Your proposal does not fit in our editorial line’

Constructing A Dissident Researcher

SEPIDEH KARAMI
PhD Candidate/ Architect
School of Architecture, Umeå University
Umeå, Sweden
sepideh.karami@arch.umu.se

Abstract
In this article I discuss the possibility and necessity of dissident researcher in academia. I investigate the strategies of interruption as methods of engaging with the institution through artistic research and approaches. Art as a dissensual activity turns artistic research to a dissident research that can question academic consensus instead of conforming its established structure.

In order to construct a dissident researcher I go through three short architectural narrations of three places: a prison (as discipline), a school of architecture (as artistic research) and a library (as dominant discourse). These three narrations are combined with three formulae: amateur, fiction, misperformance or disloyalty; each enacts certain characteristics of dissidence that feeds to an on-going micro-project explained here. These all together try to bring up the question of how perceiving artistic research as dissident research modifies the conventional evaluation systems and sets up new evaluating strategies based on politics of dissidence.

Keywords: dissident, amateur, misperformance, interrupting architecture, artistic research, fiction

Dissent!
We need to dissent. By the look of things, the world is in a status that politics of dissensus is the sine qua non for change. However consensus as a mode of government is an institutionalized gesture of being “democratic” in the so-called civilized world. Consensus is to agree on ‘one unique reality’ despite acknowledging the differences of values and aspirations among people. That ‘unique reality’ evidently becomes the measure of judgment, values, actions, interventions and construction of the politics of exclusion and inclusion in different contexts. Within this global scope, universities and institutions of knowledge production are not exceptions, but paradoxically in serious crisis; where the norms should be contested they have succumbed to the common pitfall of conformism; to academic consensus if you like or ‘professionalism’ in Edward Said’s term. Within this discussion, institutions of art and architecture research and education are important to look at, through the lens of politics of dissensus. After all, art should dissent; it should ‘introduce dissensus by hollowing out’ that ‘unique reality’.

The journey in this paper, hence, goes around the question of dissenting; taking artistic practice or artistic research not as a walking stick but as an axe to get us through uncompromising walls of institutions. It’s a cutting through the problems of eradication of politics of dissent in the mistaken belief of institutional loyalty; and thereby investigating the possibilities of dissensus as a methodology in the newly born field of artistic research and
perceiving it as *dissident research*.

In order to construct a dissident researcher - a missed character in academia- this journey goes through three short architectural narrations of three places: a prison (as discipline), a school of architecture (as artistic research) and a library (as dominant discourse). These three narrations are combined with three formulae: *amateur, fiction, misperformance or disloyalty*; each enacts certain characteristics of dissidence that feeds to an on-going micro-project explained here, as an apparatus of event-artefact-discourse-dialogue. In this paper I intentionally use artistic research and dissident research interchangeably to claim dissidence as the performative core of artistic research. I try not to give a direct definition of a dissident from the outset but building it up little by little through the development of the paper and undertaking a micro-project.

**Formula 01: An Amateur Is A Lover. A Lover Is An Idiot.**

*Artistic research* by definition is not a discipline but indiscipline. It is based on composing connections or in Rolf Hughes’ words ‘productive interplay between differing’ – and I add opposing- ‘ways of thinking’. The problem with disciplinary approaches in Hito Steyerl’s word is that:

(...) it normalizes, generalizes and regulates; it rehearses a set of responses, and in this case, trains people to function in an environment of symbolic labor, permanent design and streamlined creativity.

Unlike disciplinary approaches, artistic research, as an *unrehearsed* activity, highly works through contingency. However it can paradoxically well play through the mechanisms of discipline. Because as Steyerl suggests further, there is always a potential or ‘immobilized’ conflict in a discipline; the conflict is exactly what the discipline tries to restrain in order to retain its territorial power and resultantly hints at them by the act of oppression. Those elements of conflict that are disciplined out, I suggest could become the elements of dissensus and could be mobilized through artistic research and practice. How could this be undertaken and by whom?

For Edward Said, amateurism is a way to mobilize that conflict. A profession and its related discipline reinforce one another. But an *amateur*, athwart, undermines a profession and its adjoining discipline. Advocating *amateurism against professionalism*, Said says:

(...) I shall call amateurism, the desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession.

A dissident in this way can be understood as an amateur – that as the origin of the word suggests- is driven by love rather than rules of a profession. Additionally, an amateur performs through the character of an *idiot* that in Gilles Deleuze’s term is ‘the regular person, uneducated, untrained in philosophy’ and ‘related to the plane of immanence’. Hélène Frichot in her paper ‘I would prefer not to: How Bartleby’s Formula Troubles Collective Design Practices’ situates the idiot in the institutional arrangements and describes her/him as follows:

The idiot disrupts power relations where they pertain to knowledge, as well as the institutional arrangements through which permission is granted pertaining to who is allowed to know what and how much, and therefore who is qualified to speak.

A professional stays loyal to discipline and in turn receives instructions for ‘speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory’. On the contrary, the
amateur by nature questions the disciplinary norms and limits. S/he calls for transvaluing the values by neglecting self-evident values. Amateurism in this way, not only questions what is at work but also construct new territories of action, by doing things differently. An amateur tries to liberate her/himself from ‘being employed’ by power. By dissenting the terms and conditions of employment, the amateur maps those disciplined-out elements and try to understand why they are out and what happens if they are brought back in.

**Formula 02: Fiction Is Real**

Political and artistic fictions introduce dissensus by hollowing out that ‘real’ and multiplying it in a polemical way. The practice of fiction undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given ‘commonsense’. It is a practice that invents new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said and what can be done.¹⁰

Amateurness is highly performative. It is a fictional occupation and occupying a fictitious role. Fiction is to ‘visualize an encounter of incompatibilities’ in Rancière’s word. It always has its one foot in reality and it is its close connection with reality that makes it an affective tool for change. Fiction does not create an imaginary world in contrast to the ‘real’ world, but as Rancière says, ‘it involves the reframing of the ‘real’, or the framing of dissensus’¹¹. He explains that the configurations of what is given as real in fact is ‘a matter of construction, a matter of fiction’. And what is imposed to us as “real” is in fact the constructed fiction of the police order. If we consider a discipline or a profession as ‘real’, amateurism through fictional approaches can interrupt it and its dominant discourses. Fiction is in line with the core concept of artistic research that is rooted in re-connecting ‘different ways of thinking’ and introducing an alternative ‘real’. It is by means of fiction that one can assign different subjectivities to onself beyond and different from the terms of employment.

**Place 01: Montluc Prison- Prison as Discipline**

Dark nights have expanded their lengths over the frosty pink days. It is for this colonization of days by nights that the shadow of the building has stretched over the small artificial hill in a hundred meters distance. As an exchange, streak of light has stretched along the floor and wall, indicating an opening in the continuity of material architecture of this building. I have located my desk in the middle of the room, and my chair in line with the streak of light when it passes through the door -where a plank is missed-, flows to the corridor behind the door and pours down to the central void of the building.

The existing building is designed and renovated by the French architect, Lieutenant Fontaine, in 1943; a renovation that has liberated it from its oppressive discipline. The original building, Montluc prison was built in 1921 as a military prison that later was used by Gestapo as an escape-proof prison. Yet Fontaine as one of the many unknown dissident architects of Interrupting Architecture school, turned it to a totally different structure through days of investigation, material construction and social interaction; an exemplary of hardly achieved critical architecture that radically questioned and reconfigured the structure of a highly rigid institution, namely a prison, through executing his escape plan. That prison never became a prison again afterward.
Fontaine was imprisoned in Montluc during Nazis occupation of France. He was a natural-born escapee, checking the loose elements of the system to find a way out. He believed in architecture that was ‘beyond aesthetic pursuit of making buildings’ and ‘commit(ed) his practice to a politics of selectively taking them apart’.\textsuperscript{12} To undertake his task of architecting, he employed what was at hand -or what accidently arrived in his cell. His language with surrounding objects was cutting; he turned them to either devices of cutting or objects to be cut. When he arrived in his cell, he soon identified the door as the starting point of executing his plan. He commenced with taking away door planks, by means of a spoon. His tools of action thus were all ‘humble objects’\textsuperscript{13} in Jean Genet’s word that do not necessarily denote to any mischief in everyday life of a prison, hence the possibility of working stealthily. His work was the simultaneous act of destroying and constructing, masking constantly what he had destructed until the very last moment. He was mapping, drawing, measuring, negotiating and documenting his failures and wins. He drew details of executing his plan; and he left it for other prisoners as a manual of escape prior to his departure.
“Interrupting Architecture, is an important architecture practice that can not only rescue architecture from its inevitable complicity with dominant power but also introduces new methods and tools in making or unmaking spaces and extend architecture beyond its established discipline. As a method, interrupting architecture has emancipation at its core. In other words it emerges through questioning an institution and breaking free from its disciplines”, I write.

I put down the pen and climb the stool to take a glance through the window at the prison courtyard, where Fontaine had received his first tools for executing his architecture. The courtyard is deserted. Back at my desk I flip through a couple of issues of the architecture journal, El Croquis, piled on the ground. EL Croquis could have been a place for experimental minor forms of architecture practices as its name suggest; ‘The Sketch’: ‘a rough or unfinished version of any creative work’. However it has turned to be one of the most prestigious architectural magazines and showcase for starchitects to show their triumph over architecture discipline. Flipping through them I cannot convince myself with even one single architect that her/his work has something to do with Fontaine’s architecting.
‘Dear EL Croquis Editors’,
(I wrote as a PhD candidate at Umeå School of Architecture)

As part of my PhD project which is about Interrupting Architecture and Dessident Devices, I have a critical/fictional approach to starchitects by introducing non-architects who create, modify, destroy or occupy the existing dominant structures through their dissident acts; hence an architectural investigation of their ‘material work’. This I believe can expand the architectural discussion and its social and political application through dissident acts and resultanty include other silent agents in architecture discourse. To do so, I have a proposal of producing a complete issue on: A Dissident as architect, and interrupting architecture that leads to emancipation. That I suggest can fit into your series on architects. Firstly I would like to ask you about its possibility, and if you think it is possible I can send you a more detailed proposal.

Two days later, surprisingly, I received an answer from the editor Fernando Márquez:

Dear Sepideh Karami,
Thank you for your kind offer, however your proposal does not fit in our editorial line, focused on the publication of monographs on specific authors.

I was really delighted, to succeed in the failure of my request, as it didn’t fit in their editorial line. At the same time I might have had a chance to fail in my succession as my proposed architect was ironically a very ‘specific author’. I wrote back to the editor:

‘However what I proposed was exactly about a specific author. To be more specific I have chosen the main character from Robert Bresson’s movie ‘A Man Escaped’, who is a prisoner trying to escape. I have compared his escape plan and its execution to the work of architecture. Fontaine who is the escapee, in this way, becomes the architect of a prison, which he has destructed and escaped from.

So my idea is to produce an issue that rethink who the architect could be and what kind of making and unmaking of space can be counted as architecture. Fontaine is based on a real character in real life, but also the representative of all those who question the dominant structures by creating a minor structure within the major, toward the project of emancipation.

This proposal would not fit in your editorial line, and the idea is exactly about not being “fit to” as a special issue. In this issue even the advert pages are designed to advertise imaginary tools for such architecture.’

While not having received any answer, I started to ponder about the idea of not fitting to that could be one of the main characteristics of a dissident researcher and her artistic research. Not fitting to in fact is a phrase that, paradoxically, hints to restricting frame of a discipline.

Formula 01+ Formula 02 + Prison
The fictitious occupation for Fontaine as an architect and explaining his work through architectural discourse, questions who an architect is and what is counted as the work of architecture. It displaces the borders of what is acknowledged as architecture discipline and architecture work. In this way work of architecture becomes destructive; or constructing another logic within a discipline (here the prison) through creating different way of moving along the spaces and thereby modifying the sequences, appointing different roles to material agents, and producing new subjectivities by making new objects. When the prisoner escapes, the architecture she has created by means of her escape, reveals the gaps and weak points in a highly disciplined structure. Even in case of failure those weak points (points of ‘conflict’) are revealed. This
fictional take on architectural work, pushes architecture as a discipline to a status of collapse and thereby hints at what architecture cannot do and introduces an architecture that ‘accept’ its ‘insufficiency’\textsuperscript{17}.

**Place 02 – Hanging School of Architecture**
As I walk corridors lit, I hear my footsteps on well-polished concrete floor. Like other institutions, this building has corridors, rooms, doors, meeting rooms, sealed rooms, invisible rooms; however arranged more freely. One can stroll along the corridors where are partly used as workstations. One can easily sneak through the open offices, lip-read stealthily through the glass walls over the confidential meetings. Eavesdropping is facilitated through vertical connections between the floors, through the gaps between the solids. Everything sounds like possible here, except the escaping, as you always feel free. It’s a new school of architecture in a cube. The cube is in a very strange condition of exile. It is hung from a highly tall crane over a deep deep valley. The crane is fixed firmly to the ground but the school oscillates with the wind. Papers, books and coffee-cups fall down from the desks whenever it’s windy. You should be careful when you step out the school; if it’s windy, it might take you away, you might never find your way back. There was once a man who tried to connect the cube with some tightropes to the ground; tightropes not stairs. Because he believed in playfulness in any movement; and play is risky. It was not windy when he stepped out. But as soon as he stepped out, the wind took him away.

It’s where I’ve been doing my PhD. I call it an exemplary building of artistic research. In fact it is the only school formally involved in artistic education of architecture in Sweden. It’s windy and my papers fall down the desk. I ponder how can one achieve not fitting to in this space? But

Figure 5. Hanging School of Architecture (collage by author). Umeå Laboratory of Architecture, initiated by Peter Kjær, started with a concern for the lost relation of architecture ‘to the social political quality of life’; a ‘laboratory’ as a place to develop practices of architecture with ‘new scopes and values’ through ‘raising questions’ and ‘developing trans-disciplinary research’. With high emphasis on international profile of the school Peter Kjær succeeded to curate a platform for different and opposing ways of thinking to encounter. Although his project was disrupted for different political reasons, including normalization of education, the values he installed can still be traced at UMA.\textsuperscript{18}
perhaps the building itself doesn’t fit to anywhere in the overarching institution and maybe it’s why it is kept suspended.

With the introduction of Artistic Research to the conventional academic research, where experimental methodologies are at work and motivated, the project of resistance has turned to be a difficult one. The question of what doesn’t fit to is not an easy one to answer either. For an academic researcher to go places, s/he is demanded to perform according to the established criteria and value systems -established along a long history of scientific research. In this sense when artistic research is legitimized within the academia, certain criteria and value systems have also taken shape along the way; a formal freedom offered to researchers or artists. Yet the main critic about the artistic research is about the tension going on between the ‘academic value’ and ‘artistic value’ that Mitra Azar in her ‘Schizo-notes on artistic research as universe and conflict’ describes as follows:

(...) on the one hand, the need for a format or a protocol with its own set of rules and epistemic implications to be adopted to prove the academic value of the work; on the other, the bold standing of an artwork or a body of works as pure singularity, indeed as something which somehow self-defines its own set of laws and artistic values.19

However, it is in this tension between ‘academic values’ and ‘artistic values’ that artistic research becomes an interesting project to pull off. What if instead of taking artistic research as a restraint for artistic practices, making it to a dissenting machine of criticizing the institutional conformity: a dissenting machine that through artistic approaches questions the disciplines, the institutional structures and ‘academic values’? Instead of trying to fit it into the conventional scientific research methods, we can turn it itself to the project of not fitting to and accordingly creating opposing or dissenting forces of evaluation.

**Formula 03: Disloyalty or Misperformance**

Radical pedagogical experiments in architecture education, in the second half of the 20th century, can be read as a historical example of dissenting the institutions. They were highly successful in questioning, established and institutional values in architecture education that produced in tandem new modes of practices still at work today. In those experiments, tools and methods from other creative practices were employed to enrich architecture discourse and to change its evaluation criteria. At its own time, it was a powerful movement that was also in line with social movements and revolutionary struggles. As part of the first wave of institutional critique, not only architecture but also other creative and cultural practices of this sort, attacked institutions ‘aesthetically, politically and theoretically’20. However it all gave way to the second wave of institutional critique (from the 1980s), as Simon Sheikh states, that critique itself became part of the institution. In the current wave (third wave) of institutional critique, institution is not something to be destroyed but to be propagated by curators and directors, through ‘modifying and solidifying’ it.

Where does a dissident researcher stand in relation to the discussion of institutions? As institutions work generally toward the politics of consensus they resist changes coming from disensual approaches. This might be better explained by what Peter de Graeve addresses as the ‘relative failure’ in the relationship between art and art institutions. The latter resists the changes and the former is unable to bring any changes, although we all endeavor to contribute to the culture of ‘high performance’21. ‘We work hard’ he says while identifying ‘we’ with the ‘institution’ itself and ‘work’ as a ‘narrow game of forming and reforming’ the institution;22 a loyalty to institutional consensus that is at odds with what art should do as a disensual activity. Jacques Ranciere considers the work of art as strategies that aim at changing the given frames
through which visible and invisible are configured. Not swapping the place of visible and invisible but to create heterogeneous apparatuses where the encounter of visible and invisible produces new meanings or transvalues the ‘self-evidence of the visible’\textsuperscript{23}. If we agree on this definition of how art works, then art should rescue itself from the ‘narrow game of forming and reforming’ institutions.

Situating a dissident in the realm of artistic research, one can contribute to breaking the frames in which the ‘we’ and the ‘work’ is defined. A dissident is the one who contest radically the way in which subjects are governed.\textsuperscript{24} In this regard I do not argue for strategies of withdrawal that are in favor of autonomy. Chantal Mouffe in criticizing the strategies of withdrawal advocates for ‘a strategy of engagement with institutions’\textsuperscript{25}. Along Mouffe’s strategy of engagement I would prefer to argue for \textit{strategies of interruption}: that is when ‘we’ becomes the dissidents and ‘work’ becomes \textit{misperformance}. In this sense loyalty is not defined in conformism but in criticality and artistically interrogating and interrupting what is expected from the researcher as necessary and essential to go places. Loyalty is defined in \textit{misperformance} when the performance of conformism and consensus is at work. As Said says:

\begin{quote}
(...) instead of doing what one is supposed to do one can ask why one does it, who benefits from it, how can it reconnect with a personal project and original thoughts.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Place 03: Library}
The library is small. It is a hub connected to the main university library. It is colored with columns of sunlight passing through the colorful glasses. I enter with a copy of my \textit{Al Croquis} book on Fontaine. I look at the row of \textit{El Croquis} journals in a lower shelf and return the issue I had borrowed months ago. The issue was my template to copy and to produce my own issue on the author Fontaine. Lenita Berggren –librarian at Umeå Art Campus- flips through the first self-published \textit{Al Croquis} issue. I explain about the project in the same way I wrote to \textit{El Croquis} editors. I ask if it is possible to include it not only in the shelf next to the \textit{El Croquis} journals but also include it in the library database and make it available in search engine. She writes me the next morning:

\begin{quote}
Dear Sepideh,
I have talked to a colleague and it’s no problem to add your book to our catalog. We don’t need any ISBN number. Would you like the book to be possible to borrow? Or, do you want it to only to be read in the Library? We can catalogue the book as soon as possible. Let us know when it suits you and what date you want to have a lecture in the Library.
\end{quote}
The grand narratives have occupied the referencing systems in academic production. This involves a vast theoretical and political discussion of colonial knowledge, western domination, media politics etc. that are materialized in libraries. The micro-project of Al Croquis is an experiment that ends up in questioning and interrupting mainstream and dominant references in practices of architecture. What happens when an architecture student flips through the issue of a magazine that has hijacked the form of a mainstream magazine, and read about a fictional take on work of architecture? A work that tries to extend what architecting could be and what it could do. Therefore this cannot only be a way of interrupting the bookshelves but also building up an alternative reference that can question skills and knowledge in architectural design.

**Formulae+Places = Dissident Research**

When art is a dissensual activity then introducing it to the academic research would turn the artistic research to a dissensual machine that questions the whole conformist logic of our today institutions. The Al Croquis micro-project as an artifact resulted from theoretical discussions, negotiations, dialogues and fiction, is a try to map the institutional possibilities and impossibilities and therby finding ways through those impossible walls of institutions as a dissensual act. It is a way to experiment with the idea of *not fitting to*, and to use publication as a tool to get engaged and interrupt various dominant institutions i.e. the discipline of architecture, the mainstream publications and academia and its established evaluation systems. It is not only to criticize but also to construct different dissenting apparatuses that bring with themselves various tools, methods, references and discourses. In other words by applying fictional methods it introduces a ‘real’ that is different from the existing one.

Strategies of interruption as methods of engaging with the institution are about transvaluing the values that we constantly conform. They are to chang our understanding of loyalty to the institutions and to put criticality above loyalty. Percieving artistic research as dissident research brings along not only artistic research as a dissenting machine but also introduces its own evaluating strategies. Thus, in order to evaluate a project that is about *not fitting to*, the questions
instead of measuring it by conventional academic values- could become: How much can a project dissent the norms and self-evident values? How much does it transvalue the conventional setups in research? How does it contribute to a discipline to set free its embedded conflict? And last but not least how can every dissident research project dissent and question itself or supply sets of dissenting tools that can set free its own restricted elements?

References
9. Ibd. P. 80
11. Ibd. P. 141
15. This is a real series of emails exchanged with Editors of El Croquis journal.
16. Ranciere in defining what art does in his Dissensus states: ‘Doing art means displacing art’s borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as the political.