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Notes on Claire Bishop's lecture: "Information Overload: Research Based Art and the Politics of Spectatorship"

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This blog post reports on art historian Claire Bishop's lecture *Information Overload: Research Based Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, while incorporating a few further notes and thoughts. The text begins by contextualising this particular lecture with respect to Bishop's academic oeuvre as an internationally acclaimed scholar on contemporary installation and participatory art. Secondly, references are made in the following text to additional literature and artistic practices, both complimenting and questioning the assumptions and theses of Bishop's presentation.

1. Research-Based Art and Its Discontents

In *History Depletes Itself*, a lengthy review-essay of two Danh Vo exhibitions at the 56th Venice Biennial, 2015, Bishop foreshadows some of the key concerns and theses of her latest lecture:

“To be fair, [Danh] Vo’s approach to research results in seductive sculptures—and in this respect he is unlike many of his peers, who are content to present vitrines full of texts, and slide shows of appropriated images. But both strategies of research-based art evince a reluctance to synthesize and organize the information in which they are trading; such installations demonstrate that research has taken place but leave it up to the viewer to do the work of drawing the strands together. Again, this operation was once valuable as a counterpoint to dogmatic, elitist histories, but today this open-endedness reads more like a symptom of information overload.”¹

Continuing this line of thought, Bishop focused on the present-day ubiquity of research-based art exhibitions. The art historian uses the term “research-based art”, instead of “practice-based art”, or similar terms, to designate a type of work that has been circulating in gallery exhibitions and museums over the last decade (as opposed to that being produced in PhD-in-practice programmes).² Bishop contends that research-based art presents both “a resistance to and an internalisation of internet logic”, and “despite making an explicit critique of digital presentism and algorithmic aggregation (...) this work is nevertheless inseparable from the internet search engine as an extension of our consciousness.”

Certain strands of artistic practices – that once offered a radical promise of decentring, pertaining to remove male-artist subjectivities and hegemonic historical models – have arguably morphed into a dominant model of artistic production. Bishop’s concern is that this does not challenge but rather bolsters present-day economies of attention: “Immersing the viewer in information is no longer emancipatory, when we spend our lives in drifts of data.”

2. “OS XXI”

Bishop’s current book project is titled *OS XXI*, referencing the ubiquity of the operating system as a structuring model for both the everyday and artistic production. The project encompasses contemporary work that addresses “ruined modernity” and citations or “reformatting” of iconic modernist architecture, the emergence of dance exhibitions, and the pervasiveness of performance in contemporary art, as well as a chapter on research-based art.³ The latter was outlined by spotlighting spectatorship in an age of networked cognition and present-day economies of knowledge. She underlines how the influence of digital technologies and new types of user behaviour have also altered the status of the spectator or visitor from that of a “co-researcher” in practices of the 1990s, to more recently transpire to that of a “browser”.

While the project appears as a rupture in Bishop’s body of work, there is striking continuity in her argument of art as different to, yet in a relationship with the everyday. In her 2005 book, *Installation Art*, Bishop finds that the merit of installation art is “to reveal the ‘true’ nature of our subjectivity as fragmented and decentred” by immersing the viewer in “a discrete space

contiguous with the 'real world'".⁴ In her seminal *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), Bishop comes to a similar conclusion. Here she posits that participatory art must be framed, not as a spectacle, but as space for precarious moments and a means to renegotiate the public sphere.⁵ Her current project is connected to her earlier writings through the idea that artistic production should be in a productive relationship with real spaces. A similar idea surfaced in her recent text "Palace in Plunderland", about a venue soon to be opened in New York City called Shed. Bishop argues against this cultural venue, defining it as a stage tied to financial interests, social control and spectacle, finally resuming that it is "open to all, but participation is invitation-only".⁶ Instead, she urges towards a constitution of the public after Judith Butler's model – a type of assembly that (re-)claims spaces and constitutes them from below.

3. Genealogies of "Research-Based Art"

The postmodern contempt for providing authoritative narratives and keys to interpretation, might be grounded in overcoming what Jean-François Lyotard termed "grand narratives", or universal claims of truth. In response to postmodernity's loss of historicity, artistic practices from the early 1990s onward began to favour singular perspectives over the master narrative. Increasingly complex geopolitical situations required fragmented approaches instead of retaining the idea of totality.

Bishop outlines that together with the reception of post-structuralism (from Jacques Derrida to Jean-François Lyotard, and the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), feminist theory, identity politics and post-colonial theory, three strands of art historical genealogies provided the foundation for contemporary research-based art. In a somewhat eclectic coming together of theory and precursors in the arts, Bishop sketches the emergence of present-day research-based art practices. With the shift from vertical forms of display to horizontal vitrines in the 1990s, Bishop senses "one of the most conspicuous signifiers" of research-based art – together with refashioning outdated technology (overhead projectors, slide carousels, 16mm film, etc.) and an abundance of material exhibited.

According to Bishop, the strands that converged in artistic practice in the 1990s – which altered the role of the viewer to that of a "fellow researcher" included; the photo documentary, the essay film, and Conceptual Art. Captioning resurfaces in photographic practices of the 1970s and 1980s as a central topic in photo documentary. Essay film, as a "synthesis of the poetic and the political", has also been an influential category. This is evident in the work of Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, Harun Farocki, the Black Audio Film Collective, and more recently, the work of Hito Steyerl. Bishop identifies another central line of flight in the links between Conceptual Art and other disciplines: Hans Haacke's inquiries into economics; Mary Kelly's psychoanalytically informed *Post-Partum Document* (1973); or anthropology in Susan Hiller's work.

Hans Haacke's early conceptual piece, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, for the New York Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is composed of texts, graphic charts, photographs and maps arranged on various panels. This arrangement displays the entanglements of the Guggenheim's board of directors with real estate speculations. However in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as Bishop explains, the text-heavy and complex display previously favoured by Haacke, was transformed into a more digestible form as he "marshals the viewer's attention in a different way (...). He limits the amount of information." Instead, Haacke began to translate or "synthesize" his research on the geopolitical entanglements of global corporations into the corporate identity of the firms he investigated.

Bishop chooses Renée Green's 1992 installation *Import/Export Funk Office* as an early example of an artistic practice in which these influences converge. Composed of shelves with magazines, books, records and ephemera, *Import/Export Funk Office* investigates "African diasporic culture, bohemia, and subculture". Green had taped a series of videos with the music and art critic Diedrich Diederichsen in Cologne in the 1990s. Bishop describes the installation as "a rupture with previous models of artistic research (...) because it positions the viewer as someone to explore the fragments, synthesize them together, and potentially even use the material even for his or her own research." Seemingly crucial to Bishop, was the launch of *Import/Export Funk Office* as a CD ROM in 1995, reflecting the fact that the extensive material can be better processed when browsing through it on a computer. She identifies the fact that Green's work had this insight in advance of the internet and the "distributed model of knowledge that has since become the norm." Profound changes in the economies of knowledge are reflected in this work; from linear to networked, and from individual practices to collaboration. Bishop argues however, that Green's piece is less a reaction to the internet than the product of her reception of poststructuralism and postcolonial theory.

4. "Synthesis" instead of "Aggregation": Walid Raad and Anna Boghiguan

Both "sampling" and "skimming" currently appear to Bishop as "default modes of attention", derived from activities such as browsing and searching the internet which have also exerted an influence on contemporary spectatorship. In the production of artworks and exhibitions, Bishop argues that the "aggregation" of material has become a prevalent mode, referring to David Joselit's term "aggregator":

"Aggregators are online services such as Contemporary Art Daily or e-flux that filter information for art-world consumption, making it possible, as a new generation of artists and critics has begun to assert, to shape vast flows and reservoirs of art-world information through the digital template of search algorithms and screen-based visual interfaces from laptops to smart phones."⁷

Bishop argues that this model corresponds to present-day modes of production (and reception), as assemblages of re-contextualised material, leading to work in which "images and information are arranged without any hierarchy or narrative". This leaves the viewer with a situation comparable to that of online searching and browsing. She finds an example of this in Wolfgang

Tillmans', *truth study center* (2005–ongoing). Comprising a series of tables with digital printouts, newspaper clippings, photographs, alongside every-day materials (such as leaflets and bus tickets). These are “laid out in an apparently aleatoric composition, the arrangement does not seem to have an underlying logic”. The work corresponds to the logic of the internet, requiring quick skimming, elliptic reading, browsing, while inviting viewers to make sense of the material themselves. Being both drawn into, and overwhelmed by the sheer quantity and eclectic mix of information presented in the horizontal wooden tables with glass supports, Bishop criticises this type of work as merely reproducing the digital world and the daily response of users with it.

Armenian-Egyptian artist, Anna Boghiguiian's installation *The Salt Traders* (2015) was initially conceived for the 14th Istanbul Biennial “SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms”. The work features a shipwreck (as if shattered and distributed about the space). According to the artist's narrative, a wreck of an ancient salt trading ship is excavated in a future beset by global warming. In keeping with the metaphor of the ship, *The Salt Traders* sets out to take us on a journey to explore entangled histories of trade and slavery from antiquity to modern times. With poetic sensitivity, these intimate views also reflect the artist's singular approach to translating historical accounts, making this a unique transcription of history and interpretation of present-day perspectives, while creating a space for poetic encounters. One part of the installation is a series of wooden structures holding small frames, variously filled with salt, drawings, newspaper articles, paper cut-outs and beehives. Alongside the artist's narrative, these elements expose histories of imperialism and trade from antiquity through the 20th century decolonization. Her works often take the form of painted notebooks and diaries responding to her experiences and findings, materializing extended periods of travel and research. For Bishop, this type of research, together with the artist's ability to create narratives, appears to be a prime example of “research-based art”. With Boghiguiian, it seems that the research is “internalised”, translating “extensive reading” and experiences into a personally creative and sensible form deemed agreeable to Bishop.

Storytelling as method can equally be expanded to include a vast number of emerging practices in post-war Lebanon in the 1990s. This includes practitioners such as Tony Chakar, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, Jayce Salloum, Akram Zaatari, among others. Bishop chooses the work of Walid Raad as a prominent example. As part of the Lebanese post-war generation, Raad became famous in the early 2000s (in New York) for his imaginary collective, *The Atlas Group* (1999-2004). The works under the alias of the “The Atlas Group” reflect on the perennial Lebanese civil wars, their aftermaths, and their enduring effects by constructing series of expanding narratives. His recent project “Scratching on Things I Could Disavow – A History of Art in the Arab World” (2007–ongoing) shifts focus to the contemporary Middle East and its thriving art world. While Raad's work can be understood when placed within a genealogy of institutional critique, Bishop claims that (in comparison to Hans Haacke) Raad's work could also be grasped less as a “denunciation” of power structures and geopolitical entanglements of the art-world, but rather as a series of “seductive stories” that open up a much wider field of engagement.

Apart from the medium of performance constituting a vital, if not central part of Raad's work, fiction and the imaginary are crucial elements of the artist's practice. He presents narratives that manifest themselves as ruptures in the making of sense. Raad's approach is frequently labelled as "storytelling", and Bishop referred to a particular exhibition at the MoMA, New York (October 12th, 2015 to January 31st, 2016).⁸ The exhibition featured *Walkthrough*, a performance in which the artist weaves together various works that are part of this project. The narratives are linked to manifest states of hysteria, amnesia, or the suggestion of an incomplete subjectivity.

Walkthrough builds on a poetics of exaggeration, hyperbole and metaphor. Raad activates the material with scripted texts and here a constant play of difference and repetition can be grasped: along with a mere execution of a script, a deliberate aberration is vital to the performance's nuances. Formerly suppressed in a fictional collective, in this performance Raad returns as an authorial subject. The artist continues to question the veracity of artefacts, documents and his own positioning as an *artist-as-researcher*. However, the subject also appears manic and subtly scrutinises artistic subjectivities such as the "artist as historian", expanding them with fissures and ruptures.⁹

Bishop positively cites both Boghiguian and Raad as having practices that "synthesize" and thus do not immerse the spectator in a sheer quantity of information. They instead provide paths of navigation enabled by storytelling, be it in the form of performance (Raad) or elaborated installations (Boghiguian).

5. Addendum: Forensic Architecture

Although Bishop repeatedly mentioned the work of Forensic Architecture (a research agency founded and led by theorist-architect Eyal Weizman in 2010) as a contemporary "counter-example" to the model of aggregation in research-based art she did not go into depth, therefore a few extra notes on their practice might assist in explaining their ostensible resistance to "information overload".

Significantly, the agency is based at Goldsmiths, University of London and is composed of researchers of various disciplines, many of them pursuing their PhD theses as part of the agency's investigations. Their investigations into dominant narratives around events are not finite. Rather, they act as spotlights, gathering evidence and interpreting materials, reinforcing their work with public events, seminars and workshops. They operate as a commissioned, research-based undertaking which seeks to provide spatial evidence to help monitor and shed light on conflicts. Their aesthetics (the form of presentation they choose and how they translate data into registers of the sensible) can be placed in a genealogy of artistic research practices that have developed into dominant post-conceptual forms of representation. Essentially, they redefine the artist or architect-as-researcher roles to those of active agents – able to counteract the state's stranglehold on interpretation, e.g. in armed conflicts, dispossession cases and human rights violations.

To do so involves a type of narration that builds on multiple voices and the agency's concern is predominantly that of a human rights engagement. In a recent presentation in Vienna, Aziz al-Tūri (Bedouin resident and activist from the settlement al-'Arāqīb), introduced himself to the audience stating that "Al-'Arāqīb is an unrecognised village."¹⁰ Al-Tūri's presence at the one-off event "Ground Truth: The al-Araqib Museum of Struggle" (October 31, 2017 at REAKTOR, Vienna, Austria) was a recent episode in an ongoing dialogue between the village, located in the Negev desert in the south of Israel, and the research group. The settlement of al-'Arāqīb (according to al-Tūri's narrative and Forensic Architecture's presentation of evidence) has been repeatedly torn down by Israeli government forces and is not recognised by the state, leading to a situation in which the villagers' basic human rights are being violated. Forensic Architecture and the Israeli NGO Zochrot (as well as various other organizations involved in the project) have utilised historical research on the settlements, aerial photography with self-made civic satellites and gathered oral testimonies. In their presentation, interacting with visual documents (including trade documents, which prove that the activist's family used the land throughout the century), Eyal Weizman and his team assembled a multifaceted model consisting of testimonies, documents, satellite imagery, video and audio recordings from mobile phones with other types of data presentation.¹¹

What was striking about al-Tūri's narrative at the event, was that his physical presence merged two formerly distinct registers, that of testimony and that of evidence. While testimony is commonly associated with a presence created within singular acts of speech, evidence is assumed as a passive index of material requiring interpretation, an archive of traces. During the presentation, al-Tūri was both a conveyor of memory and an interpreter of the material associated with the village's resistance against the Israeli state's violent actions. Far from being a mere interlocutor, the role of al-Tūri shifted to that of the archon, introduced by Derrida as the archive's guardian. Following Derrida's understanding, the archon is not a clerk, but an active figure in the making of sense. As such, they are granted the right to interpret the documents, and thus are granted a "hermeneutic right and competence".¹² Making use of metaphors of the domicile (the house), Derrida sees archons as literal keepers of a space who take on a double role: as protectors or gatekeepers of the archive and representatives entrusted with the interpretation of documents and objects stored in an archive. This force of interpretation is granted by law and they are endowed with a "publicly recognized authority."¹³ While this authority is usually attributed to official representatives of the state and its agencies, in this instance al-Tūri takes over the role.

6. Conclusions

Bishop concludes that the "enthusiastic use of new media, interdisciplinarity, tendency to use research as a public resource", the immersion of the spectator in a multitude of viewpoints, and an abundance of material in the 1990s, has led to contemporary artistic practices that (perhaps in a generic way) replicate these once valuable strategies. Today, she senses a "complete naturalisation" of the digital condition, with little resistance to it. Further, the coalescence of "research" and "search" poses a threat as the latter seemingly prevails against the former. While research involves the formulation of new terminologies and concepts, the search is delimited by

a set of pre-existing concepts, and thus, the boundaries of existing knowledge. The practices of Walid Raad, Anna Boghiguan and Forensic Architecture were cited as contemporary examples providing strategies to counteract quick “leaps and connections” corresponding to the economies of attention of the internet (poignantly, as put by Bishop, “a machine for detours”).

Following Bishop’s detailed inquiry into the proliferation of “research as search” and research-based formats becoming a dominant form of artistic production, one question remains to be answered: Who is allowed to speak and to narrate?

Another question may follow: Do we see the return of a modernist artist subject or instead a type of subjectivity that reflects the notion of “cooperative subjectivities”?¹⁴ The work of Raad, Boghiguan and Forensic Architecture use narration and storytelling as crucial components. They “synthesize” material, historical accounts and testimonies, the common and the individual, providing glimpses on truth yet without a sense of closure. In these practices, narration is complex, decentred, ruptured and complicated through geopolitical and intricate authorial positions.

Text: Christoph Chwatal, Art historian and critic

1) Bishop, Claire. “History Depletes Itself. Claire Bishop on Danh Vo at the Danish Pavilion and Punta Della Dogana” *Artforum* 54 (September 2015): 324–330, 329. Available online at: www.artforum.com/print/201507/claire-bishop-54492

(<http://www.artforum.com/print/201507/claire-bishop-54492>) (accessed 17.01.2019).

2) All quotations without reference number: Transcript by the author of Claire Bishop’s lecture “Information Overload: Research Based Art and the Politics of Spectatorship” presented at the Universität für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna, on the 7th of January, 2019. Bishop was invited to speak within the framework of Kunsthalle Wien’s discursive series *Political Futures*. The lecture briefly addressed the “marketisation of higher education”, however this did not become a primary focus. For further information on this topic please see for instance: Holert, Tom. “Artistic Research: Anatomy of an Ascent” *Texte zur Kunst* 82 (June 2011): 38-62.

3) For examples see: Bishop, Claire. “Déjà Vu: Contemporary Art and the Ghosts of Modernism”, paper presented at Blaffer Art Museum, Houston, on September 17, 2015.

Bishop, Claire. “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention” *TDR/The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 22-42.

4) Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art. A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 133.

5) Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 284.

6) Bishop, Claire. “Palace in Plunderland: Claire Bishop on the Shed.” *Artforum* 57, No. 1 (September 2018): 93-96. Available online at: www.artforum.com/print/201807/palace-in-plunderland-76327 (<http://www.artforum.com/print/201807/palace-in-plunderland-76327>) (accessed 17.01.2019).

7) Joselit, David. “On Aggregators.” *October* 146 (Fall 2013): 3-18, 12.

- 8) Respini, Eva (ed.). *Walid Raad* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 29.
- 9) Godfrey, Mark. "The Artist as Historian." *October* 120 (Spring 2007): 140-172.
- 10) See a video documentation of the event at: vimeo.com/240943216
(<http://vimeo.com/240943216>).
- 11) The project is part of an ongoing series of research that ranges from desertification in Israel to armed conflicts. As a prelude to this engagement, Weizman's and Fazal Sheikh's findings were published in 2015, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*, which firmly locates the struggle of al-'Arāqīb in its geopolitical and historical context. Sheikh, Fazal and Eyal Weizman. *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015).
- 12) Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago/London: Chicago University Press, 1998), 2.
- 13) Ibid.
- 14) Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Assembly* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 295.

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