

Vasilis Papageorgiou

Writing and research

FROM A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

*There were several levels of research –
fiction writer's research.*

DON DELILLO

Dear Vasilis,

I had this epiphany that morning, the result of something dreamt perhaps the night that just passed or another maybe, or even one that is in wait, it was you as you are, and this “you are” was double and multiplying in different modes, you were expressing yourself while you were studying yourself, you were changing shapes while searching in you and around you, you were inside and outside yourself at the same time, enjoying with your body, heart and mind the moment and the place you were at, the event you were enacting, enjoying how the abysmal was continually turning into an ever so fine, ever so intricate and yet ever so lucid and familiar, even warm, arrangement. I was speaking to you and you were speaking to me, asking me or reciting to me with a pleasure and a curiosity that was becoming even greater by the fact that you at the same time could neither be inside me nor outside me, you had neither a self,

a being, nor a manner of being. You were and then you were not, you were that activity and then that other, all the time that you never left me. Or did you?

Who is doing what, how and why? Will we be able to do it in the future? What is our future? How do we relate to our world and its future?

Working consciously with the how, the form, with the aesthetic.

Working consciously with the what, the content, with knowledge.

Working consciously with the synthesis and interaction of form and content, the what and how, with what I say and how I say it, with what I depict and how I depict it. For instance, the intimate relationship between essay and art: to have a thesis or produce a thesis, and show a thesis, enact a thesis within a form. To give the text its texture, its expression and sensuality. The result of a praxis that is also a praxis itself, the revealing of a practicing that presupposes and produces the parameters of its being. *Dianoia* and *lexis*, intellect and word.

Doing entails knowing something and being able to give form to this something, while at the same time aspiring to do more, to either form or know more, or both. It is the ancient way of interacting with cosmos and cosmetics: the way the world was, is and could be, and at the very same time the way the world was, is and could be formed. The intentions and the way the doer's heart beats could take us in different directions, make us give emphasis to the what or the how, mingle them, harmonize them, play with them, bring them even against each other. Aesthetics and science, surface and the mechanisms that enable it. For

instance, the Greek word for color: Chroma: skin, color, complexion, character of style, modification, ornaments, embellishments, complexion of heavenly bodies.

This then is a series of manifestations of forms of objects and activities. Manifestations that are generated by and generate knowledge. They talk to me and you, they enter us, modify us, transform us. The I as knowledge or form, or both, towards the you as knowledge or form, or both.

And what for me, as I, as an event in becoming, is most important: the way the how and the what are perceived in relation to logos, to truth and to identity. Here it is a logos without logos that informs what follows, a logos that examines logos as a function and malfunction within the cosmos, that turns cosmos into cosmetics. And in a way, such a presupposition suspends and even annuls any effort to polarize or limit. This is why the heart should beat in the right place, the right time, that of generosity and responsibility when it expresses itself, when it affects others and itself, when it shows intimacy and moves from inside to outside, and then to inside again. A palindromic movement of the heart that has its beginning long before the work of art is conceived, and reaches far beyond it.

When do writers do their research? Maybe all the time? Do they not do it before and during the process of composing their literary text? The latter can of course be in any genre and placed in any time in history, past, present or future. This is a form of artistic research that can be practiced and discussed together or in contrast with the research that the writer might do after the literary text is finally written: it could have the form of a terse meta-commentary or a multilayered meta-text, or it could be given the more or

less open form of artistic or philological commentary.

Are there any other than operational differences between these two research activities, the one before or during, and the one after the creation of the text? How do they contribute to the formation, reception and evaluation a text? And can these two kinds of research be done by other researchers than the writer of the particular text? Are there any more kinds of research pertaining to the creation and analysis or deconstruction of a text? How do we approach literary texts that are openly and even challengingly a combination of art and research, that are both fiction and essay at the same time, a far-reaching interaction of aesthetics and knowledge? Is there any work of art that does not already include research? And while writers turn research into a work of art that a literary text is, how do the same writers or any other writer, artist or any enquiring person turn a work of art into a subject for research?

And then, when it comes to its moment of urgency, of explaining or even justifying: How do we teach research in relation to creative writing? What is most imperative in teaching creative writing at a university: The writing itself or the research done in relation to it, both before and after the text is written? How do we evaluate our double activity and its results? How is the market and the agora (two different terms as I hope to show soon) involved in this activity?

The fields of the writing processes, its theoretical and practical contexts would for me include the challenge of our times, the way events and ideas are shaped, their sources, arrangements, modalities, their nomadic movements, the monadic search for independence and individuality, the necessity of composing, its concerns, urgencies, trans-

lations, its diasporic and aporetic complexity, its impossibilities and affirmations, its ability to inspire and generate new texts and contexts, its melancholies and euphorias, the deliberate and forced migrations of people, identities, languages, bodies, digits in an open world, in bodies without organs, texts without texts, in a logos without logos. The ethics in, with, through and beyond our worlds. And then inevitably the strictures and dangers of crossing borders, the violence of uprooting and the unconditionality of generosity that reaches beyond knowledge by affecting and touching in an open and immediate presence, in the opening of a yet unknown and even unknowable piece of life, that is also eternal in itself.

Various schools and programs, starting from what they take now as a given, the arbitrary polarity scientific versus artistic research, seem to have knowledge as their ultimate goal. For instance, the Swedish Research Council privileges knowledge against aesthetic experience, something that is emphasized by the fact that in Swedish it is called “Vetenskapsrådet”, “Science Council”, excluding thus the Arts right from the beginning, and by the motto that follows on the top of its website: “Research for a wiser world,” “The Swedish Research Council is Sweden’s largest governmental research funding body, and supports research of the highest quality within all scientific fields.”¹ Wisdom and science, the knowing and the thinking it requires are what the arts are in need of in order to offer themselves, as though art and the pleasures it generates in the mind and body were without them until now. In any case the Swedish Research Council thus far has failed to explain what artistic research

1 <https://vr.se/english.html> (17.11.2018).

is, although in its new presentation (that is still under consideration) it speaks of an already “established” field.

Knowledge is given the first place also in the artistic research that is done in the International Music Institute in Darmstadt: “Artistic research is a young discipline which has stirred up not only academic but also artistic discourse. It is based on the notion that knowledge is inherent in aesthetic experience and practice. This knowledge is not necessarily directly accessible through reason; it often evades the logic of language, and can therefore not be approached through regular research methods alone.”² (Knowledge was privileged in previous presentations in the master program for artistic research at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. These could be read on the Internet and can now be found in online archives. In the current presentation, however, as in the Swedish one, artistic research is approached and described through its different practices rather than directly defined. In its previous presentation the Swedish Council stated: “The point of departure for artistic research is found in the artistic process and works. Research, regardless of art form, is practice-based and includes intellectual reflection aimed at developing new knowledge.” Maybe the criticism that has since then been directed against such definitions has been of decisive importance in rethinking the already obsolete arbitrariness. Similarly, the Netherlands Film Academy, still keeping the body and its senses out, redefined artistic research as “neither a discipline nor a methodology. Instead, it’s a state of mind, a ‘mentality’ or

2 <http://internationales-musikinstitut.de/en/ferienkurse/kurse/kuenstlerische-forschung-als-kompositions-oder-auffuehrungspraxis/> (17.11.2018).

an attitude”,³ while in an older text on the subject artistic research was presented “as a form of knowledge production”. See also, Hakan Topal’s text “Notes on dOCUMENTA (13): Artistic Research”, in which knowledge, despite its mention together with “intuition” and “experience” plays the central role: “When an artist enters into a social realm to conduct research, intuition allows her/him to generate in-situ knowledge, therefore a particularly practical intellectual opening.” And further down: “artistic research aims to create a type of knowledge”).⁴

A few days ago, I received two mails from *Research Catalogue* announcing events about artistic research in which knowledge occupies a central position.⁵ The first event emphasizes the role of thought and knowledge in the production of sounds and music,⁶ while the second has the title “Knowing in performing.”⁷ All this is very exciting and promising in many ways, but at the same time it seems to presuppose that artists maybe do not already know much about knowing while creating, or that the artwork is secondary to artistic research.

But why do polarizing, reducing and downright negation take hold within the university? Why do they express

3 <https://www.filmacademie.ahk.nl/en/master-film/programme/artistic-research/> (17.11. 2018).

4 <http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2012/08/notes-on-documenta-13-artistic-research/> (17 November 2018).

5 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net>. (17.11.2018).

6 <http://ruukku-journal.fi/en/next-issue> (17.11.2018).

7 https://www.mdw.ac.at/knowinginperforming_rvo/ (17.11.2018).

such a need to prevail? Why does funding and evaluation of institutions have to be based on negation and create barriers that go against their pronouncements about democratic values, principles and freedoms, against the respect and the empathy that is unconditionally needed in any migrating activity (pleasurable, as that of flaneuring, or a result of violence), be that artistic research and work, pre- or post-research, or even the project of an escapist, one who observes or enjoys from afar or while fleeing, one who is an ascetic, for whom representing and thinking work are versions of monasteries, one who cannot tolerate borders and definitions, or is after the movement or event or the argument or the epiphany that might sustain the divide between art and knowledge? Why steal and appropriate a term and an activity that has already become open and daring and is always inviting more openness and challenge? And this openness, is it not an artwork already, a pre-work and meta-work, a pre-text and meta-text? Does it not include its own presuppositions and arguments about its own being as event, form and meaning? Why erase all this just to establish yet another dogmatic activity?

And now the practical, but mainly grounding question: What is the position of the education that will lead to the creation of artworks in the world of the university and the various institutions that support and fund it, and at times even attempt to dominate it? Whom, what and how are the departments of Fine Arts going to fund and be funded by? How are they going to structure their present and future education programs and activities, their efforts and visions in order to employ the teachers they believe will advance and broaden these programs and activities? What do uni-

versities want from artists who teach? What do they want from art courses? What do students want?

In many ways it appears and it might even be the case that the university is under siege. Even worse, it is already captured. And all this has to do with putting up borders and placing it under the powers of the market. Funding is served by and serves definitions. This interdependence that, helped by a technical administration and a cloud of entrepreneurial fallacies, undermines democratic and free thinking, and ignores the fact that university already is a market. It is an agora, where ideas are generated, debated, tested, upset or transgressed. The market applies, sells, buys and exploits. The agora questions, researches, doubts and self-doubts. We face questions about rules and the breaking of the rules, about typifying and questioning the typified, about the relation between quality and quantity, between the general and specific, about the relation between the oxymoron and the pleonastic in the expression “free market,” if we are speaking of the market as agora, a place where we can express ourselves freely within the various events of democracy, while questioning it or broadening it. University, being already more than the market, is the agora where even the philosophy and art of negotiation are debated.

Here is your poem from your website⁸ dedicated to John Ashbery’s ninetieth birthday and inspired by his play with knowing and forming, his mastery of the breezeway, which is also the title of a collection of poems he published in 2015:

8 <https://chromatachromata.com/2017/07/28/τζον-άσμπερν-john-ashbery-at-90/> (17.11.2018).

John Ashbery at 90

Three haikus as shadows for collages

University
is already more than the
market. It is the

agora where
exchanging terms are formed,
all terms debated.

Stoas, lyceums
arcades, secret gardens,
needed breezeways.

It is also inside these different forms of agora, different forms of learning, reflecting and debating spaces, that the phenomenon of peer reviewing strikes me as not only redundant, but highly immoral (as the frequently used term “blind reviewing” reveals: something not transparent or open, something clandestine) and practically useless. Is it possible to examine the legitimacy of new forms of expression, opinions, critical approaches, propositions for discussion, without ever attempting to censor or normalize them, especially when these aim at daringly deconstructing, questioning or suspending established notions and ways of creating and thinking? Is it possible to study, use and cite texts by those who are not or refuse to be peer reviewed, without risking disapproval and rejection? Will these artists and writers themselves not be allowed to enter the university

world at all? Similarly, those who, for various reasons, refuse to peer review, will they be ostracized from the academy, or marginalized?

Those then who agree to peer review, why do they do it (and especially without being paid)? Is it because they believe in the advance of sciences and the arts? Is it merely a matter of surviving in hard academic times? Do they do it out of friendship, and if so, is this not suspicious when it comes to taking a critical or adversary stance, one that transgresses the circle of friendship? Do they believe in the system, which is equally suspicious and naïve, that is dangerous in both cases? Are they capable of understanding and appreciating what they are about to read and evaluate? Are they not intimidated by the procedures that demand that they interfere in the thinking of other people or of messing with the sensitivities of artists and their works?

Are the uninstitutionalized artists or authors to be avoided, ignored as sources of inspiration, interaction and reference? Is the work that is created outside the institutionalized, the quantified and conventionalized a part of another world altogether, one that must be discriminated against or negated? Are all peer reviewing journals respected as equal, and if not why? Who decides it, and why is such a phenomenon accepted or tolerated to begin with?

Are we soon to lose the ability to judge ourselves, to be critical without relying on the system of peer reviewing or any Norwegian list? Are we not in the critical business, expressing opinions rather than verifying facts, proposing hypotheses and speculations that must retain and cultivate the right to be visionary, radical, groundbreaking, upsetting, controversial, polemical?

Is not all this blindness creating a fear that a power above democracy in secrecy controls and regulates the limits of democracy? That it is beyond, unreachable by democracy?

We discriminate any time we, through negation, choose something over something else. Why not affirm everything that promotes affirmation itself? Dividing into this and that discipline might throw light on something dark, but does it not in turn darken something else? Is peer reviewing respecting affirmation or does it start from and remain within an established system of rules, trying to fit all thought in this system?

The difficulties with peer reviewing become more complicated in confronting works of art. Artists, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, create beautiful forms and work with the concept of beauty.⁹ They invite us to consider the concept of beauty itself, the relation of the beautiful in any work of art to beauty, as well as the relation between what is beautiful for the artist and for anyone who admires it, the role of aesthetics and its relation to truth and ethics, to desire and pleasure. More than that, they invite us to reenact thinking itself, to consider its conditions and its place in the world. Working with forms and knowledge, and creating even more beauty, artists offer us more cosmos, reaching beyond knowledge and any words, into an openness that invites further pleasure, wonder and quest, aware that there is always the risk that knowledge might even destroy art and the beauty in it, might arrest the progressing of opening.

9 Jean-Luc Nancy: *God, justice, love, beauty: Four little dialogues*. Translated by Sarah Clift. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, 97ff.

Artworks position us and themselves in an expanded cosmos, thus becoming independent of their maker, as well as of any peer reviewer that aspires to decide their fate. What or whom then are the peer reviewers judging: The artists or the object of art they have created and which lives its own life beyond any effort to restrict it or reform it? Or are they judging the whole context, the setup that has made the artwork possible and which gives it its immeasurable meanings within both history and any present and future moment? The artwork is a living organism, created and creating other organisms, an active event, an ever transforming and transformable arrangement, a pleasurable modality that reaches us always itself as an always augmenting, an always epiphanic other.

Dear Vasilis,

from within this relation to art and its world, in which it doesn't feel strange, it doesn't feel oxymoronic at all to say that I have the epiphany I mentioned at the beginning of my address to you constantly, I greet you

most cordially

The artwork

VASILIS PAPAGEORGIOU is Professor of Creative Writing and Reader in Comparative Literature in the Department of Film and Literature at Linnaeus University, writer in Greek and Swedish, and translator.