

## Artistic Research and the Role of Critique

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### Abstract

The proposed paper argues for a close relationship between artistic practice and its reflection and contextualisation through a process of critique as not only a necessary component of research but also of art itself.

The paper approaches the question of critique from a philosophical angle basing the relationship between theory and practice on Walter Benjamin's dissertation 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' (1919), which foregrounds criticism as a function of art. In arguing that the Romantic definition of modern art is still valid, the paper then moves on to speculate on some of the themes. It claims that an artistic definition of research that moves across the divide between theory and practice has been a fact during much of modern art's history, a fact, however, that only now in the context of practice-led research can claim its proper status.

### Full Paper

#### Introduction



Fig.1 Michael Schwab, *Negative Light*, Digital Print, Café Gallery Projects, London, 2004

When an artist starts to do research, his or her work needs to change somewhat in order to accommodate a research concern. An artwork such as 'Negative Light' does not appear to explicitly reveal

its relationship to research - its proper status as research remains somewhat hidden beyond its appearance as art object. In fact, showing research on its own seems to necessarily misrepresent the object. The AHRC thus concluded that for a practice to be seen as research something else was needed 'to support its position and to demonstrate critical reflection.'<sup>1</sup>

Research, on the other hand – and this is taken from the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise – is defined as 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding'.<sup>2</sup> Taken together these two definitions seem to suggest that artistic practice on its own is no means to advance knowledge and understanding. Such a proposition leaves the arts in a somewhat difficult position as many artists – myself included - would actually think that they are advancing understanding; some would even claim the understanding they advance to be 'deeper' or more meaningful. This paper will argue for a position where artistic research in the sense of the AHRC is seen as the result of and not in opposition to an *artistic* demand for critique deeply embedded in the modern project. As far as such a position supports the existing regulations, it nevertheless challenges the institution and the researchers to reconsider their conception of critique. With the acceptance of an explicit supporting structure comes a demand for an extreme freedom, which must redefine what we think 'knowledge and understanding' is.

## **Aesthetical Judgements**

Beginning with Plato the status of art in relation to knowledge was not considered to be a problem, because art if anything *obscured* human knowledge and - in the 'Republic'<sup>3</sup> - was outright considered dangerous. Such a negative position towards its cognitive implications defined art's status as an outsider in the realm of knowledge right up to Modernism. It is only since Kant's differentiation of aesthetical from logical judgements that art was given a genuine basis to operate from. As Jean-Luc Nancy

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<sup>1</sup> *Guide for Applicants for Postgraduate Awards in the Arts and Humanities. The Doctoral Awards Scheme*, Arts and Humanities Research Board, December 2004. Available from: [http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/images/4\\_95110.doc](http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/images/4_95110.doc) (03/02/05).

<sup>2</sup> *2001 Research Assessment Exercise: The Outcome*, 2001. Available from: [http://195.194.167.103/Pubs/4\\_01/section2.asp](http://195.194.167.103/Pubs/4_01/section2.asp) (23/02/05).

<sup>3</sup> 10tes Buch, 8. '[Wir] werden aber, solange sie nicht im Stande ist sich zu rechtfertigen, beim Anhoeren ihrer Leistungen als Schutzmittel gegen sie die von uns gewonnene Ueberzeugung und den in ihr enthaltenen Zauberspruch uns zunutze machen [...]. Wir verzichten also auf sie, da man sich nicht ernstlich mit einer solchen Art von Poesie befassen soll als haette sie mit der Wahrheit etwas zu tun und als waere sie eine ernstliche Sache' (409).

remarked, it cannot be seen as one of Kant's objectives to develop a theory that allowed for the emancipation of aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, Nancy believes that Kant although building the right foundation proposed a critical system designed to encompass art and lay it to rest. The result of Kant's third critique thus was the opposite of what Kant might have envisaged. By giving art its own domain as based on aesthetical judgements he in effect unleashed the Romantic Movement that, to say it with Isaiah Berlin, 'is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world'.<sup>5</sup>

If one was to extend this romantic tendency backwards into the works of Kant one could argue that art as research became possible only with Kant in that his philosophy created the foundation for the distinct place of art in the domain of aesthetical judgements. That Kant located judgements within the subject in the first place can, with Nietzsche, be seen as a direct result of a crisis inherent in Christianity. As he described in his 'Gay Science'<sup>6</sup> God was put into doubt by Christianity itself through its emphasis on the human conscience, which is, in effect, the human's capacity to judge if an act was done in accord with or against the will of God. Once this capacity, Nietzsche argued, had grown strong enough it was ready not only to put the acts of humans into question but also the principles by which they were guided, God himself. The question of knowledge as created by judgements could only become central from the moment - to say it in Nietzsche's words - God was dead. In his lecture 'On Science and Art in Relation to Academic Studies' (1803) Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling claimed that art as science made sense only if art produced intellectual intuition.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In his 'The Sublime Offering' Nancy argues for a 'Kantian theory of the arts, regardless of Kant's intentions' by placing the sublime at the centre of Kant's third critique (and not just as a 'mere appendix' to the 'Analytic of Aesthetic Judgements') (p.220f.). The fundamental shift that such a theory comprises is that from art as 'representation of the truth' to art as '*presentation of freedom*' (his italics, p. 215). Nancy, J-L. 'The Sublime Offering' in Sparks, S. (ed.) *Jean-Luc Nancy: A Finite Thinking*, California: Stanford University Press, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Berlin, I. *The Roots of Romanticism*, London: Pimlico, 2000, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> 'One can see what really defeated the Christian god: the Christian morality itself, the increasingly strict notion of truthfulness, the confessional-refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublated into the scientific conscience, into the intellectual cleanliness at all cost.' ('Man sieht, was eigentlich über den christlichen Gott gesiegt hat: die christliche Moralität selber, der immer strenger genommene Begriff der Wahrhaftigkeit, die Beichtväter-Feinheit des christlichen Gewissens, übersetzt und sublimiert zum wissenschaftlichen Gewissen, zur intellektuellen Sauberkeit um jeden Preis.') Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, vol. KSA 3 München and Berlin/New York: dtv and de Gruyter, 1988) Fifth Book § 357, p.600.

<sup>7</sup> 'Intellektuelle Anschauung' Schelling, F.W.J. 'Über Wissenschaft Der Kunst, in Bezug Auf Das Akademische Studium [1806]', in Frank, M. (ed.) *F.W.J. Schelling: Ausgewählte Schriften Bd. 2*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985, p.570.

According to him, art either targets the production of a beautiful deception - in which case art is not seen to contribute intellectually - or, in the second possible type of art which Schelling calls 'holy art,' art could reveal what remains hidden in the senses (a non-sensuous, intelligible quality). This latter understanding of art is, according to Schelling, directed against the common understanding of art as it recognizes intellectual intuition as 'necessarily immediate appearance resulting from the absolute'.<sup>8</sup>

For Schelling, writing in the wake of Kant's separation of imagination and understanding, this second type of art allows the absolute, the ideal to be present in the real. The *naming* of the ideal as the real belongs, however, *not* to the domain of the real (art) but to that of the ideal (philosophy).<sup>9</sup> In other words, art cannot claim what it does, but philosophy can! Thus the relationship between art and philosophy is such that art needs philosophy should it aspire to the domain of the ideal, which is as it were the domain of the free subject.<sup>10</sup>

## Reflection

Walter Benjamin's dissertation 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' (1919) takes the notion of 'reflection' as developed by Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis as a possible definition of that 'intellectual activity' that allows for artistic research.<sup>11</sup> Before I go onto a discussion of this, I would like to make clear that I am using the primary sources Benjamin refers to through his perspective (as much as I am using him through mine). I am not, for the purposes of my argument, interested at this stage in a critical textual analysis that might question some of Benjamin's readings.<sup>12</sup> Rather, I take

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<sup>8</sup> 'Nothwendige, aus dem Absoluten unmittelbar ausfliessende Erscheinung', *ibid.*, p.570.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.573.

<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, this is opposite to a movement identified in Wolfgang Iser's book *Ästhetisches Denken*, in which a modern philosophy inspires a postmodern art. See the section entitled: 'Die Geburt der postmodernen Philosophie aus dem Geist der modernen Kunst' in Iser, W. *Ästhetisches Denken* Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991, pp.79-113. Here in Schelling it appears that a postmodern art inspires a modern philosophy! The game of the 'post' as in fact 'ante' was also entertained by Lyotard who claimed that in the very movement to Modernism there has to be identified the postmodern gesture. See: 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' in: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, p.79.

<sup>11</sup> One will note that I am projecting backwards the question of artistic research into the work of Walter Benjamin and through him into the discourses of German Romanticism. I feel I am allowed to do so, because what they were discussing was a larger question, from which I am only picking up this particular portion.

<sup>12</sup> See Menninghaus' article on Benjamin's generous use of his primary sources. Menninghaus, W. 'Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of

the force, which he undoubtedly applies, as another step along the trajectory that brought us before the reality of art-driven research. Benjamin grounds, historically correct it seems,<sup>13</sup> early romantic philosophy on Fichte's work up to 1794<sup>14</sup> and the reception of his work by the key romantic thinkers. According to Kant, aesthetic judgements are somewhat removed from logical judgements and as such open up a sphere that is non-conceptual and thus beyond philosophy. If that were the case one would be asked to either give up the unity across the different domains of judgement or claim that what I termed above 'intellectual activity' was at play even when concepts were lacking.<sup>15</sup>

The early Fichte, according to Benjamin, opted for this second possibility and tried to devise a system that could deal with the consequences of mounting 'reflection' as such a system's centrepiece. Thought is assumed to be at play in both aesthetical and logical judgements. Since the types of judgements, following Kant, are seen as essentially different thought cannot easily form the uniting principle - how do we know that it is the same faculty of thought that is at play in both? According to Fichte, the unity of the faculties of judgement is achieved only when thought thinks itself and becomes reflective. If art occupies a different sphere from conceptual understanding, we can only claim that both domains share the same root when art and not just philosophy is seen to be reflective. Thus reflectivity is an integral component to art as much as it is to other forms of knowledge.

Applying Fichte's approach to Schelling's concept of art one can speculate that the 'non-sensuous, intelligible quality' he considers necessary for art to be fit as research might lie in the concept of reflection. It both unites the human faculties and allows them as faculties to be distinct.

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Reflection' in Hanssen, B. and A. Benjamin (eds.) *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, New York/London: Continuum, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy acknowledge Benjamin's choice to approach Romanticism through Fichte. They, however, choose to relate Romanticism to 'the effective philosophical *crisis*, whose entire violence romanticism had to experience' (original emphasis). Lacoue-Labarthe, P. and J. Nancy *The Literary Absolute* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p.132, n7.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin sees Fichte close to romantic philosophy only up to his 'Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre'. Later Fichte is seen as idealist thinker. Benjamin, W. 'Der Begriff Der Kunstkritik in Der Deutschen Romantik' in Tiedemann, R. and H. Schweppenhäuser (eds.) *Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften Band I, 1*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, p.20.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted here that 'knowledge and understanding' are seen as related to the outdated 19th century notion of 'thought'. Although the concept of 'thought' is the basis for both Idealism and Romanticism the meaning of 'thought' in relation to the question of unity is where they departed. Romanticism sees the unity achieved through imagination, Idealism through philosophy.

Such unity is possible only if reflection functions regardless of what it reflects: reflection has to be a strictly formal process. However, what reflection reflects is not just this or that but it reflects acts of intelligence when this or that is *thought*. These acts are in themselves formal, making reflection the application of a form onto a form, or, to say it in Benjamin's words, 'reflection [is] the re-forming – and nothing but the re-forming – reflection of a form.'<sup>16</sup> Reflection is thus the (formal) relation of two layers of consciousness, through which immediate and certain cognition is given as both layers ultimately are layers of the same (thought). Through reflection, the knowledge we have of the world is re-formed into (or identified as) our engagement in the world as an 'act of freedom'<sup>17</sup> as Fichte calls it; as independent from the conditions through which it arises.

There is of course no need to stop here; reflection can continue to reflect itself to ever higher degrees (reflection of a reflection of a reflection and so on), which shows that an aspect of infinity is built into the concept of reflection next to the idea of immediacy. Fichte, and this is where Romanticism departed from him according to Benjamin, believed that infinite reflection was weakening the subject because if its ground (the act of freedom) was not found in the first reflection it would not be at all, or, worse, continuing to reflect would displace the ground infinitely. For Fichte the immediacy of reflection as based on the absolute subject's act of freedom was possible only if it although having the potential did not continue to reflect infinitely.

Thus for Fichte, it is the integrity of the subject of reflection that delimits reflection; the I that reflects is the true centrepiece of Fichte's philosophy. And in Romanticism? Benjamin sees its point of departure in the fact that it would not 'trade' the I against reflection, but rather take reflection as *the* central phenomenon and build everything around it regardless. But how could it make reflection infinite at the same time as preserving the self that Fichte saw under threat by such infinity? The answer is that the romantics had to 'tweak' the concept of infinity away from Fichte's *temporal* definition of an infinite regress that reduced the self to nothing to a *spatial* definition of a totality, in which every member continuously reflected.

If one can call the 'self' the subject of reflection and the 'I' the human form of that subject for Fichte the 'I' was the only form the self could take. For the romantics, however, the concept of the 'self' expanded onto everything i.e., everything was now seen as

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, W. op. cit., p.20.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted in Benjamin, W., *ibid.*, p.21.

reflective self. Art in Romanticism is seen as realising exactly that: reflection beyond the limits of the 'I'.<sup>18</sup>

After having established art's contribution to the development of 'knowledge and understanding' through a romantic notion of 'reflection', the remainder of the paper will address what might be happening to an art work like 'Negative Light' once its reflective qualities are acknowledged.

## Art and Critique

In early romantic philosophy an artwork takes the place of the subject. In *The Literary Absolute* Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy refer to this as the 'subject-work'.<sup>19</sup> It's subjectivity lies essentially in its reflectivity, which can, however, not be thought as being removed from other subject-works as the infinity of reflection connects everything with everything.

The artwork, thus, carries a relation to the absolute insofar as its reflection, objectively speaking reflects *everything* and subjectively speaking *has the power* to reflect everything. The artwork is in effect beyond its representation as either subject or object. When Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy refer to it as 'subject-work' they do so in order to emphasise its subjective qualities against the subject-artist and the object-work.

Benjamin highlights the fact that if a thing is seen *only* in relation to itself as an object it loses its relation to cognition, because as object-only it cannot reflect.<sup>20</sup> The romantic theory of understanding is engaged in a play of difference. The result of a reflection is not identical with its source; their relation is that of the same but on different levels of reflection. Benjamin quotes Schlegel in saying that the move from one level to the other has to be thought of as a 'jump'.<sup>21</sup> Only the identification of these levels of reflection denying the 'jump' produces the notion of the 'object', in which reflection is lost.

Reflection is a process of difference between something and itself, but also between two things. In fact, it doesn't matter if I know myself or if I know a thing, because the knowledge of myself will allow for the knowledge of the thing, dependant however on the knowledge of the thing of itself. This process of difference is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>19</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, P. and J. Nancy, op. cit., p.115.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, W., op. cit., p.58.

<sup>21</sup> 'Sprung', ibid., p.27.

directed towards the absolute, which would be the immediate knowledge of everything through something. Benjamin states clearly that this case being the ultimate goal of reflection is nevertheless not the norm, not even in artworks, but it cannot be excluded along the trajectory towards absolute reflection. An artwork can thus be situated between two poles: the one of absolute reflection and the one of first reflection (or 'Ur-Reflexion' as Benjamin calls it). As he says:

In order to differentiate between the two one would have to assume that the absolute reflection captures the maximum ur-reflection the minimum of reality in that sense that although both carry the whole reality [...] this [reality] would be unfolded to its highest clarity in the first [absolute reflection], not unfolded and murky in the other [ur-reflection].<sup>22</sup>

The meaning of an artwork, that is its quality, can be judged by 'placing' it on that scale. This 'placement' is, following Benjamin, the work of the critic.

Although art criticism forms the title of Benjamin's dissertation it is not exercised therein. In an early text from 1914/15 'Two Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin - 'Dichtermut' - 'Blödigkeit'', Benjamin asserts that the judgement of an artwork must be derived from itself, not, however, from the way it solves a particular challenge, but from the 'seriousness and scale of the task' it poses.<sup>23</sup> Benjamin sees in art criticism a complementary reflection that follows the *ambition* of the work, which it seeks to complete in an act of cognition.

The ambition of the artwork is not an objective quality. Rather, we can only speak of an 'ambition' after the art object has been transformed through reflection into a 'subject-work'. Critique brings out the best of the work, which - since it is the result of a reflection - must be genuine understanding.

## **Artistic Research**

In this paper I have tried to speculate what 'understanding' might mean in the context of artistic research. I have – with Walter Benjamin – opted for a romantic perspective as early romantic philosophy has developed an *artistic* idea of understanding through a concept of reflection. I have then indicated with additional help

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, W., *ibid.*, p.31.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, W. 'Zwei Gedichte Von Friedrich Hölderlin: 'Dichtermut' - 'Blödigkeit' [1914/15]' in Tiedemann, R. and H. Schweppenhäuser (eds.) *op. cit.*, p.105.

from Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy that such a process transforms what we think the art object is into what they call 'subject-work'. It seems natural to me to relate artistic research to this extreme understanding of art as in it artistic reflection is developed to the full, which surely must be the ideal of artistic research.

The transformation the research process offers is far from being just a theoretical annex to the separate building of art. Art is seen to suffer if it seeks no completion beyond itself. Reflection affects both what we term 'practice' and what we term 'theory' in that both elements interpenetrate each other. Critique becomes a very *practical* element in the execution of art; art aspires to be understood. None, however, can be sublated in the other as their formal difference guards the process of reflection.

This is of course not what we desire when we do research. Everybody in their own way seems to imagine a moment when the burden of reflection is stilled in the resolution of the difference. As I mentioned earlier the artist, the 'I', needs to cease for the 'subject-work' to be, which is a very uncomfortable place and doesn't even pay the bills. It might just be that today we see art centred on 'the artist,' which is a perspective research cannot join. Making 'researchers' is not necessarily the same as making 'artists'! If artists are made to last, researchers need to be made to disappear! What artistic research takes from art is an extreme particularity of a choice. If I use a pencil *only* because I always use a pencil I will probably obstruct an element in my work. The choice of the pencil needs to make sense in relation to the work that is developed. The pencil will change everything as it can or cannot further the ambition of the work. When a researcher writes, much the same is true. Although I have acknowledged the need to ultimately reflect the work in something that is not itself, the form such reflection takes or even the time when it occurs are completely up to the process the researcher has entered into. Therefore, assumptions about the 'written component' should not be made. It should in particular always activate the ambition of the artwork, which might not be best achieved in the language of cultural studies or philosophy. I would guess that in more cases than not the use of philosophy in artistic research must produce bad reflection and in return – bad art.

Every researcher needs to claim validity for his or her research. The researcher will have to demonstrate how the research contributed to the development of 'knowledge and understanding'. Taken together, all of these efforts will shape what we think artistic research is and what place reflectivity can have in art. Walter

Benjamin set the task for us in describing the need 'to build the epistemological founding of a higher notion of experience'.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The present paper can only indicate a possible philosophical dimension in relation to the concept of 'artistic research' and, thus, needs to call for a further investigation. However, in relation to my own practice the argument I am proposing, rudimentary as it is, serves an important function: it is one possible context that can be opened up as a way into a totality that, as I have described above, is so vital for reflection and for the transformation of the art object into a subject-work. A philosophical discussion is, however, by no means the only way to do this. Others can be art history, material research, psychology, or any other context that seems fit. The only difference is that a philosophical discourse is most able to *name* that that is achieved through artistic research.

What is required of the reader is to set an art work like *Negative Light* in relation to such a context and in the process to set up a reflective relationship, in which the subject-work can appear, i.e. in which the art work can be seen to embody reflection. I hope that the reader has understood that he himself is crucial for this to happen as he is also part of the reflective relations that have been set up.

*Negative Light* might, thus, be given credit to appear as an active and reflective entity and not as an object whose only function is to please or to illustrate. It may be for this reason that my work often utilises spaces that are shared with the spectators such as the gallery walls or that the work is set up in such a way as to make visual comprehension difficult. *Negative Light*, for example, consists of square pieces of ripped-out black paper that are stuck to the wall; although the image which the piece forms can be seen as much as an opening in the wall as a layer on top. The instability of the image is intended as it shows activity on the spectators' side, which in this particular case can be experienced as 'opening' at the same time as issues concerning the construction of the image are raised.

The research focuses very much on the implications of technology, which are also part of *Negative Light*. The source material for the piece is photographic, while its representation utilises the raster that has been taken from the computer image. The black visible

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, W. 'Über Das Programm Der Kommenden Philosophie [1918]' in Tiedemann, R. and H. Schweppenhäuser (eds.) op. cit., p.160.

shape is, thus, as much a technical construction as it is the recording of light. This relationship is developed mainly through the irregular grid structures that appear within the image and its overall 'blob'-shape that seems to contest such a construction.

My research needs to use contexts in addition to philosophy to activate these aspects. Most importantly, I am discussing photographic practice and its relation to image computation and the practice of conceptual art, which are the key areas to which my research contributes. For any of these cases, an understanding of the art object as subject-work is necessary as the research contribution might otherwise stay invisible.