UNFINISHABLE SKETCH OF ‘AN UNKNOWN OBJECT IN 4 D’:
SCENES OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH
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0000 Many of us must feel we’ve been doing ‘artistic research’ for years—without quite calling it that. Like Moliere’s Monsieur Jourdain stumbling over the fact he was indeed speaking prose all along, we too are taken by surprise. Fuss over the subject’s ‘legitimacy’ rumbles on. But it has not stopped doctoral programmes in visual art practice being steadily constituted all over. Whatever we feel about this, we cannot wriggle out of unpacking what we mean by research in contemporary visual art practices and art education.

0001 In everyday parlance, ‘art research’ is a blanket term taking in almost all in its path: processes of making artwork; art practices that probe and test experience; thinking-doing as visual art practices vis à vis other knowledge systems; modes of thinking through the visual that are with, athwart, beyond academic methods. This apparent mishmash is a scene of unwieldy, unorganized possibilities—something we should hang onto to avoid defining artistic research simply along institutional academic lines. This means focus on the singularity of how art practice-theory-history and other ‘disciplines’ intersect and coalesce in individual projects. As we cannot quite know beforehand what form this will take—each instance is different and unpredictable—we have to be wary about attempts to regulate artistic research, to knock it into shape of the academic disciplines, to make it a lookalike of their logic and architecture. What matters today is its ‘difference’—the distinctive modalities of its knowledge production.

0002 A side step: Aby Warburg had experimented with strategies of looking and with interpretative instruments at odds with the sober criteria of academic methodology. They were ‘scrambled, disordering’ modes not unrelated to Dada—associative, cognitive capacitors perhaps best summed up in the phrase ‘critique of pure unreason’. Georgio Agamben re-affirms this ‘nameless science’—the expanded zone of art history/theory/related visual practices and studies. We should see it as a scene without ready-made object of study or technique. But artistic research is not just an unnamed activity—as though we already know what it is but are just fum-
bling around for the right label. It is, in Samuel Beckett’s word, more of an ‘unnameable’ because it has to invent its own methods each time rather than parrot pre-given ones. Mapping itself during take-off, it cannot be spelled out in advance of the processes of its making.

0003 Artistic research is ‘work in pregross’ where the echo-word ‘progress’ connotes succession, sequence, possible fulfillment. Joyce’s twister ‘pregross’ implies that some final, full bulk of the project is never quite attained, we are always at a ‘preparatory’ stage just short of its total gross state. The job at hand cannot be entirely scripted in advance—a vital part of artistic research today. Its procedures are ‘unsquarable’ with the more exactly chartered, pegged research protocols prevalent in the institutional academic sphere.

0004 The following on-going projects with students and participants are my various stabs at artistic research at the confluence of theory/practice/history spanning several years:


3. Xeno-epistemics. 2000-02. Humboldt University, Berlin. Thinking Documenta & Doing Documenta examines modalities of knowing ‘the other’ and ‘other ways of knowing—visual art practice as a form of knowledge production and its ethics (Xeno-epistemics: makeshift kit for sounding visual art as knowledge production and the retinal regimes: Documenta X1 Platform 5. 2002. pp.71-84). In more traditional lingo, epistemological studies. Also, how visual art practices and performances interact with what