

## *Epilogue: Ambivalence and Authority*

Sarah Pierce



Sarah Pierce, *Test Pieces, Ambivalence and Authority* (2006-2008), Nameless Science, Apexart, installation shot. Image credit: Hugh Watt.

In 2007, I became interested in a specific PhD course. I was not looking to do a PhD. After two years working as a Research Associate in an art department in a UK-based university, I felt duly ambivalent about “research” as constituted by the British point system. As university departments seek to accommodate (and profit from) artistic research, they require those engaged in practice-based PhDs (artists) to codify their output. For example, self-publishing, a mode of artistic research that is certainly prevalent enough to warrant academic attention, does not count unless it is reconstituted as a *topic*. But legitimating self-publishing as a topic of artistic research is not the same as recognizing self-publishing as a form of basic research with its own findings – as itself capable of discovering, interpreting and producing knowledge. It is precisely this relationship of knowledge to legitimacy, legibility and recognition which is at stake in artistic research produced within the university context.

The ambivalence that some of us feel, that indeed continues to be the condition of my PhD, is perhaps rooted in a certain suspicion of structures seeking to institutionalize artistic production. But as Grant Kester rightly points out, art practice is subject to pressures, both informal and formal, which institutionalize and accredit, not least among them the university, which has long awarded degrees in art in recognition of certain behaviors and outputs. What is more important than somehow protecting the space of art from such pressures, or worse, imagining that in so doing we protect its abilities to transgress them, is to understand that ambivalence is a condition of knowledge that artistic research shares with other fields. Here, we might understand how rebellion at the site of knowledge is present in a notion of the PhD.

In 1959, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote *The Sociological Imagination*, where he outlined a way of working that calls upon the interdisciplinary aspects of intellectualism and the practice of keeping a file or set of files containing all the ideas or materials that compel one's research. He wrote the book for his students, young sociologists whom he anticipated would constrain their interests to outdated systems that require researchers to know their topic before setting out on a course of study. He recommends periodically spreading the files out on the floor and arranging their contents to figure out connections, convened temporarily, and driven in places by merely coincidental affiliations that lead to unexpected readings often immersed in dissent and self-determination. During his lifetime, Mills was notably anti-careerist, anti-expert, and anti-establishment – attitudes he carried throughout his professional tenure at Columbia. He despised the tendency of universities to delineate what constituted “official” research, and he encouraged those entering academic study to challenge the policies of disciplinary work. Mills understood the importance of research that is both interdisciplinary and undefined through “discipline”. Mills wrote scholarly texts, but in keeping with his intellectual commitment, he was an avid pamphleteer – a proclivity that greatly disturbed colleagues. It is in the face of these dismissals that I have decided to cite his work here. As we enter the political apparatus of intellectual work, *The Sociological Imagination* moves us away from specialization and prepares us, quite optimistically, to disagree, to dissent, and most importantly, to self-determine one's intellectual “craft”.

It is this notion of return, of going back into one's archive, an archive formed through the specificities, anomalies, conventions, and particularities of an education, I would like to reflect on for a moment in this epilogue to a collection of texts focused on current debates surrounding artistic research. At the heart of these debates, perhaps like any other, are processes of validation and rationalization that simultaneously attempt to legitimate the artist-researcher while making artistic research legible through terms like “outcomes” and “best practices”. Yet all the while we repress a paradox that is crucial to our work *within* the university. Accreditation, as it arrives through various stages of a PhD, allows our work to gain certain authority, yet we still do not know exactly what that accreditation is. Instead of rationalizing this difficulty, perhaps we can understand it as an ambivalence that will follow us through the PhD. The PhD sets us out on a path that carries with it the insecurities of not knowing our destination. Derrida, when speaking about “sendoffs” in *Eyes of the University*, thinks through the scheme of destination as rhythms, accents, phases, “points of pause” named as “those signs destined less to mark the measure than to suspend it on a note whose duration may vary.”<sup>1</sup> Derrida uses the word fermata for points of pause, which in music is the notation that indicates that a note should be sustained longer than its note value would indicate. Exactly how much longer it is held is at the discretion of the performer or conductor. Rather than leaving us suspended or in suspense, it is possible, I believe, to highlight these points of pause as a kind of praxis. A “doing” that in the moment of research indicates a hesitation as well as a decision. A point of pause that is not about casting off limits, but about duration. An insistence that at the same time avoids the trap of assurances along the way; the “disguised re-centering”, “the hegemony of a problematic” – to use Derrida's words – that convince us that this is indeed the right path.

In a precursory paper to ‘Sendoffs’ delivered at Cornell University in 1983, Derrida speaks of a “double gesture” similar to the paradox in “sendoffs”, which asks us to act “as if” no object of study is out of the question, is “off limits” so to speak, which Derrida suggests transforms the contract itself into a pretence for the regulating *idea* of the university. “There is a double

gesture here, a double postulation: to ensure professional competence and the most serious tradition of the university even while going as far as possible, theoretically and practically, in the most directly underground thinking about the abyss beneath the university.”<sup>2</sup>

This double gesture both opens the university to the outside, “the bottomless” depths of what is not yet “knowledge”, and in doing so closes the university in on itself as it strives for “still not legitimated path-breakings” that attempt to situate what is “unsituatable”. Derrida refers here to Cornell’s landscape, famously built high along the rim of several deep gorges. Cornell University is “the campus on the heights, the bridges, and if necessary the barriers above the abyss – and the abyss itself.” (In noting the barriers on campus, Derrida also refers to suicide, a myth that persists at Cornell to this day, especially around exam time, when the temptation to jump into the gorge, and into the vast unknown, is all the more real). We base our grounds for our research upon a gorge; “[...] by which we mean on a grounds, whose own grounding remains invisible and unthought.”

I have no idea what “outcomes” might be in this context, nor do I feel reassured to be included among a set recognized as “best practice”. How we stage our research, how we declare its meaning at the site of knowledge, is how research becomes practice, and not the other way around. While “artistic research” PhDs might gain some kind of authority, this does not mean we need to fall into the traps of assurances where research comes to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, translated by Jan Plug (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, et al., *The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983).