

# A sequel: Thinking with Turbulence

Towards a study programme that approaches research  
as a composite of practices and being in (geo-)politics  
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From what location can we think, in between systems, technologies, generations, time-zones, crossing borders and entangled histories? What happens to 'knowledge' in a socio-technological epoch that predominantly calculates the unknown into capital growth? What can research do for those of us who operate in the field of contemporary art and struggle to think along the violent pressures in the 21st century? What does *thinking under turbulence* actually produce?

October 28, 2015. Twelve students gather around the table of the CCC seminar room, salle 27, located in the main building of the Visual Arts Department of HEAD – Genève on Boulevard Helvétique 9. Four female students decide to form the *Committee of Naming/Renaming* in the context of the *Unmaster Class: Committees of Decolonisation*. Each student introduces herself by explaining that her name changes according to either the country in which she is physically present, or aligns itself with the maternal or paternal lineage that eclipses one parent's family or the other. She is called by a different name whether in Geneva or in Teheran. Her name hides that her family is from Algeria. The *Committee of Naming/Renaming* notes that the academy's name changed ten years ago: l'École supérieure des beaux-arts de Genève has been renamed (fused with Haute École d'arts appliqués) into Haute École d'art et de design Genève, or HEAD – Genève. The concern for *Naming/Renaming* emerged from Nabil Ahmed's lecture 'The Question of West Papua' during the *Unmaster Class: Committees of Decolonisation* that Farid Rakun, member of the artists' initiative ruangrupa (Jakarta), Nabil, architect/researcher from London, and I proposed as an experimental setting and social work-gathering with the objective of tackling geopolitical realities and a social contemporaneity informed by history as necessary elements for framing a research process in the field of art today.

# A gift that cannot be

# refused

It is helpful to leave the notion of ‘research’ aside for a moment in order to turn towards *the curatorial* as a potent term. I will come back to the question of ‘research’, because it is obviously important to be clear how this term resonates within a study programme whose pedagogical foundations have been dedicated to the question of ‘research’ since its institutional formation in 2000. Bringing *the curatorial* into the conversation at this moment allows us to speak through a conceptual framework for sheltering and drawing a temporary constellation that springs from the various research projects around the table, which appear in the form of different practices, languages, knowledges, and subjectivities. In the *Unmaster Class*, the framework accommodates perspectives from architecture, curating, decolonial writing, cultural community work, Indonesian independence; it brings in West Papua, Naomi Klein, and Achille Mbembe, Rob Nixon’s ‘slow violence,’ the Bandung moment 1955 and Soekarno, United Nations’ Committee of 24 (Special Committee on Decolonization), Soeharto, environmental rights and the different horizons as projected by the students: Shirin Neshat, the Master Thesis, the status of students at the University (HES-SO), Algeria, the self-taught Syrian Abounaddara film collective, Catherine Quéloz and Liliane Schneiter, the CCC programme in transition, Walter Benjamin, le traité de Versailles, Hitler’s interpreter Paul-Otto Schmidt, etc. This constellation of voices, theories, systems and periods addresses a condition of transdisciplinarity that I would like to situate closer to the ‘model of reading that is post-disciplinary but that also comes before the separation into disciplines’ as Nina Power proposes in her

text for the *Transdisciplinary Problematics* issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* (2015) to approach those forms of crossing ‘not only from within [a discipline], but also from without, moving across texts and disciplines in a way that raises the possibility of a truly transdisciplinary, collective mode of reading in general’. It is impossible to grapple with this transdisciplinary constellation on one common ground, as it is also counterproductive to sum up that horizon as ‘research’ without understanding that the conditions for ‘doing research’ are equally essential. The term ‘research’ has become an institutional category in the art education framework through peer-reviewed journals, the *plane d’études* calculating ECTS, ‘scientific excellence’ in interdisciplinary programmes of funding bodies, research institutes at art academies, and international conferences. Those structures of institutionalisation erase, or limit at least, the space *to think with the conditions*, for example, to think with the complexity of elements that constitute the environment of research. Today, it feels as though ‘research’ struggles to live outside of the bureaucratic tick-box in funding applications, which seems to be exactly the opposite of ‘doing research’ that had enabled previous generations of artists to break away from the idolatry of objecthood in the art market, or to develop a kung-fu-like technique to counter institutionalisation by analysing its very structures. Anselm Franke addresses this point when he argues: ‘What happened to conceptual art is already happening to “history” and “research” as well: the commodification as a genre. Research has become institutionalised on all levels. It is monitored. It makes every student in this programme here pay tuition fees.’

To be clear, I am not alluding, with *the curatorial*, to the many curatorial study programmes, edited readers, books, schools or Young-Curator-Biennale-workshops. Rather, I propose to approach the curatorial as a ‘gift

before [...] the curator/viewer relation, prior to any contractual determination' that has taken place, as Jean-Paul Martinon writes in *Theses in the Philosophy of Curating* (2013) published by the Curatorial/Knowledge group at Goldsmiths, which I joined in 2007. The curatorial is a gift that comes unexpected and without a contractual agreement, in other words, without the cultural rule to deliver a gift in return. It is a lived experience, impolite but generous and cannot be refused. In that sense, the curatorial operates like a travel companion during the trajectory of a process, ready to navigate between the horizons of language, systems, discourses and practices. The curatorial is something similar to a navigational chart that allows the 'researcher' to move around without having a map or a compass, without originating from the place of investigation, without having been born in Geneva, without having family here, without mastering its cultural, social and linguistic idioms – but still being able to find orientation amidst the layers made of knowledge and non-knowledge. The curatorial operates through movement that is similar to the type of 'navigation [that] is not only a movement through space but the shaping of that space by this very movement' as Fabien Giraud and Ida Soulard propose in their contribution to this volume. A research process conducted through such a knowledge-based *polis* – as Tom Holert frames his approach to the political implications and neo-liberal imperatives of knowledge production today – that is sceptical about mastering a discourse towards normative excellence and likes to speculate, to dance, to delay, to just laugh and joke around, to be misunderstood (sometimes), and thus, to disobey the principles of institutionalisation. The curatorial likes to invent a conceptual personae similar to those that Reza Negarestani introduces in *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Material* (2008). There, as

Kodwo Eshun discussed with the students in the Theory Fiction seminar, the nameless substance of *oil* is the lubricant that narrates the world through a composite of Zoroastrianism, physics, Iran, a hotel room in Istanbul, and the Cross of Akht. As if *oil* is a sentient entity, endowed with capacities to remember, to forget, to think and to feel – only our human brains might be simply insufficiently programmed to receive the message of 'what matter thinks' as Ursula Biemann elaborates with the students in Eshun's seminar. It remains crucial to emancipate 'research' from its academic imperatives that demand the mastering of a discipline. It is necessary to unmaster the principle of 'best practice' that otherwise considers itself superior to other forms of practice. Or, as Griselda Pollock argues, the question of 'methodology [...] takes place *through* a practice, or *on* a practice, or, when you are describing the curatorial, curation can itself be a research exercise. I would define it as a *thinking through making or thinking about making*.'

## Xeno-punk

Ongoing conversations with students of the CCC at this moment have taught me that it is necessary to flesh out, in each seminar, the question of practice in the framework of a Research Master Programme that dedicates itself to reading, listening, textual work, theory (as a practice), again reading and writing – as this volume at hand exemplifies – apart from all further possible forms of practice. It is *practice* amidst all research desires that comes with an impatience to re-entangle with *theory* without Theory – two fields that have been kept separate since the first art academy, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, opened its doors with the emergence of European

modernity around 1648. Practice is necessary because politics takes place *in practice*: we are *being in politics* as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states in *Death of a Discipline* (2003) when we *think with* the conditions of making. Returning to those students who struggle with *practice* in the CCC, or who have the impression that amidst all reading, listening and transcribing talks, editing texts, looking for books and reading lists that *practice* is absent: the practice of *being in politics* should not to be mixed up with learning technical skills for operating the new HD-digital camera, though this is important too. It also should not be misunderstood as learning canonised vocabularies of Critical Theory, though surely, it is critically important to know about the mechanisms of the Cultural Industry in order to analyse the archaeology of the contemporary object-oriented cultural industrial regimes; learning the educational principles of Brecht's 'estrangement effect' is vitally enlightening for sharpening the weapons to politicise the cultural class struggle by revealing the invisible mechanisms – tiny moments and gestures – of the ruling class. But what if alienation is the living condition that we cannot escape? What if critique, that which our teachers taught us, has been stabilising the teacher's position, but did not change the structures of power – gender, class, race, knowledge-forms – throughout the entire past century? Following Françoise Vergès timely call to decolonise Europe, it is necessary to call for resisting the 'idealisation of resistance,' historically and socially. It reminds me of a tutorial and conversation with a student, who journeyed as an LGBTIQ activist from Lima, Peru and arriving as a student in the CCC Programme in Geneva found himself being interpellated by an idealisation of resistance, as if to speak for a queer movement and for the so-called 'Global South'. Following Eyal Weizman's call for a 'citizen science' as the only possibility for

practising justice when the law obstructs it from being served in the court: 'Politics is dangerous [...] and this is exactly the moment when theory can be useful, like a yardstick that helps you navigate,' as he declares in his conversation with the students. Or, following Laboria Cuboniks' clear conclusion during the 'Xenofeminist Session': '...if we keep waiting for a moment when we can advance an entirely unsullied politics, we'll be waiting forever. History up until this point has been a river of shit!' This reads like punk-speech, but a punk who refuses the idealisation of resistance, who is a stranger, a *xeno-punk*, to any forms of normalised/naturalised resistance. It speaks of a political urgency for popular culture that is 'going to make punk seem like nothing' as Mark Fisher posted on Facebook on October 24, 2013.

Beirut, Thursday, November 12, 2015. David Bowie. La Culture Lutte. Theory Fiction. Paris, Friday, November 13, 2015. FNS. Oil-bag bombs (soak deeper into the façade-cleaning). Grand Théâtre. Oskar Freysinger. Initiative populaire "Pour un revenu de base inconditionnel". Research Practice. T3 Swiss Universities. Joint Plan of Action. GVA. Livret pour étrangers G. Grenzgängerin. Critical Theory. CCC Alumni Association. Workfare. Xenofeminism. The Curatorial. François Hollande extends the state-of-exception in France beyond January 2017. Ports Francs Genève. Situated Art Practices. Istanbul, Wednesday, March 19, 2016. Prix Manor. Prince. Safe Host Data Center SH1. I, Daniel Blake. Tuesday, November 8, 2016. Anis Amri. AMAQ [news agency of Daesh]. AfD [Alternative für Deutschland]. Political Studies. John Berger. 4,913 migrants and refugees died on the Mediterranean Sea in 2016 – on average 14 people per day.

be Thinking under Turbulence

The *Unmaster Class* took place during the *semaine de tous les possibles* – the everything-is-possible week. Nabil's lecture 'The Question of West Papua' provided a repository of concepts, terms, and working methods to approach the seemingly entirely unfamiliar topic of West Papua in Geneva. The landscape of West Papua, the Western part of the Papua Island of Indonesia, hosts the world's largest gold mine (Grasberg Mine) and major copper resources, which explains the violent history of the Indonesian military occupation that goes hand-in-hand with the 'slow violence' (Rob Nixon) of rare-earth material extraction by multi-national companies such as Freeport-McMoRan (USA), leaving spatial and environmental traces of incurable destruction. During the session, the group began to develop the means to operate an 'environmental-historical methodology' for investigating the entangled geography between Puncak Jaya, the nearby mountain of the Grasberg Mine, and Geneva, where in early 1961 the United Nations in Geneva issued C-24: Special Committee on Decolonization by implementing the Resolution 1514. Only a few months ago, Prianka Srinivasan reported in *The Diplomat* that the UN has failed – again – to recognise West Papua's struggle for independence with the consequence that West Papua – again – depends on Indonesia in its struggle to gain economic independence from multi-national companies such as Freeport-McMoRan that continue to exploit gold resources. The Papuan population not only fights for independence but also ecological/environmental rights.

# Transgenerational time

While writing up this sequel, I am reading Donna Haraway's new book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* that arrived in bookshops in Berlin in early Fall 2016. The book can be found listed in the 'contextual material' of 'When Matter Thinks' with Ursula Biemann and Kodwo Eshun and of 'The Anthropogenic Image' with Armin Linke and Gene Ray. Students are reading Haraway's seminal essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988) in the seminar *Situated Art Practices or Pratiques Artistiques Situées* with Anne-Julie Raccoursier. In the Research Practice seminar with Griselda Pollock, she questions the actuality of situatedness in a time when we are implicated in proxy politics and global infrastructures by the means of technology and the *longue durée* of histories. Pollock argues it will be necessary to investigate the constitution of the 'planetary subject' that Gayatri Spivak thinks of when she writes that 'the planet has to overwrite the globe [...] The globe is on our computers. No one lives there.' Territorial exclusivity is impossible in times of turbulence. We humans who are living on a planet on loan, cannot afford to split the earth into millions of parallel universes. Instead, the making of the world is only possible *with* each other, crossing into each other's cultures, languages, sentiments, dreams, and histories. This is complex enough to be the most difficult condition to think with, to operate, to realise and to navigate. Some will argue that the complexity of human existence has always been the foundation of the human labour of thought. However, it is vital to recognise processes that operate through transgenerational time, not for the sake of competing for complexity, but to allow for modes of emancipation that are specific to the temporal and political conditions of each generation. In other words, this writing takes place in a moment when we humans might be confronting the

fulfilment of biologist Lynn Margulis' speculation that a species only progresses successfully according to evolutionary rules when it develops towards its own self-destruction. *The globe is on our computers. No one lives there.* It is critical to realise, however, that Internet access is not a global standard; 60% of the world's human population does not have regular access to the Internet. However, looking from the second floor of Geneva's Safe Host Data Centre, close to the Geneva Freeport and Rolex Headquarters, the rows of cooling turbines outside of building SH1 indicate that computational algorithms certainly siphon water and electricity 24/7. In other words, typing Spivak's statement 'The globe is on our computers' into Google or DuckDuckGo means plugging into energy infrastructures through fingers, eyes, attentions, and brainwaves as if we had bioports in our coccyxes that have turned us already into playmates for Allegra Geller's game *eXistenZ* (1999).

# Period of incubation

It helps to read Haraway's words: 'In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe [...] of clearing away the present and the past in order to make future for coming generations. Staying with trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with trouble requires learning to be truly present...]' The concern in our 'terrapolis' is not so much an investigation into the mode or the *what* of thinking. Instead, it begins at an earlier stage. In times of jet-set curating, Biennale-tourism, planetary

computation and profound political shifts towards a *new* 'Great Moving Right Show' (Stuart Hall, 1979), we need to investigate *where* the 'truly in the present'-thinking takes place amidst troubles and turbulence. *Where* are the conditions for thinking with the fellow traveller, the political friend, the species-companion, even with the field enemy, the friendly competitor or sentient entity? *Staying with the Trouble.* Goodness. That sounds like a continuously fatal present tense. Linguists call this the Gerund form. What present tense is meant here? The tense of writing? Of thinking? Of generating knowledge? Of being with? Is it possible to do all of these at once without the feeling of speed, impotence and incompetence? Thinking under turbulence asks for a voice like Stuart Hall's who, however, could not prevent us from the current rise of 'authoritarian populism' in the U.S. and in Europe. It echoes in the radical pedagogies of minds such as Henry Giroux who could not slow down the neo-liberal speed in Higher Education. It calls for the need to re-activate 'the inscription of the feminine' into academic study programmes as Griselda Pollock suggests. It necessitates the re-activation of Hannah Arendt's thoughts on the 'end of the rights of man' as Pierre Hazan has been reading with the students in his Political Studies seminar, for creating a space to analyse the active forces of political violence that discipline people – again today – by categorising them as 'refugees.' Thinking under turbulence occurs in the era of globalisation that 'takes place in capital and data. Everything is damage control. Information has ruined knowing and reading' as Gayatri Spivak argues. It has generated a 'communicative capitalism' (Jodi Dean) where the quantity of 'likes', 'comments', and 'tweets' defines the quality of a message.

Thinking under turbulence demands that we seek orientation, to watch for friends and allies, to collectivise

and ‘slow down.’ Slowness is rare amidst busy schedules and institutional project-machines. It needs to be trained, as Marion von Osten and Grant Watson propose, through taking a seat, sitting down and in ‘helping each other to find situations in which you can sit.’ This calls for different ways of positioning ourselves as subjects, as Yann Chateigné reflected, that are not defined by biographical records but through gaining self-knowledge, that emerge from processing unknown terrain. Slowing down takes place through the intensity of listening as if the thoughts of each person propose a new horizon that helps to navigate in a collective effort. Slowing down means granting the process of thinking a period of incubation, as if it breeds a virus that mutated with the capacity to survive in times of scarcity. Maybe the space of a Master Programme of two years helps to make one realise the symptoms and processes of that kind of incubation.

Thinking under turbulence goes beyond the scope of one generation. It operates in transgenerational time of which the processes of naming/re-naming call forth its geo-spatial, political and social implications. It implicitly demands, therefore, to question the dominance of one school of critique or one culture for taking collective positions. Thinking under turbulence departs and inscribes itself in our lived experiences as planetary subjects from which we must re-engineer our thinking. In other words, if there is ‘slow violence’ (Rob Nixon) that inscribes itself across generations and geographies – often at the thresholds of undetectability – then there must be slow revolution that stands with ‘revolutionary patience’ as the blogger, friend and theorist Mark Fisher argued a year ago. More needs to be done. January 13, 2017.

This text is dedicated to Mark Fisher (1968-2017).

This text was written as a sequel to the *Thinking under Turbulence* colloquium that took place from September 2015 to May 2016 at the seminar room of the CCC Research Master Programme of the Visual Arts Department at HEAD – Genève. The CCC was inaugurated as one of the first Research Master Programmes in Switzerland in 2000 by Catherine Quéloz who conceptualised it together with Liliane Schneider until 2014, informed by the radical pedagogies of Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren. The proximity of the abbreviation ‘CCC’ stands to reason the resonance with the legendary Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham as the CCC library suggests through its publications by Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, or Angela McRobbie that can be found next to the writings of Walter Benjamin, Mahmoud Darwish, bell hooks and the books of research-exhibitions by Marion von Osten. Kodwo Eshun’s readings of the CCC bookshelves spotted also, here fittingly, Alain Greenspan’s *The Age of Turbulence*.

CONTEXTUAL MATERIAL

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