

## THE POWER OF READING

A conversation with Irit Rogoff

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**Leire Vergara:** I would like to start this conversation addressing directly the theme proposed by editors Gelen Jeleton and Pablo Martínez for this issue of *Re-visiones*, which focuses on practices of producing knowledge collectively. In fact, I would like to recall now some moments we have shared together within the context of research at the PhD programme *Curatorial/Knowledge* within the department of *Visual Cultures* at Goldsmiths College that you have been running first together with Paul Martinon and later with Stefan Nowotny since 2006 and that I came to join as a student a bit later in 2011. In particular, I would like to talk about the ongoing reading group that has taken place in every seminar on Saturdays almost since the beginning of the programme. Regarding this format, I remember in particular something unexpected for me that happened right after I joined the group. Artist Sarah Pierce, who was more advanced than me in her research, as I think she had already gained her upgrade, asked me to run the reading group with her. I immediately liked her proposal, because it made me understand the research programme I was embarking on, so to say, a collective situation within the academy that embraced the unforeseen in order to allow new forms to come through the desire of studying together. In this context, the reading group was a tool that helped us to find our own ways in each particular research project and find a place within the group, but most of all, this was a format that managed to dissolve the roles between tutor and student and therefore the hierarchies implicit therein. In other words, a method that allowed us to develop new voices, new positions and consequently a collective setting.

**Irit Rogoff:** It is good to be reminded of the early times of *Curatorial/Knowledge* that somehow I had forgotten. When you start a programme like that you hope for something which is not there yet. It is not about what you would study or how you would study, but having a field coming into being. However, coming into being, not just out of general interest, but also out of a sense of a necessity. In that case, the programme started because we felt that we had pushed *Visual Cultures* in various directions, but we hadn't tested it in relation to practices. With this thought in mind, we set up two programmes, one in *Research Architecture* and the

other in *Curatorial/Knowledge*, assuming with this that there were people outside academia for whom their practice was not sufficiently grounded in thought and in study. So, this was very much related to what we understood as a shift between curating as a professional practice and “the curatorial” as an event of knowledge within the practice of curating. But the question then was, having set it up, what would we teach? And then, who would we teach it to? I must admit that the question of what we should teach is something that we are still struggling with at present. Every beginning of the academic year we struggle with this question. So, it is not only about shifting hierarchical relations between tutors and students, but about coming into being amongst equals. It is only amongst equals that, from one side, the need can be defined and, from the other, knowledge can be put on the table. I think this was one of the unique things. In the end, the people who finally came were people disenchanted with what they had. This made *Visual Cultures* become a theoretical field directed to agitate the practice of curating. Besides, it recognised the constituency of the disenchanted and their own feeling of needing more. Consequently, it also acknowledged the limits of study that are normally defined by a discipline, a field. This is the genesis of what I would call “coming together in study”.

**Leire Vergara:** Something that I really appreciated in the programme is that we never discussed practical issues concerning curating. We were engaged for years with notions like “the curatorial” or “justice” and with many different issues and concerns apparently distant from the practice of curating but, of course, in the end completely engaged with it.

**Irit Rogoff:** I am now thinking about transforming the programme, because in a way the task it originally set itself is done. I want to move to what interests me today, to what seems urgent in the contemporary, what I am calling *Advanced Practices*, which we can discuss later. In relation to the dynamics of the programme of *Curatorial/Knowledge*, these rest on the actual fact of bringing people to study together. This implies that everybody has a stake.

**Leire Vergara:** And then the conditions are also important. We are staying now for some days in London in a friend’s flat, and we are practising this good habit of borrowing a flat from a friend and ending up reading their books while they are away from home. So, last night I was reading a collection of essays by Hannah Arendt, in particular the famous interview with her by Günter Grass in 1964 on West German Television. At a certain moment, they discuss the relevance of the conditions in which a model of politics takes shape. Going back to *Curatorial/Knowledge*, I am thinking now how important the conditions of studying are when trying to establish the dynamics that you are addressing. In the context of this programme, something really special was that one could join the seminar as an enrolled

student or as an auditing guest. In fact, we had people who audited the programme for years. The small Prokofiev room at the library, our room, was packed with all of us, tutors, enrolled students, long-term auditing guests, passers-by.

**Irit Rogoff:** I think if you want to bring about a field, an area of study that hasn't existed before, it is not possible to do it purely through institutional channels, because what field would these people be enrolled in? So in a way, one of the things that was interesting was to raise a flag for *Curatorial/Knowledge* and to see who came. And the "who came" produced the field. It was very interesting to have people gravitating towards it, because they might think there was probably something there. I was very committed to keep it as an open platform, to allow people to have in the end a degree or to leave it open and also letting people to audit for years and never complete a PhD. But to take the ideas and materials into their professional practice —some of the most provocative thinking came from those who were not at peace with enrolling in a programme, of thinking their concerns in relation to a degree. The University was not very happy with this, but they provided some of the sharpest and most meaningful contributions to the discussion, precisely because of their ambivalence.

**Leire Vergara:** All this was occurring alongside the tremendous rise in tuition fees at University in the UK.

**Irit Rogoff:** It was, to some extent, a refusal of the dominant financialisation of studying as the only principle underwriting academic study. It was a very important moment. However, I am realising that you cannot sustain such moments, that you have to change, and this is interesting to me, that these moments are not sustainable. "The Curatorial" now exists within many practices. When we started, it was not underpinned by theoretical knowledge and it was not considered a research practice. Now it is different, "The Curatorial" is acknowledged as a research practice. However, in the meantime, the field has also changed. It really doesn't need our intervention anymore. So, it is time to move on. "The Curatorial" has now been unfolded into something bigger. What we can take from it is yet one more experiment amongst many other experiments of how to study together, or even "the coming together in study". I find interesting the kind of community that gets constituted at the time when you are not entirely clear of what you should be doing. You have a question, but you don't know the materials, the protocols, the forms you should deploy in relation to that question and you come together in the aspiration for experimentation.

**Leire Vergara:** I should also add that from the position of the student, the challenge was also having to write a thesis. It was hard in the sense that the field had to be invented, the tools, but then again you had to be

assessed within the format of a PhD. I remember now a conversation with you in those years about precisely the format of the PhD thesis. After both of us being critical of it, you also added a new perspective, reflecting on how this old academic format is still capable of allowing for possibilities for experimentation today.

**Irit Rogoff:** I am always of two minds, one part of me thinks this is an absolutely antiquated model that we really don't need anymore. But after having seen through about thirty PhD theses, I have realised there is something not entirely correct about this desire to leave the dissertation behind. Something happens when you make such rigorous demands on yourself. I don't really care about the dissertation, but I do care about the transformation that people undergo as a result of challenging themselves to write a dissertation, people amongst whom are non-academics. Every single person that wrote a PhD in the programme underwent some form of transformation, whether the dissertation was good or not.

**Leire Vergara:** Yes, because it is a very big commitment for a long period of time.

**Irit Rogoff:** And it is also something that one never does in one's professional life, which is to conceptualise a problem, figure out how to investigate it, then find the appropriate mode to present it as an investigative project. This is a huge task, if it is not what you do every day. The transformation is the challenge. You do it yourself, you invent your methodology, but the end result is a real confidence that is gained for being entirely in charge of a high-level project. So part of me wants to do away with the dissertation and part of me sees that the dissertation serves a purpose, separately from what is produced. I often think that in an ideal world, we would give awards for self-transformation rather than for the dissertations. I would love that to happen. Coming from that transgenerational community that *Curatorial/Knowledge* has been, the interesting thing is what direction we took it in. So for example, in your own research project, but also in your daily practice, you have invested quite a bit of thought into all kinds of modes of study, but not necessarily as "what you would study" but "what this would produce". So, it would be interesting to hear about your dissertation project in Morocco and your work developed at Bulegoa in Bilbao.

**Leire Vergara:** From the very beginning the things that I proposed at Bulegoa, the office for art & knowledge that I initiated together with my colleagues Isabel de Naverán, Beatriz Cavia and Miren Jaio in Bilbao in 2010, came very much inspired by sessions that we were having in *Curatorial/Knowledge*. I really wanted to keep up with the conversations that we held there together. Every two months we gathered in London in

this very exciting and productive reflective platform, but then we all left to go back to our own contexts of life and work. Somehow I really wanted to continue beyond the seminars with that same intensity and complexity when reflecting, speculating, sharing common concerns with different people. I remember telling my friends why not have a similar dynamic in our own home town, Bilbao, outside academia, far perhaps from the particular debates that we were having in London, but engaged with other artistic and conceptual interests relevant locally, and consequently transmittable to other contexts. We naturally then started to be quite engaged with the format of the reading group. All four members of Bulegoa at the time came from different backgrounds, and for example, Beatriz Cavia, who comes from Sociology, immediately recognised the pedagogical and research potential of this tool. This is in fact a tool that they had used a lot in diverse research groups in the Sociology Department of the Basque University. The idea was then to use it for researching together outside the limits of academia. In our case, it was really about digging into certain debates and emerging issues happening within artistic practice and research. For example, this moment also coincided with an interesting process of self-reflection within choreography that we were introduced to by our colleague Isabel de Naverán, but also with the emergence of certain debates within Anthropology that started to get attention from the international art context. First, the reading group helped us to get to know about these debates without necessarily becoming entirely committed to them, without having to trust them immediately or apply them to our own milieu. We opened this reading process publicly through open calls and people joined us to closely study particular lines of thought. Later on, we began to test the reading group as a curatorial methodology in the context of some specific productions.

**Irit Rogoff:** There is a very interesting shift where the authority of the text gets undone by the multiplicity of readers who look at the text as something that produces a relation between them, rather than a rigid statement that has to be fully understood. I have a huge commitment to reading, I always want everybody around me to read a lot. I recently started teaching a bit in our new programme, *BA Curating*. The students are very young. In the first class, I realised that none of the references that I was sharing were familiar to them. Therefore, I told them that we had a problem and asked them what to do about this. They answered they would think about it and they really did. When they came back they suggested that I give them a list of references and they would Google them. I thought about it and I accepted their suggestion, because what they would develop is a kind of investigative mode and if they get really interested in something, they will go to the library. I realised that a commitment to reading is a far more pluralistic affair than I ever imagined. I think that the reading groups perform a lot of different things. First of all, they perform a dualistic relation to a text,

recognising on the one hand that it has something to give you and on the other that it doesn't have any authority over you. I really like that duality. Reading groups also offer the recognition that social dynamics between readers are as important as the text that they read, but mostly they perform one's desire to know. It is the desire to know that constitutes a practice of reading.

**Leire Vergara:** I am remembering now the way Sarat Maharaj dealt with references when he was teaching in the department in the late 90s. He never provided us with complete library references of the theory he was teaching. We spent hours wandering in the library searching for the texts he was introducing to us.

**Irit Rogoff:** Then perhaps searching was more important than the texts, and Sarat understood that with his fascination with chance and with unexpected encounters that don't fit in. I had a very traditional art history education at The Courtauld Institute of Art. When I finished my PhD, I knew that I didn't want to become a traditional art historian, but I didn't quite know what to become. So far, I had not had enough exposure to the kind of things that helped me to decide. Then, I was very lucky as I got a postdoctoral grant for two years at Harvard University within a programme called *The Centre for European Studies*. I started there by reading. I was part of seven seminars and reading groups. I went to at least one lecture every day, often two. I also went to conferences every weekend. My head was exploding. One of the things that I came across was a small book that had just been published. This was the late 80s. The author was an English literary theorist, Francis Barker, and the book was titled *The Tremulous Private Body*. I recognise now how courageous a book it was, because it invented a subject and a methodology, it was hypothetical and propositional. The book was about the fact that in 17<sup>th</sup> century the body begins the process of becoming singularised, becoming no longer a universal entity. The book has no footnotes at all and in the introduction the author says something like this: "if you want to know where I am coming from, read Nietzsche, Freud and Derrida." I thought this was magic. He was revealing the genesis of his thinking without tying everything down to a scholarly authority. You read the book in one sitting, it was so exciting at that time. That book was a real marker in my life. Ever since then, it has been one long journey of exploring methodologies, the power of reading, the urgency of translating these concerns into a programme, a scholarly programme or a curatorial programme. When I saw how you were developing your methodology for your PhD, it really rang true to me, because this was a process that I had been through. In my case, I was very interested in how reading groups are not about something we already know but about making a subject come into being. In your case, in regards to colonial proximity through the specific geography of "the *plazas* of

sovereignty” brought alive by reading groups that took place around different locations and around these elusive entities.

**Leire Vergara:** For me, it was very important to build a concern within the particular context of North Morocco, a context that was strange to me, since I didn't know it beforehand and since I had to be careful in how to say things there, how to publicly address the issues that I wanted to deal with. This difficulty stayed with me in an interesting way. It made me realise quite early on at the stage of the fieldwork that I had to find an indirect way to approach these subjects publicly. Then, another of my worries was the danger of falling into exoticism and ending up reproducing a colonial imposition when opening specific debates in that particular context. Regarding all this, the reading group allowed me to open an extended time through which to establish a prolonged relation with the site, the context in which my research was situated. Therefore, the reading group was finally divided into a series of sessions that all together lasted for several months. It also developed out of different locations, in dialogue with several artists, from the local context, from my own home context and from beyond. Further than this, the reading group also tried out something that somehow we were all struggling with in our theses: the potentiality of working through theory and practice. Thus, the sessions tried to read theory through specific artistic practices. Every session was moderated in dialogue with an artist, whose practice allowed for an artistic entry to the text. This structure for the reading group, within a prolonged time, created the context for approaching the specific geography of the *plazas*. The curatorial operated within this ground. Exercises of reading and writing emerged in every session; the subject of my thesis was starting to become a public concern from which to develop a situated practice.

**Irit Rogoff:** When I saw the photographs of this fieldwork, I thought it was amazing how all these practices simultaneously were coming into being, people were absolutely enthralled by texts, something that I really believe in, that a text has the power to enthrall someone. I really liked how the work developed out of the introverted situation of a group of people encountering a text. The reading group dispenses all the power relations that conventionally tie down a classroom.

**Leire Vergara:** One of my questions regarding reading groups has to do with how to work curatorially with texts. I always refer to the way texts and books are normally displayed within exhibitions. We commonly find texts and books tied to a table, texts and books that cannot be read there, but that perform on display the intelligence of the exhibition. This impossible relation with texts within the exhibition brought me to this question: How to work with texts, not theoretically, but curatorially? I recently was talking with writer and artist Rachel O'Reilly, a tutor colleague who also teaches at

the Dutch Art Institute about similar concerns regarding reading and writing. She was telling me about her background in Comparative Literature and how nowadays this perspective within Literature has lost influence in the academy.

**Irit Rogoff:** In my generation, Comparative Literature was an incredibly radical place because you could study Philosophy, Literature, Political Theory, but you were not necessarily confined to one national culture, in fact, you could be in several national cultures simultaneously.

**Leire Vergara:** Postcolonial Theory emerged from a comparative project, so to say, from comparing different cultural and textual productions and contexts. Having never been myself within this context of study, I asked Rachel about the methodology employed within Comparative Literature, about how this was employed. She said it was all about "close reading".

**Irit Rogoff:** Yes, that's a good code for it. When I started teaching, "close reading" was a method I absolutely believed in. I was then teaching undergraduates in California and they believed whatever the text said. I applied "close reading", going deeply in certain paragraphs, in order to introduce them into the operations of the text, to its own textuality, its own ability to establish an argument. However, today, I am more concerned with the performativity that takes place beyond the text. I want to understand the convergences of performance that come together in this particular moment of study. The text is only one of them, but there are many other lines of confluence outside the text. Many of them are even invisible to us within a classroom situation. I like very much how every decade things change substantially. A method such as "close reading", an absolute foundation of my practice as a teacher, now is no longer the only crucial thing for me. I feel very much persuaded by the dissonance of a text, to understand that a text can perform in opposition. For example, a text can saturate the reader with data, but at the same time promote an independent and critical voice. Somehow this comes together, this kind of duality in some texts is interesting to unpack, because the readers need to allow themselves to experience the dissonance of the text. However, the power of the text, so to say, its own ability to change the world as we felt it in my generation, now seems to be diluted within the current fragmentation of reality to emphatic statements in which persuasion has less of a role.

**Leire Vergara:** In my own context, the Basque Country, there has been a certain resistance towards the power of the text. Artists situate themselves in this resistance and, in fact, it has grown through generations, contesting the increase of influence of discourse within the art sphere in the last decades.



**Irit Rogoff:** I can understand where this resistance can come from, a sort of struggle towards authority. But for example, last year I was teaching BA students Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, which takes place as an ongoing dialogue between the narrator and a group of students while they visit museums and galleries in Berlin in the 1930s, a moment embedded within the struggle between fascism and communism. This particular reading made me realise about the lack of references of these young students.

**Leire Vergara:** How did you read *The Aesthetics of Resistance* at the classroom?

**Irit Rogoff:** We just read paragraphs together, but we had a big blown-up image of the Pergamon altar in the background. This year, I have decided to do it differently. I want to take them to the British Museum; we are going to enact the reading of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* in front of the "Elgin Marbles" from the frieze of the Parthenon. I have to figure out how to set this up in the contemporary. In the 1930s in Berlin, the battle was really clear, but today in London this is not the case and the question is how to share this with a group of students around eighteen years old. We will spend some sessions figuring out how to contemporise Peter Weiss's novel before going to the British Museum to enact there that battle in front of the "Elgin Frieze". This is interesting to me, because a historical moment, a contemporary moment and a performative moment can come together. This format that can bring knowledge into being.

**Leire Vergara:** Through my own experience in teaching at the Dutch Art Institute, I have realised that sometimes it is very important to leave the classroom, to go out and do something as a group. In my case, I decided to go walking with the students in the evenings, in between seminars. This simple proposition generated a lot of things for us. Thus, we developed together a new series of walking methodologies that became a base for endless possibilities. One of these evening walks took place in Barcelona and we mixed in with the group of students from the Independent Study Programme of MACBA. Both groups started sharing methodologies, approaches to their collective study and even anxieties, ones of not having left the classroom, others of being exhausted by the constant roaming around of a master like the DAI which no longer has a fixed base.

**Irit Rogoff:** In *BA Curating* I took undergraduates to Tate Modern. Each step of the visit contributed another layer of knowledge. For example walking around the building with critical urbanists who spoke to them about gentrification and urban development in the area or being inside, speaking with different members of the staff about the notion of research in the museum. We finally spent several hours at Tate Exchange, an area in which

anyone can share questions and concerns with different workers of the museum. We met there with the curator and other members who talked about the history of the institution and its project, an institution that in essence had completely invented itself fifteen years ago with a very poor collection, since contemporary art was never before a central issue in British cultural life. Every two hours we changed perspectives guided by the different conversations. At the end of the day, I suggested to look at the skyline to search for the cranes in order to understand where development was taking place and in relation to what other aspects of the city. On their way back to college, they texted me saying that they had seen altogether seventeen cranes. I thought then of the importance of a multidimensional knowledge that doesn't study something frontally, in one direction, but looks at it from many different perspectives, discourses, in order to avoid simply judging a reality and to be aware of the complex problematics that confront that reality.

**Leire Vergara:** Practice seems to play a relevant role within this format.

**Irit Rogoff:** I no longer believe in the separation between theory and practice as I may have earlier, as I consider myself a practitioner for whom theory is one of the main tools. Theory is the place from which I start things. I work with a collective called *Freethought*. It is an odd collective because it involves three generations and it is not consistent in terms of our backgrounds. Massimiliano Mollona is an anthropologist, Louise Moreno is an urbanist, Nora Sternfeld is an educator, Adrian Heathfield works with performance, and Stefano Harney does logistics and radical study. What unites us is the desire to take knowledge out of the academy and deal with it in unexpected ways in order to invent challenges for ourselves. After we did a few projects in Germany and Austria, we were invited to co-curate the *Bergen Assembly*, The Norwegian Triennial. Bergen is a small city, but it has quite established art institutions, an art academy, museums, and art galleries, and the artist community is also quite large and supportive in various ways. We decided to focus on the notion of "infrastructure", for two reasons. One of them was related to the idea that we are "infrastructural beings", meaning that many of the possibilities and conditions that we live in are determined by infrastructure. Besides this, infrastructures are supposed to be neutral, efficient, dedicated to the delivery of resources, the control of social dynamics, etc. We departed from this "neutrality" in order to reach further meanings of this notion, exploring the subjectivities and affective textures of it or, as Adrian put it, "sensate infrastructures". The project was very exploratory because we all come from different areas and methodologies and the way we got organised was that everybody had to produce a chapter of this exploration. One thing that we did together was to set up a city seminar in Bergen that lasted for the period of the two years of preparation for the Triennial. So, every six weeks two of us went to Bergen,

so we all had the opportunity to work together in different moments. We chose a text and a problematic and the sessions were held only in civic institutions like the public library, the Literature House, etc. The sessions were completely open to the city, people had to register online and all the readings were accessible online. No one was obliged to come to all the sessions, but we persuaded most people to do this and over two years we managed to build a foundation in the city to think about infrastructure. It was very satisfying to come together every six weeks for a full day and work with the kind of intensity similar to the one that we had in *Curatorial/Knowledge* at the beginning with a group that was not at all used to working like this. Our task, firstly, was to convince the seminar of the importance of the problematic, and, secondly, to take them through a text. I taught a wonderful seminar with Stefano Harney in which we used Foucault's text *What is Critique?* We took the famous sentence in which Foucault says, "We don't want to be governed thusly" and Harney changed it into "We don't want to be accessed thusly". Then we read the whole text from the perspective of 'access', which placed us within contemporary neoliberal culture and through all the mediums by which we are captured. The whole process was fascinating. We all learnt a lot while we were going along. At the end, we organised an Infrastructure Summit for the opening, which Adrian Heathfield organised as a performance piece. We were the actors, he was the director, but we weren't fully aware of it. There were lectures in the morning, group discussions in the afternoon, sometimes a lecture in the afternoon. In the middle of all this, we had two-hour lunches and it was these moments that turned themselves into the core of the summit. Two artists whose practice is cooking contributed with the menu, and three hundred people sat at these long tables and talked for hours about what they heard in the morning, and that became the summit, not the lectures.

**Leire Vergara:** So was this Adrian's performative proposal?

**Irit Rogoff:** He didn't propose it. He just did it. This conjunction between the performative and the seminar was quite unique. After the evening lectures over the two preparatory years, we also hosted a dinner for the city. We borrowed a public art space and we invited a special guest to talk about what we had been studying in the morning but in a much more open and accessible way. Those city dinners could go up to hundred and fifty people. What I learnt from this exercise is to revisit things through different formats. During the whole process, the problem remained the notion of infrastructure. We discussed this, while creating a complex set of infrastructures. In the end, the tension between the "talking about" and "inventing in" is what gave the project its own life. After all these activities, we finished with a gigantic party for the whole Triennial. I was sitting there and some people approached me to tell me how important the seminar was

for them, that the seminar was followed by hundreds of people who were not present in the room. Then I realised that beyond the spectacle, what you want to remain behind is people engaged in this speculative thinking, beyond the moment of exposure.

**Leire Vergara:** The Infrastructure Summit reminds me a lot to the project *EL CONTRATO* that I organised between 2013 and 2015 with my colleagues from Bulegoa z/b. In this case, the project was developed through the commitment of more than 20 people together with the four of us at Bulegoa to meet every fifteen days for a year at Azkuna Zentroa (the institution that produced this project) and to read, study and speculate together around the notion of the “contract”. We set up a reading group on it and prepared a bibliography. The sessions were moderated by two of us to bring out different crossovers between our different practices and backgrounds, which were performance for Isabel de Naverán, Social Theory for Beatriz Cavia, Art Criticism for Miren Jaio, and curating for myself. The group of readers was quite mixed, including students, artists, young curators, dancers, choreographers, but also retired and unemployed people, civil servants, etc. During the process of reading, we had two moments, one before August when we broke for summer holidays and then from September until April when we finished. In the first period, one of the members, Manoli, a civil servant working at a local tax office and who was about to retire, was complaining about the texts we were providing, arguing that they all came from the same field, poststructuralism. She claimed that she had already read these texts when she was young and she encouraged us to search for other references. This comment made us completely change not only the reading list, but also the format, and in September the reading group transformed into a writing group. We came up with a series of exercises that we ended up trying out in this context, and thus a collective practice in between reading and writing progressively developed. Manoli stayed with us till the end and she was one of the most engaged participants.

**Irit Rogoff:** I understand her point. It relates to a current initiative that I am at the moment engaging with that we have called *Advanced Practices*, which may substitute the term *Curatorial/Knowledge* in the near future. What it really conveys is a shift of working from inherited knowledges, meaning with all that we have inherited (the texts we have read, the historical events we have lived, different expertise knowledges...) towards a notion of working *from conditions* —not about conditions, but from conditions. This is opening up a real stream of thought for me. For example, taking into account that the world around us is one of extreme precarity at every level, in terms of security, economy, professional continuity, etc. we cannot use stable knowledge in order to explore this precarious condition. We have to work from the circumstances and decide what knowledge has the capacity to engage with our precarity. For example, what knowledge is

able to think of itself as precarious in order to be engaged with today's conditions of security, financialisation, managerialism, algorithmic culture, anything that is determining our lives right now. This is a really big shift, something that is going to directly influence the relation between all the people involved in the project —teachers, students, visitors— creating an immediate proximity with the subjects of study because these conditions affect us directly. The group that we have already set up is trying to understand what *Advanced Practices* are and we have been joined in it by twenty to thirty wonderful thinkers, all struggling with similar issues.

**Leire Vergara:** Is this a self-organised group?

**Irit Rogoff:** It is a self-organised think tank. We all work in institutions and research groups and we have realised that institutions such as universities, museums, or research institutes instrumentalise knowledge for their own expansion. So we have decided to articulate what we have identified as *Advanced Practices*, ones that refuse easy capture within regimes of knowledge evaluation. We will characterise them and will produce a vocabulary in order to expand ways of valuing such new work within official evaluations of research. Evaluators do not have the terms of breadth of understanding of the work going on all around us, since it does not conform to old disciplines of fields of research. We will therefore have to provide them with the tools to do this. In this sense, it implies a real intervention in thinking “knowledge”.

**Leire Vergara:** Is this an intervention within the institution in order to undo the institution itself?

**Irit Rogoff:** It is an intervention in a whole range of institutions, because it is relevant for museums, universities, research institutions and, to a certain extent, also for NGOs; in other words, for anyone who works with knowledge production. It is mainly directed at keeping knowledge from being immediately packaged, rated and evaluated. In a way, it is geared towards the culture of evaluation that is dominating our lives more and more. Brian Massumi has just come out with a new book called *99 Theses on the Re-evaluation of Value* in which he starts by saying that value has for too long been in the hands of the wrong people, and what we have to do now is take up an understanding of value for ourselves. I identify with this completely.

**Leire Vergara:** This economy of evaluation is something that is quite dramatically affecting education in Britain but also elsewhere, determining which courses and subjects should be taught and which should not, what is profitable or useful for the economy and what is not.

**Irit Rogoff:** Exactly. Discarding all that is experimental, exploratory, any study that does not result in something concrete. In this case, the structure that we have initiated is performatively quite formal and rigid. It is going to produce a white paper. This implies an absolute formal equation of a group of stakeholders intervening in a field. It has to be precise, it has to be specific about the field and about the terminology that applies to it. It is fascinating as it is a real critical input that has a discipline impulse, but again, going back to the beginning of our conversation, it will be done through studying together.

**Leire Vergara:** Is reading together one of your methodologies?

**Irit Rogoff:** There are different generations, different stakeholders and practitioners at every meeting, which takes place over two days. Sometimes there is an inspiring text in the background such as the one I mentioned by Brian Massumi. We work together on how to characterise this notion of *Advanced Practices*. We talk about it all together and then we break into small groups to focus more specifically on different aspects, on new terms. After that, we come back together again and try and merge what we are doing.

**Leire Vergara:** But what exactly do you mean by *Advanced Practices*? How are you characterising this term so far?

**Irit Rogoff:** *Advanced Practices* is a term that tries to get away from a rigid understanding of artistic research, trying to allow for other possible relations between theory and practice. We want to approach practices that invent their own methodologies of research, that produce multiple positions, that avoid being illustrative. In some cases, artistic research has been applied to address a problem through the design of an artistic project. This has often produced an illustrative approach to the unpacking of the problem. We are interested in a set of practices that take up a problem through a multiplicity of positions, methodologies, materials. My collaborator Florian Schneider and I were working recently and suddenly we realised something quite significant. The reason we find reading radical Black Study, authors like Fred Moten, Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers... is because that is what they are doing, they are doing *Advanced Practices*. What they do never settles anywhere; their subject, their materials, their methodologies are unknown, everything is set up to talk to everything else around an urgency. It unsettles knowledge, unsettles the reader. The urgency is the legacy of racial violence against black people, but it affects readers far beyond, making them see how limited their understanding of the basis of knowledge is, of how to know and how to make political claims through what they know.

**Leire Vergara:** They are producing a new field through the condemnation of that violence and thus claim a new position which empowers them.

**Irit Rogoff:** It is a position that claims that something happens in the world, even if we can't name it, trace it or explain it. This is related to Deleuze, in the sense that it lives out the effects of that happening. However, they are doing this in ways that Deleuze could have not dreamt of, not purely through what European philosophy led a radical thinker like Deleuze to, but through an attentiveness to every texture, every sound, every smell that might have meaning for those affected.

**Leire Vergara:** I think they are also challenging the notion of identity politics and consequently the ideological conditions of that notion.

**Irit Rogoff:** I completely agree, and they are for us a model for what we want to characterise as *Advanced Practices*. It is not the only model we are looking at, there are also specific artistic practices, art works, activist forms, NGOs, organisational formats taken up by cultural actors —a whole gamut of inputs.

**Leire Vergara:** However, I don't think the problem rests on the ability for art to invent, research, or enable multiple positions in relation to a problematic. The problem, perhaps, has to do with the fact that artistic research has been instrumentalised in certain ways, therefore limiting the capacities of art to invent, investigate...

**Irit Rogoff:** Exactly, art is able to allow radical explorations and investigations to occur, and this is normally the case, but its potentiality has been reduced lately, precisely because it is not easy to evaluate. With our expanded project, we want to create a congenital impossibility for evaluation, because evaluative mechanisms reduce the potentiality of artistic research. The other thing is that *Advanced Practices* are constantly advancing, they are dynamic, they are moving forward and, therefore, the lack of stillness of their own form of study should be acknowledged. I am realising now how useful it is for me to be rehearsing all these questions with you. We have known each other for a long time and we are now able to consider the things that disenchant us, that make us aware of the limitations in order to lead us to the next thing.

**Leire Vergara:** I think part of the problem is our entrapment with protocols. I was telling you about Manoli, our reader from *EL CONTRATO*, who was actually at the beginning questioning our way of leading the reading group. She was in fact challenging the format to move away from the protocols of teaching. Thanks to her, the group immersed itself in a more speculative mood through the invention of a battery of exercises.

**Irit Rogoff:** The problem comes when one intersects with institutional imperatives towards visitors, evaluation processes, being legible in order to be funded... The issue is how to deal with the system, but producing an alternative to it. For this moment, to produce an alternative system by which the significance of knowledge is marked is hugely important. We will be working for two years with these concerns.

**Leire Vergara:** What will be the outcome after these two years?

**Irit Rogoff:** I am writing a book titled *Becoming Research* and, as I mentioned earlier, we will produce a white paper together with a vocabulary book in which a terminology will be proposed and defined at least by two thinkers, writers. Each term will be defined by different understandings, so it will be contested rather than defining.

**Leire Vergara:** This contested vocabulary reminds me again of the early stages of *Curatorial/Knowledge* in which the term "curatorial" was examined by the group for a long period of time. One of the outcomes of that prolonged time was the book *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* edited by Jean-Paul Martinon. This is a collection of multiple entries to the term "curatorial" aimed at exploring the conditions of what you have referred to as an event of knowledge. We can see that book as an attempt to open rather than close the definition of a term. In my opinion, approaches of this kind confirm the power of the disagreement between multiple voices when trying to define a field, an institution. The potentiality of this type rests on the myriad of perspectives and procedures, sometimes even antagonistic ones.

**Irit Rogoff:** Gavin Butt, my colleague and friend from the Department of Visual Cultures until very recently when he has left for the University of Sussex, and myself have written a book on seriousness. We were very much interested in this notion, but in completely different ways. In the end, each of us wrote half a book and then we had a long conversation in which we shared our perspectives. For example, I had a very interesting experience last year in Sardinia. I was invited to give the opening talk of the Gramsci Campo Sud. This is a Gramsci project held in public space and my talk took place in the middle of a park in which children were running, screaming, falling, mothers were going after them, dogs were barking, bicycles passed by... In the middle of all this, there was a little circle of chairs and a podium with a table and a chair from where I was supposed to talk. I didn't know what to do.

**Leire Vergara:** Did you have a microphone at least?



**Irit Rogoff:** A microphone and a translator. Then I apologised for the heavy theoretical talk I was about to give, but I pointed to the fact that they had to understand that in the neoliberal nightmare that we are all living out now, seriousness is my only weapon. As soon as they heard the word WEAPON, everybody sat up straight and paid attention. I really believe that seriousness is our only weapon, because the whole neoliberal configuration is to take away seriousness from value, as essential to value, as a form of commitment and urgency, and replace it with quantifiable data. The resurrection of seriousness is one of the few critical things we have left.

\*This conversation was recorded in London, on the 2nd of August of 2018.