

## AN ONGOING DEBATE: ART AS ACADEMY AS ART

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*Quand l'homme a voulu imiter la marche,  
il a créé la roue qui ne ressemble pas à une jambe.*

GUILLAUME APOLLINNAIRE [1]

This essay will be a work in progress contribution to an enduring argument on the making of art based knowledge. Its effort will be derivative (full of contradictions and pauses) but it will try to immerse itself on the debate defining the conceptual and methodological structure of PhD's in Arts (Art and Studio based PhD); something that is consensual among all parts involved in this debate is that it has been built on a disadvantaged standpoint because of its pioneering nature – ontological and methodological questions surface from its unfinished literature; as we go through the overwhelming literature produced by this debate – James Elkins has warned us that this is no longer a one man/woman job – one feels that the borderline separating scholar research on art making from artistic and creative practices hasn't been fully crossed and that the puzzlements and contradictions surrounding both territories have a likeness to an hybrid city with simultaneous and symmetrical development paces: if we enter through one of its sides it looks like we are coming into Klondike, with its encampments, ephemeral and precarious living conditions, with a lack of infrastructure but with an intuitive and mix and match capacity to expand its conceptual expectations –like in Ilya Kabakov's immersive installation *C'est ici que nous vivons* (Centre Georges Pompidou – MNAM, 1995) we see a city fully involved in the construction of a new city, of a new community and inevitably implicated on its own demise; the building yard and the monument have still the same face value. But if we enter through a different direction we find a Chicago like environment,

[1] Foreword to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, 1917. In *L'Enchanteur pourrissant* followed by *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* and the *Couleur du temps*, NRF, collection Poésie/Gallimard, rééd. 2009, p. 114.

a finished and in full motion city, with its economic, cultural and social institutions well embedded and recognizable in the built environment; in this part of the city the infrastructure is also in a continuous change but an elusive sense of stability, of permanence prevails. Both scholar research on art practices and artistic practices fit in this dual urban metaphor depending on whether one positions himself (or herself) in the art process: for artists, Klondike is the delayed and retrospective approach that scholar research gives to the artistic phenomena, and Chicago stands as the fixed image of their own art community and of the institutional systematization of the Art phenomena; for scholars instead, Klondike stands as the colorful image of the hermetic and unclear creative process socialized as Art and Chicago plays the role of the cultural and artistic heritage already discussed and singled out by this research field.

Another metaphor for this growing hybridization is the myth of the Argonauts. Roland Barthes used this model to explain the concept of structure through nomination and substitution and Rosalind Krauss replicated the “Argo-model”, as she called it [2], to talk of a post-formalist and post-humanist conceptualization of the works of art that goes beyond “the conditions of their creation” (KRAUSS: 3), a conceptualization which separates the work of art and its potential meanings and cultural engagements from its author’s biography, psychology, intention and motivational paths; the ship of the Argonauts’ endeavor is full of mishaps and turmoil which demand the constant rebuilding and change of the vessel. This means that as the voyage reaches its destination the original one has physically disappeared within a new one and the only element connecting the past and the present of the ship is the name itself.

My use of this “Argos-model” may be farfetched but as one discerns the relationship, within the PhD’s in Arts conceptualization, between scholar research and art practice one realizes that the building blocks of the scholar methodological approach (case studies selection, factu-

[2] See Krauss, Rosalind. (1986). *The Originality of Avant-Garde and other modernist myths*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, pp.2-4.

al and historical documentation, critical reviews of state of the art bibliography, norms and conventions of scientific papers) can happen to be found embedded and manipulated by art practices and, on the other hand, the tensions that envelop art as an object (as an enclosed space-time body, as an upholder or “wrecker of the unitary being” to use Rosalind Krauss words) and as phenomena (the given occurrence of art as a disruptive multiple, a space-time condition where the work of art gives way to a set of conditions that turn, in specific institutional circumstances, every object. environment and practice into art) have become a defining nutrient for the conceptual and methodological changes between art theory and art history. Both vessels travel and are reshaped by the other’s building blocks in such a forceful change that we could paraphrase Robert Louis Stevenson [3] and say that the studio based PhD is an in between work of art and scholar practice not so much because of its inevitable resemblances to both, which are forced and material, but by its immeasurable difference from both.

I’m aware that this essay is still far from detailing the design of what a research on this conjunction should look like. However our recent experience at Colégio das Artes has become a significant case study on the fact that a mandatory guideline is not available and is not recommended when we are talking about a practice which is more attached to prototyping, trial and error experimentation and the contrasting opposition between practical wisdom and primary source based research than to stereotyping what has already become accepted and legitimized in the Academy. Art practices are more keen on devaluing disciplinary hierarchies, cancelling semantic distinctions and sometimes they are both additive and subtractive by superimposing on the same scale differing methodologies (relational and participative aesthetics and hermetic and disruptive postures like, for instance, Ilya Kabakov or Thomas Hirschorn working methods) and playfully fragmentizing discourses that claim to have a collective output (i.e. art

[3] “The novel is a work of art not so much because of its inevitable resemblances to life, which are forced and material, but by its immeasurable difference from life.” See *A note on realism*. In Stevenson, Robert Louis. R.L.(1999). *Stevenson on fiction - An anthology of literary and critical essays*, Edimburgh: Edimburgh University Press, p.85.

practices tend, as artist Mark Dion explained, to work on a mix and match basis). This is a method but it is not the scientific method that scholars are used to and that they depend on to get and disseminate reliable data because artists (the main target of this kind of PhD's) as well art making and art environments are less involved in separating true from false, factual from fictional, lived and experienced from deferred and unverified data. A qualitative sideline of this blurring is that there is a more demanding and creative posture from the PhD candidates as they find that their own artistic practice and research is lacking systematization and at the same point they feel they should go beyond the conventions of academic papers and critically approach, through rationalization and theoretical discussion, the random and autobiographical features of their research; what comes out of this work process is a notion that a dissertation with these features more than being an "object provider" is a "context provider". Phd candidates do have some solid ground to walk through within this Klondike-Chicago model such as the already conventionalized dissertation structure with a preliminary roadmap – the Index framework – an introduction to the problem and its context, a state of the art and literature review generalization and then the focusing, problematization and discussion of case studies which can be directly based on the author's professional and creative experience.

A fact remains concerning the main target of this studio based research: Art stands as a "ritualistic praxis" that is vulnerable to misunderstandings, stereotype and ethical issues. A practice that, nowadays, can offer us the unheimlich and aporetic intuitions of such marginal artifacts as Henry Darger's Vivian Girls bloody battles or Achilles Rizolli's ego-buildings but also Thomas Demand's photographic simulacrum or Santiago Sierra's distressful paid-to-do performances. This means that besides discussing the requirements and *raison d'être* behind a scholar cross-disciplinary research on Art practice, one needs to agree that this unusual generic codename which is Art is a Pandora box full of historical, ideological and cultural aporias. Trash and uselessness filled with a meaningful narrative (the power of ten of subjectiveness) and the hyped organization of leisure (the art

institution with its apologetics and critics) are the polarities of this conundrum. How to begin this journey through a reality that is both subject and object, both action (and interaction) and commodity?

In the early eighties both Hans Belting (1983 and 1992) [4] as well as Arthur Danto (1984 and 1997) [5] problematized an historical turn in art making and art reception; they argued that a master narrative positioned around the formation, self-discovery and self-awareness of artistic value was no longer available and even if it were it wouldn't be of any use whatsoever. They claimed that the foreshortening recentness and novelty of art practices no longer carried on its shoulder the weight of art history; in a later chapter Danto would assert the absence of a slogan, of the possibility of a slogan and the lack of an agonistic profiling of artistic condition-the guidelines were obsolete or derri-soire; A “style of using styles”, “an enfranchisement” and “an aesthetic entropy” were the space-time, the contemporaneity in the Art world.

These scholars post-historical matrix of contemporary art was intuitively available to anyone interested in the cultural phenomena of art and art making and displaying: living art and artists or dead art and dead artists, anonymous or famous, infamous or popular authors were all immersed in this delusion that their viewpoint was unilateral and foundational (even for what accounts the meaning and semantic scope of their work) and yet they managed to show that a borderline had been crossed and art could no longer function as an “unitary being” but instead had to be seen as an anthropological field where intersubjective narratives, fiction bordering real experience, densely codified and even incomprehensible messages and finally a franchising of aristotelic suspension of disbelief, prevailed.

The weight of art history was never a weight on itself but a learning by doing guideline; history (the slices of time cut down by man as explained by the history school teacher in Alain Tanner's film, *Jonas qui aura 25 ans a l'an 2000*) doesn't give coherent and functional

[4] See *The Meaning of Art History in today's culture*. In Belting, Hans. (2003). *Art History after modernism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. pp.7-8

[5] Danto, Arthur C. (1992). *Beyond the Brillo Box - The visual arts in post-historical perspective*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

instructions (and when it tried it failed miserably) but it teaches the next generation (if it is willing to learn) that artists, creators, authors, performers, and all those empowered with the will to do useless but mind blowing stuff, look into the present but eye also into the past: Ingres didn't need to know and understand Cezanne to do what he did but he surely needed Poussin who would care less about Ingres's pictorial rationale but would feel mandatory to understand Rafael's painting. We need memory and specific outlines to work out our own identity (what we want and don't want to be, what we love or hate) and we cannot find it in a space time that doesn't exist but in one that ceased to exist. Danto's Hegelian discussion on the end of art history only asserts that meaningful activities in the art field are no longer locked in a trans historical obligation to surpass what was behind and be surpassed by what is forward; and it also asserts that art history posits itself in between Rem Koolhaas's Junkspace [6] (a concept also available in Art Theory as one can infer from Yve Alain Bois reasoning of George Bataille's Zone, the pervasive presence of ruin and emptiness in our living space) and the coolness shallowness of a travel agency brochure.

A point has been reached in this essay that demands a broader approach on this pioneering dialectics within the Academia between deskilled (in a scholarly sense) practices and the specialization and cross-disciplinary knowledge exchange that defines contemporary academic research. So in order to consolidate my reasoning I will have to be attentive and discuss a contemporary, daily and inescapable phenomena: I'm referring to the immersive and magnetic cloud of web-land and its proxies; these virtual entities have become the empowerment of information as a physical reality but they are also strong sources to understand the status quo of real objects and real life in the information age. Why divert from this book main target? Probably because in its expanded, anomic, post-medium, end of art condition, contemporary art making and its rationale are still locked

[6] Koolhaas, Rem. (2002). *Junkspace*. In *October*, Vol. 100, Obsolescence. (Spring, 2002), pp.175-190.

in the millenary problem of human condition, in the mind and body experience of being alive and struggling to stay alive and struggling to give some forecast and sense to that experience.

In the global and murky breaking news mechanics of our times it has now become a full-scale system of beliefs that the world of human activity, the visible and the invisible dominion of its proceedings, the flow of the organic and the inorganic, that this whole secretive openness works “in and out” of context with its representations; this “in and out” has reached the point where Borges ‘s Map makes complete sense: the geography of the world we live in is the territory of its depiction: we walk through a built-image, a landscape made out of spaces that we will never see or feel, of space-time unavailable to us (whether because of their demise or because of the material constraints), of other people experiences (even of non-existing people, larger-than life characters), of images encoded, signified by others in different languages and cultures, of different and technology based representations (like spectrograms, tomographic, Eco graphic or positronic scans), of the familiar and the usual, representations that make these realities come closer to the unfamiliar and the unrecognizable. In short this system, and the image and knowledge tsunami which it brought in, tell us that societies have overcome the realm of rumor and hearsay as instruments of horizontal communication (oral communication has lost its persuasiveness as a builder of worlds: Homer and all the bards and storytellers that gave us the narrative of past times would nowadays be locked between fast driven keynote speakers in some TEDx event or constricted to the timeline of a TV talk show). We are no longer blind, obscure and alienated, so conventional wisdom (Google and the whole World Wide Web) convincingly tell us. We’re connected and a disconnection maybe an hazardous and anachronistic decision. This hazy connection is supposed to mean that we no longer disambiguate the world by filling in the gaps between true and false, between fact and fiction. We no longer build our perception of reality as if it was a painting by numbers scheme where some of those numbers are missing. The global village togetherness optimism is of course over rated; hearsay lies, urban myths, misconceptions, racial and gender

prejudices pour out of that connected world like mushrooms in a moist soil. Yet these beliefs of a global transparency have been successfully merged into our perception of reality. We are persuasively convinced of news face value because we've been told that media (corporate and increasingly non investigative media), the main object of this apparatus, is genetically embedded in the mechanics of democracy and democracy in the mechanics of truth. Democracy is truthfulness mediatized to the point that its process has been surpassed by the vividness of its image. And media (but also tv serials and blockbuster movies) is the provider of that image. But we also can feel the ideological standoff between the socialization of historical facts and the eclipsing duration of those same facts in the media outlook. In other words the premature obsolescence of real time life has become the essence of media based depiction and narration of human experience (social, cultural, political and economic experience). The multi layering and multidimensional continuum gives way to the noisy fragment of the present tense – the affair, the current event, the climatic escalation of what is happening right now, they all appear as the only available image of reality. It's true that a real time tracking of world's catastrophes, natural and man-made, is at our disposal. We can see from different points of view an autocrat being mutilated, and morbidly review it over and over again; through different media platforms those who lived their youth in western and heavily mediatized societies, can go back to their coming of age as TV consumers, down memory lane and even play with cinematic image (news reels, documentaries, films, advertising, cartoons, animation, computer graphics, etc.) using digital montage as an inclusive process that allows them to incorporate their own symbolic and autobiographical input into the historical processes that they received, witnessed (as bystanders) or participated (as activists), or even those moments that they wished to have lived. We can scope the ever widening limits of wolf-like man and god-like man and we can do it as a real time depiction. Yet a sound bite curtain has dropped on us. We face a screen full of elusive and look alike images of what reality is supposed to mean. The detailing of complexity has become a problem on itself. We can see but we fail to understand and



to use all the information that is pouring in and this unfiltered flow has become a strange metaphorical combination between reflexive (the object displays itself as a surface) and projected (the subject interacts, immerses in the received) content. Transparency has become opaque. It's an oxymoron I know, but it defines our present condition: an unfamiliar sense that we can grasp the totality but all we get is deferred fragments. Figuratively speaking, and because this is a document to be, hopefully, read by artists, we are decentered between the shock waves of estrangement produced by modernist collage (dissonant arrangement of forms) and the didactic serialization and “cognitive anomia” of Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, between specialization and de-skylled practices [7]. Our life has become a mixture of an impressionist and cubist painting. Empirically produced effects and aesthetically enhanced camouflage and a tactile sense of void and fullness, they all seem to condense what is our relationship with reality.

Borrowing it from Borges' map Baudrillard calls this blurring the Hyperreal [8], a territory without beginning made out of the superimposition of life extracted from fiction that comes out of life. The discourse of Baudrillard reads political and ideological antagonism (even war, he gives the example of the Vietnam war) as the historical process where the rationalization of social relations surpasses (exterminates) the archaic anarchic forces of pre-modern life (BAUDRILLARD: 36-38); political and ideological antagonism is the play (simulacra) where modernity (whether capitalist or non-capitalist) prepares the extinction of the human as an animal body. Rationalized bestiality focuses on the social control and destruction of radical bestiality (non-formatted to a prescriptive mode of existence and action). Random violence is obliterated by organized violence. I don't wish to go in depth into Baudrillard's reasoning and I feel that simulacra, the pretend game of societies, enhances the sense of passiveness of the human subject, no longer an historical agent but a recipient of a reality that he cannot grasp nor

[7] C.f. Buchloch, Benjamin. (1999). *Atlas/Archive*. In Coles, Alex (Ed.), *the Optic of Walter Benjamin*, London: Black Dog Publishing, pp. 31-33.

[8] Baudrillard, Jean. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, p. 1.

even imagine. There is something discouraging in this relativism. A (Bourgeoisie) and B (Proletariat) can no longer fight for the power to change reality because reality has dissolved in its mirror-image. But anyway the concept of Hyperreal, this helpless, uncanny immersiveness, is effective in depicting what I want to talk about. I apply it but I don't turn it into a foundational conceptualization of our times. We are wrapped up in reality but it looks more alive and tangible when it is seen from abroad or when others fictionalize it [9]. We no longer suffer from a lack but from a bulimic form of world vision, a form that has enveloped us, better, it has engulfed our everyday life and is turning it into a process of information management.

(The reader has already marked my handicaps, I tend to take the long walk before facing the issue; I beat a lot around the bush! I delay the arrival for the sake of the journey, one could say.)

Modernists were right. Long hours of book reading are doomed as a social skill. Only a few happy ones are up to the task. Our permanent present entraps us in the finitude of our bodies, of ourselves as a great dystopic alarm clock against daydreaming. Today, the not so heroic present has won as an immaterial dimension: so we have the multi-tasking web-land; so many voices to listen, to ignore, to delete, to fear, to forget. Walter Benjamin claimed that modernity encompassed the destitution of the living place as a space of memory; industrialization meant the dead ending of craftsmanship and the glass and steel tropes of modern architecture were positively codified by W. Benjamin [10] as the rarefying environment where fetishization and myth were no longer possible; industrialization separated

[9] One could argue the opposite: our body aches, we can stumble and break our legs, nausea and migraine, skin rash and anxiety, disease and death are waiting for us around the corner. Finitude, mortality are prevailing symptoms of our presence. Accidents, natural catastrophes, bankruptcy, homicides, terrorism and wars are there to prove it. True, but exactly because we feel everything can go on without us, that the eternal present is not anthropocentric and can deliver without asking our opinion. Exactly because of this dispossession we retreat to this bulimic world vision looking for the reassurance that this dispossession is universal but also that there is hope for our irrelevance. And then everything complicates. There might be a contradiction on my reasoning but it complies with the fact that everything I'm saying is as fragile, partisan and true as everything I failed to say (due to ignorance or indifference).

[10] Cf. Gough, Maria. (2002). *Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde*. In *October*, Vol. 101. (Summer, 2002), p. 58.

the habitat from the working environment [11]. Facelessness was the depleted image of human work. And the commodities of this work were ever more depleted of human traces. Benjamin's expectations on the productivist appropriation of the domestic environment [12] were not fulfilled. The working class would not live in the electrodynamic glass towers designed by Bruno Taut's followers (Mies's Lake Shore Drive apartments were not built for the American proletariat; instead they would have to help themselves with the serialized picket fenced Levytown and cope with its growing distance between home and work). But worst they would not observe the ascetic countenance expected from them: they would also enjoy leaving traces, do bricolage and accumulate kitsch and useless commodities. Though Benjamin (as a psychological counter-measure to the rise of fascism in Europe, one should say) was over-optimistic in his expectations on how emancipatory, revolutionary subjectivity would fill in modern living space he was a forerunner in thinking of a methodological and spatial resistance to the awakening of a consumer society based on quick and irreversible devaluation of commodities and eventually of cultural entities. He was well aware of the risks behind that consumer based society notably the obsolescence of culture and the credible (and terrifying) possibility of a technocratic society highly efficient in its efforts to exist without the dialectical tensions between art and culture, society and politics.

How do the last pages of this account fall into the realm of PhD on Arts and of its aporias? If one is attentive to the epics of last century art making from *Les Grandes baigneuses* by the eremite of Aix, Cezanne, to Vanessa Beecroft's serialization of eroticism as numb bodies, one will see that the gap separating both experiences is as wide and full as the grand Canyon but despite their historical distance they are both products of human nature and reflexive of the human condition.

[11] You'll have to walk, to drive, to go away every day. Every day will become departure, unadventurous, repeated departure. Every day will include sameness. Things we will have forcibly to do in order to embark, catch, move into the flow. Web-land has become the Frankenstein creature of this destitution.

[12] As it was well depicted in *Co-Op Zimmer*, Hannes Meyer's fictionalized photograph of the modern habitat as a temporary encampment.

So with all its shortcomings, rocky and unstable landscape, and with its overpowering demographics (so many artists, so many geographies of artists), this gap is where culture can be saved from oblivion and nullification and a serious researcher both in a scholar context and in an art studio is the one that keeps in mind that the job of art is not to save (and the verb “save” should be read both in the humanitarian and the digital sense) culture but to keep it alive, Culture doesn’t need to come clean from the hands of art it just needs to come kicking and dialectical.

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