

# THE DISENCHANTED

Irit  
*Rogoff*

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# The Dis-enchanted

**My classroom is a pantheon of disenchantment, it echoes with the strong voices of those who have lost faith in how to know in any conventional sense and are in the process of trying to self-institute towards another pathway into knowledge, into the acts of knowing. The voices of the authors echo with the voices of the readers, learners who view acts of self initiation or inauguration into knowledge, as the performative gestures of this pantheon of disenchantment that drives everything in the pedagogical milieu of which I speak.**

These voices are the ones that drive our oddly named courses in our undisciplined field, that perform the gestures that stop common sense in its tracks - the gesture of not this, not there, not where its supposed to be, not how we are meant to go about it. They perform Deleuze's 'exhaustion', Foucault's 'insurrection of surreptitious knowledges', Agamben's 'whatever', Nancy's 'Being Singular Plural' and Derrida's 'supplementarity', Haraway's 'Capitalocene' and Blanchot's 'power of speech to interrupt itself'. They enact the 'Necropolitics' of Mbembe and the "Extrastatecraft" of Easterling and Sassen's 'Expulsions' – borne of the recognition of an urgency, of a despair with the state of things, they are nevertheless always an opening gambit rather than an end lament.

The disenchantment I am so drawn to is not a protesting one, though it is profoundly critical. It is not an oppositional one, reproducing the binary logic of

antagonistic opposites, though it keeps the enmity of ideas in mind. And It is not a form of resistance though it does take the form of 'action' rather than of analysis. If the disenchanted do not enlist declamatory rhetoric to raise their voices, how do they operate?

These voices don't lambast, they don't analyze, they don't explain or refute and they don't lament or deny - they halt the discussion, refuse natural continuity and surprise by starting again from the middle, from elsewhere and otherwise. What is so compelling to me about these is not that they are a theoretical pantheon in and of themselves, not that they are novel – certainly not part of cognitive capitalism's endless pursuit of marketable novelty with its bright, shiny, promising titles and old, familiar arguments. But perhaps that they perform an uncompromising and insistent duality: on the one hand a critical move of halting the discussion in its conventional mode and on the other the possibility of starting it again from elsewhere and differently. I have come to think that being able to halt a discussion without criticising it and to inhabit that stoppage as more than an intermediary gap, is the very voice of disenchantment.

And of course that gap is not simply a stoppage but it is equally a promise, for disenchantment is placed firmly between the initial enchantment that inevitably preceded it and the re-enchantment that will inevitably follow it. Inevitably because once one has the propensity for enchantment and the understanding of its persuasive potential, it will take place again and again. Who of us does not remember the first time we read Foucault, or Derrida, or Kristeva, or Haraway, or Deleuze or Amitav Ghosh or Michael Taussig and all of our subterranean frustration with thinking, found a break in which to locate itself. The intense pleasure of not reading something and agreeing with it, but of being actualised by it, having an inherent critical faculty galvanized into conscious being.

In part disenchantment is so important, because it follows by necessity, the condition of ‘enchantment’ a state of persuasion and seduction which fuses rationally conscious thought with affective conviction, a duality of intellectual clarity and emotional entanglement that are crucial for any acts of affecting knowledge. And of course because moments of enchantment and disenchantment both enact and insist on the significance of ‘the moment’ rather than that of ‘the long line of tradition’ in which knowledge has usually found its place.

This preoccupation with ‘disenchantment’ follows on from a question I have been asking myself for some time – if we agree that ‘we only know what we know how to know’ – what are the mechanisms by which we might catapult ourselves from one knowledge paradigm to another, one belief system to another? How might we equip ourselves to move towards that which we don’t know how to know? How does this leap come about?

The Pantheon of Disenchantment that propels and animates the work in my classroom is not only a pedagogical model, it also points me in the direction of what is being called ‘practice based research’ or what I would prefer to think of as ‘creative practices of knowledge’. It allows towards a shift both conceptual and methodological in which it is not only the theoretical but the active unfolding of the work, that produces a shift in knowing. For these too are moments of suspension that move sideways, giving themselves permission to know from elsewhere rather than to negate dominant knowledge.

Recently, the annual BBC lecture series known as the Reith Lectures, commemorating John Reith the founder of the broadcasting company, was broadcast.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rees, M. (2010) *Martin Rees: Scientific Horizons: 2010*, The Reith Lectures, BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sk5nc>

The lecturer was Martin Rees the president of the Royal Society of Astronomy. He began by

looking back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century emergence of aristocratic, self taught, scientific amateurs, who gathered out of passionate curiosity about the natural world and in the face of knowledge orthodoxies – formed societies, exchanged books, reviewed each others experiments and theorems, and formed the first professional learned associations devoted to uncovering radical new knowledge such as the Royal Society in 1660 – when a dozen men gathered to hear the young Christopher Wren give a lecture on Astronomy. In the discussion that followed they decided to form a society for the study of the new and still controversial ‘Experimental Philosophy’. The motto they decided on for their new association was “take nothing on authority”! a motto that still resonates with me today as I try and think about academic protocols and the academic authority of ‘truth regimes’ and how these are constantly challenged by creative practices of knowledge everywhere else.

Obviously I do not hark back nostalgically to the 17<sup>th</sup> century; to privileged amateur men, sustained by colonial adventures, indentured laborers, vast estates, arrogant entitlement and the ensuing leisure for the pursuit of knowledge in their private libraries – but I do want to keep a hold of two of their formulations; the value of ‘experimental philosophy’ and the edict to ‘take nothing on authority’. And I think that ‘creative practices of knowledge’ are some of the ways in which we might grasp these and ensure that they do not cede to the endless pragmatic demands of knowledge protocols: outcomes, outputs, impact, constant monitoring of the exact usefulness of knowledge or its ability to follow the demands and the imperatives of cognitive capitalism to be portable, to be transferable, to be useful, to be flexible, to be applied, to be entrepreneurial and generally integrated within market economies at every level.

Later that same day, the day I heard the first Reith Lecture, a rather brilliant,

practice based researcher at Goldsmiths underwent what we call the ‘upgrade’ which is the passage from the preliminary to the final phase of the Ph.D. On this occasion 3 professors sat in a room trying to convince this exceptional young man that he could do whatever he wanted, since he was clearly both serious and knowledgeable in his research and passionate about his subject. We went on saying he could invent a narrative, de-contextualise his objects, speak in any kind of voice and in general take as many inventive liberties with his work as served his purpose in constituting what we saw as a potentially exciting emergent subject and method. He on the other hand, clung to the conventional academic protocols like a drowning man to a raft – how could he prove this and how could he ground that and what did he need to do to be taken seriously by an professional/academic community that held him up he felt, to higher scholarly standards of knowledge. There was something both comic and confusing about our trying to liberate him from scholasticism and from his belief that it was some mysterious realm that he needed to crack in order to enter formal bastions of knowledge.

The first story of aristocratic gentlemen in 17<sup>th</sup> cen. London refers to knowledge pre signification and the second story of the PhD researcher wanting to be legitimated by scholarship, refers to knowledge needing to be liberated from over-signification and somewhere between the two is the dilemma I am trying to get at. And I think that ‘creative practices of knowledge’ – are some of the ways in which we might grasp these and ensure that they do are not held captive by the criteria of evaluative and auditory structures that now prevail and

shape the landscape of institutional research funding and research understanding. But my question is whether

constantly dealing critically with the structures and with the protocols and with the demands – is actually going to get us to where we might need to be? This because my concern is with the actual knowledge and my belief is in its power. This concern is not satisfied simply by unearthing new ideas, but in also trying to recognize the urgent drivers behind them, of which disenchantment is clearly one.

In this state we move beyond ‘criticism’ of regimes and players and intentions and from ‘critique’ of the underlying political and ideological structures that have captured and seized the conflict and continue to hold it ransom to their logics, and towards ‘criticality’ – a condition in which we both see through the conditions of our lives while continuing to live out their difficulties. In criticality both the knowledge and its conditions play equally important roles and we who live out those conditions while trying to hone a critical and imaginative gaze, are complicit at all levels.

What do the politics of criticality , so much less directed and goal oriented than political resolutions, have to offer to the exhausted, the disenchanted with the knowledge trajectories and protocols we are mired in, with our unsatisfactory attempts to make knowledge or practice ‘politically engaged’ as a way of forcing it to confront political conditions and realities? ‘criticality’ as I have been trying to articulate it in recent years is the tail end of this set of developments – a shift from Criticism with its inherent value judgements and from critique with its epistemological unveiling and uncovering of assumptions and knowledge regimes – to a contemporary state which I would call criticality.<sup>2</sup> Criticality being at once an ability to see through the structures that we are living in and to analyse them in a theoretically informed way, while at the same time to recognise that for all of one’s critical apparatus, one is nevertheless

<sup>2</sup>Rogoff, I. (2003) *From Criticism to Critique to Criticality*, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies <http://eipc.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>

living out and imbricated in those very conditions. Of course criticality has critique enfolded within it, but it is more. It is a conscious duality of both living out something while being able to see through it, and it requires another mode of articulation, one that cannot smugly stand outside the problems and offer a clever and knowing analysis. Instead it requires that the experiential dimension of what we are living out be brought into contact with the analytical. And of course one of the reasons I so value a notion of criticality is because it does not allow for either cynicism or sarcasm which are the ultimate expressions of knowing outsidership. Instead the need to navigate the terrain at levels of analysis, feeling and mutuality emerge in what Arendt has so beautifully termed “we, fellow sufferers”.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the discussion around creative practices of knowledge is one of institutional protocols and although I have to deal with it in my daily reality of endless committees and national funding councils and audits of published research , I do not wish to rehearse these on this occasion. Instead of fighting for alternatives I want at this moment to pose questions about the circuits of knowledge that went from amateur to professional, from general to discipline based, and to currently understanding themselves, at a level I am familiar with at least, as being ‘undisciplined’. Obviously the vast body of thought that Michel Foucault put into play with his historical analysis of knowledge formations and the assumptions that these have been based on, has been key here. But we have also been through a decade in which activist initiatives at countering institutional dominance of knowledge production and dissemination have also shifted the ground in terms of expanding the range of the possible formats available for learning. In this instance I want to

pay as much attention to the knowledges themselves, as we do to the demands

put on them: the structures that house them, the strictures that police them and the rhetorics that they are embedded in. In parallel to rethinking formats and protocols there has also been a move to the substances, of knowledge. There is an argument forming here I think, that we should not be arguing formats with counter formats, structures with counter structures, protocols with counter protocols – but rather with emergent knowledge formations that have the ability to undo the ground on which they stand. This is a slightly awkward quest at a moment of digital and cyber culture in which the truly innovative dimension of the work being done and effecting us all at every level, is in the constitution of new platforms of access and new modes of ever wider dissemination and of address through increasingly sophisticated methods of marketing in the widest possible sense. And so I am aware of how antiquated the desire to deal with the substance of knowledge sounds within such an expanding circuitry. But as Paul Mason has recently argued under the aegis of ‘postcapitalism’ – the rise of automation, the over abundance of information that is clashing with market pricing policies on the one hand, is equally buttressed by a contradictory rise of new collaborative modes of not-for-profit production divorced from markets on the other. These arguments do indicate that the pure forms-driven innovation, are increasingly being countered by new modes of production that are grounded in substance and content. That substance and content though can no longer be underpinned by old ideological drives, nor occupy old hierarchical positions nor operate through old authorities.

To advocate for creative practices of knowledge is to advocate for its undisciplining as well as to recognize that there is no clarity about its address – who is the recipient of this knowledge and what interpretative tools they have to make

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, H. (1943). *We Refugees*, in Marc Robinson (ed.), *Altogether Elsewhere. Writers on Exile*, Washington, Harvest Books 1996.

use of it is no longer a clear trajectory. It is to argue that it needs to be viewed as an a-signifying practice that produces ruptures and affects within the map of knowledge. This is difficult since the legacy of knowledge we have inherited from the Enlightenment has viewed knowledge as teleological, linear, cumulative, consequent, and verifiable either through experimentation or through orders of logic and sequential argumentation.

And of course, It is slippery to try and talk about the knowledge itself, slippery to avoid essentialism or notions of autonomy and equally awkward to avoid the heroics that attach themselves to the declaration of ‘the new’. In this context Foucault’s ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ comes to mind. But not necessarily as he may have meant it in terms of repressed knowledges that come from less normative or less hegemonic positions of class, sexuality or epistemology – Instead perhaps a contemporary notion of such an ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ is to do with their pursuit of ‘unfitting’ bodies of knowledge from their accepted frames, leaving their place within the chain of argumentation and drawing to themselves unexpected companions , company whose attachment and proximity can provide paradigmatic challenge rather than arguing and supplying affirmation.

## A-Signification and Singularisation

This is the process by which knowledge becomes A-signifying knowledge – as Simon O’Sullivan has argued “For Deleuze and Guattari, an a-signifying rupture is a process by which the rhizome resists territorialization, or attempts to signify, or name it by an overcoding power. It is the process by which the rhizome breaks out of its boundaries (deterritorializes) and

then reassembles or collects itself elsewhere and else-when (reterritorializes), often

<sup>4</sup> O’Sullivan, S. (2006). *Academy: The Production of Subjectivity*. In: I. Rogoff and A. Nollert, ed., A.C.A.D.E.M.Y. 1st ed. Berlin: Revolver.

assuming a new or shifted identity. In the classroom, assignifying ruptures are those processes students employ to avoid being just students, that classrooms use to avoid being just classrooms, that content uses to avoid being just subject matters, and that teachers use to avoid being just teachers. Asignifying ruptures are those various processes by which rhizomes proliferate, wallow, accrete, spread, shatter and reform, disrupt into play, seeming chaos, or anarchy”.<sup>4</sup>

So the process by which knowledge assumes as significatory forms, is one that destabilizes its relation to other fixed knowledges and acquires an affective surplus.

Elsewhere recently I’ve argued that education needs to engage with the notion of ‘FREE’. Obviously it is not the romance of liberation that I have in mind here in relation to ‘free’. The kind of knowledge that interested me in this proposal to the university was one that was not framed by disciplinary and thematic orders, a knowledge that would instead be presented in relation to an urgent issue, and not an issue as defined by knowledge conventions, but by the pressures and struggles of contemporaneity. When knowledge is unframed it is less grounded genealogically and can navigate forwards rather than backwards. This kind of “unframed” knowledge obviously had a great deal to do with what I had acquired during my experiences in the art world, largely a set of permissions with regard to knowledge and a recognition of its performative faculties — that knowledge does rather than is. But the permissions I encountered in the art world came with their own set of limitations, a tendency to reduce the complex operations of speculation to either illustration or to a genre that would visually exemplify “study” or “research.” Could there be, I wondered, another mode in which knowledge might be set free without having to perform such generic mannerisms, without becoming an

aesthetic trope in the hands of curators hungry for the latest “turn”?

Knowledge cannot be ‘liberated’ as it is endlessly embedded in long lines of transformation which link in inexplicable ways to produce new conjunctions. Nor do I have in mind the romance of ‘avant garde’ knowledge with its oppositional modes of ‘innovation’ as departure and breach. Nor am I particularly interested in what has been termed ‘interdisciplinarity’ with its intimation of movement between disciplines and which de facto leaves intact those membranes of division and logics of separation and containment, through illusions of ‘sharing’. Finally, and I say this with some qualification, neither is my main issue here to undo the disciplinary and professional categories that have divided and isolated bodies of knowledge from one another with the aim of having a heterogeneous field populated by ‘bodies’ of knowledge akin to the marketing strategies that ensure choice and multiplicity and dignify the practices of epistemological segregation by producing endless new subcategories for inherited bodies of named and contained knowledge.

So while we might no be able to liberate knowledge, its exposure to an attitude of disenchantment as its driving force discussed earlier might be a productive rupture.

I have recently seen a range of new works by the Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. In two recent works in particular I found the force of disenchantment producing a conversation around expertise, knowledge and competence, that greatly interested me. In ‘3Abschied’, de Keersmaeker circles around her deep affection of the last song in Mahler’s ‘Songs of the Earth’ – ‘Abschied’.<sup>5</sup> Her fascination and affection,

her recognition of how the work sutures on to contemporary events both personal and

public, makes her want to engage with it in some form – makes her want to know it through her own choreographic practice. But none of the available protocols are able to produce the engagement she is seeking, an engagement that recognizes both the piece’s historical and contemporary resonances. And so her actual longing to engage with a piece of canonical classical music becomes one of the subjects of the work she is making – is it a legitimate desire? – she recounts to us, while sitting on stage, that she cant dance it and she cant sing it despite taking lessons in an attempt to, and she cant engage an orchestra to play it on stage as it is too large (some 110 musicians). Finally she tries with a chamber orchestra in which each players dies on stage after performing their solo and of course this too does not effect the kind of deep immersion she is attempting, being far too symbolic in nature. In the end she is dancing around the stage accompanied by only a piano and failing visibly at what she had wanted to do – to dance Mahler’s ‘Abschied’. This rehearsal of multiple failures focuses on the narrow limitation of the interpretative model – to know something by interpreting it in another medium. It also opens up the very legitimacy of such a passion as the one she feels for the music and she is clearly somewhat embarrassed by her own overwhelming desire for such a conventional practice – but... she deeply loves the piece, continues to be moved by it again and again and must find a path into it, her love of it as legitimate as her inability to come to terms with it, is disruptive of this simple affirmative model.

These are the workings of disenchantment, the duality of a push / pull at once evacuating the value of what one has to hand while at the same time adhering to the drive to engage with it. De Keersmaeker inhabits the rupture she has made manifest, she flails around trying this and that, she lives out the failures of her attempts but does not give up the drive to engage. She has broken down the practice

<sup>5</sup> Bel, J. and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (2008) 3Abschied <https://www.rosas.be/en/products/341-3abschied>

into components and then stripped those of their convictions.

In another recent piece 'Cesena' (I saw the sunrise part of a two part piece) the stage is inhabited by both dancers and singers – everyone seems to have abdicated their expertise – the dancers have been persuaded to sing and the singers to dance – and neither do this particularly well.<sup>6</sup> In the few moments in which each part of the equation do what they were trained to do, we can see the profound difference – but that seems very insignificant within a work that gives the sense of an investigation of ontology, pure being. At one point the combined company stand at the edge of the stage and they all sing at us – they are not performing music, they are being in sound and the difference between performance and being becomes very apparent. This abdication of expertise in favor of some form of inhabitation of stage, body, movement and sound – was exceptionally moving for someone like me who does intellectual work – in particular because it was not a withdrawal, an exit, a named failure. It was a statement that the proficiencies that we have are not up to the task, that we are not defined by them, that they are interchangeable, that the drive to engage is far more important than the ability to achieve – but none of these mean for one moment that one evacuates the stage. It is an instance of a-signifying knowledge as Guattari longed for, knowledge or proficiency that perform an incoherence, a suspension, the opposite of what is expected of them, but nevertheless mean.

This is the practice of disenchantment that I first understood through the thinkers who shaped my own thinking. It is a moment

of suspension but not an exit or a withdrawal. It perceives of this moment of suspension as the subject but it also keeps one eye cocked towards the possibility

of some other form of enchantment, not writing it off but not having an idea of what form it might take. For me these were

"Processes of singularisation – a way of rejecting all these modes of pre-established encoding, all these modes of manipulation and remote control rejecting them in order to construct modes of sensibility, modes of relation with the other , modes of production, modes of creativity that produce a singular subjectivity."<sup>7</sup>

moments of the re-singularisation of dance or choreography through disenchantment and one of the most poignant instances of just how rich the moment of suspension can be.

While Knowledge in the process of ascription produces a spatial and located detachment from its moorings, knowledge in the process of singularisation is relational but not necessarily aligned. As Suely Rolnik argues

So the potential is that practice based research might singularize knowledge rather than be neatly placed within its structures. That materials, associations, narratives, methodologies would pursue one another in unconventional modes, invite each other to dance as it were – art history and astro physics for example might develop some conversation, not just as bodies of knowledge but as the narrative structures they are recounted in, as drives, impulses, personal histories, modes of curiosity, conceits of intelligence etc'. Practice based research then is a permission for knowledge that is tangential

<sup>6</sup> De Keersmaeker, A. T. and Björn Schmelzer / Rosas & graindelavoix. (2011) *Cesena* <https://www.rosas.be/en/productions/350-cesena>

<sup>7</sup> Guattari, F. and Rolnik, S. (2008). Molecular Revolution in Brazil. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), p.51.

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and contingent, driven by disenchantment and whose sociability as it were, its search for companionship, is based not on linearity and centrality but on dispersal, on encounter and on consistent efforts at re-singularisation.

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#### About Irit Rogoff

Irit Rogoff is one of the initiators of the transdisciplinary field of Visual Culture and founder of the department at Goldsmiths. Her initiatives to establish this new field are led by a belief that we must work beyond bodies of inherited disciplinary knowledge and find motivation for knowledge production in the current conditions we are living out.

Her 1997 essay “Studying Visual Culture” (*The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. N. Mirzoeff, 1998, 2nd ed. 2002) articulated some of the substantive and methodological strands of this new field as a meeting ground between the philosophical, the political and contemporary creative practices. Rogoff works between academic teaching, theoretical writing, curatorial projects and organizing public study. Together with colleagues she formed the freethought collective in 2011 who went on to co-curate The Bergen Assembly in 2016.

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