

UNFINISHABLE SKETCH OF  
'AN UNKNOWN OBJECT IN 4 D':  
SCENES OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH  
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0000 Many of us must feel we've been doing 'artistic research' for years—without quite calling it that. Like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain stumbling over the fact he was indeed speaking prose all along, we too are taken by surprise. Fuss over the subject's 'legitimacy' rumbles on. But it has not stopped doctoral programmes in visual art practice being steadily constituted all over. Whatever we feel about this, we cannot wriggle out of unpacking what we mean by research in contemporary visual art practices and art education.

0001 In everyday parlance, 'art research' is a blanket term taking in almost all in its path: processes of making artwork; art practices that probe and test experience; thinking-doing as visual art practices vis à vis other knowledge systems; modes of thinking through the visual that are with, athwart, beyond academic methods. This apparent mishmash is a scene of unwieldy, unorganized possibilities—something we should hang onto to avoid defining artistic research simply along institutional academic lines. This means focus on the singularity of how art practice-theory-history and other 'disciplines' intersect and coalesce in individual projects. As we cannot quite know beforehand what form this will take—each instance is different and unpredictable—we have to be wary about attempts to regulate artistic research, to knock it into shape of the academic disciplines, to make it a lookalike of their logic and architecture. What matters today is its 'difference'—the distinctive modalities of its knowledge production.

0002 A side step: Aby Warburg had experimented with strategies of looking and with interpretative instruments at odds with the sober criteria of academic methodology. They were 'scrambled, disordering' modes not unrelated to Dada—associative, cognitive capacitors perhaps best summed up in the phrase 'critique of pure unreason'. Giorgio Agamben re-affirms this 'nameless science'—the expanded zone of art history/theory/related visual practices and studies. We should see it as a scene without ready-made object of study or technique. But artistic research is not just an unnamed activity—as though we already know what it is but are just fum-

bling around for the right label. It is, in Samuel Beckett's word, more of an 'unnameable' because it has to invent its own methods each time rather than parrot pre-given ones. Mapping itself during take-off, it cannot be spelled out in advance of the processes of its making.

0003 Artistic research is 'work in progress' where the echo-word 'progress' connotes succession, sequence, possible fulfillment. Joyce's twister 'prograss' implies that some final, full bulk of the project is never quite attained, we are always at a 'preparatory' stage just short of its total gross state. The job at hand cannot be entirely scripted in advance—a vital part of artistic research today. Its procedures are 'unsquarable' with the more exactly chartered, pegged research protocols prevalent in the institutional academic sphere.

0004 The following on-going projects with students and participants are my various stabs at artistic research at the confluence of theory/practice/history spanning several years:

1. Monkeydoodle. 1994–1997. Goldsmiths College, London. A stretch of research covering theory/practice/curatorial activity. The period had seen the rise of critical theory in the British Art Schools—deconstructive analyses of visual art practices and discourse. Monkeydoodle sought to explore this at its limits—to probe the theoretical/textual/verbal through the visual while continuing the critique of the visual. (Sarat Maharaj. Monkeydoodle. *Art Journal*. Vol.56. 1997)

2. Xeno-sonics. 1998–2000. Goldsmiths and Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht. Exploring through sound-image constructions how the visual is 'shot through' with the sonic. Also, sound as a probe for the visual. It looks at everyday image-sound coalescences, visual-sonic experience and the significance of 'noise' in the sound economy – its 'outsider, foreign, unknown, other' connotations. (Sarat Maharaj & Goldsmiths MA group. *Mutations*. Arc e Reve. Bordeaux. 2001-02 and *T& N Probe* Vol 9 .2001 Japan)

3. Xeno-epistemics. 2000-02. Humboldt University, Berlin. Thinking Documenta & Doing Documenta examines modalities of knowing 'the other' and 'other ways of knowing—visual art practice as a form of knowledge production and its ethics (Xeno-epistemics: makeshift kit for sounding visual art as knowledge production and the retinal regimes: Documenta XI Platform 5. 2002. pp.71-84). In more traditional lingo, epistemological studies. Also, how visual art practices and performances interact with what

Francisco Varela called the triple braid of phenomenology, neuroscience /brain studies and cognition/consciousness studies – ‘Art/Science’ interaction proposed for the ‘Ideas Lab’, Malmö Art Akademie /Lund University, Sweden.

0005 It is sticky business bandying about terms like ‘Art/Science’ and ‘artistic research’. These are all-gobbling, monolithic categories perhaps best put in ‘brackets’. Few scientists would feel at ease with our use of equivalent catchall terms to describe their activities. Yet, imagining we are taking our cue from ‘Science’—our touchstone for rigour, truth, systematic procedure—we persist with references to ‘Art’ and ‘artistic research’ as if its one sweeping thing. It is sobering to recall that the notion of a ‘unitary’ scientific method had been vigorously debated in 20-century philosophy of science. Its upshot was to show that diverse, often crosshatched practices, incompatible models and criteria jostled under the umbrella ‘Science’. Karl Popper had come to set up ‘scientific thought’ or ‘critical rationalism’ as some single agenda, a cumulative narrative of progress and truth. At times it felt like an unwitting version of the very historicist iron laws he was knocking. As his criteria become tighter, more punishing, the joke was that little actual scientific activity could actually happen if they were strictly adhered to. By paring things down to examinable ‘research programmes’, Imre Lakatos, ushered the subject towards more piecemeal, less totalizing consideration. Lyotard’s critique of meta-narratives is a not dissimilar corrective that unnerves the tendency towards one-track drives of grand categories like ‘Art/Science’ – cautionary tales for those chasing after a single ‘right’ method for a ‘unified thing’ called ‘artistic research’.

0006 From the ‘Popper et al’ spat we can perhaps see ‘scientific method’ in more differentiated, less absolutist ways – as enterprise that throws up propositions, rules and shifting models that are subject to constant evaluating, tinkering, chucking out. This is at odds with our everyday, larger-than-life pop-myth of the fixed poles of ‘Science/Art’ in capital letters. For this reason, Duchamp—inspired most likely by Henri Poincaré’s reconnoitre of scientific conventionalism versus nominalism – mooted a ‘pictorial nominalism’ for plumbing the category ‘Art’, for breaking out of its limits and for stripping it bare of worn-out definitions. What if after each ‘art event’ there was no residual memory of it? By wiping the slate clear of habit-encrusted assumptions about ‘Art,’ we would have to cook it up afresh each time. A nominalist dose such as this keeps ‘artistic research’ open as an ‘unknown’. Also, as globalizing forces churn up a spread of cultural ele-

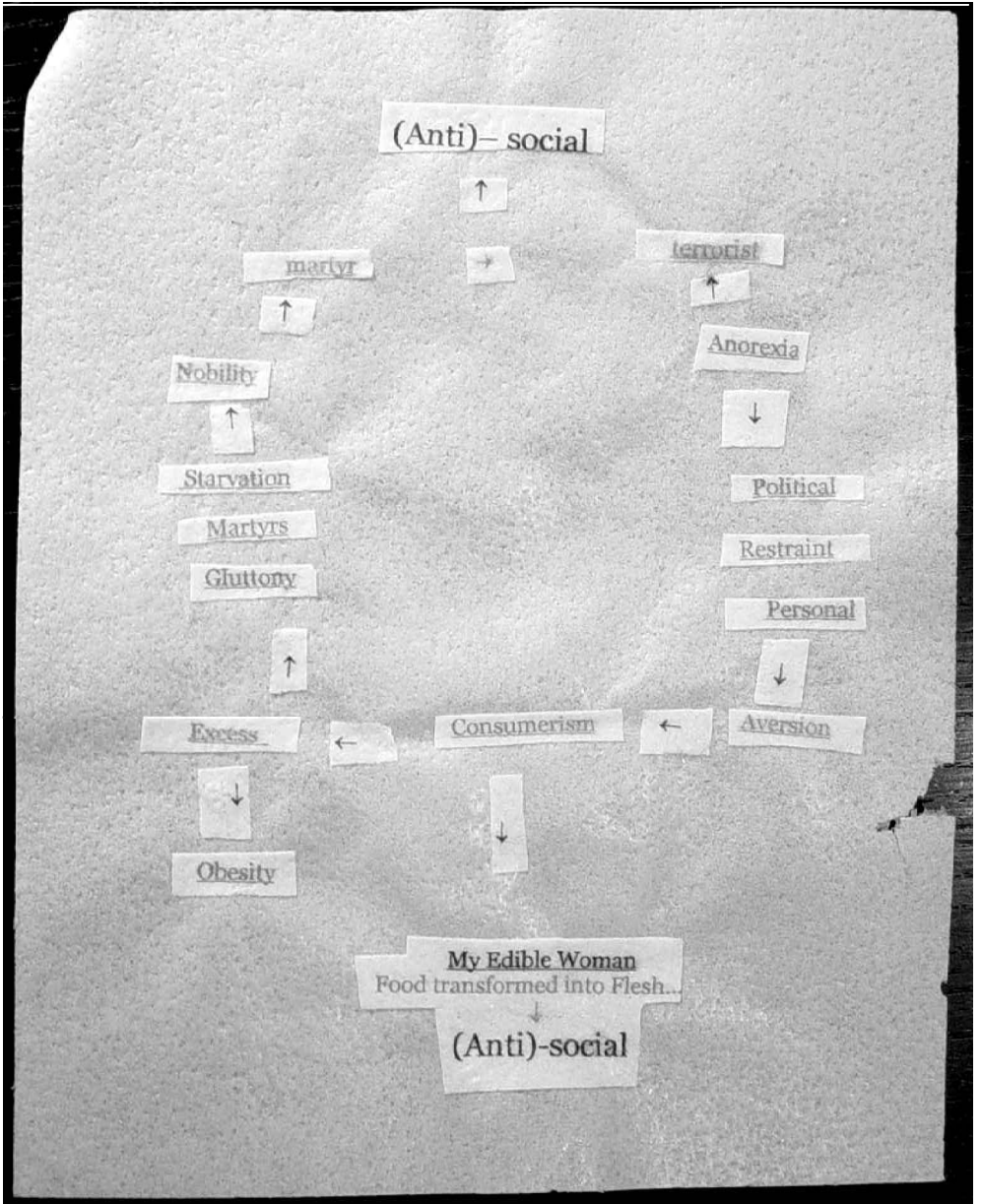
ments and experiences, a scene of indeterminacy unfurls where we are hard put to decide ahead what ‘Art’ should look like to count as ‘Art’.

0007 During the 1990s debates on the doctorate Ute Meta Bauer was instituting in Vienna and, earlier on, Susan Hiller in Ulster—I had asked “what is artistic research’s ‘object of study’, how to identify it?” The formulation suggested a version of the ‘classic Enlightenment episteme’ or Kantian 3D conceptual system. It encouraged some to feel that ‘Art’ had a clear-cut, designated patch squeezed in between other well-thumbed epistemological territories and objects – ‘reason’ and ‘ethics’. ‘Art research’ would therefore ‘know its place’ even before its got going. It would simply plug into the 3 D conceptual system at hand. The snapshot is of an over-awed late-comer creeping through the university portals to take up an assigned place dutifully for processing established bodies of data and knowledge.

0008 Against this, it is better grasped as a contraption for generating knowledge – not simply for transmitting already-made information of a known ‘object of study’. It is roughly modeled on the artist’s workspace—an ‘indeterminate’ zone not articulated by rigid 3D coordinates. It is a scene of maceration— a mixing of scraps of percept, feeling and concept, subjectivity, affect and object, without knowing what might happen. To call this ‘bricolage or assemblage’ is no more than a short-life nickname for what should remain nameless.

0009 Where art research is modeled exclusively on the 3D conceptual system, it is fenced in by what other disciplines mainly do. Hence the charge it is trying to ape philosophy or sociology or anthropology, at second-hand and without their expertise or internal rigour. Its ‘models’ more easily spring from inside art practice—from its singular think-feel-know modes for sussing the world. To assume it will in due course establish its credentials vis-à-vis the 3D academic corpus is to cast it as ‘cap in hand’ subordinate. It does grapple with this corpus, its canons and methodologies. But it also cuts across them, shreds them, tips them overboard—a *detournement*, a *topsy-turvy* dynamic for producing a kind of knowledge it alone can muster.

0010 As a *detournement* of the 3 D academic corpus, art research has not a little in common with Paul Feyerabend’s views on science as an ‘anarchic enterprise’ –for which he tellingly used the shorthand ‘Dadaist epistemology’. Targeting Popper’s strangulating criteria, he was game for a methodological mishmash: ironic, experimental strategies, Brechtian V-effects, ludic modes, reversible states, ‘contradiction’, non-binary, nonlinear asso-



ciations, paradoxes. He saw these exploratory, asystematic modes as truer to how ‘scientific inquiry and research’ happens than its stereotype as ‘system-locked, hard-hat’ procedure.

0011 In his swap-over, ‘Science’ is prodded into looking at approaches taken by ‘Art’. This reverses the normal demand that ‘artistic research’ can only be ‘proper’ if it mimes hard-nosed scientific method. Here ‘Dada’ flags up key elements of some contemporary art practices – a capacity to throw up an indefinite series of ‘self-raising-self-erasing’ models. Each vaporizes as soon as it is rigged out. This flies in the face of positivist notions of pre-given norms to which practice has to conform. It is a factor in today’s extra-rapid turnover of art events, works and projects – though, this is no less attributable to the insatiable consumerist appetite for ever-more art-ware. The desire to make art again and again does elicit the moan that “there is too much art and art research, too many artists who should really become practical designers.” Some academies have toed the line. But this fails to recognize that creativity goes with a volcanic overturning, de-constructing, ‘self-de-Kanting’ where art practice becomes a ceaseless test and try-out. ‘Canonicals’ such as Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso and Duchamp amongst others described their practice more or less as ‘research and experiment’. In the postwar space this becomes intrinsic to art practices themselves so that today ‘research’ is the self-reflexive, self-dismantling’ 4th dimension ‘practice’ cannot shake off.

0012 A telegraphic account of factors in the scene of Xeno-epistemics detailed elsewhere: (Sarat Maharaj: *Avidya: Non-Knowledge Production in the scene of Visual arts Practice in Education. Information. Entertainment.* ed. Ute Meta Bauer. Vienna 2001)

- i. Visual art as knowledge production has to be distinguished from not only ‘knowledge transfer’ but also from the ‘knowledge economy’ – media-communication circuits, info-infrastructures that are tied up with intensive copyright, patent and data control right down to genetic codes (Information Feudalism). From Seattle to Göteborg and Cancun, global protests relate not only to ‘agri-labor’ but also to ‘immaterial labour’ – knowledge production and how it is shaping and carving up the world.
- ii. Internal developments in visual arts – in practice, curating, criticism, advertising and marketing – have been accompanied by heightened professionalization and managerialism now experienced as an ‘octopus’ institutional grip. Visual arts ‘doctoral studies’ is both in tune with this development – the art-culture industry has itself become the ‘indispensable ambient’ of ‘material’ production – and it is a refuge from it. It is part of the

drive towards ‘professionalization’ and a recoil from it – with the potential for opening up reflexive spaces that ‘delay’ investment simply in churning out art-culture industry wares.

iii. We tend to see PhD’s in music as more justified than those in ‘visual arts’ because it is felt music remains more of a ‘discipline’ with a recognizable ‘object of study’—sonic systems and languages’. From Handel and Bach to Schönberg and Boulez, from ‘topsy-turvy sound orders’, atonal, asystemic, random explorations to today’s sonic shredders, the argument goes that they ‘make sense’ within the frame of music’s ‘object’— either elaborating or pulping it. Equivalent ‘disciplinary boundaries or limits’ in visual art now are hardly discernable or simply not applicable. This raises the issue: What exactly is today’s Art School all about, what is taught/learned there? How to assess this? A re-evaluation is essential as the academies have become less and less about sustained ‘training/teaching’ by ‘masters’ in the framework of a ‘discipline’. This is in contrast to their classical heyday. As a ‘friendship’ model of learning/teaching evolves, it is at odds with the ‘authorities, subject areas and prescribed objects of study’. Artistic research looms into view as an unscripted zone where engineering think-know-feel capacitors and transformers for oneself becomes the thrust of practice.

iv. The art school and the art gallery-museum circuits add up to a star system in which the former is increasingly whittled down to a clearinghouse for the next crop of celebrities. In early 1990s Goldsmiths, the pressure to groom for the market and to gear up for visibility was almost palpable (New Contemporaries. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Gillian Wearing, Sarat Maharaj. 1997). However, credit is due to smart-thinking players of the time who did manage to keep this in check. Today the star league figures almost as the *raison d’être* of art schooling. Whatever its thrills and rewards it marks a constricted view of ‘creativity’. It has distorting effects on art education. All practitioners are free to aspire to becoming ‘celebrity darlings’. But how many do achieve this goal— every five years, out of 140 students perhaps 5 or 10? Has the art school nothing to do with thinking-creativity of the rest? It seems they are consigned to oblivion simply because they cannot clamber up the star ladder. Are they ‘losers’ or are they perhaps into something different? An expanded view of creativity is key to keeping art practice-research open to dimensions of the unknown.

0013 Visual art as knowledge production is about engaging with ‘difference and the unknown’ in both ‘artistic’ and ‘social-political’ terms. The latter concerns ‘writing the foreign’ or xenography. It touches on the ‘other, outsider, non-citizen—named asylum seeker, refugee, illegal, sans

papier, clandestini, detainee, deportee – who is increasingly now an object of xenophobia. Getting to know ‘the other’ is an ethical tussle: how to cope with the ‘other’s difference’ without imposing our epistemic frame? For this, we have to come up with ‘other’ think-feel know equipment—a quest in Duchamp’s paradox: ‘Can one make a work of art that is not of Art?’ It proposes a ‘delay’, a holding back from ‘known’ genres, keeping them at bay – circumventing known forms that reduce ‘difference’ to ‘sameness’. The ‘ready-made’, now commonplace, eventuated as a vehicle for the ‘unknown’, for articulating what ‘ordinary’ genres shut off. For Bergson, ‘readymade’ signaled the mechanical, repetitive, all-too-known—as opposed to dimensions of unpredictable possibility, the virtual. In a flip-over, Duchamp floated the idea of the ‘readymade’ as a vehicle for raiding the unknown – ‘the mechanical’ itself becomes a medium for breaking out of auto-pilot artistic experience into ‘other’ conceptual spaces. Duchamp interacts with Bergson— not as academic commentary but researcher-practitioner— turning his ideas and terms upside down, fleshing them out as concrete images. Here knowledge production is about ‘epistemological contraptions’ such as the ‘readymade’—pervaded by a sense of the ironic, makeshift, DIY— improbable contrivances rigged up for the nonce without ‘proper’ tools or the ‘right’ parts.

0014 By knowledge production I do not mean something conceived—Cartesian fashion—as ‘strictly’ mental but as spasms and episodes of the mind-body continuum. Joyce’s ‘false-meaning’ etymological chain dramatizes the point:

Gyana

Gnosis – gnoseology

Knowledge

Visible-audible-noseable-edible.

The Sanskrit word ‘Gyana’ or ‘Knowledge’ retains the link with the physical through ‘gyana-yoga’ practices. With ‘Gnosis’, knowledge is inflected as a more hived-off, mental affair— something Joyce trips up with his pun on ‘nose’: ‘knowing’ takes place through the smell-organ and olfactory sensation, ‘lowest’ of the faculties. ‘Knowing via the nose’ cuts across Cartesian mind/body divisions and dualisms. With brain muscle-mind circuits, Joyce telescopes eye-ear-mouth in a single digestive conveyer belt. These condense in Nicki Lees’s Monkeydoodle project (2000)—literally a rice paper eatable essay—studies in knowing through the experience of the



hunger artists of the Northern Ireland Troubles and anorexia/ bulimia. To see artistic research as ‘embodied’ knowledge is to differentiate it from conceptual-speculative-computational circuits that tend to be seen as self-enclosed and detached from motor-sensory-somatic processes. (Francisco Varela et al. *The Embodied Mind*. 2000). From this perspective, art practice as ‘research’ seems well placed to venture beyond the ‘mentalist dimensions’ in which 3D knowledge systems tend to be locked.

0015 A common doubt expressed about the ‘practice-based’ researcher is whether they are at all equipped for ‘competent’ reading. We should scotch this by distinguishing between reading as ‘mapping’—a process that spawns a world— as against ‘tracing’— copying a given world-text. But these processes can also be intertwined. The Humboldt/ Malmö classes (2001-2002) centred on a two-track-reading of the Rhizome section of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari.1980). At times, a deliberate back to front reading, with participants starting off not with the essay but with its battery of footnotes —that stamp of scholarship, bibliofetish or name-dropping. By reading ‘edgeways’ across the essay’s main body, a new text is tailored either to ‘fit’ the footnotes or to become meta-commentary on them. Over the duration of the readings, participants would paste annotations, diagrams, sketches, doodles on an unfurling roll of paper across the Test Site wall (Roseuum. Malmö 2002). An image of worker-students in the Pergamon as in Peter Weiss’s ‘Aesthetics of Resistance’ (1972) – itself echoed in Andreas Siekmann’s ‘Die Krumme Pranke’ (2000)? These ‘sideways’ readings, all-over tracking, are unlike the reading regimes of classic scholarship tied to step-by-step explication. The idea was to trigger ‘loose-footed’ soundings. Artists are generally suspected of this kind of crazy-paving reading that makes them ‘dodgy’ from the ‘doctoral’ point of view. (On ‘reading’ also see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Death of a Discipline*. 2003).

David Hatcher, a Malmö participant, chased up Footnote 21— excavating Joëlle de La Casinière’s *Absolument Nécessaire* (Minuit.Paris.1973) and its ‘nomadic’ logic as cited by Deleuze/Guattari. He unearthed this somewhat overlooked inspiration of ‘Rhizome’, hunting down the artist to her boathouse lair on the Belgium river-networks. She would eventually contribute to a Test Site event (Roseuum. Malmö 2003). On the one hand, his detective work on ‘Footnote 21’ is a ‘tracing’ that pushes ‘scholarship’ to the extreme, parodic lengths by finding the ‘missing’ flesh and blood ‘source of sources’ herself. On the other, it is a mapping of the Rhizome chapter from which fresh events-thinking-publications-situations spill out. (David Hatcher& Astrid Mania. 2003-04).



*'London is now even more PC' street scene . PJ Mayers. 2003*

0016 The academic's suspicion that the artist's reading is 'wobbly' and their grasp of philosophical foundations 'shaky' should be turned against itself. Could it be the artist's 'lack of competency' is index of quite another think-read-map – more in tune with 'non-knowledge'? To name the later, I have used the ancient Sanskrit term Avidya. Its opposite, Vidya (to see-know) gives us the Latin cousin 'video'. By adding 'A' to vidya – Avidya– signals not just its polar opposite 'ignorance – its closer to the privative than to negation. It expresses the middle term as in moral<amoral>immoral or typical<atypical>untypical– the 'neutral gear' of knowing that is neither that of the 3D disciplines nor its conventional opposite 'ignorance'. Perhaps something approximating 'crazy wisdom'? Avidya stands for that in-between space explored by a long line from Sankara backwards to the Buddha's celebrated description by non-affirmation–'Neti, Neti, Neti'. The 'no, neither, nor' oscillations in Avidya 'delay' polar thinking involved in 'knowing /not-knowing'. Let's note this as the rough frame for John Cage's 'sonic research'– his 'in-between' noise-sound-silence constructions.

0017 To call art research/visual art 'knowledge production' by its apparent opposite term 'Avidya' or 'non-knowledge' might seem slightly perverse. But it is in the spirit of Duchamp's provocation 'a work of art that isn't'. It is about adopting the pejorative to probe the 'excluded'. Feyerabend touched on this when, on the publication of his translation of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, he realized that something had disappeared and gone quite dead in print. With Wittgenstein's aphoristic, quasi-sutra form, was 'knowledge' to be found literally in the lines or words or fitfully in the gaps, hairline fractures, cracks between them–in 'non-knowledge' spaces?

0018 To speak of Avidya as the 'other, the unknown' dimension of knowledge is perhaps to risk seeing it less for its own sake than as the latter's 'shadow' and 'ghostly spume'. But 'non-knowledge' it pitted against global standardization induced by the knowledge economy because it speaks of difference, multiplicity, resistant alternatives. As globalizing drives try to mould the 'other' in 'our' image, today there seem to be few qualms about using armed force to pound the 'foreign' into the 'familiar'– an intensifying crisis of management of difference. The 'other' becomes little more than an object of pacification: Pax Americana. Images of the Islamic world as the 'terror-other' in Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (2000): recasting Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* (1817) for our time by Bernard Lewis (*The New Yorker*.19 November 2001): Pim Fortuyn's De

Islamisering van Onze Cultuur (Karakter Uitgevers B.V. 2001) – signpost the pressure to ‘become like us or be consigned to the Axis of Evil. This ties in with the xenophobic low-growl ‘demand for assimilation’ of the ‘internal other and unknown’ across Europe and beyond. Let Shakespeare’s ‘something is rotten in the state of Denmark’ encapsulate these tendencies that are no less applicable to The Netherlands and Norway and other classic ‘democracies of tolerance’. Against the everyday crisis of the management of difference, issues of ‘knowing the other’ and ‘other ways of knowing’ – non-knowledge modalities – loom large on the horizon as urgent, unexplored dimensions of research.

0019 Michel Houellebecq’s Platform (William Heinemann. 2002) – with its anodyne tone on sex and alleged defaming of Islam – jolts us into mulling over how to respond to the ‘other’ in a consumerist culture that breaks down ‘radical difference’ and re-spins it as a less troubling, nondescript commodity or ‘palatable exotic’. ‘The other’, the Muslim in our midst, he notes, is like a blood clot that clogs up the system causing meltdown or they are an alien factor to be broken down by the body politic’s immune system – to be gobbled up and assimilated. For Houellebecq, ‘unknown dimensions of difference’ represented by the great religions share this fate. The Virgin Mary celestial is rendered mundane as the sublime Madonna struts her stuff and SM gear. Nirvana becomes a street-corner transcendental trip eased along with a bit of dope and pop. Is the sensual paradise promised to the faithful by Islam now deliverable at massage parlours on the package holiday? Platform blandly records this post-Weberian ‘stripping bare’ – a violation of ‘otherness’ – as unrelenting everyday attrition.

0020 To explore the ‘breakdown of difference’, let us take a glance at D’Arcy Thompson’s ‘Cartesian Transformation’ – device for the ‘reduction of difference to similarity and vice versa’. (Sarat Maharaj in Reverberations. Jan van Eyck Academy. 2000). He sought to demonstrate how creatures we take as ostensibly ‘diverse and divergent’ could be shown to be related and similar. By ‘tweaking’ their images within strict mathematical coordinates of the ‘Cartesian grid’, he graphically showed similarities where there appeared to be only teeming differences. The Cartesian Transformation, however, seems to operate on a see-saw principle of reversibility and equivalence. Differences can be boiled down to similarities: conversely, similarities express themselves in a welter of apparent differences, mutations, variants. We see differences morphing into similarities – as in those laminated postcards of George Bush that switch into Osama Bin Laden and vice versa. The fluent equivalence that

the Cartesian grid generates might be described as a plane of tolerance. It exacts a steep price. Differences are put up with and accommodated as long as they pass through the grid's epistemic filter. What it cannot stomach, drops out of sight.

0021 We might relate this to 'global art' curatorial projects and cultural difference – to a landmark show such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989). It sought to establish affinities, links, similarities between heterogeneous art works and cultural forms. In this sense it aspired to 'ideal commonality' where the mishmash of conflicting diversity is condensed to 'sameness' – a single structure or explanatory principle. The space of the show itself functions like a Cartesian grid rendering elements 'the same'. The plane of tolerance, however, has to be distinguished from the critical idea of the 'commons' – a 4 D scene of interacting, ever-changing differences where each time a new element appears the whole of the 'commons' itself re-configures. (Sarat Maharaj. *Fatal Natalities in Faultlines*. Africa Pavilion. Venice Biennale 2003 and the network of Raqs Media Collective. New Delhi. 2002)

0022 This shows up the limits of the 'plane of tolerance'—keystone of official EU thinking on how to manage difference or, in governmental-administrative jargon, its 'cultural diversity policy'. I have called this 'multicultural managerialism'—directives to put cultural differences on display but in regulated, stage-managed fashion as static, countable elements. Differences are seen not so much as processes and passages in translation. They are cast as icons and standstiff-signs that have to make it into the arena of representation. They are 'retinalized'. They might be metamorphosing but 'they' are expected to conform to 'our' fast-freeze image of them. The 'outsider' has to play out our image of them for 'us' – a convoluted, manipulative exchange. The inclusiveness of the representationalist approach turns out to be little more than a facet of the demand for assimilation. If the Somalians are deemed to be left out, the spectrum of cultural representations simply has to heave over to make room for them. Tolerance becomes a matter of head-counting to see if every culture is 'on board'. 'Access to representation' is undeniably a crucial part of people's attempts to make themselves heard. But it is no less a double bind for that. For 'multicultural managerialism' shares not a little of the formal ground of Apartheid logic. With the scramble for representation, it even-handedly places each and every culture in its own box for separate, equal attention. In reality, some boxes are treated more equally than others. The drive to equal, separate slots also encourages a sense of rivalry and resentment

between the spread of ‘cultural representations’ that now have to vie with one another for their day in the sun.

0023 As ‘the plane of tolerance’ narrows down to ‘putting difference on parade’ it gets tarred with the ‘political correctness’ brush. For multicultural managerialism ‘display’ is a control mechanism, part of the demand for assimilation though it might present itself in quite opposite terms as self-critical, as capable of going beyond its limits and of laughing at its own ‘foibles and excesses’. For example, it ribs itself for its own ‘PC’ behaviour in the clever ‘Vorsprung durch Technik’ Audi ad. Or in this ad for the London Metropolitan Police featuring a trio of police officers – Asian woman, White and Black—with the tag: ‘London is even more PC now’. On one level, the ad leads us on to suspect it of simply mouthing a PC line—precisely what gets people hot under the collar. On another, soon enough the penny drops that here PC can also stand for ‘Police Constable’ (let alone personal computer). PCs of an ilk perhaps less irksome than PC. The ad gets the viewer’s hackles up only to make them feel a little foolish for tilting at windmills for having imagined a ‘PC message’ in the first place. It gives us a glimpse into how managerialism remains one smart step ahead in promoting a representational strategy even as it appears to keep it at arms length—ruses and turns that a ‘critique of multicultural reason’ would need to unpack.

0024 The ‘retinal’, a Duchamp term, has several connotations that are also at odds with one another—a situation perhaps best comprehended by his phrase ‘oscillating density’. The term has both a positive and negative charge. The act of seeing, even perception-cognition, is understood not as a neutral ‘depiction’ of a given ‘out there’ but a construction – somewhat tottering and makeshift – pieced together under particular circumstances. These overlap with some of the conditions of seeing Joyce had ‘regarded’:

Tallowscope  
Pudendascope  
Farscope  
Doordekky

Tallowscope: Joyce casts the telescope as scientific viewing apparatus, extension to the eye and male member. It is phallic blubber like a tallow candle with flaming wick. Pudendascope: These associations would telescope in post-1980s visual art studies by way of cinematic-psychoanalytic



*'Theory of the Discursive Picnic 1. Artarbeiters Unwetter Group'*.  
Kassel 2002. Dorothee Albrecht

theory and Lacanian inflections of the ‘spectatorial’, the ‘self-other’ relationship, the shame-subordination of the symbolic realm. Doordekky: Hindi for telescope or ‘Farscope’ – instrument of conquest of ‘faraway places’. It is the means through which the colonial subject is captured, named, kept under surveillance. The act of seeing is understood as plugging into unequal sexual-colonial-symbolic relations of power–dimensions flagged up and explored in art practices often long before they were to become ‘objects of study’ in the academic sphere.

0025 Duchamp counterpoised two types of seeing experience: The ‘retinal’ – where seeing is taken to be an affair purely of eye surface and nerve endings. Against this, he proposed a kind of seeing that involved the brain – the constitutive activity of the visual cortex in producing ‘what is seen’. The title of a celebrated essay “What the Frog’s Eye tells the Frog’s Brain” (1959) might be taken to signpost what he was prefiguring: the eye is not simply a flat receptor but active participant in constructing what’s seen. Matisse, it seemed, aspired to the opposite condition where the artist might almost be able to ‘detach’ the eye from its moorings in the body – a retinal zone that short circuits data-synthesis carried out by the brain. Duchamp countered this kind of ‘frisson of the eye surface’ by speaking of sight as part of a cortical circuit – giving us the glimmerings of his anti-retinal stance and the idea of ‘grey matter’ art. Between Conceptualists and some Abstract Expressionists these positions were further played out in the post war space. Today his reflections on and experiments with ‘the retinal’ and its various registers add up to critical artistic research *avant la lettre*.

0026 An ‘anti-retinal’ stance was also taken by Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Indian art historian-philosopher who, like Duchamp, was ‘marooned’ on the US east coast. He had explored the ‘retinal’ around the same time as Duchamp if not earlier. His cross-cultural coordinates took in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhardt, the *Sahitya Darpana*, *Kama Sutra* and the *Visnudarmottram*. He unremittingly interrogated mimetic-eye-frisson art against grey matter art. His anti-retinal perspective offered a re-evaluation of non-western art that had been deemed ‘non-retinal and inferior’ under prevailing colonialist views ‘through the doordekky’. His critique of the retinal opened up a fresh look at Gandhara sculpture – hybrid mix of Hellenistic and Indian forms and ideas – an episode of ‘cultural translation’. His critique was to embarrass both Indian nationalist and colonialist views of art-culture purity and their limited 3 D concepts of art. From his



scholarly ‘tracing’ of the retinal to Duchamp’s ‘mapping’ of it, their analyses add to a sketch of how artistic research might take shape today.

0027 Coomaraswamy’s ‘critique of the retinal’ intersects with Duchamp’s – who sketches a visual-space-time experience that counters the static one-eye 3 D Cartesian grid. This is less about 360 degree vision than ‘engulfing sight’ where seeing feels like ‘holding a knife in the palm of one’s hand’. This kind of embodied viewing should be distinguished from the ‘tactile’ which is about the experience of fingering an object at one-remove, in the viewer’s mind or in virtual terms – ‘touching with the eyes’. Duchamp is outlining a kind of seeing that is an actual sight-touch-embrace of what is seen—as visceral as two bodies locked in sexual intercourse or union. Flesh-vision, somatic-seeing?

0028 Multiplicity’s ‘Journey through a Solid Sea’ (Stefano Boeri et al. 2002. Kassel) looks at the tragic event that was at first ‘denied’ by the Mediterranean authorities and locals. Was it also simply ‘missed’ by the sophisticated surveillance satellite – today’s total retinal capture system –scanning the region? On 26 December 1996, a ship loaded with its human cargo of ‘migrants’ went down off the Sicilian coast, near Portopaulo. Against images of the ‘Mittelmeer’ of tourism, resorts, fun, Multiplicity maps it as the fatal shore. Those who do not make it end up as corpses and stiffs washed up on the beach. The zone is xenographic: as the doomed non-citizens pass through, their ‘identity’ solidifies: they become no more than ‘non-citizen, foreigner, outsider, intruder, other, clandestini, sans papiers, illegals, refugees, asylum seekers, stowaways’. Multiplicity calls this reductive classifying ‘hyper-identification’ – a process of retinalization.

Rumours of the disaster circulating in the Mediterranean had been met with denials and outright disclaimers from the authorities. Was it a phantom ship, did its passengers really perish or was it simply journalistic sensationalism? Was there a governmental ‘cover up’ with which the coastal villagers colluded? Were the developing world families liars and deceivers when they insisted their relatives had drowned? A dogged search for ‘solid’ facts ends when the ID card of one of the dead, Anagopalan Ganesu, was fished out of the sea in the nets of fisher folk – ‘brute evidence’ of the tragedy. Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa might fleetingly cross the mind. But Multiplicity stages the investigation to plunge us into the congeries of facts, realms of evidence, differing accounts, versions, voices. From this sea of ‘raw data’ details have to be painstakingly teased

out in a process of scrutiny and evaluation before validation as a 'solid fact'. As hard facts of the case emerge from the watery grave of the 'non-citizens' a tangle of dilemmas about truth-telling and its ethics has to be tackled.

0029 Solid Fact? To probe it, Feyerabend pushed it to the end of its tether almost altogether cutting it off from anchorage in anything. He weakens commonsensical assumptions that facts are 'hard' like a stone against which we might stub our toes. The 'scientific fact' is pieced together in the course of argument, in sorting out pros and cons of the data. This takes place in a discursive field, an uneven mix of theory and observation that can leave things subject to several interpretations. His drift is that the 'scientific fact', contrary to appearances, is not impregnable solid because it remains open to overhaul depending on changes in context, coordinates and controls. This is mirrored, from RG Collingwood (*The Idea of History*. 1986) to Hayden White (*Meta-History*. 1973) regarding 'historiographical facts': they are provisional constructs. The approach overlaps with the open-ended ways in which art practices handle facts –perhaps a curb on the hectoring Mr. Gradgrind whose demand is we stick to the 'facts'. A science research programme has a definite cut off point: it has to settle on what is a 'fact' so as to press on with the larger inquiry. This is decided according to what survives the test of the most coherent prevailing evidence. The art practitioner, on the other hand, is not so constrained. In the thick of an indefinite testing and revising of facts, they can feel they are treading water.

0030 In the 'Missing Lebanese Wars ' (*Atlas Group*. 2002. Kassel), Walid Ra'ad ponders methodologies he could deploy to do justice to research for an account of the shattered world of the Lebanon. This depiction has to take place with the barest, jumbled scraps of evidence and sources – with no regular data bank or storage centre, no corpus of documents at hand to dip into. To map the individual lives caught up in the civil conflicts, destruction and trauma, the terror bombings, invasions and attacks he has to contend with both the absence of an archive and with the possibility that if it existed all it might authorize a stilted official version of events. How to represent 'missing' historical experience, to voice the unspeakable? The dilemma he faces has some parallels with the problematic of 'representing the Holocaust'. Lyotard looks at the impossibility of meeting Faurisson's demand for 'facts' on the gas used to annihilate the Jews. Holocaust-deniers feel this therefore clinches their argument. The kind of

‘first hand evidence’ they want can only be provided by those who perished in the gas chambers. They are unavailable for the brute reason they were wiped out. The impossible demand is for the dead to speak to confirm the circumstances of their murder.

Against this dead-end absolutism of the fact, Ra’ad devises startling, fresh ways of thinking history and memory – new methods of archiving. He takes ‘evidence’ here in a neutral-toned way as a factual-fictional construct. A hoard of 226 notebooks of Dr Fadl Fakhami, a documentation treasure trove of videotapes is found. This serves as a fictive device for probing the unthinkable of the strife-torn time, articulating what could not be said, sounding gaps and holes in the narrative.

A catalogue is cited with dry, quasi-meticulous referencing. ‘Found-fictive’ videos, Tape 17 and Tape 31 refer to real life events –the American and British hostages are named and identified as real persons. To this is added a made-up character, an Arab hostage. The situation is staged as edgy, potentially explosive. It gives us a glimpse into the space of captivity, its psycho-atmospherics, its sense of claustrophobia and paranoia. In this fantasy-fact-fictive scenario, the Arab hostage, Souheil Bachar, reflects on the unspeakables of the Lebanon: how to know the other, implying perhaps the yearning for communication beyond the barriers of tribe, religion, nationality.

In pondering this in *A Passage to India*, EM Foster answer was ‘Only Connect’ – ‘empathetic oneness with the other’ as a way of scaling the walls separating colonizer and colonized, self and other. How to give flesh to such an idealistic connection? Perhaps literally through body contact is a thought Souheil Bachar fleetingly toys with in a torrid interior monologue: ..”pressed myself against his ass...punched me in the groin. Why they wanted me to fuck them then to fuck me...” Could the momentary desire to break the taboo of body-flesh contact between males, to cuddle the other hostages, – the fullness of an all-enveloping 4 D embrace – deliver that authentic contact and coming together, that dissolving of self/other antagonism? The thought vanishes quickly in a mix of revulsion, loathing, fear of rejection. But the crucial lines of an ethics are faintly, tentatively drawn.

In Ra’ad’s several stabs at finding a method for the ‘Missing Wars’ he strikes on the fictive device of ‘found documents’ on a Professor’s passion for horse racing. Each horse represents one or another methodological perspective: positivist, empiricist, historical materialist and so on. All perhaps have had their day in the arena of the Lebanese conflicts. Which one will be the winner or are they all deadbeat? Which can deliver a way of filling

in the gaps and lacuna in narrating the ‘Missing Lebanese Wars? The bets are open.

His concern with inventing methodologies while critiquing existing ones, with the liquidity of ‘solid facts’, with eking out a kind of ‘non-knowledge’ from cracks and chinks in the knowledge systems – all touch on elements of what we call ‘artistic research’ but which is also doggedly no more than his singular art practice.

0031 With the projects, events, activities scanned above, the term ‘artistic research’ is placed in brackets from the start. The category as it has been handed down to us is made to ‘thaw and dissolve into a dew’. It is no more a taken-for-granted given. We have to proceed as if we haven’t a clue as to what artistic research looks like – to treat it as something unknown. Each project becomes a stab at fleshing out what it thinks is ‘research’ to see if it tests ‘positive’: each time the test proves both ‘definitively inconclusive’ and registers an allergic reaction to ‘research’.

Today it is essential to broach ‘research’ in this wary, nominalist spirit in order to resist regulated, institutional-octopus versions of it. Particular instances and episodes come to count as ‘art research’ – and not the other way round where we imagine we know what it is and tailor art practice to match it. A striking example is the Artarbeiter group’s on-going Unwetter activities, a chain of Discursive Picnics (Berlin.2002-03): swarming around, walkabouts, displays, jabber, readings, text analyses, trips and tours. These pop up, fizzle out, gel again amounting to forays and drifts into the unknown– research-rambles into passages of everyday consciousness, into somatic modes of knowing. As a rough interim measure we might call this spread of events and experiments ‘artistic research’ or ‘non-knowledge’. It would be like sticking a nametag on an ever-changing, unknown object proliferating in uncountable dimensions.

Note:The title pays homage to Richard Hamilton’s introduction to his translation of Marcel Duchamp’s White Box Notes. A L’infinif (1966) 2000. I see both MD’s Notes to the Large Glass (1911-21) and RH’s art practice, his MD translations and commentaries as ‘artistic research’ *avant la lettre*–amongst leading examples of what the term might signal today.