Radicalizing the Political Ontologies of Arts-Based and Artistic Research (15 min paper)

Let me start by saying that the provocation I wish to lay out in this paper does not concern methodology, but presents an attempt to radicalize a politics of artistic and arts-based research. In this respect, I do not offer direct answers to the dilemma concerning what artistic or arts-based research actually is. Rather, my intention is to tackle the other central question of this conference, that of, “What kind of knowledge is being produced and in what ways can it be discussed?” and place it within the context of academic knowledge production and its politics in the present day academia. My critique operates in the realm of ontology: I am interested in examining how to constitute the epistemological specificity of artistic and arts-based research and how does this relate to the political theorization of art, its education, and its research practices.

Along these lines, the general statement of my paper is following: if the Art of artistic and arts-based research is treated merely as another kind of knowledge within the academia, its political character becomes dependent on the actualization of this anotherness in an epistemological and methodological level, leaving, however, the ontology of its own politics unquestioned. Such anotherness follows the premises of liberal pluralism, where inclusion and recognition serve as the undisputable prerequisites for political agency. Of course, if one does not find the existing societal climate for research problematic in any way, this is not a problem: then, arts-based practices can strengthen the function of the university within the creative, innovative, and, exciting frame to which academics are currently asked to give their time and labor. If, however, one would like to think artistic and arts-based research as something else than a good investment, it is necessary to step away from the demands to save the university (i.e. a strategy that, as we are currently experiencing in Europe, includes introducing and/or raising tuitions) and, indeed, find ways to change it.

Contra the ontology of politics that necessitates a liberalist imaginary, I propose an approach to politics that is informed by Maurice Blanchot’s writings on literature and Giorgio Agamben’s political theorization. These two writers offer tools to think both art and research as activities that corrode rather than construct or reconstruct power, thus opening a perspective to politics beyond inclusion and recognition. In the words of Walter Benjamin (who is a central intellectual figure in Agamben’s writings), I am interested in a “destructive character” that sees no image hovering before him. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least,
empty space – the place where thing stood or the victim lived. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 541)

This paper is divided in two parts. First, I take a look at a/r/tography, an arts-based research practice that has gained a fair amount of attention in the academic field of art education in the United States during the last decade. What I find interesting about a/r/tography is that one of its central attempts is to create a practice of knowledge production that disrupts the traditional boundaries between academic research and art. However, I will show that this disruption is not radical enough, but, on the contrary, fits more than well within the neoliberal academia. The second part of this paper examines what kind of questions Blanchot’s and Agamben’s texts pose for political theorization in arts-based and artistic research and how might they it help to radicalize it.

To go back to the dilemma “What kind of knowledge is being produced [in arts-based and artistic research] and in what ways can it be discussed?” a group of academics, artists, educators, and students affiliated with a/r/tography have tried to answer this question by challenging the boundaries that limit one’s identification with Art, Research, and Teaching (A/R/T). As Patricia Leavy writes in the introduction to the special issue of Visual Arts Research journal on a/r/tography,

> When I discovered a/r/tography a new world of possibilities opened before me. I found myself both somewhere new and quite at home. The polarization of my artist–researcher–teacher identities never worked for me; I could not carve out parts of myself and place them into different boxes. Like many educators I have always felt that we teach who we are. In these respects and others, I could not separate my “work” from my “life.” How thrilled I was to learn that I did not need to—that I could be in community with those creating work that is fulfilling, meaningful, ethical, and resonant—work at the intersections of “art” and “research.” A/r/tography invites and celebrates interconnectivity. (Leavy, 2012, p. 6)

Here, it is the de-polarization of the differences within the multidisciplinary field of art, its education and its practice that ought to open new trajectories to understand arts-based research and its knowledge production. Notably, these disciplinary differences are not the only boundaries that a/r/tographers are interested in blurring: as La Jevic and Springgay (2008) argue, this approach also disrupts the one-directional relationship between the researcher and the object of research, thus opening an ethical frame of “being-with” (in reference to Merleau-Ponty and Nancy; a view on ethics that Leavy seems to suggest as well).

To recap these ideas in terms of my initial question, one could say that the epistemological and methodological specificity of a/r/tography lies in its ability to multiply the elements of academic knowledge production while, perhaps paradoxically, diffusing the boundaries of these very elements.

From the perspective of political philosophy, it is important to ask what does this horizon of blurring boundaries, expressed ultimately in Leavy’s point about the inseparablesness of work and life, mean for artistic and arts-based knowledge production as a political practice? Notably, this inseparablesness is congruent with the current socio-economical era that has been labeled as post-Fordism; an era when labor is not tied to a separate realm for work, but dispersed in the fabric of the society. However, while labor in cognitive capitalism takes
multiple, often immaterial, forms, it still remains as labor from which surplus value is extracted and used in the reproductive mechanism of capital (thus keeping it as alienated labor, following Marx). Similarly, when a/r/tography “invites and celebrates interconnectivity” of various forms of knowledge, the very production of academic knowledge is not challenged, but, on the contrary, repeatedly affirmed through an inclusion of all the parts that Leavy had troubles with carving out from herself.

So, just like a consensus-driven democracy and money as a general equivalent, a/r/tography celebrates differences in order to do away with them. To paraphrase Benjamin, one finds no destructive character from this logic: rather, it is the continuation and amelioration of what already exists that serves as the ultimate goal of research.

If, then, practices like a/r/tography merely reproduce the existing order, what would a corrosive knowledge production (maybe an oxymoron in itself) look like? In order to grasp this question, I turn to Blanchot and Agamben. Due to the limited time I have for my paper, I present two passages from their extensive work and leave them as provocations for further discussion.

In his book *The Space of Literature* (*L’Espace littéraire*), Blanchot takes the activity of art making (writing, specifically) under a meticulous scrutiny. By calling art as “the consciousness of unhappiness, not its compensation” (Blanchot, 1989, p. 75), Blanchot dwells on the poiesis of art as a relation to the world in Kafka’s work. He writes,

> art is linked, precisely as Kafka is, to what is “outside” the world, and it expresses the profundity of this outside bereft of intimacy and of repose – this outside which appears when even with ourselves, even with our death, we no longer have relations of possibility. Art is the consciousness of “this misfortune.” It describes the situation of one who has lost himself, who can no longer say “me,” who in the same movement has lost the world, the truth of the world, and belongs to the exile, to the time of distress when, as Hölderlin says, the gods are no longer and are not yet. This does not mean that art affirms another world, at least not if it is true that art has its origin, not in another world, but in other of all worlds. (p. 75)

Before discussing this passage further, let us look what Agamben has to offer. In a short essay “On What We Can Not Do,” Agamben reflects on the Aristotelian understanding of potentiality as a capacity to act that is always connected to what he calls impotentiality, that is, the ability not to do. He concludes the essay by writing that,

> Nothing makes us more impoverished and less free than [an] estrangement from impotentiality. Those who are separated from what they can do, can, however, still resist; they can still not do. Those who are separated from their own impotentiality lose, on the other hand, first of all the capacity to resist. And just as it is only the burning awareness of what we cannot be that guarantees the truth of what we are, so it is only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or can not, do that gives consistency to our actions. (Agamben, 2010, p. 45)

What could arts-based and artistic researchers take in from these passages, especially when dealing with the present ideological climate of the academia? Notably, what Blanchot and Agamben provoke us to do, in different ways, is to dwell on our potentialities to act, that is, the potentialities embedded in the very production of art and research. These two passages

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help to delineate the activity of art and research beyond a liberalist imaginary where all potentialities are actualized and, subsequently, exhausted in a multiplicity of voices that, as pointed out earlier, merely supports the continuation of the existing categories of knowledge production.

After all, for Blanchot, art’s relation to the world as “the outside” is neither a romantic affirmation of one’s true self nor a safe haven for seeking the truth of the world. Rather, it denotes the properly unknown, the unknown as unknown (the neuter in Blanchot’s lexicon), not a blurry area of interconnectivity from where one waits something to emerge, but a collapse of the world and the speaking subject through a poietic act (that is, production as corrosion). This corrosive unknown, I suggest, unfolds the impotential character of art’s poiesis: art can “speak,” (that is, actualize its anotherness) but it can also remain silent and unresponsive. This way, following Agamben, art is connected to what it “can not do” and, subsequently, to its “capability to resist,” thus opening an ontology of politics that troubles the demand of participation embedded in the neoliberal imaginary.

This does not necessarily mean that we should stop working (like Melville’s Bartleby), but, rather, reclaim a modality of worklessness (désœuvrement) in our practices of knowledge production. Instead of participating in a multiplication of voices within the existing academic framework, I see that the radical political potential of arts-based and artistic research is to introduce a corrosive silence in it; a silence that denotes an existence that is neither present nor absent. The challenge is, of course, that silence can also be understood as a gesture of approval, which is why I see no reason to take it for granted. In Blanchot, whose oeuvre can be seen as a practice of producing such corrosive silence through writing, a radical silence does, indeed, involve speech: it is a mobilization of “the outside,” of what “we can not do,” in the act of speaking. While such corrosive knowledge production might still remain in the realm of abstract thought, I see that it is an important component in the process of thinking and rethinking the politics of artistic and arts-based knowledge production.

References


