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The Expanding Field

We work in an expanding field, in which all definitions of practices, their supports, and their institutional frameworks have shifted and blurred. But the fact that we have all left our constraining definitions behind, that we all take part in multiple practices and share multiple knowledge bases, has several implications. On the one hand, the dominance of neoliberal models of work that valorize hyper-production has meant that the demand is not simply to produce work, but also to find ways of funding it, to build up the environments that sustain it, to develop the discursive frames that open it up to other discussions, to endlessly network it with other work or other structures so as to expand its reach and seemingly give it additional credit for wider impact. So in this context the expansion is perceived as a form of post-Fordist entrepreneurship.

On the other hand, the dominant transdisciplinarity of the expanded field of art and cultural production has entailed equal amounts of researching, investigating, and inventing archives from which we can read in more contemporary ways, finding new formats, self-instituting, educating, organizing, and sharing. Most interestingly, it has dictated that each idea or concept we take up must be subjected to pressures from other modes of knowledge and of knowing—it cannot simply stay within its own comfortable paradigm and celebrate itself and its achievements. And so in this other context, the expanding field is one of broader contemporary knowledge bases and practices.

Seemingly in each of these two cases the emphasis is on *more,* but in order to come to terms with this duality, which is often less than compatible, I need to think through what has happened in the field recently and of ways this might or might not be quite the opening up or loosening up we had previously thought.

So this paper is about several issues—one is to do with a desire that the proliferation of different activities that we see around us in the art world does not remain a simple model of multiplicity and diversity, but, rather, that we begin to think of it as a series of enactments of an epistemological crisis—knowledge in crisis rather than practice or form in crisis.

Secondly, I want to go back to the issue of archives, the vexed old question of the desire to *know* from a stable and accumulative place. In the context of

this particular argument, I wish to see whether it might be possible to read ourselves out of others' archives—others who might be less privileged in the infrastructures that support them, but nevertheless might allow us a new and rich way of seeing ourselves. When Michel Foucault first opened up a critical discussion of archives, he spoke of "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges"—knowledges that had been suppressed and marginalized because they spoke in the name of those deemed inappropriate and uninfluential in class, sexuality, ideology, and unruliness or incivility.

Subsequently, Foucault opened up another seemingly unrelated problematic in his thinking about parrhesia, the demand to speak the truth publicly and at risk to oneself. One of the many things I am wondering about archives is whether they might become sites of parrhesia—sites of risk taking. So, archives as instability rather than stability, and as a set of challenges in how we see ourselves rather than as the way in which we ground and solidify our own significance.

And that is the third issue that I want to touch on—infrastructure—the seemingly neutral provision of efficient delivery of whatever we might need but that is actually enacting a hugely hierarchical system of that which is valued by neoliberal governance. My interest in infrastructure has to do with the recognition that it is one of the main building blocks of world governance systems such as colonialism or capitalism, but it also has to do with infrastructure's masquerading as a neutral form of efficiency, pure disinterested delivery. In the context of the art world, we can begin to see that cultural infrastructure is actually deeply value-laden and that superior infrastructure has come to mean superior culture.

It is of particular importance to me that all these questions be asked from within the art world—that they be seen as part of art's expansion into the social, that we do not take for granted some earlier definitions of what art and its activities are, and that we continue to reproduce these for the challenges that we are facing in the contemporary moment, allowing us to be a great deal more.

"What on Earth Do They Mean?"

On occasion, within the discussions we are all part of, one will hear someone say the word "art" and wonder, "what on earth do they mean by that"?

Do they mean "collectibles" and "displayables" and "catalogueables"—objects and entities that can be known, that can be captured by these logics and fit neatly into the economies of institutions, foundations, or private assemblies?

Or do they mean "artists" who are working in the community or the field, trying to make complex the simple-minded politics of representation practiced by the media—to make complex by layering intricate and contradictory strata and performances as the cumulative affect of a place or a group or an event?

Or do they mean the operations of new modes of research by which creative practitioners enter the arena of archival knowledge and posit other protagonists or other events, not main ones and not even marginal ones, but ones whose very articulation will trouble the subject of the archive, challenge its raison d'être—an innocent vegetable within the archive of a genocide, the design of a refugee tent rewriting the narrative of custodial roles, the aerial shot as the amalgam of centuries of governance through surveillance—non-symbolic and non-representational ways of navigating a cultural entry point into the production of knowledge.

Or do they mean the group that has set itself up as an immigrant smuggling entity, or as a time bank, or as the repository of mutations in the wake of genetic engineering or genetic modification, or as the fake company representatives of a multinational corporation offering a settlement to the victims of a disaster? The mimicry of structures and protocols that by their daring to enter the field of aid and support, produce a critical gesture.

Or do they mean a small group of usually young people huddled in a basement reading some smudged Xeroxes, insistent on their need to know something of urgency and to gain an unspecified set of tools by which to tackle the world and to make their engagement a performative manifest?

All of these make up an "art world" as I have experienced it over the past decade. What was so clearly a trajectory that led to a final product, or emanated from this final product in curating or collecting or reviewing or critical assessment, has opened up to inconclusive processes whose outcome might be learning or researching or conversing or gathering or bringing a new perspective into circuits of expertise. The discrete boundaries of the product that enabled its capture by various economies or teleologies have fragmented into strands of knowledge, of affect, of structure, or of action that insist on presence in relation to other presences—what was "art," as various objects have assumed the status of "the manifest," the ability to alert us to the emerging of a presence in the world.

It is not simply that the world of "art" is one of multiple practices and a proliferation of incommensurate protocols that awkwardly coheres, resulting in the inevitable confusion of one word that has contradictory meanings for so many of the stakeholders within the field. But I would say that this goes far beyond a simple evacuation of stable meanings of this or that form or practice and is actually a part of living through a major epistemological crisis. So here is the beginning of my argument—I am not interested in understanding the expanded field of art as a multiplicity, as a proliferation of coexistent practices, as a widening of what might have previously been seen as a somewhat narrow arena defined by fine art practice.

In addition to art I would designate the terms "practice," "audience," "curator," "space," "exhibition," "performance," "intervention," "education," and many other terms as subjected to this same disorientation—a historically determined meaning that has been pushed at the edges to

expand and contain a greater variety of activity—but never actually allowed to back up on itself and flip over into something entirely different. The hallmark of an epistemological crisis in the way in which it interests me here is not the trading of one knowledge or one definition for another more apt or relevant one but, rather, what happens when practices such as thought or production are pushed to their very limits. Do they collapse, or do they expand? Can they double up on themselves and find within this flipping over another set of potential meanings?

When Stefano Harney and Fred Moten wrote a text on debt and study for a special issue of *e-flux journal* on education, they took the maligned notion of "debt" at the heart of a financial crisis of irresponsible fiscal marketization of debt and flipped it over into something else. "But debt is social and credit is asocial," they said:

> Debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way. Debt runs in every direction, scattering, escaping, seeking refuge. The debtor seeks refuge among other debtors, acquires debt from them, offers debt to them. The place of refuge is the place to which you can only owe more, because there is no creditor, no payment possible.
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> This refuge, this place of bad debt, is what we would call the fugitive public.[1]

These are the hallmarks of an epistemological crisis, exiting from previous definitions, refusing former meanings, refusing moral inscription, refusing the easy stability in which one thing is seemingly good and the other potentially threatening, risking a capacity for misunderstanding—what is it to declare debt social at a moment when millions of people are experiencing eviction or financial ruin due to the capitalization of debt? It means that one can no longer be content with taking positions within a given definition; one has to make it stretch and twist itself inside out to become significant again.

The Limits of Multiplicity

Would it not be simpler to settle for a celebration of multiplicity? A proliferation has about it a measure of happy mutuality, a multiplicity of things co-existing and not disturbing one another—multiculturalism being a fabled example of such happy harmony! But the confusion about what the hell do they mean when they say "art," the epistemological disorientation, has to imply a contested ground and if this ground is contested then each mode of understanding is grounded not just in vested interests— the neoliberal art market and its evil twin cultural diplomacy—but in differing ways of knowing the world and its practices. However, while the antagonistic mode of differentiation may be crucial for the initial moment of distinguishing between this mode of practice and that one, between the vested interests that sustain them and their operations—for me, ultimately it serves to reinforce the divisions between hegemonic and alternative

activities, a distinction that is unhelpful in the task of reconfiguring the field as a set of potentialities.

There is a discussion by Derrida in his book *The Eyes of the University*, the book in which he reflected on the founding of the "College de Philosophie" in Paris in the 1980s—in which he says "Boundaries, whether narrow or expanded, perform nothing more than establishing the limits of the possible."[2]

So not wanting to operate within this impoverished mode of "the limits of the possible," I need to think of how to go beyond the pluralistic model, an additive mode at whose heart is a very old Enlightenment conceit that cultural institutions are universalist and infinitely expandable—that they can stretch and expand to include every one of the excluded, elided, and marginalized histories. This conceit, updated to the realm of post-slavery, post-colonialism, post-communism, insists that we must deal with issues of cultural difference and cultural exclusion by practicing their opposite, namely inclusion and compensation. Of course, the problem with this infinitely expandable model is that it promises no change whatsoever, simply expansion and inflation.

So an epistemological crisis seems a much more fertile ground from which to think through the notion of an emergent field. An epistemological crisis would allow us to think not of competing interests but absent knowledges; it would allow us to posit a proposition that would say that if we were able to find a way to know *this,* it might allow us to not think that. So there would be the loss or the sacrifice of a way of thinking, as opposed to the cumulative proliferation of modes of operating.

For both curating and the curatorial, the notion of an epistemological crisis is paramount, since these are fields largely grounded in a series of work protocols with little cumulative history and without a body of stable empirical or theoretical knowledge at their disposal. Thus the temptation to hurriedly build up a body of named and applicable knowledge that would dignify the field is probably great. While such absences allow for a flexibility of operating and for the possibility of considerable invention, be it of archives or subjects or methodologies, there is an ongoing demand for an end product that coheres around an exhibition, around the act of revealing and concretizing, and that belies all the loosening that went into its curatorial operations.

Our move to "Curatorial/Knowledge" addressed precisely such an epistemological crisis, one in which we would not determine *which* knowledges went into the work of curating but would insist on a new set of relations between those knowledges—a new set of relations that would not drive home the point of an argument, as in much academic work, and would not produce a documented and visualized cohesion around a phenomenon, as in much curatorial practice. So rather than say, "This is the history of curating, and it will now ground the field professionally," we have tried to map the movement of knowledges in and out of the field and

how they are able to challenge the very protocols and formats that define it: collecting, conserving, displaying, visualizing, discoursing, contextualizing, criticizing, publicizing, spectacularizing etc. If curating can be the site of knowledge in which to rehearse its crises, then it has the potential to make a contribution rather than to merely enact representation.

Going back to the question I began with, asking "What on earth do they mean when they say art?," the epistemological crisis I have tried to sketch out here, allows us not to choose among different definitions circulating at present, but to make the curatorial the staging ground of the development of an idea or an insight in the making. These would be ideas or insights in the process of development, but subject to a different set of demands than they might bear in an academic context or in an activist context— not to conclude or to act, but rather to speculate and to draw out a new set of relations. To some extent this speculative gesture has resulted in an understanding that it is not that the curatorial needs bolstering by theory, philosophy, or history—but rather that these arenas could greatly benefit from the modes of assemblage that make up the curatorial at its best, when it is attempting to enact the event of knowledge rather than to illustrate those knowledges.

Contemporaneity as Infrastructure

In our department at Goldsmiths, London University, we often say that our subject is contemporaneity and that this is not a historical period. Rather, we think of contemporaneity as a series of affinities with contemporary urgencies and the ability to access them in our work. Such an understanding of contemporaneity is equally significant for the curatorial, demanding that it finds ways of conceptually entering contemporary urgencies rather than commenting upon them, taking them up as "subject matter"—the endless exhibitions about terrorism or a globalized art world we have endured in recent years being a case in point. And not only is contemporaneity about engagement with the urgent issues of the moment we are living out, but more importantly it is the moment in which we make those issues our own. That is the process by which we enter the contemporary.

So, finally, I would like to put forward a very tentative argument, not fully and deeply worked through yet, about the relation of our expanding field to infrastructure and to a redefinition of "archives," and about this conjunction's central importance to the understanding of contemporaneity. For Michel Foucault, the archive is "a density of discursive practices, a system that establishes statements as events and things."[3] So it is this understanding of the archive not as a documentary context but as establishing concreteness in the world by transforming statements into events that allows us to take it up within the actual practices of contemporary art rather than as a support structure of knowledge.

When Okwui Enwezor was curating documenta 11, he said again and again, in an effort to ward off the constant tedious questions about which artists were going to be included in the show, that it is a less a matter precisely of

which artists or works he would be including, but, rather, which archives we would be reading them out of. His efforts to privilege the archives and the reading strategies at our disposal have stayed with me as an important principle of contemporaneity.

As Foucault insisted quite early on: "The analysis of the archive then, involves a privileged region: at once close to us and different from our present experience, it is the borer of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which outside ourselves, delimits us."[4]

When we in the West, or in the industrialized, technologized countries congratulate ourselves on having infrastructure—properly working institutions, systems of classification and categorization, archives and traditions and professional training for these, funding pathways and educational pathways, excellence criteria, impartial juries, and properly air conditioned auditoria with good acoustics—we forget the degree to which these have become protocols that bind and confine us in their demand to be conserved or in their demand to be resisted.

Following Michel Feher, thinking about the impact of NGOs as modes of counter governmental organization, the shift from consumers to stakeholders has significantly shifted our understanding of infrastructures—from properly functioning structures that serve to support something already agreed upon, to the recognition of ever-greater numbers of those who have a stake in what they contribute to or benefit from.[5] Much of the more activist-oriented work within the art field has taken the form of re-occupying infrastructure: using the spaces and technologies and budgets and support staffs and recognized audiences in order to do something quite different—not to reproduce, but to reframe questions.

We think of infrastructure as enabling. We think it is an advantageous set of circumstances through which we might redress the wrongs of the world, redress the balance of power within a post-slavery, post-colonial, post-communist world of endless war. When New York's MoMA gets around to putting on an exhibition of contemporary Arab art, it is either celebrated as a great step against Islamophobia or decried as the cooptation of such work into hegemonic systems of market patronage. But whatever the position, there is a sense that the incorporation of this work within an august context, into the ultimate infrastructure that ignored its very existence for so long, is a benchmark—a contested benchmark, but definitely one.

So if we keep in mind Achille Mbembe's question "Is the edge of the world a place from which to speak the world?"[6] we might reflect about what the absence of infrastructure does make possible, which is to rethink the very notion of platform and protocol, to put in proportion the elevation of individual creativity, to further the shift from representation to investigation.

Thinking about the links between collectivity and infrastructure, the obvious necessities of mobilizing as many resources and as much expertise as possible at a given moment in order to not only respond to the urgencies of the moment but also in the need to invent the means, protocols, and platforms that will make that engagement manifest among strata of stakeholders—then the decentering of the West is not only the redress of power within a post-slavery, post-colonial, post-communist world but also the opportunity in the absence of infrastructure to rethink the relations between resources and manifestations.

In order to understand the potential of a particular condition we do not mythologize or romantically glorify it, but rather extract from it a revised set of relations—from Tucuman Arde to Collectivo Situationes, from Chto Delat to Raqs Media Collective to Kharita, from Public Movement to Public school, from Oda Projessi to X-Urban—these shifts have and are occurring all around us, and while I would not claim that they are a model to be reproduced within far more privileged conditions, I would suggest that they are the archive from which we need to read our own activities.

Speaking for myself, I can honestly say that being lectured about the limits of the possible seems to me to be as impoverished a condition as working without the means of a dignifying infrastructure—which is nothing more, as Derrida says, than the means of containment. So perhaps the necessary links among collectivity, infrastructure, and contemporaneity within our expanding field of art are not performances of resistant engagement, but the ability to locate alternate points of departure, alternate archives, alternate circulations, and alternate imaginaries. And it is the curatorial that has the capacity to bring these together, working simultaneously in several modalities, kidnapping knowledges and sensibilities and insights and melding them into an instantiation of our contemporary conditions.

Notes

1 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "Debt and Study," *e-flux journal* 14 (March 2010), http://www.e-flux. com/journal/debt-and-study/.

2 Jacques Derrida, *The Eyes of the University* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

3 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 130.

4 Ibid.

5 Michel Feher, ed., *Nongovernmental Politics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007).

6 Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000), 261–86.