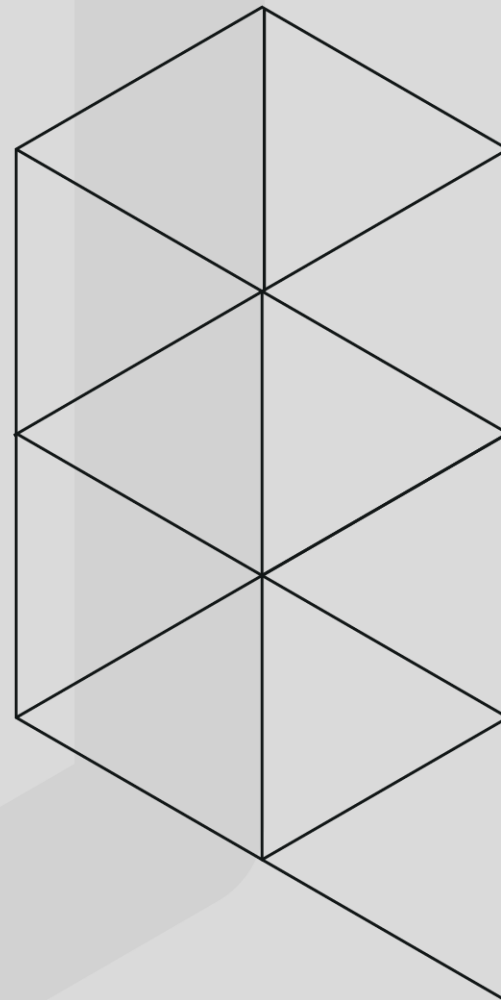


Supervising Art Researchers and Performativity: Reverse Mentoring, Ethics, Adjacency and Consilience

SPACEX Deliverable, Work Package 5 (D5.6, D18)

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Amsterdam
SPACEX Work Package 4: Archives
Secondments: Sirius, Mayday Rooms, Project
Art Centre, Prague City Gallery



Supervising Art Researchers and Performativity: Reverse Mentoring, Ethics, Adjacency and Consilience

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The former Director of the UK's Secret Service (GCHQ), David Omand, recently outlined that the world has become more complex and less predictable. In order to be ready to fight the effects of climate change and general political volatility, it is important to cultivate (in my own terms) creative and lateral thinking.¹ When I asked him why it is then that governments seem so reluctant to value (and pay for) Art(istic) Researchers and their education, i.e. support precisely those who model and apply this kind of thinking, he said that I'd be surprised how neurodiverse the intelligence community is. He thus both agreed – and pathologized Art Research. Even more recently, the Dutch NATO Admiral Rob Bauer has similarly told the (Dutch) public to expect the unexpected.² He elaborated that, as a response, Western societies have to ready for war – not just in terms of budgetary priorities (which will of course diminish both arts and academic funding), but also in terms of attitude or “mentality”.³ Military strategists through the ages have reiterated the truism that wars are won not on the battle field, but in classrooms – or, by extension, universities.

Advanced (PhD level) education of Art(istic) Research practitioners is the topic of this volume, and I would like to approach the question of what kind of knowing and doing (performativity) Art Research can contribute to the urgent questions of today through the lens of the supervision of researchers who investigate such projects, or through welcoming them into academic institutions, advocating for their work in university bureaucracies, ideally shaping these structures to suit them, and creating cohorts of Art Researchers, who can be active in and beyond the academy. Can there be – or can we perform – a sense of joint purpose, a unity, in all the necessary, pragmatic and programmatic diversity that Art Research constitutes? And does that contribution to our institutions, to academic work and to society have anything to do with the mentioned threat of unpredictability and complexity?⁴

I cannot begin without acknowledging “my” past PhD researchers, many of whose projects include a practice element to the submission.⁵ They have taught (or at least tried to teach) me both what they need and what they can impart; and I have spent (too much?) time trying to advocate for that in my institutions, often abandoning (as it surely appeared) their immediate requirements in the process (and coming close to burn-out myself). An institutional perspective is also what I elaborated in a chapter dealing with (Creative) Writing and its (belated) entrance into Artistic Research debates.⁶ There, my point was that joining the field about a decade ago should not be an occasion for celebrating certainties, but an expression of solidarity in the margins. I then attempted to establish Art Research as a “minor” field in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense (where writing is deterritorialized in relation to art, not literature). In the following, I will continue developing such thoughts – as the criteria for the minor include political immediacy and communal enunciation – on the question of a joint purpose just posed. But I also want to deviate from this earlier work: solidarity now sounds too triumphalist and potentially essentialist, too similarly to the use of terms like “democracy” by people like Rob Bauer. Instead, Tina M. Camp’s concept of adjacency will serve better – and consilience as a belief in (the need to pursue) the unity (not universality!) of enquiry across disciplines demands to be (re)claimed as the purview of Art Research.⁷

The BAK Summer School convenors wisely based our discussions on Barbara Bolt’s important essay on the performativity of Artistic Research and its place in the academic field.⁸ It is vital, indeed, to stress that small gestures and ritualized behaviours in our everyday lives have the better capacity to break the habit of norms and effect (societal) change; and that art is where unique situations and the unpredictable (as above), rather than repeatable experiments, are foregrounded. If, on this basis, shifting the focus to the supervision of Art Research projects, much space opens for newly thinking through and acting in academic bureaucracies.⁹

One clear institutional role that Art Researchers and their supervisors can arguably aim to assume in the academy is what the museum sector already practices: Reverse Mentoring. Some museums have paid members of marginalized communities to give feedback on their exhibitions and all aspects of the visitor experience.¹⁰ If institutions wish to know where they could improve, there are means and ways

of achieving that. Especially if PhD researchers are funded (and that is a big “if” in many countries), it is (in my view) a justified hope or expectation that, in addition to being mentored (or supervised), they will engage in imparting their perspective and ways of knowing on the university.¹¹ They are more likely than others, who fit more seamlessly into this institutional frame to have made experiences that reveal where the university is less than the thoughtful, caring place that it wants to be (and says it is). They may also belong to communities that are not as yet adequately represented among the institution’s staff. To find ways to listen and take seriously such feedback is important on a number of levels, of course, but not least because, as the truism goes, doing what one says and saying what one does (i.e. cognitive coherence) enhances (academic) credibility – and is a basic ingredient of leadership at all levels.¹² Art Researchers arguably lead when they observe, as they tend to do, the ways in which infrastructures are used, how resources are distributed, where current habits and norms point to surviving hierarchies and injustices that are incommensurable with current institutional mission statements, policies and best intentions. They often have an uncannily failsafe way of gauging calcifications, as Andrea Philips calls them in this volume, and that Jalal Toufic has termed a “shit detector.”¹³ They can make institutions, including their supervisors, see – and should, of course, be valued for it. Barbara Bolt elaborates:

If, as I have argued, the aim of a performative paradigm is not to find correspondences but rather to recognise and ‘map’ the ruptures and movements that are created by artistic research, then isn’t that the same as for science? Here the work of art is not just the artwork/performance or event and science is not just the reduction of the world to data as immutable mobile. It is the effect of the work in the material, affective and discursive domains.

One domain, where this can be the case, is the university itself in all its breadth. To its unity, consilience, I will turn later. Let us for the moment, though, turn to a prime location or target of reverse mentoring: ethics.

Ethics procedures are key to how universities mind their coherence between aspirations for excellence and what happens in individual research projects. The reverse mentoring impetus can thus particularly include a two-way assessment of who or what is served, e.g. when insistence on good practice becomes gate-keeping.

Assumptions that the institution is the rightful arbiter in all cases cannot be left unquestioned. In many institutions, ethics reviewers are open for conversations and do appreciate the fact that the university (like the museum) has been shaped in the likeness of colonial modernity. They may even undertake steps to mitigate this (asking, as BAK does in the art ecosystem, what living in non-fascist ways could mean). The *Johannesburg Principles for Migration Research* spell out actions for research design to begin to address inequality and precarity.¹⁴

In many cases, institutions, however, have a tendency to apply norms and “manage” diversity with metrics, which is surprising, as one of the basic tenets of academic work is to focus on what is said (the most persuasive argument), not on the identity (or position) of a human being, i.e. the academic. Adjacency, as introduced earlier, is one way of pushing against identity politics and find modes of being with others and not to be silent in the face of their plight. This again is part of that Art Research process of learning to see, as well as showing and imparting that seeing in the face of what Ann Laura Stoler has called colonial aphasia.¹⁵ The humility and often “as if” indirectness of the showing and affective evidencing that art can achieve is important in light of the feeling that we may communicate too many uncomfortable truths.

It is impossible, however, to take away that discomfort. Art Research is engaging in analysis and while that most often does not take the shape of the kinds of audits to which institutions are accustomed, the assessments that emerge are all too clear: the subject (society, its organisations and especially our academic institutions themselves) is found wanting in terms of that cognitive coherence. This is what even the most humbly presented artistic gesture communicates when it teaches (institutional) recipients to “see”. (It was already Adorno’s insight that all art shows how the world could be otherwise). Bolt writes: “The problem for artistic research is often recognising and mapping the transformations that have occurred [through] tacit and intuitive processes that make pattern-making difficult.”¹⁶ Yet a pattern arguably does emerge: that societies, as currently governed, are heading into climate emergency, war and discord, when all policy statements and institutional self-characterizations point into the opposite direction.

Scholars researching evaluations in the cultural field are advising that art itself, including Art Research, should be used to convey its

value.¹⁷ This takes art seriously as a mode of analysis. However, it doesn't account for ever more aggressive governmental demands that art justify itself – and especially its funding. When those governing feel criticized (as they have to be, given the status quo), they are less likely to fund their own – effective and most often impartial – interpreters or “auditors”. Art is then subjected to unsuitable, numeric assessments the other way around, and of course devalued, its funding is denied. This may increasingly be out of a feeling of retribution, owing not to the failure, but to the stringency of the most often carefully and lovingly imparted feedback; the success of the reverse mentoring that those working in art and through its ecosystem have given.

What is to be done? Martin Warnke has cautioned that we tend to do with art what we do to one another: we should avoid pressing all detail into an (artificially) complete and hierarchical whole.¹⁸ When – inevitably – working on complex, always incompletely understood issues, tentative language, multiple pathways to partial “solutions”, several voices, methods and “styles” will need to suffice. For me, such ambitious worlds are connected to the literature of James Joyce, who taught me to bear and enjoy not knowing. Such an impasse is also what prompted Ariella Aïsha Azoulay to formulate her vision of art as a site of working to unlearn: *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*.¹⁹ At the event out of which the current book has grown, I shared parts of a text I was then writing.²⁰ It argued (on the basis of Luke Gibbons' 2023 book *Joyce and the Irish Revolution*) that the literature of James Joyce formulated an alternative to colonial or authoritarian thinking as part of a “thought collective” that formed around 1916. History may have substituted the Catholic Church for the British Empire in Ireland, but Joyce and others developed strategies that I likened to current thinking: attitudes conveyed by Azoulay's *Potential History* and Tina M. Camp's concept of adjacency. They feature empathetic immersion (interior monologues of marginalized characters), manipulation of (non-linear) time, multiplicity of voices or styles, the use of sources in ways that privilege a repetition with a difference etc. I traced the effects of formatively reading Joyce in and through the art writers / art researchers / curators (Carola Giedion-Welcker, Leo Steinberg, Sarat Maharaj, James Elkins and the present author with recourse to Aby Warburg as a contemporary of Joyce's). What emerged (as just one example of a piece of research among many in our field) was a commonly felt necessity to transcend disciplinary boundaries and

those between interpreting and doing, the need to take art seriously by in effect becoming (fellow) art researchers and embracing this field's performativity as a working with others (and since artists are often scapegoated, being with others, i.e. adjacency). In line with Joyce's dictum that his "war effort" in relation to WWI was to write *Ulysses*, we can today in and through Art Research establish and disseminate a discourse, where a (sharp) evaluation of society's current state is made with both humility and determination, but also transcended. Art can make one see and feel and act as a force of / for non-violence, when considering the performativity of seeing the "ungrievables" (in Judith Butler's expression).²¹

And why is it the university – and art researchers based there – that has a role to play here? The artist John Latham was convinced that society, including the field of art in the twentieth century, had failed to account for relativity and developments in science – except for James Joyce, he told me.²² The university is maybe a space where disciplinary gate-keepers sit, but also where, among many colleagues in all faculties, those can be found who wish to join art researchers in bearing complexities, engage in ArtScience collaborations – and more: together aim towards a unity of enquiry, what E.O. Wilson has called consilience.²³

His cross-faculty erudition is both rich in detail and immense in its aim. I wonder what Wilson (who died in 2021) would have made of the mounting evidence in his "home" discipline of biology, of the Gaia hypothesis supplanting neo- and social Darwinism more thoroughly than he (who already pushed against it) knew. He would have been pleased with my art research students and how they read across Faculty boundaries not necessarily with ease, but with vivid interest. Co-location and symbiotic exchange among different organisms, and a non-hierarchical, self-regulating equilibrium as enabler of higher forms of life: this does seem to point towards a workable, consilient understanding in more areas of investigation. In addition to Margulis and Lovelock, Barad, Haraway and Stengers are among the favourites of "my" art research students, who thus thoroughly think with and through science. Wilson wavers between according art (and its interpretation) a large and not so large a role in consilience. If he had already been informed about the last quarter of a century's developments in art research, ArtScience and social practice, I expect that he would have considered it as promising and exciting – if not a prime, expanding (and in itself diverse) site to find allies for

consilient convergences. Such work in and on holistic fields of knowing and doing is there for others to further. I argue that entering consilience (whether it is called that or not) into discourses constitutes considerable part of the Reverse Mentoring that Art Research PhD candidates can (and also tend to) perform. They remind us that the university is a university. Seeing consilient entanglements across the disciplines, a standing with those across divides created by colonial modernity – i.e. adjacency – appears as precisely the kind of approach that art researchers can muster.

This is also stringent as a matter of ethics bound up with art researchers' reverse mentoring of the university. According to Simon Critchley, "Ethics is anarchic meta-politics. It is the anarchic moment of democratic dissensus articulated around the experience of the ethical demand, the exorbitant demand at the heart of my subjectivity that defines that subjectivity by dividing it and opening it to otherness."²⁴ Walead Beshty asserts that an endeavour to reflect "on the specific quality and nature of the social field the art object constructs and of which it is simultaneously a part [...] the discourse of ethics is particularly well suited."²⁵ Social practice (art) and art research are

"concerned with 'learning to inhabit the world in a better way' [...] a notion which encapsulates in lay terms what the discourse of ethics is chiefly designed to discern, i.e. a description of a mode of inhabiting the world [...] Thus the evaluation of the aesthetic condition of ethics (a barometer by which we ascertain the value and quality of interpersonal relations) has become one possibility, if not the only possibility, for the discussion of the aesthetics of the social field."²⁶

E.O. Wilson in turn devotes to ethics (and religion) the culminating penultimate chapter of his book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*.

"Because the success of an ethical code depends on how wisely it interprets the moral sentiments, those who frame it should know how the brain works, and how the mind develops. The success of ethics also depends on the accurate prediction of the consequences of particular actions as opposed to others, especially in cases of moral ambiguity. That too takes a great deal of knowledge consilient with the natural and social sciences. [He continues:] The future of [art

research lies] in addressing the fundamental questions of human existence head on, without embarrassment or fear [...]. That of course is a very difficult task. [...] Competent people get on with them, because they need to be done.²⁷

From all this, we can infer that the infrastructures of academia and art, particularly art research and social practice, are connected, or better entangled, sites of consilient inquiry and performativity. Cohorts of PhD researchers with their different concerns, but strong links through art research discourses, themselves holistic, can reach across divides, keep ethics and consilient social performativity in mind and – in line with an attitude of adjacency – impart (or live) that bearing differences and complexities is not just possible, but a basis for synergetic leaps to better (even if unpredictable) futures.

The art sector can do that, too: e.g. documenta fifteen assembled social practice art, civil rights and ecological initiatives, including many Art Researchers (some of them with science-driven initiatives in e.g. the realm of biodiversity and waste). And it was overshadowed by identity politics hysteria.²⁸ At the time of writing, we still have spaces to do this important work again, maybe to fail better in combatting the identity politics-driven (self-)destruction underway: the university, which minds ethics and regularly and ritually assembles thought collectives-cum-“movement of movements” of Art Researchers at PhD-level, their supervisors and examiners. We have our work cut out for ourselves.²⁹ And yet, whenever there is a viva, a conference, seminar, an opening or other academic or art ritual, there is an opportunity to practice, i.e. perform, the seeing of others that is central to the force of non-violence, and let Art Research-based consilience foster adjacency.

Notes

1. In his lecture “How Spies Think: Ten Lessons in Intelligence”, David Omand was summarizing the findings of his book *How to Survive a Crisis: Lessons in Resilience and Avoiding Disaster*, in Amsterdam’s Zuiderkerk, December 9, 2023. He advocates taking responsibility and thinking for oneself: “people cling to the rule book when they should be prepared to tear it up if necessary.” “Surviving a crisis [...] is a form of spontaneous performance art in which the cast follow an outline script [...] but then improvise the details.” <https://www.g10vandeconomie.nl/speakers-en/david-omand>

2. *NOS Nieuws*, January 17, 2024, 18:47. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2505275-navo-admiraal-samenleving-moet-het-onverwachte-gaan-verwachten>
3. Ibid.
4. I'm here echoing the ritualised formulation that accompanies the conveying of a PhD diploma at the University of Amsterdam: all new doctors accept not just the degree, but their concomitant "responsibilities to science and society".
5. At Ulster University, Belfast, National College of Art and Design, Dublin, and the University of Amsterdam they were: Julie Louise Bacon, Áine Phillips, Marion Dowdican-McGarry, Jeannie McCollum, Helen Sharpe, Jill Strauss, Catherine Devlin, Lyn Gallagher, Sandra Johnston, Robert Huber, Aoife MacNamara, Emma Dwan O'Reilly, Amanda Coogan, Andrew McClelland, Dave Loder, Martin Krenn, Megan Johnston, Maite van Dijk, Gregory Sholette, Janice McNab, Florian Göttke, Timea Lelik, Melissa Rombout, Aga Wielocha, Erdem Çolak, Francesca Verga, Barbara Cueto, Stacey Vorster, Matisse Huiskens. I dedicate this chapter to them and to those who currently trust me with their supervision.
6. Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes. "Minor Literature in and of Artistic Research." In *Artistic Research and Literature*, Edited by Corina Caduff and Tan Wälchli (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2019), 49-62.
7. Tina M. Camp. *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2021). – I will follow scholars like Sarat Maharaj in using "art research", rather than "artistic research" to refer to the field at stake, except for where I paraphrase the work of others, who choose the latter term.
8. Barbara Bolt, "Artistic Research: A Performative Paradigm?" in *PARSE Journal*, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 129-142, <https://parsejournal.com/article/artistic-research-a-performative-paradigm/> Bolt points me – for the present chapter – towards art researchers "reverse mentoring" their (academic) institutions, engaging with the ethical and other conventions they find there, as well as are particularly well placed to aim towards a unity of inquiry: consilience. These thoughts also explain to me why, in art history, Aby Warburg, who focused on the "travelling" or repetition of small, "misfired" gestures (traces of affect) carried the "afterlife" of ghostly pasts better than "great" works of art – and why his work is so interesting to art researchers.
9. This shift is in line with my previous work on indirect efficacies in and of art that complement also at times necessary directness. This differentiation echoes the positions of Claire Bishop and Grant Kester in canonical social practice discourse, and I want to clarify that indirectness is, in line with Bolt, the preference on account of it achieving, where possible, more sustained change. In some situations that is not possible,

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- and (or as a result) what Tania Bruguera calls “political timing specificity” is necessary to bear in mind. Claire Bishop, “Rise to the Occasion: The Art of Political Timing,” *ARTFORUM* (May 2019): 198-206.
10. Laura Raicovich, “A Unique Program Pays you to Visit Museums as a Guest Critic,” *Hyperallergic* (June 27, 2019), <https://hyperallergic.com/505841/laagp/>
 11. This has an art history in the Artist Placement Group of John Latham and Barbara Steveni and, similarly from the early 1970s, the Free International University for Interdisciplinary Research of Joseph Beuys and others. See: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, “Beuys’s Legacy in Artist-led University Projects,” *Tate Papers*, no.31 (Spring 2019), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/31/beuys-legacy-artist-led-university-projects>.
 12. What Achille Mbembe says about Europe can and should, in my view, be applied also to the university: Decoloniality “invites us to an alternative reading of our modernity. It calls on Europe to responsibly live what it says are its origins, future, and promise. If, as Europe has always claimed, the goal of this promise really is the future of all of humanity, then postcolonial thought calls on Europe to constantly open and restart this future, in a singular manner, responsible for itself, for the Other, and before the Other. That having been said, Europe is no longer the center of the world.” Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 76.
 13. Jalal Toufic, “Jalal Toufic’s Notification / Notice de Jalal Toufic,” ALBA website <https://alba.edu.lb/english/school-of-visual-arts-Directors-Statement>.
 14. The Johannesburg Principles Building Equitable and Effective Partnerships for Migration Research, <https://www.migration.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/JHB-principles.pdf>
 15. Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France,” *Public Culture* no. 23.1 (2011): 121-126.
 16. Bolt, “Artistic Research”: 141.
 17. For the EU-funded project in which I am involved (see last note), Francesco Chiaravalloti developed such a position at a meeting of the consortium with the UvA’s “Artistic Knowing” research group, September 21, 2023.
 18. Warnke, Martin, “Wissenschaft als Knechtungsakt,” in *What’s Wrong With Art: Stephan von Huene*, ed. Peter Weibel and Philip Ziegler (Karlsruhe: ZKM, Hirmer, 2021), 53-63.
 19. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019). – Isabelle Stengers’ preference is to follow and evaluate (not judge), before leveraging the arguments to effect change (unless there is a need to “make a fuss”). She rethinks the relationship between scientists

- and politicians, suggesting “inventing-thematizing” scientists as politicians. Isabelle Stengers, *The Invention of Modern Science* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 164.5.
20. Lerm Hayes, Christa-Maria, “James Joyce and Art Writing: Indirect Efficacy, Potential (Art) History and Adjacency,” in *Joyce and the Arts*, ed. Keith Williams, Cleo Hanaway-Oakley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024) (forthcoming).
 21. Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, London: Verso 2021. And, when all else fails, i.e. when the orthodoxies of the day prevent direct reference to what is liberating, we can follow Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work (including the concept of the answerable other) can be read through his admiration of Joyce, but who, under Stalin, was not in a position to mention the author. Indirectness, allegory, the poetic, while being clear on the principles: that has for long served practitioners and (academic) writers under authoritarian and imperial conditions.
 22. In interview, London, April 2003. The reciprocal need for artists in universities and research in art is effectively outlined in: Tom Holert, “Artistic Research: Anatomy of an Ascent,” *Texte zur Kunst* no. 82 (2011), 38–63.
 23. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (London: Abacus, (1998) 2013). I thank James Elkins for mentioning this term in relation to the chapter from which I read in Utrecht.
 24. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2012), 130.
 25. Walead Beshty, *Ethics*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London, Cambridge MA: Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2015), 18.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Wilson, *Consilience*, 267, 301. He wrote “liberal arts”, not art(istic) research and yet, I think that this is what the current formulation would have been, accounting for Creative Humanities developments, as well as art research at PhD level.
 28. In the context of the performativity of Artistic Research, guided by Butler, it is worth pointing out that Butler makes very clear that it (her work and the struggle of which it is an important part) was never distinctly about any one group: “It was always about equality and justice”. Judith Butler, “Identity Politics and Culture Wars”, *Holberg Prize Debate 2021*, <https://holbergprize.org/en/2021-holberg-debate-identity-politics-and-culture-wars>. On documenta fifteen see: *(Un)Common Grounds: Reflecting on Documenta Fifteen*, FramerFramed, KNAW, Amsterdam 23 September 2022, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/9917537>.
 29. I mean “work” in Kevin Quashie’s sense: “work, the craft or poiesis where what is being made is the self’s project of inhabiting life rather than a product that confirms systems of capital. Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black*

Aliveness, Or a Poetics of Being (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2021), 113. Work, for Quashie thus “constitutes an ethic of relation” (130), both with regard to the self and others.

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Citation

Original Citation: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, "Supervising Art Researchers and Performativity: Reverse Mentoring, Ethics, Adjacency and Consilience", *Challenging Institutionalization: A Propositional Toolkit for Doing Supervision of Artistic and Practice-based Research* by Barbara Bolt, Mailbritt Borgen, Geoff Cox, Laura Guy, Maria Hlavajova, Maureen de Jager, LEE Wing Ki, Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Glenn Loughran, Jacob Lund, Mari Mäkiranta, Andrea Phillips, Henk Slager, Alexandra Regan Toland, Iris van der Tuin, and Mick Wilson. *The Contemporary Condition 19*, London, Aarhus: Sternberg Press and Aarhus University 2024, pp. 94-106.

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, "Supervising Art Researchers and Performativity: Reverse Mentoring, Ethics, Adjacency and Consilience", *Spatial Practices in Art and Architecture for Empathetic EXchange (SPACEX-RISE)*. 2024.