

Practice in the Flesh of Theory: Art, Research, and the Fine Arts PhD

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ABSTRACT *In what follows I offer an anecdotal engagement with the Fine Arts PhD at a moment when it is just emerging in North America. I argue that doctoral activities that cross theory/practice lines, at their best, offer a unique opportunity to rethink what constitutes academic knowledge production and assessment by necessitating that these lines be porous and responsive to each other. This reconfiguration, to the extent that it calls into question both the subject and object of knowledge, is one that benefits from the insights of feminism in its “new materialist” incarnation.*

KEYWORDS *Research-creation; New materialism; Feminism; Interdisciplinarity; Fine Arts PhD; Anecdotal theory*

RÉSUMÉ *Dans ce qui suit, je m'engage de façon anecdotique avec le doctorat d'arts plastiques au moment où ce dernier vient d'apparaître en Amérique du Nord. Je soutiens que les activités du doctorat d'arts plastiques peuvent mettre en doute la distinction entre la pratique et la théorie, et qu'elles offrent donc l'occasion de repenser ce qui constitue le savoir et l'évaluation académique. Cette reconfiguration de la pratique et la théorie, dans la mesure où remet en cause à la fois le sujet et l'objet de la connaissance, s'appuie surtout sur le féminisme et sur ce qu'on appelle le « nouveau féminisme matérialiste ».*

MOTS CLÉS *La recherche-crétion; Le nouveau matérialisme; Le féminisme; L'interdisciplinarité; Le doctorat és beaux arts; La théorie anecdotique*

Anecdotal theorizing

Abstract, disembodied theory, theory in no place or time,
dreams of being the last word; [in contrast] occasional,
anecdotal theory, *theory in the flesh of practice*,
speaks with the desire for a response.

—Gallop, 2002, p. 164 (emphasis added)

This article considers what is at stake in the current reconfiguration of artistic and academic labour in the United States and Canada under the auspices of the Fine Arts PhD. This issue is of particular relevance given that, while they have long existed in the UK, Scandinavia, and Australia, Fine Arts doctoral programs are only just now emerging with any seriousness in North America. Moreover, debates surrounding such

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programs tackle important questions, such as: How can art-as-research, research-creation and artistic knowledge production inform how we understand the practices of the humanities, the sciences and social sciences? What are the modes of practice and engagement traditionally embedded within the discursive field we call “art,” that, when taken seriously, contribute to important re-conceptualizations of the North American university system? (These re-conceptualizations include those surrounding the “digital humanities” and problem-based knowledge production, as well as interdisciplinary knowledge coalitions often branded under the banner of cross-departmental “synergy.”) And why, other than institutional pressure, should we produce a Fine Arts PhD—a doctor of philosophy—rather than the more traditionally practice-based designation of a Doctor of Visual Arts? In other words, what is at stake in proposing artistic labour as a branch of philosophic discourse? Linked to this, in the context of the humanities and social sciences, what marks the limit of the Fine Arts PhD? Where do the humanities, sciences, and arts meet and clash around the issues of their language and utility? What kinds of labour can be said to qualify for doctoral level assessment and what kinds of labour cannot? The following article fleshes out some of the ways to navigate this territory and the stakes that lay in the questions themselves, the ways we ask them, and the provisional answers that we might propose. This will be done both anecdotally and theoretically, drawing on feminism as a central rubric.

The role of the personal voice in feminist criticism—read in, but not reducible to, the autobiographical, confessional, situated, motivated, interested, anecdotal, and performative—is to assert a location and production of value tied to those material and phantasm-like locations we call the “I” and the “me.” It is a voice that champions the home as a location from which to speak, whether that home is understood as the private and domestic, the personal and cathected, or the location of a political identity (Loveless, 2010). In this article, I speak from my homes as a scholar, an artist, a teacher, and a maker in order to explore the intersections of practice and theory in the context of the Fine Arts PhD. In speaking politically, and diffractively, from my locations within and without the academy, my voice echoes with a host of voices in feminist theory and practice.¹ I start, then, with feminism as a mode of attention, political commitment, and theoretical engagement for emerging questions surrounding artistic knowledge production. In attempting to ground this work in feminist *theorypractice*, I am indebted to feminist psychoanalytic and literary theorist Jane Gallop (2002), in particularly her “Anecdotal Theory” from which my epigraph is taken.

The title, “Practice in the Flesh of Theory,” inverts Gallop’s “theory in the flesh of practice.” It does this in part to signal that, while I am an ally in Gallop’s feminist project of championing a “theorypractice” that is grounded and enmeshed in the everyday, her alignment of “practice” and “the flesh,” if taken at face value, re-enshrines a set of binaries that I am concerned with questioning. Instead, I pair “theory” with “flesh” as a way of opening up the question of what we mean by each.² While many of the debates surrounding the Fine Arts PhD focus on how we might think of artistic praxis as a mode of theory-making, in this article, it will be suggested that the other axis of this relationship is equally important. If the notion of “theory,” broadly speaking, is not itself opened up and reconfigured, these debates threaten to rearticulate an inherited

hierarchy in which the aim, for all practices, is to rise to the level of theoretical knowledge production or “research.” I am arguing for the value of philosophically-based doctoral training for artists, while at the same time suggesting that such practices work not only to reconfigure our artistic practices, but also to bring attention to theory-making, itself, as a messy, fleshy practice. In this, I draw on an understanding of the flesh posited in the work of phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The flesh, for Merleau-Ponty (1969), is meant to invoke both the fleshiness of a body and the deep web of materiality surrounding that body, of which that body is a part (Braidotti, 2001). Here, the constructed binarism in which “we” autonomously inhabit “our bodies” and, from this location, act upon an external and often passive world is challenged. Further, and paramount to this article, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh addresses itself to those elements not commonly considered material: thought and language. As Gary Madison (1999) reminds us,

Merleau-Ponty rejected the view that words are mere signs and that language itself is essentially nothing more than semiotic code. ... for Merleau-Ponty *language was the very flesh of what we call the ‘world.’* (p. 179, emphasis added).

This gloss on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh alludes to the importance of wresting “language” away from the frameworks of a “purely” discursive turn and towards the multiplicity of a transversal materialist perspective that challenges the binary split between “theory” and “practice.”³ Similarly, this article attempts to wrench “theory” from its inherited alignment with a disembodied, abstract rigour that is somehow separate from, yet applied to, “practice.” This is achieved here through the use of the compound neologism *theorypractice*—on the model of Donna Haraway’s (1997) groundbreaking *naturecultures*—in order to hold together practice and theory in a way that reminds us that the latter is, itself, a “making practice,” one that is embodied and aesthetic.

Gallop’s (2002) work on anecdotal theory offers one way into such a *theorypractice* (Loveless, 2011). Anecdotal theory insists not only on pulling the taint of the explicitly local, fleshy, embodied, and personal into the formal realm of academic knowledge formation, but also on an excavational practice through which we see that very “taint” as always already embedded within the loftiest registers of the academy. In this way, anecdotal theory opens theory-making up as a materialist category, which, given Gallop’s inclinations, is grounded in the psychoanalytic notions of transference and cathexis.

Cathexis refers to a libidinal investment in a person, place, idea, or thing. Importantly, however, cathexis is never an investment in the economic sense of the word; that is, the choice to invest is never, psychoanalytically speaking, a free choice. Instead, cathexis is better thought of as a kind of force. One does not cathect an object, so much as find oneself knotted up in a cathected relay through which meaning, identity, and value emerge. Anecdotal theory pulls one into the kind of relation implied by cathexis by insisting that the locations that we theorize from are always grounded in what moves us most deeply, in that which we are driven by and to which we are driven. In acknowledging the importance of cathexis, anecdotal theory reconfigures modes of accountability in theory making, as well as its very form. Thus, the work of any anecdotal theory, including the experimental work of this article, is both a working with

and working through in which identity is at stake.⁴ This working through is not an analysis in which answers are found; it is the work of an enmeshed and complex tracking of those situated webs we call “affect.” A grounding in anecdote is then understood not as the return to the fullness of an “I,” but instead as the negotiation through the relay of what Gallop might call “the ear of the Other” (Derrida, 1998), an ear that invites dissent, debate, and friction.

An anecdotal accounting

This article is motivated in part by the question of where one might look to make strong ethical choices as artistic, intellectual, social beings. Accordingly, I am led to question what it means to answer or ask a question from “within” rather than from “without”; what it means to assert an approach in which the cathected and the situated are valued rather than disavowed. In this, what is at stake is the status of the subject-object of knowledge: what gets to count as knowledge, where, when, and how? I turn, then, to a story that has implications for a more broadly located ethics of pedagogical practice: my personal experience in choosing a PhD program—one that cannot, in any sense, be mistaken for a Fine Arts PhD—and in configuring my labour as an artist, in and along with my “traditional” PhD labour.

In short, my trajectory was as follows: in the first year of my MFA (2001), I realized that there were theoretical questions enmeshed with my material explorations that I wanted to work with in ways that the program’s faculty were neither prepared nor trained to accommodate. The kinds of art theory that circulated during my arts training drew heavily on Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and their interlocutors; however, at the studio level, engagements with the terms “deconstruction,” “performativity,” “the Other,” et certa, were limited to a kind of art theory lingo that had little to do with the intellectual commitments of the scholars who stood, emblematic and impervious, behind these terms. Instead of the transmission of ideas in their process, their porousness, their contextual care—that is, instead of an understanding of theory as a “making practice”—the legitimating function of “art speak” circulated as a kind of super-egoic task-master which one could bend to or resist. Encounters were *de facto* instrumentalized within a commodity market towards which “art speak” was put to use, and in which primacy was put on material skill within or between clearly defined artistic media. These are, of course, simplifications and generalizations, but for a specific purpose: not to account for every faculty member and course I encountered during my MFA but, rather, to account for the structure of the MFA and for the kind of labour it is traditionally designed to support.

It was in this context that I petitioned my MFA institution to allow me to apply to and complete an MA in contemporary art history, criticism, and theory at the same time as my MFA, as well as petitioning what was to be my MA institution to accept my application, even though I was already enrolled in a graduate program. This wasn’t easy. After all, within the traditional organization of the North American University, art history and studio programs are often located on opposite sides of campus. Furthermore, within these programs the long fought-over lines between artist, curator, historian, critic, and theorist are often drawn in such a way as to limit the kinds of works that are possible. Even if housed together, however, participants in these pro-

grams are generally trained not only not to comprehend the language and value of each other's approaches, but also to have competing hierarchies of value based on these differences. During my training, I regularly encountered this dynamic as some form of practice/theory divide in which theorists were given the "explanatory gloves of gold" and practitioners the "idiot-savant access to genius," to the detriment of both.

After convincing both institutions that this move was essential for my work, I pursued both the MFA and MA simultaneously. If I had been doing this today, I might have gone directly into a Fine Arts PhD, but as there were, to my knowledge, no such programs in North America at that time, I completed my two masters and then entered a program that can in no way be mistaken for practice-led, practice-based program, organized around research-creation practices. Indeed, the program I attended is known as a bastion of "high theory," and, as such, has historically rejected any practice other than the book-length dissertation as a legitimate final product of doctoral labour. This was nonetheless the most interesting choice for me intellectually, politically, and personally. It was the first non-disciplinary humanities doctoral program in North America, it created the first official position within feminist theory in the United States, and it encouraged doctoral work that was "problem-based," a self-driven and self-legitimizing practice familiar to me from my interdisciplinary MFA labour.

In hindsight, it is clear to me that learning the practice—the *medium*—of the book-length dissertation has been invaluable, and it is one of the forms of making that I plan to engage in for the rest of my life. The book, as any academic can attest, is a fascinating medium and a gratifying, if infuriating, labour practice with its own set of mutable conventions. While normative in the humanities, however, it is only one form of practice. And, as with all media, the book lends itself more gracefully to the exploration of some ideas than others, a fact that alternative dissertating practices, such as digital dissertations, insist we confront.⁵ It is in the space between this encounter with the book and the specific way that I approached my PhD theory-making, alongside the artistic and curatorial practices that I was engaged in, that I began to think about debates surrounding the Fine Arts PhD, curious about the ways that it asks us to reconfigure interdisciplinary pedagogy in a way that neither eschews disciplinary dedication and specificity, nor simply creates a new norm of practice, a new to jettison the old.

In considering these debates, I was not interested in the imperative to jump on a degree inflation bandwagon as a way to get access to greater funds for students who, rather than engaging in a differently inflected branch of inquiry, would simply produce an expanded version of MFA labour—that is, an MFA show complemented by an explanatory thesis, a common practice with distinct subject and object lines. While I have a full understanding of the need for funding in the arts and of the value of the label "research" for acquiring such funds, what primarily interested me in these debates was to see the political and intellectual commitments of project-based or question-driven knowledge production extend beyond the comfortable frames of a now common interdisciplinary axis. When one speaks of conventional interdisciplinary practice, this generally means two disciplinary frameworks being brought together that inhabit the same general school or division of knowledge, such as video and performance in the arts, or anthropology and history in the humanities. Often, in this

strictly interdisciplinary model, moderate differences are brought together to create a new comprehensibility. I came instead to think about my doctoral practices in terms more closely linked to what Rosi Braidotti (1994; 2002) would call “nomadology”: a multiplicity of responsive practices that demand situated accountability rather than allegiance to discipline. If a discipline can be said to be constituted by what it excludes, and inter-disciplines by how they couple the central concerns of two or more disciplinary practices, then what I am arguing for is something different. Though interdisciplinary pedagogy can and has been read as a situation that demands a set of “depth” analyses from within discretely articulated disciplines that are then brought together, it can also be read as a structural dislocation of fixed loci of knowledge in favour of a situated imperative that engages in both a responsive and “response-able” dialogue between sources, inspirations, discourses, and stakes (Coles & Derfert; Klein, 2001; Moran, 2002).

In this context, it is worth noting art historian James Elkins’ 2009 “Artists With PhDs: On The New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art,” the first book on this topic directly addressing a North American context. For Elkins, one of the central threats of a Fine Arts PhD is identitarian:

[by] turning artists into scholars, and requiring that they produce impossible amounts of writing (p. vii) ... art as a whole may become even more academic and intellectual—more involved with theory, possibly even more alienated from skill and technique. (p. x)

Attached to this concern is the question of disciplinary specificity and sanctity:

[The Fine Arts PhD] makes art into a hothouse flower. It makes it into philosophy, or literary criticism (p. vii). ... These new programs deserve better: they deserve a language that is at once full, capacious, accurate, and not borrowed from other disciplines. ... [These appropriated theories] may be widely useful, but [they] will not provide the *indigenous accounting* that is required, according to the logic of the university, of every field. (Elkins, 2009, p. xi, emphasis added)

Assertions like this bring to mind experiments such as Lucien Clergue’s 1979 doctoral dissertation, *Langage des Sables*, produced under the direction of Roland Barthes entirely in the medium of photography (Rowe, 1995)⁶. While something like *Langage des Sables* —a PhD that didn’t have a single word in it—might be what Elkins has in mind in calling for “indigenous” PhD practices for the arts, and while I am, admittedly, interested in gestures such as this and the challenge that they propose to doctoral level assessment, I want to respectfully disagree with what I read as Elkins’ fundamentally disciplinary approach. Rather than artistic identity and indigeneity, the Fine Arts PhD, at its most interesting, serves doctoral level work that experiments with inherited formal constraints and challenges the lines delineating legitimate disciplinary labour. In this way the Fine Arts PhD contributes to new thinking in inter- and non-disciplinary pedagogy by insisting that we ask ourselves what gets to count as legitimate knowledge production, where, when, and how (a challenge, to my mind, that marks it as a deeply feminist project).

While this seems clear to me now, it is debates, such as the one above, that I struggled with, in my move from MA/MFA to PhD. To begin with, I found myself insisting that, as in the work I produced for my MA and MFA, the writing practices of my PhD and my ongoing commitment to artistic practice were distinct. The importance of this lay in my having been trained in a model of knowledge production in which philosophy takes charge of and frames art, a hierarchy of knowledge endemic to the North American university structure.⁷ What I wanted to resist, above all, was an illustrative framework in which my dissertation explained, justified, or described my artistic practice, or conversely, an artistic practice that translated my theoretical research into artistic form. It was crucial to me that the relationship between the two—my proposed manuscript and my artistic practice—not be programmatic. I didn't want either to become, in any simple sense, the object of the other.

My insistence notwithstanding, by the end of my PhD qualifying process, I found that the practices that I wanted to keep apart were entangling themselves in new ways, and around new questions. I realized that it was precisely an approach that refused the book form as artistic medium, and the dissertation as artistic genre, that was keeping the seeming binary of appropriated artist-object, or explanatory theorist-subject, in place. In considering these disciplinary variances as differences of medium—both plastic, both theoretical—the questions became: Which medium or form does this exploration want to take? How does it want to be molded? Viewed? Contemplated?⁸

To offer one example of how my practices and theories were entangling themselves in each other, in 2009 I was invited to produce a conversation-based wall drawing at the Kentler International Drawing Space in New York, which I called "Short Statements on Artistic Knowledge Production." For this project, I invited twenty-five international artists and theorists to send me a statement and instructional performance action on the topic of "The Artist's Knowledge." I performed each of these actions in the gallery space, videotaping them with an iPhone attached to my body. With each performance-action I became a pawn in a debate staged between different approaches to the topic and different modes of attention and action, some slow, some quick; some humorous, some contemplative; some painful, some fun. Upon completion, I traced the marks left by the actions on the gallery walls in Silverpoint and made a small hole at each point two lines intersected, creating an intricate process-based document marking the event of each action. Finally, during the exhibition, a book was made available with the collected statements and actions. This, along with a DVD loop of the performances themselves, invited viewers to consider the question of artistic knowledge production in an open-ended fashion; to read, watch, linger, and meditate on the delicate traces, making archeological links between the statements, actions, and the visual field left behind.

Practically speaking, this project informed the work of my written dissertation by pushing at the limits of traditional pedagogy, challenging its inherited linearity and replacing it with material and rhizomatic investigation.⁹ It was, however, just one of many such explorations, and though some of the artistic projects I worked on during my PhD found their way into the dissertation as anecdotes, this one did not. Instead,

it stands here as an example of one of the practices I engaged in as a way of inhabiting and making porous the theoretical world of a dissertation on the question of pedagogy: how we come to know, how we come to learn, and how what we come to know and learn comes to matter.

As I progressed in my PhD labour, what I realized was that attention to pedagogy as daily practice—as an articulating force of the social, political, and aesthetic—was not only central to my artistic and academic projects, but also, in hindsight, the logical extension of both my MA and my MFA work. Instead of finding myself doing a theoretical dissertation on a completely separate topic, I found myself, over the course of my six years of doctoral labour, on the very same path, only working in different media. Although I had fully intended my projects to remain distinct, the deeper I inhabited each of them, the closer they became. I say this not to subscribe to the popular figure of artistic and academic coherence and identity, but to invoke something less rational and recognizable—something closer to the level of the psychoanalytic drive. While writing my dissertation, this drive lured me responsively between practices: extensive periods spent with books, alternating with extensive periods spent at performance festivals or residencies, which, in turn, alternated with extensive periods spent ensconced in writing and in conversation. It was through navigating the different modes of attention, literacies, canons, and voices demanded by each of these practices that I developed my ideas about the pedagogical both as cathected space and material practice. By negotiating the, often uncomfortable, differences between these practices, I discovered the importance of speaking with difference and dissent.

Molded in and with conversation, and in and with performance, in the end my dissertation performed a sort of writing marked by multi-vocal and multimodal registers, by shifting in and out of variously coded vocalities, literacies and disciplinary methodologies. While inhabiting the strictures of social convention—i.e., what counts as legitimate (writing) behaviour, where, when and how, versus what is too personal, where, when, and why—I worked to bring attention to something between what Haraway (2004, 2010) calls the “worlding” and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call the “hacceities” constitutive of each disciplinary practice. In this respect, my doctoral labour—both artistic and academic—was deeply indebted to the feminist new materialist perspective.

New materialism—a term attributed by some to Rosi Braidotti and by others to Manuel de Landa—is organized around a central presupposition: that our world is not divided into the inert and the active; instead, it is made up of “various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations” (Bennett, 2004, p. 354). It is worth noting that the “new” in “new materialism” is contentious. Many of those who are associated with the term have been around for a long time and might argue that there is nothing “new,” in any progressive sense, happening here (for instance, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Isabel Stengers, Jane Bennett, and Karen Barad, though younger scholars such as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Petra Hroch, and Natasha Myers belong in this list as well). To my mind, the “new” is meant simply to distinguish this work from the work of historical materialism, as it is traditionally conceived. A feminist new materi-

alist perspective notes the clear and often determinist relationship between subject and object in the historical materialist view; in a new materialist context, attention to material specificity opens onto dense webs of interconnectivity in which the relations between body, space, and psyche are never a priori determinable. Instead, we find ourselves in the realm of what Donna Haraway (1991) refers to as the material-semiotic—a non-reductive enmeshment of modes, such as practice and theory, mind and body, private and public, that we are often trained to think of as separate. Rather than any neat progressivist figuration of the “new,” what is intended by the prefix is an awareness of objects and things, disciplines and practices, as operating always already in relation; not as “out there,” waiting to be interpreted, rehearsed, and transmitted, but as elements in a constitutive dance of which we are a part.

This perspective invites us to build on post-structuralism’s discursive insights, while attending to the specificity of lived encounters, visibilities, and materialities; it invites a renewed, nuanced attention to some of feminism’s core concerns, particularly the challenging of binaries (i.e., binary logics, oppositional thinking), intersectionality (i.e., the terrain of human differences), and the role of the personal (i.e., the located, autobiographical, and situated).¹⁰ In the context of the Fine Arts PhD, it works to remake questions surrounding artistic knowledge production, the shifting university landscape, and the political implications of both, suggesting a mode of interdisciplinarity that crosses practice/theory lines, not to instrumentalize one for the other, but rather to acknowledge the politics of asserting theory in practice and practice in theory, without collapsing one into the other. I understand this reworking of the relation of theory to practice as the strongly feminist and materialist underpinnings of both my doctoral labour and the pedagogy of doctoral level practice/theory programs more broadly.

Participatory dissent

During the fourth year of my doctoral work, I stumbled upon an exhibition and panel organized by Dutch philosopher and curator Henk Slager at New York’s apexart gallery (December 2009).¹¹ Under the heading *Nameless Science*, seven Fine Arts PhD candidates exhibited a variety of PhD projects in progress, paired with a panel event at the Cooper Union School of Art on the theme of “The Significance of Artistic Research for Art Education.” Most interesting to me during the panel was the insistence, across the board, on the value and challenge of the practice-led PhD as a dynamic and individualized program of study, in which assessment parameters would need to be reconfigured for each project, despite the potential bureaucratic nightmare. This corresponded with the exhibition’s title, which derived from Giorgio Agamben’s 1975 essay “Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science” (later reprinted in his 1999 *Potentialities*), and refers to a practice whose rules cannot be known in advance. Accordingly, at stake in the overall event was a re-configuration of the modes of creative intellectual practice commonly called theory-, criticism- and history-making. These processes work in different ways within different disciplinary spaces, to be sure; yet, there is something of the cathected investment traditionally associated with the arts to which this event brought attention. It did this in service of an ethics of knowledge production that might remodel the academy as a location of care and curiosity, and that insists that we learn to work with multiple modes of difference.

On my reading, the exhibition asked that we see the Fine Arts PhD not as an institutional gesture that equates artistic knowledge production with normative university research practices, but rather as one that obliges us to ask how we understand that labour we call “research” in the first place, wherever it is done. True research, it suggested, must be understood as an embedded entanglement that reconfigures all participants in unexpected ways. As an invitation to rethink the stakes of the political as well as the social, this approach to research pays attention to non-reproductive, or queer, models of engagement that impact not only theories of participation and collaboration in the arts, but also pedagogical and disciplinary debates within the humanities and social sciences.¹² These debates centre on conflicting understandings of art’s political possibility, as well as conflicting understandings of what it might mean to think pedagogically. They necessitate a mode of research in which the question emerges responsively from the encounter; an encounter that, at its most fruitful, is characterized by what Anna Tsing (2005) calls “friction.”

Friction, in Tsing’s (2005) idiom, refers to a “zone of awkward engagement” (p. xi) and champions the “unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (p. 4). Tsing’s conceptualization is both extremely poetic and generative for thinking through Fine Arts PhD practice, in which matters of expertise, assessment parameters, and fundamental literacies are necessarily called into question. In what follows, and to conclude, I propose friction as a mode of thinking across and with difference, pairing it with feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s (2005; 2006) conception of an “agonistic” social order. Agonism in Mouffe refers to an affectively grounded conflict of elements both internal to, and between, subjects. Agonism not only speaks to irreconcilable differences between people, disciplines, and practices, but also insists that such differences lie *within* them as well. In so doing, it draws on the role of psychical conflict in psychoanalysis.

It is agonism’s psychoanalytic basis in the conception of working through that readings such as Claire Bishop’s or Grant Kester’s fail to address adequately (Bishop, 2004; Wilson, 2007). These readings take Mouffe to task for her focus on the antagonistic dimension of social interaction. However, while Mouffe’s understanding of the political is inextricably bound to the possibility of antagonism, in a pluralistic democracy it is crucial that this antagonism be *worked through*. The psychoanalytical process of working through, for Mouffe, transforms the Habermasian “friend/enemy” relation into a contingent hegemonic formation; that is, into a “we/they” that respectfully acknowledges the rights and positions of others and recognizes the centrality of dissent (both inter- and intra-subjectively) as an ever-present possibility (Habermas, 1984; Mouffe, 2005). In other words, while a “friend/enemy” relationship works “against” or “beyond,” a “we/they” relationship works “through” and “with” in a way that, as Donna Haraway (2010) would put it, “stays with the trouble.”

Of key importance here is staying with the trouble of disciplinary, affective, and structural differences, allowing for their *friction*. This, I argue, is one of the central possibilities of the Fine Arts PhD and similar institutional locations. Respectful dissent piques my curiosity, as do models of democratic order predicated on conflicting values and opinions. As Mouffe (2007) remarks, “in a democratic polity, conflicts and con-

frontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism” (p. 14). This pluralism creates a contact zone, a space that welcomes asymmetrical power relations in the exploration of *timeplace* specificity, tangibility, and embodied practice.¹³

I am fundamentally interested in the daily labour and daily play of *makingthinking* practices, whatever the form, whether social, political, electronic, sculpted, painted, performed, or imagined. What matters is our willingness to engage the multiple ways in which this “making” is a fundamentally situated, relational construct; one that entangles us in relations of debt in ways for which we can never account, despite always being willing to be accountable. This accountability is one that emerges not only at the level of disciplinary transversality, but also at the level of an agonistic personal practice open to friction. Working and weaving together the lines between not only disciplinary factions and political ideologies, but also between thinking and making, art and life, the personal and the political, the Fine Arts PhD, rather than crossing putative practice/theory lines, fundamentally reconfigures them in a profoundly feminist way, challenging the myth that the daily practices called “research,” “theory,” “academic,” and “intellectual” labour are the reified other to the “embedded,” “instinctive,” “messy,” “creative” labour of the artist.

The work that I do in the studio called my office, while different in task and form, is no less messy, or mindful, than the work I do in the office I call a studio. The affective engagement, or trance, that I can inhabit when engaging in “artmaking” is not dissimilar to the trance that can grab hold of me when writing. This is not to make facile equivalences, but rather to resist facile accounts of the lived materiality of these practices, and, through this, to bring a political and ethical mode of attention to them (Mouffe 2005, 2006, 2007; Lacan 1997, 2008).

Practice and research are messy and entangled. They are both deeply creative practices that emerge as a kind of thinking that can take many forms. Drawing, for example, can be thought of as a mode of knowledge production based on observation, classification, attention to the irreducible specificity of each object or fold in the field of vision, and translation into a representational or non-representational marking system. Attention to the context-specific, to the irreducibly individual, occurs within and at once with what systematizes and classifies. That is, attention to the individual occurs in the context of translatability, shared language, and the ability to recognize.

In this, I am particularly interested in the drive to know what we don’t know we are driven to know; that is, the drive to map and capture, to know in context, as well as to know in specificity. This interest drives much of my writing, performance, and dialogic installation practices. That said, the aim in thinking art-as-research is not to submit to an instrumentalizing drive in which a dialectic of total knowledge can and will emerge if, for example, we only gather enough data; although, at a certain level this is probably an inescapable utopian desire. Instead, if we take the etymology of “research” seriously—to circle again and again—we are led to think about what it means to link the designation “Doctor of Philosophy” to the stakes of the “competent researcher.” Philosophy, after all, articulates the love (Philos) of wisdom (Sophia), which,

if we follow the latter etymologically, invokes a mind (“Wit”) that is always already a deeply embodied figuration.¹⁴

I’d like to assert, then, that at stake in the call for speaking across and with uncomfortable differences is not only a shift of analysis from the disciplinarily indigenous object or product as pedagogical aim; rather, also at stake are the time, labour, and risk of disciplinary and theoretical difference as a practice of always opening oneself up as the one who does not know. The one who does not fit. The one whose grammar is denied. It is in the care and curiosity of that risk that I see the most interesting feminist possibilities emerging from this institutional crossroads in the academy.

The question—how do we understand the context we are embedded in as we are embedded in it?—is both a reflexive and diffractive exercise that, if nothing else, leads us on a cat’s cradle journey through how to think about understanding and re-understanding what matters to us, where, when, and how. It is a question that brings us back, though not full circle, to the stakes of the Gallop (2002) quotation with which I began, and to a feminist new materialist sensibility conceived more broadly. It is a question that demands that we craft renewed ways of dealing with the practice/theory relations we inherit; of reconfiguring them not as either/or oppositions but as a set of complex relations that require us to ask ourselves how we understand our ecologies of practice, how we *do* our politics, our theory, our “artmaking.” This is what I hope for as we work at configuring these new institutional spaces in the academy.

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Notes

1. The voices to which I am indebted are too numerous to name. That said, here I am drawing in particular on Joan Scott’s germinal essay, “The Evidence of Experience” (1991), Chela Sandova’s work with differentiated/oppositional consciousness in “Methodology of the Oppressed” (2000), and Rosi Braidotti’s call for a nomadic feminism (1994, 2001, 2006). My use of “diffraction” draws on the work of Donna Haraway (1992) and Karen Barad (2007).
2. While such a reworking of Gallop’s sentence helps me refine my stakes, I hasten to add that these stakes are very much in line with Gallop’s overall project. On the distinction between anecdote and autobiography, and for an extended engagement with Gallop’s work on anecdotal theory, see Loveless (2011).
3. On the transversal and its importance for feminist new materialism, see van der Tuin and Dolphijn (2010).
4. “Working Through” is a psychoanalytic concept that refers to the working through of resistances. The practice of working through, as Freud formulates it in his 1914 “Remembering, Repeating and

Working Through,” allows the subject to accept repressed elements and loosen the grip of the repetition compulsion. Important here is that repression is not overcome once the resistance of the ego has been overcome. Instead, unconscious resistance, that which emerges in the repetition compulsion, has to *be addressed by working through and with, not against or beyond*. To work through something is not to get rid of it but to reconfigure one’s relation to it, and it is in this context that I marshal the concept.

5. On the digital humanities and electronic literacies as thought sculptures, see feminist digital theorist Caitlin Fisher (NALD, 2002). I also direct the reader to a more recent piece of Fisher’s that discusses the way her digital dissertation worked to undo inherited practice-theory relations, the transcript of which is available at HASTAC, (2007). See also “The Institute for the Future of the Book” (n.d.).

6. It is important to remember that these disciplinary concerns emerge equally around the written word—as Stephen Watson reminds us, “a listener at Merleau-Ponty’s 1946 defense before the *Société Française de Philosophie* responded, derogatorily, that ‘this philosophy results in a novel!’” (Watson, 2008, p. 127). On this topic see Brad Buckley and John Conomos’ “Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artist, the PhD and the Academy” (2009), and Steven Henry Madoff’s “Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)” (2009).

7. George Smith (2010) speaks to this point by tracing a history of philosophical debate surrounding the relation of artistic praxis to epistemology, suggesting that: were it to get us finally out from under the dialectics of knowledge and aesthetics, the philosophical education of the artist would necessarily entail the philosophy of history, but also the study of history *per se*:

the history of art, yes; but as importantly, the history of ideas, the history of science, and the geopolitical history of the State, as these histories mix with the history of art. Might we then expect philosophy to tumble from its rigged position at the top of epistemology?—that Aristotle’s phallo-perpendicular, pseudo-dialectical hierarchy of knowledge would at last give way to rhizomatic and dialogical relations among history, art, and philosophy? ... That the philosopher knows and the artist makes is one rule of specialization on its way out. (p. 3)

8. I give “agency” here to the exploration not to anthropomorphize it, but rather to suggest the embedded and tangled process of coming into, working through, dancing with, being formed by and forming something out of a set of curiosities and cares, whether it be a book, a seminar, a laboratory experiment, a public intervention, conference, installation, performance, or gallery piece.

9. My dissertation, *Acts of Pedagogy: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Art and Ethics* (Loveless, 2010), argues that how we do our pedagogical thinking and how we live our social and political lives are powerfully intertwined: pedagogy is a political act, and changing how we do pedagogy impacts the ethics of all social practices, including research and scholarship. Central to my dissertation is the argument that pedagogy is not the simple activity of (self-transparent) subjects thinking together in the classroom. It is, instead, the event of being visited by something other, something unexpected, messy, improper, queer. Accordingly, I deliberately structure a different rhetorical voice and archive for each of the dissertation’s chapters. These voices resonate with and across each other, each mobilizing different pedagogical figures: (1) the feminist theorist and teacher, (2) the visual cultural theorist, (3) the ethnographic researcher, (4) the literary theorist/textual close reader, and (5) the artist-theorist. Through this genre-play I ask how we can be attentive to irreconcilable difference in productive ways, the kinds of differences that come from working across the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. I do this in order to build towards a theory of “participatory dissent” as a practice of speaking across and with affective and disciplinary difference.

10. In challenging and reconfiguring inherited binaries, new materialist feminism works to produce us as “of the world” and not “in the world,” thereby calling us into a different mode of accountability and responsibility that is fundamentally ecological. I distinguish ecological thinking here from environmentalism; on this distinction see (Miles 2005; Morton 2007, 2010).

11. The panel brought together UCSD professor Grant Kester, Mick Wilson, Dean of the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, in Dublin, Ireland, and George Smith, founder of the first PhD program in

philosophy for artists at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in Visual Art. The full text of this panel (Kester, Smith, & Wilson, 2009) is available in *Art and Research*.

12. Importantly, here, the alternative to reproductive logic is not a barren one (see Sedgwick 1991; de Lauretis 1991; Edelman 2004; Ahmed 2006; Hoogland 2007; Munoz 2009). Rather, it is the insatiably curious that marks a queer queerness. The insatiably and impossibly curious is what disrupts any and all normative reproductive models of engagement, and it is this mode of being driven by our cathected curiosities that both characterizes pedagogical thinking and a pedagogical ethics (Loveless, 2010). Drawing on Lacan's "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis" (1997), it is precisely the impossibility of prescribing an ethical program that is at stake; rather than decided upon in advance, an ethics emerges as one's animating force.

13. I borrow the term contact zone from James Clifford (1997), who, in turn, borrows it from Mary Louise Pratt (1991).

14. In "Metamorphoses," Braidotti (2001) distinguishes figurations in the following way: "Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied, position" (p. 2).

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