Politics of Study
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There's not a single contemporary art college or university today that isn't a battleground. These wars are wars about value, meaning, pedagogy, criticality, and above all, unfortunately, the market. Whether we rise above them, move sideways, go underground, embrace or escape these fights, we did not choose them and their terms generate increasing losses for all those who still desire a relationship to something irreducible to money. This collection of interviews contains passionate visions and analyses that lay bare the stakes of our contemporary political, emotional and educational predicament.

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ANYTHING BUT A SAFE SPACE

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TOM VANDEPUTTE The notion of 'unruly' knowledge production is one of the focal points of your current work. What makes certain forms of knowledge unruly? How do these kinds of knowledge production challenge what you call the 'limitations' of critical theory?

RUTH SONDEREGGER The first thing we have to take into account here is the fact that knowledge, in the current phase of capitalism, is primarily a commodity, not only an instrument of power, which it has always been and still is today. In other words, knowledge is now, first of all, an asset-creating asset: an entity that is produced to make a profit and at the same time assessed in light of the return it produces. However, not all (contemporary) knowledge production follows the rule of the market. The general assessment, policing and enforcement of this rule already implies that there are certain forms of knowledge which do not produce enough return, or no return of the expected type – in other words, seemingly inferior forms of knowledge. Moreover, there are various kinds of forbidden, suppressed, subjected and censored forms of knowledge: knowledge which may be regarded as unruly. Such knowledge is unruly because it attacks and weakens powerful institutions. Just think of the information on surveillance practices that was leaked by Edward Snowden.

But apart from forms of knowledge that are directed *against* violent concentrations of power, some knowledge is unruly precisely because it withdraws and hides itself from such concentrations. This is a form of knowledge production that tries to prevent the assimilation, exploitation, and valorisation that tends to accompany visibility. Whatever the intent, fixation on the attack of violent power structures always runs the risk of affirming their authority to determine what counts as critical or unruly knowledge. Additionally, focus on the structures that we intend to criticise might easily become an obsession that immobilises the capacity of thinking differently or more autonomously, whereby 'autonomously' should not be understood as 'individually'. In my view, the praxis that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call 'study' is a good case in point, here.[1] Harney and Moten delineate the praxis of study as a collective enterprise, where the respective group determines together what kind of research or 'study' is needed in the first place, but also how such knowledge can be obtained or preserved. Next to

1. See: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, New York: Minor Compositions, 2013.

this element of autonomy in 'study', they also emphasise that it involves concealment or invisibility.

In my opinion, we should not pit these distinct variants of unruly knowledge production against one another, for they only indicate two different dimensions of a single project, both of which are needed today. Whereas knowledge that opposes powerful institutions puts the emphasis on nay-saying, 'study' stresses both the inventive and the preserving elements in the critical production of knowledge. Interestingly enough, in the occidental tradition, unruliness and critique are most often conceptualised as avant-garde, revolutionary practices that negate, deny, and demolish. However, the preservation or reinvention of already existing practices may, at times, have a stronger critical power. Negativity, invention and preservation are, in my view, all necessary vectors that, as a parallelogram of forces, jointly determine the power of critique in ever-new compositions. As for its relation to the limitations of critical discourse, I would like to suggest that (German) critical theory, like Western Marxism in general, tended precisely to underestimate the inventive and affirmative traits of critique.

SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN In a recent essay you introduced the concept of 'practical theories'. What does it mean for you to approach theory as a practice – and what are the possible implications of this approach?

RUTH SONDEREGGER When thinking about the relation between theory and practice, the first thing that probably comes to mind is Karl Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. According to this well-known thesis, philosophers have interpreted the world long enough, and – not 'but', as Friedrich Engels inserted into Marx's manuscript – the point is now to change it. In my view, this claim is the core element of all critical theories: namely that they want to bring about change, instead of only (neutrally) analysing or (discursively) criticising what others do or believe without being conscious of it. To put it differently, critical theorists claim to bring about change even if all they do is read and write – as, for instance, in the case of Theodor W. Adorno. I hold this, by the way, to be a very timely claim: for in a world that is intent on making an asset of any thought, essay, book etc., the very act of reading for the sake of reading and thinking, without any kind of so-called output, might become a critical intervention. Seen in the light of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach and the tradition of critical theory based on it, 'practical theories' are

theories that contribute to change, to actions that are directed towards less domination.

However, various (and often conflicting) theories of practice have shown that practices can neither be reduced to intentional actions, nor to the application or implementation of theories. On the contrary: whereas *actions* are planned in the light of their respective ends, *practices* are performed without much explicit knowledge on the side of their performers. They seem to only be possible as long as they are not known discursively, but only bodily. Antonio Gramsci, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John L. Austin, Michel De Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler and others have written extensively on this – always emphasising that habitual practices are the result of repeated processes of imitation and normalisation. According to theories of practice, not only walking, swimming, riding a bike, or baptising are (normalising) practices with which we have become acquainted after myriads of imitative repetitions. Also speaking a language, writing, calculating, making art, and researching, for instance, are habitual practices that rest upon repeated acts of normalising imitation. From the standpoint of critique, such 'practices' are quite dangerous because of their normalising qualities and their capacity to hide domination in seemingly natural norms. But the Marxist tradition of critique, due to its focus on (false) beliefs and (necessarily wrong) consciousness, oftentimes missed all those stubborn relations of domination that structure habitual practices and left them no less unaddressed than those who profit from the aforementione relations of domination.

The production of theory is also a 'practice' in this sense. Just think about the way in which today's journal articles are 'normally' expected to be written, or the implicit norms that reign in admission exams in art schools. Therefore, a second meaning of 'practical theories' would refer to the normalisation, cliché, and (often hidden) domination implicit in theory. Or, to put it differently: if it goes unquestioned, theory production can itself be a habitual, normalising practice – all the way down.

To grasp practice-based naturalisms in theory production and elsewhere, we need critical theories of practice, like for instance those developed by Bourdieu or Butler. But at the same time we need materialist, bodily practices that call the dominant practices into question by modifying or deviating from them. An exemplary model might here be the (ancient) Cynics, who are at centre stage in Foucault's last lecture courses at the Collège de France. In Foucault's

reading, the Cynics were after a way of performing habitual practices that questioned these practices the moment they were performed by continuously testing them as to their effects of domination. What I find promising about this approach is its emphasis on *permanent* questioning, as opposed to event-like, spectacular, if not heroic interventions. The Cynics are well aware of the importance and ideological power of habitual practices. They even go so far as claiming that mere changes of belief and consciousness (most often) are too weak to bring about change and that we therefore need to rehearse practices critically. In an almost paradoxical way, they both accepted and questioned the claim, defended by theoreticians as diverse as Wittgenstein and Bourdieu, that practices are 'blind' and incapable of instigating or performing critique. The 'militant' lives of the cynics, as lives that are doing and undoing practices at the same time, testify to the fact that critical practices are possible – even when we acknowledge the constraining power of habitual practices.

TOM VANDEPUTTE You have written extensively on the history of the concept of critique. What is at stake in this history? And how does it help us to understand the current predicament of the project of critique?

RUTH SONDEREGGER As my previous responses might have suggested, I am interested in critique as a precondition of resistance or, at times at least, as a practice of resistance in its own right. Sometimes critique can take on the form of a judgment, but this is definitely not the only or main enactment of critique. In my view, everything speaks in favour of following and elaborating Foucault's suggestion that critique is the 'art of not being governed quite so much'.[2] This 'art', which Foucault also dubs a 'practice', or 'attitude', consists of constantly and almost habitually testing how one is governed – mentally as well as bodily. Such testing is, according to Foucault, at the same time a practical, indeed corporeal, search for resistance against all forms of being 'governed too much': whether this is by my own anxiety, by implicit or explicit censorship, by thinking in clichés, or by repressive state apparatuses. Therefore, critique is much more than an attitude of suspicion: it is also a quest for alternatives to excessive government. There is reason to

2. Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' in: *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, New York: Semiotext(e), 1997.

believe that we are unable to articulate critique discursively as long as our bodies and sensible surroundings do not change at the same time. However, I am not implying that the sensible is more fundamental than the mental: I don't believe in 'firstness'. New thoughts call for bodies that are unheard of, while new bodily movements or sensible environments, in their turn, trigger new thoughts that might turn out to govern (me) less. From this perspective, critique signifies not only a long-term attitude that runs through the whole process of subjectivation, of becoming a subject, but also rather singular quests, rejections a nd inventions.

Research into the history of the concept of critique is imperative, for it can bring to light when and how certain conceptions of critique have become hegemonic and at the expense of other methods. Again, one might learn a lot from Foucault here, especially from his last two lecture courses, *The Government of the Self and Others*, and *The Courage of Truth*. Here he began to reconstruct how the occidental tradition of philosophy increasingly reduced critique to a discursive act of differentiating and discerning, at the expense of an understanding of critique as an attitude of resistance – an attitude, that is, which rests upon courage and enduring exercise.

Foucault therefore speaks of the tension between a metaphysical and what he calls a 'parrhesiastic' account of critique, one concerned with 'speaking the truth'. His account draws a line from a fascinatingly ambivalent Greek antiquity where figures like Plato were, virtually at the same time, metaphysicians and *parrhesiastes*, to the Enlightenment movement and its aftermath, which for instance includes Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory. But what is problematic about this well-known historical narrative is its exclusive focus on the occidental tradition of critique. Moreover, and this makes things even worse, the seemingly innocuous reconstruction of such a lineage implies that critique is a *uniquely* occidental invention and praxis. We now need to go beyond the historical narrative that is reconstructed and repeated here, by rethinking this historical lineage on the basis of geopolitical questions and postcolonial critique.

TOM VANDEPUTTE During the last decades, it has become increasingly common for programmes dedicated to critical studies to be located within art-educational institutions. You are yourself involved in running the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies, which is situated within

the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. What are your thoughts about the possibilities and pitfalls of the art academy as a site for critical inquiry?

RUTH SONDEREGGER Let me start by way of a caveat. In my view, there are no common rules for all art academies or study programmes, not even in the European context, despite the fact that the so-called Bologna reform was implemented here in order to transform higher education into a homogenised space. In my experience, every art academy is a specific and quite unique universe. Some art academies embrace theory and (artistic) research, be it for reasons of self-critique and self-reflection, or for a neoliberal desire to take a leading position in the creative industries. Other art academies embrace a modernist canon that excludes popular visual cultures, theory, and at times even time-based media. Some function like nineteenth-century Académies des Beaux Arts, while others resemble business schools. But perhaps the obvious failure of homogenising higher education suggests that homogenisation was never the real goal of the 'Bologna process'. In hindsight, I would say that this reform was ultimately about *disciplining* all of the actors who inhabit universities and art academies: whether this is by modularisation, by incessant evaluation procedures, or by forcing them to constantly invent and adapt to new curricula. The hidden agenda of this reform was also about cutting budgets, firing old personnel holding permanent contracts, and hiring innovative and young rising stars on a temporary basis. Moreover, by promoting undergraduate degrees and presenting master's degrees like an exception for the more talented students, it has tended to shorten the general duration of studies.

As for the general tendency of art institutions to welcome critical inquiry, I would like to emphasise that there is an almost equally strong tendency of blaming art institutions for illegitimately claiming criticality, as if critical inquiry became unreliable when it became part of the art institution. This might be part of the age-old adage that what was critical yesterday is nothing but affirmative today. Such reasoning gained enormous momentum in the wake of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's critique of the only seemingly critical generation of '68 in their *New Spirit of Capitalism*. However, I am rather hesitant when it comes to critiques of critique. On a closer look, apparently descriptive statements like Latour's famous thesis that 'critique has run out of steam', all too often turn out to be normative calls for elimination: let's forget about critique, let's stop being (self-)critical because it is so destructive, etc. Of course, I am not

denying that critique is often appropriated and validated by powerful institutions; nor do I want to refute that critical intentions do indeed, time and again, have un-critical and affirmative effects that could have been anticipated. But such future corruption does not speak against the power and necessity of critique in general. In order for a thought or an action to truly have critical force it is not necessary for such thought or action to retain this force forever – on the contrary.

Adorno provocatively defended a concept of truth that is determined by time and spoke of a certain *Zeitkern* of truth. I would venture to say that this is even truer of critique. If critique is directed at accumulations of power, if it is about the attitude of not being governed quite so much, it might turn out to be totally uncritical to stick to beliefs or actions which had critical power in the past. Critique is also a matter of finding out why an attitude that was once critical has now lost its power: it is not about eternal criticality or its impossibility. This also holds for the field of art, which in recent years was fervently blamed for invoking critique in a virtually inflationary way. Even though I acknowledge that art institutions might cynically commission pseudo-critical discourse in order to prevent serious questioning, there are still many artistic practices, differing from one context to another, whose critique is not welcomed by art institutions, or even rejected by them. One cannot simply claim that the critique in general has been absorbed by the art game and has thereby become powerless.

This brings me to the possibilities and pitfalls of the art academy. In my view, the primary goal of institutes of higher education is to reproduce elites – no matter whether we are talking about universities or art academies, despite the fact that cultural elites are different from economic elites. Undeniably, there was a sense in which certain western universities opened up in the wake of '68, but this has now come to an end. However, I still believe in the critical power of (semi-public) educational spaces in which different people meet to produce and reproduce knowledge. For where there is knowledge production, it is impossible to preclude the seduction of curiosity, which often leads beyond confined ways of thinking and desiring. Moreover, a plurality of experimenting beings is likely to encounter the anti-foundational fundament of knowledge as well as its contested character.

The question is only whether educational institutions leave room for such experiences and encounters, or even instigate them. To the extent that most study programmes at art academies are less modularised than

non-artistic programmes (since artistic practices cannot be divided so easily into introductory and advanced phases), there are certainly possibilities to realise the kind of space I just advocated. In other words, the fact that it is difficult to hierarchically divide the process of artistic production into different stages might turn out to be a considerable advantage in times when study programmes are increasingly based on modularised curricula. But even under circumstances of excessive regulation and government, teaching and studying are never without explosive moments, in the best sense of the word. Art academies could foster these explosive moments, by providing spaces where the curiosity and contestation that are of the utmost importance for knowledge production can hibernate without actually sleeping. However, recent tendencies in artistic research, from peer-reviewed journals to modularised courses, or essentialist debates about the definition of this kind of knowledge, exemplify quite well that art academies are anything but a safe space for critique.

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ART EDUCATION AND THE PREDICAMENT OF PROFESSIONALISED CRITICALITY

Suhail Malik