

We are delighted to publish Florian Mussgnug's final contribution to this series of posts based on the LINKS event that took place on 13 June 2022. A description of the occasion can be found [here](#). For previous posts, please scroll down.

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On Pluralism and Vulnerability in the Arts and Humanities

In my brief intervention, I would like to stress the positive importance of pluralism in the Arts and Humanities.¹ Instead of championing a single definition of the Arts and Humanities, I wish to emphasize the positive ambivalence of these fields and the interdependence of arguments, attitudes and styles that are in play; the irreducible complexity of political, social and cultural situations that will not be settled by neat solutions that focus on one interpretative category alone. In other words, I wish to suggest that the social importance of the Arts and Humanities cannot be stated in purely economic or institutional terms. It also stems from the artist's and the scholar's ability to query the human from diverse angles, including the position of its least privileged and most vulnerable designations. This ability, I propose, must continue to serve as a bedrock for reasoned and respectful dialogue, in academic criticism and in wider cultural and political exchanges. It can give shape to communities and projects that invite resourcefulness, generosity and kindness.²

The colleagues who have gathered for this event know that Goldsmiths has long been a vibrant home to traditions of critical practice that are not defined exclusively by the application of rigid protocols of knowledge. These traditions

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion, see "Prelude", in Florian Mussgnug, Mathelinda Nabugodi and Thea Petrou, *Thinking Through Relation Encounters in Creative Critical Writing* (Oxford: Peter Lang 2021), pp. 1-17. I am grateful to Peter Lang for permission to republish some passages from this text here, in revised form.

² This argument is informed by Doris Sommer, *The World of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

view scholarly inquiry as a patient and open-ended scrutiny that goes hand in hand with curiosity and care. Like the musician's skill or the ability of the experienced craftsman, it develops from practice, through success and disappointment alike. It achieves neither conclusion nor perfection, but can offer illumination and fulfilment.

Goldsmiths' research strategy underlines the importance of vibrancy, boundary-crossing, and inventiveness. These terms carry a positive tenor in the numerous disciplinary and cross-disciplinary frameworks that give shape to discussions in the modern languages, comparative literature, film and media studies and creative writing, among others. They hold a privileged place in structures of argumentation that have become deeply familiar to researchers in the Arts and Humanities, and that are often employed to defend their work against external attack.³ As a result, these terms have become near ubiquitous in recent scholarly debates. They are, in the words of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, *attractors*: they hold the power to engage other terms and concepts, draw in values, and disseminate feelings "exactly as though everyone knew what was meant".⁴ We may use them without quite knowing what they mean. But if we take them seriously, they compel us to understand academic research as a set of immanent, ever-modulating force-relations, which emphasize both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, across space and time.

Do we still need research in the Arts and Humanities? It would be easy enough to respond to this question if we simply chose to posit the importance of our work in terms of institutional orientations. The work of the literary and cultural critic, then, could be said to consist in the systematic pursuit of specialist expertise and comprehensive knowledge. Specialism, accordingly, might be imagined, as a

³ See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴ Marilyn Strathern, *Relations: An Anthropological Account* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

gradual homing in on an object of study: a progressive, discursively and epistemologically monolinear approximation that is ultimately rewarded by complete and definitive understanding. Once this understanding is achieved, the project has reached its conclusion.

As philosopher Raymond Geuss has shown, this conception of specialism is central to many academic knowledge practices, especially in the West. For example, it holds a powerful grip over analytic philosophy, where it functions, in Geuss' words, as a culturally constructed myth "to which we have a strong tendency and perhaps a deep commitment – a commitment so deep that it generates an illusion of necessity".⁵ The same can be said for literary and cultural studies, where the pursuit of specialist knowledge has found expression, in recent decades, in the rhetorical and epistemological conventions of *critique*: a mid-Twentieth Century style of analysis that postulates the reader as an expert, whose scrutiny serves to interrogate and decode certain qualities of a given work of art that are not readily apparent to the non-specialist.⁶ I wish to interrupt this orientation and sketch a different response.

Comparatists at UCL and Goldsmiths joined forces with their colleagues at King's College London, twelve years ago, to create the London Intercollegiate Network for Comparative Studies (LINKS). In more recent years, the network has also been joined by our distinguished colleagues and friends at Royal Holloway, Queen Mary University London, SOAS, Birkbeck and at the London School of Advanced Studies. What we have experienced together, over more than a decade, is the power of a community that resists the strictures of competitor-thinking and disciplinary silos and that celebrates experiences of aesthetic encounter, research, and creative critical practice that serve to unsettle the

⁵ Raymond Geuss, *Who Needs a World View?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2020), xv.

⁶ For an important introduction to this concept, see Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (eds), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

singular authoritativeness of specialist knowledge. We do so not because we wish to dismiss the importance of specialist knowledge but because we want to open the debates in our disciplines to more diverse orientations, subjectivities and narratives. From the perspective of hegemonic regimes of evaluation and assessment, this renders us vulnerable.

But vulnerability is crucial to our experience of scholarly community. Social Anthropologist Tim Ingold describes research as a state of vulnerability, not unlike the experience of being in love:

What the thinker and the lover have in common is that they are uniquely vulnerable. They are in a condition of surrender whether to the idea or to the beloved. But the condition is far from passive; on the contrary, it is passionate, an affectation of the soul that calls mind and body to contemplation.⁷

I wish to take this opportunity to thank colleagues and friends, at Goldsmiths, across LINKS institutions and elsewhere, who continue to take risks, and who champion practices of writing and teaching that are not restricted to established registers of expression or modes of scholarly attention. In this way, they point our attention beyond prescriptive regimes of production and assessment, disciplinary protocols and organisational structures.⁸ They remind us that reflections about art are ultimately reflections about life, and vice versa. They alert us to vulnerability and beauty that are shared by humans and non-humans on this living, unpredictable and wondrous planet.

⁷ Tim Ingold, *Correspondences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), 2.

⁸ We recognise the importance of institutional practices and policies in higher education that foster a space for creative critical exchange, such as the PhD in Creative Critical Writing, which was developed and run by Timothy Mathews at University College London. It is important to emphasize, however, that creative critical research, by definition, will and should exceed the scope of such initiatives, even where it is facilitated by them.