Alexander Dunst, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Gudrun Rath and Anja Schwarz

Introducing: Pluralising Practices

Cultural studies today fork distinct trajectories, thus making it impossible to speak of a unified cultural studies agenda – an approach that already carries plurality in its name. This heterogeneity has been strengthened by the increasing emphasis on practices of decolonising knowledge and the need for new transcultural approaches that transcend the limitations of regional studies. On the one hand, this development highlights the necessity of translation: of languages, concepts, between different intellectual approaches. On the other, this decolonial momentum reasserts the status of cultural studies as a political project that exceeds academic knowledge production and opens itself to epistemologies from the outside that challenge the university’s Eurocentrism, gender and class gaps. Experimental forms of knowledge production at the intersection of artistic, academic and activist research have proven central to these developments. They are open to diverse publics and are co-produced in dialogue with them. The debate that follows originated in a two-day workshop that reflected on the theoretical effects of cultural studies’ spreading beyond the confines of the university and probed its artistic, intellectual, and political practices.

In Linz, participants were invited to reflect upon practices of epistemological translation between diverse knowledge spaces that move outside of and beyond academia. How can such acts of translation be achieved? How do we invent and foster plural practices to ensure the visibility of intersections between supposedly separate entities such as ‘theory’ and ‘artistic practice’? How can we create resonances between virtual and other spaces, as in online and street activism? What kind of a dialogue can be maintained between activist or artistic practices and pedagogies that do cultural studies’ work in other arenas? We are excited to share some of the inspiring contributions to our workshop on the criticalhabitions blog: Anna Artaker and Sumugan Sivanesan will open the debate.

Artaker introduces us to her artistic practice that transforms Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “dialectical image” into a body of artworks in her project MEDIUMS OF HISTORY. In a practical rather than linguistic sense, this series of works attempts to excavate a central conception of Benjamin’s thought, which to a certain extent remains opaque, the indeterminate centre of his philosophy of history.

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Sivanesan in turn reflects on his involvement in The Climate Games, a campaign of creative civil disobedience that coincided with the United Nations Conference of Parties on Climate Change, COP21 in Paris, from 30 November to 12 December 2015. His critique concerns a lack of “cyberactivism” across the Games platform, which was designed to integrate street action with networked knowledge-sharing and organisation. Drawing on the pioneering work of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre and the recent activities of ‘hacktivist’ collective Anonymous, Sivanesan discusses resonances between online and street activism and the potential for their further co-development.

These emerging practices of producing knowledge, we feel, should prompt us to reconsider the way we ‘do’ cultural studies. Thus, the university has to reflect on and open up to the shifting sites for this kind of knowledge production.1 Already, academic writing is becoming more journalistic, creative, and spontaneous through faster modes of publication like blogs and tweets. Researchers from different environments engage with diverse publics, and move from lecturing their audience to co-creation and critique. Our debate on “Pluralising Practices” seeks to engage these issues in an open-ended discussion between artists, activists and academics that are united by a curiosity to go beyond the limits and limitations of existing institutions and discourses.

1 Increasingly alternative structures, art spaces like SAVVY International in Berlin, or networks such as The Silent University, become important contributors to cultural studies that those of us who work in the academy can and should not ignore.