

## Towards a Criticality in the Now

Ignaz Cassar

*Almost every artist I know wants to be critical.  
So what should an art critic do if the art itself is critical?*  
Boris Groys<sup>1</sup>

*A theorist is one who has been undone by theory.*  
Irit Rogoff<sup>2</sup>

*Art, in its transhistorical quality, and bourgeois society,  
work from diverging ontologies so that its appropriate  
specificity must go unrecognized.*  
Adrian Rifkin<sup>3</sup>

### The Rhetorics of Practice

Much has been said about the term ‘practice’ in the last decade or so: a large amount of thinking went into all sorts of terrains pertaining to the doings of practice as well as to the operational fields of those who call themselves practitioners. And much has been thought out as practice, including the academic model of ‘practice-led’ research. Notions of ‘practice’ appear in different contexts and to differing ends: in framing the activities of an artist; in thinking about the ethical conducts of research; in catching up with the performative moments of the live act; in pursuing the roles of a cultural practitioner; in tracing the *Bahnen* of deconstruction; in adhering to professional models of academia; in working suitably to disciplinary ideals... The actualities of ‘practice’ are many, its signifying space polysemic. Yet the present inevitability of this term for anyone working in the humanities must invite serious questioning as to why it has achieved such a prominent and, for some, critically acclaimed status in the arena of research. This essay wishes to challenge some of the claims, concerns and confusions relating to the spaces of art practice and their conceptual and ideological reconfigurations by the politics of a scientific research framework of the twenty-first century.

One cannot avoid hearing it: the artist *practises*. In the books and journals of art history and theory, in the course outlines and programmes of art education, on the websites and CVs of artists, etc., ‘practice’ is a term very much in need nowadays. Of course, this might simply confirm our custom of describing the actions of an artist as practice. It is a fact of banality: artists practise. That they indeed practise is reproduced in a myriad of institutional and disciplinary forms: the organizational clarity of the North American education system and its distinctions of ‘studio practice’; the continuing emergence of centres for so-called ‘practice-led’ research in mainly UK higher education; symposia and conferences seeking to evaluate the spaces of practice and the activities of practitioners of all kinds whereby the artist is conveniently thrown into a larger crowd of practitioners ranging from the psychoanalyst to the documentary film maker; an expanding list of publications

around the topic of practice including its viability as research method; and, again in the UK, all those little appearances of practice in universities' regulations of student admission and degree structures (applicants in 'creative' subjects are usually required to show evidence of being 'practitioners'), public relations materials of museums, arts councils and other lobbying groups (practice is emphasized by referring to artists as being 'practising' artists), as well as in strategic papers of funding bodies that have set an agenda for practice.

Practice flourishes, certainly institutionally, and especially on the British Isles.<sup>4</sup> One could see its current notoriety as an ungainly backlash to the bodies of poststructuralist knowledge that one associates with Theory. Yet in this revisionist framing we would just give rise to the simplistic formula of the theory/practice opposition and its stale ideologies. Surely, if there is a point to Theory, then it is its assertion of itself as a practice, that is, the assertion of its own workings as *happening* from within the things it addresses. And the ideas put forward by textuality, deconstruction, performativity and, to some extent, psychoanalysis too, theorize by doing. They are examples of intellectual projects wherein *theory is practised*, and indeed, where the ideological divisions of theorizing and practising become untenable: theorizing is not oppositional to but *inseparable* from practising – gaining critical thrust precisely by thriving on the moments that enable the undoing of the positions upon which theory rest.<sup>5</sup> Theory gives space to an articulation of the *positionalities* of theory so that it brings into relief how its ideas are always already entangled in, and conditioned by, a set of formats, conventions, materials, temporalities, geographies, genealogies, histories. Even the signified needs a signifier in the *signified*. Indeed, in considering the work of deconstruction, Derrida often pointed out that it cannot be a method but can only ever be a practice tracing a pathway or *Bahnung*.<sup>6</sup> Derrida recognized philosophy's practices in the spaces of the technologies of writing, in philosophies' historical tropes and rhetorics. We may only think of his signal book *Of Grammatology* published in 1967.<sup>7</sup> And yet, with the beginning institutionalization of art practice in the methodological moulds of research three decades later, the 'new subject' of art justifies itself with a practice-led agenda that – one cannot help but think – is particularly attached to its own idea of practice as uniquely to itself.

No doubt, the current availability of all things 'practical' in academia is an easy route for those who regard theory as extraneous or even think it is antagonistic to their work.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, these academic 'practitioners' can wear the robes of theoretical appeal because of the status that practice has lately attained in the institutional spaces and discourses at this particular historical moment, which integrates certain dominant forms of art practice in the nomenclatures of a twenty-first century research scheme. Yet, what could bring about a crucial paradigm shift that would help us move away from an individualistically expressive approach in the arts, let alone help us recovering from the ongoing hangovers of romantic interiority, is more often than not just a swapping of terms and a redistribution of economic resources in a changing political landscape: the art school becomes a university, artworks become research outputs, artists become researchers. And practice, it seems, has thereby become the favourite pastime of the newly born artist-researcher. One is persuaded to consider this current inevitability of practice from within the critical frameworks with which the social history of art has intervened several decades ago. Practice could thereby be brought into focus as a leftover of the ideological fictions of artistic creation, which

has gained another lease of life in the name of research. Instead of reflecting upon the concrete procedures and materials that surround the production of work and lend its making *meaning*, ‘practice’ comes in handy, giving the artist-researcher’s work a pseudo-appearance of critical rigour.

One of the challenges of setting out to combine the terms and conditions of research with those of art practice is the need to recognize that such a merger ultimately remains unsound if it is not thought in *historical* terms just as it requires an awareness of how the wider apparatus of art history and criticism produces its objects of art – and practice is one these objects. On the one hand, practice is a term that is repeatedly problematized in, and is indeed central to, modern art theory. Thus, practice is an already disciplinary sanctioned object of investigation and research in itself. On the other hand, the claim to a practice is a convenient tool for the artist-researcher to lend his work analytical and methodological credibility so as to qualify it as research and to conform to its technical terminology. It is needless to say that this short-sighted approach to things falls short of its supposedly critical purpose of ‘researching through practising’, not the least because, as indicated earlier, practice is such a loose term that could not possibly cover the diverging forms of cultural production. Rather we end up with a practice for the sake of practice that gives us nothing but its own academically reified version.

The twenty-first century marriage of art and research – as understood in their current political and institutional forms of their respective traditions and conventions – is not critically served if we think we can close the case by institutionally legitimizing a certain genealogy of art practice as research. Not only does this remain a superficial enterprise as long as we are not considering art’s historical conditioning, but it also cannot work if one party claims priority over the other.<sup>9</sup> This is the trouble with endorsing practice-led research. The risk of relying on the lead of practice is one of decontextualizing practice from the political and ethical arguments that bear their *specific* weights on it. Such an art practice, as sophisticatedly argued as it might be, might not be able to contribute much original knowledge other than the pretty forms it has produced, in fact, for itself. This state of affairs is reminiscent of the purifying terrains of High Modernism and its aesthetic regimes. Thus, instead of engendering effective practices of reflection and analysis that also *do* something, the efforts made in ensuring that practice could be some kind of auto-powered vehicle of research leads us into a space of empty rhetorics – politically correct but hardly political.

### **Desiring the Lead of Practice**

The wish for practice-led research might, at best, echo the real need for thinking up alternative models for conducting and disseminating research, which is an issue of relevance to all fields of research, encompassing both the humanities and the sciences – models that do not solely constrict us in analytical hardness but models wherein the performative can take place, models that bring into play the transparent and obscure, the articulable and the inarticulable, the accidental and the deliberate, models than can cope with the personal inside the political, models that recognize the desires and sexual interests that permeate the work, models that entrust themselves to the poetic alongside the analytical. *Models that practise theory*. Yet little of this can be gained if practice is severed from the ideological spaces that regulate and operate it. These

include the discourses of art history and museology, art criticism, media theory, etc., but also the institutional geographies of cultural industries, mass media, education, exhibition and conservation.

Likewise, given that modern research asks for the production of original knowledge, we cannot simply assume that whatever happens in art practice can lay claim to originality – certainly not in the space of research where the creation of work is not required to respond (which is not to say that it can escape) to a bourgeois framework of artistic creativity upon which the trope of originality is established in the first place and kept alive, with all sorts of tricks, as a particular value within a capitalist state of affairs. Such an assumption is only available to those who work in certain traditions of art history by keeping their focus on writing the historical events as they refract in the figure of the artist and his work. This, however, also necessitates a realization of how the figure of the artist is projected into its historical and societal position, including the art historian's own (re-)projecting of the artist.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the artist can double as a historian and conceptualize his practice against the theoretical background of history – a kind of seismographic work of the present in respect of the genealogies of art's histories, which is also one of the main lines of reasoning when explaining what a 'practitioner' can actually research with his 'practice' or as to how it can produce meaning. Nonetheless, in order to keep this model in its signifying place, one needs some conviction to not see how it still supports itself on the privileged spaces of art as ideologically already secured, which it thereby also re-inscribes in its own doings.

However, as soon as an art practice is *not* conceived within these parameters, then the claim to contributing new forms of knowledge – which is, after all, the aim of research as conceived within a scientific culture – is harder to sustain. (And perhaps, for the strict art theorist, the meaning of art would be equally endangered.) Practice becomes then more comparable to any professional's practice: in medicine, when a general practitioner (GP) practises, then it is a matter of execution, of evaluating phenomena against existing records, of applying protocols, of adhering to ethical standards. This practice does not set out to research so as to produce new forms of knowledge but relies on the results that have come out of research. Still, we would be rushing our case if we were not to see that even in the GP's wider medical world and its divisions of labour the researching bit is organized around its own set of practices: all the procedures that might not feature directly in the research output but which have nonetheless shaped its forms – even though the clear division of medical research on the one hand and practice on the other might easily mislead us into thinking in absolute terms. The same, then, could also be said about the GP's regular duties carried out in practice: although its stated goal is not directed towards researching novel phenomena but towards applying consistently the established orders of medicine – indeed, he would be in trouble not to do so – the pursuit of research need not be excluded from the scopes of the GP's practice. But the foci of this research will be necessarily restricted as they are embedded within medicine's professional structures that regulate how medical practice ought to function, which is to say that such 'practice-led' research can attain useful results only if it concerns itself with itself – with addressing and researching practice itself such as its ethical frameworks, its economic efficiencies, its spaces of interaction and communication, etc. Otherwise the broad distinction between the spaces of *practice* on the one hand, and those of

*research* on the other, would be useless as there would be no need to establish such a division of labour in the first place.

Regarding the model of practice-led research in the arts and its speculation of granting art practice a lead in the work of research, we might be cautious in making too direct a comparison with the practices of medicine or, for the matter, any other practice of a liberal profession in the spaces of activity of which an overarching notion of practice is perhaps most profoundly visible: medics, architects, lawyers, etc. They all practise, just as they all like to have a practice. And one can add to this list, even though not professionally regulated as such, the contemporary figure of the artist in all its modern shades.<sup>11</sup> The artist of avant-garde modernism, as brought into relief by modern art theory, is not regulated anymore like an academician used to be once with regards to subject treatment, style, tradition, etc. The *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* in Paris, inaugurated in 1648, is hailed as the forerunner of the modern art school, ensuring that its ‘students’ would not only ‘make’ but would do so with intellectual sensibility towards their subject matter, which is to say towards the idealized representations of the classes they were required to work with. The Academy did so by ensuring a discursive framework of ideological positions. But most crucially, the Academy in itself was the best device to ensure that its outputs achieve consistency. Today one would call its strategy a politics of regulation and professionalization. The practice of the academic artist, tightly networked and rigidly taught by his Academy, compares well with any other liberal profession whose procedures and standards are safeguarded by a guild, association or other types of professional bodies. If the quality of an academician’s output was largely guaranteed by a clearly identifiable institution that, at the same time, also helped secure the academician’s reputation, then the artist of today is unbound from such centralized quality assurance.

The postmodern artists of a globalizing twenty-first century, as we are all too upsettingly aware of, can do what they like and their practices are not subjected to a regulatory system of accreditation the way academicians used to be. The higher education system, from where most of today’s art professionals are emitted, awards the student of art various degrees and different shades of prestige depending on the esteem of the institution and the standing of its teachers. A university may have its own artistic lineage and intellectual outlook – both of which may impact on the student and possibly come to bear on her work *should* she develop a career as professional artist with all the conventional decorum (a representing gallery, a string of publications, international exposure, work in relevant collections, etc.) that is required to go with it. Nonetheless, this type of artist cannot guarantee you any standards with regards to her work because there is no single dominating framework that would be checking on the artist’s practice. All there is, we could argue in stressing our argument, is an artist and her practice. Sure, there are the appropriate spaces where art ought to happen and be received, as an institutional theory of art would have it.<sup>12</sup> And there is of course the critic to help us interpret the artist’s practice. Just as there are social conventions and historical representations exerting pressures on the artist’s practice. Yet that does not prevent the contemporary artist from doing, potentially, what and how she pleases to do. In this complex network of manifold institutional forces and individual players, overall resembling more an exploded view of the academician’s centralized world, we fall back on the artist’s ‘practice’ from where things are supposed to take their critical beginning. This

practice can be well cultivated in idiosyncrasy – the signature of the artist – at the same time as promising to be, to paraphrase Barthes, the artist’s ‘search of his “truth”’, forming ‘an order in itself [...] whose readability feeds on a sort of totality of the artist’.<sup>13</sup> With less romantic charge, however, practice can emerge as an intellectual enquiry and art as a discursive, or what one otherwise would call a *theoretical*, subject – attributes that enabled art practice to meet the criteria as an academic subject just as academia argued for integrating it into its subject spectrum.<sup>14</sup> And in the context of this practice, any sign-object is useful. Just as any sign-object can be qualified as art.<sup>15</sup> Anything.

That anything can become meaningful in this matrix of art practice is made possible by a configuration of an ‘artist’ who bears the marks of modern art scholarship and its theories of the avant-garde, and in particular that stinging mark of the Duchampian moment of 1917 that continues to be of so much concern to art historiography. Or rather, perhaps, art historiography cannot let go of this moment because it concerns the work of art scholarship itself and its institutions of evaluation. And it is thanks to the story of the avant-garde that we can no longer be certain about the whereabouts of art – not even art’s space *par excellence*, the museum, can convince us that what it displays is ‘art’, colouring our experience in, to borrow from Groys, a ‘phenomenology of suspicion’.<sup>16</sup> What we all know, however tentatively, is that we do not know where or what art might be. We could call this awkward mode – a certain uncertain certainty – a professionalized form of the historico-theoretical concept of avant-garde practice, which serves, by way of proxy, as a ghostly structure around which the mainstream of contemporary art practice and its teachings has found its purposeful bearings. Indeed, the critique of the avant-garde has been absorbed so well that it is now possible to rely on the name of Duchamp in advising us about the strategies of practice-led research.<sup>17</sup> Duchamp’s coming of age as an emblem of avant-gardism-cum-innovation is a reminder of historical change but also a reminder that what is now valued as ‘innovative’ in the practice of the avant-garde cannot be interpreted without its specific context. If Duchamp is supposed to be our guiding light in today’s art practice, then this name comes to represent the opposite of what made the message of the avant-garde so radical, a message grounded in the refusal of regulatory frameworks through which the so-called ‘academic art’ was suspended in aesthetic autonomy. In this particular socio-historical state of affairs – the constellation of a bourgeois society – the radical avant-garde artist might well not obey any longer to any professionally accepted framework but he does so, according to Bürger’s theory of art, to ‘demand that art become practical once again’. The practice of this artist breaks through the forms of academic aestheticism so as to critique thereby ‘the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content’.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the avant-garde stands for an overcoming or sublation of the separation of ‘art’ and ‘life’ so as to achieve an integration of art into the praxis of life.<sup>19</sup>

If there is something in the model of the avant-garde that can still be rescued for our times, then, I think, it is the need to look for the site of an *actuality* before one sets out to practice if practice is supposed to be a critical one, rendering impractical the formal notion of ‘practice-led’ as an a priori defined practising. Otherwise those cases made for practice which argue its importance to lie in the experiential will not move us closer to *praxis*, a term to which practice is obviously linked – in other words, to the phenomenological sphere of experiencing in the now, reminding us of practice as

residing inside the live act and as taking place in the performative event. Psychoanalysis has developed a particular sensitivity to these issues, since it relies on speech as a means of doing its work. Or, alternatively, one could say that psychoanalysis has chosen to pay attention to the embodied dimensions of speech, which inevitably will make them the subject of psychoanalytic research.<sup>20</sup> Lacan's definition of praxis is useful here; for him, praxis designates 'a concerted human action, whatever it may be, which places man in a position to treat the real by the symbolic'.<sup>21</sup> For Lacan, the symbolic would thus pass through the sphere of praxis so as to touch on the real. Leaving aside the distinctively Lacanian tone of being reigned by the symbolic, praxis would be the sphere of treatment – *but* with the symbolic. This helps us to conceptualize one possible axis that could be spanned between art practice and research so as to develop a more formally articulated purpose of their alliance. On the one hand, it shows us that for to work within the paradigms of research, the sphere of art must be still treated symbolically, which means historically, theoretically, empirically, etc. On the other hand, the space of art practice, *if* more formally conceived as a culturally specific conduit of creation, helps us relativize the hardness of scientific research by not expecting full symbolization. Still, the current academic fixation on the 'lead of practice' and its institutional formations provokes a rather different picture which, I suggest, should be read as a symptom of its own paradoxical doings: if the role of practice (in the widest sense) is an ethical one that allows *poiesis* to emerge within the work of research, as deconstruction continues to show us, then a privileging of 'practice' *per se* fails what it sets out to do: instead of relativizing the analytical hardness of science, it finds itself hung up engendering its own hardening.

In this light, then, one could also comprehend the motivations of people who hold out the torch of practice-led research by making claims for research-by-making-art as the 'enactment of thinking', thereby enlarging our notions of the spaces of thinking by emphasizing their embodied or performed dimensions.<sup>22</sup> But, a direct reply to this proposition must be that thinking the research conducted by art as the enactment of thinking is seriously essentializing. Should the artist-researcher really be better equipped for enacting thinking than another researcher? Surely, any researcher, from the archaeologist to the zoologist, enacts thinking in their individual practices. Every professional research field constructs, consciously or not, a set of practices for itself, which enables the researcher to work methodologically at the same time as defining the forms the research takes. And while there speaks nothing against conceiving practice-led research as, say, a phenomenologically or hermeneutically driven reflection on thinking and on the means such thinking employs – in this case the signifiers associated with art – it would be naïve to believe that such an expertise would be specific to the artist-researcher. Such an assumption of practice-led research leaves an unpleasant aftertaste of the privileged tropes of artistic individuality. After all, no research field will take practice lightly because it is good practice that sustains the work of the researcher – not to mention the financial risks that working without one would entail.

### **Uncoupling**

The networks invested in art will continue to develop art's own institutions just as they will be made to adapt to changing social and political circumstances. The

territorialization of largely individualistically conceived forms of art practice by the regulating protocols of research of a scientific culture, which we have been witnessing since the 1990s in the UK and beyond, ought to be seen within the politics and possibilities of an advanced capitalist system and an information-driven economy. As such, art's diverse producers have been given a structural overhaul in this transformation instigated by top-down policies. Academia's institutional outgrowths of so-called 'centres for practice-led research' and the establishment of practice-led research paths demarcate this particular historical moment.<sup>23</sup> Yet thinking that art practice could be simply cast into a research method of its own, in other words, a practice that does not consider the epistemological grounds upon which it rests, remains a frail enterprise if one is to take the institutional offer of research earnestly and wants to work with its critical frameworks – instead of practitioners who rest content with, and are limited to, an institutional critique that is served by fulfilling the diverting role of the semi-intellectual. Therefore, let us ask again: why should practice lead research? Research that is led by practice, if we take it to the letter, seeks to put the methods of a certain model of 'practice' first, accepting its regulatory framework as a method of research in itself. Advocates of practice-led research have taken pains to argue for 'practice' and its spearheading role, producing a remarkable array of incisively argued publications in support of their intended cause.<sup>24</sup> Yet while their campaigning work might well satisfy the acronymic spaces of RAE, AHRC and NESTA, presuming a practice as one of its own – as terminologically secured as it might be – will only satisfy itself if it does not put theoretically into question not just the need for practice but also the spaces that engender its existence.<sup>25</sup>

The result is a conflation of practices: of the researcher on the one side; of the professionally working artist on the other; and, between the two, of those posited by the theories and histories of art – all of which give rise to much confusion. It is a confusion that takes its roots precisely in the assumption that one could research (solely) by leading a practice of art. This is replicated in the conceptualization of most research programmes which demand that applicants be practitioners; or, at least, formulate some vision of a practice. This coming together of two roles of labour (researcher/artist) and their historically specific frameworks of operations is complex. It attains a particular complexity of an easily deceiving kind if the research project expects of itself to house the category of 'art' or to be inhabited by a an 'artist' – which should not be taken as a given. This manifests itself also in the not infrequently posed question whether work produced in a research project makes good art, a query that is thrown up, remarkably, by the teaching staff themselves.<sup>26</sup> But the question is badly put: it should not ask for art but it should ask why it asks for art. The answer to this, I suggest, directs us back to the institutional conception of practice-led research and its suggestive fixing of practice as a self-reliant corpus. However, a way out of this loop is to accept the difficult answer that a research project of this sort is not centred on making or addressing art but equally that there is no need to exclude that as a possibility either.<sup>27</sup> A research project concerns itself with a problem. It has to look to this problem and establish a critical context for it so as to see its complexity more fully. Unless the research concerns itself with the category of art, there is no need to be preoccupied with the issue of whether the work would interrogate or entertain a discourse with the ideational images of bourgeois art production. Again, the assumption that there is some 'art' coming out of all this research, an 'art' that is deemed to satisfy the criteria of prevailing modalities of art in a particular time and place, reveals itself as a potential red-herring for the kind of critical work that does

not want to abstain from engaging actively – as a *practice* – with contemporary issues in the wider fields of the humanities as well as with their diversifying means of research production and representation which has enabled us to work beyond the domain of words and the conventions of academic writing styles – a diversification that, arguably, has also been stimulated by taking a closer look at the practices of art. What this attests to, then, is a new mode of contemporary practice that is in the process of peeling itself out of the institutions and histories of art, but which *no* longer pursues its work within the paradigms of art or artist.

If we assume, for apparent reasons perhaps, that in order to do research in the academic subject of art one practises art, then what I propose will stand as a contradiction by not taking at face value the formula that art practice leads research. Or, again, as I argued above, this equation is only sensible if it poses the problem of art and its practice (its institutions, ethics, histories, etc.), examining through its means the conditions and qualities of its self – a field of research that is, by the way, not exclusive to art practice and is equally carried out, albeit with different means, in art history, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. Still, this set of problems must be considered within the wider historical development of post-war art practices and their repertoire of art forms variously framed by art historians and artists themselves, which have moved art from being a formal, aesthetic object of autonomy that is the subject of evaluation in the space of art criticism and under the discerning eye of the figure of the critic – rendered so brilliantly by Greenberg – to analytically and discursively sustained practices of art that have shifted our focus from aesthetic contemplation to an institutional critique of art concerned with art's values, functions and spaces. The way we largely understand and teach art today derives its critical vigour from this legacy that enabled the 'making of art' to become an intellectual practice as well as an academic subject. At the same time, the aesthetic autonomy of the art object has been worn out, although I have no illusions about it simultaneously living on. Inextricably related to this historical development is a refiguring of the professions and the softening of their profiles so that we do no longer have to think of the artist as running steadily side by side an art practice, let alone coincide with it, as a more humanist outlook might encourage us to think. We can broadly associate this with the postmodern moment that took issue with art's institutions by putting forth a critique engendered in the very practice of art and its spaces. It seems, practice-led research would anticipate doing so too if it wants to entertain critical work with 'art' and 'research' through 'practice'. However, we should not forget that the practices of 'institutional critique' were critically effective *because* of their specific historical context. The continuation of such practices without an appreciation of the dialectics that nourished art's critical productivity leads us into the well-oiled art machine of what Rainer Rochlitz aptly called the art of 'subversion and subsidy'.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the materials sustaining a critical practice of intellectual enquiry acting in and upon contemporaneity should be thought in the light of this historical trajectory, which Irit Rogoff has convincingly outlined as having moved from the appraising work of *criticism* and its theories of art to the self-consciously exerted *critique* directed to its own institutions to a space she calls *criticality*: a space wherein work unfolds in the performative moment of meaning 'taking place' and which, at the same time, is critically productive precisely because, knowing that our subjectivities constitute themselves *in* difference, such a practice avails itself of the possibility of not predetermining its locus or mode of operation.<sup>29</sup> This, however, entails accepting

that what is at stake in practice is not inherently an occupation with 'art' but finding the spaces for a performing of critical practice for which neither the subject nor its site can be taken as an already given. This is also what the critic Craig Owens proposed already in 1987: 'A radical critical practice presumably would work through whatever channels are available both within and without the specific institutions and align itself with the position that these other practices represent vis-à-vis them'.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys, 'First Roundtable', in *The State of Art Criticism*, ed. James Elkins and Michael Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp.129-79 (p.162).

<sup>2</sup> Irit Rogoff, 'What is a Theorist?' [2004], in *The State of Art Criticism*, ed. James Elkins and Michael Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp.97-109 (p.97).

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres Then, and Now* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.127.

<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, the determined formalization of 'practice' is an issue of particular visibility in the landscapes of UK academia where 'practice' has come to be employed as a shielding term through which to substantiate the viability of doing research through practising art. It is equally palpable in the proclivity of academic members to distinguish their research project as 'practice-led' as if practice could be packaged into a subject in its own right. This should be seen as a despairing attempt to meet the terms of the educational reforms that turned art colleges into research-active institutions, whereby artist-academics offers us now their expertise in 'practice'. For a to the point overview of the evolution of art education in post-war England and its entry into Higher Education, see Charles Harrison's and Fred Orton's section 'The Modernization of English Art', in *A Provisional History of Art & Language* (Paris: Fabre, 1982), pp.5-13.

<sup>5</sup> For a poststructuralist elaboration on a 'practising of theory', see Irit Rogoff's essay 'What is a Theorist?', cited above, and Martin McQuillan, 'Karl Marx and the Philosopher's Stone, or, On Theory and Practice', in *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy*, ed. Martin McQuillan (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), pp.235-53.

<sup>6</sup> On the significance of 'practice' for the work of deconstruction – a recurring concern in most of Derrida's writings – and often paralleled by a notion of 'pathway' or 'Bahnung', see Jacques Derrida, 'The Almost Nothing of the Unpresentable' [1982], in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp.78-88; and 'I Have a Taste for the Secret', in *A Taste for the Secret*, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp.1-92.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). For an expansion on Derridian deconstruction in the light of the format of 'practice-led research', see James Williams, 'Poststructuralism, Theory and Practice', in *Reflections on Creativity: Exploring the Role of Theory in Creative Practices*, ed. Hamid van Koten (Dundee: Duncan of Jordanstone College, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> A useful collection of essays indexing the moment of Theory's rise in art education is Jody Berland, Will Straw, David Thomas, eds., *Theory Rules: Art as Theory/Theory*

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and Art (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). Of relevance is also John Tagg and Joanne Lukitsh, 'Practising Theories', in John Tagg, *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1992), pp.62-96.

<sup>9</sup> This applies to 'research' as well as 'art'. The formats of research, despite their striving for scientific objectivity and disseminatory clarity, are not immune to subjective colouring, historical change or administrative standardization. Research has its own practices – our poststructuralist selves will remind us of this in case we think we could escape this difficulty. Nonetheless, that art practice is a historically determined concept is happily swept under the carpet in the name of a scientific model of research wherein practice risks becoming fossilized. For an overview on the evolution of the PhD system in the UK, see Renate Simpson, *How the PhD came to Britain: A Century of Struggle for Postgraduate Education* (Guildford: Society for Research into Higher Education, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> The project of the social history of art has offered a momentous critique of art history's writing of the artist as being a part of the wider ideological investments that carry both the figure of the artist and meanings of art. I let Pollock's words stand in for this critical stance: 'The attempt to place the artist as a representative of a class outlook registers the need to recognize point of view and position in class society as a determination of the production of art'. However, I would argue that while such a critique unravels the ideologies that hold art in its place within a society's network of production – including the productions of art history – we cannot but take the artist as a point of accentuated reference, which entails the reinstallation of an, albeit altered, artist. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* [1988] (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p.39.

<sup>11</sup> Victor Burgin provides an incisive delineation of modernism's conception of the figure of the 'artist' – and its postmodern remnants – alongside the historical proliferation of the liberal professions. See Victor Burgin, 'The End of Art Theory', in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Houndmills: Macmillan Education, 1986), pp.140-204.

<sup>12</sup> As with regards to the 'limitations' of an institutional approach to the theorization of art, Richard Wollheim's differentiating account, although specifically dealing with the tradition of painting, can be our guiding point here: 'Another way of putting the [institutional] theory is to say that for a painting to be a work of art the representatives of the art-world must recognize it to be one: and with the theory put this way, the trick is to grasp how we are supposed to understand "recognition". What "recognition" does not mean in this context is that, before the representatives of the art-world appear on the scene, the painting already is a work of art and this fact about it leads them, being so knowledgeable or so discriminating or both, to see it, and think of it, as one. On the contrary: what the theory tells us is that, first, the representatives of the art-world must think of the painting as a work of art, and then, in consequence of this fact – this fact about them – the painting becomes a work of art. [...] For what the theory manifestly does is that, by laying upon them legendary powers, it grossly enlarges the self-esteem of those tempted to think of themselves as representatives of the art-world. Painters make paintings, but it takes a representative of the art-world to make a work of art'. Richard Wollheim, 'What the Artist does', in *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp.13-42 (p.14).

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Musica Practica' [1970], in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp.149-54 (p.151).

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<sup>14</sup> Declarations attesting to this educational shift in support of an academic place for the subject of art include: Herbert Read, 'The Place of Art in a University' [1931], in *Education Through Art* (London: Faber, 1958), pp.256-64; Harold Rosenberg, 'Educating Artists', in *The De-definition of Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp.39-48.

<sup>15</sup> I have dealt with this issue in my essay 'How to use Parasites: Notes on Contemporary Art, Curating and the Work of the Context', *parallax* 14:4 (2008), pp.30-41.

<sup>16</sup> Boris Groys, *Unter Verdacht: Eine Phänomenologie der Medien* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> I allude to a paper on practice-led research issued by the Arts and Humanities Research Council where Duchamp's legacy features as a point of reference in the opening epigraph. Chris Rust, Judith Mottram, Jeremy Till, 'AHRC Research Review. Practice-Led Research in Art, Design and Architecture' (2007), p.4. <[http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/About/Policy/Documents/Practice-Led\\_Review\\_Nov07.pdf](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/About/Policy/Documents/Practice-Led_Review_Nov07.pdf)> [20/05/2009].

<sup>18</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1974], trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.49.

<sup>19</sup> While the avant-garde's aim of integrating art into the praxis of life entails that the aesthetically secured autonomy of art will be overcome, we also can no longer assume art's purpose in this convergence of art and life. As Bürger writes: 'In Aestheticism, the social functionlessness of art becomes manifest. The avant-gardiste artists counter such functionlessness not by an art that would have consequences within the existing society, but rather by the principle of the sublation of art in the praxis of life. But such a conception makes it impossible to define the intended purpose of art. For an art that has been integrated into the praxis of life, not even the absence of a social purpose can be indicated, as was still possible in Aestheticism. When art and the praxis of life are one, when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art's purpose can no longer be discovered, because the existence of two distinct spheres (art and the praxis of life) that is constitutive of the concept of purpose or intended use has come to an end'. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.50.

<sup>20</sup> Psychoanalysis is an interesting case with regards to its organization as practice. While fiercely regulated vis-à-vis the formats of its therapeutic work (lengths and number of sessions, for example) and its divisions into schools and associations, the practising of psychoanalysis between the analyst and the analysand takes place *in practice* – in the dialogical spaces of speech and the animations of free association as they subjectively unfold in a session. However, even as a session provides fresh 'material' for research, both through its transference traces on the analyst and the newly accumulated chain of signifiers, the analyst works in accordance with already approved and 'tested' protocols of analysis, which he ought to respect. As such, the psychoanalyst's practice is, like the general practitioner's, also one of applying already existing knowledge so as to have the skills of interpretation, and does not, just by itself, generate new knowledge. To do so, the session needs to be turned into a clinical study and subjected, for instance, to comparative analysis itself.

<sup>21</sup> Lacan makes it clear that he is not really interested in the imaginary by adding: 'The fact that in doing so he encounters the imaginary to a greater or lesser degree is only of secondary importance here'. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* [1973], ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), p.6.

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<sup>22</sup> Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge, 'The Enactment of Thinking: Creative Practice Research Degrees', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2:1/2 (2002), pp.5-11.

<sup>23</sup> In 2009, there exist for example: 'Centre for Practice as Research in the Arts', University of Chester; 'Centre for Practice-led Research in the Arts', University of Leeds; 'Centre for Research into Practice', University of Hertfordshire; 'The Centre for Practice-led Research in the Arts', University of Northampton; 'Practice-led Research – Centre for Research and Development', University of Brighton.

<sup>24</sup> In designating art practice as research various terms have been created, whereby I find 'artistic research' the least helpful with its suggestive use of 'artistic'. Publications that engage with institutional debates around the structures of doctoral programmes, the 'new' professionalization of the 'artist' and the viability of assessing 'artistic' work within the paradigms of research include: Satu Kiljunen and Mika Hannula, eds., *Artistic Research* (Helsinki: Academy of Fine Arts, 2002); Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager, eds., *Artistic Research* (Amsterdam: Lier en Boog, 2004); Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practice* (Helsinki and Gothenburg: Academy of Fine Arts and University of Gothenburg, 2005); Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge, eds., *Thinking through Art: Reflections on Art as Research* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005); James Elkins, ed., *Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art* (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> These are the acronyms of three key organizations, channelling funding and evaluating research in UK higher education: Research Assessment Exercise (RAE); Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC); National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA).

<sup>26</sup> This conflation of the researcher and the professionally working artist manifests itself in the doubts whether 'research art' makes 'good art', voiced for example by the academically teaching artist Phyllida Barlow who states in an interview: 'A PhD does not mean better art. In fact, it is often the opposite'. This nagging quest by artist-academics whether art has happened in the space of research reproduces thereby art's ideational qualities of aesthetic autonomy and transhistorical framing. Phyllida Barlow and Mark Godfrey, 'Learning Experience', *Frieze* 101 (September 2006), pp.169-73.

<sup>27</sup> Another explanation for this conflation would be to say that universities have not made up their mind whether the subject of art should be a vocational subject that produces professional artists or whether it should be a humanities-oriented subject that teaches critical thinking. This would be appallingly reactionary if interpreted as diktat for a stringent segregation into two modes but not so if we see it as a problem of *articulation*.

<sup>28</sup> Rainer Rochlitz, *Subversion and Subsidy: Contemporary Art and Aesthetics* [1994], trans. Dafydd Roberts (Greenford: Seagull, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> See Irit Rogoff, 'Academy as Potentiality', in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, ed. Angelika Nollert, Irit Rogoff, Bart de Baere, et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006), pp.13-20.

<sup>30</sup> Craig Owens and Anders Stephanson, 'Interview with Craig Owens' [1987], in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp.298-315 (p.311).

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