

**LETTERS TO IMAGINE  
SOME ENDS  
TO *THIS* WORLD**

This collection of Letters is part of a larger series of encounters: 'EXPANDED PRACTICES All Over: re-practicing multispecies story-telling in times of neoliberal performativity'. It was first presented in Copenhagen, in the frame of Artistic Research Lab: On the Notion of Practice, Dansehallerne, 2019.

Dear Practice,

My interstellar cloud of dust...

My infinite chain of pro-research sparkles, creatively improvised across proliferating Immaterial Encounters of the Fourth Kind, into the *eventification* of literally every-little-thing. You've been a close friend these last years. We've shared on-the-go meals and sleepless nights; slept exhausted, agitated, delirious, sometimes half-dead in each other's arms.

Oh Practice my Practice. My everything. I am at your feet. Devoted, I confess: I haven't been producing many art and fiction works lately. Not many academic pieces of writing either. Yet we both know (since you have become flesh of my flesh): I work without end, and sleep the least I can. I don't even really dislike it. YAY. *Liberated from work in order to work more, to work harder* – as it stands in that short text by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2015), that we've read together so many times.

Oh Practice my Practice. What are we practising for? I hope you forgive me for having so many doubts about our relationship after all these years. I am vulnerable, and right now so under the influence of the Whitechapel *PRACTICE* anthology I received from a friend: *PRACTICE* (2018). I am so sorry. I cracked it open and it felt as if it were reading my mind, I guess it was: “a blur of generalized doing”; “a haze of activity”; “a nebula”. *PRACTICE* recalls: “in contemporary art, practice signifies the shift away from the artwork or medium toward open-ended actions, series, processes, and projects; from contemporary practice to social practice to practice-based research”. *PRACTICE* recalls: the shift to practice “crystallizes profound changes in how art has been defined, made and received, as well as transformations in the economic and political spheres” (13). *PRACTICE* recalls: “practice is tied with the radical social and political movements of the twentieth century and equally to the economic order of precarity and immaterial labour established after their repression and dispersal”. The Practice Turn, *PRACTICE* says, is a shift from the work-of-art to art-as-practice, “variously defined as the dematerialization of the art object, the shift from medium to social practice and the emergence of the post-medium condition”. In that sense, says *PRACTICE*, the shift to practice “informs many of the keytropes of contemporary art, from relational aesthetics to participation, to site-specificity to institutional critique, to interdisciplinarity” (2018, 13).

Oh Practice my Practice. What exactly have we been doing together?

In which shady transactions are we implicated?

Don't take me wrong. I love you, and I always will. But I suspect you may have led me into fulfilling the demands of an expanding cultural industry increasingly aligned with anthropophagic experience-and-gig-economies, clearly and bluntly disclosed in the nowadays recurrent vocabularies and figures of a hyper-active pro-creative knowledge economy. I'm sure you've seen it too: its terms are increasingly

used in artistic and academic institutions across the globe, to scaffold and boost the ‘sexiness’ of their public programming and of their (utterly creative, groundbreaking) knowledge output and impact.

Who knows, dear Practice, the art of being a ‘sleepless creative worker’ (artist, researcher, performer, consumer) that it seems we have been practising together, may well be a new art ethos, feeding in – and being fed by – an enticing format of hyper creative research. But it seems to me it is first and foremost a “new model of normativity”, as Jonathan Crary has described it in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013, 15). A model of normativity of the generation of those that sneakily govern and manage the citizens’ behaviour and subjectivity around the clock, as if they were granting them liberty – what Irit Rogoff (2017) has called “neoliberal conditioning” by means of surreptitiously “hijacked subjectivity”. In short, a normativity devoted to fabricate human subjects that can coincide “more intensely” with “the 24/7 markets” and “the global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption, that have been in place for some time” now (Crary 2013, 3-4).

Oh Practice my Practice. I’m sure you remember Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1990). Well, Yves Citton has now written “Post-scriptum on the societies of *recherche-cr ation*” (2018).<sup>1</sup> He points to *recherche-cr ation* as a “fourth form of governmentality”, to be added to “sovereignty”, “discipline”, and “control” (the three forms of governmentality previously outlined by Deleuze, after Foucault).<sup>2</sup> The point made by Citton goes more or less like this: if none of those three forms of governmentality has disappeared from the picture, things have moved on significantly since the “societies of control” diagnosed by Deleuze, with their undulatory citizens constantly in orbit, following the motto: it’s not enough that each worker does her work appropriately, the machine needs flexibility and constant networking. According to Citton, if those three modes of governmentality – sovereignty, discipline, and control – have made us (and still make us) rather obeying subjects, well-trained pupils and workers, and highly performative [amazingly flexible] self-entrepreneurs... well... flexibility of performance is still required and much appreciated, but it’s no longer enough. From the eight features that would constitute, according to Citton, that new form of governmentality, one in particular caught my attention: in the societies of *recherche-cr ation* the keyword is ‘improvisation’. We remain in a register close to the one of flexibility, in adaptation to constant instability, writes Citton, but we have fallen into a terrifying situation: it’s not anymore a matter of bending – in order not to break – in response to circumstantial requirements; we are now hijacked by a contradictory injunction: IMPROVISE! In other words: “Do whatever you like, even if there’s actually nothing to be done, do it anyways, just to prove that you are capable of doing something unexpected!”, i.e. something creative from scratch, on the spot (2018, 3). Sounds familiar, dear Practice, it reminds me of you sometimes, and I am starting to feel good about the fact that I have always been such a lousy improviser, and an even lousier performer.

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<sup>1</sup>. ‘Recherche-cr ation’ (sometimes appearing as ‘recherche & cr ation’), is the expression used in French speaking countries to designate, broadly speaking, Artistic Research, Creative Research and/or Practice Based Research.

<sup>2</sup>. At this point, dearest Practice, a re-reading is very recommended: “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (*October*, Vol. 59, Winter 1992, 3–7): [https://cidadeinseguranca.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/deleuze\\_control.pdf](https://cidadeinseguranca.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/deleuze_control.pdf); acc. 04.05.2019.

It's not all, dear Practice. There is another fundamental aspect related to your expanding vocabulary, which has been bothering me. It's the "celebration of a generalized immateriality" that contributes to keep "the material labour of sweatshops, call centres, maintenance services" invisible, along with many other activities and infrastructures that support and help producing our "immaterial experiences", in other words: "the physical labour and material work" that is actually required to produce the so-called immaterial experiences for receivers-visitors-consumers (Jackson 2014: 55).

Oh Practice my Practice.

I guess our main concern about the (pro-sleeplessness) practice-research-creativity-improvisation turn, as both a new form of governmentality and a field to re-imagine shared response-abilities, is how artists and researchers alike, all caught in the current predominantly rapacious economy – along with many other cultural workers and workers in general, but first and foremost along with all the other exposed vulnerable beings – will be able to enforce alliances and arrangements of mutual assistance and help in order to stay alive and reclaim our right to rest, in a "globalist neoliberal paradigm" where "sleeping is for losers" (Crary 2013, 14), i.e. a world that "radically excludes the possibility of care, protection, or solace" (ibid. 8).

I guess my main questions to you and me would be, dear Practice:

Where exactly does our very implication in the economy of art-as-practice stand, in this model of never-ending pro-investigative pro-creative pro-improvisation activity (one where stability has the bad reputation of amounting to 'inaction'), as it has been gradually diagnosed by Deleuze, Crary, and Citton, to name a few.

How exactly have we – me and you, dear Practice – been providing for significant non-monetisable interludes, if any, in this homogenising "duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning" (Crary 2013, 8), constantly demanding our total investment not only to keep it going, but also to intensify the senses in which it can be creatively performed and re-performed.

Dear Research

Due to a by now fully incorporated digital logic – or Google logic, to go straight to the point – I hear, deeply under the influence of a lecture given by Claire Bishop in Vienna last January – that you, dear Research, have been proliferating in many places that I myself frequent, more as SEARCH than RESEARCH.

At this point, dear Research, I am fully assuming that I am living in the ‘age of practice’ which is also the ‘age of research’, which is also the ‘age of creative knowledge’, which is also the ‘age of improvisation’, which is also the ‘age of performance’, which is also the ‘age of digital logic’. In other words: ‘the age of more search than research’; more ‘the age of disengaged navigation across information overload’ than ‘the age of actually imaginative research and knowledge composition’. Research – increasingly acted out as ‘search’ –, seems to have become omnipresent not only in education broadly and in artistic practice in particular, but in many other endeavours where we wouldn’t expect to encounter it.

In her lecture, “Information Overload: Research-Based Art and the Politics of Spectatorship” (2019), Claire Bishop pinpoints a paradox she has observed in what she calls ‘research-based art’, a term she distinguishes from ‘art as practice’, and its correlative framings as ‘PhD-in-practice’. Having noticed the ubiquity of research-based art exhibitions, and a lack of articulated thought acknowledging its specific aesthetic and epistemological forms of doing and presenting research within the arts, she observed that many of these works, in their ways of “replacing authoritative information with subjective meandering narratives”, tend to embrace an aesthetics and an epistemology that functions exactly like resources online – and this happens even within the works that respond to the uniformity of the screen interface by resorting to the aura of obsolete media and analogical archival-like mediums and devices. She thus considers that their effect is very close to implicitly replicating an experience of information overload for the viewer (most of the times unconsciously). The task of interpreting, articulating and composing the senses of the work is left in the hands of the viewer, whose reaction is no other than browsing and surfing, not really taking the time to decipher the accumulation of aggregated items, to rather skim the surface to get its quickly-squeezed-together essence. In these cases, the very fact of the off-screen assemblage the work exposes seems to be what it is about, leaving aside the question about its very modes-and-movements of com-posing sense(s) and knowledge(s).<sup>3</sup>

Bishop’s question sounds relevant for you these days, dear Research: she wonders whether and how contemporary works of research-based art can contest the epistemology and aesthetics of Google – or whether they are doomed to implicitly and a-critically embody its logics into infinity. More importantly,

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<sup>3</sup>. For a comprehensive report on Bishop’s lecture, read Christoph Chwatal’s “Notes on Claire Bishop’s Lecture: ‘Information Overload: Research Based Art and the Politics of Spectatorship’” (Kunsthalle Wien, January 22, 2019): <http://kunsthallewien.at/#/blog/2019/01/notes-claire-bishops-lecture>

Bishop inflects that research-based art in the current decade needs to rethink strategies like the fragmentation of authorial voices and the refusal of master narratives – that were groundbreaking and politically relevant throughout the 1990s – but that now no longer bear the same criticality, because of our new perception rhythms and habits, predominantly dispersed attention spans and the ubiquity of digital information and data/noise overload in every inch of our mind-bodies and frequented spaces. This makes me think of an essay by Hito Steyerl, that we both loved, dear Research, one that we should perhaps read aloud again and again after Bishop’s lecture: “A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition” (2016). What we liked about it, as far as I can remember, is that it shows the large extent to which contemporary perception is already “machinic”, with vision increasingly losing its relevance, not only because it is replaced by algorithm-like homogenising operations of “filtering, decrypting, and pattern recognition”, but also because it starts to perceive more and more according to algorithmic modes of assembling. In another earlier essay, “Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise” (2014), in which Steyerl already makes us think of the unprecedented fusion of human and machinic vision, she points to the ways in which “humans feed affect, thought, and sociality into algorithms”, while “algorithms feed back into what used to be called subjectivity”, and how this intimacy between human and digital technology, which literally turns us into the very objects of a technological algorithmic perception, “makes seeing unforeseen things more difficult”.

Oh Research my Research. What are we going to do. One of Bishop’s ideas is that “storytelling strategies *might* assume greater importance now” – since they “provide the viewer with a path through the material, rather than leaving [her] adrift in data”. Hearing about “storytelling strategies”, I think of the ones we have been trying to learn from Donna Haraway’s book *Staying with the trouble* (2015), and Denise Ferreira da Silva’s notions of “deep implicancy”, “radical immanence” and “fractal thinking”, that is to say, the ones that always combine several scales to constantly reclaim the complicatedness of things in their situated entangled ways (Da Silva 2019).<sup>4</sup> The ones that have nothing to do with claims to re-instate some nostalgic modernist pro-linearity logics, and are thus not necessarily opposed to fragmentation and open-endedness *per se*, whenever they are required (because sense-making and interrogating is a troubled matter that will never be contented with simplistic forms of closure).

Oh Research my Research. What are we going to do with you. And beyond. Partly due to the emergent field of Artistic Research and the academic professionalisation of art practices and studies, your vocabulary has considerably expanded these last years. That expansion also points to significant transformations in the ways we conceive of you, along with your fellow ‘knowledge’. Promising as they may sound, formulations of “knowledge as singularity”, to use the term Irit Rogoff has proposed in direct connection with practice-based research, have to be balanced by the acknowledgement – as Rogoff herself emphasizes – that institutions of higher education and museums tend to instrumentalize

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<sup>4</sup> See a recent interview with Denise Ferreira da Silva, “An End to ‘This’ World” (by Susanne Leeb and Kerstin Stakemeier, in *Texte zur Kunst*, April 2019): <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/interview-ferreira-da-silva/>

you, in the figure of “advanced artistic research practice”, for a multitude of pragmatic ends (be it to justify “expansion and variety” *tout court*, or gather resources; be it to “satisfy public sector demands” or “claim greater numbers for their programs”). In this sense, many of the practices associated with you, my dear Research, “as they are presently framed within the institutions”, risk losing their critical potential, as they often tend to promptly align with the creative industries terminology: “innovative”, “cutting-edge”, “exciting new research”, only to become “the latest cog- in the wheel of cognitive [informational, digital, algorithmic] capitalism” (Rogoff 2017).

You take care of yourself, dear Research. I must think of Jonathan Crary’s lines again, as he wrote about the “irreversible transfer of human ‘reason’ to the 24/7 operations of information processing networks, and to the unending transmission of light through fiber-optic circuitry” (2013: 27).

Take nothing for granted. That’s all I have to say, dear (Practice As) Research.

Dear Practice As research As creativity As Improvisation (you name it),

Here I am, under influence again. In the title of this collection of letters, i.e. **LETTERS TO IMAGINE SOME ENDS TO THIS WORLD**, the **this** refers to the world of corporate state and the all-pervading bad ‘company’ it keeps us: a world of planetary civil war, let’s face it, in which insatiable forces of economic domination, resource and human rights depletion, have long targeted and monetised art-as-practice, art-as-research and research-based art alike, along with the whole apparatus of networked media, hyper-pseudo-social and visual culture that impinges on our daily experience; a world where the very idea of vulnerability (as “bare condition of exposure”) has long been “unhinged from its relation to communal forms that at least tentatively offered safekeeping or care” (Crary 2013: 21); a world of privatization of security, where “the very idea of justice is in danger” – to quote Denise Ferreira da Silva, in her recent interview (April 2019) – since the security-and-corporation-state is “now firmly in place, with the sole mandate of protecting the economy”, the “corporation-state” (read: protect the economy from democracy)<sup>5</sup>. Its primary role being: “to create juridical instruments and structures and mechanisms that facilitate extraction, expropriation, and exploitation, and protect the interest of corporations and their investors.”

So, dear Practice As...As...As,

I wish you were less of a derivative conundrum, if you see what I mean.

I don’t think I have told you this yet. It’s time. I am lost.

Many things in my life, many strands of studying, thinking and making art – all those things that once seemed to offer a promise of ‘profanation’ (in Agambian sense, 2007), and displacement from male-artist subjectivities and hegemonic historical narratives and representations – seem to have, to a huge extent, morphed into the dominant model of artistic and knowledge production. I am not sure that anything I do will ever be able to challenge the current economies (the current economy of attention included, or most of all).

Let me tell you a story. Close to the end of Mad Men’s last episode, my sense of time and place came out of joint. There they were, as a slightly embarrassing footnote of History: the hilltop singers of my childhood. Unwrinkled, enthusiastic, and colourful: diverse, together, forever<sup>6</sup>. As the cut into the famous 1971 television Coke publicity ad broke in on the screen, my body quaked. It had just been given to (mis)re-member and re-live – right out of Don Draper’s imagination – the intoxicating power of one of the most durably haunting spots of advertisement history. The ad in case was part of Coca Cola’s “It’s the Real Thing” campaign, no wonder, just magic.<sup>7</sup> In hindsight, I guess one of the

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<sup>5</sup>. See the documentary “Requiem for the American Dream” (2015), starring Noam Chomsky (on how capitalism has tried, since the 1970s, to protect itself from democracy).

<sup>6</sup>. Please go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxtZpF13pPM>; acc. 03.05.2019.

<sup>7</sup>. The narrative of its ‘making of’ is on the Coca Cola Website / History: <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/coke-lore-hilltop-story>; acc. 02.05.2019.



sentiments that invaded my whole person as I was watching was close to catharsis; somebody had managed to combine fiction, history, archival remains, and humour to articulate the seductive skill and the speed at which the corporate world would phagocytise much of the counter-and-pop-culture critique and alternative lifestyles, along with related iconographies and vocabularies. Imageries of the sort bring to mind Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, and its enthusiasm about the then new "realm of intimate, personal power": "power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment and share his adventure with whoever is interested" (Brand / Cadwalladr 2013).

Well what then, dear 'Practice As-As-As', I guess the image conveyed by the 1971 Coca Cola ad epitomises a formula that has been intensified with the Internet and its co-tech-products. It goes like this: get together, closer, (over)share, (hyper)socialise, intoxicate, derivate, improvise, constantly let the magic operate, repeat, repeat, repeat. *Satisfied with your toilet experience today?* [this is a sentence I recently read at an airport toilet, with 'go to: feedbacknowfrance.fr']. The coercion to interconnect, to be on(-the-)line (Harney & Moten 2015; Deleuze 1990), and express our most intimate experiences and contribute to the production of information overload now follows us to the toilet. It seems we will never be alone again. It seems we are doomed to never ever again stop (re)searching. There is an omnipresent injunction to search and share one's own and search and follow everybody else's, only to feed the wealth and power of "those who control the platforms on which all of us create, consume, connect", improvise ourselves (Taylor, 2014). We: all banking instances (Rogoff 2017).

The after-affects that assailed me during *Mad Men's* grand finale have ultimately turned into a disquieting allegory of something that I felt more and more compelled to scrutinise during the spring of 2018. Most probably because I was living in a city where the omnipresent colonisation of the public space by a blatantly barking go-get-shit-done advertisement imagery felt increasingly suffocating to my exhausted mid-lifer senses.

One day, at the entrance of the subway, I realised I was literally obliged to touch the sentences "In Doers We Trust" and "Be a Doer" with my hand, in order to push the turnstile gate that allowed me in. They had put it there. Posters and videos everywhere around on the walls of the station hadn't been enough. You had to touch it, grab it and go with it imprinted on the tips of your fingers. I've told this episode elsewhere twice since. I'm still in deep disbelief. It was another moment of the already mentioned gradual but steadfast crumbling of my supply of "suspension of disbelief". Your year of doing starts now, they say. Back home, I found a version of the ad in case on Youtube, and I read a critical article by Jia Tolentino on the *New Yorker*: "The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death"<sup>8</sup>

I was clearly starting to feel unequipped to deal with such a degree of overstimulation, impinging on my daily experience in ways that could hardly be quieted. Truth be told, I started to worry I might end

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<sup>8</sup> Here, ad and article, respectively: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJkfN1Qey8g>  
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-gig-economy-celebrates-working-yourself-to-death> ; acc. 14.08.2018.

up getting used to that permanent over-assailment, as if it were acceptable, normal, unavoidable, part of *what-has-to-be-has-to-be*, let's not take it literally, we've seen it all before, it's been here for ages now and it hasn't killed us, sometimes it even makes us laugh, we speak that language well, *in doors we trust, so go and do it, if you see something say something*, we're all creative makers, say it aloud, show it on all occasions, *pitch it to your mother, to your dentist*, we will survive. While the reason why all advertisement and communication strategies, in all possible mediums – whether explicitly commercial, informational, political – seem to be playing the same kineticist song all around is no mystery, I am compelled to raise and repeat the question, whether I am really obliged to be a part of this. What aches is that I know my body will always be exposed to processing it, inevitably. So there is urgency to start radically refusing: start ungluing and tearing out the layers of habituation to this Luna Park the world has become, overstuffed with hyper choreographic compulsions into homogenised never ending durations.

But what exactly am I going to (not) do, what exactly am I going to (not) be? A couple of days ago, while reading Denise Ferreira da Silva's interview, I was struck by the mention of a certain TASK OF ENDING. For her, a way to be invested in that task of ending, or at least in the imagination of an "end" to "the world as we *know* it" – a world that would have to be "rebuilt and recuperated from the destruction caused by the extractive tools and mechanisms of global capital", in spite of the difficulty to believe in the possibility of such an ending – "can only and necessarily happen within and against the given institutional and monetary frameworks of art, the university, and (dare I say [she says]) social media". Denise F. S. also reminds us, that "ways of ending also include minor revolts, moments, gestures of refusal and refuge".

Very concretely, this brought me to think about what needs eradication, neutralisation, evaporation: POOF! – for us to reclaim what is being eradicated, neutralised, evaporated (think of labour protections, for instance). Modestly but increasingly, I started to think about small gestures of refusal that I can practice in my daily life as it is. For example, I can start reducing my response to the thousands of 'calls for' (papers, articles, participation, you name it), which rush into my mailbox every day and night. From here on, I started to feel closer to some endings. Step by step:

- \*Stop co-responding; this can produce misfires of a certain (mostly normative) performativity.
- \*Fail all my next public performances (at the university, in theatres, online...).
- \*Force intervals, interludes, cuts, all sorts of unproductive interruptions: "mean-times", to be taken literally; bad times, times from which no value can be extracted.
- \*Frequent history (as fiction) and the dead. In other words: for better quality 'company' and protection against the permanently "illuminated 24/7 world without shadows" described by Crary as "the final capitalist mirage of post-history", i.e. the mirage of "an exorcism of the otherness" (2013: 9), I guess I would recommend transforming death and history into companions, or places to go for companionship: visit a certain "happiness of the dead" and "frequent history" in senses close to the ones we can find in

Vinciane Despret's *Au Bohneur des morts: récits de ceux qui restent* (2017) and John Berger's *Confabulations* (2016), respectively. Not because we would be "nostalgic about the past" or "utopian about the future", writes Berger, and not because we would need "to prove any argument", but because history can be "a meeting place" that we frequent "for company", for support against the current "Historic loneliness", the current marginalisation, if not elimination, of our sense of history (2016: 77, 78).

\* Sleep more. For sleep remains, in "its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity", the "incongruous anomaly and site of crisis in the global present", since "nothing of value can be extracted from it" (Crary 2013: 10, 11).

Apart from writing these lists of minor gestures towards the 'task of ending', I have been trying some video-graphic pieces of storytelling (of-and-for study). I called them 'iconographic critical poems'. A dear friend abbreviated the expression to ICP and I stayed with it. For how can some-thing made to deal with desolation sound so pretentious: *iconographic critical poems*, really?... you guessed it, ashamed I am. But it doesn't matter. For the end, I might send you ICP #1:

**All Together – Feedback Now – Total Access Inc.**

**(on my personal Coca Cola memories and other globalised pop affects)**

If we're lucky, it will make us all fall asleep for long enough and wake up in better moods.

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