

Reviews

Knowing looks

Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020). 278 pp., €22.00 pb., 978 3 94336 597 9

Tom Holert remarks near the beginning of *Knowledge Beside Itself* that art has traditionally been defined in contradistinction to knowledge, at least scientific or systematic knowledge. How then to understand the proliferation of discourses of 'knowledge' and 'research' in contemporary art?

This is visible, Holert indicates, in 'curatorial statements, advertisements for art institutions, art criticism, and writing by artists', where artistic practices are described with increasing frequency as research practices; and in the way that contemporary art spaces provide platforms for 'various kinds of study, investigation and experimentation'. Museums and galleries act more and more 'as providers of critical discourse and sites of knowledge production. With their educational and discursive programming, as well as a curatorial approach interwoven with academic theorizing, museums of contemporary art [...] deliberately transform themselves into institutions of knowledge production and management'. As Holert points out, this tendency is connected to the rapid expansion since the 1990s of 'fine art PhD programs, "artistic research" as the new normal of higher education in the arts, and the presumptuous trope of art as "knowledge production"'. The growing use of such terminology is in part an effect of the 'university-isation' of the art school and increasing incorporation of contemporary art into the academic protocols of research and teaching in the neoliberal university, at least in much of Europe.

The book also frames these issues in relation to transformations in art and economy since the 1960s – specifically, postconceptual art's tendency towards a 'drastic boundlessness', conditioning its expansion into spheres where knowledge is at stake either directly (its increasing transactions with 'theory' or pedagogy) or indirectly (archival or activist turns); and a post-Fordist shift to-

wards the 'knowledge economy' and creative industries, which Holert talks about in terms of 'immaterial labour' and 'cognitive capitalism' taken from post-autonomist Marxist theory. The parallels and transactions between these two tendencies have been explored at length elsewhere by other art historians and theorists, such as Dave Beech, Helen Molesworth and Marina Vishmidt. For Holert, the rising importance of 'information' within capitalism means that knowledge becomes a site of political struggle, for instance in relation to intellectual property and the 'knowledge commons'. In this context, what Holert calls the 'epistemisation' of art takes on critical stakes, enabling contemporary art to engage in 'knowledge politics'. It is the task of getting to grips with this complicated cluster of developments that the book sets itself. In the process it mentions an extremely wide range of ideas and practices, from decolonial epistemology to the ethics policy of the British Academy.

The titular idea of 'knowledge beside itself' suggests a productive non-identity between art-as-knowledge and knowledge-as-knowledge. On this model, art scrambles, dislocates, reconfigures, interferes with and opposes the forms and contents of knowledges; it 'purposefully fails, neglects, queers and ultimately overwrites [their] protocols'. As Marina Vishmidt puts it, in a phrase Holert quotes, art 'defers, inverts, implodes knowledge'. This is an essentially negative relation to knowledge that is actually one of two perspectives on the art-knowledge relation threading through the book. The other, a positive one, is also implicit in the idea of 'beside itself', and concerns art's ability to generate or act as a platform for alternative ('subjugated' or 'minor') knowledges. Both models have valid potentials: critique or deconstruction in the first instance, subcultural or para-academic counter-production in the second. Both have possible

drawbacks. The first might lead to a nihilistic or cynical game in the debris of research, or acting as a playful but harmless poetic companion to ‘real’ knowledge (as sometimes seems the case in collaborations between artists and academics), or even – more problematically – functioning as a sort of blue sky thinking for knowledge production, a ‘disrupter’ (to use the business jargon). The second might lead to a logic where art is only justified when it produces some determinate knowledge, and in the context of academia, feeds smoothly into the notion of the artwork as ‘research output’. (Elsewhere, Vishmidt writes that ‘research-as-art works best when it’s breaking down’, and the implication here for art to apply the negative function above to any positive knowledge it produces seems like an important rule of thumb.)

Despite acting as a primer covering important ground, the book is constrained by the fact that although it recognises the existence of an antinomy – the tension between ‘art-as-research’ as a potentially radical critique and expansion of art, and ‘art-as-research’ as the subsumption of art under neoliberal forms of measurement and control – it only seems able to repeatedly point it out, rather than providing an analysis that yields further understanding of its determinants and effects, or gives a sense of how the two apparently contradictory tendencies might interact. This antinomy, which appears several times throughout the book in slightly varying guises, is clearest in chapters one and three. In the first of these, ‘Artistic Research: Anatomy of an Ascent’, Holert begins from neo-avant-garde claims – forwarded by US artists such as Allan Kaprow, associated with Fluxus, and pre-Situationist International groups in Europe such as SPUR and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus – for art as a type of unruly, deviant research. Such a polemical identification of art with research, continued in conceptual art, was an anti-aesthetic, anti-autonomy gesture. While such ideas may be in the background of current discussions, Holert argues that there is no direct line between them, given that ‘the signifier “research” ... has, in the hands of many educators and administrators, become a key discursive instrument in the administration and management of artistic production in the realm of higher education and beyond’. In this chapter, as well, Holert makes an important point about the colonial history of ‘research’, the way that anthropology and sociology have provided con-

ceptual underpinnings for colonial biopolitics; a history that, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith says (quoted by Holert), makes research ‘one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary’.

Holert persuasively states that at their best research-centred artistic and curatorial projects ‘produce a specific knowledge that exhibits rather than conceals the tortured materiality of the objects on display and the practices of the institutions involved ... Following Roland Barthes, it can be said that these projects successfully unsettle the fiction “that research is reported but not written”.’ However, as Holert acknowledges, ‘the institutionalization of artistic research’ often has an opposed effect, one of ‘domestication and pacification’ of the un- and anti-disciplinary features of the artistic research suggested by groups like SPUR. Indeed, reversing Barthes’s terms, it could be said that in many cases art-as-research results not in the exposing of ‘research’ to the ‘writing’ or ‘text’ that it is underpinned by but represses, but instead a move in the opposite direction, with artworks seen as primarily representations of a reified content, as in the tendency to overly describe artworks and exhibitions in terms of the subject matter they are ‘about’.

A similar structure is visible in chapter three, ‘The Problem with Knowledge Production’. Here, Holert cites relevant debates within Soviet Productivism in the 1920s. As Holert characterises these, Boris Arvatov argued that in order to enter industrial production, artists first required technical retraining to obtain practical skills and knowledge. In contrast, Varvara Stepanova argued that artists’ ‘objective knowledge of external forms’ already enabled them to actively enter production, as a more experimental complement to the engineer. Meanwhile, Boris Kushner’s position was a compromise between these two, claiming like Stepanova that artists could already make this shift, but to do so it was necessary for them to learn some ‘auxiliary knowledges’. Holert then shifts to tracing the term ‘knowledge production’ to, interestingly, the work of Fritz Machlup, a ‘champion of neoclassical microeconomic theory’ who argued that knowledge was a valuable commodity. The reappearance of the term ‘knowledge production’ in 2002 in Documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enwezor, Holert argues, might seem curious, since knowledge was clearly not meant here as a commodity. Instead, it was the critical potential of making art a space for generating know-

ledges that was foregrounded. For Holert, this 'semantic recoding' of the term was done by shifting the emphasis to knowledges from the global periphery, although it is a shame that Holert does not spend more time analysing the discourse around Documenta 11, given its prominence in his argument and in the recent history of contemporary art.

Across the chapter, the same antinomy again emerges. On the one hand, a Productivist or neo-Productivist emancipatory desire to link art to social revolution by connecting it to knowledge and material production; on the other, the 'institutional convergence of art and research' leading to a managerialist quasi-Productivism. As Holert is aware, the attempt to realise the Productivist programme under late capitalism tends to simply instrumentalise art in the service of the value-form. Holert states that 'the case is far from settled', but instead of interrogating it further, the problem is left hanging. Symptomatically registering the tension between emancipatory and instrumentalist aspects of

art-as-research/art-as-knowledge is a limit point that the book seems unable to pass beyond.

The other chapters are primarily structured around case studies of artworks. The most interesting of these is on 'Knowledge Politics in the "Middle East"'. Although Holert does not explicitly frame this in terms of Edward Said's account of Orientalism, his discussion of works by Adelita Husni-Bey and Tony Chakar as resisting a Western, imperialist 'will-to-knowledge' could be understood in these terms.

Overall, the book is a frustrating read, in large part because it suffers from an apparent anxiety to mention everything related to the topic at hand. While countless writers, artists and topics are cited, key problems are not interrogated thoroughly. Distinct positions tend to be conflated because they are not explored in enough depth for significant differences to emerge. The strategy is collation rather than theorisation proper. The lengthy 'Bibliographic Addendum' to chapter one is a miniature image of this: attempting to provide a definitive biblio-



graphy of artistic research since 2000, it both acts as a useful resource and flattens the works listed.

Another case in point is the discussion of Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) that appears unexpectedly at the end of chapter three. Holert argues that Macherey is 'neo-Productivist', but it is hard to see how, unless two very different definitions of Productivist are in play. Macherey's understanding of literary 'production' is basically a formalist, Althusserian one, where 'production' means any transformation of a 'material' into a 'product' through determinate 'means' (an activity that can take place entirely in thought), whereas in Soviet Productivism it refers to the relations of material production. (A third, more strictly Marxist definition of 'production' as the production of value hovers in the background of the book, but is never quite invited to announce its presence outright.) Meanwhile, Holert seems to understand Macherey's notion of the 'object of knowledge' as evidence that Macherey sees art as an epistemic activity, but Macherey's (Althusserian) object of knowledge belongs to the critic, not the artwork. Macherey's arguments are constructed on a categorical distinction between art and science, in fact, which sets them at a distance from the claims of Soviet Productivism, and inflects any appropriation of them in relation to questions of art-as-knowledge.

In general, despite its caveats, the book is overly gen-

erous to the art institution. Holert's solutions to the problems he raises are often voluntarist and idealist. What is needed is an analysis that is more structural. (Stewart Martin's essay for Documenta 12 (in *RP* 141), and Peter Osborne's recent text on the subsumption of research (in the collection *The Postresearch Condition*) contribute to this.) This is a necessarily bleaker analysis, but this does not mean there is no space for new artistic practices. Indeed, such analysis should also orientate itself by current or recent practices that take up critical and reflexive inquiries into knowledge – Harun Farocki or Ultra-red, for instance. Holert raises the possibility of artworks carrying out a new form of institutional critique – in relation to academia rather than art – but implies, rightly, that this shouldn't be limited to a narrow form of critique that disenchantedly enumerates the ways in which art production is enmeshed in the neoliberal university. Instead, he points to Vishmidt's notion of 'infrastructural critique', an expansion of institutional critique that locates art in an expanded social and material field and can take 'immanent' or 'transversal' forms. This does indeed offer a productive way of conceptualising the intervention that critical art practices may make in the present. But after Holert's book, there is still plenty of space open for theorising art's interfaces with research and knowledge production.

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Climate struggle

Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* (London: Verso, 2022). 320pp., £16.99 hb., 978 1 78873 388 5

The US Congress passed its largest ever investment in clean energy in August – the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) – and yet it remains impossible to shake the feeling that, as Matthew T. Huber puts it, 'the climate movement is losing' in both the US and globally. Fossil fuels still provide the vast majority of the world's energy. Pipeline protests and youth climate strikes, irrepressible in 2019, have seen their momentum scotched by the pandemic. The Russian war in Ukraine now provides a national security pretext to 'drill, baby drill' in the US, UK and else-

where, as supply shortages drive record profits. Even the IRA represents a victory not so much for the 'climate movement' as for investors in 'green capital', who stand to benefit most from new clean energy tax credits. Meanwhile, climate disasters multiply, and the people who dragged the world into planetary catastrophe still call the shots.

Given the venality of the global ruling class, content to place scattered 'green' bets while sucking every last dollar out of fossil fuels, the way for the climate move-