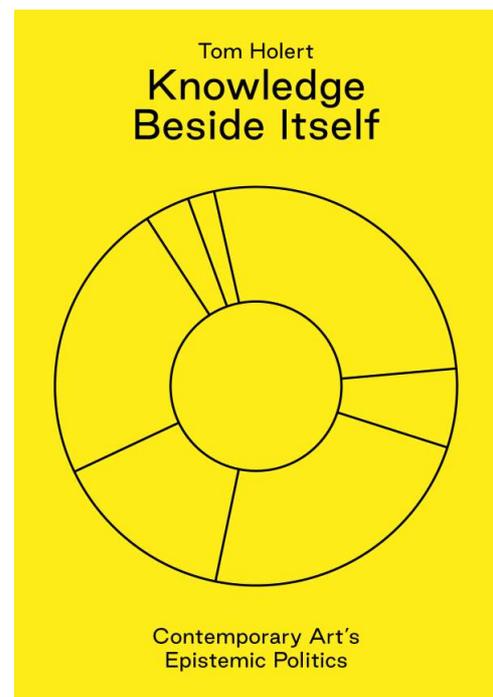


BOOK REVIEW: Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics*

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Knowledge Beside Itself takes as a point of departure the invocation of terms such as ‘research’ and ‘knowledge’. Besides the high currency of these terms, contemporary art’s insistence on producing, staging and disseminating knowledge is apparent in the ubiquity of sprawling research exhibitions, counter-archival practices, formats such as lecture performances as well as workshop sessions organised by art institutions. Knowledge production seems deeply entrenched in specific artistic practices, be they individual or collective, in institutional programming and curating, in the discourses led in the field, and in the curricula of art academies.

This ‘knowledgization’ (p 9) appears to some as yet another tombstone of art’s autonomy. Likewise, it supposedly signals an end of the aesthetic in favour of the discursive and the intellectual, and a final surrender to global capitalism where shared production, consumption and networkedness are the defaults. The contemporary arts as a ‘field of speculation, privilege, and critique’ (p 19) are not exterior per se to dominant knowledge politics, but, rather, short-circuited to them.¹ ‘After all,’ Holert asserts, understanding art as knowledge production ‘is bewildering especially considering the widespread progressive conception of art informed by the *critique* of capitalist economy’ (pp 140–141). Yet, particularly when considering the expansive changes in artistic production, curatorial work and art education, this can also be understood as productive attempts towards the

¹ See also Simon Sheikh, ‘Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research’, *Art&Research*, vol 2, no 2, Spring 2009, p 6. Sheikh writes that ‘the notion of knowledge production implies a certain placement of thinking, of ideas, within the present knowledge economy, i.e. the dematerialized production of current post-Fordist capitalism.’ He argues that ‘we can see the interest of capital become visible in the current push for standardization of (art)education and its measurability, and for the molding of artistic work into the formats of learning and research.’ For Sheikh, this implies ‘a direct corollary between the dematerialization of the art object, and thus its potential (if only partial) exodus from the commodity form and thus disappearance from the market system, and the institutional re-inscription and validation of such practices as artistic research and thus knowledge economical commodity.’

‘destabilization of the ontology of art’ (p 81). This inextricable double-sidedness surfaces throughout the publication.

The book sketches the historical and theoretical premises and multiple genealogies of art’s coupling with research (and its difference to it), spanning historical avant-gardes, post-war neo-avant-gardes, the 1990s and up to the art of the present. Throughout the publication, artistic and institutional practices that challenge, distort and ‘trouble’² contemporary art’s alignment with the knowledge economy feature as productive deviations from bold invocations. Holert provides valuable and thoroughly argued discussions of philosophical debate and economic theories while introducing artistic practices that work toward a ‘radical politics of knowledge’ (p 47). Besides discussing twentieth and twenty-first century art history from the viewpoint of knowledge production, it is partly a search for criteria separating ‘conformist, depoliticizing ways of associating knowledge with art’ and those ‘different, oppositional modes of knowing and thinking in counter-archives, alternate networks and (para-)institutions’ (p 19).

The arts’ orientation toward knowledge, research and their ‘intellectualization’³ over the last two decades or so has arguably rendered other (aesthetic) criteria less significant, if not unable to analyse (and account for) a vast share of contemporary artistic production. While invoking ‘knowledge’ implies placing the discursive over the aesthetic or visual, Holert maintains that through ‘the activation, reconstruction, resurrection, recomposition, and invention of ways of knowing and modes of thought that are irreducible to Western rationalism and cognitivism, the aesthetic might be regained as the reservoir and repertoire of a cognition that is based in bodily, sensations, in affect, in empathy’ (p 61).

This is especially true when knowledge is understood as broadly incorporating feminist, queer and decolonial epistemologies, and practices that pursue an excavation of what Michel Foucault termed ‘subjugated knowledges’ (whether historical or present-day).⁴ This excavation could lead to a ‘reconfiguration and remapping of knowledge systems’ (p 17). ‘Knowledge’ here does not refer simply to an object that is circulating but to a ‘principle force of production’,⁵ as described by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, which bears the pertinent subtitle ‘A Report on Knowledge’. Holert maintains that ‘knowledge’ more frequently has a narrower definition. He asserts that this can be pinned down to counter-knowledges that are in conflict with hegemonic types of knowledge. This of course implies a focus on the coupling of power and knowledge, leading Holert to investigate

² See Carola Dertnig et al, eds, *Troubling Research: Performing Knowledge in the Arts*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2014

³ See Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder and Binna Choi’s ‘Introduction’ to *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder and Binna Choi, eds, BAK and Revolver, Utrecht and Frankfurt am Main, 2008, p 7

⁴ See Michel Foucault, ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, eds, David Macey, trans, Picador, New York, 2003, p 7

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988, p 5

‘how art has become increasingly invested in politics via struggles around access to knowledge and education, the facilitation of platforms for oppositional and minor knowledges, and the growing acknowledgement of the epistemological dimension of coloniality’ (p 45). The author’s understanding of knowledge production is far-reaching, yet it can be summed up in the more open formulation of ‘*epistemic activity*’, including activities such as using language, thinking, learning and archiving or ‘social organizing’ (p 45). An understanding of knowledge as social organisation seems especially pertinent when one considers the manifold practices that engage in setting up infrastructures and organisational forms – an issue to which I will return to below.

Besides the standardisation and institutionalisation of artistic research practices throughout Western art academies, and contemporary art’s alignment with ‘subjugated knowledges’, one of the backdrops to this book is the broad tendency of ready-made research in exhibitions. At times, these appear generic, surfacing as congealed signifiers of research or ‘epistemic gestures’ (p 59). As art historian Claire Bishop (whom Holert also cites) contends in a review-essay of two Danh Vo exhibitions at the 2015 Venice Biennial, dense research exhibitions were ‘once valuable as a counterpoint to dogmatic, elitist histories, but today this open-endedness reads more like a symptom of information overload’.⁶ Bishop maintains this point and argues for practices that do not ‘immerse the viewer’ in the sheer quantity of research but offer pathways of navigation through the corpus of research.⁷ Although Bishop is more concerned with the role of the spectator, both Bishop and Holert share a contempt for ‘artistic research’ becoming an empty form and seem to be searching for criteria by which to evaluate.

In a recent volume, curator Lucy Cotter assembled text contributions to ‘reclaim’ artistic research, foregrounding the perspectives of practitioners, thinkers and curators (from Lawrence Abu Hamdan to Sarat Maharaj and the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev). Cotter contends: ‘At its best, the paradigm of artistic research opens space to expand the parameters through which we view art, supporting its organic interconnectivity with other fields of enquiry and its agency beyond the narrow confines of the art world.’⁸ In contrast to Bishop’s interest in spectatorship and Cotter’s foregrounding of artistic-curatorial perspectives, Holert’s writings seem informed by both a Foucauldian (genealogical theory and power-knowledge) and a post-operaist strand of theory, while arguing closely alongside singular practices of artists – including Natascha Sadr Haghghian, Adelita Husni-Bey,

⁶ Claire Bishop, ‘History Depletes Itself: Claire Bishop on Danh Vo at the Danish Pavilion and Punta Della Dogana’, *Artforum*, vol 54, no 1, September 2015, p 329

⁷ Claire Bishop, in a lecture at Universität für angewandte Kunst, Vienna: ‘Information Overload: Research Based Art and the Politics of Spectatorship’, 7 January 2019; see Christoph Chwatal, ‘Notes on Claire Bishop’s Lecture: ‘Information Overload: Research Based Art and the Politics of Spectatorship’, *Kunsthalle Wien Blog*, 22 January 2019

⁸ Lucy Cotter, ‘Reclaiming Artistic Research’, in *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, Lucy Cotter, ed, Hatje Cantz, Berlin, 2019, p 21

Claire Pentecost, Tony Chakar, Pilvi Takala, Bureau d'Études, or Fernando García-Dory's *Inland*.

In the extensive Introduction, 'Contemporary Art and the Traffic-Driven Episteme', Holert presents various instances that detail how 'the supposed shift from the aesthetic toward the epistemic' (p 14) – and thus from the visual to the discursive – has reshuffled the very definition of art, as well as the functions and roles assumed by art institutions today. He also asks how the arts position themselves in and towards the 'global digital order of power-knowledge' (p 61). Holert ponders:

When knowledge has been disowned, corrupted, and displaced by the opacity of financial transactions, neoliberal market epistemology, platform capitalism, and right-wing populism's denigrations of truth, it is urgent to dislocate it again, deploying the epistemic strategies developed by marginalized or disobedient thinkers and practitioners, schools, and collectives, making positive use of their relocations and redistributions in contemporary art's epistemic engagements. (p 61)

Chapter 1, 'Artistic Research: Anatomy of an Ascent',⁹ discusses the rise of research-based art and artistic research programmes throughout the European art academies. It charts the conflicting formulations of 'artistic research' in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, spanning from Gruppe SPOR to Bauhaus Imaginista. As Holert argues, the rise in the 1990s of research-based art 'should not be confused with a seamless continuation and realization of the claims to research made by artists in an avant-garde or neo-avant-garde vein' (p 66). The 1990s saw a distinct refashioning of artistic production 'informed by institutional critique, feminism, anti-racism, postcolonialism, or critiques of technology, economic structures, and urbanism' (p 70). Holert goes on to demonstrate how, from the 1990s (and, in the German-speaking world, from around 2010) arts-based research can also be seen as a means of 'defense', as 'art education and the arts in general' were 'systematically marginalized by educational research policies' (p 67). It could be argued that this has changed today, with artistic research frequently problematised as a form of neoliberal governmentality within the university. The chapter offers a nuanced account, refraining from wholesale rejection on the one hand, and laudatory speech on the other. The extensive bibliography spanning two decades of publications is particularly helpful here.

Chapter 2, 'Matters of Form', starts with the legacies of Relational Aesthetics and its 'attempt to characterize collectivity, cooperation, and participation in the field of contemporary art as forms' (p 90). Holert also mentions practices which assume the form of (artistic) organisations operating across and in-between particular social contexts and art institutions. Fernando García-Dory's *Inland* features here as 'an arts collective, dedicated to

⁹ Holert published an earlier version of this chapter in *Texte zur Kunst* 82, June 2011, pp 38–62

agricultural, social and cultural production, and a collaborative agency'.¹⁰ *Inland*, which will be part of documenta fifteen in 2022, details how organising as artistic practice can transgress problematic understandings of participation, as in *Relational Aesthetics*. Quoting García-Dory's description of *Inland* as 'working together, against, and beyond existing institutions' (p 113), Holert posits that its 'emphasis on translocality, transversal pedagogy, interventionism, and the commons' transgresses art while, in turn, saving it from the 'epistemological constraints that undergird social hierarchies, economic inequalities, technological formalisms, epistemic violence, and suffocating bureaucracies' (p 115).

Besides touching upon it briefly, the issue of such 'para- and alter-institutions'¹¹ could have been further addressed in the following chapter, which focuses mostly on the work of the artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian. Instead of detailing the artist's roles and functions within the collective NSU Tribunal Auflösen (Unraveling the National Socialist Underground Complex) or the related Society of Friends of Halit (both within the framework of documenta 14), Chapter 3 discusses Sadr Haghghian's contribution to the German Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennial, and other works. As observed at the beginning of the chapter, art institutions today, as 'providers of critical discourse' (p 121), tend to assume the role of knowledge producers and thus insert themselves into the global economy of knowledge. Here we can consider a variety of formats such as symposia, podcasts, publication series and (post)academic fellowship programmes. Holert traces Sadr Haghghian's stances on 'research' and how the artist assumes an 'extra-disciplinary' position which unsettles research (p 126). He sets the artist's practice in dialogue with Productivism, hence examining how art can exceed mere commentary and instead lend itself to usefulness (beyond the neoliberal notion of the term).

Chapter 4, 'Being Concerned: Research and Responsibility', provides an account of questions of responsibility, accountability and integrity, both in academia and the arts.¹² It discusses the growing significance of ethics policies, which can serve to legitimate research as a form of governmentality or 'bureaucratic control in the research university' (p 158). The work of Christine Borland features here to shed light on art's relation to responsibility, given Borland's research in the medical humanities. Holert wonders how to make sense of navigating between 'neoliberal responsabilization' and 'neofascist celebrations of irresponsibility' (p 176), an impasse that renders criticism of both utterly complex. Chapter 5 turns to the relation of artistic practice and activism. This coupling is often framed as threatening 'art's autonomy and its potential for unfettered aesthetic evidence while faced with the strident neoliberal discourse of responsabilization' (p 200). Discussing Claire

¹⁰ For more on Fernando García-Dory's *Inland*, see <https://inland.org/about/what-is-it/>

¹¹ See Sven Lütticken, 'Social Media: Practices of (In)Visibility in Contemporary Art', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 40, Autumn/Winter 2015, pp 4–19

¹² Holert's 2013 essay, 'Burden of Proof', would have made a substantial addendum to this chapter as it discusses more specific artistic practices; see Tom Holert, 'Burden of Proof: Tom Holert on Contemporary Art and Responsibility', *Artforum*, vol 51, no 7, March 2013, pp 250–259

Pentecost's work for dOCUMENTA (13), Holert calls for a closer examination of the 'issue of force and desire in the new assemblages of community arts, socially engaged arts, practice-based research in the arts, and participatory arts', which 'usually remain untouched and under-appreciated' (p 198).

Chapter 6, 'Just in Time', shifts to 'strategies of withdrawal, opacity and unknowing' (p 203), taking the example of Pirvi Takala's *The Trainee* (2008). In Takala's performance, which resulted in a video work, the artist inserted herself (much in the legacies of the Artist Placement Group) into a consulting firm to perform as a sort of undercover creative worker. This work turns the very logic and self-fashioning of the firm (invoking a vast array of terms such as 'creative', etc) upside down by extended hours of inactivity at her workplace. Holert's detailing of the artist's insistence to work on 'nonnormative terms' (p 217) is one of the instances in the book where his previous arguments become palpable. Towards the end of the book – in Chapter 7, 'Coming to Terms' – Holert revisits both the topos of the archive and the Western fascination with the 'Middle East', discussing the work of the artist–sociologist Adelita Husni-Bey which often takes on the shape of diagrams and mind maps, and circles around questions of language and translation. Holert challenges the assumption that civil society institutions are 'expected to produce art and knowledge' (p 228) with a focus on the 'Middle East', and, more specifically, discourses surrounding the 'Arab Spring'.

The author's position as both an independent researcher and his former role as an educator is implicit. This becomes most evident in Chapter 8, with its discussion of the artistic and militant (co)research conducted by Lina Dokuzović for her MA thesis and PhD dissertation at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, where Holert was then based.¹³ He also examines the work of the French duo, Bureau d'Études, which conducts diverse mapping projects as 'modality of political action' (p 244). The chapter also connects forms of visualisation and mapping as pursued by García-Dory and Husni-Bey, artists whose practices negotiate their positions in art contexts and beyond them.

A specific kind of artistic production and a distinct set of institutional infrastructures 'within and on the fringes of contemporary art' (p 19) are being addressed in the book. In part circulating beyond the blue-chip market, these are found, rather, in select independent, 'alternative' or 'progressive' art spaces throughout Europe and America. The funding priorities, cultural policies and networks within which such institutions manoeuvre are, however, addressed only sparsely. This is also the case regarding the history of such institutions, the role of the New Institutionalism in the early 2000s and more recent networks emerging out of that New Institutionalism (eg the pan-European network, L'Internationale). Holert's material circles almost exclusively around artists and their practices, as well as considering some of the repercussions in art education policies. Thus, the book does partly neglect to detail the institutional power structures and the funding priorities and policies that

¹³ Parts of Chapter 8 previously appeared in Tom Holert, 'Margins of (Re)Presentability: Contemporary Art and Knowledge Politics', *OnlineOpen*, 12 October 2016

have bolstered and advocated an understanding of art as knowledge production. For instance, New Institutionalism's role in entrenching process-based, participatory and discursive formats, and combining them with the pursuit to 'redefine the contemporary art institution'¹⁴ not only lead to a problematic form of (auto)critique, but also to the very 'knowledgization' that is addressed in the book. Holert notes that 'the new conception of art as knowledge production was promoted by curators such as Catherine David, Ute Meta Bauer, Okwui Enwezor, Chus Martínez, and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, arriving as part of the global discourse of biennials and documentas' (p 70). Various iterations of documenta feature throughout the book, yet the question of *how* this quinquennial has entrenched the coupling of art and research (or knowledge production) would need some further clarification.

Although Holert's definition of knowledge includes 'social organizing' (p 45) there is little mention of artistic practices that actually engage in setting up (whether temporary or long-term) organisational forms, 'institutions' (whether real or imaginary), or other models that bridge the realms of art and the social. A more detailed analysis could include, for instance, Maria Eichhorn's *Rose Valland Institut*,¹⁵ the aforementioned *Society of Friends of Halit*, the various long-term organisational works of Tania Bruguera, Jeanne van Heeswijk or Jonas Staal, and artist-initiated projects such as the *The Silent University* or *The Natural History Museum* of the American collective Not An Alternative, to mention just a few. In contrast to imaginary artistic institutions and earlier manifestations of Institutional Critique, such practices insert themselves into the public sphere, bridging artistic and social-political realms through both developing institutional forms and cooperation with art institutions, non-governmental organisations, and, on occasion, state agencies.

Holert, an academic, writer, curator and educator himself, inhabits multiple and shifting roles that surface regularly throughout the book and might explain the richness in perspectives, theories and practices he invokes. For instance, the author's interest in the art-knowledge complex seems to stem, in part, from his role in co-conceiving and setting up a PhD-in-Practice programme at Vienna's Academy of Fine Art, where he taught between 2006 and 2011. There, Holert writes, he (and others involved in the process) 'strove to contest dominant understandings and institutional forms of artistic research' (p 74). Although it might be welcomed that Holert refrains from recounting anecdotes in respect to this task, a more detailed account of *how* these processes played would be helpful.

¹⁴ See Jonas Ekeberg, ed, *New Institutionalism Verksted #1*, Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo, 2003, p 9

¹⁵ Art historian Sabeth Buchmann describes the *Rose Valland Institut* (initiated by Maria Eichhorn) as a 'significant example of artistic-curatorial, scientific cooperation in the form of long-term research' (author's translation). Buchmann also mentions the work of Forensic Architecture and the long-term projects of Jonas Staal. See Maria Eichhorn and Sabeth Buchmann, 'Gemeinschaftliche Kunstpraktiken im öffentlichen Raum: Das Rose Valland Institut und andere Projekte', Mosse Lecture Series, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 9 May 2019, https://www.mosse-lectures.de/wpms_programme/sprachen-des-politischen-in-literatur-und-kunst/

The author is a regular contributor to publications such as *Texte zur Kunst* and *e-flux*, and has (co)curated numerous exhibitions. One recent example is the comprehensive research and exhibition project, *Neolithic Childhood: Art in a False Present, ca. 1930*, at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2018. Additionally, Holert co-founded the Harun Farocki Institut (HaFI) in 2015. This institution engages in filmmaker Farocki's legacy as 'a platform for researching his visual and discursive practice and supporting new projects that engage with the past, present and the future of image cultures.'¹⁶ Holert's multiple roles are implicit in the book, yet there could be a more straightforward questioning of the role of curatorial and (para)institutional knowledge production and the author's involvement in knowledge production via curatorial-academic work.

In light of the high currency of research-based practices, to discuss art as knowledge production, and as having an epistemic function beyond simply invoking a 'presumptuous trope' (p 14), is arguably a mammoth task but one that is pursued here. The timeliness and strength of *Knowledge Beside Itself* lies in its in-depth mapping of the larger historical, theoretical and discursive framework of contemporary art's relation to knowledge, introducing a well-chosen share of practices and institutions that navigate and negotiate the small stretch between critique and complicity.

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¹⁶ See <https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/about-us/> Although exerting a long-standing influence on contemporary film and media artists, Farocki, the artist and filmmaker, is strikingly absent in Holert's book