

Knowledge

Understanding or misunderstanding the relationship between art and research

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In a letter to his brother Theo, Vincent Van Gogh wrote: “I would rather die a natural death than prepare myself to die through the University...”¹. In these lines, it’s possible to recognise the Christian motive *noli me tangere* (“don’t touch me”) as a recurrent artistic view towards the relationship between art and the university. This motive says: “Don’t touch me, university scholars! Art cannot be explained and you don’t understand what art is really about.” Van Gogh’s words would nowadays seem old fashioned and romantic.

1.

Art has changed, so the Postmodern period would claim. Evidence for this can be found precisely in what may be called the *academisation of art*, with artists entering the university, becoming scholars dedicated to scholarship. A process that can be epitomised with the expression ‘art and research’. However, the question about what this relationship means, remains unanswered: How does ‘art’ and ‘research’ relate to each other?

The academisation of art discussed here has a specific meaning. It is not the idea of art being taught in the studios of academies from ancient times till the present. In our discussion, the academisation of art means, on one hand, that art assumes an academic, scholarly ‘outlook’. On the other hand, it means that academic research may use artistic expression to present its results.

1. *The letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother 1872-1886*, Houghton Mifflin Co, 1927, 15th October 1879.

However, the most important consequence of the academisation of art is that through the connection of art and research, a new way of institutionalising art and research is emerging. The academisation of art means its institutionalisation in two senses: in organising the 'existence' of art, and of legitimating and instituting art *as* art. As an institutional proceeding, the academisation of art is in fact the contemporary way to *preserve* and *administer* the concept of art.

Academisation of art means that art is not only defined as that which is bought (or 'represented') by museums, galleries, corporations, and public institutions; or defined as art by critics and art historians. But also as artistic work realised through, and in connection to, institutionalised artistic research and artistic scholarship. The figure of the free and solitary 'artist' today would be considered an old-fashioned romantic or a naive dilettante.

According to Walter Benjamin's now clichéd expression, a clear sign of modernity is the reproducibility of the artwork. In its 'essence', the artwork is a *product*, and as such something that can be reproduced. A sign, perhaps unclear, but quite evident, of the postmodern period. However, the product is no longer the artwork, but an art-concept, the idea of art, the theoretical administration of art, art's conceptuality.

The administration of art as a concept, of art history, of the value of art, or to sum up in one word - 'aesthetics' - is now the product to be reproduced. Artworks have become the virtual object of the real 'physics' of art theory. If art events are to be organised as examples of art concepts and curatorial investment, this cannot be accomplished without theoretical discussions. It would be too romantic (That is, naïve, and who wants to be considered romantic today?) to relate to art without discourses on art. Theoretical discourses on art, can be considered contemporary academic prosthesis for eyes, ears, mouths, and hands, for body and soul, that promises to bridge the distances between observer and art, rather than observer and artwork.

Consequently, the expression 'art and research' describes a contemporary way to institute and legitimise art as *concept*. It indicates a need to preserve and administer a specific art concept. In its internal motivation, however, this necessity is neither artistic nor academic. It is an institutional, political, and economic necessity. Or more precisely, it is the intertwining, or con-fusion, of politics and economics. It becomes a political and economic necessity to preserve and administer art as concept. This has been demonstrated clearly enough by the fact that the expression 'art and research' was negotiated during discussions about economic resources for academic research. Discussions on the issue of art and research, and the need for artistic research, intensified and became widespread in the course of the redefinition of the European economy as a *knowledge-based society*, through which Europe could find its new leading role in the global economy. According to several important treatises, Europe is now to produce knowledge products, rather than 'things'. Knowledge and experiences as products is at the heart of the politico-economical necessity of establishing links between art and research. A theoretical discourse on this relationship that does not take the *politico-economical need* for 'art and research' seriously into account (as well as claims for pure 'artistic' and 'academic' needs) ought to be considered a conceptually disorienting hypocrisy.

But is 'art and research' the same as the 'academisation of art'? And moreover: is theoretical work the same as academic research? What does 'academisation' and the 'academy' mean?

First, they mean a *place*. The academisation of art is the conceptual place where art is not only preserved and administered, but is also installed and instituted. The academy is therefore a discursive place. Art is what is called art (to recall Joseph Kosuth's tautological aesthetic imperative). But this only makes sense if a central distinction between the academisation of art and a more traditional art theory becomes clear. The romantic figure of the art theoretician – in the Ancient Greek sense of someone who observes things and events from a bird's view – has almost completely disappeared.

The talent or genius to see a painting, to listen to a piece of music, to relate to an artwork has lost its importance. Increasingly in focus, is the ability to relate to different art concepts and aesthetic discourses, to choose which is most suitable to be configured or translated into artistic expressions. The centre of attention now lies in 'artistic configuration' being given the task of shaping discourses on form. As 'configuration', art could be defined as an extension of *design*. The question here is the functionality of signs, of theoretical and conceptual signs, of de-signs.

2.

One of the most challenging questions of 'art and research', however is the academisation of the theoretical attitude itself. It is not only art that 'dies' in the contemporary idea of university, but theory too. Moreover, in relation to theory, it seems that Kosuth's tautological aesthetic imperative is quite valid: theory is what is called theory. 'Art and research' indicates not only the academisation of art, but also the academisation of theory, that is, the institutionalisation and submission of theory to political and economic claims. When theories and knowledge appear functional, it is called 'research'. To research means to 'design' theories. This means to use, instrumentalise, and to functionalise theories in a context that traditionally calls for a 'field'. It seems that there is no need to develop new theories, but only to administer different theories by updating and/or transposing them from one theoretical place to another. The name for this theoretical strategy is *multidisciplinary research*.

For a long time it has been proclaimed that the criterion for theoretical procedure, for good academic research, is the 'scientific value' and the 'scientificity' of the research. *Scientificity* is a concept that has, for a long time, been linked to mathematical ideals, the idea of positive science and the claim to provide a precise, objective and correct (true) image of reality. Precision, objectivity and correctness are, in turn, deeply connected to quantitative methods through which a phenomenon can be 'measured'. But this is precisely where the confusion appears. In order to establish a sure scientific criterion, a measuring parameter must be established, and this measuring parameter cannot itself be measured.

In every grounding of positive science, there is a foundational moment, in which an analogous tautological imperative can be identified: a scientific criterion is what has been called a scientific criterion. 'Art' is what is called 'art'; 'theory' is what is called 'theory'. 'science' is what is called 'science'.

A central question in the numerous media debates on scientificity is whether scientific value can be ascribed to the Humanities. The main focus lies in the supposed lack of legitimacy, truthfulness, and the arbitrariness of the Humanities. The main argument is that there is a crisis in the Humanities because, in their postmodern form, their scientific significance seems to be

void. Observing how a great part of Humanities' scholars globally react to this accusation, one could conclude it is seldom that the Humanities challenge either the very concept of *scientificity* (as defined by positive natural sciences), or the *techno-scientific image* of reality. Today, these two beliefs are sacred.

I would state that the crisis of the Humanities, lies in the swollen ideal of science that dominates the Humanities, in which 'concept' and 'technique' completely unite and overlap each other. In other words: *the crisis of the Humanities could be formulated as the global validity of the techno-scientific image of reality*. On one hand (based on the techno-scientific image of what really is) this means that only the natural sciences could in fact be called 'sciences', and on the other, that every other image of reality (among them those provided by the Humanities) can only be considered as *theoretical narratives*. Is it possible to question a bio-molecular, a biogenetic, a cybernetic demonstration of what is called 'matter'? We live in a period characterised by global neo-positivism. A positivism that is 'new' precisely because the frontier between natural sciences and Humanities has been erased, despite the impression of unbridgeable difference. This frontier was erased when the techno-scientific image of reality became globally valid when knowledge turned out to be a product, and experiences the most desired goods. In its absolute and global validity, only positive science can be considered science. Everything else becomes mere 'theory', that is, quasi-science; fiction rather than abstraction, narrative, construction of meaning rather than 'truth'.

From this perspective, we may claim that the crisis of the Humanities lies in the fact that the meaning of knowledge and reality, has not been criticised at all. The crisis is that the Humanities do not have a crisis. The crisis lies not in the absence of scientific value, but in the lack of critical approach to the very idea of scientificity and the neo-positivism that orients the idea of knowledge. This is the condition sine qua non of the identification of theory and research, that is the academisation and institutionalisation of theory.

The procedures and methods of the positive sciences, have of course, been the object of critical questioning, but this is not the case with their specific ideas of 'knowledge' or 'scientificity'. Consequently, many ethical and political implications are discussed, but not the idea of science itself. The important question we should ask here is how to define the criterion of scientificity within the realm of a theoretical research which admits itself to be no more than a 'narrative'. This criterion seems to refer to the legitimacy, truthfulness, and verisimilitude of a narrative.

In short, the question of criteria of scientificity in the Humanities seems to have been reduced to a question of *popularity*, misunderstood as *recognition*. So, the criteria for scientific research in Humanities is limited to measuring popularity: what is read more, sold more, viewed more, measurable by (for instance) biblio-metric resources.

3.

Presently, the major trend is not only a growing necessity of making research in the Humanities popular and 'medialised' (by promoting research outside the circles of specialists and the 'proper' scientific market), but also the internationalisation of research (making it popular with other circles of specialists and within international scientific markets). To produce academic scholarship in English is therefore considered an imperative. Scientific quality is thus being defined by the number of readers. Institutional hysteria about the

legitimising role of peer-reviewed articles, as a foundation for scientific criterion of quality in the Humanities, is another strategy to assure worldwide recognition of an academic knowledge product. Important books of the most significant authors within the Humanities appear trifling since they were not peer-reviewed! (Poor you, philosophical classics, you were never peer-reviewed!) This is the criterion for legitimising research that will appear as truthful and worthy of global recognition. However, the question is, to what extent can scientificity be defined through recognition? Let me sum up this anamnesis of contemporary research procedures: good theory, (that is good research) is recognised research, is research *seen* in the world. Decisive is the present tense – good research (that is, research that receives institutional, political-economic grants and funding, and that shall 'exist'), is research that can be seen *here and now*.

"I am seen here and now, therefore I exist". This is the here and now in the role of *fundamentum inconcussum veritatis*, the contemporary transposition of modern scientific *cogito* into postmodern and post-industrial conditions. This becomes manifest in connection with 'art and research'. The academisation of theory, which becomes manifest in the relationship between art and research, can therefore be initially defined as the *actualising of a conceptual field* that legitimises whatever question that appears as 'the here and now' (German, *Aktualität*, French *Actualité*).

The actualising of a conceptual field proceeds very frequently as a new decoration, or arrangement of existing concepts and conceptions, where the new presents itself as the newest, where new 'words' or 'metaphors' emerge or are invented, and seem 'new' and 'exciting'. Montage, collage and sabotage of concepts become a modernistic 'must' in new ways of making theories and designing new research fields in 'art and research', even if it does not seem very suitable to confess oneself as 'modernist' in regard to art. The central concepts here are the 'here and now' and 'actualising'. In art and theory, the academisation through conceptual investments in the relationship between art and research is the need or claim for 'the here and now' that speaks loudly. A complex phenomenon appears here that can be formulated in the following terms: our 'now' (understood as a shared historical time and place) has no need either for art or theory. The only need is for the 'here and now'.

Aesthetic discourses about contemporary art frequently claim that contemporary art is that which does not claim to be art. Either because it does not use traditional and specific artistic means, or because the frontier between art and non-art has been supposedly erased. In order to avoid those paradoxical definitions, some art historians and theoreticians claim that art today, should be considered an 'actualising procedure' rather than 'contemporary'.

4.

Actualising relates however to a certain sense of *Aktualität*. Therefore, the *Aktualität* (the *actualité* or the 'here and now') could present itself as a relevant artistic, but also an academic criterion. However, it becomes necessary here to define the meaning of the *Aktualität* and to question its importance for theory. The *Aktualität* of theory can be defined primarily and in general terms as theory capable of reflecting on itself in its own time. In Michel Foucault's well-known commentary to Kant's essay from 1784, *An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"*, Foucault says that the major feature of enlightened critical rationalism is that for the first time in philosophical tradition it asks the

question about theory's *Aktualität*. This question questions the ways a thinker may belong to a cultural and theoretical 'we'. In this sense, modernity can be defined as the epoch when every theoretical discourse, is at the same time, a discourse on its own time. Theory defines itself as a consciousness about its time, about itself, and as such is separated from the past. It aims to understand itself as mature, capable of thinking solely by itself. Foucault showed that Kant, with this question, asked in philosophy for the first time about the *Aktualität* of theory, which is intimately connected to the question of revolution, and the identity of the revolutionary.

As a consciousness of the *Aktualität*, modernity is also a consciousness of the *Aktualität* as revolution. The *Aktualität*, the here and now, is by no means an evolution from past to present, but a revolution, an interruption, where the unique emerges, where something that did not exist before begins to exist. The *Aktualität* is the new, and the new is the incomparable, discontinuity, but not simply that. As revolution, the *Aktualität* is what changes the course of time, and thereby inaugurates a new time. Kant claimed that revolution and the revolutionary lies in what happens around it, rather than in the revolutionary facts themselves. It lies in something that looks more like a state of enthusiasm, insofar as the revolutionary becomes overwhelmed with hope, or at least with a perspective of future. The revolutionary determination of *Aktualität* defines it as a break up from the past, and as an essential relation to the future, to the dream of something better, of something to come. In this sense, the revolutionary character of the *Aktualität*, of the *here and now*, can be determined as what *can* (or cannot) be seen later, rather than what is seen, as a 'dwelling in possibility', to recall a beautiful verse of Emily Dickinson.

Today, the Kantian view of *Aktualität* and its revolutionary character appears highly romantic. Today's discourses on *Aktualität* have extracted it from all connection with the future. Today we live the euphoric and happy nihilism that assumes we have no need for future, nor for utopian placelessness of places defined by unpredictability. If today one talks of the future, then it can only be in terms of new products, new experiences, in terms of the reproducibility of today. The future can only mean the eternal return of the now.

Modern and romantic ideas of *Aktualität*, of a present-today, which Foucault reads in Kant, define it as revolutionary *Aktualität*, and hence with an intimate relation to the future tense. Our time's idea of *Aktualität* has extracted it from timely relations, and in this way limited it to the logic of, and a claim for recognition. *Aktualität* means what is recognised *here and now* by everyone that is *here and now*. *Aktualität* becomes an extreme spatial relation defined as a simultaneous here and there. What has been called time now appears as a virtual dimension. Here and there at once corresponds to the techno-scientific idea of *Aktualität*, the idea that is most valid today. This can be defined as the actualising character of the *Aktualität*. No longer has it anything to do with the revolutionary force of the *Aktualität*, but is now only connected to the actualising procedure by that which exists there, simultaneously exists here. The actualising procedure of the *Aktualität* (the disassociation between *Aktualität* and the future's unpredictability) becomes visible in its capacity to actualise the past, in its relation to what is commonly called 'history'.

5.

How does the *Aktualität* actualise something, make something present today? It makes something present when it identifies everything that is to be found within a 'there', either in a remote past-there or in a distant spatial-there (with a 'figure') and its corresponding 'expression'. This identification, philosophically grounded by Wilhelm Dilthey, can be called *styling*. Styling² is the conception of a 'there' as a figure expressed and an expressive figure. In styling, however, the eventfulness of things dissolve. The dimension of eventfulness and of its continuous form – the *while being* of something which cannot be fixed in a here or there, nor in a now and a later on. Styling can only be realised if one neglects the durative is-being of things, its force of giving birth. In this sense, a styling is a kind of sterilisation. The unmeasurable, undefineable, unpredictable dimension of eventfulness becomes sterilised in styling. Everything meets in the virtual place of a styled outlook – everything is now. This is the active force in what we could call our time's *actualism*.

Everything must happen here and now. Everybody must be present here and now. It is not *Aktuell* to deal with matters that do not belong to the now, to the here and now. This is only possible when what has happened, the closest past, the yesterday is immediately styled, and thus shaped, becomes historical. Our *actualism* corresponds directly with contemporary historicism. The new historicism that increasingly dominates our relation to the past, drives historicism's styling capacity to its extreme. Every past 'now', every sign of the past, shall be registered, archived, styled. As the virtual object aims to imitate the physical object as much as possible, the *Aktualität* equally aims to make present today, each infinitesimal second distance in the past in order to dissolve all infinitesimal distance in time. The all-dominating *actualism* is a mirror image of our historicism, of our relation to the past. If the *Aktualität* of our 'times', physicality and psychic actualism, is capable of making into a present-today everything that is to be found in a 'there' (temporal as well as spatial) it is however incapable of discovering history as the event of appearing in the appearing of eventfulness. This is the fundamental lack of knowledge of the *Aktualität* itself. Its own non-knowledge, or non-knowing. In this dominating actualism, what disappears is the distinction between the first time and the 'as if it were the first time' – which is the pulse of eventfulness. In the pulsatory force of the event, the present today is neither actualism nor revolutionary, but dis-actualising – a distancing from what is obvious and evident, a becoming other of the self, an estrangement of the known, a breaking down of the core of the *Aktualität*.

Dis-actualising is the hermeneutical meaning of an actualising understanding. Differently from actualising a 'there', which submits all strange experiences to our own way of relating to the present, what takes place here is rather a dis-actualising of the 'here', and thereby the opening of an in-between, in which it becomes possible to question the 'now'. Now becomes a questioning place, a dis-actualising place, where what appears as the most evident: namely that we are solely our here and now, loses its evidence. The actualising procedures of the *Aktualität* are not capable of seeing themselves. The eye cannot see the

2. Dilthey doesn't use the term "styling". He discusses rather the concept of "style" (*Stil*). With the expression "styling" I aim to discuss the post-modern sense of the relation between figure and expression as styled outlook, as "image".

eye, and is therefore incapable of seeing that that defines the *now* is not its presence, but its continuous sliding away. Now's sliding away appears when human existence exposes itself to self-transformation, precisely when it is not trying to escape from the *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) with its own existence, with the cruel question: 'What is it all about?'

In this *Auseinandersetzung*, with its own existence, art and thought relate to each other not as disciplines, not even as figures of speech or as expressions, but as life's eventfulness in the singularity of a life. It is not about the relation between expression and knowledge, between work and theory, but about genesis, about the beginning or birth of things and reality. It is about 'as if it were the first time'.

If criteria for the meeting between 'art' and 'theory' are to be discovered, then it is necessary to acknowledge that both art and theory have a common beginning. Both begin in the intensity of an *Auseinandersetzung* with the eventful character of life in a life's event. This *Auseinandersetzung* unites 'art' and 'theory' in a thought event, that can provisionally be described as a *thinking-feeling*, or *pensar-sentir*, to recall an expression of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa.

Thinking-feeling is not the same as to reason on feelings and desire, nor to feel thoughts or make sensibility sensitive. Thinking-feeling means firstly to give space and time to life's in-betweens and thereby to dis-actualise active understandings of what thinking and feeling mean. A dis-actualising discussion on what art, feeling and thought means have become urgent. This discussion and character of *Auseinandersetzung* needs, I would claim, the double movement of leaving behind an uncritical idea of theory and research, and at the same time getting into a listening position to the 'poetics' of what traditionally has been called 'art' and its own poetogories. Instead of searching in traditional theoretical features categories for 'reading' and legitimising as art what is academic research and non-art; at stake is a dis-learning and dis-actualising of the theoretical, a discovering of a becoming other than theory, a theory beyond theory.

At stake is a learning of dis-learning, a learning of dis-actualising that may prepare a new way of, quoting Fernando Pessoa again,

"thinking as if we were walking, feeling as if we were seeing, and when it is time to die, to remember that the day dies and that sunset is beautiful and beautiful is the night that remains".