

ARTISTIC RESEARCH AND THE INSTITUTION: A CAUTIONARY TALE¹⁹

by Mark Fleishman

What impact do the specific institutional contexts in which we produce research have on the artwork? What would an ethical approach to the work of art-making entail with reference to these institutional pressures/distortions?

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

The central question I will examine here might be stated as follows: what impact do the specific institutional contexts, academic or otherwise, in which we produce research, have on the artwork itself and the potential ways of knowing associated with it? If we were to shift from a concern with epistemology (how we go about doing artistic research), or ontology (what in fact artistic research is), to a Levinasian concern with ethics, what would an ethical approach to the work of art entail with reference to these institutional pressures/distortions?

I have been engaged with artistic research since the mid-1990s. Over that time, I would suggest that artistic research has undergone a process of institutionalisation. I understand institutionalisation to be a process by which individuals come to accept shared definitions of a particular reality – the process by which actions are repeated and given similar meaning by oneself and others. Such an understanding requires us to accept that institutions are not ‘naturally’ occurring entities but are made by people over a period of time. Any process of institutionalisation involves regulative elements: the development of policies and work rules; normative elements: the emergence of habits and work norms; and cognitive elements: the institution of a relatively stable set of beliefs and values – all three help to provide a basis for legitimacy and durability. One vector of institutionalisation has been driven from within the arts disciplines themselves. Artistic research has developed a history, a number of structured organisations in different geographical locations (PARIP; The Society for Artistic Research; The Performance as Research Working Group of the IFTR; The SenseLab, etc.), and a set of writings, literature consisting of a body of key texts. And, while these texts are by no means equally available or meaningful to all and the literature assembles and reassembles differently according to regional specificities, understandings, and proclivities, the literature ensures an element of legitimacy and a perception of stability to the practice. Even if we cannot/do not necessarily always agree on everything to do with artistic research, the existence of the literature suggests that

¹⁹ This paper was first presented at the Arts Research Africa annual conference in Johannesburg in 2020 and is part of the published conference proceedings: <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/items/9fc6e2f2-bd89-41e4-b2bo-57af503274cd>.

something actual is out there when we speak of artistic research in our various contexts.

One of the papers from that body of literature, published in 2009, continues to haunt me in the sense that it unsettles any certainty I might entertain about what we now, quite confidently, assert about artistic research. It is a chapter by Simon Jones, at the time Professor of Performance at the University of Bristol, with the title: "Practice-as-research as a paradigm shift in performance studies" (2009). I will take some time here to rehearse some of what I take to be its key points.

Jones begins by pointing out that the chapter is itself a development of an earlier conference paper entitled *The con and the text* (1993) in which Jones is interested in the idea that when we engage in doing art practice as a form of research in the academy, we "con" or fool others in the academy into believing that practice is a text by a different name and that what we do when we practice is the same as what they do when they produce texts (2009). Or, alternatively, we "con" ourselves that we are doing something different, with an entirely different logic, when in fact we are really aligning performance texts in the academy with "always already self-authorizing critical texts" and "in doing so, we have committed the theatre event to the logic of the critical text. We have validated it on terms not its own" (2009:20).

Jones then goes on to argue that "the closer [artistic] researchers get to power – that is to say, the white-hot interstices through which capital circulates – the more volatile the environment becomes, and the more attention researchers' activities are subjected to by their paymasters" (2009:20). So, as long as practice-based work in the academy remained essentially undergraduate and was focused on skills development for application in the various forms of the so-called "creative industries" out of the orbit of research and knowledge production (the "real" work of the university), we were pretty much left to our own devices (we could determine our own modes of practice and of assessment for example). However, as soon as we began to venture into the realm of research (including doctoral education) and to make claims on the funding schemes associated with that realm, our modes of practice were subjected to a level of scrutiny previously not encountered.

The latter, in my opinion, introduces institutionalisation from without: the ways in which the academy, as institution, maintains itself by resisting the unfettered development of difference. In other words, once the reality of artistic research became clear, and because of the need to maintain a semblance of academic autonomy, rather than an outright outlawing, specific policies, forms, and methods were instituted by those in authority, which disciplined artistic research, delimiting its possibilities. And, these policies, forms, and methods were acceptable as long as they were essentially recognisable or believable as 'text-like': in other words, as long as we could con the institution or ourselves. In this way, "the hegemonic authority of the textual asserted itself" (Jones, 2009:21) once more and the institution maintained its own reality in which there are many different disciplines but very little fundamental difference between them epistemologically.

Jones argues that one of the consequences of what I am calling the institutionalisation from without is the economisation of the objects and outputs of artistic research. According to Brian Massumi, economisation refers to "the process by which the qualitative field...

is economically appropriated and subsumed under the principle of perpetual quantitative growth” (Massumi, 2018:39). As part of this process, artistic research becomes commodified – its essential eventual/occurrent nature gives way to the production of things that are apparently stable and occupy a specific fixed position in time and space. These things are then valued quantitatively (the more we can produce, the more value is generated), and this becomes the basis for processes such as tenure evaluations, promotion applications, and research assessment exercises. The drive of the neo-liberal institution, then, is to keep the system operating efficiently (read: producing as much as possible so that the institution can profit) and, to paraphrase Jon McKenzie, the artistic researcher, like all other workers, must perform or ultimately disappear (2001).

This leads to the part of Jones’ argument that I find haunting. It is the appeal, right back at the point of artistic research’s emergence, not to allow this process to take root. Not to con ourselves or others into believing that there is a commensurability between the artistic practice part of our research and the hegemony of the text in the academy; rather, for artistic research to become a play of weakness at the heart of the academy. That is, by emphasising the anomalies in our practices “that threaten ... to disrupt the strong lines of force that mark the flow of capital conducted by certain kinds of textual practice, the attempt to monopolize the business of naming, of judging, of mastering, in the pure sense of coming to know a practice apparently once and for all time” (Jones, 2009:22). In this sense, Jones is arguing for artistic research to operate in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s terms, as a “minor literature”: “an expression machine capable of disorganizing its own forms, and disorganizing its forms of contents”(Deleuze & Guattari: 1986:28). I say that I find this haunting because I fear that we have capitulated too easily, that we have given in to the authority and the logic of the text so as to meet our performance targets and imperatives at the expense of holding onto what makes artistic research particular/different – the possibility of getting beyond capitalist imperatives, in part at least, by revaluing value as qualitative rather than quantitative. This is an action that Massumi argues is “ethical by definition” (2018:4). By not taking heed of this call, it is my contention that we have behaved unethically or, perhaps, we have ignored/forgotten the ethical dimension of the work of artistic research. At this point, I will leave Jones’s paper temporarily, but I will return to it later.

MY PRACTICE AND ITS CONTEXT: MAGNET THEATRE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

For the past 32 years, I have been engaged in a practice that involves the making of performance works or productions. This is a practice I have described elsewhere as a particular form of dramaturgy (Fleishman, 2016). The particular context within which I have conducted this practice is the organisation known as Magnet Theatre, based in Cape Town. In parallel with this practice, I have also been an academic in a university theatre department. It is important to note here that the duration of my art practice extends beyond the duration of my academic employment. In other words, I was engaged in the practice of art before I began to conceive of it as a part of my research.

Elsewhere, I have outlined the features of Magnet's dramaturgical practice in detail (see Fleishman, 2010; Fleishman, 2012), but here I simply wish to suggest that besides being a practice of making works, Magnet's practice of dramaturgy is also a knowledge practice. In other words, while making space for new works, Magnet also makes space for thinking, for raising questions, generating ideas, and developing concepts. In this respect, in Karin Knorr-Cetina's terms, Magnet Theatre is a particular "knowledge setting" (1999:8). As such, it has its own "epistemic culture" that is defined by Knorr Cetina as "those amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms ... which, in a given field, make up *how we know what we know*," (1999:1, emphasis in original) and its own knowledge-producing strategies, which are not so much regulated as normative patterns of activities.

While completely unpacking this "epistemic culture" is beyond the scope of this presentation, I would like to highlight four features. First, the body, as opposed to textuality, is the central methodological instrument or point of departure in Magnet's knowledge practice. This does not mean that we eschew texts completely, but rather that we proceed from the body in space and, if texts become involved, they follow after. Second, the nature of the knowledge objects in Magnet's knowledge practice can best be described as what the historian of biology, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, calls "epistemic things": "objects of knowledge that escape fixation" (Rheinberger, 1992). As Knorr Cetina suggests, these are knowledge objects that are "open, question-generating and complex" (2001:181). For Knorr Cetina there is an "incompleteness" about such knowledge objects; they unfold indefinitely over time and in unanticipated directions, never quite attaining a finality or fixedness. Third, each Magnet production has a project team which constitutes a "repertoire of expertise" (Knorr Cetina, 1999:225) required to bring the production to fruition. The emphasis is on collaboration rather than on individual genius. Fourth, if Magnet's practice is a way of thinking – another way of doing philosophy – then it is a philosophy understood in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, not as a set of concepts that are "waiting for us ready-made like heavenly bodies" (1994:5) to be applied to the world and our engagement with it, but rather the "art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts" (2).

Despite research being a part of what Magnet Theatre says it does (its vision statement claims that it "seeks to celebrate a spirit of theatrical research") and that it has the infrastructure and collaborative networks to facilitate the work of artistic research, it is not funded as a research organisation but as an arts organisation. And, as an arts organisation, particularly one in the global South, it exists under conditions of precarity – always needing to chase the money – whether from audiences buying tickets or from funders. In an environment of austerity with a decreasing funding pool, the chase is increasingly competitive. Furthermore, under the conditions of the neo-liberal economic system operative in the country, access to funding, whether from public or private sources, is dependent on being able to demonstrate social impact. Such impact is demonstrated through quantitative value measures – bums on seats, numbers of people benefitting; numbers of outputs produced; instances of skills transfer. Therefore, Magnet has built up a whole suite of projects around social impact, with only an indirect relationship to the theatre production and research foci, and has used these to fund the

research and production activities described above, indirectly or, perhaps, covertly. As a result, while Magnet has, over time, become a relatively well-resourced organisation with a growing community of participants, most of these participants do not have an interest or expertise in research and, even if they do have an interest, they certainly have minimal time in the midst of everything else they are doing to pursue/develop it. Furthermore, as an arts organisation, Magnet has no overt requirement to reflect on its work and its relation to other existing practices, or to articulate publicly the thinking it generates through its research activities and the discourses that support it. The only requirement is that it demonstrates social impact in quantitative terms relative to other similar organisations and, to do this, it must produce – continually and in increasing quantities.

On the other hand, the university is a space in which the ideas emerging through practice at Magnet can be refined through discussion with a community of like-minded researchers, through research writing, and through postgraduate teaching – particularly pedagogical initiatives around artistic research methods and procedures. In other words, the work at Magnet is folded into the university context and, in the process, it becomes the driver for ongoing theorising, and influences other practitioners. At the same time, my position at the university pays my salary, ring-fences time for a different kind of thinking (at least notionally), and provides access to other research costs, such as travel (on a competitive basis).

It seems from the preceding discussion that the two contexts of Magnet Theatre and the university exist in a symbiotic relationship with respect to artistic research, where symbiotic refers to an interaction between two different entities/organisms existing in close physical association. This relationship has evolved over a number of years and is facultative rather than obligate; the different symbionts or entities involved can exist independently of the relationship – they do not require the relationship for their ongoing and complete existence. The question that follows is whether this symbiotic relationship should be characterised as mutualism: both sides benefit; as commensalism: only one side benefits but the other side is not harmed; or parasitic: one side benefits to the detriment of the other side.

AN ETHICAL APPROACH: OPERATING BEYOND CAPTURE

In 1951, Suzanne Briet published a manifesto on the definition of the document. In it, she states that “a document is evidence in support of a fact” (1951:7). It is “any physical or symbolic sign, preserved or recorded, intended to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon” (7). She goes on to consider the case of an antelope. If the antelope is running free in the African veld, it is, according to her, not a document. However, if it is captured and displayed in a zoo, it becomes an object of study and therefore a document, which acts as evidence for those who study it. It becomes an intentional object.

Are Magnet’s works like antelopes? When they are brought into the institutions of the academy – do they become documents? Are they reduced to pale versions of their true

selves forced to exist within the confines of the institution and its logics? Has, in Tim Ingold's terms, a "textility" (2011:211) produced by makers from fleshy materials become a textuality produced by "scriptorians" (to coin a phrase from Bruno Latour), captured, stabilised, and fixed in place and time?

While I believe there is a truth in this that presents a challenge to those of us who would conduct our research through art practice, I am not proposing that we abandon all our attempts at exposition: at speaking or writing. I might suggest, however, that we think less of writing *about* and more of writing *with* or *alongside* the practice. But I would also suggest that we resist the will to meaning/comprehension that is so prevalent in the Humanities and, in the process, avoid or perhaps simply delay the inevitable domestication of the antelope in the zoo. To do this, I contend, we have to proceed primarily from an ethical perspective and, in line with Emmanuel Levinas, such an ethics would insist on conceiving of and maintaining the artistic research object as alien: alien in and of itself – beyond grasping or comprehension – and alien to the institutional logics and neo-liberal imperatives of the contemporary university. With regard to the former – the alien in and of itself – we must, I would argue, aspire to engage in a manner that is beyond capture, that does not trap, appropriate, or render mundane our artworks in pursuit of our research.



The work of art is (and here I am influenced by Levinas) not a phenomenon but an enigma. It is "something ultimately refractory to intentionality and opaque to the understanding" (Critchley, 2002:8). To the extent that we can approach it analytically at all, it is "a movement toward an alterity ... that is not comprehended, or appropriated" (Lingis, 1986:xiii). For Levinas, the relationship with alterity is the topic of ethics. In his later work, Levinas suggests that it is through "sensibility" that we can begin to approach across the distance between ourselves and the alien, that we can begin to make contact: a contact that reverberates as sensation. For Levinas, sensible things have a specifically sensuous character made up of quality and intensity and sensation "is not just reception of data for cognitive synthesis" – a reduction of sensible things to signs that reach beyond the sensations themselves to some meaning that lies beyond them (Lingis, 1986:xx). As Alphonso Lingis argues, "Levinas contrasts presence, achieved in representation, and proximity, effected in sensibility. Cognition represents, it renders present across a distance. Sensibility ... effects proximity and contact, approaches across that distance" (Lingis, 1986:xiii). Adopting such an approach can be described as "non-hermeneutical" and "a challenge against the universality claim of interpretation" (Gumbrecht, 2004:2). This goes against the grain of the dominant modes of practice within university humanities disciplines based on particularly western epistemologies, but it is not meant to be "anti-hermeneutical" – against all interpretation, specifically of so-called aesthetic objects. Hans Gumbrecht, for example, argues that we should "conceive of aesthetic experience as an oscillation (and sometimes as an interference) between 'presence effects' and 'meaning effects'" (Gumbrecht, 2004:2).

To engage in this way proposes a slowing down of approach that is, in itself, oppositional to the overall habits of the neo-liberal institution in which the will to produce is limitless, profoundly inhuman, and totally remorseless. For the Korean-born, German-based philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, “what we face today is an absence of any experience of duration” or the ability to “linger” (2017:33-4). This is coupled with the fact that we have all become enslaved to work: “everything has to be a kind of work, and there is no time that is not dedicated to work” (2017:98). He draws on Martin Heidegger who, in his later work, makes much of the idea of slowness, the “courage to go slowly”. Heidegger emphasised the idea of lingering or dwelling in the world in a manner he termed “releasement” (*gelassenheit*), a “counter-movement, even a counter-rest to the determination to act” (Han, 2017:83). *Gelassenheit* in Heidegger refers to a particular mode of thinking that is described as “meditative” as opposed to “calculative”. While calculative thinking builds on the given circumstances to achieve specific ends racing “from one prospect to the next” and generally reproducing the same because of increasing time pressures, meditative thinking “bides its time,” attempting to reach for something truly different beyond the known and the same (Han, 2017:46-7). As Heidegger put it, we are “in flight from thinking”(1966:45) and we need to cultivate the patience required to trace the “measured signs of the incalculable” (Heidegger, 1998:237). This requires a practice of lingering, through which we can rediscover an experience of qualitative duration.

With regard to the latter point on alienness – alien to the institutional logics and neo-liberal imperatives of the contemporary university – I will return, once again, to Simon Jones. In his article, Jones proposes a model for the “emergence of value” in artistic research based on the idea of “dialogue” proposed by the physicist David Bohm. He conceives of such a dialogue as a gathering of multiple participants, logics, and modalities in which any sense of judgement is suspended; an act of thinking together collectively without predetermined agenda or fixed objective. A dialogue is not a discussion or a debate that works towards a goal or decision. It is an open-ended process of exploration between positions that can technically never agree even when embodied by the same person but which, nonetheless, recognise the value in working along-side each other without any attempt to resolve the paradox. Such gatherings have the potential to produce a “complexity and intensity ... infinitely greater than any single artist or scholar,” (Jones, 2009:27) or any individual modality could produce.

The above suggests that artistic research practice must struggle to retain its collaborative and open-ended dimensions when it enters the academic context – what Massumi calls its “transindividual” and “n-dimensional heterogeneity” – in the face of attempts to reduce it to “a punctual event of accumulation, individually owned” (Massumi, 2018:38-9). When an artistic research process becomes an intentional object in the institutional context of the academy, we must fight to retain its alien multiplicities: multiple dimensions; multiple modes of investigation; multiple questions to answer; multiple problems to address.

Now, with this idea of multiplicities in mind, I want to return to Magnet Theatre. There is another, intermediate level of organisation at play that is central to the “epistemic

culture” of Magnet Theatre and its symbiotic relationship with the university. Early Magnet works tended to be random, opportunistic events that responded to various impulses and circumstances. Over time, a more considered relationship between the work in the university, and its conceptions of research, and the practice in the studios, and on the stages at Magnet, began to emerge. This led to conceptualising a number of multi-year thematic foci around which a number of different kinds of activities and outputs coalesced. In this way, the research is arranged into what I term, following Deleuze and Guattari, “assemblages”. Some of the elements that make up any particular assemblage take the form of an “intermingling of bodies reacting to each other”(1988:88) at a variety of scales – the human and non-human bodies engaging each other in the molecular moments of each production; one production reacting to another at the molar level of forms and formations. Other elements take the form of “acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies”(1988:88, emphasis in original) which might be formal (as in journal articles, or book chapters) or informal (as in interviews, rehearsal notes, post-performance discussions, reviews, etc.).

Some of the elements are produced by Magnet, and some are produced by others, most often from within the university context, in reaction to what is produced by Magnet. To this extent, the assemblage is not entirely predictable or planned. It is not determined in advance but emerges over time, revealing its properties and capacities in the process. It is a structural composition defined by its dynamic nature, shifting and adapting as it incorporates new elements. There is a sense of coherence between the elements. But this doesn’t mean a sense of total agreement. The assemblage is characterised by difference, by the emergence of alternative possibilities. What is required is what Deleuze and Guattari call a “disjunctive synthesis”, which is an affirming and “positive relation among a multiplicity of... incompatible alternatives” (Shaviro, 2009:114).

I would argue that conceiving of artistic research as an assemblage is to understand it – to paraphrase Massumi – as an ecology of multiplicities belonging to everyone and no-one, which resists private appropriation: the enclosure of its potentialities into a possession (Massumi, 2018:38-9). This, together with an ethical approach built around proximity rather than presence (understood as representation or comprehension), around lingering rather than the hectic onward rush to production, has the potential, at the very least, to resist, weakly and playfully, the institutional stresses and the distortions they cause to our ways of knowing.



Figure e: *Clanwilliam Arts Project*, Clanwilliam. Photograph by Mark Wessels.