



Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

(when designing practice-as-research programmes in higher education)

Presentation for the 'Artistic Research' conference, Iceland Academy of the Arts, Oct 3-4, 2008.

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"Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said. "One can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*

[This text represents the – relatively - formal part of an informal presentation, which started with a series of images from the Camp for Climate Action at Kingsnorth in Kent, UK during August 2008. See www.climatecamp.org.uk for details and images. The presentation started by offering the camp as a model for a properly educational space that combined artistry, analysis and activism – creativity, critique and citizenship – a trio of terms associated with a version of Performance Studies most fully promulgated in the work and teaching of Dwight Conquergood and others in the US, but the ramifications of which have yet to fully followed through in most academic contexts.]

I want to try and address myself to the particular task which I take to be one of the motivating factors for this event – namely, on what basis and with what kind of underlying principles and values are you here in Iceland going to initiate a set of new postgraduate practice-based educational programmes. This has been a great opportunity for me to listen and to properly think through in a more considered way some of the ideas we've been exploring in trying to design our own new MA programme at Roehampton, Performance and Creative Research.

The fact that you have so kindly by accident called me here to Iceland is possibly based on an assumption that my situation at Roehampton with regard to the development of practice-based research degrees may have some relationship to a similar initiatives that you are undertaking. (After my talk, I'm sure you will agree that that assumption was perhaps unfounded). My obvious and simply point is that my presence here is a function of the globalised discourses not just around practice-as-research but around higher education as a globalised market commodity. I'm sure that my university's enterprise department was rather I were recruiting in China or India right now, rather than in Reykjavík, attempting to help you think how you can best educate your own population instead of exporting them to us. But I am here with you instead.

A little later on I'm going to talk about some ways of thinking and doing that 'artistic research' (I love the simplicity of this title) might need to creatively and paradoxically suspend when it comes to designing new educational programmes. And the first thing that might need to be suspended is precisely the homogenization of this globalised educational discourse – one which ironically has brought us all here. And this event has forced me to think differently and more rigorously about this and to realize the extent to which, in our own efforts in London, we might be failing to do just that, failing to properly think through and act within our specifically local circumstances.

Failure, breakdown and collapse along with stupidity, idiocy and naivety have been my perennial interests in and outside of both the theatre and the academy. In testifying to these interests as somehow topics of research, it's hard to avoid a guilty, confessional tone. For while much contemporary performance has made much of failure as a theme and a tactic, it still seems sacrilegious to talk about its manifestation within an academic context. The books not written, the performances not made, the students not educated are amongst the many things lost amidst the hysteria of the unending string of achievements and successes that count as progress. I think one of things that artistic research might be able to do is to articulate these losses and failures productively rather than simply mourn them.

It seems important to do this during a time in which the global failures of capitalism are becoming increasingly explicit yet somehow increasingly illegible. [*This text was presented on the day that the full extent of the 2008 Icelandic banking collapse began to emerge*]. Hedge funds and short selling were once upon a time supposed to be useful tools for the management of risk in financial markets. Now they are the cause of the latter's meltdown. Biofuels were once upon a time part of the technological solution to climate change and energy crises. Now they are a cause of climate change, energy crises and, in addition, food shortages. States were once impediments to the goals of human freedom for both anarchists and right-wing 'fundamentalists'. Now they appear to be the only buffer between peoples and 'failed' market mechanisms. Is it an exaggeration to say that we are living in or close to catastrophic times? How differently are such times manifest and expressed in Reykjavik compared with Roehampton? How do we educate against catastrophe without terrorizing ourselves into the unthinkable but all too obvious *jouissance* that comes with it? These are some of the vague, fuzzy whole-world kind of things I think we should be taking on in artistic research – rather than well-articulated areas of enquiry discreetly plotted within clear disciplinary boundaries and matched to a set of precisely phrased research questions.

I should mention that I'm standing in for my colleague Adrian Heathfield, with whom I'm currently designing our new programme. But I am also stand-in in a more literal profound way, as someone who still feels rather illegitimate as a so-called artist-scholar or practice-based researcher within the academy, someone just 'standing-in', until the proper actor/artist/research/scholar arrives.

This feeling is relevant to my sense of the wider context of 'practice-as-research' as a whole in the UK since the 1990s. During this time, many people have exerted a lot of effort to try to prove they were the real academic deal according to a set of pre-established and extremely conflictual criteria, about which we're still having more or less anxious conversations. These anxieties are evident in the still incessant debates about the epistemological basis of 'artistic research' and what can count or not count as research (and be funded as such) under varying national criteria, which, as Henk has so clearly illustrated for us, are ostensibly being further rationalised as part of the Bologna process.

For practice in the performing arts in the UK this has been especially difficult given the commitment of performance as a paradigm, strongly influenced by the leftist traditions of avant-garde live art and popular performance forms, to a strongly anti-statist, anti-market, anti-commodity and even anti-representational values in which ephemerality, intangibility and hybridity were loaded with a cultural and political significance that has proved difficult to sustain.

The often cited strength and significance of these values is perhaps in direct relation to an equal but opposite sense in which theatre and performance are in fact haunted by their own political uselessness and sense of irreversible compromise with forms of neo-liberal commodification. In that respect, the academy has been a welcome opportunity for performance studies and for politically-minded artists working with performance, as UK arts funding policy became obsessed with issues such as art as a means for the delivery of 'social inclusion' and the promotion of the 'creative industries' as an economic and employment asset. Yet when everything becomes performance, as it seems to have done in our catastrophic times, then performance ceases to function as a critical paradigm and is left to gesticulate theatrically from the wings

with signs pointing to the main stage, saying on one side “This is a performance!” and on the other “This is not a performance!”

In ensuring that we take our rightful place at the academic table, it would seem that a form of passionate but empty-handed criticality has replaced a more turbulent desire for political and social transformation that characterized so much of 20th C avant-garde. And if we see those diverse movements as ultimately failures, acts of attempted transgression that, according to a Zizekian formula, instead of intervening and altering the rules of the game once and for all, were only subsumed by those same rules, thereby actually securing the prohibition of their own desires, then what is left for art, let alone ‘artistic research’? And does the absorption of artistic practice as research into state and corporate sponsored education in fact signal the effective end of art’s transformative social function except, as one my UK colleagues Baz Kershaw puts it, as a ‘pathology of hope’.

As noted by Malcolm Quinn (Quinn 2006), this relationship between ‘intervention’ and ‘subsumption’ in aesthetic practice has been most insightfully raised by Jacques Rancière. In his *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière claims that the aesthetic regime of the arts engenders a paradox, by basing its bid for autonomy on the absolute integration of art and its contexts:

The aesthetic asserts the absolute singularity of art, and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself (Rancière 2004: 23)

Rancière adds that this aesthetic state is both ‘a pure moment of suspension, when form is experienced for itself’ and ‘the formation and education of a specific type of humanity’. Rancière appears to making a claim for a paradox that is specifically aesthetic and which depends for its binding relationship to a specific type of humanity on insisting on its own autonomous artificiality. This paradox insists that the art object or event is both in the world, yet not of the world, whose task is, according a phrase of Alain Badiou’s “to be *and* not to be” (Badiou cited in Quinn 2006).

I propose that localised pathologies of hope that take on the whole world might be articulated in relation to a pedagogy of practice-as-research through systematic, tactical amplifications of Rancière’s moments of suspension.

If this all sounds nebulously abstract, I’m going to offer some prescriptive practical suggestions that might embody this proposal.

Six Impossible Things Worth Suspending When Designing Practice-as-Research Programmes in Higher Education

[There could be a lot more or less than six, I chose six because six starts with ‘S’ and so does ‘suspending’, seven would have worked just as well, I did have 7, but the 7th seemed to be part of the 6th. You will have to add more or take some away. Following each proposal are sets of ‘notes to self’, rather than fully worked out elaborations, which could be undertaken best in relation to specific institutional circumstances.]

1.

Suspend institutional structures that replicate divisions between so-called ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ research and between different disciplinary practices.

Practice-as-research discourse itself has, to date, been elaborated in fairly separate disciplinary domains, as

each seeks to carve out a distinctive disciplinary take on the issues, which will offer an operational advantage.

2.

Suspend the ancillary status of teaching with regard to the identity of those studying practice-based research in the academy.

Teaching typically considered as a means of financial support and for the relief of staff. Grad students often exploited. BUT Staff/students own being within the pedagogical scene as an essential rather than peripheral or coincidental aspect of the experience of training to be a 'Master'! Reflection on identifications, disidentifications and disavowals within the pedagogical scene best facilitated by taking on the other role in that scene.

3.

Suspend the continuing legacy of the graduate or doctoral student as 'lone researcher' as the cornerstone of professional and career development.

My experience coming from artistic 'company' to academy – isolation, fragmentation, lack of collective culture or community. Sustained through on-going emphasis on monographs.

However, in UK, new models of research funding explicitly emphasise and reward group-based research practices. Postgraduate study can be a place to engage with an intense whole cohort-based collective endeavour that still provides room for the development of autonomous individual practices.

Also means overcoming the continuing value attached to the artist's unique signature and individual idiosyncratic vision and the concomitant branding of creative identity around a single name.

4.

Suspend the delimiting of the 'problem' of practice-based research to questions of epistemology.

What makes something research or not research? This has obviously been important as a tactic of getting inside the academy, establishing legitimacy, credibility and equality.

This has happened with large dose injections of theory that will a) bring art practice up to academic standards and b) will provide it with a critical edge. Given our emerging "after theory" era, it becomes questionable as to whether questions of epistemology or ontology are still the right ones. Interrogation of cultural practices by theory itself informed by an earlier era of artistic avant-gardism does not appear to have had a discernible social impact.

We need to ask: what is research for? What is the practice for? What do we want? How do we avoid answering these questions with simple shortcuts based on arguments for direct social utility? Do we actually need to avoid those answers?

5.

Suspend attempts to *fully* dissolve practice-based research into its social contexts in the name of ethically

motivated gestures of avant-garde engagement, political solidarity or socio-economic utility.

Pursuit of abolition of art and life in a revolution of everyday life, which fuelled earlier avant-gardes, is still alive and well in the post relational aesthetics era. There is a pervasive demand, probably experienced by many in the room at some time or other, to abandon the ivory tower to directly pursue projects of local social emancipation elsewhere on the ground or in the streets, perhaps to return to the academy periodically for periods of rest and the telling of ‘war stories’ to the less enlightened, less mobile, or the simply lazy.

This type of approach currently being mobilized around issues of human rights, environmental justice and ‘sustainability’.

Note the ‘advance praise’ on the back cover of Michael M’Gonigle and Justine Starke’s *Planet U: Sustaining the Work, Reinventing the University*, Professor William Rees suggests that:

The modern university is at a tipping point. It can either continue its contemporary flirtation with the corporate world and submit to its assigned role as enforcer of the status quo or it reasserts its claim to leadership on society’s intellectual frontier. M’Gonigle and Starke provide the rationale and inspiration for universities to break rank from the growth and globalisation mainstream that is destroying the planet. Only by reinventing itself can the university hope to become society’s champion for the locally-rooted global sustainability that is the quest of people and communities everywhere.

The aesthetic here is subsumed into a wholly laudable politicization of the university as a physical site for a pedagogical scene, but which is somehow separated from and immune to the market, as if making a “claim to leadership on society’s intellectual frontier” wasn’t something that will be instantly recuperated for competitive advantage in higher education. But which is ironically seen as having increasing social and economic weight in the age of mass higher education as the training ground for the future workers of the knowledge economy.

Somehow we have to keep a minimal operation of difference between ‘artistic research’ and its subsumption into projects of reinvention of this kind. This does not mean NOT pursuing these kinds of projects – indeed precisely the opposite – but it does mean confronting them with their “unbearable other” and the ability to discern what that might be in the first place.

“While new modes of research in the humanities increasingly find new ways of including ‘the work’ of investigation within ‘the whole world’, they would not normally regard the inclusion of ‘the whole world’ within the work of investigation as a reasonable course of action. In the approach to art through humanities (for example, in AHRC definitions of research practice) aesthetic subsumption is privileged, while aesthetic suspension is not. In fact, as new forms of interdisciplinary research in the humanities continue to invest in the notion of ‘the whole world’ as a sphere of sociality which grounds their investigations, the less likely it is that this notion of context can be displaced.” (Quinn 2006).

6.

The academy as a place practiced – in terms of its relationships to time, space and its outside - as *either* both in/of the world *or* as at one remove from it.

The ivory tower is dead, long live the ivory tower! Cultivate the university as a specific place, cultivate the artificialities of its own practices of space, rather than as a double of some other life (the city) into which it ought to ultimately dissolve.

Refer here to the specific temporal rhythms of the academy (its durations – the 2 hour seminar, the 12 week term, etc.) its production of space as having as relating to what is practiced there.

Also to sense that research, unlike teaching, is something that goes on elsewhere whether in the favelas of Rio or the city library. What can practice-based researchers can learn from the sustainability movement, which is in part about to what extent an organization is able to pay attention to and do something with its own 'shit' in the place that it is actually produced. Examining the relations of knowledge that structure those practices as they are played out within the physical and social 'body' on which the contemporary university still seems to depend.

The academy needs to develop a fundamental ecological alertness to its own environment both as a social responsibility but also as a critical and creative opportunity. But reinvention won't take place wholesale, it will have to be through a series of persistent micro-interventions that take place in the gaps and lacunae left by power, regulation and bureaucracy, gaps that things such as creativity and research are being asked to fill with new initiatives that do not conform to current protocols. We will have to test.

References

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