

AGAINST VALUE IN THE ARTS & HUMANITIES

23RD FEBRUARY 2012, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

“Our cabaret is a gesture. Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect.”

– Hugo Ball

The current crisis in higher education has required a spirited defence of the value of the arts and humanities. Likely this defence has not been sufficient to the task. This event has not, however, been curated as a defence: perhaps we can take two steps further back, to rethink.

The first step back takes us not to a defence but to a critique, a challenge, a suspension, of value. The defence of value is everywhere marshaled by the bureaucratic ceremonies of transparency and audit. Value is presumed to be legible, to be auditable, to be verifiable: to be turned into truth. The first step back is a critique of the kinds of values being assumed, and a critique of the ways in which those values become coercive; the defense of values is already being carried out by their auditing. How, instead, can we critique values that present themselves as inherently virtuous? Dada understood that the protest against a reasonable war could not be made with reason.

If I cry out:

Ideal, ideal, ideal.

Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge,

Boomboom, boomboom, boomboom,

I have given a pretty faithful version of progress, law, morality and all other fine qualities that various highly intelligent men have discussed in so many books, only to conclude that after all everyone dances to his own personal boomboom, and that the writer is entitled to his boomboom.

- Tristan Tzara

Derrida tapped into the insight of Dada with his provocation: “nobody has ever founded a university against reason”. Might the arts and humanities might best be considered the sustained critique of, or even the sustained violation of, dominant and dominating values?

The second step back is to turn to the complex ties between experience and knowledge. Does art remains resistant to translation into knowledge if knowledge is defined speciously as information? Perhaps art is more like knowledge if knowledge is conceived to be more like the experience of art than it is the objects of art? That is, perhaps knowing, cognition, and the suspension of knowledge in and by questioning are closer to knowledge’s anticipatory delight? The end-point of education (knowledge) cannot (must not?) be determined in advance. In part this is a response to the psychology of commodification, the expectation that knowledge, too, might prostrate itself for consumption. Instead should knowledge be understood as in some sense intractable, finally *unknowable*.

The name of that is of course money,
and the absurd trust in value is the pattern of
bond and contract and interest – just where
the names are exactly equivalent to the trust
given to them.

Here then is the purity of
pragmatic function:
we give the name of
our selves to our needs.
We want what we are.

- J.H. Prynne, "Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self"

This is an argument about *incommensurability*, about having "no common measure" by which knowledge can be translated, no shared value: against value. Knowledge is always in its anticipation, its deferral, or dispersive partiality. As Marilyn Strathern writes when describing the practice of listening, there is, finally, incommensurability between the scholar or student, and the people or things to which they attend. She writes: "Perhaps the anthropologist's macrocosm is this: co-presence. At least the presence of persons is not, thankfully, reducible to the anthropologist's relationships with them. In this realization, anthropology might find a purpose for the displacement of knowledge." And:

"I like to think that anthropologists could assert the potentials there are in being human *against* everything they know about people, individually or collectively, and against how they form particular social relationships[...] I suspect we do not really want our descriptions of ourselves to become true; we hope they are partial enough to hold out promise of better things. No particular description is in any case adequate to the possibilities human beings are capable of, any more than any particular set of relations encompasses people's capacity for social life. So anything we might use in claiming common humanity is just that: a claim. Rather than redescribe the world in order to find humanity within it, one might wish to conserve the concept beyond and outside descriptions of it, and even *despite* them." – Marilyn Strathern

Music, compiled by Steve Chase:

1. John Cage - Music for Duchamp (Markus Hinterhauser)
2. Christian Wolff – *For Piano with Preparations I* (John Tilbury)
3. Christian Wolff – *For Piano with Preparations II* (John Tilbury)
4. Christian Wolff – *For Piano with Preparations III* (John Tilbury)
5. Morton Feldman –from *Last Pieces* (Dante Boon)
6. Jez riley French – *Isolde no.4* (Philip Thomas)
7. Christian Wolff – *Snowdrop* (Sabine Liebner)
8. Lucio Capece & Lee Patterson – *Efervesce* (clarinet & hazelnuts)
9. Michael Pisaro – *Fields have ears 1* (Philip Thomas)
10. Laurence Crane – *Twentieth-Century Music* (Michael Finnissy)
11. Christian Wolff – *For Piano I* (John Tilbury)