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Review of *The Pleasure of Research* by Henk Slager

Slager, Henk. 2015. *The Pleasure of Research*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz.
<https://www.hatjecantz.de/the-pleasure-of-research-6412-1.html>

This book on *artistic research* is substantially anchored in its own field, that is to say, it is a research that emanates from effective experimentation with artistic processes. The reason why we begin our global appreciation referring to the “nature” of the edition derives from the fact that it is a text free of “extra-artistic foundations” and intentionally distant from commitments to philosophy of art, aesthetics, or art theory, a theoretical attitude that we often observe in many texts about artistic research. No matter which part of the book we choose, in each of its ten chapters the author seeks in the very elaboration of artistic practices, and in the arrangement of the elements that give shape and meaning to the presented objects and situations, the set of creative notions and the grounding for what is affirmed about artistic research, revealing an expressive independence from external conceptual apparatuses which are dangerously homogenizing and usurping the vitality of artistic thought and creation.

In our view, this concern expressed by Henk Slager should guide any text that intends to “touch” artistic research with “authenticity,” leaving thus, by contrast, open space for other research possibilities, mainly those characterized by argumentations in which artistic notions and extra-artistic foundations converge, as we may see in *research into art* and even in certain specific forms of *Art-Based Research*, which associate the practice of artistic research with the fields of

aesthetics, philosophy of art, or other theoretical motivations. As a limit, we could say that we may develop reciprocal relationship conceived between *artistic research* and *research into art* (based on aesthetics and art philosophy), but the “rule” of this reciprocity game has to be produced by artistic research and never by art philosophy, which will be subordinated to artistic research according to a certain degree of “breathing” and autonomy.

Having exposed these aspects concerning the “nature” of Henk Slager's narrative and the peculiarity of the book's argumentation, the choice of its title thus sheds a new light, since the reference to the “dimension of pleasure” it conveys openly diverges from the classical methodologies of artistic research literature. Pointing now to a form of research which requires the pleasure that an artist-researcher receives during a long process of work, with which one *fully recognizes him- or herself*, both in what s/he does and what s/he thinks, seeing mirrored in the presented production the traces of the personal identity metamorphoses and the traces of the conquest of personal creative languages. In our view, the dimension of pleasure that echoes in *The Pleasure of Research* also refers to the “delight” of not being forced—by the Academy or by other inhibiting institutions—to research in an atmosphere of dependence on “knowledge” produced outside the art world processes, as if it were some unwanted “outsourcing.” Something that even may have certain “elective affinities” with creative production, but which is not intrinsic to it—for example, explaining the interaction experienced in an *installation of artistic inquiry* with the categories of Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, or with the phenomenology of by Merleau-Ponty.

This “intention” of creating a certain distance from “knowledge” coming from philosophy, aesthetics, or art theory—we say intention because we consider that Henk Slager methodologically emphasizes this effective possibility of distance—is accomplished in this book by the presentation of several notions of artistic research (which we will refer to in the following paragraph), curating artistic research, and installation of the produced research. However, the author establishes a certain reciprocity with philosophers who think particularly creatively and who often take artistic production as the central theme of their concerns, namely Friedrich Nietzsche, Roland Barthes (notably with *The Gay Science* and *The Pleasure of the Text*, which *The Pleasure of Research* subtly evokes), or Gilles Deleuze, author with whom Henk Slager does not hesitate to show affinity, without affecting the authenticity of artistic research notions. For example, in the fourth chapter, “Methodological Mapping,” he does not hesitate to quote a Deleuze-inspired sentence by the author John Rajchman: “the process of thinking in art is fundamentally *extra-territorial*. Or, to use Deleuze's own idiom, thinking is always

deterritorializing in an *absolute way*, one from which there is no way back.”¹ With this parallelism, he just wants to highlight a certain “oscillation” that can be experienced between “artistic knowledge production” and the “the pleasure of the process of thinking.” The connection established with philosophical reflection has also moments of divergence, as seen in the ninth chapter, when Henk Slager moves away from Michel Foucault’s notion of “archiving” and “device of power” to develop a *Critique of Archival Reason*, which is also the title of the exhibition he has curated in Dublin, at the Royal Hibernian Academy, in 2010, where we have artistic thinking about the installation task of archiving, as seen in the projects of Shoji Kato, *Tie: Place and Symbols, or Index*, by Sean Snyder.

Let’s now discuss the central notions, or rather the rhizomatic notions (adopting Henk Slager’s own speech, “Artistic thinking as a form of pure rhizomatic thought separates artistic research from aborescent and sedentary conceptions of knowledge”)² that run through the ten chapters of the book. Among several categories suggested in the book, we chose the following ones: “experimental aesthetics”; “artistic thinking”; “laboratory-style environments”; “creative practices of knowledge” (shared with the researcher Irit Rogott); and “artistic archiving.” It is an extremely dense and interdisciplinary set of notions, which are meant to displace aprioristic research methodologies; as a consequence of this position of principle, the attitude towards “categories” is clearly anti-academic, although “investing” and extending its disruptive energy to academic circles, in particular to the institutions in which the third cycle (PhD) is functioning, as we can read in chapter I, “Temporary Autonomous Research,” with references to the Bologna Process, or in chapter II, “As the Academy Turns,” with several research examples and references to the project *Agonistic Academies* (with a 2011 publication of which Henk Slager is co-editor).

Derived from the fruitfulness of the projects explained in the book and the vision for the future for artistic research expressed by Henk Slager, the notions listed above make a decisive contribution to the dignity of artistic reflection in the Academia, causing the erosion of restrictive procedures that characterize the academic world, making room for the demand for a thorough research, free from the doctrinal constraints of aesthetics (hence artistic inquiry is projected as “experimental aesthetics”); an artistic research which is independent from protocol and peripheral mediations of its authenticity. Artistic research is also “laboratorial” and confluent with non-artistic (or less creative) researching practices, deconstructing its own methods, but also opening gaps in the methods of others, based on a principle of intelligible deconstruction,

¹ John Rajchman, “Art as a Thinking Process, New Reflections”, in *Art as a Thinking Process*.

² Henk Slager, *The Pleasure of Research*, Ostfildern, ed. Hatje Cantz, 2015, p.43.

arguable and exposable to the *other of the discussion*, in the double sense of something that may be exposed: that is, it exposes itself as a set of “archives,” arguments and notions for theoretical judgments, but it also exposes itself or installs itself creatively in a determined space for an appreciation and differentiation of other objects of knowledge, awakening artistic and aesthetic judgments of the community to which this set of “objects” has some significance.

For the full functioning of this dynamic set of notions, the book is built on a fluid network between symposiums, collective exhibitions and essays on artistic research, resulting in a projectual (and doctrinal) consistency that has started around 2006 with the creation of the EARN platform (in conjunction with Jan Kaila and Gertrud Sandqvist), through multiple projects such as *Art as a Thinking Process* (Venice, 2011), or *Staging Knowledge* (Istanbul 2012), or later on, after the year of *The Pleasure of Research*'s edition, with other publications and projects, namely the partnerships that are developed with Uniarts Helsinki's Academy of Fine Arts, in particular with researchers Jan Kaila, Anita Seppä, and Mika Elo, to conceive the *Research Pavilion* in Venice, which is already in its third edition (2015, 2017, 2019). In fact, the coordination and co-ordination of these curatorial projects and editions has the merit of introducing artistic research into spaces for an ever-widening audience, which is more than enough to read Henk Slager's book carefully.

However, this network of referrals between symposiums, exhibitions and publications on artistic research also generates some misconceptions, deserving some objections from us to what is conveyed in this book. More precisely, we would say that two arguments can be directed to the book, namely: (1) the articulation between symposiums, publications, and curatorial projects does not always allow us to assess the modalities of materialization of research proposals, and sometimes we verify a certain overlap and indifference between *art exhibition* and *art research exhibition*; (2) the nature of the presented artistic and research projects tends to be *homogeneous* in their plasticity and spatialization, at least if we judge them after the photographic traces of the exhibitions. That is, apart from some performances such as the 2010 Opera Soap *As the Academy Turns*,³ and certain projections of which we have received photographic testimony, the dominant features of the artistic projects tend to be highly

³ “The soap *As the Academy Turns* brings together two diverging poles. On the one hand, it addresses contemporary artistic practice, and autonomous artistic research and production as outcomes of art education. On the other hand, it presents the art academy ‘remodeled’ as a product of the entertainment industry in the context of popular daytime television serving a mainstream, hedonistic, neo-liberal, consumerist ideology. Elements of critique and of hoax are brought together through the soap opera form so that the genre’s exaggerated dramatic style subverts and deconstructs popular views on higher art education.” <https://manifesta.org/2010/10/as-the-academy-turns/>

homogenized installations in their visual devices, with strongly documental, seriously compromised with the notions of “archivism,” “showcasing,” in our view missing a broader horizon of plastic and installation possibilities, in other words, the lack of other possibilities of “experimental aesthetics,” less conditioned by laboratory immersion and less indebted to a “reason of artistic archive.”

In our view, the almost exclusion of other artistic and investigative orientations may be attributed to a certain distance taken from the production and the artistic research done in the light of “creative capacity” and in a “studio” atmosphere. Not because “creative capacity” and the “studio” are to be perpetuated as a rule of artistic production and disruptive thinking model, but because this book adopts a perspective that eclipses many other forms of organization, curation, and public sharing of artistic research. For example, referring to the Bologna Process Henk Slager touches upon the aspects we are mentioning, alluding to a time with the following requirements and characteristics: “Thinking in terms of creation, creative capacity, studio, and talent is no longer accentuated. What is at the core of the current discourse are artistic constructions and interdisciplinary activities which, going ‘beyond the studio,’ seem to be able to occur anywhere if they can properly connect or respond to a given or required context. Topical visual art, then, should most of all be ‘research-based’ and ‘context-responsive’.”⁴

However, now to conclude our appreciation of the book, it contributes deeply to make artistic research more robust and contemporary, allowing its readers (and visitors to the projects mentioned therein) an understanding and an internalization of this researching phenomenon which, having behind itself a flow of thirty years of reflection and agonistic, will still need as many years to become completely autonomous.

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⁴ Henk Slager, op. cit., p.7.

Biography

José Quaresma (Portugal, 1965), Lives and works in Lisbon.

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Graduated in Painting, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon (FBAUL), 1996. PhD in Philosophy of Art at the Philosophy Dep., Univ. of Lisbon (theme: *Intersubjectivity and Abyss in Aesthetics Discussion*), 2008. Master in Philosophy of Art, University of Lisbon (theme: *The Experience of the Sublime in Suprematism*), 2001. Assistant Professor at FBAUL (Painting Department), where currently teaches the following subjects: Painting I; Models II, Printmaking, and Pictorial Thinking; since 1997 has curated many artistic projects, in Portugal and abroad, in the Painting field, Contemporary Printmaking, Public Art Projects, others. Since 2008 has edited and co-edited several books about Painting, Digital Sphere, Sciences of Art, Contemporary Printmaking, Art and Public Space, and organized lectures about Research in Arts, Public Art and the Public Sphere, Printmaking, others. Individual and Group Exhibitions since 1982.

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