

191 Research Culture as Instituent Practice: the possibilities of thinking differently?

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This exploratory paper draws from curatorial and art theory to speculate on the possibilities of conceptualising research culture as instituent practice (Raunig 2009). Research culture is increasingly being problematised and contested (Moore et al 2017, Moran et al 2020) with contemporary challenges for researchers including academic precarity (Mulligan & Danaher 2021) and its impact on the persistence of 'publish or perish' and competitiveness, to increased expectations through growing emphasis on impact literacy (Bayley 2023), interdisciplinarity, and collaboration. In the United Kingdom expectations for researcher support are set out by funders and bodies such as Vitae and the Royal Society, and research environments are assessed through the Research Excellence Framework and resulting league tables. How might thinking through instituent practice help us to reimagine research culture? What are the possibilities of instituent practice as critical self-reflection, as recognition of research culture as political practice, and as openness to continual transformation?

Full paper

Prompted by the continued growth in practice research in creative disciplines and in creative methods across disciplines, this paper draws from curatorial and art theory to speculate on the possibilities of conceptualising and enacting research culture as instituent practice (Raunig 2009).

The research landscape is changing and along with it the expectations of academics as researchers with challenges including academic precarity (Mulligan & Danaher 2021) and its impact on the persistence of 'publish or perish' and competitiveness, to a growing emphasis on impact literacy (Bayley 2023), interdisciplinarity, and collaboration. Research culture in terms of the "behaviours, values expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities" (Royal Society 2018) is complexly entangled with the structures and processes of the research environment. In the United Kingdom expectations for researcher support are set out by the national governmental funding body UKRI and formally encoded through the Researcher Development Concordat (Vitae 2019) and the Higher Education Funding Council commissioned report on the Characteristics of high-performing research units (Manville et al 2015). Research environments are formally assessed through the Research Excellence Framework, impacting on funding institutions receive and league tables. However, research culture is being increasingly problematised and contested (Moore et al 2017). The Royal Society's recent Changing Expectations (2018) programme focused on research culture in the sciences and the Wellcome Trust commissioned report on perceptions of research (Moran et al 2020) culture indicate growing recognition of a need for changes in approach.

In this context, I speculate that looking to practices and concepts within the arts might prove fruitful for rethinking research culture as a practice (Trowler 2013). In identifying a third phase of institutional critique in contemporary art practice, philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig defined instituent practices as a linking of social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism (2009). His conceptualisation of instituent practices is complex theoretically, drawing on Foucault, Deleuze, Virno and decades of artistic practice and theory. It addresses earlier institutional critique in art that sought distance from the institution, and then acknowledged artistic practice's complicity with the institution. Raunig advocates instead for "betraying the rules of the game through the act of flight: 'transforming the arts of governing' ... as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions" (2009:11) in an instituent practice as instituting itself, always in a state of becoming. This conception of instituting as an ongoing practice of critique which has the capacity to change the structures of institutions (or perhaps to resist forming such structures) is thought provoking in relation to research culture in higher education. Raunig was arguing against both historical conceptions of the art institution as elitist and exclusionary and the more contemporary market-driven art world and its organisations. The parallels with debates around higher

education are clear, indeed Raunig's later co-authored *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (Raunig et al 2013) focused on both the art world and the university as a potential sites of resistance and transformation.

So what might we draw from instituent practice to reimagine the concept and practice of research culture? Raunig lays out a complex philosophical terrain around concepts of power, constitution and constituent, and of the interrelationships between governmentality, institution-as-establishment, and institution-as-process. Without necessarily delving into the philosophical complexities, and thus appropriating rather than interrogating at this stage of speculation, an instituent practice would demand attentiveness to research culture as political practice as well as social practice. A critical attitude would recognise research culture as embodied and enacted in organisations and processes as much as behaviours and values and commit to research culture in its many manifestations as in remaining in states of becoming, that is as open to transformation. It would of course be naïve to imagine that research can ever exist entirely without institutions or governmentality in terms of systems of funding, quality assurance and accountability. Raunig's concept of instituting is useful to reflect on how much of the problematics of contemporary research cultures are also enacted through self-government, through "dichotomies such as that of the individual and the collective" (Raunig 2009:8), as much as through audit processes, competition and gate-keeping. Adopting a concept of instituent practice would entail a continual process of reconsidering research cultures with an openness to reorganizing, to traversing fields and structures, and to responding differently. Arguably attempting to enact research culture conceived as instituent practice might enable more openness to inclusivity and care, as well as appropriate and agile responses to our changing social, technological, ecological contexts and challenges.

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