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Socially Engaged Practice: a Reflection on Values, Theory and Writing

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I

In *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, sociologist Richard Sennett makes the argument that skillful co-operation is a craft that has to be learnt, requiring the ethnographic researcher to 'respond to others on their own terms' (2012: 6). By outlining the differences between dialectic and dialogic conversations, Sennett draws attention to the rewarding virtues of empathy over instantly felt sympathy as a mode of engagement with the other, to the curiosity inherent in ethnographic fieldwork as a dialogical practice and to the 'subjunctive mood', which can serve to counter 'the fetish of assertiveness by opening up instead an indeterminate mutual space, the space in which strangers dwell with one another' (ibid: 23). Sennett's compelling sentiments resonate powerfully for both doctoral and established practitioners pursuing collaborative, cross-disciplinary, socially engaged practice, where fieldwork coordinates are emphatica0lly marked by questions of ethical representation, positionality, intersubjectivity, reciprocity, empathy and social justice. Such concerns are further crosscut by the complex interplay of civic participation and sociopolitical agency, shaped in turn by race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, age, and ethnic identify formations, among other performative variables. Taken together, these intersecting and observable spheres of lived experience, of transculturalism, of globalisation from below, topographical and corporeal in their reach and having a close affinity with the still and moving image, have the potential to harness the documentary form, as visual anthropologist Lucian Taylor writes, 'to one of its initial imperatives: to open our eyes to the world, and in so doing, to restore us to it' (1998: 9).

Transcultural research practice with its commitment to socially engaged forms, bridges the divide between cultural theory and creative practice, in so far as it promotes a self-reflexive and critical understanding of the use of media and new communication technologies in the production, theorisation and dissemination of new knowledge within and outside the

academy. Significantly, such an orientation must remain responsive to the fact that we live among people who differ, and who experience what Judith Butler calls 'up againstness – the result of populations living in conditions of unwilled adjacency, the result of forced emigration or the redrawing of boundaries of a nation state'[1]. This constitutes a major challenge to image makers and civil society today as politics and aesthetics collide and the visual and creative arts contribute to the formation of new social and political spaces and new subjectivities. While socially engaged art and media practices cannot in and by themsleves promote recognition, equality and social justice, they can nevertheless serve to anticipate and foster innovative ways of thinking and seeing – realigning what Jacque Rancière refers to as the 'distribution of the sensible', namely the legitimatisation of 'what is seen and what can be said about it', to 'who has the ability to see and the talent to speak', alongside 'ways of doing and making' (2006: 12–13). Given that contemporary artistic practices foreshadow the social and economic conditions of our time, new forms of relational and dialogical aesthetics may well lead to 'a radical transformation in practice' (Hutchinson, 2002: 438). For art critic Mark Hutchinson, the notion of the immersive anthropologist could 'become something akin to citizenship, or political action' (2002: 438). The role of the ethnographer conducting fieldwork parallels the investigative and creative methods used by the artist when producing art works and media artefacts. In order to create a coherent dialogical art work it requires the artist to think beyond the limitations of a single discipline or model of creativity and to embrace a hybrid methodology, described by Irit Rogoff as 'the emergence of visual culture as a transdisciplinary and cross-methodological field of enquiry' (1998: 16).

II

What, we might ask, is the role and place of theory and, specifically, writing in socially engaged practice-based doctoral research? Have we moved beyond the perceived and

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[1] Judith Butler, 'Precarious Life and the Obligations of Cohabitation', Nobel Museum Stockholm, May < www. Nobelmuseum.se/sites/nobelmuseet.de/files/page_file/Judith_Butler_NWWW2011.pdf> [Accessed 1 March 2016].

debilitating dichotomy between theory and practice, one which arguably still casts a giant shadow over what constitutes critical scholarship and the constitution of new knowledge in the academy? In an attempt to answer this question it may be worthwhile revisiting some of the debates on the practice of theory within cultural studies that took place from the early 1980s onwards, where 'critical and cultural theory' was not simply applied a priori to singular projects, namely theory for the sake of theory, but rather conceived of as a 'territory that cultural studies must pass through in order to address the concrete-life questions that motivate its projects in the first place' (Rodman, 1996: 21). For as Stuart Hall was to declare: 'I am not interested in Theory. I am interested in going on theorizing' (cited in Grossberg, 1996: 150). Similarly, cultural studies scholars Meaghan Morris and Lawrence Grossberg argue against the rigid application of theory to a social problematic. As Grossberg puts it: 'Cultural studies rejects the application of a theory known in advance as much as it rejects the possibility of an empiricism without theory' (1993: 89). What is useful in this discussion about the place and performance of theory in cultural studies research is an understanding that theory grows productively out of its object of study and, therefore, emerges within a methodological framework that is "radically contextualist" (Grossberg, 1997: 254). Theory, therefore, is messy and certainly not neatly curtailed (or contained) by a set of abstract theoretical paradigms or propositions. This immanence of theory surely resembles the complex and interventionist terrain of socially engaged practice with its emphasis on mobilising the visual as a critical medium of analysis, and entailing at least some of the methodological paramaters and challenges of cultural studies, in its shaping of what is increasingly an insistence on the specificity of 'context' and 'place' versus the narrowly 'textual' and hermeneutic.

The crux of the matter here is not so much the tension or false separation between critical theory and creative practice, but rather an openness to how theory might be produced in and *through* practice itself and a recognition of both the necessity and 'impossibility' of translating creative practice reflectively, via writing, during or after the 'event' so to speak. At stake here, and a central supervisory concern of ours as PhD supervisors, is a resistance to

written submission formats which effectively conflate a *reflective* versus *reflexive* analysis, whereby the written text provides 'the' critical map guiding the reader in their interpretation of the practice-led artefact – film, photography, installation – and thereby supplementing and often surplanting the meaning of the art work. Filmmaker David MacDougall's comments are apposite here:

> A concept of deep reflexivity requires us to read the position of the author in the very construction of the work, whatever the external explanations may be. One reason for this is that the author's position is neither uniform nor fixed, and expresses itself through a multileveled and constantly evolving relation with the subject … One of the difficulties involved in placing much confidence in external reflexivity is that the author is poorly placed to define the terms in which the work should be read. The things that matter most are likely to be those in which the author is most deeply implicated (1998: 89).

For MacDougall, reflexivity is then both an implicit and an intrinsic part of the form and structure of the work, whether intentionally registered or not. The explanatory commentary and 'reflection' provided in the written thesis accompanying the body of creative work presented as the core of the practice-based PhD, can be contrasted to the exercise of 'deep reflexivity', inherent in the art object itself. This reflection on practice is what the practitioner offers textually in the form of secondary insights following the work's completion. So how then do we juggle this sensitive balance between encoded 'reflexivity' and critical 'reflection'. In many submissions we encounter a cumbersome attempt by postgraduate practitioners to render the 'reflexive' moves within the practice visible to the reader via the textual account. In its extreme form, it's as if all the critical and theoretical analysis, the very reflexive encoding, is virtually drained from the lens-based artefact in an attempt to validate the worth of the practice, via the invocation of theoretical discourse, employing what often smacks of poor writing, with little finesse and attention to modes of narration and modes of experimental and poetic prose such as one might expect of an artist. In our experience, a more critical and innovative approach to 'writing up' is needed, one better suited to the tenor of

socially engaged practice-based research, which commonly engages with constituencies through ethnographic methods, longitudinal fieldwork and through an art intervention. It seems imperative that the 'writing' work undertaken in the practice-based PhD is developed in conjunction and in dramatic synergy with the accompanying artefact? In registering our dismay at the standard of writing that is typcial of the practice-based submission, we're not issueing here a demand for improved standards in academic writing but rather making a plea for more imaginative ways of literally 'practicing' the integration of critical theory with creative practice. We're hard put to see how written explanatory process-led methodological accounts, surely ingrained and encoded *in* the very artefact itself, constitute a mode of scholarship other than diary-like testimonies. Indeed such an emphasis on the reflective documenation of process leaves little scope for a dialectic engagement between the artefact and the written submission. We need to listen hard to how practice does speak both to and about a multiplicity of phenomena. Instead of commandeering the practice into a set of ill-thought through and derivative submission protocols, largely borrowed from positivist social science, we need to re-direct the debate through a careful negotiation of the framework of inquiry of any one project. This means elaborating the context of an initial resrach design and framing it within an appropriate set of theoretical references drawn from distinct and overlapping fields of study and intervention that constitute the expanding, cross-disciplinary terrain of socially engaged practice-based scholarship.

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