undisciplined studies". The danger with positioning ourselves *a priori* in this "undisciplined" terrain is remaining obdurately blind to our own academicism.

7. See Fahim Amir, Eva Egermann, Marion von Osten and Peter Spillmann, "What Shall We Do...?" in *e-flux journal* #17, June-August 2010, pp. 7 y 9.

8. This refers to the growing ability by universities to compute hours spent in the workplace as academic credits. The clearest example of this is the generalisation of "work experience" periods as a prerequisite of graduate and postgraduate courses. But beyond these, the tendency is towards courses that are designed to be almost completely undertaken in the workplace. A clear example would be the foundation degrees that Manchester Metropolitan University accredits for employees of Boots, Tesco y McDonalds, see www.mmu.ac.uk/news/articles/1384 (retrieved on 21st September 2011).

9. At that point one could still argue with some conviction not denied by history that such education could stop class divisions being replicated at an educational level. This is for example, Eric Robinson's argument in *The New Polytechnics: A Radical Policy for Higher Education*, London: Cornmarket, 1968. I owe this reference to the fascinating account offered by Lisa Tickner in *Hornsey 1968. The Art School Revolution*, London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2008.

10. See Dieter Lesage, "Theory and the Academy" in this volume. I am wary of demonising the "natural sciences", establishing lines of antagonism with scientist colleagues. It is no doubt true that the humanities in general and art in particular have had to make undue efforts to fit into academic criteria designed to fit the sciences (the peer review journal is only the most commonly cited example). However, the sciences are far from comfortable in the entrepreneurial university, in fact they suffer disproportionately from its pernicious effects. We can recall, for example, the reaction of the scientific community in the UK when faced with the demand that research funds applications should include a report on the "social economic" (i.e. commercial) value of such research, known as an "impact summary".

www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=405350 (retrieved on 12th August 2011). To believe that the aim is to turn the arts into sciences is to turn our attention away from the problem, the aim is to turn both into commodities.

11. Lesage locates the value of the Bologna process precisely in its self-defeating potential, in the fact that it "possesses the strange ability to destroy itself", *op. cit.*

12. John Roberts, "The Uncertain Terrain of Art Theory": *Bildung*, the University and the New Artist" in this volume, pp. XXXX. The substantial raise in University fees and the increasing concentration of "centres of excellence" in metropolitan centres with a high cost of living, makes it difficult to conceive of these "enclaves" as class neutral.

13. In this sense, Rosalind Krauss' declaration that "the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art" is pretty eloquent (see Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, p. xiii). Similar pronouncements – if not necessarily so radical – have come from Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster and others. (T.J. Clark whose melancholy remains harder to dismiss deserves a separate mention). Roberts offers a convincing counter-argument to these laments in his *The Intangibilities of Form. Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, London: Verso, 2007.

14. Thierry de Duve, "When Form has Become Attitude—And Beyond" in Stephen Foster and Nicholas de Ville (eds.), *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and The Wider Cultural Context*, Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 1994, pp. 23-40, p. 40.

15. De Duve, *loc. cit.*

throughout the university.¹⁰ Here, artistic research is seen as a Trojan horse with the ability to destroy from within the system that has given rise to it.¹¹ John Roberts' position comes close to Lesage's in his defence of Fine Art PhDs as veritable "enclaves" of critical thinking, sites where the "building of primitive cadres that will shape the progressive direction of future artistic and cultural struggles" will take place.¹² Both share a fundamentally optimistic view regarding the ability of Fine Art Schools to act as sites of resistance and transformation within an increasingly hostile university context. Both are suspicious of the attempt to posit "inter/multi/cross/transdisciplinarity" as a problem. Obviously, questioning the relevance of pursuing a true transdisciplinarity could bring us into line with a host of melancholic critiques (that have recently proliferated even within the left) that call for artistic practices cemented on a kind of artisanal know-how, a creative engagement with the medium and technical skills. The most conservative of those critiques understand those practices to be compromised by a pernicious fixation with "theory", understood as the generalised after-effect of conceptual art.¹³

It is not hard to detect some of this melancholy in Thierry de Duve's tripartite account of the evolution of artistic education. According to De Duve, the first ever model—that of the traditional academy—was guided by the triad talent/*metier*/imitation: the academy "detected" those endowed with genius or exceptional talent, training them in the techniques of the *metier*, directing them towards the imitation of great masters. In the next stage, corresponding to the modern academy (quite clearly De Duve's favourite), the triad was that of creativity/medium/invention: creativity, understood as a universal attribute can be trained to engage with a given medium in order to innovate within its limits. In a third moment (presumably our own) this triad will be made up of attitude/practice/deconstruction. For De Duve, this is the time in which, "linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, structuralism and poststructuralism, in short, 'theory' (or so-called 'French theory') entered art schools and succeeded in displacing—sometimes replacing—studio practice while renewing the critical vocabulary and intellectual tools with which to approach the making and the appreciating of art."¹⁴ Unfortunately De Duve is unable to gather much enthusiasm for the arrival of all this theoretical cargo. In its aftermath, he sees nothing more than a widespread cynicism. Today we will be left with nothing more than a residual image of the modernist paradigm, only "minus faith, and plus suspicion."¹⁵

De Duve's position is reminiscent (doubtlessly despite himself) of that visceral rejection of "theory" (often linked to a rejection of cultural and postcolonial studies as coded signifiers for the "working class" and the "non-Western") that survived the infamous *culture wars* only to re-emerge energised post 9-11; that recurrent jeremiad about how the University is being taken over by "radicals" or "relativists" that is dramatically invoked while the University is placidly being taken over by management. But scepticism about current models of transdisciplinarity does not necessarily have to be linked to a desire to reinstate the borders between disciplines, reestablish a division of intellectual labour, much less any attempt to question the pertinence of "theorising" in a world subsumed in utilitarian practice. That is to say, the search for that revolutionary *Bildung* Roberts talks about is not necessarily incompatible with a questioning of current models of artistic research, nor does the

latter presuppose a rejection of “theory”. In fact, when I talk about “the uncertain territory of art theory”, whatever anxiety I might be sharing has less to do with the dominance of (critical) theory than with its survival.

The writings of the prolific Henk Slager can serve as a case in point to untangle some of the contradictions that a great deal of debate around artistic research incurs in when dealing with the status of “theory”. In a text from 2009, Slager starts by describing a kind of *knowledge*—artistic *research*—that “cannot be channeled through rigid academic scientific guidelines... but requires full attention for the unique, the qualitative, the particular, and the local... a form of nominal knowledge production unable to serve a retinal, one-dimensional worldview characterized by transparent singularity”. For Slager, this kind of knowledge production must be tied to a research “attitude” characterised by remaining “open and non-disciplinary”, inserting itself in “multiple models of interpretation”.¹⁶ That is to say, it can be approached from a potentially enormous (or miniscule) variety of methodologies and previous knowledge and, beyond this, it can also be received in an equally overwhelming plurality of ways. And yet, research conducted by artists “is as well-guided [as any] by the most important maxim of any scientific activity since time immemorial: the awareness of the necessity of transparent communication”. This unexpected (not to say incoherent) turn goes even further.¹⁷ The artist-as-researcher must attend to the basic parameters of academic research, being able to explain not just why the field of visual arts must deal with the questions his or her research poses, but also why those questions must be raised from this field and no other. Explaining this latter point becomes quite difficult without appealing to some kind of *specificity* of the artistic field, a specificity that is revealed as follows:

A striking methodology in the topical practice of artistic research appears to be the formulation of a certain problem from a specific situational artistic process and, furthermore, to interconnect that problem in an open constellation with various knowledge systems and disciplines. Such artistic research projects seem to thwart the well-defined disciplines, since they know the hermeneutic questions of the humanities (the alpha-sciences); they are engaged in empirically scientific methods (the beta-sciences); and they are aware of commitment (the gamma-sciences). Because of that capacity and willingness to continuously engage in novel, unexpected epistemological relations in a methodological process of interconnectivity, artistic research could best be described as a delta-discipline: a way of research not a priori determined by any established scientific paradigm or model of representation.¹⁸

In this way Slater grants artistic research a seemingly unique role within the university, in terms of its ability to function as a meta-discipline that transversally crosses through all others. That is to say, it would be its intrinsically multidisciplinary character (that combination of *alfa*, *beta* and *gamma* sciences, not to mention *delta* ones) that would endow artistic research with the requisite methodological specificity (perhaps compensating for its epistemological indeterminacy). Against this exciting inter-multi-cross-trans-discipline, the rest of the academic landscape appears as little more than a compendium of “rigid directives” determined *a priori* by scientific paradigms and informed by a world vision that is “retinal and one-dimensional”. It is comforting to see anyone demonstrate such enthusiasm about the relative standing of his field, but Slager’s outburst calls to mind a recent *boutade* by Tirdad Zolghadr in which

16. Henk Slager, “Editorial” in *MaHKUzine 7. A Nameless Science*, (Summer 2009), pp. 4-7, p. 4.

17. It is hard to understand how Slager can reconcile his “multiple modes of interpretation” with his “transparent communication”. Even if we are sceptical about the transparency of times immemorial, appealing to different modes of interpretation implies allowing for multiple readings; far from allowing transparency this would weave an ever denser (and hence opaque) net of meanings.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

19. Tirdad Zolghadr, "Worse than Kenosis" in *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism*, Vancouver: Phillip/Artspeak, 2010, pp. 13-31, p. 25. I quote him freely.

20. On the ulterior life of this desire for totalisation, see Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Critical Theory*, London: Routledge, 2000, esp. chap. 1, which is discussed extensively by Gail Day in this volume.

21. See Alberto Toscano, "Divisions of Reconnaissance".

22. See Gail Day, "Transdisciplinarity/Totality/Critique".

23. In an explicit echo, needless to say, of Marx's last *Theses on Feuerbach*.

24. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York: Continuum, 2002, pp. 188-243, p. 222.

he lamented that, if the epistemic field of contemporary art can be said to extent to the whole universe, there will be no place or conversation in the world where we could expect artists to remain silent and listen out.¹⁹

But needless to say, the problem does not reside with the desire of artistic research to turn the whole world into its field of study. Such an ambition could only be applauded. The delta discipline described by Slager might be nothing more than that old philosophical will of moving in an absolute universality, miraculously devoid now of the threat of formalism that always haunted it, instead dwelling quite comfortably in "the unique, the qualitative, the particular, the local."²⁰ This resonates with Charles Wright Mills' intellectual imperative revived by Alberto Toscano in this collection, the one that urges us to "grasp one's epoch in its totality, while not treating this effort at totalisation as an excuse to justify any kind of determinism, or notion of social and historical fate."²¹ As a prescription it remains defensible, as a description of what already goes on in Fine Art schools that pursue doctoral studies it is at best naive. The problem with defending artistic research by *affirming* its transdisciplinarity as non-problematic (the seemingly boundless ability of the artist as researcher to comfortably navigate any pre-existing discipline) and politically subversive (for it must be carefully monitored by institutional authorities) is that it takes what it should be our main task as already realised, relieving us of the obligation to work towards it.

Before it was a buzzword, transdisciplinarity was a political need—in order to tackle a wider social reality, it was necessary to acquire critical tools that traversed the narrow and arbitrary confines of traditional disciplines. As Gail Day reminds us, the turn to theory reflected an aspiration "to break away not only from disciplinary specialisation, but to break the effects and substance of social reification."²² In Max Horkheimer's classical formulation, "critical theory" is opposed to "traditional theory" inasmuch as the former is oriented towards the transformation of the whole of society, rather than its mere interpretation.²³ There is no theory that does not contain political motivations, he writes, but these cannot be calibrated through "neutral" reflection, but rather "in personal thought and action, in concrete historical activity,"²⁴ in that conjunction of the "citizen self" and the "militant self" discussed by Day.

So leaving aside the issue of how to quantify artistic research, how can we more properly think about that uncertain terrain we have called "art theory"? It might be worth thinking transdisciplinarity from this angle, not as a merely pedagogical issue, much less one particularly (or even exclusively) linked to artistic practice. If we understand inter/multi/cross/trans-disciplinarity (in the weak sense) as the field of operations contemporary theory *as such*—theory "in general"—understands itself to be setting off from, what value does this inter/multi/cross/trans-disciplinarity hold *in itself*? Could it be, as Pilar Villela suggest, simply a way of ensuring that our concrete historical activity can always be expected to lie *somewhere else*?. Disregarding one's disciplinary *habitus* is no guarantee of anything. If our *habitus* is always already understood as inter/multi/cross/transdisciplinary, we have not even left home yet.

