

<http://artnodes.uoc.edu>

ARTICLE

NODE: "ART AND RESEARCH"

Reclaiming Aesthetics

16 notes

Henk Slager

Dean, MaHKU

Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design

Submission date: October 2017

Accepted date: October 2017

Published in: December 2017

Abstract

This article explores the idea that the increasing satiety and institutional jadedness of the currently ubiquitous research-based discourse may lead to new forms of aesthetics and aesthetic thinking. How can the art academy, as a sanctuary for experimental (thinking) processes, facilitate and possibly anticipate such a development?

Keywords

artistic research, knowledge production, artistic thinking, experimental aesthetics

Recuperación de la estética

16 notas

Resumen

Este artículo explora la proposición de que la creciente saciedad y hastío institucional del discurso actual ubicuo basado en investigación, posiblemente llevará a nuevas formas de estética y pensamiento estético. ¿Cómo puede la academia, como santuario para procesos (de pensamiento) experimentales, facilitar y posiblemente ya incluso anticipar tal desarrollo?

Palabras clave

investigación artística, producción de conocimiento, pensamiento artístico, estética experimental

1. The instrumental logic of the current efficiency-obsessed, result-driven culture, and its neo-liberal focus on the free market, supports a flat worldview that, as philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes in *Fatigue Society* (2015), continuously demands transparency and visibility and, therefore, forms of exhibition; this produces a horizontalist worldview that, with its twitter-democracy and the ubiquitous blogosphere, has resulted in an “online culture” that leaves no room for rest, contemplation, creation or experimentation. Such a world is driven almost entirely by entrepreneurial thinking and a focus on a contemporary ideal in which adaptability and flexibility have been elevated to the highest standard.

2. Here too, the current manifestation of capitalism seems to translate into all sorts of values on a neo-liberal plane, thus creating a world without room for verticalist perspectives, such as reflexivity, new means of imagination and historic depth. Therefore, art/ research should specifically engage in the tasks of considering, revealing, and speculating. In other words, research should strongly urge investigation into new verticalistic perspectives in order to arrive at “not-yet-known-knowledge” (Rogoff, 2010). To pave the way for this, research in art (education) – as an autonomous space for concentration and experiment – should open up the possibility of defining new questions. Only by posing those questions will it be possible to change the structure of our thought.

3. Until now, the art academy was the pre-eminent environment for “doing research”. After all, from its foundation the academy was analogous to “inter-esse,” intellectual curiosity, and excluded by definition the “oikos” as calculating reason. In spite of the present threat of increasing instrumentalization, quantification and disciplining, and despite the hollow rhetoric of the creative industry and its cognitive capitalism – manifesting itself in homogenizing patterns of thought, such as expert knowledge, knowledge transfer, stakeholders, employability, assessment and quality assurance that try to reduce art education to a neo-liberal dispositive – the academy still seems to be the last enduring free space in the cultural field in which innovative processes concerning experimental production, reflection and presentation can take place.

4. The academy should continue to fight for a temporary, autonomous space for experiment and reflection, since such a space could succeed in combining various forms of knowledge into new speculative theoretical ensembles. PhD researchers could be of particular importance in continuously pointing the art academy in the right direction, as this form of research – characterized by maximum concentration and mental freedom – more or less forms the intellectual conscience of the academy. PhD research reminds the academy that despite the pressure of neo-liberal free market thinking and its corresponding fixed and fixating models, the academy

as a free space should adhere to verticalist dimensions: heights of imagination and the depths of history.

5. The intrinsic relationship between thinking and making in artistic research continuously requires novel processes of conceptualization in which intellectual activity merges with the expansion of forms and formats so that art can be symbolically presented and explained. This interaction demands flexible definitions and a fluid framework that can be continuously adjusted and recalibrated: a thought process that, starting from a base point of attentiveness, goes on to ‘become’ interested in something and reaches an open-ended form of differential thinking that explicitly or implicitly rebels against the currently presented “will to know” of managerial machines. The artistic knowledge that manifests in the creative process cannot be reduced to statements, arguments or interpretations. Rather, it is essayistic in nature: like a non-disciplinary form of experimental probing that will not be canonized, but can be seen as a “strategy of interruption and a staging of disruption” (Mersch, 2015).

6. The first decade of the 21st century was characterized by a disproportional interest in artistic knowledge production (Maharaj, 2008). Consequently, a large section of artistic activities started to view themselves as processal, directed by a rigid series of points of departure and deliberations which all seem to steer art creation. The increasing academization, or the willingness to comply with formatting requirements that the disciplining academic apparatus imposes on knowledge production, appears to underline this tendency. Therefore, there is an urgent need to draw attention again to what precedes knowledge production, ie the process of thinking, as since time immemorial there has been a strong bond between philosophy and art. In this dialogue with philosophy, artistic thinking can draw attention instead to not-knowing, the singular, the affective, the transgressive, and the unforeseen.

7. In line with Hannah Arendt’s book *The Life of the Mind* (1974), a clear distinction between thinking and knowledge needs to be restored. Arendt refers to Kant’s sharp division of thinking processes-Verstand and Vernunft. Verstand is described as the disciplining domain of cognition and empirical knowledge based on certainty and clarification. Verstand on the other hand aims to understand perceptible reality and operates by applying laws and fixed criteria. Kantian Vernunft (Reason) goes beyond that domain, transcending the criteria of certainty and proof, and focuses on a continuous search for Meaning (by posing questions about existence, religion and freedom to which no verifiable answers are possible). From that latter perspective, Arendt views both philosophy and art as pure thinking activities, in which thinking is always simultaneously aware of the activity of thought.

8. In line with this way of thinking, the inevitable question arises as to whether the current debate on research in the arts – at risk, as it is, of academic formatting that has little bearing on the singular character of the artistic thinking process – is better off letting go of result-oriented scientific models and concepts (such as argument, hypothesis, method, analysis, proof, application). Perhaps it should instead focus on the more open and unconditional, experimental approach of philosophy. Deleuze's idea of art as a non-philosophical understanding of philosophy could possibly be re-considered and deployed here. (Deleuze, 1994).

9. Such a shift means that artistic research could reclaim philosophical awareness and modes of questioning. Indeed philosophy can provide the right tools for stimulating thinking and at the same time provoke reflections on thought itself. In the context of a shift in the relationship between thinking and knowledge, I would like to paraphrase Roland Barthes (1980): research means taking the *studium* (the canon, art theory, art history) seriously in the hope that it will be momentarily punctuated by a thought movement – a line of flight – whose unpredictable nature remains external to its condition of possibility. In this explanation, Barthes emphasizes that both perspectives, both poles of the aesthetic ellipse (knowledge production and artistic thinking) need each other and cannot be considered in isolation. Both ultimately derive their intrinsic quality from the constant oscillation between one and the other.

10. In philosophy there is also renewed attention to the concept of aesthetics. Since contemporary thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Ranciere have started to redefine the aesthetic domain, aesthetics seems once again to point to extra-territorial frameworks that are able to avoid producing instrumentalizing concepts (Slager, 2014). Aesthetics, according to them, is a field that in the current era is characterized by the absence of established narratives, and can lead to imagining new models that are yet to be invented. It is an undisciplined and speculative field that can think in and through art, beyond the given forms of knowledge and the conditions of sensibility. Indeed, such a topical understanding of aesthetics appears to be astoundingly compatible with what was once advocated by artistic research: the self-reflexive and self-critical capacities of artists engaging in other configurations of understanding and signification.

11. The curatorial project *Aesthetic Jam* (Taipei Biennial, part of *The Great Acceleration*, Bourriaud, 2014) also stressed the oscillating bond between aesthetic thinking and experimental processes of making art. A zero-degree exhibition plan developed by co-curators Hongjohn Lin and Henk Slager hosted a relay-type series over three production periods of three weeks, with additional presentations. Participating artists not only produced new works, but also continuously engaged in adapting the display system, alongside public discussions of the

material conditions and relevant conceptual frameworks of both the exhibition and their improvisational art making for *Aesthetic Jam*.

12. Participating artist Clodagh Emoe, for example, argued – in line with Badiou – that the correlation between artistic practice and philosophical enquiry has only been investigated from the perspective of philosophy until now. She stated that this imbalance should be re-addressed by exploring inaesthetics as an expansion of the contemporary aesthetic discourse from the perspective of experimental art practices. Thus, an alternative engagement with art and philosophy could emerge, not characterized by external interpretation, but with an inherent thought process undertaken throughout the entire process of art making for an intraphilosophical purpose.

13. With its roots in a multitude of perspectives and lines of thought, the project *Aesthetic Jam* intended to question anew the concept of aesthetics and its relevant positions and situations:

- Could a new concept of aesthetics reveal different forms of interest in and processes of artistic thinking?
- Could the concept of aesthetics have the power to reframe the concept of artistic research?
- Should experimental aesthetics as an undisciplinary methodology, distinctive from a theoretical and an academic philosophy, be at the forefront of artistic practices?

14. The addition of the adjective “experimental” served a purpose similar to Badiou's proposal of referring to “inaesthetics,” (Badiou, 2005) ie, indicating a practice succeeding in withdrawing from the totalizing tendencies of an academic philosophy of art. Such an often cocooning, purely academic discipline called “theoretical aesthetics” would be analogous to the division in science. Similar to theoretical physics, theoretical aesthetics as a discipline focuses on the philosophical question of transcendental foundations.

In line with experimental physics, experimental aesthetics, ie the practice of the artistic researcher, is characterized by a disciplinary hodge podge methodology drawn from the laboratory.

15. And just as experimental physics relates in an oscillating way to theoretical physics, experimental aesthetics also continuously challenges mutually inspiring encounters with theoretical aesthetics. Therefore, there is no hierarchical relationship between these two practices at stake, and nor is there a relationship of judgement and objects. Rather one should speak of a relationship of “resonances” and “interferences”.

16. Now, after a decade of excessive attention to knowledge production, artistic research should take a firm stance on an activity that departs from the idea of a mutually inspiring interaction between

the disciplined perspective of knowledge production (ie the perspective of academic research) and the undisciplined perspective of artistic thinking (ie the perspective of a “gaya scienza”). Because of the resonances and interferences, the condition of artistic research as experimental aesthetics is ultimately characterized by a continuous movement between fluidity and rigidity, laboratory and herbarium, smooth space and striated space, non-discipline and discipline.

References

- ARENDR, H. (1974). *The Life of the Mind*. New York/London.
- BADIOU, A. (2005). *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford
- BARTHES, R. (1980). *Camera Lucida*. New York.
- DELEUZE, G.; GUATTARI, F. (1994). *What is Philosophy*, New York.
- HAN, B. (2015). *The Burnout Society*, Stanford.
- MAHARAJ, S. (2009). “Know-How and No-How: Stopgap Notes on Method in Visual Art as Knowledge Production”. *MaHKUzine, Journal of Artistic Research*, no. 7.
- MERSCH, D. (2015). *Epistemologies of Aesthetics*. Berlin/Zurich.
- ROGOFF, I. (2010). “Practicing Research: Singulating Knowledge”. *MaHKUzine, Journal of Artistic Research*, no. 9.
- SLAGER, H. (ed. 2014). *Experimental Aesthetics*. Utrecht.
- SLAGER, H. (2015). *The Pleasure of Research*, Berlin.

Recommended citation

SLAGER, Henk (2017). «Reclaiming Aesthetics: 16 notes». In: Irma VILÀ and Pau ALSINA (coords.). «Art and Research». *Artnodes*. No. 20, pp. 15-19. UOC [Accessed: dd/mm/yy]
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i20.3156>>



This article is – unless indicated otherwise – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 3.0 licence. You may copy, distribute, transmit and adapt the work, provided you attribute it (authorship, journal name, publisher) in the manner specified by the author(s) or licensor(s). The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/es/deed.en>.

CV

**Henk Slager**

Dean, MaHKU, Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design

henk.slager@hku.nl

Rotsoord 3

3523 CL Utrecht

The Netherlands

Research and visual art have been the focus of many of the activities carried out by Henk Slager (Dean MaHKU Utrecht) over the last ten years. In 2006, he co-initiated the European Artistic Research Network (EARN), a network investigating the consequences of artistic research on current art education through symposia, expert meetings and presentations. Departing from a similar focus on artistic research, he has also (co-) produced a number of curatorial projects, such as *Translocalmotion* (7th Shanghai Biennale 2008), *Nameless Science* (Apex Art, New York, 2009), *As the Academy Turns* (Collaborative project Manifesta, 2010), *Doing Research* (dOCUMENTA 13, 2012), *Offside Effect* (1st Tbilisi Triennial, 2012), *Aesthetic Jam* (Project Taipei Biennial, 2014), *Experimentality* (1st Research Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2015), *Timely Meditations* (5th Guangzhou Triennial, Asia Time, 2016), and *The Utopia of Access* (2nd Research Pavilion, Venice, 2017). He recently published *The Pleasure of Research* (an overview of educational and curatorial research projects 2007-2014), Hatje Cantz, Berlin 2015. Link publication: <www.e-flux.com/announcements/hatje-cantz-publication-the-pleasure-of-research/>