

SHORT REVIEW

Losing Hold of Experimenting

Some Insights on the 1st Artistic Research Pavilion in Venice 2015

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In his description of the tenet of the 56th Venice Biennale *All the Worlds' Futures* (2015), curator Okwui Enwezor builds a thought-provoking bridge across current historical ruptures in the fields of art, culture, politics and economics, and Walter Benjamin's famous description of the *Angelus Novus*, the Angel of History, who is so confused about the storm of progress blowing from paradise that she can only fly backwards towards the future, her eyes persistently stuck on the events of the past. By bringing this mythological pre-modern figure to the current global landscape with its unforeseen number of refugees and immigrants, environmental upsets, chaos, dystopia, and promise of change, Enwezor makes visible why the challenge of seeking new realities, truths and futures – that we have learned to link with the idea of *experimenting* – is not a mere cliché of utopian modernity, but even some sort of imperative of the present time that we simply cannot stop pondering or practicing.

Yet, in the age of post-colonialism, post-modernism, and post-humanism that have all questioned the modern labels of 'progress,' 'objectivity,' 'potentiality,' and the 'new,' we are also painfully aware that we are 'living in the end times' as Slavoj Žižek expresses it, and that there is not necessarily anyone waiting for us at the end of history any more. In the midst of these puzzling considerations, many avant-garde artist-researchers have started to consider experimentality from partly new perspectives aiming not so much at building new laboratories and showrooms for (white, elitist, and male-centered) Enlightenment thought, but to discuss and practice various kinds of experimental activities in ways that pay homage to unknown others, be they other human beings or some other groups of animals, spirits, dark material, trees, air, historical ghosts, or whatever.

Along this development, the criteria for experimenting have also changed, even radically. The positivist and utopian tones of modernity have largely been replaced by epistemologically more complex, even messy, forms of knowing, participating and presenting, that now also guide many activities of art and science. As Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze suggest, the potentiality inherent in this 'new logic' can be developed further only by a refusal to represent issues and phenomena that in themselves escape representation (Agamben 1999). In other words, we need to understand that 'potentiality,' be it artistic, scientific or whatever, must remain 'enigmatic yet non-arbitrary; in short, a new logic, definitely a logic, but one that grasps the innermost depths of life and death without leading us back to reason.' (Deleuze 1997: 82)

Giving up overtly rationalized forms of reasoning and experimenting has also led to rethink the methodologies of both art and science. As Brian Massumi emphasizes, we should no longer label or categorize newness and innovation in already existing labels and concepts, especially if we tend to reproduce the social worlds of predetermined order and discourses of methodological certainty.¹ The new methodology of experimenting might also be described in terms of 'ungrounded,' 'fluid,' or 'groundless' methodology, for it seeks no longer merely rational and linear rules for knowing, but aims instead to stimulate deeper and also more engaged ways to reflect, participate, and accommodate anticipated social and existential situations and preferred spatial and timely dimensions.² Seen in this way, experimenting becomes differentiated also from the 'normal' – or normality acts in this new context no longer as a gradient for the 'new,' but more like a cut-off point actually preventing all experimenting, including from falling or failing.

Against this background, one might think that the decision to choose 'experimentation' in 2015 as the main theme for the 1st Artistic Research Pavilion in Venice was not only topical and important, but at the same time extremely challenging, even risky. Would the curators and initiators of the research pavilion

¹ B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 2002.

² Ljungberg-Koro 2016, 86-90; and Mol & Law 1994, 659.



Figure 1: 1st Artistic Research Pavilion, Entrance: Hito Steyerl, Strike (2010) and Matts Leiderstam, After Image (2010-12), Venice Biennial 2015. Credits: Jan Kaila.

concept, Jan Kaila, Henk Slager and myself, be able to truly exemplify in the end what had been gained in the manifold activities of the pavilion during the summer? In our invitations and program, we had asked: How does experimentality manifest itself in contemporary art? Has the discourse on artistic research and its methodologies redefined our ideas of experiments and experimentality? And, finally, does artistic research facilitate the emergence of new ways to discover connections between science, aesthetics, and politics?

During the time the pavilion was open, an interesting group of artistic research activists, students, teachers, and collaborators of all kinds had entered the spacious 350 square meter exhibition venue in the old monastery of Sala del Camino, Giudecca, filling it with workshops, performances, artistic interventions, symposiums, and art works. Very few of these activities were actually recorded and collected by us – we wished to keep the situations somehow untouched (or fluid if you like) and, therefore, decided not to install recording equipment in the space permanently. Hence, I felt slightly confused when all ‘experiments’ had been realized and the last artist-researchers had left Giudecca. The pavilion scene looked empty and just the same as before. No bombs or revolutions. No confusing sentences on the walls or in our mail boxes as tokens if not of new innovations then at least of some new modes of thinking, feeling or sharing. Simply not anything to reveal radical ways of living, of doing research and art, of laughing, loving, and dying. . . What did we achieve? *Where* had the experiment gone – and had it ever even been there in the space?

Yet, positive thoughts came to mind as well. A remarkable amount of artist-researchers and other people had visited the Sala del Camino’s space bringing together activities and institutions from all over Europe. Most probably, those individuals and groups got *something* out of the Research Pavilion’s events. They had shared coffee, tea, and Italian wine; formulated words, gestures, performances, lectures, discussions; found confusing inconsistencies, silences, murmurings; danced and sung together; played the grand piano and put on theater performances; and, at least for a moment, they felt connected to each other – and separate and different as well. Surely, they felt inspired surpassing every day situations and creating a sense of being free. Surely someone in the old monastery’s space thought of the monks long gone as ghosts of history that continued their migration across the fixed lines of walls, rationalities, and measurements of time.

And suddenly the Angel of History was there in the empty Research Pavilion space. Only now, with everybody gone, could I understand that the Angel had been there all the time, *recording infinitely* how present moments and experimentations realized in the pavilion turned into history, *but at the same time*, carried all sorts of past experiments into the fleeting moment of present and future. The next (dead) figure that came



Figure 2: 1st Artistic Research Pavilion, view of the rear of the room, Venice Biennial 2015. Credits: Jan Kaila.



Figure 3: 1st Artistic Research Pavilion: Seminar Space, video presentation Magnus Bærtås, *The Miracle of Tensta (Theoria)*, Venice Biennial 2015. Credits: Jan Kaila.

to the fore was Jacques Derrida. Was it also *she* Derrida was talking about when he wrote *Spectres of Marx*, not only *Hamlet*? I opened up the book to see. And there it was, the very ghost of Benjamin's story, the Angel of History who spoke to both past and present people on their way to the future. A ghost incessantly

deconstructing our rationalized spatializations of time and turning them into fleeting experiences of lived time inviting us to follow a special 'loser wins all' logic to which all living creatures are doomed to anyhow. Derrida reads:

'No justice – let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws – seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any other form of totalitarianism. Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question 'where?' 'where tomorrow?' 'whither?.' (Derrida 1994: xviii)

So, that *was* the answer. We had, of course, failed in our efforts to report the results of the experiments realized in the 1st Research Pavilion, and that was exactly how it was meant to be. The Pavilion had been a fluid gateway filled with movements towards all possible directions, not only those who aimed to manifest something 'innovative,' 'new,' and 'potential,' and hence to fix the floating experiences of time into rationalized and measurable spatiality. No matter how white and cube-like the walls were, the *real* pavilion had no laboratory-like structure of Enlightenment ethos. Clearly, the key issue was movement of thought and experience, rather than fixed names and end results, abstractions, simplifications or holdings of something. And, most importantly, there was also some 'winning' in this losing game: the deep poetry of the empty pavilion space extending endlessly beyond the walls – and a specific sense of happiness and freedom that followed. Derrida – together with the Angel of History (and Hamlet) continues:

'This question arrives, if it arrives, it questions with regard to what will come in the future-to-come. Turned toward the future, going toward it, it also comes from it, it proceeds *from* the future. It must therefore exceed any presence as presence to itself. At least it has to make this presence possible only on the basis of the movement of some disjoining, disjunction, or disproportion: in the inadequation to self. [. . .] To be just: beyond the living present in general – and beyond its simple negative reversal. A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present; "now", future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the spectre does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one: "Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost" (*Hamlet*).' (Derrida 1994: xix)

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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