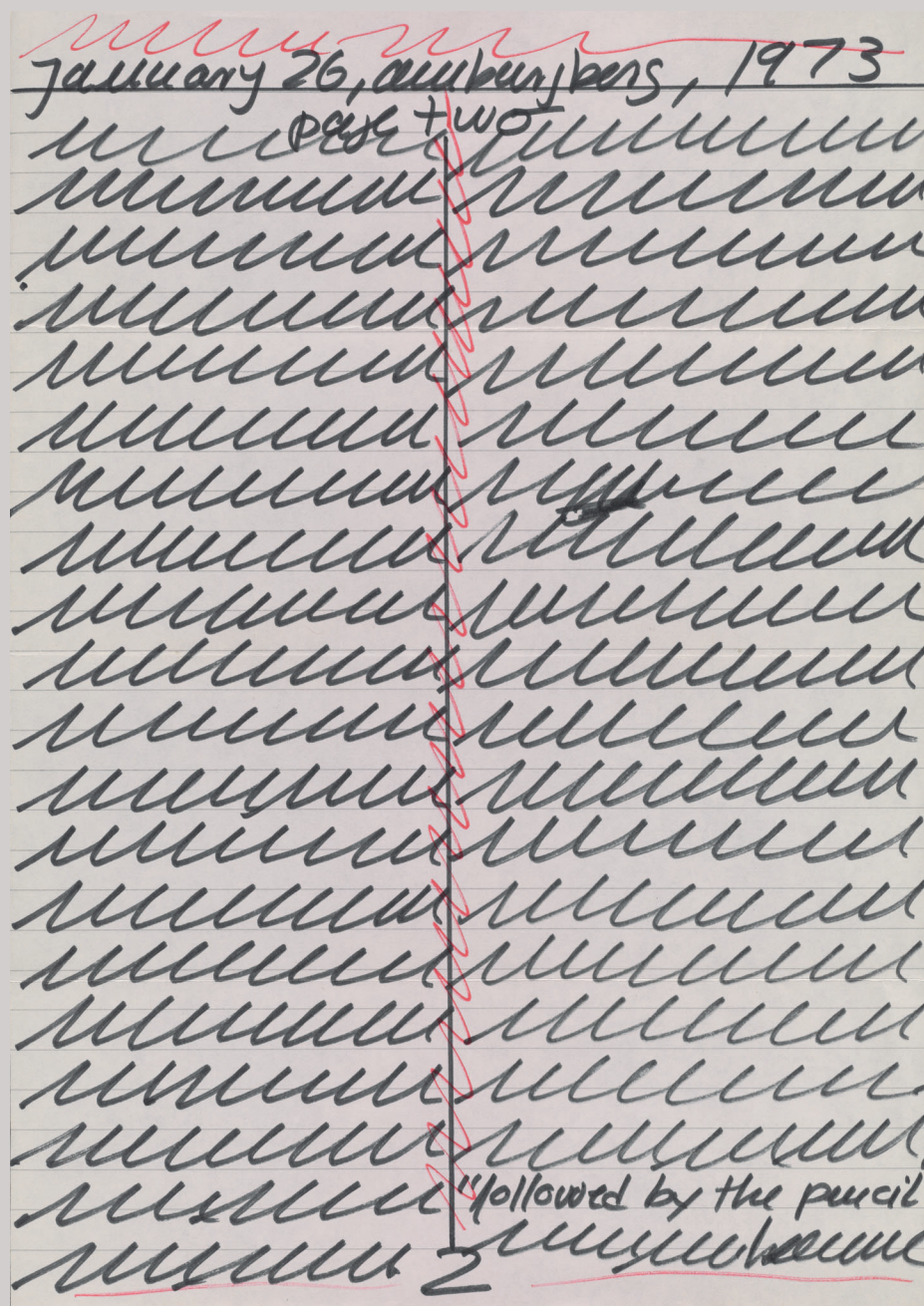


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FEAR OF KNOWLEDGE

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NR. 33 2025

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LOUIS-ANTOINE MÈGE, LEJLA MRGAN,
ANTHI-DANAÉ SPATHONI, PAULA STOICA

INTRODUCTION

Fear of Knowledge?

Artistic and Curatorial Practices as Critical Knowledge Production

In his 1960 contribution to the prestigious Reith Lectures on BBC Radio, art historian Edgar Wind drew attention to a persistent and problematic assumption that had shaped art history since the early nineteenth century: the belief that knowledge impedes the artist's imagination.¹ The transitional period between the Enlightenment and Romanticism was crucial for the consolidation of this notion, as the ideal figure of the artist was radically redefined. Moving away from the earlier conception of the artist as a *doctus artifex* or *pictor doctus*—a learned artist distinguished from the mere craftsman by erudition and intellect (Białostocki 1984; Damm, Thimann, and Zittel 2013, 2–6)—Romanticism enshrined a different ideal: the artist as an intuitive genius, untainted by the “touch of cold philosophy,” as John Keats famously put it in *Lamia* (1820).² Despite the fact that artists continued to acquire and mobilize various forms of knowledge³ (e.g. Holert 1998; Le Men 2016), this Romantic idea proved extraordinarily resilient within academia as well as the broader public and policy makers.

This idea of the artist as a kind of anti-intellectual figure resurfaced in Denmark in 2021, where heated discussions and political debates arose over the role of research, theory, reading, and writing at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Some of these issues have already been addressed in *Periskop* 24 (2020), which looked at the idea of “unruly knowledge” in artistic research. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and various crises—social, political, economic,

Part of Bertel Thorvaldsen's
book collection at Thorvaldsens
Museum. © Jakob Faurvig,
Thorvaldsens Museum.

humanitarian, planetary, ecological, and climate Periskop 24 presented artistic research as a critical, dynamic field that raises awareness about the precariousness of life in its various forms and fosters the imagining of alternative worlds. In the meantime, the cry for reimagining and building an equitable, inclusive, and genuinely sustainable world has grown even louder and more urgent. In line with the transformative potential attributed to artistic research by Periskop 24, our issue adopts a broader yet complementary perspective, expanding the claim raised by our colleagues to include artistic production and curatorial practice more generally.

The first occasion to discuss knowledge and artistic production arose in an online session of the 13th triennial NORDIK Conference of Art History in the Nordic Countries (2022), entitled “The Fear of Knowledge. Artists’ Book Collections.” This session focused quite narrowly on the relationship between artists and books—how artists collected, owned, circulated, and used them—as a way of probing the broader tension between knowledge and artistic practice.

A second call for papers, which has resulted in the present volume, shifted the focus slightly. While still grounded in the historical tension between, on the one hand, the artist as *doctus artifex* and, on the other, as an intuitive genius, it sought to expand the scope, situating the debate within the broader history and politics of knowledge, considering multiple forms of knowledge beyond books, and explicitly engaging with critical concerns such as postcolonialism, decolonialization, power structures, and the situatedness of knowledge. The issue at hand thus opens up to wider, more theoretical dimensions of knowledge production and circulation. The papers collected here engage primarily with twentieth-century and contemporary art, more specifically conceptualism, exploring how artists and exhibitions negotiate, contest, or reimagine knowledge. Together, they situate questions of knowledge within broader artistic, theoretical and historical contexts.

From Conceptual Art to an “Epistemological Turn” in Art

As art historian Tom Holert argues, “Marcel Duchamp and Conceptual art paved the way for the visual arts to be considered a special realm for interrogating knowledge claims and art’s ontology” (2020, 11). Since the early twentieth century, but especially from the mid-1960s onwards, artists have increasingly challenged the myths of the unlearned creator and the purely formal autonomy of art. From this perspective, the emergence of Conceptual art in the late 1960s can be understood as a rejection of the “fear of knowledge,” or conversely, as a reevaluation of “the potential cognitive significance of art” (Harrison and Orton

1984, xiii). In a seminal 1968 article, critics Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler summarized this shift:

During the 1960's, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. [...] The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete. (*Lippard and Chandler 1968, 31*)

Art never became wholly dematerialized, nor did the object become obsolete, however much traditional know-how, manual skills, and material qualities were abruptly devalued. Instead, ideas, information, and process assumed central roles in contemporary artistic practice. As conceptual artist Ian Burn declared in the 1980s: "What was witnessed with Conceptual Art was an absolute separation of mental or intellectual work from manual work, with a revaluing of the intellectual and a devaluing of the manual" (1980, 61). This theme recurs throughout his writings, collected in an anthology reviewed by **Louis-Antoine Mège** at the end of this issue.

Stephen Melville famously described the "extraordinary epistemologism of the sixties" (1996, 234), which found concrete expression in a generation of artists who actively appropriated, manipulated, and assembled wide-ranging interdisciplinary knowledge—not merely as material, but through innovative methods. Artistic practice increasingly adopted analytical and critical approaches (observation, description, analysis, criticism), sometimes reflecting the rigor of philosophical or scientific inquiry. In this context, language (including mathematics, logic, and even algorithms) emerged as a privileged medium for knowledge-based practice. Some works were logically and linguistically structured, such as Mel Bochner's *Measurement Series: By Formula (CIRCLE)* (1970) or Christine Kozlov's *Neurological Compilation, The Physical Mind Since 1945 (Project 1: The Bibliography)* (ca. 1967). Others functioned as iconotextual devices, such as Adrian Piper's *Hypothesis Situation #19* (1969-70) or *Art is all over* (1971) by N. E. THING CO. LTD. More broadly, exhibition spaces themselves became "studies." Texts, books, archives, matrices, lists, filing systems, maps, diagrams, charts, and even furniture such as tables, chairs, and bookshelves—objects conventionally associated with intellectual labor and the organization of knowledge—were presented in an art context. Examples include Joseph Kosuth's *Information*

Room (1970), which displayed dozens of books and newspapers on tables, and *Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry* (1973-75) by Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, which combined binders, screens, and wall-mounted documents. In addition, at the end of the 1960s, American conceptual gallery owner Seth Siegelaub was dedicated to “redefining the exhibition catalogue, running a publishing house, selling rare books, building libraries, compiling bibliographies and creating online databases” (Martinetti 2012). This phenomenon extended beyond post-Duchampian practices and Conceptual art, significantly reshaping both the foundations and the formal structures of contemporary art (McEvelley 2005; Osborne 2013; Holert 2020). Art theorist Peter Wollen even described Conceptual art as “the single greatest shift in art since the Renaissance” (1999, 81).

From the postwar period to the present, artists have not only renewed their interest in knowledge but have also interrogated its forms, criteria, scope, and limits (Holert 2020, 50). Attention thus shifted from the nature of art itself (ontology) to the types of understanding it generates (epistemology). In doing so, artists established new and often experimental relations between art, knowledge, and their social uses,⁴ thereby challenging conventional aesthetic concepts and practices.

In a Changing Global Political Economy of Knowledge

The epistemological ambitions of conceptual and post-conceptual practices must, however, be situated within the broader material and infrastructural conditions of the postwar global economy. Contemporary art has become deeply entangled with the “global political economy of knowledge” (Holert 2020, 8), shaped by processes of expansion and acceleration at multiple levels. The accessibility of knowledge increased with the democratization of higher education. Artists enrolled in reformed academic programs that became progressively interdisciplinary.⁵ Simultaneously, the proliferation of books (notably anthologies) and the growth of libraries and bookstores stimulated intellectual curiosity and encouraged cross-disciplinary exchange. A rapidly developing global infrastructure further facilitated and accelerated the circulation of information, first within the Western world and later, progressively, on a global and digital scale (Burke 2012; Lässig 2016; Feichtinger 2020).

The emergence of high-speed data networks and digital repositories has fostered the “knowledge society” (Drucker 1993) and the “knowledge economy” (Powell and Snellman 2003),⁶ both of which have shaped the informational and conceptual forms of contemporary art (Buchmann 2006 and 2015; Holert 2020).⁷

The archival and anthological tendencies of conceptualism, for instance, laid the groundwork for digital platforms such as *Monoskop*, *UbuWeb*, and *e-flux*—online projects that aggregate artworks, essays, experimental forms and vast digital reservoirs of knowledge.

Recent scholarship has sought to overcome entrenched dichotomies between intellect and matter, idea and materiality, mind and hand. This so-called “material turn” redefines knowledge not simply as conceptual content but as something materially embedded in infrastructures, institutions, technologies, and forms of labor (Burke 2012; Bert and Lamy 2021). Within the field of art history, a parallel effort has demonstrated that many approaches since the 1960s—even those apparently most “dematerialized”—have aimed to transcend the restrictive dualism between thinking and making, between intellectual and manual labor (Berger et al. 2019; Parvu et al. 2025). Questions of access to knowledge have likewise come to the fore. British conceptual artist and art historian Paul Wood recently emphasized that access to knowledge in the 1970s depended on substantial infrastructure—from postal systems to early computing. He adds: “For all our limitations we were beginning to see that theory and knowledge did not by any means function in abstract context but were linked in subterranean ways to the power of institutions” (2024, 53).

This insight resonates with the broader emergence of artistic critical perspectives on the infrastructures of knowledge production, often shaped by post-structuralist and post-Marxist theories. From the institutional critique of the 1970s (Alberro and Stimson 2009) to more recent investigations of infrastructural power (Vishmidt 2017; Beck et al. 2022), artists have devised “counter-institutional” practices that contest—or at least render visible—the dominant modes of organizing, accessing, and legitimizing knowledge (Neugärtner 2023). These practices foreground the multiplicity of knowledge forms—expert and vernacular, explicit and tacit, intellectual and material—while exposing the ways in which knowledge is framed, filtered, and policed.

Knowledge Revisited: The 1960s and Beyond

These critical art historical accounts and artistic practices have emerged during widespread reevaluations of the concept of knowledge and its prerequisites, mainly from feminist, postcolonial, and post-structuralist perspectives. One of the most consequential critiques of the concept of knowledge as a progressive accumulation of facts resulting from “free” and “objective” inquiry was initiated by Michel Foucault. His analysis (1994 [1966]) of the very condition of possibility of the emergence of knowledge (the so-called *episteme*) offers signifi-

cant insights into crucial factors like historical specificity and contingency that delineate what can be thought and known at a particular time and in a specific context. Equally advocating for rethinking the notion of knowledge is Foucault's (1980 [1976]) exploration of the so-called power/knowledge complex. The latter famously states that power and knowledge, besides being interconnected, shape each other. As a subtle network consisting of discourses, practices, technologies, and institutions, among others, this complex' all-encompassing effect becomes evident in how knowing subjects and known "truths" emerge both as products of and vehicles for power-knowledge relations. Against this background, Foucault (1980 [1976]) emphasizes the importance of subjugated knowledge,⁸ encompassing on the one hand historical knowledge, concealed by an imposed order or particular systematization efforts in the name of "true knowledge" (82). On the other hand, subjugated knowledge also includes marginalized forms of knowledge, regarded as inadequate and pushed to the very bottom of the hierarchy, "beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (82).

Situated Knowledges, or: Feminist Objectivity

In a similar vein, Donna Haraway (1988) departs from a diagnosis of the epistemological field, "where traditionally what can count as knowledge is policed by philosophers codifying cognitive canon law," (575) to denounce objectivity, the very epitome of scientific knowledge, as something of a "god trick" (584). Objectivity implies transcendence, propagating divisions between subject and object, mind and body, and distance and responsibility, and as such is accessible only to (the disembodied and unmarked positions of) White Men. In opposition to this impossible transcendence, Haraway introduced the (limited and partial) vantage points of the subjugated—i.e., that of "women and colonized bodies" who "are not allowed not to have a body, a finite point of view" (575)—as a more accurate account of the world. Coined as "situated knowledges," this account not only reveals the ideological claims of objectivity and its equivalent universality, but also proposes a feminist-political epistemology based on embodied objectivity. The latter builds on the knowing subject as "partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original" which enables the subject to "join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" (1988, 586).

A productive way of "seeing together" was already established in the 1970s through the feminist method of consciousness raising, which relies on lived experience as a source of knowledge and agency alike. Although articulated from an individual, situated standpoint, it extends beyond the particular by establishing a foundation rooted in shared experiences of oppression, paving the way

for collective action against it. Consciousness-raising and lived experience were ushered into the art world around 1970 by feminist initiatives as part of the counterculture, embedded in the social upheavals of the time (such as the 1968 student uprising, the second wave of the feminist movement, and the Stonewall riots, among others). Even if some women artists opposed the rising feminist efforts and the labels “woman artist” or “women’s art,” the oppression of women in both the art world and everyday life remained a hard-to-ignore reality. The renowned feminist critic and curator Lucy R. Lippard (1976) describes this precarious situation for women when recalling her feminist awakening as follows: “Androgyny was attractive because it was too hard to be a woman” (4). The conceptual artist Hanne Darboven reacts to this intricate situation by declaring her incessant writing as her form of resistance, introducing significant epistemological implications, as **Paula Stoica** argues in her article in this issue.

Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge

The 1960s and 1970s also saw major geopolitical shifts driven by the ongoing Cold War, the fall of colonial empires, and the emergence of new, post-colonial countries, the so-called “Third World.” However, far from overthrowing colonial hegemonies, it merely reproduced them as neo-colonial dynamics. Indeed, according to decolonial approaches, real and lasting change towards an equitable and democratic world emerges from epistemic disobedience and decolonization, along with decolonial knowledges. Building on and expanding the concept of “situated knowledges,” Walter D. Mignolo (2009) addresses the strong link between racism and epistemology by emphasizing that the knower is always “implicated geo- and body-politically in the known” (162). Its location is determined by what the author refers to as the colonial matrix of power, encompassing economy and authority, along with gender and sexuality, knowledge, and subjectivity. This racial system, besides manufacturing Occidentalism and Orientalism, and dividing the world into first, second, and third during the Cold War, also classifies bodies, whereby inferior bodies equaled inferior intellect.

Introducing the aspect of geo- and body-politics in the field of knowledge not only throws into relief how Western epistemology has succeeded in concealing its own geo- and body-political involvement in the known by constructing the figure of the detached, unimplicated observer—“a neutral seeker of truth and objectivity” (2009, 162). It also enables a radical reframing of the parameters of knowledge-making rooted in Western cosmology (theology and philosophy-science), enforced and reproduced by the European imperial languages and

institutions that form (obedient) knowers and control disciplinary knowledge-making: who can engage in knowledge-making, which knowledge is allowed and validated, and which is devalued and disavowed. This radical shift is what Mignolo calls “the decolonial option,” propagating epistemic disobedience to and epistemic de-linking from Western imperial epistemology and its self-declared universality as a prerequisite for both decolonizing being and for establishing alternative “modernities.”

Decoloniality has already gained traction in art production, curatorial practices, and exhibitions⁹ with its ongoing effort to decolonize aesthetics and liberate aesthesis (that is, senses and perception),¹⁰ as forcefully proclaimed in the Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto in 2011. Besides highlighting the importance of decolonizing the visual realm within the larger effort of decolonialization, it also emphasizes art’s active role in advancing decoloniality as well as its instrumental role in (decolonial) knowledge-making (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013). **Thomas Laval** persuasively argues in his article enclosed here that Fareed Armaly’s *(re)Orient* (1989) and Renée Green’s *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992) represent early examples of epistemic disobedience through de-westernizing knowledge.

Indeed, it appears that art has never been more valued as an ally in creating a more equitable, sustainable, and inclusive world than in our troubled times, as the buzzword “worlding” suggests. Art’s potential to challenge established knowledges, thereby facilitating transformation, brings us back to Foucault. In the preface to his influential “The Order of Things” (1994 [1966]), Foucault credits Jorge Luis Borges’ fictitious taxonomy as the source of inspiration for his work. Supposedly originating from a Chinese Encyclopedia, it classifies animals according to the following, deeply idiosyncratic categories:

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies (*Foucault 1994 [1966], xv*).

The laughter provoked by this classification, as Foucault notes, broke down “all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography” (1994 [1966], xv). In a similar vein, Allan McCollum’s hundreds of identical casts of symbolically charged museal objects deeply challenge the *museum dispositif*, as **Filip Pręgowski** argues in his article. This certainly does not suggest

that art is a domain eluding the “touch of cold science” to adapt Keats’s remark quoted at the beginning of the introduction. Nor should this imply that science is inherently negative or incompatible with art; for, as argued above, it has at least since Conceptual art served as a reference, paving the way for artistic research. The 1999 Bologna reform, however, marked a significant shift in art education, art practice, and curatorial work, prompting discussions such as applying the peer review system to exhibition-making. **Anne Julie Arnfred** discusses in her article the challenges and potential benefits associated with this.

This volume brings together a series of essays that interrogate knowledge in contemporary art and visual culture. Across a range of case studies—from conceptual practices and curatorial methodologies to postcolonial exhibition strategies and reflexive photography—these contributions explore how knowledge is not merely represented but actively constructed, challenged, and transformed through artistic means. Whether through the institutional critique of museum authority, writing as artistic practice, the tactile intimacy of books, or the political implications of visual perception, the following papers trace how art practices engage epistemic questions in ways that often exceed the frameworks of traditional scholarship. Together, they propose that knowledge is never neutral or fixed, but always contingent—shaped by context, medium, history, and power.

In his article, **Filip Pręgowski** explores how the American artist Allan McCollum critically engages with the production, representation, and institutional framing of knowledge. Through projects involving mass-produced casts of natural and historical artefacts, such as fossilized dinosaur bones, Pompeian remains, and lightning-struck sand, McCollum questions the authority of museums and the assumed objectivity of scientific knowledge. Pręgowski shows how McCollum’s work reflects a deep skepticism toward the coherence and usefulness of knowledge systems, echoing themes from Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, and ultimately revealing knowledge as fragmented, commodified, and shaped by power.

Anthi-Danaé Spathoni explores how books function as both material objects and sources of knowledge in the artistic practice of Cy Twombly. She argues that books—whether collected, annotated, or handmade—fuel the painter’s creativity and become integral to his art. Through an analysis of Twombly’s personal library, his use of literary fragments in his paintings, and his own artist’s books, the study reveals how tangible and intangible forms of knowledge are interwoven in his work, ultimately showing the book as a dynamic medium of inspiration, transformation, and creation.

Paula Stoica revisits Hanne Darboven's 1970s conceptual writing to demonstrate how the simple claim "i am a woman, writing, hanne" introduces writing as Darboven's political strategy. By simultaneously writing and unwriting "woman," the artist exposes the contingency of accepted epistemologies and invites new ways of knowing at the nexus of art, gender, and self, challenging categories ("woman," "art," "knowledge") that usually organize what we take to be true.

Thomas Laval's essay argues that two installation-exhibitions, Fareed Armaly's *(re)Orient* (1989) and Renée Green's *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992), turn the very format of the exhibition into a tool of "epistemic disobedience." Working within the second wave of Institutional Critique, each project stages a different encounter with documents, artefacts and spatial design to expose the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in museums, media and popular culture, and to circulate alternative, post-colonial ways of knowing. Armaly's enclosed, fragmentary scenography forces visitors to confront the imperial debris that still structures Western knowledge, while Green's open, archival landscape maps the global flows of African-American music and activism, inviting viewers to navigate a networked, non-hierarchical archive. Together, they demonstrate that exhibitions can do more than display objects, they can rewrite who gets to produce, possess and distribute knowledge.

In *Unacknowledged knowledge*, **Anne Julie Arnfred** questions conventional definitions of academic knowledge by arguing that certain art exhibitions should be recognized as legitimate research outputs, equivalent in status to peer-reviewed journal articles. Drawing on case studies from the UK, Denmark, and the online *Journal for Artistic Research*, it shows how curatorial work generates knowledge through embodied, spatial, and collaborative practices. These processes—described as "knowing how" rather than "knowing that"—often elude traditional academic recognition. By framing exhibitions as active sites of inquiry rather than secondary presentations, the author makes a case for developing peer review models suited to the epistemic nature of exhibition-making itself.

In *Works in spite of myself*, **Leszek Brogowski** presents four casual photographs paired with short essays to demonstrate how images unintentionally betray the art-historical and cultural knowledge informing our ways of seeing. He argues that no gaze is innocent: it always involves a form of knowledge, often unconscious, that affects how we look, judge, and interpret. The accompanying texts challenge philosophical traditions, from Bergson's exaltation of intuition to Russell's suspicion of the intellectual eye, that have tried to divorce art from cognition. Brogowski recruits figures such as Duchamp, Wittgenstein and Levinas

to show instead that aesthetic experience is inseparable from acts of recognition, judgment and language. In doing so, his artistic contribution reframes photography as a laboratory for testing how knowledge inhabits perception and calls for a renewed philosophy that acknowledges the intellect within artistic experience.

Louis-Antoine Mège reviews the anthology *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993*, edited by Ann Stephen. It highlights Burn’s role as both artist and thinker, committed to merging politics and art. A key theme is knowledge; Burn argues that seeing is shaped by what we already know. The review explores how his concept of “local knowledge” challenges dominant art historical narratives. Mège shows how Burn’s writing invites us to rethink knowledge as situated, collective, and historically specific. The author thus positions Stephen’s anthology as an essential resource for understanding knowledge’s role in contemporary art.

Inge Lise Mogensen Bech reviews Jesper Svenningsen’s *Champagneårene. Kunsthandel og udstillingsliv i København 1870–1920*, a richly documented study of Copenhagen’s art market during its so-called “champagne years.” More than a history of exhibitions and dealers, the book shows how the networks of artists, critics, collectors, and the public shaped how art circulated and gained value. In doing so, the book demonstrates how knowledge about art is not only embedded in aesthetics, but also in the economic, social, and cultural mechanisms that determined which works were seen, sold, and remembered. It reminds us that any history of art is also a history of markets, strategies, and perceptions that turn objects into cultural knowledge.

Our aim is not simply to document the enduring ambivalence toward knowledge in art, but to confront it directly. By reexamining the multiple intersections between art and knowledge—historical, conceptual, political—we seek to move beyond mistrust and misunderstanding. The contributions assembled here demonstrate that art and knowledge are not antagonistic domains, but can function as mutually constitutive forces whose entanglement continues to shape the conditions of artistic practice and knowledge today.

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NOTES

- 1 This lecture was published a few years later in Edgar Wind's book *Art and Anarchy* (1963).
- 2 Wind explained that "the fear that knowledge might hurt the imagination, that the exercise of artistic faculties, both in the artist and in the spectator, might be weakened by the use of reason. This is a modern fear and, if I am not mistaken, unfamiliar before the Romantic period." See also Thomas McEvilley: "It was the cognitive faculty, epitomized as science, that the Romantic tradition had excluded above all from the art context" (2005, 77), and Holert (2020).
- 3 We do not wish to conflate these different notions, but we adopt a broad understanding of what "knowledge" encompasses: first, in a subjective sense: what we have experienced, what we have been informed about, or what we have learned; second, in an objective sense: what is subject to experience, information, or learning. In both cases, it is positive knowledge, whether empirical, factual, theoretical, or scientific" (Cassin et al. 2004, 364).

- 4 In parallel of a “material turn,” the last decades have witnessed the emergence of an “educational turn,” reconsidering the social implications of artistic practices in terms of learning, transmission and participation (Bishop 2006; O’Neill and Wilson 2010).
- 5 The post-war era and especially the 1960s are a moment of rethinking the “the specialized nature of knowledge that stemmed from the nineteenth-century organization of the research university into divisions and disciplines.” Interdisciplinarity became increasingly common in the second half of the twentieth century with the ambition “to solve problems that are beyond the scope of any one discipline” and “to achieve unity of knowledge, whether on a limited or grand scale” (King and Rudy 2023, 12;23). Since the late 1950s, numerous reforms have transformed higher education in Western countries—particularly in the field of arts education—with the aim of professionalizing curricula and fostering greater interdisciplinarity.
- 6 Since the post-war period, the cybernetic notion of “information” has gradually been supplanted by the broader concept of “knowledge.” The fields of economics, sociology and management studies have been particularly attentive to the ways in which the society and the economy have become increasingly driven by technologies oriented toward the production and dissemination of knowledge and information. A landmark publication of this period is Daniel Bell’s *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973).
- 7 According to Holert, the art after Conceptual art has been more and more aligned with “the shifts of economy, labor, and power that are said to characterize the contemporary and possibly future condition of postindustrial, immaterial, algorithmized, automatized, AI-controlled knowledge societies” (2020, 12).
- 8 These elaborations on subjugated knowledge served Foucault to define his genealogical method of inquiry.
- 9 Some of the most noteworthy early exhibitions are Modernologies, MACBA 2009; Altermodernity, Tate Modern 2009; Decolonial Aesthetics 2010, Bogota, and Duke University 2011.
- 10 The full manifesto can be found here: <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>.

Moulds, Casts and Clichés

On Knowledge in Allan McCollum's Projects

Antiques – Always modern fakes.

(FLAUBERT 1881)

Allan McCollum, born in Los Angeles in 1944, is one of the most interesting of contemporary American artists. Key areas of his artistic exploration are the culture of mass production, with its concomitant indeterminate status of original and copy, the process of appropriation of art by institutions and the market, as well as the subordination of art and knowledge to systems of power and prestige. His career began in the late 1960s in the Californian art scene. In 1975 McCollum moved to New York, quickly becoming an important figure in American art.

In my text I would like to reflect on several projects by McCollum dating from the 1990s, which make direct reference to fossils and other products of nature – traces of past history and natural phenomena, objects of scientific enquiry that symbolise knowledge of the world we live in. In these projects McCollum created various objects, often multiplied, resembling artefacts displayed in museums, which represent knowledge of the past. I will explore the purpose behind producing these objects and examine why the artist adopts museum strategies to present and support specific scientific discourses. By analysing several projects and their technical execution, I will consider how McCollum's work engages with knowledge and the institutions that shape it. In addition to the literature on the artist's work, an important reference in my text will be Gustave Flaubert's novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, interpreted today as a bitter comedy revealing the

fictitious nature of the narrative that proposes the continuity and usefulness of knowledge, as well as examples of contemporary critical reflections on the institution of the museum and its practices.

As Andrea Fraser has stated, although McCollum produces his objects in many identical copies, he does not impose the conditions of industrial production on artistic practice, nor does he attempt to elevate these objects to the status of high art, in the manner that minimalist sculpture, from which his art genetically derives, used to do. The artist uses complex techniques of mass production to create copies of objects endowed with symbolic prestige, emblems of history and trophies of our scientific knowledge (Fraser 1986, 3-4). By his own admission, he was interested in all these projects on the thin, elusive boundary between the exceptional and the commonplace, in the ranking of objects, essentially reflecting hierarchical relationships between people, and which are the characteristics of objects that induce us to invest them with symbolic value. The artist also emphasised that one such key characteristic is their age, creating an aura of time around them and investing them with historical significance (Berman 2010, 34, 53).

McCollum's projects address issues concerning the institutional conditioning of art that were important to many Conceptual artists, including Daniel Buren and Michael Asher, both of whom had links to California, or Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. The work of these artists was motivated by the need to unmask the false idealism of the 'mystical body of art' that is the modern museum (Foster 1987, 101), to critique exhibition conventions and the model developed by institutions for perpetuating an idealistic and mystical role for art (Buren), to demonstrate the limitations of the museum as a site of historical memory (Asher), and to reveal the dependence of these institutions on the concerns and corporations that sponsor them (Haacke).¹ A particularly relevant example in this context is Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'art moderne* project, undertaken between 1968 and 1975. As Benjamin Buchloh wrote, Broodthaers's fictional museum collections, created from a variety of artefacts, inscriptions and reproductions, refer to both the language and the architecture of an institution in which the discourse of art is hidebound – resistant to any change. Above all, however, Broodthaers's fictional museum collections simulate the predictable fate of objects in museums – their subjection to ideology and the fact that they are utilised in the creation of a variety of myths in official cultural circulation (Buchloh 1983, 55). Of course seriality, derived from minimalism, also plays a key role in McCollum's practice, demonstrating, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, not only that objects in a capitalist world are structurally inscribed within systems



of meaning and hierarchy, but simply that capitalism also generates our demand for cumulative possession – for the acquisition of things on an ever increasing scale (Krauss 1990, 7, 10).

A Hundred Dogs of Pompeii

In 1991 Allan McCollum carried out a project that resulted in the production of around a hundred copies of the plaster cast of the body of a dog killed in Pompeii during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE [1, 1a].² The figure of the animal, with the visible form of the collar around its neck, frozen in a dramatic, contorted pose,³ was reproduced, with the permission of the Museo Vesuviano in Pompei and in collaboration with the Studio Trisorio gallery in Naples and the New York based sculptor Nathaniel Lieb, in the form of circa 100 identical white copies, made of fibreglass reinforced with Hydrocal – plaster of Paris to which a small amount of Portland cement has been added (McCollum 1991). Photographs from various exhibitions, such as the 1993 Studio Trisorio gallery show, indicate the way the casts were presented: arranged in rows, one next to another, on grey cuboid pedestals.⁴ The project was accompanied

[1, 1a] Allan McCollum, *The Dog From Pompei*, 1990. Cast in in polymer-enhanced gypsum. Photo from an installation: Musée de Art Moderne de Lille Métropole, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France, 1998. The casts are taken from a mould which was made from a cast copy of the famous “chained dog” plaster cast in the collection of the Museo Vesuviano, in Pompei, Italy, with the museum's help, the help of Studio Trisorio in Naples, Italy, and permission from the Pompei Tourist Board, Pompei, Italy. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

by the publication of a popular scientific study that describes the history of the annihilation of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabia, both 19th century and contemporary archaeological excavations, scientific research, as well as the circumstances of the project and the technique used to make the casts.

The manner in which the project is presented, and the fact that it is accompanied by a scientific study, places it at the very centre of scientific and museum discourse. The arrangement of the casts in the exhibition may, of course, resemble a minimalist series of identical objects, but at first glance it brings to mind a scientific exhibition and its educational function. The key point here is that McCollum presents casts, i.e. copies of original objects, even though they were not actually created from the original, since all that was left of the original body of the dog and the other victims of the catastrophe are voids in the Pompeian rock, painstakingly filled with plaster by archaeologists. McCollum has spoken of the specific status of the copy that he has managed to capture in his designs on several occasions. For example, in an interview with Thomas Lawson, he noted,

I think that part of the challenge we face in living with the copies we make ourselves is that we are experiencing them as alienating because they always seem to represent something else, they're never the thing itself. So to the degree to which we're enmeshed in relationships with our own copies in the world, we are constantly in a state of banishment, from the imaginary "source" of things – from the more "authentic" things that these copies seem to replace (*McCollum 1998*).

It should be noted here that McCollum's Pompeian project fits perfectly into the critical discourse regarding the institution of the museum and its claim to represent universal knowledge.⁵ As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill wrote in her book *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, insofar as the disciplinary technologies described by Foucault shaped modern schooling and prisons, the same processes can also be found in the way in which the museum functions (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 168). The museum, born in the era of the French Revolution and operating according to a specific agenda, produces regimes of truth, and during the Modern period the education provided by it comprised a new form of social governance, directed towards the collective good of the state rather than the benefit of the individual (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 172-175). The basis of this education was a belief in the continuity of history, ordering and classifying, and investing individual objects with a meaning which would remain permanently inscribed in the canon of national values (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 175, 183, 191).

Douglas Crimp assumed a more radical perspective in his 1980 essay with the telling title “On the Museum’s Ruins”. In his view, the notion of the museum is based upon the fiction that the collection of objects which it contains comprises a coherent whole. This fiction uses, among other things, the metonymic figure of the part for the whole, where one object explains an entire era or broad phenomenon; it also stems from the belief that ordering and classifying can lead to an understanding of the world and of the mechanisms that govern it. Moreover, the ordered discourse of the museum is based on a metaphysical conviction of the continuity of history, with its ‘meaning’ and source encoded in the artefacts it engenders (Crimp 1980, 49).

The concepts of ‘source’ and authenticity, referred to with scepticism by McCollum in the passage quoted above, constitute the foundation of the modern museum. They have been perceived as representing the purported continuity of history and its meaning, as recognised by Crimp. These are among the tools through which the museum mythologises history and nature. For, as McCollum himself pointed out, what we have at our disposal are mere representations (for example, copies of objects in the absence of their originals), while at the same time we have no actual experience of the past. The concepts of ‘source’ and ‘authenticity’ represent cultural memory, but this is not individual memory but an institutionalised discourse of history in which artefacts are the only trace of the past, a confirmation that it once took place. As McCollum noted in his conversation with Lawson, the most exquisite artefacts at our disposal, even if they evoke extraordinary emotions, will remain only representations of history. The dog of Pompeii is an object that embodies this sense of alienation from the past, despite the fact that what it does, after all, is precisely evoke the past (Lawson 1996). Above all, however, *The Dog from Pompei*, part of the critical discourse concerning the museum, problematises the rationality of an institution whose fundamental role is the collection of objects and their storage within a specific intellectual environment (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 4). The even rows of identical white casts raise the question of whether this rationality is indeed something obvious and self-explanatory, or whether, on the contrary, they demonstrate that any collection of objects, appropriately presented and arranged, can in fact claim the right to be rational.

Prehistory Inc.

In 1991, McCollum began a collaboration with the Section of Vertebrate Paleontology of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, in Pittsburgh, which resulted in him and his assistants making seven hundred and fifty casts of fossilised dino-



[2] Allan McCollum, *Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Lost Objects*, 1991. Photo from an exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery, in 2017. Cast in glass fibre reinforced concrete from rubber moulds taken of a selection of fossil dinosaur bones in the collection of the Vertebrate Paleontology Section of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, with the museum's help, and coated with many coats of enamel paint. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

[3] Allan McCollum, *Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Lost Objects*, 1991. View of the installation at the exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery in 2017. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

saur bones (including fifty series of fifteen types of bones) belonging to the museum's collection. The entire set, created as part of the *Lost Objects* project, consisted of fifteen different types of bones from five species of prehistoric animals. The casts were made of fibreglass-reinforced concrete and painted with enamel in various shades of earth colour, and each was also marked with a registration number. The project was presented as part of an installation at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, in 1991, and elsewhere; photographs from this exhibition show that the bone casts were arranged upon low pedestals in groups of from a dozen to over a hundred, filling the entire surface of the Hall of Sculpture at the Carnegie, reminiscent of archaeological sites displaying freshly excavated bones (Kalina 1992, 99) **[2, 3].**

A year earlier, while visiting the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum in Price, Utah, the artist had discovered another collection of dinosaur-related fossils, which formed the starting point for his project *Natural Copies*, completed in 1994. These are natural casts of dinosaur feet from 65 million years ago, found from the 1920s onwards by miners working in coal mines in central Utah. Prehistoric animals living near rivers and marshes left deep footprints in the peat. Before these were obliterated, a local river flooded them, filling them with riparian sediment and thus preserving them. Over time the peat turned into coal and the sediments that filled the dinosaur footprints became



sandstone. When the coal was removed, archaeological excavations yielded fossilised three- and four-toed footprints of prehistoric reptiles (Parker, Rowley 1989, 362-363). The College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum (now called the Prehistoric Museum, USU-Eastern) agreed to loan McCollum fossils from its collection so that he could make casts of them in his New York studio. As a result, the *Natural Copies* project has produced more than three hundred copies of the fibreglass-reinforced Hydrocal dinosaur footprints, cast from forty-four moulds; all are painted in a variety of colours with enamel paint – both dark, in the shade of the natural fossil, and bright, recalling toys or school teaching aids [4].⁶

Photographs from exhibitions presenting *Natural Copies* (for example at the John Weber Gallery in New York in 1995) show the same display method that had been used in the *Lost Objects* project – the casts were arranged on low pedestals in even rows, in a manner that echoes the scientific methods of taxonomy and/

[4] Allan McCollum, *Natural Copies From the Coal Mines of Central Utah*, 1994/95.

Photo from an installation at Galerie Mitterrand, Paris, France, 2013. Enamel on casts made in polymer-reinforced gypsum. Produced with the help of the staff at the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum, in Price, Utah. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

[5] Allan McCollum, *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics)* 1997.

Photos from an exhibition of the project at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery New York, in 2000.

Over 10,000 casts of a single fulgurite, in epoxy mixed with zircon sand mined from the site of the lightning strike, where the artist in a sense triggered the lightning strike himself, using a rocket, with the help and collaboration of the International Lightning Research Center in Camp Blanding, Florida, and Sand Creations Manufacturing, in Sanford, Florida. The lightning was directed to hit a 44-gallon receptacle filled with sand, in order that a natural fulgurite would be created. The project was done in collaboration with the Museum of Science and Industry, and the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, in Tampa, Florida, and the University of Florida in the town of Gainesville. The project also included printing out over 13,000 booklets of 66 different writings by different writers on lightning and fulgurites. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

or shop displays (see: Decter 1985, 104). These artist-made casts replicate traces from 65 million years ago, becoming a parody of museum artefacts, which have not only scientific value, but also an economic one. After all, the dinosaur footprints found by the Utah mining community had been sold by miners to the Prehistoric Museum and thus became part of its collection. The artist's project therefore also demonstrates the commercial aspect of museum practices, based on the tangible, economic value of the artefacts and their copies that were collected. It also indicates that the commercialisation of the knowledge over which the museum has custody is one of its main forms of distribution. Particularly telling in this context is a comment on McCollum's collaboration with the Prehistoric Museum at Price. In an interview conducted by the art critic Catherine Quéloz, the artist cited comments made by the museum's curator, who, while agreeing to lend him fossils of dinosaur footprints for a fee, stipulated that the museum could itself produce casts of them for sale in order to improve its financial condition. The curator also added that, in granting him permission to make the casts, she did not want his project to compete in any way with the economic interests of the institution she represented (Quéloz 1995, 67). This interaction between the artist and the museum curator seems to be a clear illustration of the fact that knowledge is understood and treated in museum practice as a commodity, and that museums, in order to survive economically, are obliged to adopt the ethos of corporate engagement, offering visitors their artefacts and the narratives accompanying them as products presented appropriately for consumption.

In the *Natural Copies* project, McCollum thus confronts the phenomenon of the museum industry, but also shows that the status of the objects he creates is extremely complex, uneasily suspended between the fields of science (scientific artefacts, teaching aids), art (surreal objects shaped by natural factors, in André Breton's terminology so-called *objets perturbés*, or simply Duchampian ready-mades), collecting (precious specimens, curiosities), and industry (mass-produced gadgets, toys). It could be said that collections of museum-scientific artefacts find themselves at the intersection of Foucauldian *epistemes*, unable to fit into any of them.

Sudden Illuminations

A particular type of collaboration by the artist with individuals and institutions representing scientific expertise was that exemplified by *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics)*, carried out over six weeks in the summer of 1997 [5]. Working with scientists from the Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, near Starke, Florida, and with the



support of the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry at the University of South Florida, the artist made use of a procedure to trigger lightning bolts at Camp Blanding, which then struck the ground to form fulgurites – irregular, tubular formations created by melting quartz sand. So many storm clouds float over central Florida, located between the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the cooler Atlantic Ocean, that the peninsula has been dubbed ‘The Lightning Capital of North America’ (Molesworth 2000, 41-43). Lightning was triggered by small rockets fired into the storm clouds, to which a thin copper wire was attached, targeting the discharge at a specific location. The flashes of lightning directed through the wire hit pre-prepared containers filled with a suitable type of responsive material, melting it at almost 30,000 degrees Celsius and thus forming fulgurites or

sandy glass tubes, so-called ‘petrified lightnings’. Once the fulgurites had been extracted from the sand, McCollum, in collaboration with Sand Creations, a local company producing plastic souvenirs, made 10,000 casts of them from a compound that was a mixture of epoxy resin and zircon sand (Molesworth 2000, 41). The photographs documenting the exhibition at the Petzel Gallery in New York in 2000 show the now familiar method of presenting the objects – neatly arranged, one next to the other, although this time not on pedestals, but on tables covered with grey cloth.⁷ *The Event; Petrified Lightning from Central Florida* tells the story of the role of the museum object, this time embodying not – as in the previously discussed projects – a past time which is beyond our experience, but a sublime and powerful natural phenomenon. It was ultimately turned into a mass-produced memento by Sand Creations, alongside the starfish and flamingo figurines the company already made for tourists visiting the Florida beaches (Molesworth 2000, 48). But it is by means of this transformation that the artist manages to position himself in the space between museum and shop, between science and the sentimental souvenir industry, and to show the entanglements of scientific discourse with the commodity reality of capitalism. These small, identical, mass-produced ‘petrified lightnings’ made of plastic also show how easily the discourse that popularises scientific knowledge transforms sublime phenomena and processes that are difficult to verbalise (for example immense energy or the brightest light in nature) into something banal, an object of interest for collectors and tourists hungry for souvenirs of the places they have visited.

The specificity of McCollum’s project, however, directed as it was towards the process of atmospheric discharge, leads to another reflection, related to the impossibility of practical application of certain areas of knowledge. As mentioned by the artist himself, *The Event; Petrified Lightning from Central Florida* was inspired, among other things, by the scientific work of Martin Uman, of the University of Florida, one of the most eminent lightning researchers. This renowned scientist, who specialises in lightning location techniques among other subjects, and who collaborated with McCollum in the development of the lightning triggering system with the use of rockets, is the author of numerous scientific and popular science works dealing with atmospheric discharges. In his book *All About Lightning*, an excerpt of which is posted on McCollum’s website, we read that there is no effective means of harnessing the power of lightning, in addition to much information on the origin of lightning, and the process of its formation, and the electrical charge and voltage contained in a single discharge. There are two main reasons for this – firstly, lightning strikes a single location (such as a hypothetical tall tower constructed specially to capture it) with insuf-

ficient frequency to produce a significant amount of energy; and secondly, most of the energy that could be harnessed is converted into thunder, heat, light and radio waves. The only areas of research that so far have practical relevance are related to protection against lightning, not the exploitation of its energy potential. This is the case, for example, with measurements of the electromagnetic noise generated in the radio band by lightning, allowing a thunderstorm to be located for meteorological and aviation purposes (Uman 1986, 146).

Martin Uman is well aware of the large areas in which human knowledge is incomplete or insufficient to produce beneficial practical results. In an interview with both McCollum and Helen Molesworth, conducted a year after the project at Camp Blanding, he stated,

At any level when you try to understanding [sic] anything, it's clear we don't understand it well. At any level when you try an equation for something or draw a picture of it, there's another layer underneath, you never get there, all the atoms and whatever else are out into the cosmos and what was before that. I think the pure scientists know best that they are never going to understand what real means. It'll turn you into an artist, right? At least what you do is real. (Laughter) What you want to do, it's your reality (*McCollum, Molesworth 1998, 12*).

Consequently, applying the most radical interpretation, McCollum's project perhaps refers to the uselessness of our knowledge, which, despite advanced methods of acquisition and technological progress, contributes very little to the understanding of the world in which we live.

Literature

All of McCollum's projects are accompanied by scholarly and popular science studies, which he eventually compiled into his own online database called "Project Supplements". These are short essays, often illustrated, written by a variety of authors, which the artist came across in books and journals and then included in his projects in order to explain the processes of making the objects, the scientific research conducted around them and the various theories about them, as well as the history of museum display practices, the history of collecting specific artefacts, casting techniques, etc. Project supplements are an integral part of McCollum's endeavours and are presented during exhibitions, as well as also being available on the artist's website. They remind us that museums create their own discourse in the form of leaflets, brochures and catalogues, while at the same time introducing a postmodern added value, which consists of intermingling discourses and blurring

boundaries between different fields of knowledge, and which makes us seriously doubt its usefulness. For example, 'Reprints' – booklets reproduced as photocopies on coloured paper and placed in wooden trays alongside casts made as part of the *Natural Copies* project – present the history of dinosaurs, explain how their footprints were created and preserved in peat, the history of the discovery of footprints in Utah coal mines, the history of the creation of museum collections of them, and many other issues thematically linked to the project.⁸ It is significant that many of the texts present different views on specific issues and, from a scientific point of view, are mutually exclusive. The project supplements comprise didactic material, but are often full of discrepancies and contradictions, functioning as a polyphony of differing opinions and hypotheses.

In subsequent projects the artist seems to have been increasingly convinced of the key role played by the accompanying educational materials. For example, for the project *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida*, the artist produced as many as 13,000 small brochures on 66 topics related to lightning and fulgurites. Their quantity, as MaryJo Marks wrote, dominated the adjacent casts (Marks 2012). There were examples of very diverse narratives, divided between science, statistics, biblical references, lived histories and mysticism, and this diversity is reflected in the titles of some of them. For example, the text "Tubes Formed by Lightning," part of Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*, published in 1839, included remarks on "a group of those vitrified, siliceous tubes, which are formed by lightning entering loose sand" found by the scientist in Uruguay by the Atlantic Ocean, near Maldonado (Darwin 1909, 70). In the essay "How Many People Are Killed by Lightning Each Year?," the author, Martin Uman once again, analyses the statistics of lightning injuries and deaths in the United States between 1950 and 1969, taking into account such factors as distance from open water and the type of activity being performed during lightning strikes. In "References to Lightning in the Holy Bible," the author, Daniel J. Robinson, quotes passages from the Old Testament books of Exodus, Samuel, Job, Psalms, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Nahum and Zechariah, as well as the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the Book of Revelation, where thunder and lightning are mentioned. "Lightning Strike – My Story," by Elizabeth Anne, recounts the dramatic experiences of summer camp participants at The Green River Preserve in North Carolina (six boys and six girls) who were struck by lightning that hit the campground, from the perspective of one of the chaperones. "Sudden Illuminations, Like Lightning," on the other hand, is a short text by Wassily Kandinsky, from the collection *Letters and Reminiscences 1902-1914*, by Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, in which the artist proclaimed "a great day of one of the revelations of this world," and declared

that “the interrelationships of these individual realms (art, nature, science, political forms, etc) were illuminated as by a flash of lightning; they burst unexpected, frightening, and joyous out of the darkness.”⁹

It is hard not to notice that the project supplements, by acting as a narrative parergon for the objects McCollum produces, mimic the practice of museums and galleries of creating explanatory paratexts for their exhibitions. They show that the objects present in an institutionalised exhibition system always function within a discourse that gives them both meaning and a specific role to fulfil, although the number of texts and variety of narratives present in the project supplements invests them with parodic qualities. Like the objects themselves, they are representations of history, of past time and of phenomena and processes inaccessible to our direct experience. On the artist’s website, in an article dedicated to the project *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida*, there is a quotation from his own statement, which reads:

[6] Allan McCollum, *Supplemental didactics*. Printed paper brochures, view of the installation at Petzel Gallery, New York, 2000. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.



It's hard to imagine how memory and meaning could exist without language – both are always only available through some sort of representation. I imagine that objects having meaning – artworks, keepsakes, people, stones – could not exist for us without their 'literature'. How could a bolt of lightning, lasting only for the tiniest fraction of a second, be understood otherwise? Events this brief will always evade our synapses – and their existence will always only exist after the fact, amongst one's representations.¹⁰

In an Epistemic Void

It appeared to them that this substance was filled at night with an icy coldness, carried away in an endless course towards a bottomless abyss, and with nothing around them but the Unseizable, the Immovable, the Eternal. This was too much for them, and they renounced it. And wishing for something less harsh, they bought the course of philosophy for the use of classes by M. Guesnier. (*Flaubert 1896, 315*)

In the essay "On the Museum's Ruins" quoted earlier, Douglas Crimp refers to two novels by Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) and *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881), establishing a dialogue with Foucault's text "Fantasia of the Library" (1980) and Eugenio Donato's essay "The Museum's Furnace: Notes Toward a Contextual Reading of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*" (1979). Crucial to my conclusion in the context of Allan McCollum's work is the second of these works by Flaubert, the unfinished story of two Parisian copyist friends who share a compulsive thirst for knowledge.

Bouvard and Pécuchet is a story about the impossibility of acquiring the knowledge that, in an adequate manner, would explain various, if not all, aspects of the world around us. In the novel two Parisian civil servants who have moved in together, away from the city, in order to be able to explore knowledge in all possible fields, experience a profound disillusionment with the divergence between the disciplines of science. Bouvard and Pécuchet discover that there is no single coherent system of science, that the methods of classifying knowledge are questionable, and that the knowledge they have themselves acquired explains nothing, and certainly does not answer the fundamental questions about the origin of things and the cause of events. The encyclopaedic quantities of chemistry, physiology, anatomy, geology and archaeology that they feverishly absorb are merely abstract creations of the imagination. In Flaubert's novel, science, seen as a unified system for

explaining the world, falls to pieces – into incoherent unconnected fragments, and both protagonists “seem suspended in an epistemic void” (Wróbel 2022, 73).

As Crimp writes, the image of knowledge in Flaubert’s bitter comedy is essentially that of a museum, which is built on a foundation of faith in the continuity of history and on concepts such as ‘source’, ‘origin’, ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity,’ understood as being capable of explaining history, as well as its meaning and purpose (Crimp 1980, 47).

The few decades of the 19th century that the narrative of Flaubert’s novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* covers is the period during which the Enlightenment institutions that governed power and knowledge were established, accumulating artefacts, ordering and prioritising them, giving them meaning and assigning them a specific role in history. It was also the era of the birth of liberalism in the public sphere, within which tolerance for different kinds of views was declared, although, as Frances Ferguson writes, this was often on account of powerlessness rather than broad-mindedness (2010, 791). A variety of narratives, claiming objectivity and, above all, truth (as opposed to literary fiction), became the primary vehicle for the institutionalisation and popularisation of knowledge. As the philosopher of science, George Henry Lewes, wrote in 1874, “science is penetrating everywhere, and slowly changing men’s conception of the world and of man’s destiny” (1).

As we have already seen, the two clerks who met one hot day on Boulevard Bourdon in Paris epitomise the utopianism of the Positivist project, and their experiences and frustration call into question the usefulness of encyclopaedias, dictionaries and lexicons. Their compulsive absorption of knowledge seems as automatic and devoid of critical reflection as the act of copying documents they had performed as clerks. Copying remains their model of operation, even when they abandon their clerical work (only to return to it eventually, as a result of frustration at the uselessness of the knowledge they had acquired). For them, copying consists of always engaging with what is already present as a fashionable discourse, romantic ideal or popularised scientific knowledge, and then repeating to themselves what they have read and learned. (O’Meara 2023, 429). The resulting accumulation of knowledge bears the characteristics of useless recycling, of which the *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, probably planned by Flaubert as an appendix to the novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and consisting of alphabetically ordered clichés popular in French society in the 19th century, may be a representation. A cliché is a matrix – a plate for reproducing images. A cliché is a tool for mechanical copying, like a mould for making casts.

It seems that the affinity between McCollum's work and Flaubert's novel lies precisely in the activity of copying and reproducing objects and discourses. By copying museum artefacts and various studies concerning them, the American artist expresses the same scepticism as the French novelist towards knowledge and its institutions, and towards the implicit and supposed universalism of this knowledge. The multiplied objects presented by him on pedestals appear to be neutral representations of history and scientific facts, but the discursive network of different kinds of theories and concepts reproduced through his project supplements suspends this neutrality, showing that the language used to express knowledge imbues it with emotions and desires, a sense of loss and inadequacy, longing and alienation. McCollum exposes these emotions, just as Flaubert allowed stereotypical beliefs and 'accepted ideas' masquerading as universal truths to resonate in his *Dictionary*. McCollum's projects, however, are not parodies, just as *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and the *Dictionary* are not purely parodies. McCollum's works are subversive, copying words and objects in order to express distrust of the purported universalism of knowledge and to show its fragmentation and its various dependencies within the world of modern capitalism. The dozens of identical copies of objects created by the artist and the accompanying project supplements, diverse in their content, also show that the objectivity and neutrality ascribed to knowledge and supported by museum practices is simply a fiction.

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the work of the contemporary American artist Allan McCollum. For several decades McCollum has been investigating the condition of artefacts and objects in culture and science, their semantic potential and the status of uniqueness imparted to them, for example, in the practices of collecting or the commonness achieved through the process of mass production. In projects carried out in the 1990s, such as *The Dog from Pompei*, *Lost Objects*, *Natural Copies* and *The Event*. Petrified Lightning from Central Florida, McCollum made casts of hundreds of objects in collaboration with archaeological and science museums, such as the body of a dog killed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, casts of dinosaur bones and their natural footprints, and thousands of casts of natural forms created by the melting of quartz sand after a lightning strike. In all these cases, the casts are presented in the galleries in even rows, arranged on tables, pedestals or on the floor, imitating museum objects while at the same time operating as a parody of the uniqueness of natural objects. They are always accompanied by 'literature' – scientific studies of their origin and history. The article refers to the way the objects are displayed and their scientific elaborations evokes the oppressive classification system of the museum, the role of the museum as an expression of the dominant ideology and the practice of museification as an element of the exercise of power, as indicated by Michel Foucault and followed by Douglas Crimp and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, among others.

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NOTES

- 1 Examples of the work of these artists, including the project *Musée d'art moderne* by Marcel Broodthaers, are discussed by Hal Foster in his book *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (1996, 20, 236, n. 29).
- 2 As a result of excavations undertaken between 1860 and 1875 for the first time ever in a systematic and scientific manner by a team led by Giuseppe Fiorelli, not only were many remains of victims of the cataclysm found, but also traces of bodies hidden under a 3,200-foot-long layer of calcified volcanic ash. Thanks to the method developed by Fiorelli, the moulds of bodies buried by ash that had decomposed but had left a void in the solidified rock were recovered in the form of plaster casts, which can be seen today in the Archaeological Park in Pompei.

- Starting in 1863, more than a hundred such casts were made. The remains of a dog were discovered in 1874 and, like those of many of the inhabitants killed in the catastrophe, a cast was made of the void which the dog had once occupied (Rowland 2014, 169-171).
- 3 As with the bodies of humans who lost their lives in the eruption, the dog's position was the result of muscle contractions in the high temperatures of the volcanic gases.
 - 4 Studio Trisorio website. Effective August 9, 2024. <https://www.studiotrisorio.com/exhibitions-blog/allan-mccollum-1>.
 - 5 Michel Foucault, for example, the pioneer in the analysis of modern institutions, recognised their role in his work on the archaeology of knowledge, which, in representing the rational and anthropocentric modern *episteme* and pursuing practices consistent with it, perpetuated a given political order and constituted an instrument of domination and control. Foucault's analyses of institutions which exercised disciplinary power in modern societies indicate that their effectiveness consisted not only in enforcing or prohibiting certain behaviours, but also in promoting particular beliefs and ways of thinking, i.e. in perpetuating knowledge useful to the exercise of power (Foucault 1995, 27-28).
 - 6 Allan McCollum, the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. <http://allanmccollum.net/allanmcnyc/descriptions.html>.
 - 7 Petzel Gallery website. Accessed August 26, 2024. <https://www.petznel.com/exhibitions/allan-mccollum3>.
 - 8 Article "Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Eastern Utah", available on *Allan McCollum* – the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. http://allanmccollum.net/supplements/Natural_Copies_Description.html.
 - 9 All texts, only a small portion of which are referenced here, are available on *Allan McCollum* – the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. http://allanmccollum.net/supplements/supplement_samples.html.
 - 10 "The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics)", available on *Allan McCollum* – the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. <http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet2/album/fulguriteintroduction.html>.

Reader, Collector, Creator:

Books in Cy Twombly's Artistic Practice

[Twombly's] worktables are covered with oil crayons; pencils; tubes of pigment; postcard reproductions of boats and marine scenes; a big Manet art book open to a page that shows a boat painting; stacks of other art books (Ensor, Whistler, Turner); and a book of modern Greek poems in translation, turned to George Seferis's 'Three Secret Poems'. [...]

Several lines of one stanza have been altered by Twombly, with some words inked out. A section of the edited and spliced poem (with a few new words added by Twombly) is written on the canvas of Summer [Quattro Stagioni], in Twombly's inimitable, childish scrawl.

(KAZANJIAN 1994)

This is what Dodie Kazanjian witnessed when she visited Cy Twombly (1928-2011) in his studio in Gaeta for a piece in *Vogue*, in 1994: the chaotic mess of a studio¹ full of art materials and books gathering different references on art and poetry, all wide open during the creative process. As the above description shows and it is also widely acknowledged in the artist's literature, Twombly was an artists' and poets' artist. His extensive library included many volumes of literature, travel books and – as one might expect – books about art and artists. This rich collection not only reveals what an avid reader he was, but also shows his diverse taste as a book collector of valuable editions and different translations of well or less known writers.

Contrary to the belief that knowledge could hinder the artist's imagination,² this paper aims to demonstrate, through the example of Twombly, that books, which embody both a tangible and an immaterial form of knowledge, can not only be a source of creation, inspiration, and learning but also play an active role in late twentieth-century artistic practice.

For the purpose of this article, tangible knowledge refers to knowledge that is concrete, explicit, and easily communicated or documented. This means that it can be written down, stored, and transferred, as in the case of a book. In this sense, a book embodies the material aspect of knowledge that the notion of tangibility suggests, serving as a physical repository of explicit knowledge that can be shared, referenced, and transferred across time and space. In other words, books are considered physical objects containing tangible knowledge, which can be held, transferred, or collected in libraries. At the same time, I consider their content an immaterial form of knowledge: once read by their owner, the content – and thus the books – become the reader's knowledge. It is knowledge that leaves the book's pages and integrates into someone's existing understanding and personal experiences, which cannot be easily articulated. Examining the central role books play in Twombly's creative process will reveal how the artist's works engage with and intertwine these different notions of knowledge in profound and dynamic ways.

Twombly Collector

Various photographs of Twombly's apartments witness the artist's passion for books. Books were not only an object on the bookshelves but also found in every room. Much more than a mere decorative element, they were a vivid part of his life and not an artifact to collect. They were an object to live with, like for example most of his sculptures, which were kept in his studio until after his passing.

As recent research and academic interest in the artists' libraries have shown (see Le Men 2016),³ an artist's book collection not only shows its owner's personality, taste, knowledge and culture, but it also participates in the artwork's genesis (*genèse artistique*). In Twombly's case in particular, it presents a key element in his process. Despite the fact that few important studies have given limited access to his books and sources,⁴ Twombly's book collection has never been catalogued to this day. Still, tracing the poetic lines that Twombly used in his paintings could establish a partial but long list of his books which included, among others, Sappho; Theocritus; Ovid and Virgil; John Keats; Saint-John Perse and T. S. Eliot; Ezra Pound and Fernando Pessoa; Constantine P. Cavafy, George Seferis and Rainer Maria Rilke. Most, if not all of these names, will be familiar to

viewers of Twombly's work (Jacobus 2016, 1) as their lines could be often used by the painter in his own work. Just like his pictorial surface, his library would mix up Greek bucolic poets with modern Greek authors, German literature and haiku poets with writers from the Middle and Far East.

Later in his life, Twombly admitted that he also collected some rare editions of poets such as Eliot and Pope. He had proudly affirmed to Nicholas Serota: "And now I have a nice collection of books – a first edition of *The Wasteland*, little volumes of the first of the *Four Quartets*, and I also have a facsimile of *The Wasteland*" (Serota and Twombly 2008, 50). Indeed, apart from these volumes, Twombly's collection also included a first edition of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (1949); the 1698 edition of John Dryden's Virgil; the 1720 (2nd ed.) of Alexander Pope's *Iliad* and a second edition of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1624) (Jacobus 2016, 243). Quite interestingly, among the painter's books, one can also find various translations of the same poet, especially his favorite ones. This could explain the number of different editions of bucolic poetry and Rilke's translations in English as well as more than one volume of Sappho's and Archilochus' fragmented poems. Different translations could offer the artist a way to catch up with a text whose original version would be inaccessible. This shows his wish to capture the essence and meaning of the poet's words as well as his interest in approaching the text from multiple viewpoints. His attention to the original can be also traced in quotes on canvas, written in the original language of Latin, German or Spanish poems⁵ and presumably copied from bilingual editions in his library. Twombly acquired these translated editions throughout the years and the oldest acquisition could date back to the 1950s.

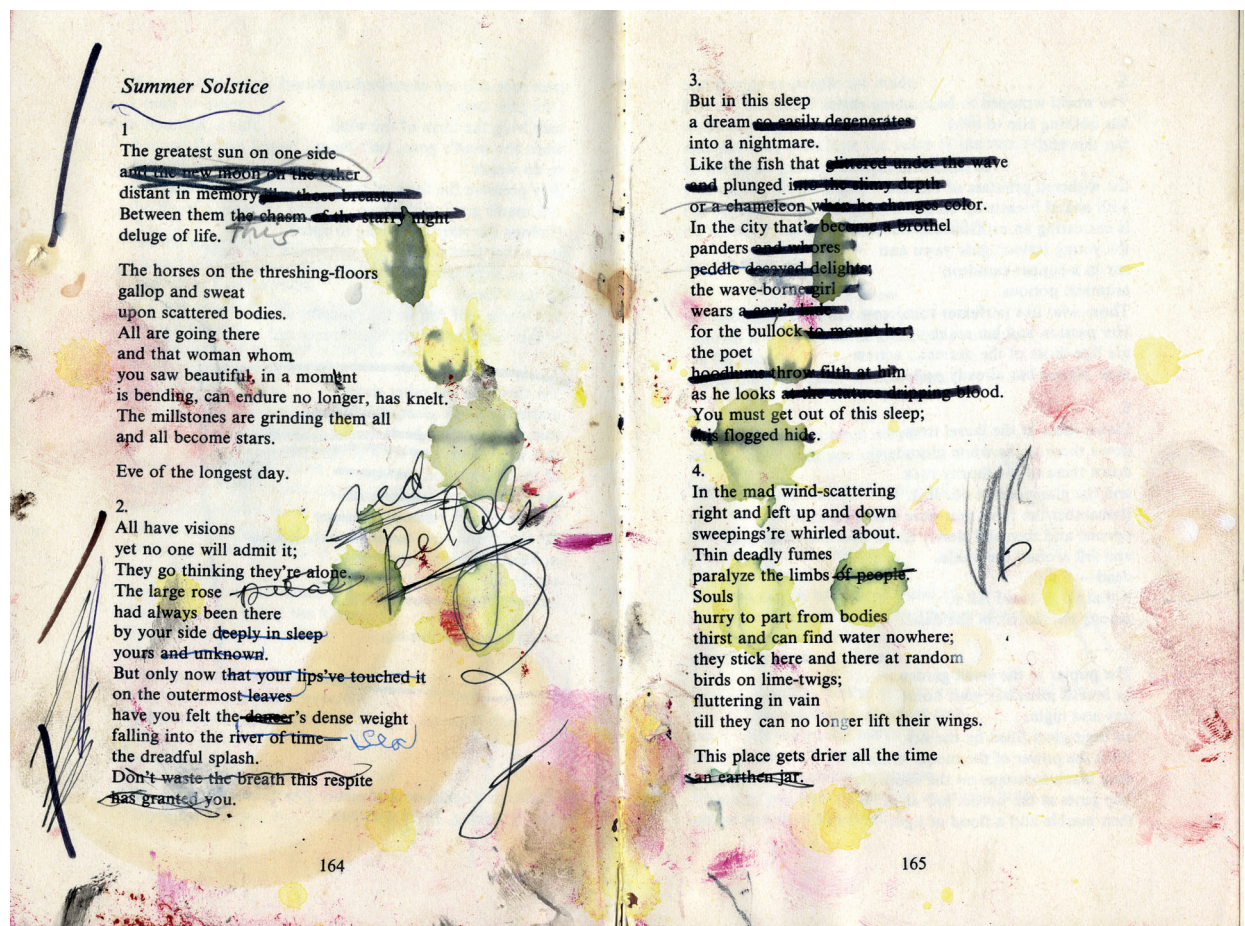
As is the case in the ancient sculpture he was collecting (Kondoleon 2020, 18), Twombly does not seem to have the eye of a collector. He purchased books of his taste which do not appear to have a specific value as a collectible or serve the purpose of collecting per se. Indeed, he could combine secondhand books, "inexpensive paperbacks, bilingual translations, or fine editions" (Jacobus 2016, 2). His approach is that of a reader who enjoys having an original edition of the writer of his liking. As Jacobus has remarked, his "collection of poetry is eclectic and unsystematic, linking past and present. Poets of the Antiquity jostle with twentieth-century European literary Modernism" (Jacobus 2016, 2). In a way, his book collection sums up his own poetics. Just like his library, his art combines past and present, high and low art, 'noble' poetry and graffiti stains, as we will see later on.

Twombly Reader

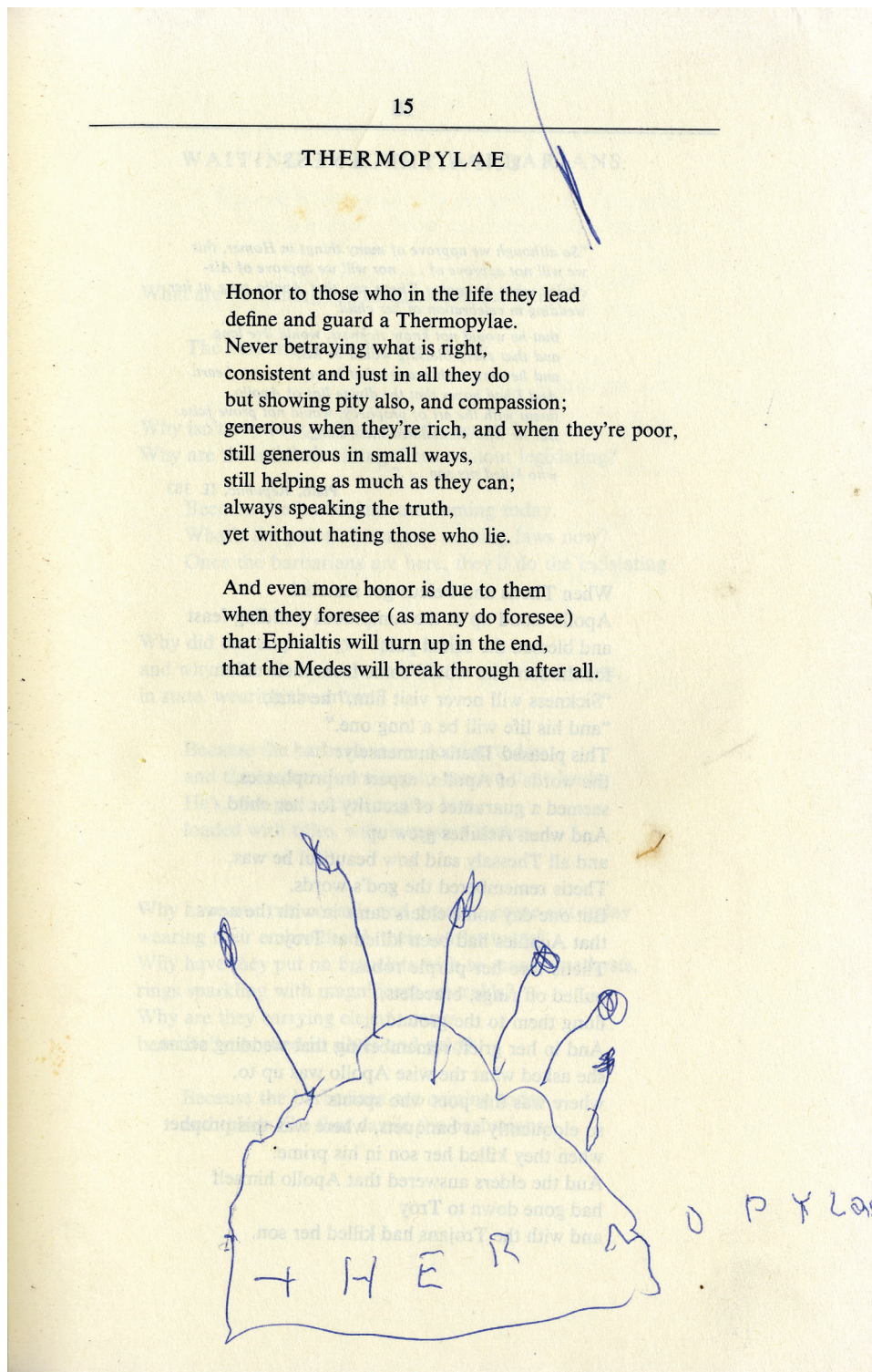
The study of the books found in Twombly's collection could allow us to explore the artist's creative process. In fact, the painter uses the book as a support that he turns into an artwork. This is thanks to the "treatment" that the book pages undergo, proving the painter's "active" reading: words and phrases that do not align with his preferences are removed, while others are replaced with vocabulary that better reflects his pictorial world. Passages that capture his attention are highlighted and set apart from the rest of the text, enclosed in boxes, ready to be used in the future. As a result, those pages full of marks and lines from his pencils, stains of paint and the artist's fingerprints become an original work, just like any other work on paper drawn by the painter [1].

He pays attention to every single word. For example, in his copy of Seferis' *Summer Solstice* (B) "falling into the river of time" [1], the word "sea" replaces

[1] George Seferis, "Three Secret Poems", in M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations: Views, Texts, Reviews* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 1983), 164– 65; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced from Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton University Press, 2016). © Princeton University Press. Courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.



[2] "Thermopylae" in C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard, ed. George Savides (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 15; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced from Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton University Press, 2016). © Princeton University Press. Courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.



the erased “river of time” and thus completes the poem (Jacobus 2016, 7). The added new word might fit better with the artist’s vocabulary and taste, given Twombly’s attachment to the sea, where he would often spend long periods of time before moving to Gaeta, a small town on the Tyrrhenian coast. Thanks to the new word “sea”, another meaning is added to the poem and reveals Twombly’s interpretation of the text. At the same time, this attention to detail, to the poem’s each word, shows a long procedure which precedes painting. On the latter, the viewer could possibly find these exact lines copied on canvas. This treatment of his books becomes the first stage of his creative process.

Apart from the notes next to the text, his books often contain quick drawings that suggest motifs to accompany a poem. These motifs are drawn as a reaction to the poetry’s images, showing the immediate impact some words would have on the artist. For instance, next to Cavafy’s *Thermopylae* [2], a strange form appears, a form that grows in three dimensions in the sculpture that carries the same name in 1991 [3]. These notes express the painter’s first impressions, reflecting his reading. Once the artist finds a powerful and inspiring text, these pages function as a sketchbook to trace his thoughts and inspiration, giving birth to the motifs of his future works. This is also the case for his copy of Seferis’ *Summer Solstice*, where one finds the inscription “Boat for Lucio” and a quick drawing which might be showing a boat [4]. The boat is introduced for the first time as a motif, combined with Seferis and a reference to his Neapolitan gallerist and friend Lucio Amelio, who passed away in 1994 (Leeman 2004, 254). This becomes a preparatory drawing for *Untitled*, a painting from 1993 dedicated to the artist’s friend [5]. In these pages, one can already trace all the elements that constitute the finished painting. Poetry is not only a condensed phrase (Serota and Twombly 2008). As his books show, it works as a source of inspiration and a

[3] Cy Twombly, *Thermopylae*, 1992, bronze, edition 3/3, (137 x 89 x 66 cm), Menil Collection, Houston © Cy Twombly Foundation



11.

The ocean they call calm
ships and white sails
a breeze from the pines and the mountain of Aegina
a panting breath;
your skin was slipping on her skin
easy and warm
a thought hardly made immediately forgotten.

But in the shallows
a harpooned octopus spurted ink
and at the bottom—
if you could imagine how far
the beautiful islands extend.

I was staring at you with all the light and darkness
I possess.

12.

The blood is now bursting
as the heat swells
in the veins of the ~~fostered~~ sky.
It seeks to pass through death
to find joy.

The light is a pulse
continually slower and slower
you think it is about to stop.

13.

A little longer and the sun will stop.
The spirits of the dawn
blew in the dry conches;
the bird chirped three times
three times only;
the lizard on the bleached stone
remains motionless
looking at the scorched grass

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[4] George Seferis, "Three Secret Poems" in M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations: Views, Texts, Reviews* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 1983), 169; copy marked by Cy Twombly.
Reproduced from Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton University Press, 2016). © Princeton University Press.
Courtesy Alessandro Twombly.
Photo British School at Rome.



[5] Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1993
 (Acrylic, lead pencil on wooden
 panel, 195,5x 152cm) © Cy
 Twombly Foundation

stimulus for the creation of certain motifs that later become his pictures, like seeds which are planned to grow later on.

After all these additions of words, notes, marks and sketches, looking at these pages makes one realize that the editing of the text also concerns another aspect, a visual treatment accompanying the artist's reading. The white large margins of the book leave a lot of space for the artist to add his marks, and they are usually filled with colors, stains, fingerprints from the artist's hands on the pages of the book. The richness of the surface proves that the painter had the copy in his studio and probably consulted these pages while painting. The book does not only inspire images; the text itself becomes a motif next to any other mark on the page – a page which can be seen as a purely pictorial surface.

At the same time, books become the subject matter of his oeuvre. As already briefly mentioned, their content, concerning most often poetic verses, is rendered on canvas and turned into a pictorial motif. Twombly keeps his 'study' on poetry: his choice of lines all together with any kind of change or erasure of the original text are meticulously copied on the painting, thereby preserving his initial reading and personal interpretation. For example, in *Untitled* seen above, various passages from Seferis' *Three secret poems* are carefully transcribed along with the artist's notes and changes one could find in his copy. Writing becomes a synonym of drawing, as the written word functions as a structural element of the painting's composition – and even sometimes the only element of the composition. The words are his subject matter and the object, the tangible material he selects, treats and transfers from one medium to another, as a form of tangible knowledge that enriches the artwork and, at the same time, is transformed to a pictorial entity.

Twombly Creator

If Twombly's viewer is more or less familiar with these aspects of the artist's work (aspects widely commented in his literature), one is less familiarized with Twombly's activity as author and creator of books. Apart from collecting, using the book as a means of support as well as content for his work, Twombly created his own books. Less studied and rarely shown in exhibitions, the wide public had not been able to discover them in their totality until the publication of the last volume of the artist's drawings' catalogue raisonné (Del Roscio 2016). Twombly made more than ten books towards the end of his career. Most of them were begun in December 1983 and completed in 2002; only the last three were started in 2002, with two completed in 2002 and one in 2003. As they were completed more or less during the same period of time, all of his books share astonishing

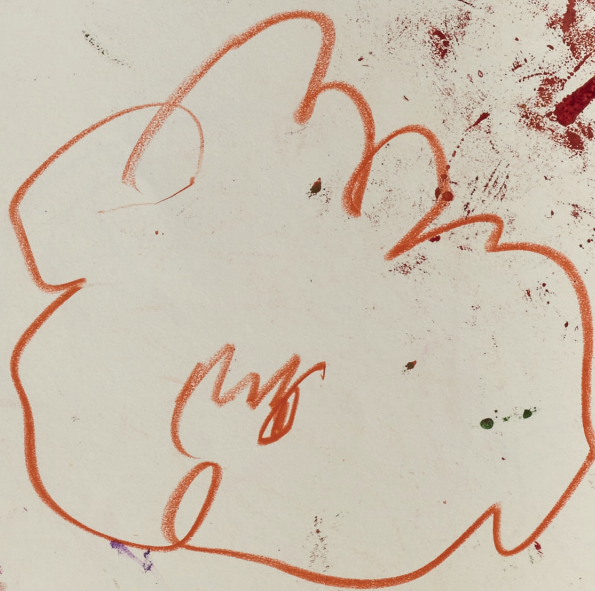
similarities presenting a resemblant color palette, common motifs such as the flowers (tulips, chrysanthemums, peonies) – which are also present in paintings in the early-mid 2000s dealing with the same forms and subject – as well as fragments from non-western poets, especially from the Middle East and Far East (Yukio Mishima, Omar Khayyam, Tan Taigi).

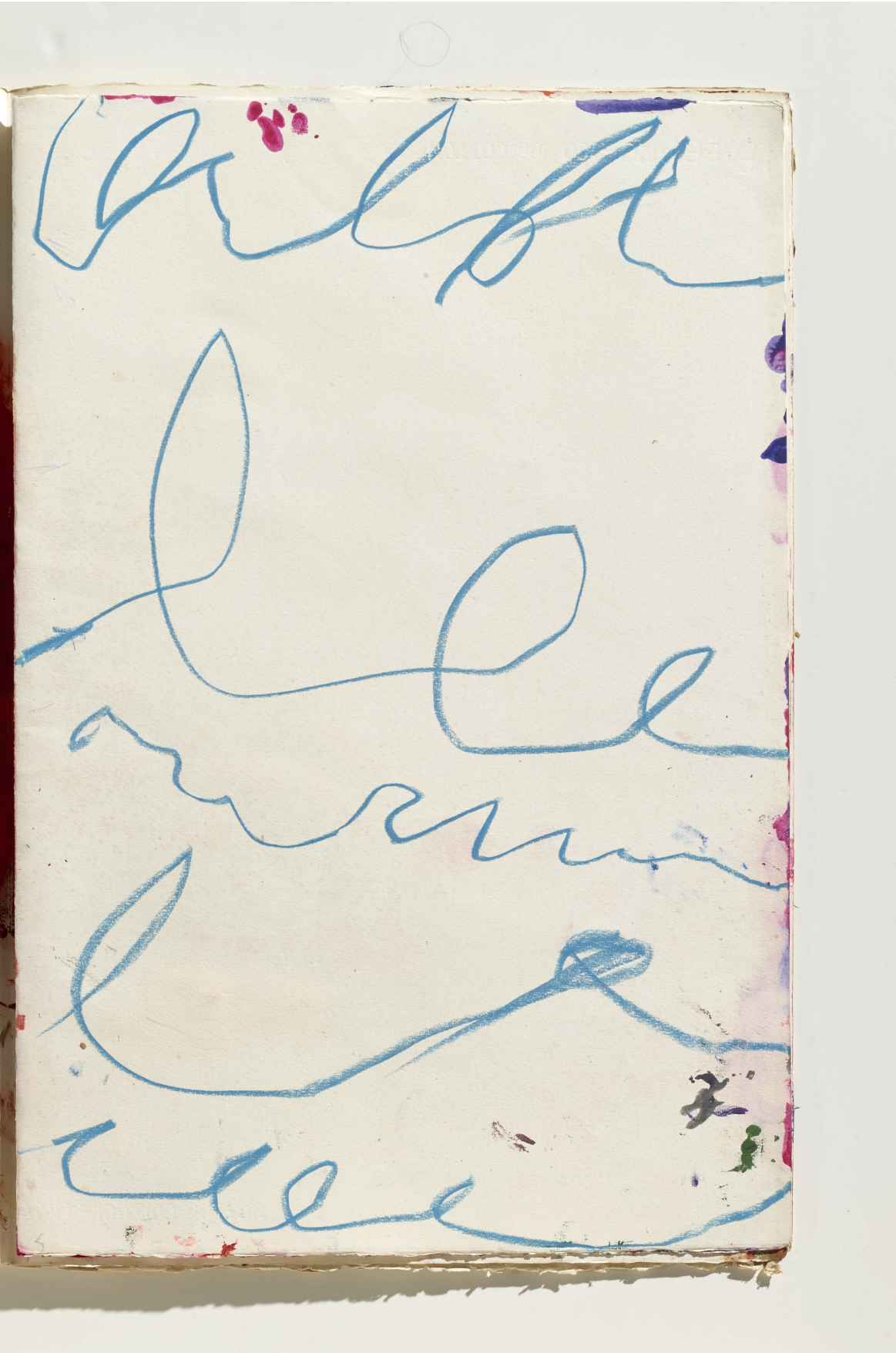
All of his books are conceived from scratch as an ensemble thought to be presented together, as an entity and as an object. He thus draws on both sides of handmade paper sheets, which he later folds together, arranging them in a sequence. As all of them are unbound and even though the pages are numbered, the artist had rearranged the sequence of the pages multiple times throughout the years, playing with different compositions that the combination of two pages could create. A unifying element of all the books is their handcrafted quality, emphasized by the paper's irregular size and texture, which lends each sheet a distinct physicality. This physicality evokes a tactile experience, inviting the viewer not only to touch the pages but also to witness the artist's own 'touch' – as the paper, soaked in acrylic paint and marked with wax crayons and pencils, bears traces of his hand. The result is a unique object that cannot be reproduced or printed in multiple copies. It is an original work of art that combines painting and poetry as in the rest of his oeuvre but, in this case, in the format of a book.

The painter's turn to the medium of the book can be understood in connection with his interest in making series of drawings and prints with the intention of reuniting them in albums or portfolios (Del Roscio 2016, 9). However, contrary to these earlier series of drawings, the books present coherence and esthetic continuity as an ensemble limited in its space, format and length. As I shall show, it is a work of art to touch and explore, with a beginning and an ending, inviting the viewer to "read" it until the end. The numerous books he created, along with his continued engagement with them later in his career,⁶ demonstrate the artist's intention to explore the book form as a creative space. Indeed, this experimentation with the medium and format opened up new possibilities, not only for his drawing as practice, but also for the text and image relationship which had always been a fundamental aspect of his work from very early on.

Take for example *Untitled (In beauty it is finished)*, 1983-2002 [6-7]; Twombly presents a book as far as the format and the material are concerned and, even though there is no binding, its folding arrangement shows its aim to be presented as a book. The painter explores the page. The white sheet is a picture plane bursting with smears of colors, flowerlike motifs and Twombly's particular trembling line, which sometimes either marks the pages purposelessly or forms letters and words of poetic verses. The painter suggests a certain order (writing

The mistle
of the peony gold
607
into me
Sunlight





[6] Cy Twombly, *Untitled (In Beauty it is finished)*, 1983-2002.
Pages 19-20, Wax crayon, acrylic,
pencil on handmade paper with
irregular size, (57,3 x 38 cm).
© Cy Twombly Foundation



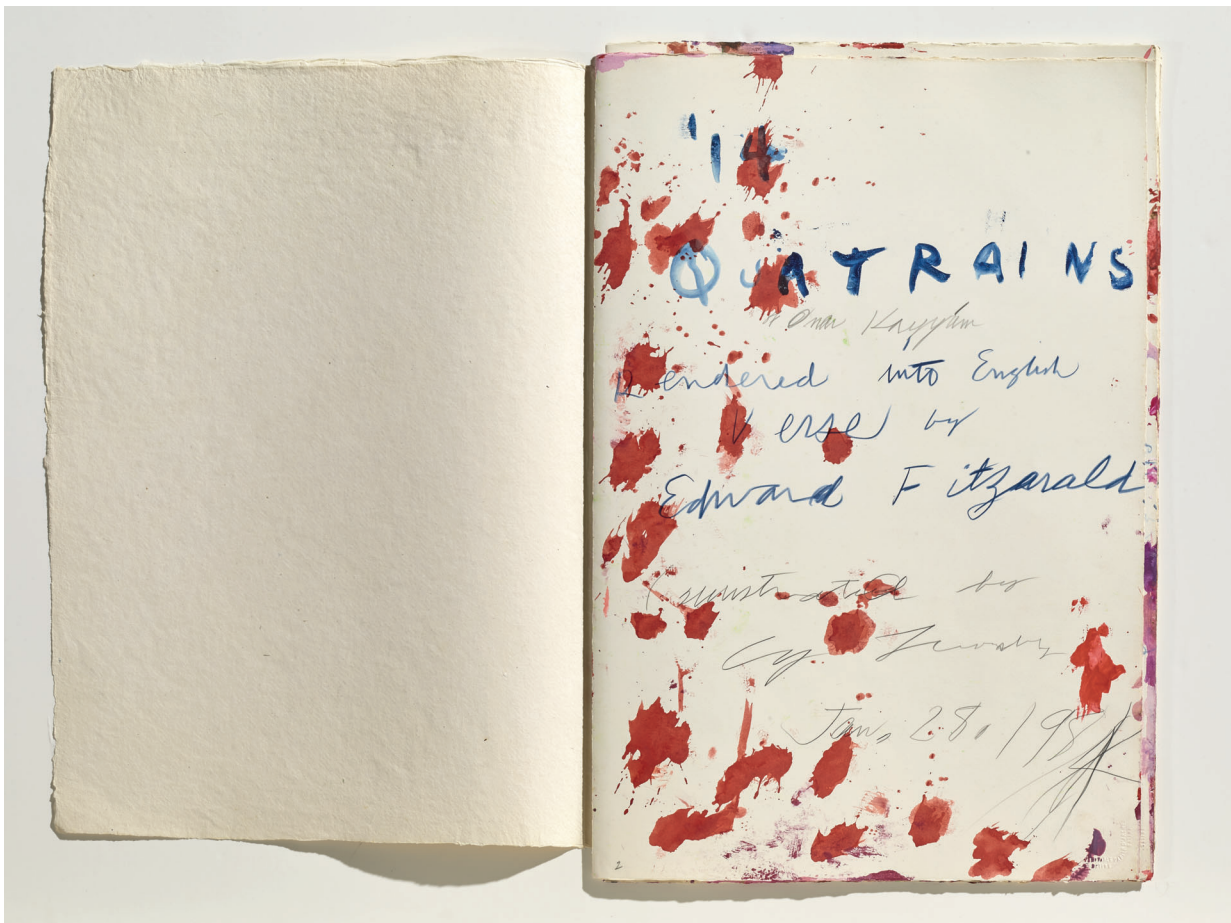


[7] Cy Twombly, *Untitled (In Beauty it is finished)*, 1983-2002, Pages 21-22, Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil on handmade paper with irregular size, (56,3 x 38,1 cm), © Cy Twombly Foundation

down the number of each page at the bottom), although, as mentioned earlier, he would experiment with the visual and aesthetic aspect of the resulting combination of pages: each double page, when folded and thus divided in two, constitute a half composition to be combined with another one. This means that, as Twombly turns these drawings into a book, the format gives him the possibility to experiment with an infinite variety of combinations; in this way, new compositions emerge any time he would change the order.

Throughout the pages, the painter reveals the lines from a prayer (part of a nine-day Navajo ceremony called the *Night Chant*), combined with a short haiku by Tan Taigi also copied.⁷ This union of text and visual elements on a page puts his book in the tradition of the *livre d'artiste* as it was established by painters like Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró and Henri Matisse, who combined their drawings with words from great poets. Nonetheless, as in many cases in Twombly's

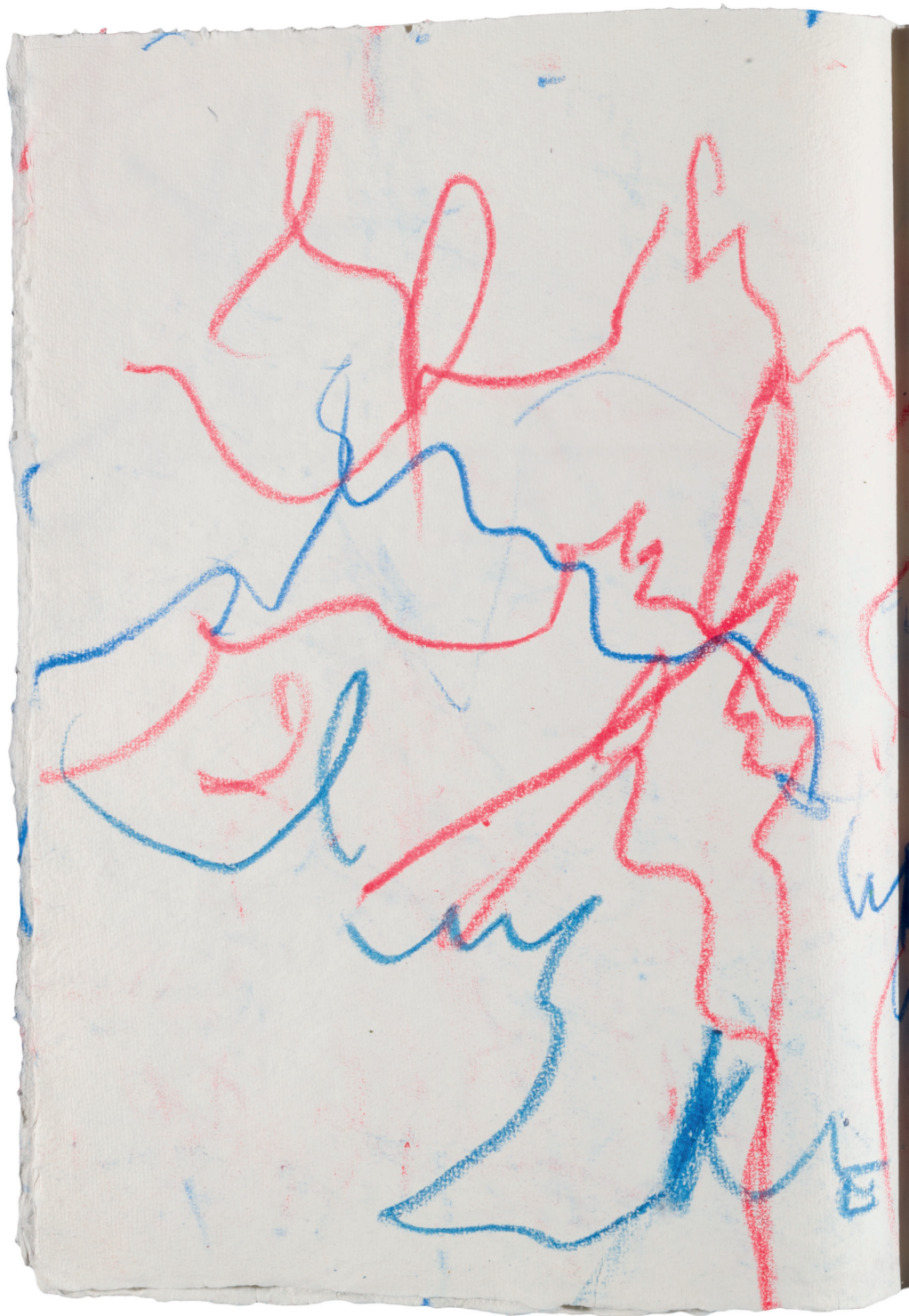
[8-9] Cy Twombly, *Rubaiyat*,
1984-2002, back cover and cover,
Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil on
handmade paper with irregular
size, (57,2 x 38,3 cm), © Cy
Twombly Foundation

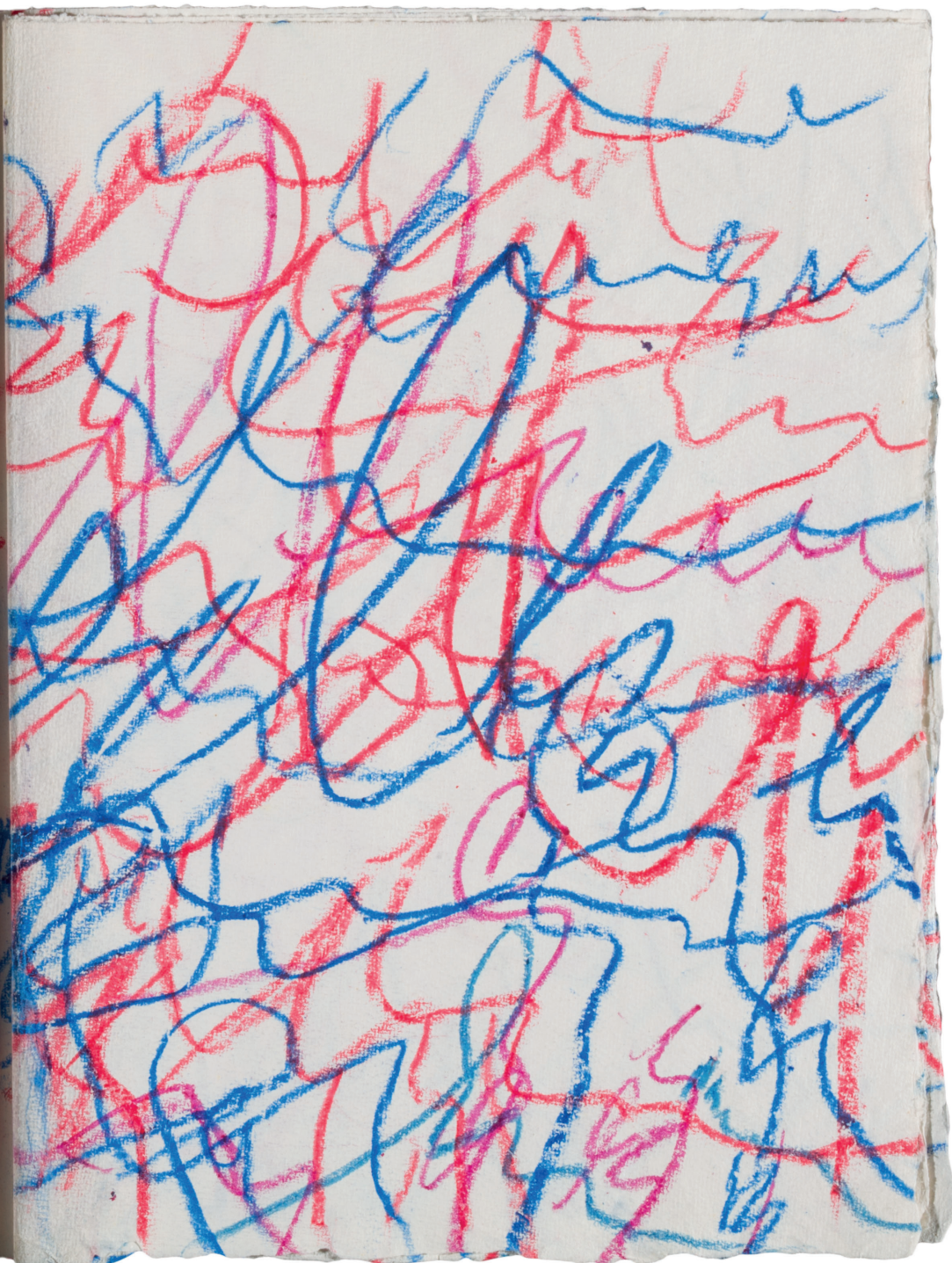




work, the poems he includes are often difficult to decipher due to his illegible handwriting, what Roland Barthes once described as the writing of a left-hander (*écriture gauchère*) (Barthes 1985, 163). The artist keeps the poem's messages to himself, choosing not to share them with his audience. The viewer is restricted to observing the written verses without being able to read them. As a result, poetry is reduced to a mere motif [8-9]. In this way, the verses that originate from a book as a material form of tangible knowledge become what Twombly absorbs and holds dear. This immaterial knowledge is then transformed into the content of his artist's book, while simultaneously taking shape as motifs within another tangible object – the *livre d'artiste*.

The pictorial value of poetry is an even more dominant aspect in the hand-made book *Untitled* (cat. Rais. No. 146), 2003 [10], whose reader/viewer follows





[10] Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 2003, Pages 3-4, Wax crayon on handmade paper with irregular size (39 x 28, 5 cm), © Cy Twombly Foundation, © Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio

the ‘adventures’ of a blue and a red line unfold on its 18 pages. Having spent all his career interweaving painting and poetry, here Twombly explores each sheet line’s endless possibilities. He thus recalls earlier series of drawings, although now his lines unveil colored paths that take form throughout the book, oscillating between writing and drawing. Sometimes his hand imitates the gesture of writing words; however, he is not forming any letters, but only creating endlessly looping lines, just as he did in some works from the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Letters of resignation* (1967). Writing becomes drawing, suggesting a movement of the hand which hesitates between actually writing words or forming lines and shapes.

Despite putting in question the reading experience, the function and the overall experience of the book are still available to the viewer. *Untitled (In beauty it is finished)*, as the rest of Twombly’s books, is an artwork which cannot be seen all at once. One has to take it in their hand, explore it, leaf through it and thus appreciate the juxtaposed and sequenced text and image given to read and see, and explore not only the page visually but also its physicality. There is a certain intimacy for the book as a medium: it is a personal object that one holds, observes – brings and looks closely, reads and spends time with. This experience of the book requires a whole different way of looking than any other work of his art. To put it otherwise, when the visual experience of viewing an artwork meets the book’s materiality, the viewer engages in a time-consuming activity (Drucker 2004). Not to mention that when Twombly creates a book, he borrows words he himself found in other books. He thus recreates the experience he once had and aims to initiate this intimate relationship between his own artwork and his reader. Therefore, the experience of the book is tactile (has to be in one’s hands), spatial (the surface plane of the sheet and the sheets all-together), as well as temporal (since the book as an object has a beginning and an ending and need time not only to fold out, read and view, but also to engage to its understanding and appreciation). This three-faced reading viewing experience sequenced into the definite space of text and images (Drucker 2004, 14) gives these assembled drawings the function of a traditional book.

Nevertheless, no one *needs to* read it from beginning to end. In fact, its other function as an original artwork implies that the only way for the public to appreciate it is in an exhibition space. This excludes the possibility of being held in hands, and cancels the full experience of the book. Instead, it is limited to the visual appreciation of the (only) one exhibited page. Although by using available technical means today, a spectator could potentially scroll virtually on a screen of a scanned copy of the book, this could not replace the actual experience described above. The latter becomes an experience theoretically available to the

‘lucky few’ who could afford to acquire the artwork. This inaccessibility limits its potential, compelling museum spectators to regard it as nothing more than a work on paper.

All in all, Twombly’s handmade books could sum up the artist’s entire pictorial practice. In connection with his paintings or even his own library books, these *livres d’artiste* gather a lifetime’s preoccupation and reflection on the text and image relationship, on color, abstraction (the line) and figuration (flower motifs), drawing and writing, painting and poetry.

Books in Practice

I have tried to delve into three different aspects of Twombly’s use of books. The book is proved to be one of the most important elements of his poetics, either used as an object, support or material. It is the painter’s main source of inspiration and intellectual support for the artistic creation, as well as a handmade object that presents an experimental form of art for Twombly.

Moreover, as already seen, his relationship with them shows different approaches to the book as a form of knowledge that is tangible as well as immaterial. The latter is suggested by its function as stimuli for the painter: books’ content and ideas are the starting point guiding the artist’s imagination and leading to later creation – a process which represents a key insight into Twombly’s work. As far as the tangible aspect of knowledge is concerned, Twombly uses the books as a tangible object to collect and elaborate (physically on its pages). Especially for the rare editions or secondhand books in his library, the idea of collecting a book pre-owned by somebody else reenforces the notion of tangible knowledge which is transferred from hand to hand, reused and reread, surviving throughout the years from one person to another. Twombly comes to add his own marks and even transform it to a material of his art. As it has also been shown, thanks to his own handmade books, the artist also creates an equivalent tangible object which is an ideal example that illustrates the metamorphosis of the immaterial knowledge already mentioned to tangible. Books in his practice not only illustrate the artistic genesis, as is usually the case for most artists, but also illustrate a full circle of the artistic process, from inspiration to elaboration, treatment and finally, creation of the artwork.

ABSTRACT

Contrary to the thought that knowledge could hinder the artist's imagination, this paper aims to demonstrate, through the example of Cy Twombly, that books can be not only a source of creation, inspiration, and knowledge but also an active element in the late twentieth-century painter's artistic practice. The study of the books found in the artist's collection reveals how the painter uses them as a medium that, through his treatment and active reading, transforms into an artwork. These same books serve as a source of inspiration for the creation of his paintings. At the same time, Twombly creates his own books out of handmade paper. This lesser-known practice offers Twombly a boundless field of experimentation, a new form of art in the tradition of the *livre d'artiste*. The analysis of these three different aspects of Twombly's use of books in his creative process allows us to study the book itself as an object of collection, as a source of inspiration, and as both a material and intellectual form of knowledge.

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NOTES

- 1 On this aspect of Twombly's studio see (Spathoni 2024).
- 2 See introduction of the present volume.
- 3 On the subject see also the research project in France: <http://lesbibliothequesdartistes.org/>
- 4 Mary Jacobus gave the first valuable insight into Twombly's library presenting not only a detailed list of the books owned by the artist but also reproductions of certain pages of his copies (Jacobus 2016). Twombly's last published catalogue raisonné also started transcribing (although not systematically) some of the artists copied lines and thus allow the identification of various sources. More recently, Thierry Greub presented an exhaustive study on Twombly's quotes and therefore offered a more detailed list of the artist's book collection (Greub 2022). My remarks are mainly based on these sources.
- 5 Although this practice is relatively rare in Twombly's work, one can nonetheless find excerpts from poems copied in their original language — for example, in Latin, as in *Animula Vagula* (1980, Cat. Rais. Drawings 7, Nos. 24–25); in German or French, as in *Untitled (Les Fleurs du Mal)* (1990, Cat. Rais. Drawings 8, No. 20); and most frequently, in Greek — as seen in the drawing series *Meli* (1980, Cat. Rais. Drawings 7, Nos. 51–56) and in *Untitled* (1980, Cat. Rais. Drawings 7, Nos. 47–49). In the latter, the inscription «ΔΙΙ ΑΘΕνΑιΟι ΜΕΔΟν ΔΑΒΟνΤΕΣ», written on the helmet of a Persian soldier, indirectly references the Battle of Marathon.
- 6 As mentioned above, since the books started in the 1980s, Twombly not only came back to the medium twenty years later to complete them, but also continued exploring the medium by creating more books at that point.
- 7 The same haiku is also found in a later painting (by the artist who copied its full version on the surface of *Untitled*, 2007 (cat.rais. No 58); see (Del Roscio 2016).

January 26, ~~Amberg~~ ^{day hills to cart to cart to NY City}, 1973

dear Lucy, your so, ———;
post-card ——— in Nov, 1972
can't tell you i wrote too you:
today the date "i don't" have to
when i will be in fight for being
NYC, i guess ——— and so on
the end of march end so far :---
or the beginning just what i do
of april ———; and can end
see you there; want to repeat
and Lucy — today, ~~will~~
do what you art is art
do and want a man a man
to do, — i do a woman a woman
my am a woman, writing, ~~he~~
all best ———

no explanation — no
did you not know this before

Un/Writing “Woman” and its Epistemological Implications in Hanne Darboven’s 1970s Writing Practice

When you asked me to speak about women and fiction, I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant.

(VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own* (1929))

“i am a woman, writing, hanne” — these words go back to a letter that the German Conceptual artist Hanne Darboven (1941–2009) sent to the American curator and feminist Lucy R. Lippard on January 26, 1973 [1].¹ The letter begins with Darboven’s vague response to a postcard Lippard previously sent inquiring about her next visit to New York.² Subsequently, the artist addresses what appears to be a longstanding disagreement between the two correspondents: “and lucy do what you do and want to do — I do so.” These words recognize the differing opinions between the two, indicating Darboven’s respectful acceptance and even support of Lippard’s different approach, all while emphasizing that the artist remains steadfast in her own views. Additionally, Darboven reminds Lippard that she already expressed her stance in a letter back in November 1972. After reaffirming her position by stating “art is art / a man a man / a woman a woman,” Darboven concludes her letter with the emphatic words, “i am a woman, writing, hanne.” Only at this moment it becomes clear that the letter addresses the burgeoning feminist initiatives in 1970s art, which Lippard was spearheading.³

[1] Hanne Darboven, *Letter to Lucy Lippard, January 26, 1973 (page one)*, Lucy Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Thus, it is only here, at the end of the letter, that we encounter the reasons for Lippard's and Darboven's differing opinions. But more interestingly, Darboven's letter and its poignant closing words effectively position Darboven in relation to both the feminist efforts in art in the US and the patriarchal structures that necessitated them in the first place.

In fact, this conversation between Lippard and Darboven appears to have emerged in the context of the preparations for the curator's final "numbers show,"⁴ which featured Darboven along with 25 other women artists working in Conceptual art at the beginning of the 1970s.⁵ Launched at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts, May 14–18, 1973) and titled *c. 7,500* after the population of Valencia, California, its inaugural location, this all-women traveling show continued to another nine venues.⁶ As it was the first show to merge a feminist agenda with an experimental curatorial style (Morris 2012; Butler, C. 2012), *c. 7,500* holds a significant position in the history of the politically inflected Conceptual art.

Moreover, Darboven's engagement with women's issues may have begun in 1972, but it has certainly not stopped then. It can be traced back in the artist's correspondence, works, and particularly in her participation in feminist and women-only exhibitions (such as *c. 7,500*) at least until 1999.⁷ These largely overseen entanglements between Darboven and feminist efforts (primarily in the US) offer a productive framework, establishing a connection between her writing and the category of "woman," and thus a new perspective on her writing practice.

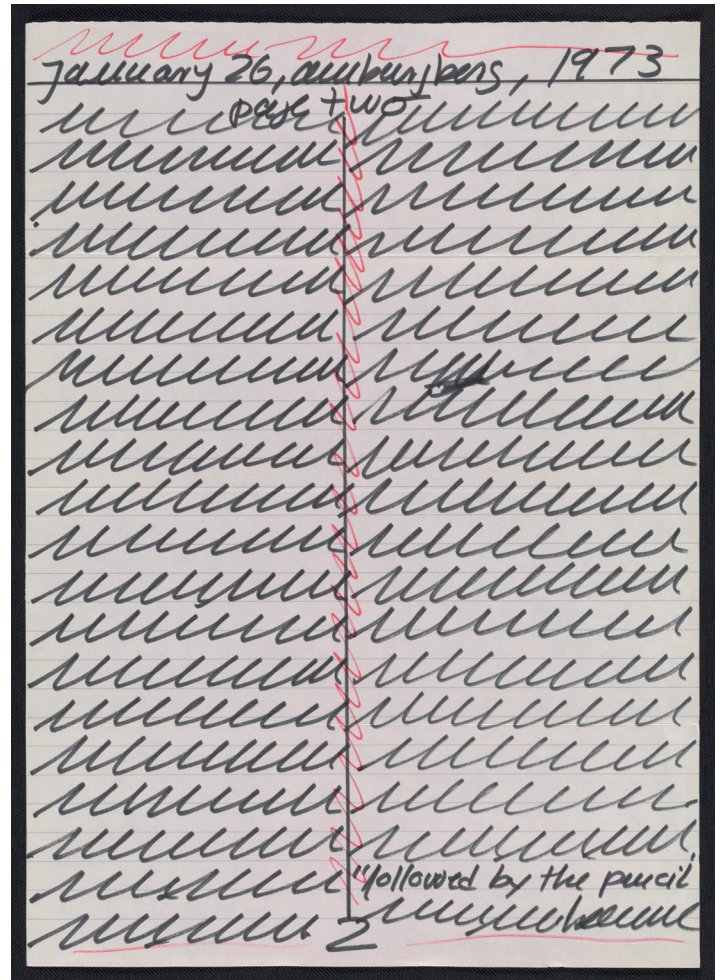
I argue that Darboven's statement "i am a woman, writing, hanne" should be regarded as the artist's own stance toward the increasingly polarized situation at the beginning of the 1970s, which implicitly requested women artists to take sides: either to join – if permitted – what Lippard called the "male mainstream," (1976, 5), and play by those rules, or engage in the newly emerging feminist efforts in art. Through her writing practice, as I will demonstrate, Darboven chose to chart her own course while remaining in dialogue with the feminist initiatives in art, contradicting the artist's disavowal that "women's issues" were not a concern of hers (e.g. Darboven 1989, 32). By highlighting that Darboven's writing practice is rooted in a gendered position, the statement introduces significant implications for the artist's writing-based oeuvre and calls for an overall reevaluation by acknowledging this primacy.

In this article, I aim to establish a foundation for this task by first situating these declaratory words within their emerging context: Lippard's show *c. 7,500*. Second, I explore one possibility of engaging with this new perspective on

Darboven's writing practice by focusing on the processuality and performativity of writing, which, as the structure of Darboven's closing words suggests, are the common ground for both gender and self. While this opens up a complex field of investigation, my overarching questions, following the focus of this special issue, are quite specific: Under the assumption that writing is inextricably connected with knowledge production, what knowledge is being produced (and presented) by Darboven's writing practice at the nexus between art, gender and self? My specific intent here is to illuminate the epistemological implications introduced by Darboven's statement "i am a woman, writing, hanne," and the conflicts and contradictions it seems to deliberately produce, targeting the very category of "woman." As I will demonstrate, writing serves as an act that both writes (or establishes) and unwrites "woman," as writing into illegibility. Viewed as an intervention into established knowledge (authorized by institutions, discourses, practices etc.) and the reality they produce, these contradictions create the possibility for resignification by revealing the instability of the categories that shape and define (and delineate) our understanding of the world. This intervention is initiated from a specific: that of a woman artist writing within the patriarchal art world of the 1970s.

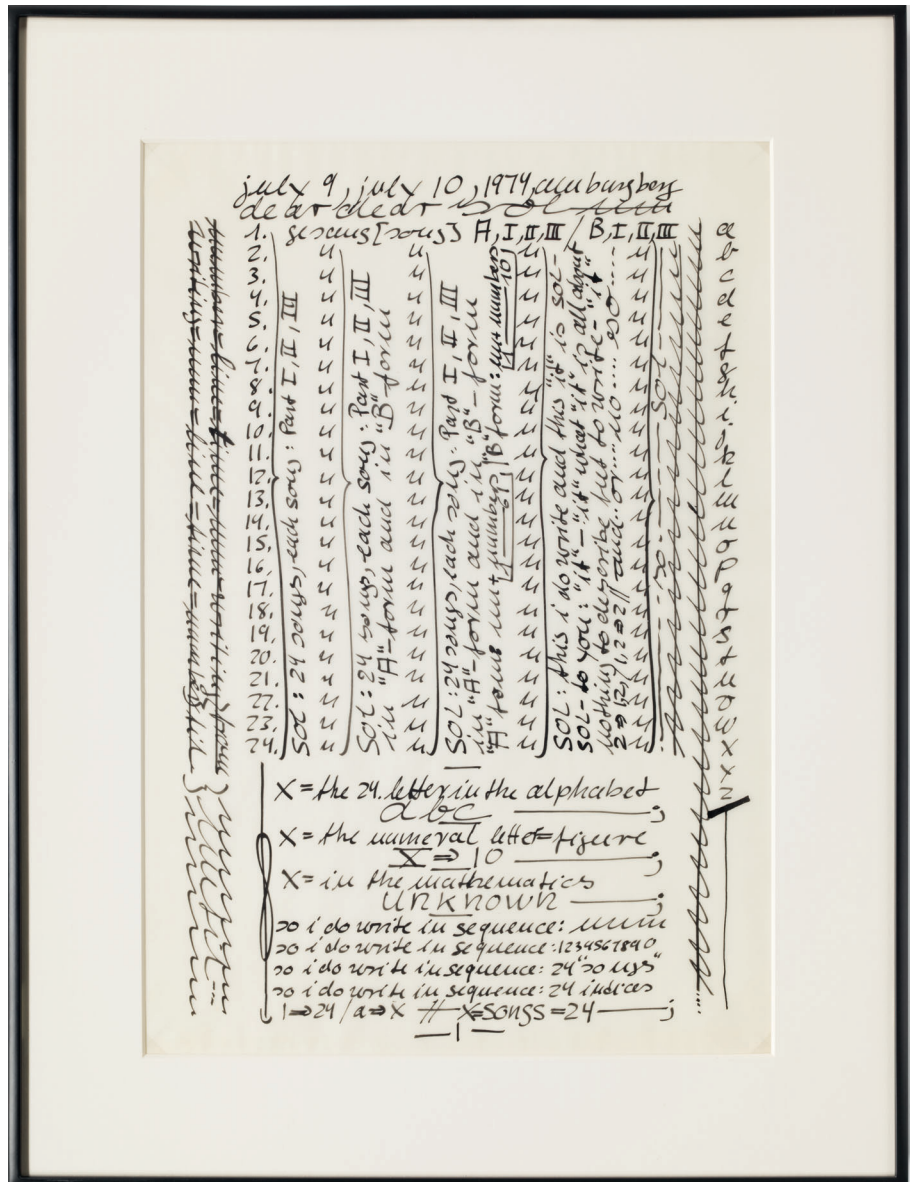
Writing as Fighting

Before starting my investigation, I want to highlight the idiosyncratic status of the correspondence in Darboven's practice, as this will clarify why Darboven's letters to Lippard hold such a central position in this article. First, Darboven described her overall writing practice as her "doing" or "it," which suggests a rejection of the category of art, thereby situating it within the quotidian, as

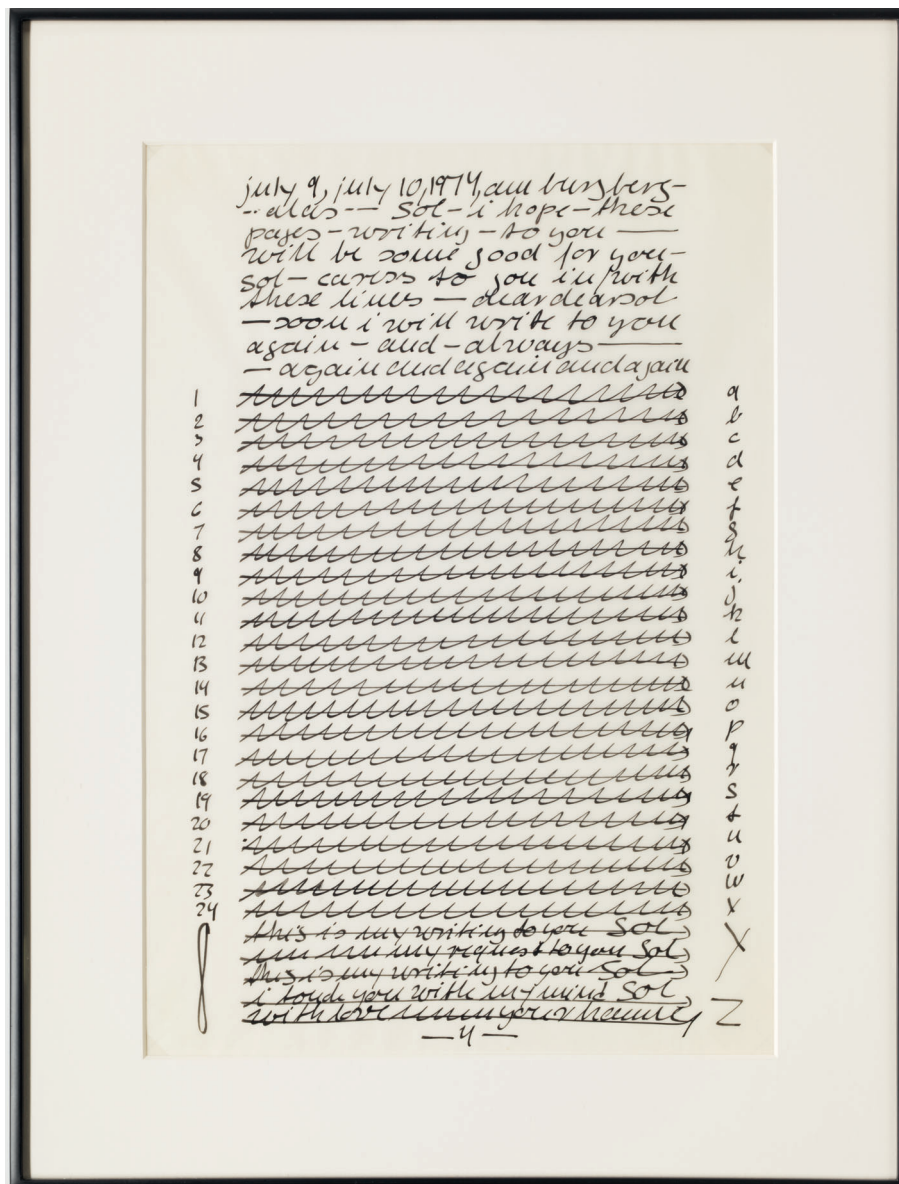


[2] Hanne Darboven, *Letter to Lucy Lippard, January 26, 1973 (page two)*, Lucy Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art (page two), Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

perhaps an everyday life practice.⁸ Secondly, there are some strong indicators that the artist was interested in blurring the distinction between writing a letter and writing a piece of “art,” and thus between what can be regarded as the private and the public sphere, respectively. Darboven has not only published her correspondence with family, friends, and professional network,⁹ but also incorporated the same quotes from various literary works in both her correspondence and



[3] Fig. 3: Hanne Darboven, Letter (page 1), from the portfolio “Letter and Indices to 24 Songs”, Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Carol and Sol LeWitt, © Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001.197.1



[4] Fig. 4: Hanne Darboven, Letter (page 4), from the portfolio "Letter and Indices to 24 Songs", Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Sol and Carol LeWitt, © Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001.1974

art practice. Furthermore, we find similar visual strategies in her artistic work and correspondence alike. Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel (2015), for instance, consider Darboven's letters to be a type of "experimental objects" (20) with a "hybrid status between the things" (52), yet an integral part of her oeuvre.

An example in the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Harvard University illustrates their in-between status convincingly [3–4]. The portfolio of 16 sheets, a gift from

Sol LeWitt to the museum, displays a letter to LeWitt himself, followed by the indices for a piece that Darboven worked on in 1974. All 16 sheets are framed, whereby no distinction is made between the letter and the indices, both of which are classified as ink drawings. While the decision to frame them as a cohesive body of work was most likely LeWitt's, it nonetheless demonstrates the letter's ability to serve as both art and correspondence, leaving the classification up to the recipient.¹⁰ Conversely, and perhaps more interestingly, Darboven chose to present her magnum opus, *Schreibzeit* (Writing Time), as a piece of correspondence of sorts by addressing it to "everyone" [5].¹¹ Also, Darboven included her name and home address, thus opening up the possibility of engaging in a dialogue with the readers of her work.

This gesture of explicitly addressing her thousands of pages of *Schreibzeit* to "everyone" draws attention to how writing letters functions as a way of constituting an "I" in the very act of presenting oneself to, and thus anticipating, an interlocutor, a "you." Indeed, writing letters has already been acknowledged and used as a technique of forming the self in Greco-Roman antiquity (Foucault 1984).

Following this, with her statement, "i am a woman, writing, hanne," Darboven effectively presents herself – and thus insists on being perceived – as a woman, writing. An asterisk above the word "writing" leads to an addition that Darboven included between the two columns of her 1973 letter to Lippard. It reads: "Did you not now (sic!) this befor (sic!) – no explanation – no" [1]. This sentence gives Darboven's closing words an uncompromising tone, while also emphasizing that her position on the matter is represented by her writing practice alone. These stark words seem to already find their implementation on the second page of Darboven's letter [2]. Consisting of a form of asemic writing – i.e. writing that does not communicate a message but highlights its graphiological dimension (see e.g. Schwenger 2019) – these waves, which emulate writing, emphasize their aesthetic and processual dimensions, rather than providing any explanatory remarks or further contextualization of Darboven's position.

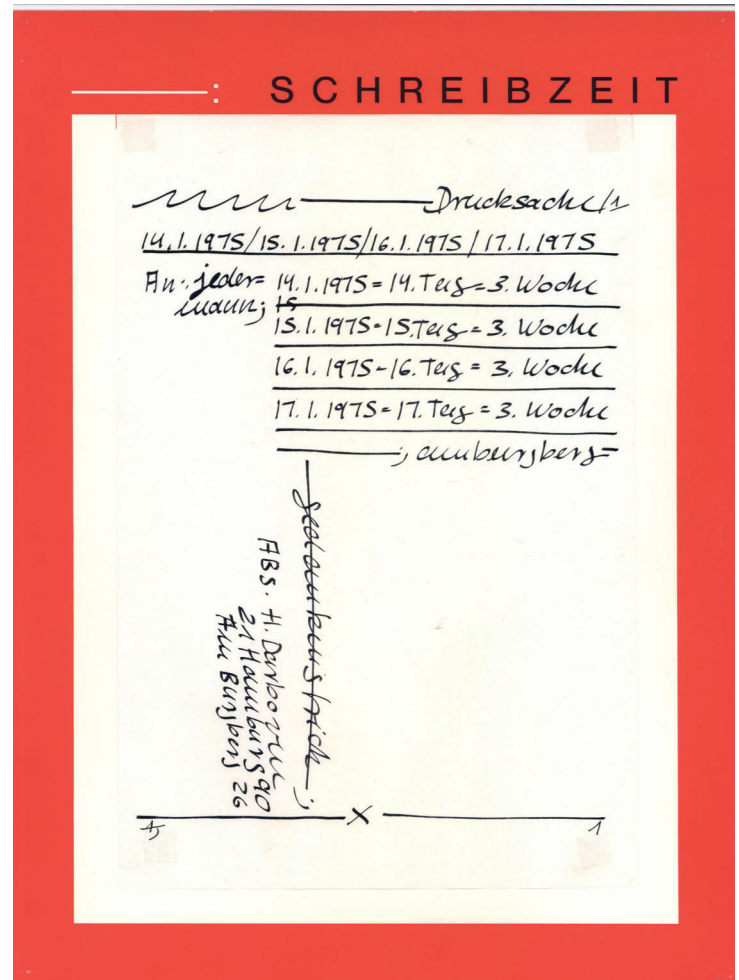
In fact, the letter from November 1972 that Darboven refers to in her later dispatch to Lippard raises the question of writing as a political strategy. Here, Darboven addresses the theme of gender – likely among the first times – and links it to her writing practice.¹² The passage reads:

and to you today: because / i am a woman, i do fight / for man ——, / i don't have
to fight for being / a woman, because i am a / woman – because i am a / woman,
i do fight for man -; / art is a piece of work, not every / piece of work is art, but

what / else can art be than art? /
 i do fight no more [wavy line] i
 write* [my emphasis]

What makes this passage particularly noteworthy is that Darboven establishes here a nexus between art, the gender binary (the very framework of second-wave feminism), and her writing practice, while also underlying that it is inextricably linked to a fight she has given up in favor of writing. Darboven returned to this statement in her writings and interviews at least five times from 1972 to 1978,¹³ albeit dropping the reference to writing, perhaps because it seemed unnecessarily obvious. Most notably, in *Schreibzeit*, the gender binary is questioned by emphasizing that the fight is carried out in the name of human beings.¹⁴ Darboven appears to advocate for a universalist stance that seeks to transcend gender binary categories, while also suggesting that this objective can be effectively realized from a woman's subject position.

While we remain in the dark about why this is the case, the quoted passage further touches upon art's limitations in conducting this fight, and to Darboven's substitution of fighting with writing. In addition to raising doubts about whether Darboven considers her writing art, these lines pose questions regarding the political impulse linked to the fight under these circumstances: Has it vanished in Darboven's shift from fighting to writing? Or has it been redirected into her writing, potentially as a more fitting means for waging this struggle? This necessitates first an exploration of Darboven's concept and practice of writing and, second, a consideration of the context in which this writing practice emerged.



[5] Hanne Darboven, *Schreibzeit* (page two), Collage, Offset, Copies, 3364 sheets, each 42 x 29,7 cm, exhibition version ca. 1980, Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Hamburg, Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Hanne Darboven Stiftung

“i am a woman, writing, hanne”

A notable detail that emerges when examining the sentence “i am a woman, writing, hanne” helps clarify Darboven’s idea of writing: the verb “writing” is in the present continuous tense, introducing some significant implications. To begin with, it showcases Darboven’s view of writing as a continuous pursuit. Writing is presented as an ongoing process rather than a means to an end, such as writing *poetry* or writing *a Conceptual work*. This understanding of writing as a perpetual activity not directed towards a specific product corresponds to Roland Barthes’ notion of writing as an intransitive verb: The writer is, according to Barthes, “the one who writes – absolutely” (1989, 18).

Darboven’s monumental, writing-based oeuvre stands testimony to her commitment to this concept of writing, whereby the single works function as “momentary figuration” (Bippus 2015, 187). But the 1973 letter to Lippard too presents us with two aspects related to this form of writing: On the one hand, there is the aforementioned asemic writing that shifts the focus from writing as a means of communication to writing as an activity, which has been referred to as “pure inscription” (Lange-Berndt and Rübel 2015, 49) or as “brain waves” (Lippard 1973, 35). The focus lies here on the interplay between corporeality, the writing instrument, the employed writing technique (or perhaps more accurately, the pattern), and the paper, whereby a more complex concept of writing emerges – one that transcends the idea of writing as merely a means for transmitting information (see e.g. Campe 2021). Returning to the assumption that writing is tightly linked to knowledge production, this concept of writing in Darboven’s practice then introduces a significant shift: The production of knowledge is linked to the process of writing and also to its performative dimension (see e.g. Austin 1962).

As previously mentioned, by penning the phrase “i am a woman, writing, hanne,” Darboven explicitly embraces this gender identity while at the time establishing its inextricable connection to writing. This encourages an examination of their relationship. Darboven’s statement may be regarded as a simple description: the artist is a woman named “hanne” who writes. The structure of the statement suggests that the category “woman” acts as a reference in the writing process, implying an ongoing engagement with it. In other words, it seems that “woman” serves as a permanent reference in relation to which the writing takes shape. This raises questions about the impact of writing on the concept of “woman” and, conversely, about how writing is shaped when conducted from this gendered position.

The sentence features simultaneously a performative dimension, which adds another layer and further complicates my considerations: It is with the

writing itself that this gender identity is attributed to the “I,” the subject of the sentence. This constitutive act appeals to the performative aspect of language and, most importantly, presents the writing act as the construction of the artist-subject as a woman within the act of writing. “i am a woman, writing, hanne” functions as an instantiation of these words within the writing process. Against this background, the “I,” the subject, is simultaneously created with/in the activity of writing: created as a woman who writes. Or, to put it in Emile Benveniste’s words: “This is a consequence of the fact that the instance of discourse that contains the verb establishes the act at the same time that it sets up the subject” (1986, 732).

The performative instantiation thus presents the writing act as the constitutive force that establishes the subject – a gendered one, as opposed to Benveniste – within writing. Furthermore, in the context of the letter, Darboven’s statement has been introduced and should, therefore, be considered in relation to the tautologies that precede it. Only after writing “art is art / a man a man / a woman a woman” does Darboven close her letter with the consequential line: “i am a woman, writing, hanne.”¹⁵ Notably, Darboven’s statement breaks with the closed circuits of these tautologies. Against this background, “i am a woman, writing, hanne” acts both as a declaration and an oblique positioning towards them. Writing, and specifically writing as an ongoing activity that constitutes a self as a woman writing, set against the unchangeable and undeniable logical “truth” of tautologies, creates an obvious conflict. This irreconcilable conflict raises the question of how this “woman” takes shape in Darboven’s writing practice with even more urgency. In other words, how does writing as an ongoing project impact this assumed gender position (qua writing)? And is this Darboven’s possibly more effective way of fighting?

Writing Contradictions

As previously noted, since Darboven presented her writing in such terms in conversation with Lippard, and within the context of *c. 7,500*, it is essential to examine this particular setting.

Lippard’s traveling exhibition *c. 7,500* converged Conceptual art and feminist impulses, albeit without being explicitly framed as a feminist show. It was conceived as an initiative to increase the visibility of women artists involved in Conceptual art. It showcased a total of 26 artistic positions from North America (U.S. and Canada) and Europe (Germany), such as Darboven, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper, and Ulrike Rosenbach (then known as Nolden). These artistic positions demonstrate that Conceptual art, precisely

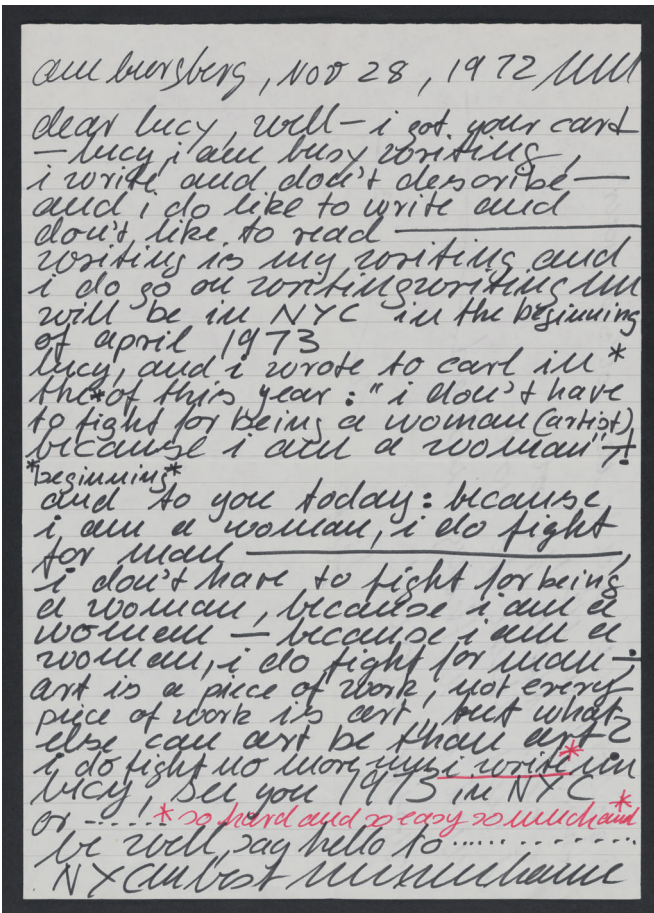
because it allows for a systematic and analytical approach, has proven particularly valuable for explorations into hegemonic narratives or forms of hegemonic knowledge conducted from a feminist or simply from a woman's perspective.

The exhibit highlighted that – contrary to popular opinion – there are many female Conceptual artists while also indicating that Conceptual art was especially appealing to young women artists, enabling them to establish themselves as artists more easily. As Catherine Morris argues, drawing a parallel to video art, Conceptual art was a largely experimental, and thus heterogeneous and dynamic field (with Lippard's *Six Years* serving as its clear evidence), not yet canonized and institutionalized. It possessed no particular market value, since it emphasized unsophisticated and cheap materials, and, more importantly, art historians and critics had not yet intervened and excluded the contributions of women artists in their discussion of Conceptual art (Morris 2012, 21). I would further

argue that the systematic nature of Conceptual art was essential for women artists to acquire knowledge about themselves and their position within a patriarchal society while also serving as an instrument in constituting new subjectivities.

Notwithstanding its importance in establishing “a Conceptual art emanating from life” (Butler, C. 2012, 68) and its urgency considering the particularly discriminatory environment for women artists, Cornelia Butler reminds us that the nascent format of the women-only show was a marginal phenomenon at that time, “doomed to second-class status in its binary opposition to mainstream exhibition-making” (2012, 63). Furthermore, unlike all-male exhibitions, which, although common, were merely seen as art, all-female exhibitions, such as c. 7,500, frequently encountered hostility, even from female critics. A review published in conjunction with the London iteration of the show went so far as to criticize it as a form of ghettoization (Tisdall 1974, reprinted in Butler, C. 2012). Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock sees in this accusation the manifestation of

[6] Hanne Darboven, *Letter to Lucy Lippard*, (November 28, 1972) Lucy Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



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[7] Hanne Darboven, *Words*
(page one), Spring 1972 issue of
the New York-based *Avalanche*
magazine, Photo © Stephan
Hauser, Schaulager.

both the underlying “male norm of culture” and the distinct treatment of women-only exhibitions, which are often regarded as “a self-conscious statement about women’s art” (1974, reprinted in Butler, C. 2012). By exposing the male norm in culture, the particular standpoint of women artists holds a critical potential. It highlights how the “male norm in art” actively produces knowledge about what constitutes a “legitimate” art show and, by extension, a “legitimate” art practice and art itself, largely diminishing women’s art to a mere hobby or the pursuit of amateurs.

And yet, it is precisely this opposition to the mainstream art world, coupled with a significant lack of funding and support from public institutions,¹⁶ that enabled (or to a certain degree constrained) c. 7,500 to establish itself as a space where critical artistic positions and curatorial experiments could meet and

[8] Hanne Darboven, *Words* (page five), Spring 1972 issue of the New York-based *Avalanche* magazine, Photo © Stephan Hauser, Schaulager.

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advance a feminist agenda. Also significant, although perhaps surprising, is the instrumental role attributed to Darboven and Lee Lozano¹⁷ in Lippard's efforts to develop a vocabulary by which she could accurately address the "brand of Conceptual art made by women," already discernible in her *Six Years* (Butler, C. 2012, 189).¹⁸

Despite her assurance that "women's issues" were no concern of hers, Darboven was among the 26 women featured in this traveling exhibition. Yet, the absence of information about Darboven's work featured in Lippard's show compelled me to choose a different path and reflect instead on the work that Darboven originally planned to submit to c. 7,500, along with Lippard's initial evaluation of the piece.¹⁹ The piece Darboven had in mind for the show was featured in the Spring 1972 issue of the New York-based *Avalanche* magazine

[7–9], published by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar. Unfortunately, the magazine had lost parts of the piece, so Darboven had to send 1969 00 → 00 instead.²⁰

Moreover, in a draft of her curatorial statement, Lippard made a remarkable observation about Darboven's work that, interestingly, wasn't included in the final version. Lippard notes that the works of Darboven and Christine Kozlov are "most systematic and unattributable to any sexual origin" (Lucy Lippard Papers, Box 43, folder 21). The fact that Lippard discusses Darboven and Kozlov with respect to gender and retracts this observation in her final version is telling. One reason that comes to mind to explain the subsequent omission is that Lippard may have felt her argument regarding potential differences in women's and men's art was compromised. While emphasizing that "art has no sex, but artists do,"²¹ Lippard indicates that gender-based differences in

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[9] Hanne Darboven, *Words* (page ten), Spring 1972 issue of the New York-based *Avalanche* magazine, Photo © Stephan Hauser, Schaulager.

art production arise from a society built on the gender binary and the oppressive and discriminatory value system associated with it, inevitably leading to distinct experiences for female and male artists, which in turn impacts on their work.

And yet, Lippard's observation regarding Darboven's and Kozlov's work raises a valid point that complicates my considerations but also introduces a productive angle. Lippard is certainly right to say that Darboven's work eludes the "mark" of gender and thereby points to a rather consequential contradiction between Darboven's self-constitution within her writing as a "woman, writing" and the simultaneous resistance of her writing pieces to being identified as "woman's work." A closer look at the project Darboven originally intended for *c. 7,500* exemplifies this convincingly [7–9].

The piece – most likely an excerpt from a larger work – was printed under the title *Hanne Darboven Words*, without providing any contextualization. It consists of ten typewritten pages that showcase written-out numerals divided into five sections. The first section covers ranges of written numerals from 1 to 44, 1 to 45, 1 to 46, up to 1 to 52; the second starts with 1 to 44 and concludes with 1 to 53; the third begins with writing out 1 to 45 and finishes with 1 to 54; the fourth starts with 1 to 46 and ends with 1 to 55; while the fifth and final section opens with 1 to 45 and ends abruptly afterward mid-counting. This sudden cut irritates and creates the impression of a quasi-contingent selection. Furthermore, based solely on this excerpt, one cannot grasp the underlying logic of the piece or its "idea," thus leaving us also in the dark about how the work might continue. Moreover, as a typewritten document, it removes the personal "touch" and its accompanying sensuous quality, adding to the work's overall austerity and prompting the reader to concentrate on the "idea." However, since it is nearly impossible to identify the idea from the given fragment, the reader is left solely with the typewritten numerals, presumably a glimpse into a larger work that remains inaccessible.²²

Similarly, what lies beyond reach is the artist-subject, as marks of subjectivity, let alone gender, are eliminated.²³ Gender is not discernible in the work as there are no gender markers on the formal or stylistic level to indicate a woman's presence behind the typewriter, nor does the "content" address gender. Solely the ascription of the work to Hanne Darboven, i.e., the work's authorship, reveals that we are dealing with a "woman's work." Lippard is thus correct in suggesting a connection between the strong systematization and the gender neutrality presented in Darboven's work. Also, in the example discussed here, the typewriter contributes greatly to eliminating the subjective

and, thereby, gender codes.²⁴ By leaving the receiver alone with their own set of expectations, the work employs opacity or strategies of withdrawal, drawing attention to the categories and the accompanying value system that underpins every act of reception and, more importantly, to their limits. What remains is a strong sense of frustration.

While the elimination of subjectivity resonates with the (male-centered) artistic strategy prevalent in Conceptual art at that time (Wark 2001), the neutrality in Darboven's work cannot be regarded as a mere adoption of that norm. On the contrary, it appears to be a consciously employed critical operation that rests on a contradiction: Darboven explicitly constitutes herself within the act of writing as a woman who writes, while her writing bluntly disregards any subjective component and any classification as "woman's work." Whereas we are encouraged to regard Darboven's writing as a "woman's work," the writing itself concurrently undermines this interpretation by strongly emphasizing its self-referentiality. Thus, it rejects not only the classification as "woman's work" but also any categorization beyond that of *typewritten numerals arranged according to an unspecified pattern*.

However, one could argue that Darboven's practice might invoke the already heavily feminized administrative labor in the 1970s. Consequently, gender would already be somehow embedded in Darboven's practices of e.g. computing, typewriting, and filing, and thus in clerical work largely performed by women in the 1970s (as it is today). Hence, the contradiction would ultimately prove to be no contradiction since gender would be addressed at the level of clerical practices and their classification as women's work within the 1970s field of work. And yet, unlike artists such as Adrian Piper, Rosemary Castoro, or Howardena Pindell – who, in addition to working as clerks to support themselves, explicitly draw on their experiences as "pink-collar workers" and incorporate instruments, materials, and techniques associated with clerical work in their artistic practices (Lovatt 2022) – Darboven is not particularly interested in making this form of gendered labor visible in her practice. In fact, Brigid Doherty (1999) convincingly argues that Darboven's focus lies elsewhere. Although specifically addressing clerical work by confronting a life-size, armless mannequin – a stenographer – with the achievements of Marie Curie, Rosa Luxemburg, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf in *Quartett 88* (1988),²⁵ Darboven identifies with these remarkable women who have impacted their fields, rather than with the women entering the workforce as clerks at the turn of the twentieth century. This is further supported by Darboven explicitly stating that she developed the foundational principle of her mathematical

prose (“1 ist 1 ist 1” and “eins ist eins ist eins”) in response to Gertrude Stein’s famous line “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.”²⁶

Without denying the reality of the workforce and the strong feminization of clerical work and its materials in the 1970s (at least in North America and Western Europe) – Darboven herself began in the 1970s collaborating with a professional typist who executed her typewritten works –²⁷ I’d like to explore a different possibility. This presents itself when we approach the contradictions and conflicts in Darboven’s writing at face value. This will enable us to consider them as critical operations with significant epistemological and political implications.

Un/Writing “Woman” and its Epistemological Implications

Darboven’s writing creates a tension that might be the crux here, precisely because it establishes qua writing “hanne” as “a woman, writing” while concomitantly refusing to sustain it. Its very position between writing and unwriting “woman” qualifies it as a form of deconstruction, supported by Darboven’s incessant (non-representational) writing. Is it within this dynamic that writing “woman” initiates its unwriting as writing into illegibility, that is, beyond recognition.²⁸ To push it even further, writing “woman” introduces its unwriting and institutes (the possibility of) an otherwise writing. By doing so, Darboven resonates with, or perhaps implements, what Judith Butler (2004) has stipulated about gender as both the “mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized” as well as “the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (42). Thus, gender itself can act as the very possibility of its deconstruction and denaturalization. This carries considerable epistemological implications since it points to the unreliability of categories and norms, which are fundamental in providing (or, perhaps better, constituting) knowledge about the world. As evidenced by the work that Darboven originally had in mind for Lippard’s show, these tensions created within writing significantly impact the reception too, frustrating labels (such as woman’s work) and expectations, thereby shedding light on the limits and instability of categories (art, woman, man) and the accompanying value system that guide the act of reception.

The significance and reach of the discussed paradoxes in Darboven’s writing come sharper into relief when we consider Teresa de Lauretis’ argument that art itself is a technology of gender, which means that, among other technologies, art too is involved in *constructing* gender. While de Lauretis has focused her analysis of the representation of gender as its construction more specifically on

cinema, the author makes the following more general yet powerful statement: “in the simplest sense it can be said that all of Western Art and high culture is the engraving of the history of that construction” (de Lauretis 1987, 3). This poignant assessment of Western Art and “high culture” renders significant Darboven’s own positionality when initiating these conflicts and contradictions within her writing in the 1970s. Situated at the intersection of feminist initiatives and Conceptual art, and therefore opposed to or, at the margins of the mainstream art world, still largely operating within the framework of a traditional, and indeed male-centered notion of art, Darboven’s self-representation as a “woman, writing” appears inevitably in sharp contrast to the (predominantly male) representations and constructions of gender prevalent throughout the artistic production in the West. This positionality exposes (Western and high) art as a technology of gender and gender ideology. What is more – and this is crucial in my view – Darboven’s writing does not present a counter representation of what a woman “is” within her writing, therefore refusing to engage in the representation/construction of gender.²⁹ Her indifference towards “putting the record straight” initiates a rupture that remains palpable. To echo what Judith Butler expressed in a slightly different context, which underlines the significance of such interventions even more: “disrupting what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality is intervening in the name of transformation” (Butler, J. 2004, 27). Following Butler, if social transformation starts with a rupture in the realm of established knowledge (which also defines what we perceive as reality), then Darboven’s act of writing “woman” into illegibility qualifies as her own (feminist) political project aimed at challenging categories and norms that create and validate this knowledge. Against this background, writing is indeed a very productive mode of fighting.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the 1970s writing practice of German Conceptual artist Hanne Darboven (1941–2009) as an intervention in established knowledge, conducted from a woman’s perspective. This new angle on Darboven’s writing arises from the artist’s statement “i am a woman, writing, hanne” and her largely overlooked encounters with the burgeoning feminist initiatives in art during the 1970s, and calls for a reevaluation of her writing-based oeuvre. Drawing from Darboven’s statement “i am a woman, writing, hanne” in a 1973 letter to feminist curator Lucy Lippard, I examine how Darboven’s writing introduces contradictions and conflicts as impactful critical operations. Darboven’s approach – writing “woman” into illegibility – serves as a form of deconstruction that exposes the instability of gender and thus of categories that organize (or, better yet, produce) our knowledge about the world. This qualifies Darboven’s writing practice as a sophisticated, yet subtle political project developed in response to both 1970s feminist initiatives and the patriarchal art world.

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NOTES

- 1 This letter also initiated another article that examines the gendering of tautologies in Darboven's writings from 1972 to 1978. The reflections in this essay expand on those ideas (see Stoica 2025).
- 2 "I guess the end of March or the beginning of April." This question most likely relates to Darboven's show at Leo Castelli in April 1973. Lippard's review of that show appeared in the October issue of *Artforum* that same year (see Lippard 1973).
- 3 Lippard referred to her pursuit as "internally subversive activism." (Lippard 2012, 74).
- 4 The so-called numbers shows are exhibitions organized by Lucy Lippard between 1969 and 1973, which include *557,087* (Seattle Art Museum Pavilion, September 5 – October 5, 1969), *955,000* (Vancouver Art Gallery, January 13 – February 8, 1970), and *2,972,453* (Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires, December 4–23, 1970). *c. 7,500* is the fourth and final numbers show. The names of the shows reference the local population of the locations where they were launched. (See e.g., Butler, C. 2012).
- 5 Correspondence in Lippard's records supports this assumption: In November 1972, Lippard began sending out invitations to artists for her show (see Lucy Lippard Papers, box 43). This coincides with the date of Darboven's first letter to Lippard regarding gender.
- 6 After CalArts, *c. 7,500* toured to The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut (19 June – 31 July 1973), Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (September 21 – October 9, 1973), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (November 16 – December 16, 1973), The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts (December 23, 1973 – January 14, 1974), Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts (January 17 – February 10, 1974), 48 Earlham Street, Covent Garden, London (April 8–26, 1974), A.I.R. Gallery, New York (June 1–15, 1974), And/Or Gallery, Seattle (September 19 – October 6, 1974), Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York (October 16 – November 14, 1974).
- 7 These exhibitions are: *c. 7,500* (1973/74), *Frauen machen Kunst* (1976), *What is feminist art?* (1977), *Speaking Volumes: Women artist books* (1980), *Typisch Frau* (1981), *Le Choix des femmes* (1991), and *Serialität: Reihen und Netze* (1999). Elke Bippus, the curator of the latter mentioned in an email to the author that Darboven herself selected the work *Webstuhlarbeit. Am Burgberg / meiner Mutter / meiner Kindheit / postum a higher / knitting Penelope* for the show. Incidentally, this work was created in response to Thwaites' 1972 misogynistic review of Darboven's work: "In a world of computer art and electronic art-objects she might well have a place. Otherwise – it is the danger she must face – her work could degenerate into a kind of Higher Knitting, with the female quality of patience, detail – and not much else. A pioneer of a Penelope of the 20th century?" (Thwaites 1972, 25).
- 8 For instance, in her letter to Isi Fiszman from March 20, 1974: "this work/life and this – call it 'it' is not to buy in any way" (see Darboven 1974).
- 9 The first collection of letters, published in 1994, contains correspondence Darboven sent to her family in Hamburg during her stay in New York from 1966 to 1968, a significant period in her artistic career development (see Darboven 1997). The second collection entails Darboven's correspondence with her family and professional network, from 1967 to 1975. It was published posthumously in 2015 (see Darboven 2015).
- 10 A similar letter can be found in Lucy Lippard Papers at the Archives of American Art. Consequently, Lippard regarded these pages as a form of correspondence, unlike LeWitt. (see Lucy Lippard Papers, Box 6).
- 11 Remarkably, the German word "jedermann" used by Darboven in 1975 in her address of *Schreibzeit* is itself embedded in and reflects the male-centered society of the 1970s since it uses the generic masculine to refer to everyone, implying that the man is the prototypical human being. The word is composed of "jeder" (the masculine form for "every") and "Mann" (man). Darboven reacts on this composite by entangling the two components. Whether this

- qualifies as a critical gesture at the level of the signifier remains up for debate. I thank Tobias Ertl for this interesting observation. Even though the feminist linguistics in Germany was slowly emerging as an academic field at this time, it wasn't until 1980 that first guidelines against sexist language use were proposed (Trömel-Plötz 2008). I thank Sarah Wiesendanger for bringing the feminist linguistics of the 1970s to my attention.
- 12 Interestingly, this letter also reveals that Darboven sent a similar response to Carl Andre at the beginning of 1972, which the artist now echoes in her letter to Lippard.
 - 13 In addition to the two letters discussed here, Darboven included this statement in similar wording in *Schreibzeit* (see Fn 14) as well as in her work presented in the exhibition "What is feminist art? (1977). The artist repeated this statement for John Anthony Thwaites' *ARTnews* piece in 1978. (see Thwaites 1978).
 - 14 The passage in *Schreibzeit* was dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir. It reads: "i don't fight for being a woman – / – because i am a woman / a human being; / i do fight for being a human being – / – because i am a woman; / i do fight for men / human beings / men; / because i am a woman / a human being – / – i don't fight for being a woman – etc." (204).
 - 15 Whereas I have interpreted somewhere else these tautologies in Darboven's work as an instrument of questioning the gender binary (Stoica 2025), here I am more interested in how the artist shapes her standpoint in contrast to these tautologies revolving around 'art,' 'man,' and 'woman.' Tautologies caught in the repetition enclosed in circularity remain somewhat ambiguous about whether they present the gender binary as an unalterable state of affairs by invoking a supposedly 'natural' order, or boast their artificiality by suggesting that their significance derives from a society fundamentally structured around the gender binary. In contrast to the first reading, in which tautologies operate as a naturalization of the gender binary, the second one points to the possibility of acting against it. Tautologies then either invoke something like common knowledge to legitimize the status quo, or, alternatively, they interrupt it and allow for transformation.
 - 16 Lippard's correspondence from the time she was organizing c. 7,500 stands testimony to the lack of support. Also, in *Framing Feminism*, Roszika Parker mentions that c. 7,500 was met with a significant lack of support in the UK as well, relying heavily on the work of volunteers (Parker 1987, 194–196).
 - 17 According to Cornelia Butler, Darboven's *One Century in One Year* (1971), and Lee Lozano's *Dialogue Piece* (1969) played a crucial role in this respect (see Butler, C. 2012, 68).
 - 18 Lippard was working on the show when *Six Years* was sent to press. (See Morris, 2012, 21).
 - 19 Neither the exhibition shots nor the exhibition catalog or other documents in Lucy Lippard Papers at the Archives of American Art offer any clues aside from indicating that the work in question was a book carrying the title 1969 00 → 00. However, no book with this title is listed in the catalog of Darboven's books (Bippus and Westheider 2002), nor does this work appear in the database of Hanne Darboven Foundation, as I was confirmed in an email from the Estate.
 - 20 This caused the work to arrive too late for the show's opening in Valencia and was therefore only included in the subsequent iterations of the exhibition. All this can be read in a letter Lippard sent to Suzanne Kuffler on May 28, 1973. (Lucy Lippard Papers Box 43, Folder 16, Archives of American Art.).
 - 21 This statement frequently appears in Lippard's introductions to all-women shows or other essays from that period. These pieces are collected in Lippard's 1976 volume, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (see Lippard 1976).
 - 22 This fragment is similar to the work *Arbeit I*, which was exhibited at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in 1971. However, the key difference is that in the latter, the counting is done in German (See exh. cat. Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1971).
 - 23 Still, as Isabelle Graw argues, certain types of "residual expression" can be identified in Conceptual art, for instance in an artist's preference for working with numbers (Graw 2006).

- 24 Regarding her overall writing practice, Bippus' concept of "de-representation" may prove instrumental for a broader analysis of this aspect in Darboven's practice (Bippus 2015).
- 25 The fact that the stenographer is armless, hence unable to perform her clerical duties, contributes to the precariousness of her situation.
- 26 Darboven presents this fundamental principle in her work *Ein Jahrhundert 1970 – 1971 (A century 1970 – 1971)*.
- 27 This work might have also been produced by a typist. If that is the case, one must consider the implications for this argument, as it would sharpen the conflict discussed here.
- 28 In this regard, it is noteworthy that Darboven considered her writing as a continuation of James Joyce's, whom she admired for pushing traditional literature into unreadability (Bippus and Westheider 2002). The same applies to Gertrude Stein, who was equally important to Darboven and is renowned for her 'unreadable' works (see e.g. Cecire 2015).
- 29 Since de Lauretis emphasizes that every deconstruction of gender is inevitably a construction of gender (de Lauretis 1987), it is still up for debate whether this refusal could actually be seen as a circumvention of this dynamic. What is certain is that it confuses or obstructs the recognizability of gender categories, thereby destabilizing them.

Where to Look (?):

Bypassing Hegemony of Knowledge with Installation-Exhibitions from Fareed Armaly and Renée Green

At the close of the last century, the presentation of certain artists within Western art institutions often came entangled with the broad and ambiguous label of “postmodernity” – a term that, rather than clarifying, tends to obscure the specificities of their practices. Famously used by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and later expanded by literary critic and theoretician Fredric Jameson, “postmodernity” has offered limited analytical traction for understanding artworks produced during a time of deep epistemological and geopolitical shifts. Jameson’s influential distinction between neoconservative and critical postmodernism – one embracing the aesthetics of late capitalism, the other offering a poststructuralist critique – while helpful in mapping certain tendencies, proves reductive when applied to a globalizing art world marked by expanded circulation, hybrid perspectives, and increasing challenges to Eurocentric frameworks. More than fitting artworks into such categories, the urgent task lies in examining how artists and exhibitions negotiated these new conditions and shaped alternative forms of meaning-making.

In this light, the rise of the *curatorial turn* offers a more precise lens. Rather than focusing solely on styles or movements, attention shifts to the exhibition as a site of knowledge production and cultural negotiation (O’Neill and Wilson 2007, 2010, 2013; O’Neill 2016). The year 1989 stands out as a critical juncture, marked by large-scale exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la terre* (Centre Pompidou and La Villette Hall, Paris), *The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, London), the *Third Biennial de la Habana* (various locations, Havana), and *China/Avant-Garde* (National Art

Museum of China, Beijing). Some favored North-South exchanges, sometimes in an outdated way in the display chosen and the discourse surrounding the works (*Magiciens de la terre*), others proposed South-South circulation that had never been explored before (*Third Bienal de la Habana*), others revealed an obliterated art scene (*The Other Story*), or a little-known and contested one (*China/Avant-Garde*). These shows have since been widely discussed, as landmarks in the reconfiguration of contemporary art on a global scale, as well as for the shaping of the curatorial discourse that comes along their enactment. Yet, to fully grasp the implications of this moment beyond these milestones, one must also consider initiatives of artists proposing exhibitions-installations presented in the more restricted place of commercial galleries or marginal spaces. These autonomous projects, albeit at times collaborative, allow to leave behind the much-discussed curatorial discourse carried by major exhibitions and concentrate on the porosities of exhibition-making when grasped and practiced by artists. This focus, supported by a growing retrospective interest in artists' postcolonial initiatives, brings to light singular epistemological and political positions within – and against – the dominant narratives of the time (Stilling 2013; Probst 2022).

On the occasion of this special issue of *Periskop* dedicated to the potential “fear of knowledge” translated into the work of artists, I propose to tackle the above-mentioned aspects through the study of two art installations that take the form of exhibitions: the first one from 1989 by Fareed Armaly (1957–) and the second one from 1992 by Renée Green (1959–). Both of these exhibition-shaped works, often approached through their relative proximity with an extension or second wave of Institutional Critique, were yet never analyzed as frameworks of knowledge whose display and content enable revelation of the negotiations operated ahead. Both reveal theoretical and practical engagements taken by artists within the Western art scene, that expand perspectives on the internationalization of the art world, and foster a move away from normative Eurocentric epistemologies of knowledge. Each of them mobilizes quite distinctly from one another and almost simultaneously, artifacts, objects and writings, which seem to constitute an early form of “epistemic disobedience” as conceptualized by semiotician Walter D. Mignolo through their distant positioning vis-à-vis the pillars of Western knowledge (Mignolo 2009).

The Context: from New York to Cologne

October journal and its main editors played a key role in legitimizing a generation of artists who, aligned with the “critical” postmodernist vein, were to be recognized as a second generation of Institutional Critique.¹ Art historian Nicolas

Heimendinger analyzes that the term was gradually coined in the pages of the journal in the early 1980s, through the conceptualization of the works from artists including Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke, all of whom will be part of the first generation of Institutional Critique (Heideminger 2016, 52). Working throughout the 1960s and then the 1970s, they focused on exposing and challenging the power structures, ideologies, and mechanisms of the art world by questioning museums and galleries in how institutions shape artistic value, control narratives, and reinforce social hierarchies (Buchloh 1999, 140).² *October* editor Benjamin Buchloh grouped these artists under the term “situational aesthetics” in 1982, while Douglas Crimp referred to them as “Critique of the museum institution” in 1984, and the definitive term “Institutional Critique” appeared in 1987 in an issue of *October* dedicated to Marcel Broodthaers (Heideminger 2016, 53). Its emergence acted on the porosities of its own institutionalization. “Octoberists” Buchloh and Craig Owens’ teaching at the Independent Study Program (ISP) of the Whitney Museum of American Art and at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, where Andrea Fraser, Renée Green and Mark Dion were enrolled, played an important role in the direct transfer of concepts and approaches from first-generation artists to what would later become a second generation. The dissemination of the discourse, of and on Institutional Critique in the New York context, led a generation of young artists to claim and act on this influence beyond the Big Apple. Their rise to prominence was confirmed across the Atlantic in the early 1990s, in Germany’s burgeoning new art scene. Among the artists of the second generation were Dion, Fraser, Green, Christian Phillipp Müller, Fred Wilson and to some extent Fared Armaly. Their work was supported by the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, founded in 1990 on the model of *October* by Isabelle Graw and Stefan Germer, and by the Galerie Nagel in Cologne. In short, what can be understood as a second generation of Institutional Critique comes into being when the discourse about the first generation from the 1960s is forged and institutionalized, twenty years on, and the direct transmission to artists at the start of their careers establishes a foundation on which to build upon, in order to extend and renew it.

Before situating the locus of epistemological detachment and disobedience lent to Walter D. Mignolo in the work of the two artists, there is a need to recognize the widely shared doubts about the Western paradigm of knowledge concomitant to the flourishing of the prefix post- to many historical and theoretical movements. In the introduction to *The Location of Culture* published in 1994, Homi K. Bhabha locates the culmination of postmodernity in the understanding of the epistemological limits of most universalist ideas from the humanities.

[1] Fareed Armaly, *The (re) Orient* (1989) 2021 version, mumok, Vienna. Image rights: Fareed Armaly. Photo: Kevin Ferdinandus mumok collection



Essentially ethnocentric, they exclude a series of individuals perceived as dissonant, which includes women, colonized beings, minority groups, and the bearers of policed sexualities, among others (Bhabha 1994, 4). Echoing this critical awareness towards knowledge, a certain skepticism regarding science, history and institutions was to be found among artists, and more widely among activist groups, academics and intellectuals, marking a widely shared attitude in the early 1990s.

This spread dubiousness allows a follow up and a continuity from the first generation to the second generation of Institutional Critique. The first group of

artists addressed the “innocence” of space and the accompanying presumption of a universal spectator subject (albeit in possession of a corporeal body). Taken as a framework to elaborate on how we envision and interact with artworks, it coincides with the conceptualization of the act of viewing by Ernst Gombrich in 1960 which, according to him, necessarily departs from a preset of suppositions (Mitrovic 2013, 72). He formulates his views on visuality under the influence of the philosopher of science Karl Popper, to whom perception is comparable to the scientific acquisition of knowledge since hypotheses precede observations, which ensures that “it is through the falsification of our suppositions that we actually get in touch with reality” (Popper 1972, 360). If it is impossible to separate observation from the theoretical elements of interpretation, there is then a necessary task to dismantle the prerequisites one applies to objects, artifacts, and artworks.

The legacy of Conceptual art and the first generation of Institutional Critique, as well as a growing distrust of Western knowledge, opened up a breach: artists would translate their doubts and questioning in their work on the basis of situated research anchored to specific fields of knowledge or artifacts.³ The protagonists of the second generation followed up on the questioning of the “innocence” of the exhibition space and its counterpart of a homogenous and universal spectator subject supported by the first generation, to propose practice-based responses to ambivalent and unquestioned objects and sites, and now subject to inquiry (Kwon 1997, 87).⁴ This same idea of an impossible detached and neutral standpoint, and understood as a point of departure for further work, is mentioned by Mignolo under what he calls “*Zero point epistemology*”, which takes this questioning to a wider framework, namely epistemological (Mignolo 2009, 163).⁵

As Graw notes in an article dedicated to Armaly, Dion, and Fraser, Conceptual art was a point of reference, a pioneering element that needed to be surpassed in order to address specific issues inscribed in space (Graw 1990, 168). The work of these artists will move in the direction of this surpassing, based on critical research into our relationship to knowledge that follows on from the skepticism towards the Western construction of knowledge designated by Bhabha. Bearing in mind this horizon to be investigated by artists, strategies are manifold and one must acknowledge the occasional permutation of artists becoming curators at times.⁶

(Re)Orient: Where to Look

The two installations at stake in this article are presented in the form of exhibitions. They challenge our relationship with knowledge, and more specifically, our access to it through its mediated condition, whether through written words,

objects, cultural policies or the discourse that surrounds them. The first one is from Armaly, an Arab American artist, curator, author and editor who works and lives in the United States and Berlin and explores the politics of culture, identity and representation. His project entitled *(re)Orient* was first presented in 1989 at Galerie Lorenz in Paris, and was shown in an updated version in 2021 at the Mumok in Vienna, on the occasion of its entry into the museum collection.⁷

A *Postscript* edition was published in 2023, including texts, interviews and reproductions that document and continue the reflection initiated by the installation. For the artist, *(re)Orient* is a way to situate the role of contemporary exhibitions within the postcolonial discourse that emerged in the 1980s. At the time, the project drew lessons from recent writings that had shaped postcolonial studies – in particular Edward Said and Stuart Hall – to question the institutionalization of this new notion in Western museology, through the example of the Louvre, but also the media and photographic treatment in the West of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) (Said 2003). More than thirty years later, the Lebanese context having changed, the artist Akram Zaatari (1966–) was invited to dialogue with the original exhibition, with a photographic work and a text that addresses image representations and their mediatic treatment during the war. It highlights a vision of perpetual ruin for wartime Beirut, as well as the reconstruction and archive projects that succeeded the Civil War (Zaatari 2023). In this exhibition-installation, Armaly indicates his theoretical positioning by summoning elements from the visual arts, popular culture, written narratives and artifacts from different eras, just as an exhibition curator would, a role he would occupy later in his career.⁸

From a formal point of view, and in its most current form at the mumok, *(re)Orient* is a quasi-autonomous exhibition room within the museum's exhibition space. Surrounded by four walls, the space features an entrance that mimics that of the Galerie Lorenz, above which is added a fragmented reproduction of an engraving, that of the *Ruins of Hieraconpolis* published in Vivant Denon's account of his trip to Egypt during the Napoleonic campaigns (Denon 1802). Once inside, within a segmented space, heterogeneous elements are on display, including: an excerpt from Jean-Luc Godard's film *Bande à part*, in which the protagonists attempt to beat a speed record in a race through the galleries of the Louvre; a 1916 artillery shell on which military vehicles are engraved as they travel from the Egyptian pyramids to Jerusalem, another instance of foreign military travel to Egypt; a small two-dimensional Venus de Milo, the original being housed in the Louvre, there illustrating the museum/culture section of a Letraset catalog whose universal character was then pointed out; computer-

generated maps of the Lebanese Civil War; a myriorama, created in collaboration with Regina Möller, depicting landscapes such as those broadcasted in the media in the 1980s featuring modernist buildings, explosions, planes in flight and urban pictograms; a 1887 collotype by Edward Muybridge in which a moving man with a bayonet appears fragmented on one of the plates, an anomaly in the series; several pedestals supporting mirrors installed backwards and in front of which stands a camera on a tripod; finally, a large circular table with empty book covers bearing the word *Voyage* on the spine, and whose covers allude to various publications, from Napoleon's vision of the Orient as seen through the eyes of Denon, to former French President Charles de Gaulle's 1942 "journey" to Lebanon and Syria, to a 1989 advertisement for the book *Description de l'Égypte* (1809) sold at the then brand new Institut du Monde Arabe, which is part of the Grand Projet pour la Culture, like the Louvre Pyramid.⁹ [1]

How can we make sense of all these precise elements yet heterogeneous in forms, dates and context? All of them operate a back-and-forth between past and present to be measured by the visitor. What becomes noticeable is the persistence of power plays translated outside the strictly politico-military exercise, in objects that belong to the public and cultural domain. Reproductions and objects referring to the campaigns led by Napoléon in which Denon was involved and then exhibited at the Louvre serve to highlight the Western colonial enterprise nourished and empowered by a reductive, fantasized vision of the Orient, as Said theorized. The more recent artifacts take part in the continuity of this violence, a postcolonial perspective on the visual and cultural productions of this fin de siècle. The Venus de Milo from the Letraset plate points to a peculiar understanding of culture and the museum, a notable bias in the visual embodiment of these notions.¹⁰ The Louvre's new pyramid, opened in 1988 to the public, and designed by architect Ieoh Ming Pei as part of the "Grand Louvre" project, conjures up a historical dialogue that resonates with the present day.¹¹ What continuity for the Western gaze, from Napoleon's journey to Egypt to what is being built today to perfect the place for preserving the artifacts marked by this imperial history? The mobilization of the various objects acts as a memorial archive: each artifact carries the discourse and vision of an era, from colonial violence to new forms of soft power. They call into question the universalist ambitions of the Western institutional apparatus. Using the medium of the exhibition, Armaly's project puts into practice and deconstructs the perspective on objects that, up until the time of his first *(re)Orient* exhibition, had remained mute in their respective contexts, from popular culture to the fine arts, untroubled by the questioning of the violence they nonetheless carry. As Marianna Hovhannisyan

notes in her essay on *(re)Orient*, the exhibition functions as a positioning system for visitors, requiring them to take positions as particular social subjects through and vis à vis these objects (2023, 137). The reference and quasi tutelary figure Hovhannisyan and Armaly both refer to is Stuart Hall recognizing the necessary question of positioning as a racialized subject in the face of narratives of the past (Hall 1990). Born of Palestinian and Lebanese parents, and the first person in his family to be born in the United States, Armaly engages his personal history in this positioning as much as that of all those whose destinies are marked by forced displacement and migration.

The spatial organization of the exhibition is an important factor in understanding the way in which knowledge is handled. Accessible through a door, the space is enclosed, with blind, windowless outer walls. The architecture of the space, punctuated by inside walls to form a path in which each artifact cannot be missed, leads to an almost solemn experience with the objects, a form of encounter that encourages confrontation. The architectural choice for the exhibition display clearly designates the artifacts to be considered and further emphasizes the eclecticism and variety of what is shown, inviting visitors to position themselves. Spatialization is then matched by the fragmented nature of the objects, most of which are presented in the form of extracts or taken from series. The artist's research culminates in the meticulous selection for the elements shown in the exhibition, which reinforce their heterogeneity in forms, dates and context. Armaly's role is that of a curator-researcher, bringing together objects that seem to have nothing in common, but whose didactic correspondence is made possible by the artist's discourse on them as well as the exhibition display. Scattered, mostly in the form of carefully selected extracts, and presented in a closed, solemn space, the objects contribute to a realistic, albeit pessimistic, postcolonial perspective. Artifacts are taken as the source of investigation for the biased knowledge they carry. They allow the falsification of our suppositions and corroborate the mistrust that must be guarded against these objects when approaching them. As visitors we are invited to confront the unspoken, the forgotten, and leave the official discourses about them behind. *(re)Orient* is an opportunity to build upon Said and Hall's decolonial theoretical positioning with an exhibition that reveals their theoretical intertwinement in specific objects through their historical and current condition. With Armaly's installation, the fear of knowledge is to be found when knowledge itself, encrypted in objects and artifacts, is not questioned in relation to the imperial and colonial history it is contingent to. What is to be feared lies in the pristine official discourse, whose counterpart is a post-hegemonic and postcolonial approach that unveils a more realistic perspective.

Import/Export Funk Office: Where to Look?

A few years later in 1992 at the gallery Christian Nagel in Cologne, with which Armaly collaborated in the early 1990s, Renée Green presented *Import/Export Funk Office* for the first time.¹² Green, an American artist, writer, and filmmaker, works from a broad range of media including sculpture, architecture, photography, prints, video, film, websites, and sound, which often converge in highly layered and complex installations.

Import/Export Funk Office is one of them, engaging two theoretical and political tutelary figures, Angela Davis and Theodor Adorno, as well as a close collaborator, the German critic and theorist Diedrich Diederichsen.¹³ The installation can be understood as an exhibition that takes the visitor back and forth between the USA and Germany, via two emblematic figures who themselves spent time in both countries. During the Second World War, Adorno went into exile in California, like many Germanic writers, before returning to Germany in the 1960s (Goetschel 2020). During his stay in the USA, and particularly in



[2] Renée Green, *Import/Export Funk Office*, 1992. Installation view at Galerie Nagel Draxler, Cologne. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin/Cologne Donation to MOCA LA by Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann Photo: Andrea Stappert

Los Angeles, he expressed his unpopular views on jazz music, which are often mentioned in connection with his writings on culture (Witkin 2000). As for Davis, she studied philosophy in Frankfurt from 1965 to 1967 with key thinkers of the Frankfurt School, notably Herbert Marcuse and Adorno. It was during her stay in Germany that she saw a photograph of the Black Panthers in Oakland, California, which acted as a trigger. Seeing the raised fists, berets and black leather jackets, combined with their political agenda, Davis decided to return to the U.S. to become a political activist. These two figures enable Green to summon up the terrain of cultural exchange and flow that immediately challenges a static understanding of notions of identity and nationality. The movement of artistic circulations and cultural transfers on a national and international scale is at the heart of the artist's research. This is reflected in the exhibition's presentation of a substantial number of documents, including archives, books, magazines, texts, audio cassettes and videos.

Green takes funk, hip-hop and, more generally, African American and Afro-descendant music as the object of her investigation and extends it more broadly to the cultural spheres they pertain to. For this project, she collaborates with Diederich Diederichsen, then director of the German music magazine *Spex*. She employs a quasi-academic methodology, at the crossroads of anthropology and sociology: like a documentary filmmaker, she produces video recordings of conversations between Diederichsen and Greg Tate, Joe Wood, Brian Cross, Medusa, Andrea Clarke, and Arthur Jafa, as well as between herself and George Lipsitz, Ingo, Black Madrid and John Outerbridge, all shot in between Cologne, New York or Los Angeles. Musicians, critics, authors, all are involved in shaping and interpreting hip-hop and funk music. She adds a questionnaire on rap music, gathering testimonials from New Yorkers about their relationship with this ubiquitous musical style, as well as from German citizens who were gradually discovering it. These recordings are available for viewing on television sets in the center of the room. Over twenty-six hours of interviews have been compiled in total.

The exhibition is arranged concentrically in the space. Surrounding the televisions are open metal shelves on which are placed books, magazines and audio-cassettes thematically intersecting with African American music and activism. These filled shelves give the impression of a library as much as an archival repository. The documents come from the personal collection of Diederichsen, who was interested in Afro-American history, culture, literature and music at that time, as well as from the artist's personal library.¹⁴ Entitled *Collectanea*, Green's selection of works from the German critic's library and her own illustrate the

contradictions that occur within the cultural economy of import and export and are translated here in an idiosyncratic way. Renée Green has followed the migration of hip-hop culture and its icons, from 1960s black nationalism and notably images of Davis, to the moment she creates this installation.

Beyond the library, on the walls of the gallery Nagel space is another part of the installation entitled *Lexicon*. It corresponds to sixteen boards on which are inscribed American slang terms: they cover the beatnik years from the 1950s to the early 1960s, the slang of the hippies and counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, through to the African American slang of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Overlapping meanings between the different eras are indicated by colored dots that designate the definitions in use at the time. For each of the plates, there's a twin plate with definitions of slang terms, written by Green, which combine references to the different eras and are translated into German. *Lexicon* is a pedagogical tool, designed to enable everyone to understand the semantic correspondences and the counter-cultural dimension of slang, right up to the present day. Finally, two other television sets are installed in the room, allowing visitors to listen to audio tracks from the protagonists of funk and hip-hop music.

The exhibition differs from Armaly's in its spatial conception and the message it conveys, particularly in regard to the handling of knowledge. *Import/Export Funk Office* is conceived as a totally open space, with no picture rails to obstruct the view or the moving in space [2]. This choice implies and conditions a different positioning for visitors. Instead of moving through the space towards a necessary encounter with a specific artifact synonymous with positioning oneself, visitors are invited to wander around, orienting themselves to a selection, or rather, a groping discovery of the documents to be explored. This aspect coincides with the very large number of documents presented – text, audio and video – making the task, if not hazardous, certainly time-consuming. On the other hand, unlike Armaly and its sporadic, fragmented presentation of documents, Green chooses the form of exhaustiveness: the interviews, more than twenty-six hours long, are presented in their entirety and so are the books, magazines and audio tracks. The abundance of documents is thus matched by their exhaustiveness, even if they are selected from particular libraries. As art historian Claire Bishop recently reminded, Green is suggesting the necessarily collaborative, networked aspect of knowledge, a pre-Internet model that is hypertext: a non-sequential form of writing based on links between verbal and visual information, which has become the main structural protocol of the Internet (2023). Diederichsen and Green, both involved in and enthusiasts for African American music and counterculture, made it possible to exhibit what corresponded to what critics perceived as

almost the entire body of knowledge on the subject at the time (Diederichsen and Green 2017). The installation, concentrically organized from its center, thus offers a panoramic view of the documentary resources summoned up by the artist, verging on thematic exhaustiveness. For the visitor, this spatialization offers a synoptic vision which leads to an extensive overview that does not necessarily include an explanation of what comprises the vision. In the specific case of the knowledge contained in the documents assembled by Green, this synoptic aspect comes into play: the visitor, at the center of the installation, can benefit from this overview of knowledge, without being provided with the necessary explanations for each element that composes it. However, the *Lexicon* section of the installation, which traces the genealogy of slang words with a pedagogical aim, slightly differs in this respect.

Epistemic Disobedience by Way of De-westernizing Knowledge

Armaly and Green are proposing two exhibitions which, through their layout, offer two distinct takes on the way in which knowledge is approached. The first selects specific objects and artefacts that, at first glance, bear no relation to one another, thus making visible the distances that separate them. This sporadicity and eclecticism reveals the gaps and lacunae in the discourse that surrounds them, in an opaque, closed space. It draws attention at specific loci to reveal the questionable and contested condition of their existence, and prompts visitors to position themselves in relation to them. The exhibition thus shows Armaly's distrust of knowledge, understood as an imperialist monolith, to which his work responds by highlighting its intrinsic biases. For her part, Green, in collaboration with Diederichsen, brings together a very large number of archival and newly produced documents, presented in their entirety in an open space, around music and African American counterculture. The artist's proposal is geared towards completeness, an abundance that allows visitors to browse, pick and choose where they wish, yet without allowing them to go round it all. *Import/Export Funk Office* is conceived as a space to trigger attention to marginalized forms of musical culture that have suffered from systemic oppression cutting across the layers of contemporary history.

The two installations, though distinct in their spatialization, both expose visitors to certain knowledge, contained in documents and artifacts, and which, by virtue of their socio-historical condition, occupied and occupy a marginal place at the time of their presentation, as a counterpoint to hegemonic and widely spread knowledge. Armaly and Green are driven by a critical concern for what is available to know about different objects, and their work establishes

a response from a postcolonial positioning. While Green's focus on music and African American activism differs from Armaly's investigation of the history of violence embodied in the objects of the "Universalist" Museum and the major projects that frame them, both engage in a reflection on the epistemological and semantic roots of culture in the broadest sense.

The heritage of Conceptual art and the first generation of Institutional Critique paved the way for critical and contextual questioning on the innocence of cultural goods and their setting, to be then updated in 1989 with further details channeling a post-hegemonic endeavor. Mignolo's epistemic disobedience offers a relevant framework to understand Armaly's and Green's research work in the exhibitions. The core idea behind this concept is made clear by the Argentinian semiologist: "Epistemic disobedience means to de-link from the illusion of the *'Zero point epistemology'*" (Mignolo 2009, 161). He conceives this form of insubordination as the enactments stemming from an awareness of the effects of the experience of global projects aimed at colonizing knowledge through language, culture, categories of thought and belief systems. Both artists coincide with this distancing from systems of power by making space, literally, to reveal marginalized knowledge and reveal its conditioning. Aware of what is available in each of their fields of investigation, they both go beyond an unsatisfactory state of the art to propose alternatives that only await the visitor's meeting.

Mignolo branches in two the directions in which his concept of epistemic disobedience is then applied. He considers a de-westernizing direction, following intellectual and politician Kishore Mahbubani's terminology, as well as a decolonial one. The first one unfolds within the globalization of a type of a capitalist economy as named so in both liberal and Marxist vocabulary. It consists of shifting the locus of the enunciation of the "rules of the game", which are no longer called by Western players and institutions. In this respect, both Armaly and Green operate this shifting, one by calling back objects that have been misleadingly portrayed in discourse and have them talk anew, and the other by giving voice to marginalized groups through multi-media documents, archival and newly produced ones. Their work, however, cannot entirely subscribe to the decolonial direction indicated by Mignolo. The latter clearly inscribes in it the cost of life and what he calls "the civilization of death" hidden in the rhetoric of the Modernity and its consequences within institutions. The artists' research, situated in the imperialist knowledge carried by designated artifacts and sphere of cultural productions, certainly underscores the absent and never betided realistic discourse about them, yet cannot address frontally the violent and deadly condition of colonized beings. In placing their investigation as such, they

operate an epistemic disobedience by way of a de-westernization of knowledge, and pave the way for what is attested in concomitant and in more recent works which, at times, establish a clear agenda of actions, targeting a resolute decolonial program.¹⁵

ABSTRACT

The article explores how artists and occasional curators Fareed Armaly and Renée Green's installations challenge the dominant Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge through the medium of exhibition. Situating their works within the second wave of Institutional Critique, from New York to Cologne, it then details the way in which they offer two very different takes on exhibition setting through the display of documents and objects they propose. Contextualizing the two works within a shared skepticism towards Western epistemology noted by Homi K. Bhabha in the early 1990s, the paper argues that both installations enact a form of "epistemic disobedience" as conceptualized by Walter D. Mignolo by revealing the biases of institutional knowledge production and offering alternative frameworks for understanding cultural history. Through spatial and conceptual strategies, Armaly and Green demonstrate how exhibitions can function as sites of resistance, reshaping the ways knowledge is constructed and disseminated beyond dominant discourses.

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NOTES

- 1 Launched in 1976, *October* is an academic journal specializing in contemporary art, criticism, and theory, published by The MIT Press, that became an influential vehicle for the debate surrounding the emergence of postmodernism.
- 2 Another genealogy is designated by Alexander Alberro (2009).
- 3 Most of the artists from the second generation of Institutional Critique will be gathered in a large-scale exhibition addressing the situated aspect of their work: *Kontext Kunst. The Art of the 90s*, at the Neue Galerie im Künstlerhaus in Graz, Austria, and curated by Peter Weibel (02.10.-07.11.1993).
- 4 The remark on the visitor's impossible innocence also overlaps with the impossible omniscient vision carried by the most sciences and analyzed in Donna Haraway's famous article on situated knowledge. Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3: 575-99.
- 5 Mignolo refers to Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007), who describes this scheme as "the *hubris of the zero point*".
- 6 The endorsement of curatorship by artists has its own history of experimentations and practices, see (Filipovic 2017).
- 7 Galerie Lorenz, a former commercial gallery, existed between 1987 and 1996 in Paris and notably presented works from John Armleder, Martin Kippenberger, Heimo Zobernig, Steven Parrino, Mark Dion, Erwin Wurm and Miguel Chevalier.

- 8 Fareed Armaly was artistic director/curator of the Künstlerhaus in Stuttgart from 1999 to 2002.
- 9 Letraset was a British company known primarily for the manufacture of type sheets and other graphic elements using the dry transfer lettering method. Myriorama is a children's game invented in the 19th century, involving the construction of a multitude of possible landscapes using cards that can all be assembled together.
- 10 There is also a historical imperialist dimension, which is particularly topical at a time when most of the big European Museums are asked to return stolen artifacts to their countries of origin.
- 11 The "Grand Louvre" is one of the "Grands Travaux" defined by former French President François Mitterrand (President between 1981 and 1995), along with the new Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Bastille Opera House and the Grande Arche de la Défense.
- 12 Galerie Christian Nagel (today Galerie Nagel Draxler), founded in Cologne in 1990, fostered a strong orientation towards the new institutional critique and presented works from Michael Krebber, Andrea Fraser, Heimo Zobernig, Mark Dion, Kai Althoff, John Miller, Martha Rosler, and later Joëlle Tuerlinckx and Guillaume Bijl.
- 13 In 1995, at the Leuphana University in Lüneburg, Green developed a digital version in CD-ROM format, compiling all the audio, video and textual sources presented in the exhibition, as well as new ones produced for the occasion. *Import/Export Funk Office* was envisaged as a long-term evolutionary project, to be completed over time. Green even envisioned a potential existence on the web (Green 1995).
- 14 Specifically, Diederichsen was interested at that time in the history of blues music, the civil rights movement, Houston A. Baker, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Michele Wallace, as well as free jazz and hip-hop.
- 15 As examples, for the French context (Cukierman, Dambury, and Vergès 2018); for the British context (Grant and Price 2020); for the US context (Copeland, Foster, and Joselit 2020); and in a broader context and approach (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

Unacknowledged Knowledge

– Can (Art) Exhibitions Operate as an Alternative to Peer-Reviewed Articles?

This intentionally polemical but also necessarily incomplete article is a first step towards examining the question of whether – and in what ways – exhibition-making can be considered an alternative to peer-reviewed journal articles when evaluating museums' research contributions within the academic field. With the increasing awareness of practice-based art studies operating at the intersection of the art world and universities, the article investigates (art) exhibitions as research, rather than as research-based exhibitions. Should (art) exhibitions – as research – be understood not only as spaces of knowledge production, but also as sites of epistemic inquiry in their own right, which might enable a transformation of evaluation metrics, allowing some exhibitions to be recognised as valid alternatives to peer-reviewed articles, thereby expanding ideas of what academic research and publishing is and can be?

To start considering these possibilities, this article will first briefly look into how the Bologna Process has brought research at universities and artistic and curatorial practices closer together. This is followed by an examination of how peer-reviewed models relating to exhibitions have gained ground and been implemented at the state level, for example the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, and in independent interdisciplinary online art magazines such as *Journal for Artistic Research* (JAR). Then the article explores the possibility of working with exhibitions as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles, drawing on museums' collaboration with universities, and how research is understood differently in museums, before examining the possibilities of working with selected

(art) exhibitions as spatial physical alternatives to peer-reviewed articles and written/digital representations. Here, I draw on experiences from both cultural-historical exhibition knowledge practices, primarily situated in the realm of production, and from the art world's concept of the curatorial, where the exhibition space itself functions as a site of epistemic entanglement. Lastly, I gather the information and point to possible points of attention and approaches that could be included in further work to create opportunities for (art) exhibitions to one day serve as potential alternatives to peer-reviewed articles.

The Bologna Process and the Homogenisation of Knowledge Creation in the Name of Equality

For the past twenty or so years, what is referred to as practice-based art studies in Denmark has been subsumed under an academic umbrella. The shift in knowledge epistemes to academic standards has occurred in the wake of the implementation of the Bologna Declaration of 1999, which introduced a change in educational practices and evaluation metrics in many European countries. This radical transformation of art schools also occurred in Denmark in 2012 with the introduction of KUV (*kunstnerisk udviklingsvirksomhed*) together with academic valuation and evaluation criteria for knowledge creation that allowed for obtaining a PhD in practice-based art studies, which also included curatorial practice (Ministry of Culture Denmark 2012; The European Ministers of Education 1999). The introduction of academic standards at the art schools also led to a re-orientation within cultural production. Research activities have always been integral to various practices within the arts – often working in the margins, as a critical comment to the established educational systems. Historically, they include practices such as The UNOVIS Collective (1925), which produced projects and publications that significantly impacted the avant-garde movement; the collaboration between French Surrealists and anthropologists in the early 1920s, publishing in journals such as *Minotaure*; Asger Jorn, Piero Simondo, and Guiseppe Pinot-Gallizio's *Imaginist Bauhaus* (1957) which already at that time used the term “artistic research”; Joseph Beuys' Free International University (1973); and many more (Arnfred 2019; Clifford 1988; Jorn 1957). As a result, cognitive agency and productivity are today perceived by many as integral and essential to artistic and curatorial practice; with the Bologna process, these knowledge processes have been more formally institutionalised, and art and curating practices are often deployed more officially as research activities (Wilson 2011; Cramer and Terpsma 2021). Yet, despite the good intentions of fair and equal access and mobility across European borders, the Bologna process has

also led to the tightening grip of a powerful “managerial” logic on education and research within both universities and art schools, as well as on artistic and curatorial practices – if they are to be considered as contributing to academic research and knowledge production (Vanhaesebrouck 2018; Cramer and Terpsma 2021) – a grip that is making it difficult to talk about epistemic equity within artistic (including curatorial) and university practices and collaborations.

However, the integration of a whole new field has changed more than the individually impacted areas – such as curatorial practices – it has also led to a significant shift in academic practice. Over the years, practice-based art studies have shifted from the obscure corners of European universities and now take a more central stage. Practice-based art studies have permeated understandings of what academic knowledge production and creation is and can be, thus challenging academic knowledge paradigms. As artist and theorist Barbara Bolt writes, practice-based art studies function as a “performative force of research,” capable of bringing about significant “movement” in thought, expression, and action within individuals and the wider society (Bolt 2016, 129). This move has led to a questioning of what are to be regarded as academic knowledge practices in light of current practice, documentation and dissemination, i.e. modes of research and publication.

While there seems to be a general consensus that exhibitions are knowledge-producing, this does not automatically imply that they are peer-reviewed. If exhibitions are to count as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles in academic contexts, does it then follow that they should be subject to peer-review processes akin to those in academia?

Considerations on Evaluation Standards

The question of how to publish at the intersection of academic and curatorial practices – particularly in terms of qualifying approaches and methods for working with (art) exhibitions as alternatives to peer-reviewed articles, and of determining what is valued and thus evaluated as knowledge creation and production – remains a contested and complex issue.¹ It is therefore worth considering whether collaborations between art, curating, and academic research in a research exhibition can be employed for research purposes beyond that of functioning as research mediation and illustration of already completed research (Arnfred 2025).

In academia, research documentation and publication primarily rely on textual and verbal presentations (Michelkevicius 2017). Academic dissemination occurs through peer-reviewed journals and books detailing the process and

the rational reflections and inspirations that lead to research outcomes. The academic form includes processes of untangling entangled knowledge processes into concise, rational arguments (Massumi 2022). From the point of view of scientific and scholarly research practice, it can therefore be argued that art, artistic and curatorial practices, and the exhibition as a medium are too loose, non-evidence-based producers with opaque knowledge processes and contributions. Consequently, the outcome of the exhibition is considered to be unquantifiable and unmeasurable, and thus not definable as quantitative data. According to this logic, research exhibitions, the art within them, and the practices and processes involved in their creation can be employed for research communication or as empirical tools, but not as academic epistemic practice.

On the other hand, curatorial and artistic practices are often performative and utilise many different materials and publication channels.² Yet in their dissemination, curators and artists do not generally account for their sources of inspiration or the research processes that led to the finished exhibition (Bishop 2023). Conversely, from an artistic perspective, it can be argued that artistic and curatorial practice neither should nor can be peer-reviewed. Working with exhibitions as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles risks leading to a limiting, ensnaring academisation, entrenching art and curating within sets of assumptions, rules and norms that come with institutional validation (Cramer and Terpsma 2021). Such a shift threatens to instrumentalise both art and curating, subjecting them to the logics of transparency and measurability – metrics that run counter to the opacity, ambiguity, open-ended reflections, fabulations, juxtapositions, and counternarratives that are often central to artistic and curatorial practices (Bishop 2023). To determine the role and effect of the (art) exhibition in an academic context, including the aspect of peer-review for specific exhibitions, could deprive the exhibition and artworks of their distinctive ways of operating, professionalise and systemise the processes they produce, and thereby transform art exhibitions from a performative act into a research tool, an illustration, or poor art and poor scholarly research (Bishop 2023). In this optic, applying peer-review processes to the exhibition presents a considerable risk of limiting artistic and curatorial freedom and fabulation, as characterised by the fact that it cannot necessarily be rationally laid out. It can therefore be questioned whether one can and should even talk about and attempt to define approaches and methodologies for working with exhibitions as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles.

A similar criticism to that of the academisation of curating and art in various forms has been raised in relation to the institutionalisation of academic practices and the mainstreaming of academic institutions, including peer-review

of academic research, as tendencies that have seeped into the humanities from hard science publication practices, streamlining academic argumentation and publication practices (Blockmans 2007; Konkiel 2018; Rijcke et al. 2016). It is imperative to pay attention to these objections, as they mirror many of the problems raised in the art world: instrumentalisation and limitation of free thinking and the freedom to find a form of expression. To take the above well-intentioned and justified criticisms of peer-review logic seriously, and try to understand what the critique is aimed at (and what it is based on), could take us somewhere other than where the polarised pro/con discussion at the intersection of artistic and academic practices all too often ends up.

However, the peer review process in academia is not only constituted by limiting criteria, gatekeeping, Western knowledge epistemes, and systematic metrics for the evaluation of quality, validity, and originality based on outdated and ensnaring institutional validations. It also entails critical engagement and peer-to-peer assistance, as a form of solidarity, and sharing becomes an epistemic gesture. Every reviewer is also reviewed, their own publishing activities also subject to peer scrutiny and feed-back in-between various research practices, allowing knowledges to move, to be touched, and to touch in return. This process permits selected peers to closely follow the coming into being of an article and offer ongoing critical reflections. Academic peer review also acknowledges, accounts for and traces epistemological process and recognises the traces of prior practices – those that have not only laid the ground for the work but that also have ruptured it, provoked it, challenged it and made it possible. References in this sense enable an ongoing entanglement with the knowledges, gestures and practices that are involved in the making of a text. (Reinhart and Schendzielorz 2024; Black and Indyk-López 2022).³

I will, in the following, address three aspects of peer review processes in relation to exhibition making: what is articulated and evaluated – reflecting what is valued and paid attention to, and thus recognised as part of an epistemological process; the peer-to-peer exchange as a form of solidarity, and sharing that becomes an epistemic gesture; and, the references that recognise the traces of prior practices – all while examining the possibilities for working with the exhibition as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles.

Museum Practices as Research

– What is Paid Attention to, Articulated and Evaluated?

Museums are not merely exhibition venues; they are research institutions that consider research, knowledge development, and critical interrogation to be

integral parts of their practice. Museums are subject to research obligations and engage in research collaborations with universities but their epistemic practices often differ from those of universities (Budtz Pedersen and Humanomics Research Center 2022, 8). As a result of the political harmonisation of research understandings, with e.g. the Bologna process, museums have been encouraged to align themselves with academic standards for research: originality, transparency and validity (Budtz Pedersen and Humanomics Research Center 2022, 13). This means that museums are increasingly required to document and publish their research through peer-reviewed channels, aligning to university standards of knowledge creation to produce quality data. Yet, museum research practice does not always correspond to the general concept of research as derived from the university sector. Museum research is often rooted in practical and experience-based forms of knowledge. It is therefore worth paying attention to the fact that much of the work that takes place at museums – working with and managing the archives, research into an exhibition subject, spatial reflections, material engagements, creation of educational material, collaborative efforts and so on – already have strong research strands (Fleming 2020). Experience and practice-based knowledges that philosopher Gilbert Ryle refers to as “knowing how” include tacit knowledges – such as how to work in archives or curate exhibitions (Ryle 1945; 2009). But they also include the epistemological inquiries involved in the more performative processes mentioned by Bolt, e.g., created by the relations facilitated in-between objects, artworks and audiences in an exhibition space. These practical, experience-based and performative epistemic practices entailed in exhibition work often differ from the theoretical and often written form of “knowing that” that dominates university research – a technical and theoretical epistemology that can be explained, defined and referenced, and found in, for example, peer-reviewed articles (Budtz Pedersen and Humanomics Research Center 2022, 36; Ryle 1945; 2009).

In the agreement text for a new reform of state-recognised museums in Denmark, released by the Danish Ministry of Culture on 16 May 2024,⁴ it is acknowledged that:

Knowledge development is more than peer-reviewed research. General knowledge development, such as studies, analyses, leaflets, popular science articles, yearbooks or catalogues for exhibitions, is an important part of museums’ work. However, the parties recognise the working group’s assessment that this is currently difficult to support with quality data.

(Ministry of Culture Denmark 2024, 6)

It is worth noting that although the committee recognises a need for a wider understanding of knowledge production within exhibition practices, the research and epistemic inquiry and practice that goes into, e.g. exhibition production, are not mentioned in the recommendations as potential sources of knowledge creation. The committee focuses instead on the byproducts and remnants of the exhibition, such as the exhibition catalogue and the exhibition, as objects of analysis. Thus, the report does not take into account the epistemological interrogation embedded in performative, practical and spatial knowledge-producing practices entailed in creating an exhibition (in the exhibition production, the exhibition space, the exhibition's after-effects). This may be partly due to insufficient data generation from these practices and activities – as they are often not accounted for. Hence, epistemological inquiry in the sense of what we pay attention to and articulate is never neutral. What we pay attention to in a work and knowledge creation process, and which of these processes we choose to articulate and thus value as part of knowledge production, matters. When working in the intersection of museological exhibition work and university epistemes, the performative process and the tacit knowledges of the “knowing how” risk being overlooked, as they are not as easily defined and do not fit into the general concept of research criteria of the university sector – which leads to the question of which practices, activities and processes are articulated in exhibition-making and what is regarded as quality data in this context.

Considering these vast, unacknowledged epistemological processes already embedded in the actual practice of creating exhibitions seems to underscore the importance of introducing more inclusive epistemic frameworks that encourage epistemic equity between university and exhibition practices – not as a checklist of inclusion, but as an ongoing practice of attention, emphasising the importance of being aware of which kind of spaces for knowledge creation are facilitated and what we are trained to notice. Which gestures, processes, or practices do we pay attention to, choose to articulate and thus communicate to others – and which remain suspended in the realm of the inchoate or the dismissed?

Reflections on Epistemologies, Practices and Peer-Review Processes

Metrics of assessment – that is, what is chosen to be evaluated and, therefore, paid attention to both as knowledge contribution and in a knowledge creation process – reflect what is valued as knowledge in academic practice, practice-based art studies, and exhibition making. Developing procedures that allow (art) exhibitions as alternatives to peer-reviewed articles entails reflection on evaluation metrics and what legitimises these epistemologies. To validate the (art)



Bloom installation, the Horniman Natural History Gallery, Horniman Museum and Gardens

Research Contribution and Recognition

Research insights and contribution:

The Bloom exhibition makes clear just how intimate and sometimes uncomfortable some of the linkages between the historical narratives of collecting, wealth and museological concerns actually are. The work set out as a somewhat quirky looking chequerboard of highly glazed paintings that mimicked porcelain but it quickly became apparent that these objects also contained other narratives connecting environment, mortality and loss with beauty, situating the work in a complex set of discourses. The accompanying publication provides a further exploration and articulation of these insights.

Dissemination:

EXHIBITION

The Horniman collection of artefacts and natural history is of nationally recognised significance and this interpretative installation had a wide reception. The visitor numbers for the Horniman over the period of the exhibition (9 July – 6 December) were in the region of 600,000.

BOOK

The Bloom book was launched at an event on Saturday 14th September at the Horniman Pavilion. 400-450 copies have been sold.

REVIEWS

The book and exhibition have been substantially covered in external reviews, including:

Ben Miller, 'Exquisite 19th century sun prints illuminate the Horniman's Natural History Gallery', Culture24, 11 November 2015 (<https://www.culture24.org.uk/art/painting-and-drawing/art541132-edward-chell-statement-horniman-anna-atkins>)
An artist's statement providing further insight into the creation and realisation of Bloom.

[1] Excerpts from the PDF report submitted to the REF on Edward Chell's Bloom exhibition, 2021, showing examples of images and accompanying text. Image: Screenshot of the report.

exhibition and its production as knowledge creation, rather than mere dissemination or illustration of conducted research, ways of articulating and documenting these processes as active forms of epistemological inquiry are needed.

While such practices are not yet established in Denmark, efforts to introduce formal evaluation criteria for exhibitions as research and epistemological contributions have been implemented elsewhere. In the UK, art schools have worked to broaden the definition of research to include non-traditional formats. While the REF, the UK's national system for assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions, includes exhibitions as valid research outputs, it also adheres to quantifiable measures within traditional academic boundaries.

The REF2021 guidelines specify that submitted materials should communicate research questions, methodologies, insights, and dissemination strategies. Assessments may include non-textual material, supported by written statements or portfolios, and must demonstrate how the exhibition meets academic evaluation criteria (REF2021 2021).

The REF report does not provide feedback along the process of the exhibition coming into being, and rather than the peer review process operating as an unfolding of knowledge-in-the-making with peer assistance (as it does

with peer-review of journal articles), the exhibition is assessed by peers as an aftermath in a portfolio format. Here exemplified by the submission of Edward Chell's 2015 exhibition, Bloom, held at the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London [1] (Chell 2015). In Bloom's REF submission, the exhibition is reduced to a 16-page PDF document featuring both images and text that evaluates and accounts for the exhibition's research objectives, research questions, findings, methods, and processes. What is not considered here is the performative aspect of the epistemological inquiry and how the exhibition could contribute to and challenge academic practice through the spatial experience, the performative aspects of the exhibition space, the exhausting archival research processes, the sensual material engagement that creates new meaning in an exhibitionary practice, or the work with the unruly exhibition texts that escapes capture. The portfolio does not bring forth what Bolt calls the performative force of research in artistic and curatorial practices and their "capacity to effect 'movement' in thought, word, and deed" and I would add practices (Bolt 2016, 130). The emphasis remains on meeting academic norms rather than exploring exhibitions themselves as epistemic endeavours, and Chell's Bloom portfolio ends up as a report in which knowledge, already stabilised elsewhere, is transmitted.

This underlines a need to further reflect on what constitutes research and how exhibition practices can expand, and not only comply with, existing academic standards. This includes recognising the performative force of exhibitionary research practices and their capacity to generate movement in thought, language, and understanding.

Some of these performative practices have been taken into account in The JAR, an online exposition platform that utilises the digital medium to rethink traditional publication practices. JAR believes that artistic research can be assessed, while at the same time be recognised for its unique qualities. The journal therefore encourages submissions that address important issues or problems in an artistic manner that engages other fields.

The multimedia expositions in JAR allow for both the integration of text, as well as image, audio, and video, enabling authors to present artistic research in a non-linear manner and through multiple modes of articulation. While maintaining rigorous standards for evaluating submissions, JAR's review board includes both academics and practitioners from various artistic fields to ensure epistemic equity when reviewing diverse modes of knowledge creation across differing ways of knowing, practising, and publishing (*Journal for Artistic Research*, n.d.; 'Peer Reviewing and Artistic Research', n.d.). In the peer-review

process, JAR employs a single-blind peer review; the reviewer is anonymous, but not the author, since artworks often carry the ‘signature’ of those who created them. Once the editorial board has approved a submission, the peer review editor invites three potential reviewers, and the author is also invited to propose a potential reviewer, as an act of epistemic alignment, someone they feel is attuned to the specific logics, urgencies, and situated knowledges that the exposition is attempting to address. The selected peers then engage with the submitted material, holding a space for peer-to-peer feedback before the final submission (‘Peer Reviewing and Artistic Research’, n.d.).

JAR simultaneously embraces the unique performative qualities of artistic research and recognises that artistic work resists rigid academic forms. The review process therefore includes nine points, which instead of addressing academic rigour in the argumentation and findings, ask the reviewers to consider their own positionality in relation to the topic, the submission’s relevance based on the submission’s subject matter, its methods and outcomes, and if it lives up to its potential. How well do the design and navigation support the submission? And are there any ethical or legal concerns (Journal for Artistic Research, n.d.)? In their guidelines, JAR importantly emphasises that they are open to various methodological backgrounds, as long as they expose practice as research meaning “that the submission exposes, translates, stages, performs etc. the practice it presents so as to engage with its own meaning, to challenge existing epistemic horizons or to offer new insights.” (Journal for Artistic Research, n.d., 3). Once the submission is published, the author is invited to take part in an ongoing dialogue with a broader public through the comment section – a space where the author’s own positionality, alongside reviewers’ reflections, is made visible and held open. This gesture does not aim to finalise meaning, but rather to activate a shared critical space, allowing for further commentary, situated readings, and exchange of shared interest across different situated practices and realities (Journal for Artistic Research, n.d.).

With these points of attention, JAR emphasises peer-review process as an opportunity for continued deep engagement with each other’s work, particularly across different situated realities and institutional contexts. Its peer review process, therefore, validates epistemic inquiries as processual and ongoing encounters that adhere to both artistic and more traditional academic standards, encouraging cross-disciplinary approaches that open a space for new ways of knowing within both academic and artistic practices.

JAR touches upon core aspects of rethinking peer review, and some of the considerations and peer-review practices that JAR applies might serve as inspi-

ration for the work, with the prospects for working with the (art) exhibition as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles at Danish Museums. Yet, both REF and JAR neglect the complexity of spatial performativity and embodied tangible engagements and reduce the exhibition or exposition to its textual documentation or visual one-dimensional surface.

This raises the question: could one imagine an alternative form of peer-review for exhibitions? A practice of peer-review for exhibitions that draws on core values from academic peer review, such as iteration and critical engagement? But also a peer review that takes into account the reviewer's embodied experience of the exhibition and its performative and spatial processes – in the exhibition production, exhibition space, and its aftereffects? That is, not as an afterthought, but in the making of the actual exhibition. Of particular interest here are the practices and gestures involved in making the exhibition and the exhibition space in its material and spatial form, which rather than illustrating research outcomes can function as a dynamic site of epistemic inquiry.

The Curatorial, Curating at Cultural Historical Museums, and the Exhibition as Research

In the context of cultural historical museums, the production of exhibitions is often understood as legitimate epistemic work, particularly when developed through interdisciplinary workshop formats. These formats foreground exhibition production itself as a space of research-in-action, creating opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement and feedback through practice-based exercises (Bäckström 2016; Vest Hansen, Folke Henningsen, and Gregersen 2019; Arnold et al. 2020; Bjerregaard 2020). Yet the minor gestures, the interstitial dynamics between situated practices and their reciprocal effects, where meaning, relation, and becoming often take form, tend to slip from view. In written accounts, attention usually gravitates toward the major gestures of practice-based processes, such as workshop structures and framing methods that produced the exhibition. In contrast, the exhibition space itself is often mediated as a relatively passive representation.

Unlike the cultural historical exhibitions, art exhibitions tend to neglect the articulation of the practice-based processes leading up to the physical exhibition; instead, they emphasise the exhibition space itself, as a space for epistemological inquiry and research in process (Sheikh 2015; Sternfeld and Ziaja 2014), thus perceiving the exhibition space as a space for critical engagement, as theorists and curators Nora Sternfeld and Luisa Ziaja write, as “a space of negotiation in which the meaning of words and things is not fixed but always open to

discussion” (Sternfeld and Ziaja 2014, 24). Here, the active research and epistemological entanglements are formed when curators, artists and audiences activate the interplay between the elements interwoven within the exhibition space and the various discursive contexts that implicitly or explicitly are played out.

To explore the exhibition as an alternative to traditional academic publishing, I propose combining these two traditions: the cultural-historical museums’ practices of legitimising exhibition production as epistemic inquiry and the art museums’ focus on the exhibition space as a performative space where multiple open-ended epistemic engagements are played out.

Art theorist Simon Sheikh deepens this inquiry by distinguishing between two translations of “research.” One is the French *recherche*, “understood mainly in terms of journalistic research” (Sheikh 2015, 37), which he associates with the more traditional research involved in curating an art exhibition. The other is the German *Forschung* “which implies a scientific model of research” (Sheikh 2015, 37), where the exhibition is not only “thought of as a form of mediation of research but also as a site for carrying out this research, as a place for enacted research” (Sheikh 2015, 40).⁵

To work with the exhibition as *Forschung* – as research – is to regard it, not as an answer to a research question, but as the activation of the question itself – a question that, as it unfolds, may contain no correct answers, but instead, multiple perspectives, contradictions and uncertainties. Rather than offering conclusions, the exhibition as research opens discursive and material spaces for epistemic inquiry, in which meaning is formed relationally in the exhibition production and in the exhibition space, with several possible outcomes.⁶

As such, exhibition as research becomes a research mode in its own right. It investigates different aspects of a subject matter through its practices, which presents different approaches and points of entry from the traditional peer-reviewed article that concludes by presenting research results and findings. Instead, the (art) exhibition as research explores its subject matter through performative inquiry, experimental processes and practices, inviting in diverse engagements, expertise and experiences. Here, meaning is formed in the researchers’ (curators, artists, and other practitioners involved in the creation of the exhibitions) interaction with the archival material, research into the exhibition subject, spatial reflections, material engagements, creation of educational material, facilitation of collaborative efforts, etc., as well as through the audience’s activation of the interaction between the exhibition elements. Here, the exhibition is a process, or something in process. In other words, the (art) exhibition as research becomes a performative act that tentatively acti-

vates and moves the subject matter of the exhibition instead of defining it and, with that, becomes a space for epistemic encounters and epistemic exploration, rather than a communication or dissemination of already produced knowledge (Arnfred 2023).

Applying These Considerations to a Danish Context

A possible unintended opening towards working with the (art) exhibition as research and as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles in a Danish context might be found in the draft for an actual ordinance for the Danish museums. The ordinance was sent out to the Danish museums for review in 2024 by the Danish Ministry of Culture, following the agreement from 2024 mentioned above. In the draft, research is defined as follows: “Peer-reviewed research publications include published articles and monographs on topics within the museum’s area of responsibility and in the fields of education, conservation and museology. The research must meet the OECD core criteria for research” (Ministry of Culture Denmark 2024, 9). Even though exhibitions are not mentioned and only “traditional” academic publications are emphasised, an alternative to peer-reviewed articles and monographs might be found in the OECD “core criteria for research”. A more detailed explanation of what the OECD Frascati-Manual guidelines consist of and how they are implemented in the Danish context can be found on the website of the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science. In the OECD core criteria, research and what they call “experimental development” is defined as “creative and systematic work undertaken to increase existing knowledge and devise new applications of existing knowledge” (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, n.d.). According to these guidelines, a research activity can be engaged with both specific or general questions, as long as it fulfils the following criteria:

- New (To be aimed at new findings)
- Original/creative (To be based on original, not obvious, concepts and hypotheses)
- Unsure (To be uncertain about the final outcome)
- Systematic (To be planned and budgeted)
- Transferable and/or reproducible (To lead to results that could be possibly reproduced)

(Ministry of Higher Education and Science, n.d.)

In this context, innovation is perceived as:

A new or improved product or process (or combination thereof) that differs significantly from an entity's previous products and processes and is made available to potential users (product innovation) or adopted by the entity (process innovation). Innovation activities can take place in all sectors of society

(Ministry of Higher Education and Science, n.d.).

Even though these modes of defining research and research activities do not encompass the actual exhibition space, or for that matter, exhibition production, they might prove helpful in building an understanding of how exhibitions in themselves could be counted as academic research practices; when working with the researching (art) exhibition as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles, this includes practices of references accounting for and tracing epistemological processes and recognising the traces of prior practices in relation to an exhibition.

An example of such reference practices is the 2023 exhibition *Full of Days* curated by South into North, which engaged with Charlottenborg Kunsthall's 140-year history and archive (South into North 2023) [2]. Although created for a Kunsthalle rather than a museum, the exhibition's mode of working with references and its connection to Charlottenborg's extensive archive and surrounding myths makes it noteworthy. *Full of Days* exemplifies how art institutions can embody the OECD research criteria, offering transferable insights into exhibition-based epistemic inquiry, knowledge practices and recognition of prior practices, including those that have not only laid the ground for the work, but also those that have ruptured it, provoked it, challenged it and made it possible. *Full of Days*, without explicit intention, employed several of the OECD research parameters and exhibition research practices listed above: a carefully structured, budgeted, and planned research process, the uncertainties regarding how to approach the archive, what the exhibition team would be able to read out of the archives, and what the final outcome would be were untangled and unfolded. The idea was to engage with what the exhibition team encountered in the Charlottenborg archive and beyond, not merely as a gathering of data, but rather to bring forth counter-narratives, forgotten histories, and divergent perspectives. At the same time, it aimed to carefully engage with and analyse the material, exploring and experimenting with how the past could highlight aspects of contemporary and future urgencies.⁷ To achieve this, novel methodologies were invented, such as Deep Publishing. Here, the exhibition team, through their collaboration with

graphic designer and editor Benjamin Åbäke, engaged with the vast archive, artworks and other material, as an examination of how to approach the exhibition production and the exhibition space as an expanded publication practice.⁸ This engagement involved an analysis and selection process, from editorial and printing practices to the exhibition production and exhibition space – both as material contributions in the form of artworks, groupings of objects, and exhibition text, and as the ongoing dialogue that the exhibition production and the exhibition space had with Charlottenborg’s archive, forgotten (or obscured) histories, and new perspectives on these historical events, and how all of that interacted in the exhibition [2]. The team applied the layered formats utilised in academic publication practices, such as chapters, paragraphs, references, and footnotes, but instead of text on paper, these formats were applied to a mixture of historic and newly commissioned artworks and visual archival material.

[2] In the exhibition *Full of Days*, 2023 at Charlottenborg Kunsthall the artworks were, in addition to the exhibition texts, accompanied by copies of archival photos from various exhibitions and events that occurred during The Kunsthalle’s 150 years of history. The archival photos ran like footnotes along the walls of the exhibition, arranged to relate to and subtly comment on the nearby themes and artworks. Artwork in photo: Sahar Jamili, *Insight Out*, 2023 and Isabel Lewis in romance with Dirk Bell, *In Repair*, 2023. Image: Partial view of *Full of Days* exhibition space. Photo by the author.



The research that had gone into the archive was unfolded through video clips, artworks, exhibition pamphlets – odd objects and facts, myths, and rumours connected to these materials, performed through exhibition text and spatial engagements. For example, reproductions of photo material from the archive ran along the walls of the exhibition space as subtle footnotes and references to past histories and exhibitions, set in relation to the themes, artworks and archival material in the specific room. Additionally, new perspectives and an understanding of the vast archive of Charlottenborg's exhibition history were produced, highlighting forgotten (or hidden) aspects of the Kunsthalle's history: Kvindeudstillingen (the women's exhibition) that surprisingly little has been written about, or the documentation of a Nazi exhibition taking place in the big halls, showing another side of Danish behaviour during the German occupation of World War II. Through their inventive publication practice, the team behind *Full of Days* thus created novel modes of approaching the (art) exhibition as research that could inspire and inform work with the (art) exhibition as a possible alternative to peer-reviewed articles.

In this sense, exhibitions such as *Full of Days* already contain some, if not all, of the aspects outlined in the Frascati Manual. They can introduce new insights into the exhibition process and often engage in original and creative approaches to the exhibition topic. In the initial research, the curatorial approach to the topic is often uncertain and open-ended, and what will emerge from working with it is unknown. The process from the initial research to the finished exhibition is complex. It engages many different practices at various stages that are often well-planned and need to be budgeted. Additionally, new modes of working with exhibitions can be shared as curatorial methods. What is missing, then, is both the conscious articulation of these epistemic processes, from the minor gestures and practices that make the work-work,⁹ to research questions, aims and context, methodology, insights, and contributions – but also addressing and acknowledging the performative force of the exhibition, taking into account the interactions in-between the different objects in the exhibition space, and how these interactions are experienced and activated through the researchers', curators', artists', and audiences' engagement with the exhibition in its different phases (such as: production, exhibition space and aftereffects). Such articulation enables communication to those outside the art world about how an exhibition can unfold as a research activity that adheres to, but also challenges and adds to, academic evaluation standards – thus making it possible to consider designated (art) exhibitions as an epistemic process and a research activity within scholarly practice.

Unpacking ongoing transparent and more opaque peer review processes, and unfolding possible modes of articulation for practices involved in exhibition making, as well as questioning how they are affected by theoretical, performative, and practice-based engagements is to consider how exhibition production, exhibition space, and the after-effects of exhibitions form part of epistemic processes and encounters. Thus, in relation to knowledge creation, this article does not merely try to position the (art) exhibition as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles as a discursive interaction or imagined event. Rather, the article seeks to emphasise the practical considerations as enacted epistemic inquiry that makes the work-work, moving the (art) exhibition as research from a space of presentation and representation to a space of activation (as a facilitator of epistemic inquiry through practice-based engagements).

Conclusion

As discussed, when considering the evaluation standards above, peer-review processes run the inherent risks of a limiting, ensnaring academisation that threatens to entrench art and curating within sets of assumptions, rules, and norms that come with institutional validation, including Western knowledge epistemes, and systematic metrics for the evaluation of quality, validity, and originality. This framework could threaten to instrumentalise both art and curating, subjecting them to the logics of transparency and measurability that run counter to the opacity, ambiguity, open-ended reflections, fabulations, juxtapositions, and counternarratives that are often central to artistic and curatorial practices. Despite these inherent risks, peer-review processes do not consist solely of limiting criteria and gatekeeping; they also entail critical engagement and peer-to-peer assistance and exchange as forms of solidarity, where sharing becomes an epistemic gesture in the sense that every reviewer is also reviewed, their own publishing activities also subject to peer scrutiny and feedback. This allows knowledge to move, to be touched, and to touch in return – a process that allows selected peers to closely follow the coming into being of an article and provide ongoing critical reflections.

Could we begin to imagine a peer review process tailored to the exhibition as a research format? Not merely in terms of evaluating the end product, but in engaging with the exhibition process through its unfolding in the exhibition production, the exhibition space and in the exhibition's possible after-effects? This would involve input from external peers – not the collaborators directly involved in workshops or production, but rather a procedure founded in professional exchange with colleagues who participate in shaping the process: in the

early stages of idea development, where the research questions are formed; during the production phase, where the ideas for the exhibition are researched, tested and negotiated; in the construction of the exhibition space, where spatial thinking and material engagement intersect with conceptual work; and, finally, in the reflective phase, where the impact and after-effects of the exhibition are considered.

To a certain extent, this already happens, unofficially, in the in-between spaces of curatorial practices. Over a coffee, in the lunchroom, in e-mails sent in the wee hours of the morning. A curator shares an idea for a show-in-progress, another reflects with a colleague on the ethics of an exhibition subject, a third realises in the exchange with an exhibition technician, midway through the install, that the process has subtly changed their understanding of institutional responsibility. These exchanges are not marginal – they are the epistemic engine that makes the work-work. To formalise them is not to contain them but to create hospitable conditions for their visibility.

What if we stopped relegating these interactions to the informal and instead recognised them as the peer review that is already taking place? Perhaps it is then not about how to formalise this, but how to recognise it as a form of knowledge we already practice. The question, then, is not whether peer review exists within exhibition-making, but whether it could be made more visible, structured and articulated without reducing it to metrics, limiting criteria, checklists or textual reports. Could such moments of professional exchange – rooted in practice, dialogue, and shared reflection – be recognised as legitimate forms of peer evaluation? And in so doing, might we create a framework that values the knowledge embedded not only in outcomes, but in the temporal, relational, and spatial dimensions of exhibition-making itself?

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential for art exhibitions to be recognised as an alternative to peer-reviewed academic publications, examining how exhibitions contribute to knowledge creation at the intersection of artistic, curatorial, and academic practices. It addresses challenges in museum research obligations posed by current academic evaluation metrics, and the institutional biases that prioritise textual documentation over performative and material engagements inherent in curatorial and artistic practices. Drawing on theoretical perspectives and institutional frameworks, the study discusses the impact of integrating practice-based art studies into academia. It investigates how exhibitions, beyond their traditional role as mediatory tools, can be recognised as legitimate sites of research production and research publication on their own terms. Hence the paper calls for a reconsideration of research assessment of museum practices in academic contexts, advocating for acknowledging exhibitions as possible alternatives to peer-reviewed articles.

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NOTES

- 1 It goes without saying that the idea of working with (art) exhibitions as a practical-theoretical catalyst for new insights and different knowledge production and contribution is just one of several ways of working and approaching exhibitions and scholarly research. It is precisely as part of a whole that the (art) exhibition (as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles), contributes to the strength of academic research and the art world.
- 2 I include art and artists alongside curating and other exhibition workers. This is because artists often work as curators of exhibitions. Thus, practices entailed in curating are included in artistic practice, and many of the concerns addressed in theories about artistic research also apply to curatorial and other exhibition practices (O'Neill Paul 2012; Sheikh 2015). Furthermore, artists, curators and other exhibition workers collaborate closely and dependently when creating an exhibition. Thus, I will draw not only on museological and curatorial but also artistic practices and theories for this research project.
- 3 It should be noted that it is imperative to critically scrutinise and re-evaluate these criteria in terms of habitual biases and tendencies, such as Western, gendered, neurotypical, etc. – knowledge epistemes on which they are based and thus favour.
- 4 The working group included museum, business, and government professionals.
- 5 Here, Sheikh does not only refer to the research conducted on the subject matter before the realisation of the exhibition, but research as the activation of an unanswered (research) question in the exhibition.
- 6 The two types of exhibitions, “*recherche*” and *Forschung*, often overlap and are rarely as distinctly defined as mentioned above. However, it can be helpful to keep these two definitions in mind when exploring the possibility of the (art) exhibition as an alternative to peer-reviewed articles.
- 7 The careful engagement with and analysis of the material, exploring and experimenting with how the past could highlight aspects of contemporary and future urgencies, was reflected in the introductory text for the exhibition and in the exhibition texts displayed in the exhibition space (however, the methodologies behind these engagements, such as Deep Publishing, were not mentioned. This also points to some of the issues discussed in this article. How can we refer to these types of contextualising and knowledge-creating texts if they are not archived or included in the exhibition catalogue, especially when a catalogue is not produced, as is the case for many exhibitions, including *Full of Days*?
- 8 Deep Publishing is a methodology created by ÄBÄKE, a transdisciplinary graphic design collective founded in London in 2000 by Benjamin Reichen, Kajsa Ståhl, Maki Suzuki, and Patrick Lacey, that addresses extensive data sets and archives within editorial contexts. For the first time, this approach is applied not just for print, but to the creation of exhibitions and exhibition spaces. This methodology has also been used for other exhibitions as a way to interact with a museum’s vast collections and archives.
- 9 I use the phrase “making the work-work” by leaning on dancer and philosopher Erin Manning (Manning 2016, 65). In my use, the phrase refers to what moves the work from within – the processes that animate practice, that activate and propel it so that it does something. It is not only about the outcomes or decisions that result from work, but also about the movements and facilitations that allow those outcomes to emerge. Making the work-work then points to the recursive processes by which we work on something, attend to its unfolding, and create the conditions that let the work itself begin to work: to move, shift, and generate something in the world.

Leszek Brogowski

Works in Spite of Myself

My proposal consists of presenting four images accompanied by short texts. The photos are taken as time goes by, as my life unfolds. When I take them, or when I first look at them, I realize that they all hint at works that, for one reason or another, have caught my attention: a characteristic shape or a specific setting of a painting, a detail, an anecdote or a title of an artwork, and so on. In these almost random photographs, I try to identify afterwards a specific visual knowledge – that of the history of art, that of the symbols of my culture or education – which is imprinted on the resulting images. This knowledge imposes itself on the image in spite of myself, spontaneously and without intention, and then I am able to talk about it: I recognize what I already know; a way of seeing things with the eyes of art. Actually, one always sees the world in terms of the images they have in their head, images that they often saw or that made

an impression on them. Photography is a more or less accidental reenactment of the knowledge we all have of the history of images: we've seen a lot of such examples, between Oscar Rejlander, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall. Here I use photography to identify a kind of sensitive knowledge specific to art. In front of my photos, everyone can do an exercise by bringing into play their own experiential knowledge linked to the meaning they give to their perceptions. Whether they share my visual understanding or not, oppose their own to mine, seek to construct new ones or switch from one image of culture to another, in all these cases they are activating knowledge, latent though it may be, that inhabits and constitutes the viewer. These are experiences, as much aesthetic as cognitive, that bring into play the knowledge that lies dormant in each one of us, because no gaze is innocent, whether it was formed in art school, comic strips or video games.

The texts that accompany these photographs do not serve to reveal my associations, to explain the meaning(s) I assign to them or to instruct the viewer. They are not intended to guide their perception, but – generally speaking – to frame a field of experience where sensitive knowledge comes to light. These are positions I take. My desperate conviction is that a large part of the history of philosophy has worked in a direction that pits art against knowledge, spontaneity against information, and ends up considering intuition and intellect to be irreconcilable. The continental influence of Henri Bergson's writings – whether well understood or misunderstood – contributed greatly to this by establishing the superiority of intuition over intellect in art, forgetting that in German philosophy, intuition is a sensitive and holistic knowledge that occurs in the immediate. At the limit of this conception,

drugs help to bring out an archaic authenticity, in which even psychoanalysis still wants to see the model of creation. In 1932, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, who was also the author of a number of controlled essays under the effect of narcotics, attacked Bergson, who, in his view, was guilty of an inexcusable contempt for the intellect, and concluded that we must “go beyond this kind of ‘justification’ of ‘white delirium.’ [...] It is better to abstain from a few scribbles of a certain kind than to lose what is most essential in today's man, namely a properly functioning intellect.” My very first essay (1978), inspired by Witkacy's youthful readings, was entitled, precisely, “Intuition on an intellectual pasture.” The texts that accompany the photos therefore point to various aspects of the philosophy of art that worked to scare off knowledge in art.



Marcel Duchamp played a particularly incisive role in overcoming the appreciative conception of art, notably through his recurrent critique of interiority as the founding reference of art. "Taste presupposes an authoritarian spectator who imposes what he likes or dislikes, and translates into 'beautiful' and 'ugly' what he feels to be pleasant and unpleasant," he asserted, while constantly complaining that his readymades were often the object of aesthetic appreciation, whereas "the choice of ready-mades is always based on visual indifference at the same time as the total absence of good or bad taste." Duchamp's proposed cure for images consisted in proscribing not only aesthetic judgment in art, but also the social practice

of judgment! "The word 'belief' is a mistake too. It's like the word 'judgment.' These are appalling facts on which the Earth is based." "The idea of judgment should disappear," he declared. In the world prefigured by such a practice of art, aesthetic fanaticism would never have taken place. To reject the judgment of taste in art and marketing is to touch the foundations of the Western world.

Leszek Brogowski, *1. Le genre et les sanitaires*, 2008/2024



Sticking to common sense banality, Bertrand Russell asserts that those with a rich intellectual culture are incapable of seeing as perceptively as those without, and that, consequently, the latter are better suited to visualization as an operation of consciousness. It's an old prejudice of art academies that it's bad for the painter to read and think too much, a prejudice that grounds the idea of art as an "archaic" expression. It's interesting to discover on this occasion that Russell was well acquainted with the work of Francis Galton, inventor of eugenics, and that his opinion on this subject is merely a validation of one of Galton's theses, set out in *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* in 1883. "I see no reason," wrote Russell

in 1919, "to reject the conclusion, first suggested by Galton's investigations, that the habit of abstract investigation makes cultivated people generally inferior to the average in the power of visual imagination, and far more preoccupied exclusively with words." The question is what place images have in language games. Questioning the relationship between seeing, reading and saying means asking whether we see the same things when we change languages.

Leszek Brogowski, 2. *Élevage d'éclaboussures*
(*poussière à l'envers*), 2021/2024



In *Lessons on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein asserts that a tiny modification, imperceptible in any form, is immediately perceptible when it takes place in the face, as it significantly alters its expression. “I draw a meaningless curve [a doodle. – S.] and then another later, which looks quite similar; you won’t notice the difference. But if I draw this singular thing I call a face, and later another that’s slightly different, you’ll immediately see that there’s a difference.” Later, in the same series of interviews, he says the same thing

about a painting: “Change the painting by the slightest amount, and you won’t want to look at it again.” Once you’ve familiarized yourself with a work of art, you’re sensitive to the slightest change in its form. Arthur Schopenhauer, too, was interested in that “less than nothing” – *das Unbedeutendeste* – which, in a landscape or architecture, gains beauty from a ray of light. Wittgenstein also compares letters to the face – “The familiar face of a word” – but then he changed the problem, whereas one who was interested in the way we read by following letters with our eyes could have analyzed the difference between printed letters and handwriting. In the face, the most insignificant changes the expression; in a handwritten text, the most insignificant can determine the very possibility of reading it. Handwritten letters are as singular and complex in their use of the standardized forms of

the alphabet as family resemblances are in their use of faces. Paleographers know just as well as visual recognition engineers how difficult it is to decipher handwriting (OCR: Optical Character Recognition). We need a philosophy of the insignificant to complement the theories of signification.

Leszek Brogowski, *3. Pharmacie*, 2024.
Readymade naturel, 2023/2024 (phot. Frédérique Guérin)



“Representation is not the work of the gaze alone,” writes Levinas, “but of language. But to distinguish between the gaze and language, that is to say, between the gaze and the reception of the face that language presupposes, we need to take a closer look at the privilege of vision,” a privilege that the philosophy of art has always accorded to the visual. Without language, there is no face. To remark, as Levinas does, that the eye is that place where we see nothing, but from which the Other looks at me, is, admittedly, more surprising in its radicality than the image of the mouth, an orifice with multiple functions (eating,

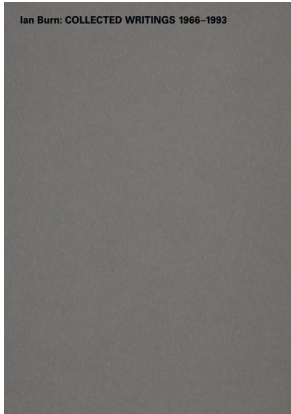
speaking, kissing, making faces, etc.), but it is nonetheless from there that the Other speaks to me. So the face is irreducible to the visual, even when the latter is reduced to a tiny black dot: the meaning of the facial expression is inseparable from the narrative in which it is involved, from the words spoken by and around its wearer, from the actions in which it participates, and so on. The tradition of portraiture needs to be revolutionized.

Leszek Brogowski, 4. *Un tas de bois, descendant*, 2015/2024

Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966-1993.

Ed. Ann Stephen.

Power Publications, KW Institute for Contemporary Art
and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König,
2023.



Did Australian art historian Ann Stephen discover the alchemical formula to transform a massive, 800-page, 1.4 kg book into a manageable, engaging, and approachable object? Behind the book's imposing size and compact form, the editorial work shines with a unique approach to

exploring Ian Burn's life and work, as well as the artistic and political transformations of the era.

Born in 1939 in Geelong, on Melbourne Bay, and dying tragically in 1993, on the east coast near Canberra, Burn is, according to Stephen, "an activist, a trade unionist, a journalist, an art critic, a curator and an art historian", and, in the artist's own words, "an ex-Conceptual artist" (11). Before Burn's death, Stephen knew and collaborated with him. Since then, Stephen has dedicated a substantial portion of her academic career to studying Burn's visual and textual work and deliberately places the label "artist" at the end of the sentence. In this way, she emphasizes this designation while warning against the limitations of simple categorization. And, if experts and aficionados of conceptual art or contemporary Australian art are already familiar with Burn's complex trajectory, it is only through reading *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966-1993* that they can fully comprehend the extent of the artist's multifaceted commitments.

The book appears at first glance to be a monochromatic volume, except for a touching portrait of the young artist at his desk on the back cover [1]. It evokes the neutral parallelepipeds of Minimalism, a movement with which

Burn was intimately familiar, both as an informed viewer and as an emerging art producer. On further inspection, the seemingly solid gray exterior conceals a lively crimson interior. From the very beginning, it is clear that the editing process is meticulous, precise, and of high quality. Indeed, the collection of fifty texts by Burn is carefully organized, with a subtle chronological and thematic structure that may be too intricate for some new readers. Alongside the anthology is a comprehensive critical section. The book begins with an extensive introduction by the editor, followed by concise headings for each text. It also includes a selection of previously published and unpublished texts from conferences that artists and friends gave in tribute to the artist after his death (Allan Sekula, Adrian Piper, Mel Ramsden and Paul Wood).

More than half of the texts in the anthology were co-authored, forming a productive collaborative constellation around Burn. Moreover, the anthology's very form, which Stephen addresses after producing an admirable intellectual biography of the artist in 2006, provides insight into the artist's practice. It also recalls a context of emulation, transdisciplinarity, and a particularly intense circulation of knowledge in which he evolved from the 1960s to the 1990s. Nevertheless, a more expansive recontextualization – i.e. beyond the close artist's social circle – might be beneficial in understanding the disruptions, continuities, bold decisions, and theoretical paths that Burn has taken. This is particularly relevant given his various travel experiences, encounters, and areas of interest. In this regard, Stephen points out that "the spelling, capitalisation and word-hyphenation of Burn's original texts have been retained, with American or Australian/British spellings conveying his work across continents." (8) Beyond the geographical dynamics, all the texts testify to the "shifting collaborative and conceptual nature" (8) of Burn's work with Mel Ramsden, first in London (1964–1967) and then in New York (until 1976), and with many other collaborators. His journey continued when, in 1977, he returned to Australia and distanced himself from the official Western, transatlantic art world. For a period of ten years

after his return, Burn devoted himself to two distinct commitments. First, as a journalist, he became a central figure in the organization of the Art & Working Life program and the development of the Artworkers Union. Additionally, he deepened and expanded his research into the recent history of Australian art. He shared his findings in articles, at conferences and in exhibitions. In doing so, he clarified the subtleties of Australian art and, more particularly, the works of certain Indigenous artists as well. This is where Burn probably offers us an extensive and fascinating range of texts on these often-overlooked subjects. Ultimately, his deep political and theoretical commitments did not prevent him from returning to pictorial production at the turn of the 1990s and reengaging with the conceptual artistic concerns of the 1960s. The anthology allows readers to explore many facets of his intellectual and artistic trajectory through

essays that are both accessible and pedagogical, while remaining critical and never demagogic. This is largely because Burn's writings are remarkably well-balanced, reflecting a combination of the artist's inventiveness, the historian's rigor, and the teacher's attentiveness.

Analyzing this diverse anthology comprehensively and systematically is no easy task, but it would be a shame not to delve into the intricate connections that the editor skillfully weaves throughout. Based on the theme of this Periskop issue, I will explore one of the recurring concepts, knowledge, which appears over a hundred times in the anthology.

[1] Ian Burn at his desk in Finsbury Park flat, London, 1966. Behind him are his paintings: *Re-ordered Painting No. 2*, 1965 and *Yellow Blue Equivalence*, 1965-66. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.



Looking at Seeing and Reading and Knowing

In the late 1960s, when conceptual art was emerging, and before he joined the Art & Language group, Burn produced a series of works that blurred the line between an academic essay and an artwork. By merging these two genres, he created a seamless transition, ensuring a captivating and thought-provoking read. These texts, including *Mirror Piece* (1967), *The Role of Language* (with Mel Ramsden, 1968) and *Notes on Analysis* (1970), show a marked interest in the subject of perception and vision. It's worth noting that his exploration of perceptual frameworks prompted a substantial shift in his artistic practice, transitioning from visual art to text-based forms. His investigation of perception is rooted in the study of art history and theory, as advocated by the art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), and is further shaped by his deep immersion in philosophy and epistemology. Notably inspired by the American philosopher of science R. H. Hanson (1924-1967), Burn states, "what we see is shaped by prior knowledge," and that "seeing embraces concepts of knowledge." This implies that any work of art appears in "an epistemic claim, not into the eyeball." (195) Rather than merely playing with visual effects, he employs textual forms and linguistic mediation to open up a dialogue and create intellectual stimulation. Within the Art & Language collective in New York, Burn gradually expands his text-based and analytical approach to a more collaborative and conversational ethos. In 1993, shortly before his death, Burn returned to these issues with the organization of the exhibition *Looking at Seeing and Reading* in Sidney. In addressing the question of the epistemic construction of how every act of seeing is grounded in an epistemic framework, he insists on "a 'space' between what we see and what we know" (625). This initial reflection leads him to conclude that "pure seeing" connected to "an ideal or transcendental subject" is impossible.

Local Knowledge, Peripheral Vision

Burn then focuses on "the acknowledgment of a socially produced subject, that is, an historically specific viewer (spatially) coextensive with the object." (637) Con-



[2] Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, *Soft-Tape*, 1966, installation with tape recorder and wall text, reconstructed for *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in the 20th Century Art*, 8th Biennale of Sydney, 1990. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

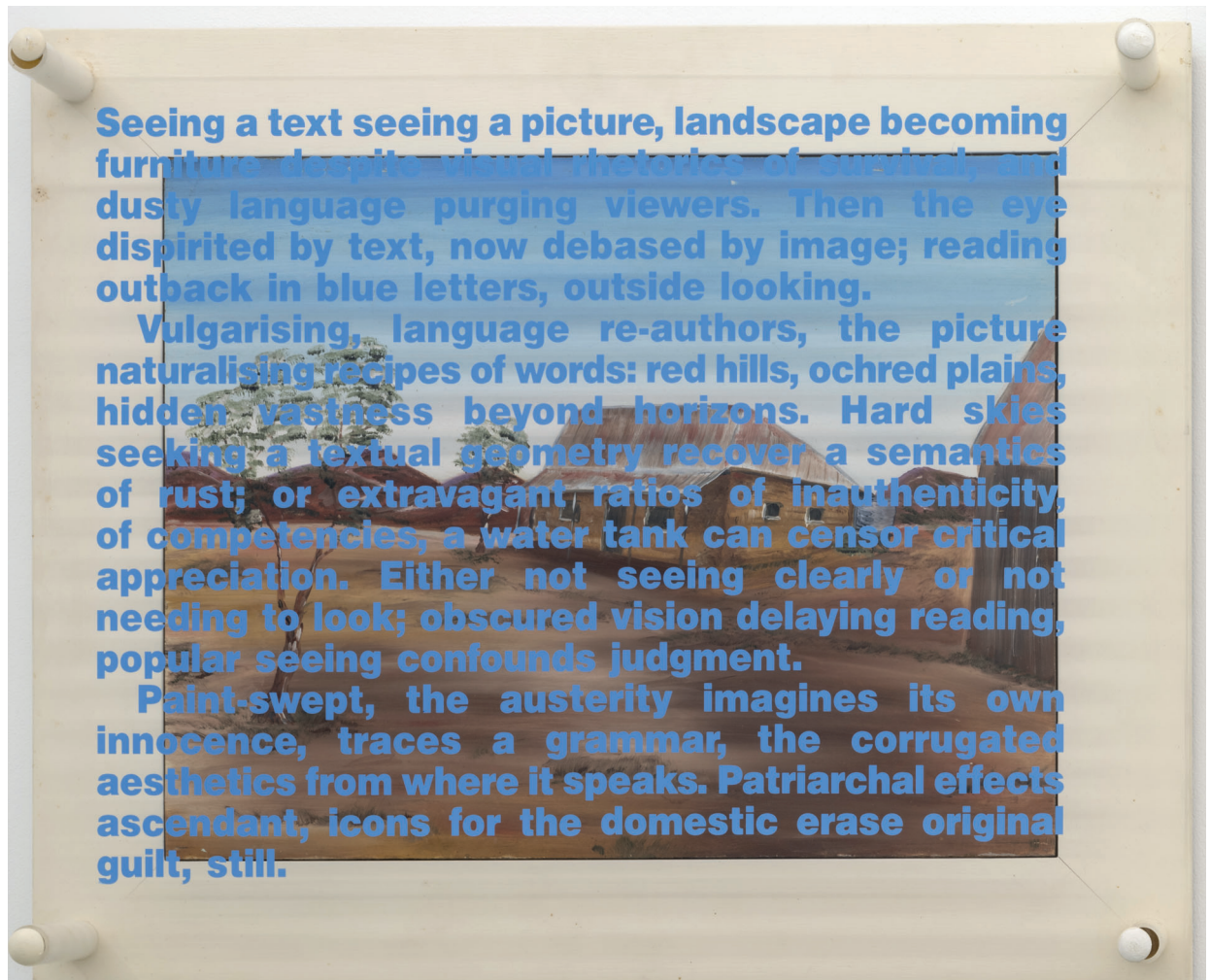
sequently, Burn develops the idea that knowledge is informed by its contextual anchoring, being always historically, spatially, and socially determined. Moreover, as with the reflections on perception, the question of local knowledge pervades the anthology. This is evident in some of his earliest conceptual works, such as *Soft-Tape*¹ (1966) [2], as well as in his essays on art history written in the 1980s, which are notably influenced by postcolonial theories. Burn's defense of situated knowledge stands in contrast to what Stephen rightly describes as "the orthodoxy of a universalizing modernist order" (35). This issue is particularly salient in Burn's writings when compared to those of some of his conceptual counterparts. Burn has consistently grappled with the issue of geographical and cultural hierarchy on a global scale. He was keenly aware of cultural imperialism, which took various forms, including symbolic and even physical domination. As an Australian who had lived in London and New York before

returning to Australia, he had a nuanced understanding of both contexts and the power dynamics that shaped them. He achieves a theoretical tour de force by proposing a particularly inspiring concept that unifies the question of situated knowledge with that of non-neutral vision: peripheral vision (introduced in “Glimpses: On Peripheral Vision” in 1990 and subsequently developed in “Namatjira’s White Mask: A Partial Interpretation,” written with Stephen in 1992). In doing so, he aims to “open up possibilities of developing counter-narratives within European history, as well as counter-narratives to Eurocentric history.” (570)

“Critical, Political”

From this point forward, his reflections on the relationship between perception and knowledge are not just phenomenological or epistemological, but remain genuinely political in nature. Burn’s political views emerged in the 1970s, as seen in the thematic structure of the anthology and Stephen’s introduction. They were shaped by his

[3] Ian Burn and unknown artist, ‘Value Added’ Landscape No. 5, 1992, oil, ink, wood, Perspex, 48.9 x 59 x 10.5 cm. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.



immersion in New York's artistic and activist communities, and continued to evolve in the 1980s with his return to Australia and involvement in labor union activities, which temporarily overshadowed his artistic output. His approach is informed by (post)Marxism and characterized by a certain analytical rigor. It is both macro, structured around a geopolitical analysis of American imperialism, and micro, turned towards what was then called identity politics. The anthology allows us to examine this transformation in depth. Burn ensures a subtle transition between a Marxist critique specific to the 1970s, focused on the central question of class struggle, and "intersectionality", influenced by feminist and postcolonial approaches². Throughout, Burn maintains a focus on the art world, demonstrating that artistic expression is inherently intertwined with matters of power, suppression, and prejudice. The author also stresses that cultural institutions, particularly museums, should be more than just places for "spatializing a set of ideas about a history of art" but strive to "exclude, segregate, disenfranchise, marginalize, affiliate, homogenize" (541). These institutions do not accommodate "'unacceptable' ethnicities or national traditions [...] women artists and to more" (544) and impose their dominance over geography and culture. In this perspective, Burn reminds us that "neutral white walls aren't neutral." Similarly, we could paraphrase it: neutral knowledge isn't neutral.

Burn's multifaceted commitments are a story of transitions between (apparently) antipodean points:

Australia and New York, modernism and conceptualism, phenomenology and politics, between a managerial and bureaucratic gray and a radiant revolutionary red. He established points of convergence and stimulated circulation, both conceptually and artistically [3]. However, his work was never about versatility or opportunism. Rather, it has consistently been characterized by intense inquiry and coherent reflection, with a critical and purposeful use of knowledge. Thanks to Stephen, Burn's life and work still serve as a reference today, thirty years after his death, in understanding the many issues surrounding contemporary art. His endeavor also remains a source of inspiration for transforming our world by combining the use of hands and heads, matter and ideas, dreams and hopes.

LOUIS-ANTOINE MÈGE

NOTES

- 1 The first artistic collaboration between Burn and Ramsden, *Soft-Tape* was produced in 1966 in London and finally installed for the first time at the Biennale of Sydney in 1990. It is an installation made in two parts: an almost inaudible sound recording on cassette and a wall notice, explaining the context of production and the theoretical ambition. For instance, they say: "We consider words, either spoken or written, to be a necessary part of our objects." It became a canonical piece of early conceptual art.
- 2 For instance, Burn mentions the writings of Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha and Trinh T. Minh-ha, and feminist art publications such as *Lip* (Australia), *Heresies* and *Feminist Art Journal* (both New York).

Champagneårene. Kunsthandel og udstillingsliv i København 1870-1920

Jesper Svenningsen

Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2024. 302 sider



Der findes bøger, hvor man har fornemmelsen af, at forfatterens viden, overblik og ihærdige omgang med empiri gør, at et umådeligt langtidsholdbart referenceværk er født. Det er den slags bog, man glæder sig over at kunne henvise til, når

nogen stiller et spørgs-

mål, der falder inden for dens ramme. Kort sagt, den uomgængelige publikation om et givent emne. I denne udsøgte kategori er Jesper Svenningsens bog *Champagneårene. Kunsthandel og udstillingsliv i København 1870-1920*. Her får man den uhyre interessante fortælling om, hvordan den københavnske kunstscene forandredes, i takt med at kunsthandlen forvandles fra Charlottenborgudstillingens og kunstneratelierers kunstvisnings- og handelsmonopol til et pluralistisk pele-mele af mange nye kunsthands- og udstillingsformater.

Jeg betragter bogen som uomgængelig læsning for alle, der er interesseret i kunst i perioden 1870-1920. At alle andre også med fornøjelse kan anbefales at læse bogen, skyldes, at det er lykkedes Svenningsen at stykke myriader af empiriske fakta sammen til en ikke blot hyperinformativ, men også særdeles læseværdig – i lange stræk morsom – fortælling. Bogens overordnede formål er ifølge forfatteren ”at give et indblik i den alliance mellem kunstnere, kunsthandlere, kritikere og publikum (herunder det mindretal af publikum, der ligefrem købte kunsten og derved forlængede oplevelsen i eget hjem), som sørgede for kunstens cirkulation og værditilskrivning” (12).

Man følger i hælene på et kunstmarked befolket med en række entreprenante og undertiden lidt for opfind-

somme kunsthandlere, der sørger for, at kunstværker skifter ejer til rette pris og rette tid. Det er som at sætte en sporhund efter kapitalismens utæmmelige begærsdynamik. Kunsthandlerkapitalisme i kombination med den hastigt accelererende kunstscene omkring århundredskiftet er bogens intenderede og meget underholdende dynamiske motor.

Bogens indhold

Gennem 18 velskrevne kapitler, der kronologisk gennemtrawler forandringerne på kunstscenen og i kunsthandlen i København, får læseren en sociokulturel indramning af en lang række kunstværker. De værker, der møder hinanden på siderne af denne bog, ville kun vanskeligt kunne kædes sammen af andre emner, og det er derfor læserens utrolige held, at bogen er overordentligt velillustreret. Ofte er det lykkedes forfatteren at identificere værkerne set på et af de knivskarpt gengivne fotografier af en samlers hjem, hvilket ikke blot tillader ham at give læseren oplysninger om kunstværkernes kunstner og titel, men også at gengive dem i fremragende farvekvalitet.

Der er ikke sparet på noget, hvilket man mærker allerede ved opslag på forsatspapiret, der viser Carl Petersens udkast til udsmykningen af Grønningens udstillingsbygning i 1916 med et decideret lækkert zoom ind på en akvarelversion af det gigantiske kakkelmønster, som dekorationen bestod af det år. Ud over en overflod af velvalgte illustrationer rummer bogen også bagerst to nyttige kort over København med angivelse af den geografiske placering af kunsthandlere og udstillingssteder i henholdsvis 1870-1900 og 1901-1925. Bykortene viser tydeligt udviklingen af det felt, bogen undersøger, for mens kortet med de tidlige år har 29 nummererede destinationer, eksploderer feltet på det sidste kort til intet mindre end 65 geografiske placeringer. Sammen med hvert kort oplistes navnene på kortets destinationer (udstillingssteder og kunsthandlere). De vises i rækkefølge efter grundlæggelsesår, og en bjælkegrafik angiver længden af deres aktive år, hvilket samtidig giver et meget overskueligt overblik over de til enhver tid aktive udstillingssteder – og en tydelig fornemmelse for variationen mellem de langlivede og

de næsten øjeblikkeligt forsvundne udstillings- og salgssteder.

Bogens første kapitel åbner med en levende beskrivelse af København i 1870'erne, med sporvognstransport, gasbelysning, stormagasiner, forlystelsesindustri og caféliv. Selvom København efterhånden var blevet en storby, var det alligevel – indtil Decemberudstillingen opstod ved en række kunstneres leje af Charlottenborgs lokaler i december 1871 – stort set kun ved den årlige Charlottenborgudstilling og i kunstnernes atelierer, at kunst og køber kunne møde hinanden. Decemberudstillingen blev et startskud til en utrolig knopskydning af kunsthåndlen, som snart skulle gøre Decemberudstillingen selv overflødig. Der var, som Svenningsen skriver:

”[...] tale om kunsthåndlens ‘champagneår’, en næsten overstadig opgangstid, hvor en branche blev grundlagt og formuer skabt, og hvor der blev tænkt stort i en blanding af idealisme og købmandskab. Såvel forretningsmæssigt som kunstnerisk er det en periode præget af et vågnende internationalt udblik og en vilje til nytænkning, og champagnen flød der, hvor kunst, marked og idealer blev forenet” (10).

Herefter følger et grundigt overblik over bogens kapitler. Bogens første halvdel (kapitel 2-8) følger de nyopståede udstillingsformater fra 1870-1900 i form af kunstnergenererede initiativer som fx åbne atelierer, auktionsudstillinger og egentlige udstillinger, herunder ”De Afvistes Udstilling” i 1888, som ”for første gang rekonstrueres i sjette kapitel” (10). Ud over kunsthåndlernes ofte entréfordrende udstillinger samt kunstsamleres (kapitel 7) mere eller mindre dristige kunstinteresser (hvor smagen i løbet af 1890'erne blev individualiseret) gives overblik over en række opfindsomme udstillingsinitiativer (kapitel 8). Bogen skrider som nævnt kronologisk frem, og kapitel 9 giver en kort status over kunsthåndlen og udstillingslivet ved århundredskiftet. Dernæst følger i kapitlerne 10-17 perioden frem til 1920. Tiden før Første Verdenskrig behandles i kapitel 10-13, mens det brølende og buldrende opsving under Første Verdenskrig udfoldes i kapitlerne 14-16, og kapitel 17 præsenterer kunstmarkedets ekstreme

afmatning og kollaps, da freden indfinder sig. Kapitlerne tager både livtag med datidens salg af samtidskunst og gensalg af ældre værker. Kapitel 11 afdækker således, hvordan det, som vi i dag selvfølgelig betegner dansk guldalderkunst, blev stærkt brandet på kunstmarkedet og i pressen, før betegnelsen vandt indpas i museumsverdenen eller blandt fagkunsthistorikere (149). Det er derfor meget betimeligt, at bogens afsluttende 18. kapitel zoomer ud og gør status over bogens indhold, herunder den ofte fra kunsthistorisk side meget oversete synergi mellem markeds kræfter og kunst(historie).

Rigt udstyret bog

Som tidligere antydnet er bogens udstyr og layout både rigt, smukt og befordrende for læseoplevelsen. Hen over bogens 279 tekstsider ægges læselysten af 133 store, flotte illustrationer med alt fra kunstværker, fotografier, vittighedstegninger, auktionskataloger, salgsannoncer, arkitekturtegninger, grundplaner (fx over Dansk Kunsthåndels butik), avissider m.m. De mange fotografier bevidner datidens ophængnings- og udstillingsprincipper – og viser (fx fig. 17) undertiden så tæt salonophængte vægge, at man næsten skulle tro, at spillet Tetris var opfundet af datidens kunsthåndlere.

Som fagperson kan man også glæde sig over, at bogens intet mindre end 561 noter ikke er henvist til en skyggetilværelse bagerst i bogen. Noteteksten kan altid findes på samme side som referencen, hvilket sparer læseren for utallige ellers ofte irriterende søgerunder ved et bogmærke i et noteafsnit. Margin er herligt bred – og papirkvaliteten både god for billeder og skrivevenlighed. Der er en klassisk lethed over det brugervenlige layout.

Skarp pen, godt blik og interessant fortælling

Man kan godt blive lidt forpustet over det omfattende materiale, som bogen præsenterer; alene det brogede – men helt nødvendige og ekstremt mangfoldige – persongalleri kunne have opsplittet bogen i atomer. At det ikke sker, skyldes, at bogen er skrevet i et levende sprog, samt at den henter interessante og opkvikkende samtidige citater ind, der elegant binder materien sammen. Des-

uden leverer forfatteren ofte morsomme og såvel fyldige som fyndige personbeskrivelser, der straks giver datidens personager nærvær i læserens bevidsthed. Et eksempel er præsentationen af en datidig specialist i handel med ældre kunst, Martin Severin Grosell (1882-1931):

”Grosell formåede vedvarende at vedligeholde et image som snu og vidende, men han var også skrupelløs og fræk som en slagterhund. Noget af Grosells ry som kunstkender byggede på en episode i 1917, hvor han under et besøg på Statens Museum for Kunst fik forevist et nyerehvervet maleri af Marstrand (fig. 74). Grosell afviste blankt tilskrivningen og lod sig føre til museets bibliotek, hvor han uden videre fremdrog Charlottenborg-kataloget fra 1838 og K.F. Wiborgs anmeldelse af samme udstilling. Herved kunne han dokumentere, at maleriet i virkeligheden var udført af den nærmest ukendte Sophus Schack. Grosell lod skinne igennem, at kun han – og ikke museets direktør Karl Madsen – besad et tilpas grundigt kendskab til kunsthistorikeren. Grosells følgesvend labbede det hele i sig, og en ny vandrehistorie var skabt. Hvad Grosell ikke fortalte, var, at han selv havde ejet det pågældende maleri, og at han faktisk havde købt det af Schacks datter. Turen til biblioteket var altså spil for galleriet og ren charlatanisme” (155).

Bogen udfolder en både spændende og kompleks fortælling, en udviklingshistorie med kunsthåndlen som den mangefacetterede hovedperson – og man må undervejs undre sig over, at bogen ikke er blevet skrevet før, for når man læser den, går det op for én, hvor meget den har manglet. Min mistanke er, at den først kommer nu, fordi kun ganske få kunsthistorikere mestrer den ofte udtrættende empiriindsamling, som bogen bygger på – og endnu færre formår at skrive sådan empiri sammen til en tekst, som noget som helst forlag har lyst til at udgive. Forfatterens afslutningssalut, der er en bredside til kunsthistorikernes berøringsangst over for bogens emne, kan man derfor kun velvilligt tage imod:

”Den gængse fortælling om periodens kunst og kunstnere har [...] ikke keret sig synderligt om salgsstrategier, prissætning, markedsføring, konkurrenceforhold eller indtægter. Al den slags er blevet slået hen som værende

irrelevant for den egentlige kunstnergerning, for tilblyelsesprocessen. Markedet med alle dets indforståede mekanismer har af hensyn til den klare fremstilling af kunstens hovedpersoner bedst kunnet reduceres til fortællingen om den ene, store mæcen, der med forståelse og pengeforagt støtter den enkelte kunstner interesseløst. Alle de øvrige og egentlige interessenter – mellemhåndlerne, agenterne, opportunisterne og svindlerne – er forblevet skygger, velsagtens af velment men misforstået frygt for at det på en eller anden måde kunne trække fra kunstnernes bedrifter at have været genstand for økonomiske interesser. Men et nuanceret billede af kunstlivet er vel næppe muligt uden skyggesiderne, og tidens kunstnere var – eller i hvert fald blev – bevidste om markedskræfterne, og om hvordan man skulle agere for at blive set og solgt. Ethvert maleri er i den forstand også et stykke branding” (279).

Bogens metode

Bogens største styrke er dens evne til at samle utallige fragmenter til en levende fortælling om kunstmarkedets usynlige mekanismer. Derfor er det interessant, at kapitel 6 om De Afvistes Udstilling (1888) afslører en af de metodologiske udfordringer, der følger med at skrive historie baseret på spredte spor. Kapitlet blotlægger som nævnt omstændighederne omkring De Afvistes Udstilling 1888 – den første danske *Salon des Refusés* – der, som forfatteren påpeger, indtager ”en betydelig plads i dansk kunsthistorie” (78).

Først får man imidlertid at vide, at udstillingen ikke havde katalog og ”lader til at være blevet fuldstændig forbigået af pressen” (78), hvorefter man gennem et citat fra udstillingsarrangøren Rasmus Christiansen fra 1930 (79) får at vide, at udstillingen blev åbnet med indbydelse af pressen, men ikke blev en pressesucces. Svenningsen opsummerer: ”Dette tyder på, at udstillingen trods alt blev mødt med nogen interesse og stillingtagen fra medlemmer af pressen, selvom den ikke blev omtalt eller anmeldt” (79).

Denne argumentation rummer en logisk dissonans: En begivenhed kan ikke samtidig være *fuldstændigt* igno-

reret af pressen og have vakt dens interesse. Den mikroskopiske seismografiske rystelse i kapitlets interne logik fik mig til at undersøge, om udstillingen virkelig ikke kunne findes omtalt i datidens dagblade. Og jo, sandelig, i avisen *Socialdemokraten*, fredag den 6. april, 1888, s. 2, kan man under overskriften ”kasserede” finde en lang omtale af udstillingen, som redegør for, hvilke kunstnere der deltog, hvor udstillingen afholdtes, og hvorfor den blev arrangeret.

At mange må have lagt vejen forbi den hastigt arrangerede udstilling, kan afledes af en notits i næste dags avis, hvor omtalen berigtiges: ”Kasserede. I vor Artikel i Gaar under denne Overskrift er der indløbet en Fejl, som vi er bleven anmodet om at berigtige. De omtalte Malerier er nemlig ikke offentlig udstillede, idet den private Lejlighed, der benyttes til Udstillingen, ikke giver Plads til et større Antal Besøgende.” Det var åbenbart i dobbelt forstand en lejlighedsudstilling.

Den manglende kilde underminerer på ingen måde bogens overordnede kvalitet, men den illustrerer en fundamental udfordring i empirifunderet, positivistisk kunsthistorie: Selv den mest omhyggelige kildesøgning kan aldrig garantere fuldstændighed, og enhver empirisk baseret konklusion bærer derfor præg af provisorium. Heldigvis finder denne begrænsning modvægt i Svenningsens alsidige materiale – hans integration af senere skriftlige kilder og det eneste bevarede fotografiske materiale sikrer en robust rekonstruktion af udstillingen i 1888. Alligevel understreger eksemplet, at kunsthistoriens heuristiske proces ikke blot handler om dataindsamling, men også bør rumme kritisk refleksion over kilders begrænsninger og egne blinde metodiske vinkler, noget, Svenningsen utvivlsomt har overvejet nøje, og som derfor gerne kunne have været tydeligere italesat i bogen – men det er et lille savn i et værk, der i øvrigt sætter en ny standard for forståelsen af datidens danske kunstmarked.

Kvinder og kunsthandel

Kunsthandlens champagneår er også årene, hvor kvindelige kunstnere for alvor indtager kunstscenen. Svenningsen nævner flere kvindelige kunsthandlere, men kunne

utvivlsomt have gjort mere ud af de kvindelige kunstnere, fx ved at zoome helt ind på kunstforeningens udstilling ”11 Kunstnerinder” i 1891 eller udfolde de kvindelige samtidskunstneres strategiske udstillingssamarbejder i 1910’erne, herunder kunstnerkredsen med Olivia Holm-Møller, Carla Colsman, Bizzie Høyer, Sofie Pedersen og Marie Graas, som Holstebro Kunstmuseum satte fokus på i 2022. Kun lidt mere end 50 kvinder findes blandt det omfattende personregisters mere end 600 personer, hvilket svarer til 8 % af persongalleriet. Når tallet præcis sniger sig over 8 %, skyldes det dog, at en for bogens vedkommende yderst sjælden fejl har sneget sig ind. Kunstneren Susette Holten, f. Skovgaard, findes både under Holten og Skovgaard, men med uens fornavne og sidereferencer (Susette/Suzette). Det forekommer dog næsten befriende, at forfatteren stålsat har forfulgt det, som er hovedtemaet, uden at ville presse kvindelige kunstnere ind og give dem en plads tilsvarende den, der vies til mændene. Det havde næppe givet et retvisende billede af datidens kunstscene eller den indsamlede empiri. Derfor hverken kan eller skal kvinderne være i samme antal som mændene. Man kan med andre ord altid ønske sig mere – og det kunne fx også have været interessant, hvis betydningen af det gryende provinsmuseumsvæsens kunstindkøb i hovedstaden, som definerede mange af disse museums-samlingers kerne, var viet ekstra opmærksomhed. Dette er dog ikke en kritik, snarere er det et udtryk for, hvor god og læsbar bogen er – den præsenterer sit emne på en måde, hvor man bliver nysgerrig på at vide endnu mere om sagen.

Skriver kunsthandleren kunsthistorie med objekter?

Tidligere har den faglige interesse for kunsthandlen som nævnt været relativt begrænset. Kunsthistoriens modvilje mod at inddrage kunsthandsaspektet skyldes antagelig frygten for at underminere idéen om kunstens værdi i sig selv. I en af de tidligste kunsthistoriske tilgange til dansk modernisme, Otto Gelsteds bog *Ekspressionisme* fra 1919, bruger forfatteren ikke blot matricen til en tidligere, desværre ofte reproduceret, næsten rent maskulin kunsthistorie, han tager også livtag med kunsthand-

len, som åbenbart havde fået ry for at være årsag til den moderne kunsts fremkomst. Gelsted skrev:

”Hypotesen om, at det egentlig er nogle entreprenante Kunsthandlere, der af intet har skabt hele den moderne Bevægelse, kan man finde fremsat i Form af en Fortælling i Johannes V. Jensens ’Aarbog 1916’. Litterært set er Fortællingen et Stykke fantastisk Satire af høj Rang, ikke ubeslægtet med visse barokt ekspressionistiske Tendenser i moderne Malerkunst. Som Kunstkritik betragtet forekommer Fortællingen mig en ny Illustration til den gamle Erfaring, at Skribenter ikke har Forstand paa Malerkunst.”

Fortællingen, som Gelsted henviser til, er Johannes V. Jensens novelle *Billedet* fra 1916, som antagelig, fordi den er skønlitterær, har undgået Svenningsens ihærdige empiriindsamling. I novellen møder læseren den selvoptagede og fremsynede antikvitetshandler Dr. Helge Pierrepont Pickles, som under en overflyvning af det krigshærgede Europa og med udsigt til ”Krigsskibe, Undervandsbåde eller andre fjendtlige Aeroplaner” fortæller de øvrige passagerer historien om et kunstværk. Beretningen udfolder de begivenheder, som under Pickles’ kyndige hånd har medført, at et talentløst smørerer er endt som en kunsthistorisk sensation. Med Pickles’ opkøb af billedet for en bagatel følger et krav om, at kunstneren (en fyrer ansat på et postkontor) forpligter sig til aldrig at male igen, fordi “En Vares Pris afhænger af Sjældenheden. Sætter vi, at en Maler er berømt, vil hans Billeder gå højere, jo færre der er af dem”. Pickles gør utallige krumspring for at udvikle værdien af sin investering; han roser billedet, han sælger det på auktion (til sig selv), han får det på museum og køber det igen, han stjæler det fra sig selv, han udgiver kunstnerens biografi og breve – og slår undervejs også kunstneren ihjel. Strategier, som skaber opmærksomhed

i pressen, på markedet og i kunsthistorien og dermed forvandler “billedet” fra makværk til mesterstykke.

”Hvordan Billedet saa ud? Med faa Ord, det var det daarligste Billede, jeg nogen Sinde har set. Det havde imidlertid en Fejl, en naiv Fejl, man kunde se hvad det skulde forestille. Det rettede jeg selv, et ordinært Billede ønskede jeg ikke, jeg vendte simpelthen op og ned paa det, saa at Folk maatte gaa med Sugefødder oppe paa Loftet for at se det ret, og dermed var Kvaliteten i Orden.”

Den griske kunstpusher Pierrepont Pickles’ blik for at omskabe det værdiløse artefakt til et mesterværk gennem dubiose, men udspekulerede praksisser, kan i nutidigt tilbageblik afkodes som Pickles’ ekstremt vellykkede reorkestrering af de diskurser, som medbestemmer betydningen af, prisen på og ikke mindst kunsthistoriens interesse for et givent maleri. Pickles lykkes i sin fortælling med at indplacere et ubetydeligt maleri i den brede befolknings opmærksomhed, i alle køberes interesse og frem for alt: i den kunsthistoriske kanon. Det var antagelig årsagen til, at Gelsted gik i rette med Jensens beretning. En fortælling, som postulerede, at det ikke var kunstværkets immante kvaliteter, men kunstværkets kontekst, som kunne afgøre, om et værk fandt vej til publikum, kunstmarkedet og kunsthistorien, var i sagens natur en regulær provokation.

Det er det næppe helt i dag, og med Jesper Svenningsens brillante bog kan vi i dag få overblik over feltet – og konstatere, at kunsthandlens udvikling om ikke ganske har bestemt, så dog haft overordentlig stor indflydelse på kunsthistorien og ofte været medbestemmende for, hvilke værker vi cirkulerer og forstår som de væsentligste.

INGE LISE MOGENSEN BECH

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