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2020

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15345>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Korolkova, Maria; Bowes, Simon: Mistake as method: Towards an epistemology of errors in creative practice and research. In: *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Method, Jg. 9 (2020), Nr. 2, S. 139–157. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15345>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/mistake-as-method-towards-an-epistemology-of-errors-in-creative-practice-and-research/>

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Mistake as method: Towards an epistemology of errors in creative practice and research

Maria Korolkova & Simon Bowes

NECSUS 9 (2), Autumn 2020: 139–157

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/mistake-as-method-towards-an-epistemology-of-errors-in-creative-practice-and-research/>

Abstract

The article focuses on creative research as a practice, a form of making, attending to the making of mistakes – errors, deviations, detours – as the uncertain ground of an emerging methodological paradigm. Our specific focus here is upon media and performance practices. Guided by references to a range of theorists who place mistakes in the centre of their thinking – Russian formalists, Giuliana Bruno, Maurice Blanchot, Tim Erchells, and Tim Ingold – this article explores the potentials *for error in method* – and the potentials *of error as method*. We begin by observing a genealogy of mistakes as method in the theories of Russian Formalists, recognising a longstanding fascination with errors and mistakes – ‘mistake as a constructive principle’ for Yuri Tynianov and *estrangement* for Viktor Shklovsky, then move on to the notion of *errare* as ‘a map of theoretical and *emotional* itineraries’ for Bruno. We continue by proposing how these fascinations shape contemporary interdisciplinary methodologies in the humanities, from qualified success to absolute failure. Our preoccupation with error spans every level of creative processes, as mistakes become not only object of enquiry, but a methodological paradigm. The second part of the article focuses on practices that use error as method. In making, practising, performing – in creative research of all kinds – erring is linked to temporality. Practice itself may be recognised as a continuous journey, where method is only ever understood as provisional. In relating such temporalities to philosophical discourses on errors, the article moves towards erring as a contemporary research tool.

Keywords: defamiliarisation, enstrangement, error, method, miscommunication, mistake, performance, practice-as-research, practice-research, Russian Formalism

Mistakes in context

Mistakes, ubiquitous by nature (to err is human!), can be difficult to define.[1] Mistakes can represent both the process and the result, allegory and experience, act and judgement, they can splash creativity, and lead to a downfall, or be a sign of unforgivable ignorance. Presently, mistakes, miscalculations, policy U-turns, fake news, software malfunctions, mutation of viruses, hacks, glitches, and miscommunications are part of the cultural formations defining the scope of knowledge and the distributions of power. The assumption that false ideas inform the process of knowledge production today is perhaps too familiar. The affective state of loss of the true path associated with wrongdoing, lack of trust, helplessness in front of technological errors, fuzziness, and uncertainty have firmly entered our everyday. Yet, (ironically) it would be a mistake to think that it is not only this state of instability and ruination that errors produce. Much like Umberto Eco advocated the positive power of mistakes, ‘the force of falsity’ throughout the last centuries, equalling it to the power of the truth in his seminal work *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*[2], mistakes and errors today can also be sites where other forces collide and catalyse – creativity and intuition, process and becoming, the real and the virtual, media and performance.

Let us briefly consider the last decade in the field of creative production. Since 2013, the online showcase of digital arts with a rather telling title ‘The Wrong Biennale’ welcomed more than 5,500 artists and millions of online viewers, claiming that the wrong is the new right for the artworld, and having become the world’s largest artistic database to date – ‘the digital world’s art answer to Venice’.[3] In 2018-2019, an exhibition entitled ‘Errors – the Art of Imperfection’, curated by Ars Electronica, one of the largest and most important international platforms for digital art and media culture, opened in Berlin.[4] The same year, the German capital welcomed its annual edition of the Berlinale, with a special thematic focus on mistakes – ‘from minor mishaps to full-blown disasters’.[5] Not to mention variations of fake news, post-truth, and misinformation that have become synonymic of digital age media.[6] Equally, in the field of performance, a poetics of failure produced a new critical paradigm. The founding of The Institute of Failure in 2001, a ‘think tank dedicated to the documentation, study and theorisation of failure in all aspects of human endeavour’,[7] may be regarded as emblematic. We might also observe the theorisation of performance-theatre, exemplified by Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, and Elevator Repair Service, in terms of

a ‘poetics of failure’.[8] If creative practice and research is a form of *poiesis*, a matter of making it is – and not only implicitly – a matter of making mistakes.

With such ubiquity of case studies on errors and mistakes in contemporary cultures, miscommunications and errors in their various forms can be seen as a certain zeitgeist of the twenty-first century’s creative processes. Critical scholarship of recent decades attempts to originate this zeitgeist in a number of related fields. Philosopher Yukihiro Saito, for example, establishes imperfections as a key concept of the everyday,[9] while media theorists Peter Krapp in *Noise Channels* as well as Mark Nunes in *Error: Glitch, Jam and Noise in New Media Culture*, Stephen Kennedy in *Future Sounds: The Temporality of Noise*, and Caleb Kelly in *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* bring together ideas on errors and noise as counter strategies to contemporary dominant systems of communication and control.[10] Likewise, McKenzie Wark’s *A Hacker Manifesto* along with Jussi Parikka and Tony Sampson’s *The Spam Book* offer an alternative to narratives about progress and digital culture, focusing on the ‘dark side’ of networked practices.[11] Equally, in the field of creative writing and transnational studies, Ellen Rутten has been exploring the aesthetics of imperfection in its various incarnations – from blogging to the transcultural rhetoric.[12] Summarising these tendencies, two forthcoming edited collections – Maria Korolkova and Timothy Barker’s *Miscommunications: Errors, Mistakes, Media*, and Jakko Kemper, Caleb Kelly, and Ellen Rutten’s *Imperfections: Studies in Failures, Flaws, and Defects* – contextualise miscommunications and imperfections, correspondingly, as a new paradigm for media and cultural studies.[13]

‘Draw a straight line’

Our contextual survey allows us to consider how mistakes might be central to the emergence of a new paradigm of knowledge. Yet, with such a broad horizon of definitions and applications, how can mistakes be productively theorised in a single coherent system? Eco asked how false ideas can gain such power in the history of human knowledge. Our guiding question opens to a different emphasis: ‘Can mistakes be conceptualised as a methodological tool for such a variety of contemporary creative practices?’ Mistakes in this sense

become systemic, controlled, it is not just a feeling of, or allegory to, the contemporary landscape of disorientation and misinformation – a detour from a correct path – it is an *intention to detour*.

To illustrate such intention, we refer to an event score by the American minimalist composer La Monte Young titled *Composition 1961 June 14, No. 19*. Event scores, a defining gesture of the Fluxus movement that emerged in the late 1950s, consist in instructions printed on cards, which are typically either performable by anyone, or unperformable. Young's score reads: 'Draw a straight line and follow it.' Yet, this task is practically impossible – straight lines do not exist in nature. What is possible, though, is to set on this journey, to follow the instruction, to test, to make mistakes, and to discover this impossibility by oneself. Then, the process of drawing opens to what the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot describes as 'the magic of the detour' and the visual studies researcher Giuliana Bruno calls *errare* – 'an act of navigation on a devious course'.^[14] Young's line draws together potentials both material and immaterial. In drawing a line, we are instructed that creative practice merges actual and virtual. Crucially for this treatment of method, this merging opens to the possibility of error inherent in every intention.

Composition 1961 June 14, No. 19 begins to illustrate how mistakes can be presented as a methodological paradigm for creative practice and experimental research in general. It also opens a meta narrative for our particular argument. Multiple narratives of theoretical works have addressed mistakes in a systematic way, and a more straightforward way to understand how mistakes can become a method for such a vast variety of creative texts would be to refer to the growing field of the epistemology of experimental knowledge,^[15] serendipity,^[16] pedagogy of failure,^[17] or indeed concentrate on a single discipline.^[18] Yet, this article (predictably) goes sideways. Attempting to move away from the disciplinary limits, this article rethinks the relationship between the result (a creative outcome) and the process (a method), taking an approach grounded in the theories of creative practices in media and performance.

Why media, performance, and mistakes? Here, we are guided by the spirit of Foucault's genealogical theories, which articulate the idea of complex, messy origins. Defending the heterogeneity of history, Foucault writes in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History':

identify[ing] the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things which continue to exist or have value for us; it is to discover that truth

or being lies not at the root of what we know and what we are but the exteriority of accidents.[19]

It is exactly through this ‘exteriority of accidents’ that we favour media and performance studies as two nomadic or ‘travelling disciplines’ – to use Mieke Bal’s term.[20] If media and performance are two unstable disciplines of contemporary humanities, we suggest searching for the genealogy of mistakes at the margins of these two disciplines.

For media, and technologies, are already and always programmed with accidents. As Paul Virilio points out in *The Original Accident*, the invention of new technology is always already designed with the possibility of failure.[21] Just as the locomotive is pre-designed with the derailment, and the car with the failing breaks, any kind of communications method has a potential for mistake – verbal, digital, or visual. Lisa Gitelman offers a similar system. For Gitelman, all media, and even more so methods of communication, are ‘always already new’ in their historical moment of origin, which opens up a view of media as the simultaneous subjects and methods of historical inquiry,[22] just like we propose to see communications mistakes as both the outcome and the process of contemporary cultural production.

Performance, then, follows this logic of accidents, variability, and alternative temporalities through its ontology of evanescence and *liveness*. A line of argument here begins with Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked*, where she attempts to define performance in terms of an ephemeral ontology.[23] Phelan asserts:

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance.[24]

Then, the line detours to *Liveness* by Philip Auslander, where he argues that Phelan’s approach is marked by a methodological failure, as she mistakes the significance of liveness itself.[25] Not only do Phelan’s chosen examples of performance incorporate various media, liveness is a possibility that inheres within media culture, since ‘there is no “live” performance before the introduction of recordings’.[26] McKenzie allows us to move a little further along this line of enquiry. While Phelan and Auslander were entangled in a debate over liveness, ephemerality, and mediatization, McKenzie imagined the conclusions of the future researcher, taking as given ‘something that we can only dimly perceive today – and then may be too horrified to admit: namely, that

all performance is electronic, that the global explosion of performance coincides precisely with the digitalisation of discourses and practices, and that this coincidence is anything but coincidental'.[27] For McKenzie, the potentials of performance for resistance of any kind are always already circumscribed.

If a discipline cannot find its own ontology, it may not be a discipline at all, but a point of convergence between disciplines. Multiple narratives of theoretical arguments have addressed the convergence between media and performance, among which there is a volume on media archaeology of performance,[28] as well as works on theory and practice of site-specific theatre,[29] and interdisciplinary studies of presence.[30] Drawing on the existing studies, we contribute to these interdisciplinary explorations by connecting performance to broader media discussions through the methodologies of mistakes.

In performance, as well as in media, especially digital media, *being* is only and ever a process of *becoming*, of material transformation. Practice and process are shaped by temporality, temporality by duration, duration by intuition, and intuition only and ever by the way of mistakes. As media scholar Timothy Barker points out in his exploration of Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy and the digital media, the process of becoming is central to the question of interactivity, a notion closely connected to both performative and media aesthetics: 'Without process these aesthetic forms would not exist'.[31] Yet, when we deconstruct these processes to their smallest level of occasion (once more, process as shaped by temporality, temporality by duration, duration by intuition...), we arrive at what Whitehead calls 'misplaced concreteness'.[32] As Barker explains, Whitehead uses the word 'misplaced' here because 'concreteness can only be found in process, as the lowest nest in the nesting of occasions of process'.[33] For us, misplaced, or indeed mistaken concreteness here forms the basis, placing mistakes in the centre of creative process.

In our attempt to draw a straight line on the map of creative media and performance failures, we look for errors in media practices of Russian Formalists, a group of literary and cultural critics and researchers in late Imperial/early Soviet Russia, who like Whitehead (and approximately at the same time) advocated for the convergence of 'scientific' and 'poetic' methods in creative research.[34] We then turn to the writings of Giuliana Bruno, who situates herself on the border of avant-garde aesthetics of the early twentieth

century including visual media, film, geography, and architecture, reclaiming the historical heritage and value of deliberately vague, misleading, and provocative methods.

If approaching method by way of mistake seems messy, it is because any method implicitly assumes that mess should remain hidden. Yet, by doing so we find ourselves in an enviable company of contemporary thinkers who attempt to use similar methodologies for their research endeavours, be it John Law's 'Making Mess with a Method',^[35] or Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka's 'Archaeology of Media Archaeology'.^[36] It is our belief that only by practicing such deliberately mistaken, messy, alternative methodologies we can cultivate deviations and possibilities that are at the core of creative processes.

Mistake as a constructive principle

To talk about mistakes solely as a methodological tool, the closest framework to relate to would be the theories of Russian Formalists. Russian Formalism was a movement of art, film, literary and indeed media critics, that emerged and was active in Russia throughout the 1910s to 1930s, and represented a radical departure from the previously dominant mimetic theory of art. The majority of its members were born in the 1890s, and their career followed closely the development of avant-garde and modernist experiments in Russia, in particular Futurists, whose creative practices aimed not at being a mirror to the world but at transforming, shaking, and shocking the world as such. At the same time, Russian Formalists prioritised the 'scientific' view on creative practices, linking closely the subjective and the objective, and in many ways influencing the future development of structuralism and New Criticism techniques.

In 1924, Yuri Tynianov, by then already a major figure of Russian Formalism, published a seminal text titled 'About the Literary Fact', by which he attempted re-establishing the genealogy of literature and media practices. Exploring various examples, Tynianov came to the conclusion that the trajectory of any written form could be conceptualised not as progress, but as a series of mistakes and accidents, a view that we explored through Foucault's genealogical theories earlier. Showcasing the career of Alexander Pushkin, the major Russian writer of the nineteenth century, Tynianov observed that every time Pushkin would come up with a hybrid form of work (mixing poems and fairy tales, novels and pamphlets), he would be attacked by critics

claiming the work was a mistake, an error, a deviation that broke all existing conventions. Yet, this particular mistake was considered the rule by the new generations of writers, and a new genre was born. Exploring similar examples from different periods of European culture, Tynianov concluded: 'In fact, every ugliness, every "mistake", every "wrongdoing" of normative poetics is – potentially – the new constructive principle.' [37] In other words, Tynianov was the first to acknowledge that in many cases mistakes were able to *form* the creative process. Moreover, any mistake, any shift in the dominant structure, after becoming the constructive principle, will soon 'seek to expand itself, to spread itself to possibly wider areas'. [38] Tynianov calls this process an 'imperialism of constructive principle', where newly born, unconventional, mistaken forms seek to conquer a wider cultural landscape until finally becoming conventional, and the cycle begins anew. [39] Tynianov gave examples of newspapers and magazines as literary forms that would have performed such cycles of moving from the periphery to the centre in his contemporary culture. [40]

As already stated earlier, theories of Russian Formalism were tightly linked to the avant-garde practices of the time, Futurist poetry in particular, which praised typing errors and misspellings as bearing great creative potential. One of the Futurist manifestos proclaimed the practice of *shifting* or mistaking words, sounds, and even materials (Futurists would famously print their books on pieces of wallpaper or cloths) as its principal aesthetic form. [41] No wonder that one of the most famous terms of formalist theories, *ostranenie*, meaning *estrangement*, defamiliarisation, making-things-strange, shifting one's perception of objects, coined by another leader of the movement Viktor Shklovsky, was born out of misspelling. [42] It was supposed to be spelled with a double 'n' *ostrannenie*, as derivative from the adjective *strannyi* (strange). In Russian, *strannyi* was also used to indicate someone 'coming from a different land', a traveller, a stranger. Through this etymology, *estrangement* is closely connected to traveling, to crossing the boundaries between periphery and centre, between familiar and unknown. This is where trespassing becomes a methodology of our next case study – Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotions*.

Mapping mistakes

Giuliana Bruno's seminal work *Atlas of Emotions: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, was published in 2002, earning her a prestigious Kraszna-Krausz Moving Image Book Award. It represented a peculiar, never-seen-before mixture of a personal narrative with a rigorous academic discourse, a mixture of subjective and objective (scientific) points of view which we have just noted through Whitehead's philosophy and Russian Formalism theories. Although not connected to Russian Formalism directly (Bruno only mentions the idea of estrangement once in her book, yet she relies a lot on practices of early Soviet cinema, contemporary to the Formalists, works by Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein), the act of exploring and discovering through becoming a stranger, a *flâneuse*, through crossing boundaries, travelling from peripheries to the centre, becomes one of the major methods of this book. Bruno famously starts her book with a mistake in the word 'sightseeing':

Sightseeing has become site-seeing. An error implies a departure from a definite path; the semiotics of the term incorporates the notion of erring, or wandering. *Error* – the deviation from a route, a departure from principles – is bound to such wandering. As an act of navigation on a devious course, it implies rambling, roaming, and even going astray.[43]

Starting with this deliberate error and further throughout the text, *errare* serves as a methodology of Bruno's innovative and largely intuitive research in film and architecture. *Atlas*, she continues, 'a map of theoretical and *emotional* itineraries – has developed as an *errare*'. [44] Her emphasis on emotions and psychogeography, i.e. the combination of space – *mapping*, and emotion – *moving*, is particularly important to our argument of establishing mistakes as a 'travelling methodology' of any creative process. 'To traverse this psychogeography is to "err" through the shifting grounds of socio-cultural mobilities.' [45]

Here, mistaking is once again seen as a method of 'shifting grounds' of an established cultural perspective – be it the relationship between the art and the reality, or between the genres, or between the genders. Yet, it is very important to stress that no shift in this process stays forever. Tynianov's 'imperialism of mistakes' can only exist in the constant flux: 'The King is dead, long live the king!' The moment one mistake becomes the norm, another one is waiting on the periphery. Bruno echoes this argument with her discussion of feminism. By claiming that the haptic, intuitive, mistaken view on space is more feminist, she does not reiterate existing stereotypical thinking about

femininity, but on the contrary presents feminism in the constant process of becoming, of shifting and re-establishing itself as a fluid term, and not as a binary opposition of feminine-masculine. In this sense, it echoes Judith Halberstam's 'low theory' from *The Queer Art of Failure* as a mode of thinking and writing that operates at many different levels at once.[46]

Finally, because like with Formalist aesthetics, *erring* takes place always on the borders, on the margins, constantly shifting between the centre and the periphery, Bruno stresses the importance of the 'in-betweenness' as a valuable methodological practice:

By working to conceive a methodological practice that is 'in between,' we aim to corrode the opposition between immobility-mobility, inside-outside, private-public, dwelling-travel, and to unloose the gender boxing and strictures these oppositions entail. Architecture is a map of both dwelling and travel, and so is the cinema. These spaces, which exist between housing and motion, question the very limits of the opposition and force us to rethink cultural expression itself as a site of both travel and dwelling.[47]

This research continues in defining a similar version of in-betweenness, situating itself on the margins of art, cinema, creative media, and performance.

The joys of difference

The field of performance may prove instructive for reconsiderations of art and process. In turning now towards performance, we continue along our line by reconsidering ephemerality in terms of duration. Performance is a practice which typically unites two times: the event itself (as presented to an audience) and its processes (scripting, devising, workshop, rehearsal, dramaturgy, and direction). Taking performance as exemplar of creative practice, we will define 'method' is an abstraction of 'process'. Process – particularly in the case of performance, unites disparate temporalities through making and presentation – may be resistant to containment and formalisation. Performance belongs, as do people, to a world of circumstance and contingency. Wherever method cannot admit mistakes, we cannot attain toward method as a virtue.

Having viewed performance studies as a history of failure in the introduction, we might recover something from Phelan's attempt to define an ontology of performance. Performance is, indeed, a temporal medium, one

which produces a temporality, or duration. A recovery of ephemerality becomes possible if we consider it not as an ontological condition but as the affective dimension of quite singular epistemic processes: always a coalescing of actual and virtual, material and immaterial. Muñoz asserts that performance matters too much to ‘simply expire’, that: ‘the ephemeral does not equal unmateriality’, that performance entails ‘another understanding of what matters’ – taking on a ‘vast material weight’.[48] Choosing a different emphasis, we might redescribe ephemerality as the passing of the actual back into the virtual. Thus, duration is the precondition of intuition, and consequently of the ways of knowledge in this field. We can only approach this knowledge by opening to an experience of error which characterises every intention.

To consider this, we turn to a substantive citation from director Tim Etchells. Read carefully, Etchells articulates the terms of relation between error, mistakes, intuition, and difference. Performance, he writes, is an invitation ‘to be here and now, to feel exactly what it is to be in this place at this time’.[49] Performance invites and demands attention because something is at stake. This sense of weight described by Muñoz is perhaps not conferred by ephemerality in and of itself but by a depth of experience which becomes possible through depth of attention – from both performers and audience. Etchells describes this in terms of risk and investment:

Investment is the line of connection between performer and the text or their task ... investment draws us in. Something is happening – something real and therefore risked – something seems to slip across from the private world to the public one – performers are left open or left exposed ... Will I carry this event with me tomorrow? Will it haunt me, will it change you, will it change me, will it change things?[50]

Here, the intimacy of knowing and duration are restored: ‘are you at risk in this? That’s all I want to know’. ‘If not, it was a waste of time.’[51] Etchells’ account instructs us, explicitly, that temporality is nothing other than duration and duration nothing other than the movement in time which makes intuition possible: the warp and weft between material and immaterial, actual and virtual, feeling and knowing. In this slip across and between worlds, knowledge is not disclosed or revealed but produced anew as intuitive, affective. For Deleuze, intuition is the ‘joy of difference’,[52] for Bruno it is ‘a transport of joy’. It is through intuition that we might seek ‘to establish, or rather restore, another relationship to things, and therefore another knowledge’.[53]

We describe this *other knowledge* as *process*, process being *other than* method. An intuitive process is *more fundamental – anterior in every respect –* to method. It consists first in a material engagement, but one which is always conditioned by the virtual as what Massumi calls a ‘pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies’, a field of absolute potential.[54] For the theatre artist or performance maker, this field emerges in face of a pressing crowd, as we convene in performance. We sense, feel, intuit – come to know, incontrovertibly – our knowledge is shaped by material experience, because as Grosz puts it, ‘Matter is duration at its most dilated’ and because ‘Life is the protraction of matter’.[55] If this protraction may be characterised as ‘shadow’, as ‘swirling of dust’, it is because intuition through which it is perceived is ‘an emergent and imprecise movement of simplicity that erupt by negating the old’ in a ‘return to the fluxes of becoming that constitute the real’.[56]

Making-known: On the efficacy of practice

We have proposed the redefinition of method in terms of process, and knowledge in terms of intuition. In making this proposal, we acknowledge practice emerges through tasks. Tim Ingold describes the field of practice as a *taskscape*. It is through tasks that we court every possibility of error. It may be through error that knowledge is, finally, accomplished. When we say something is practised, indeed, when it may appear to others accomplished, it is likely that expertise, knowledge, or aesthetic sensibility results from repetition. In a making process, ‘between beginning and ending the practitioner’s movements are continually and subtly responsive to the ever changing conditions of the task as it proceeds’.[57] Making, of the kind that produces the performance discussed, is largely a matter of repetition, where repetition is ever perceptive and responsive to difference. What emerges in practice balances *recurrent* and *occurrent* movement. The ‘coupling’ of movement and perception is ‘the key to skilled practice’, as we follow the ‘tendencies of inner tensions of materials’. This following is a matter of *iteration* and also *itineration*. Characterising life as lived along lines, Ingold considers the practitioner (artist, artisan) as a wayfarer. Here the confluence with Bruno’s conception of *errare* is remarkable. The movements of aesthetic experience are disorientation before they are re-orientations, dislocating knowing and knowledge in a ceaseless elaboration of sensible form. If practice is a form of

research it is guided not by method but by the attentiveness of intuition. Practice is a process of orientation within a taskscape, where 'every ending is potentially a new beginning, marking not a terminus but a pause for rest in an otherwise continuous journey'.[58]

Acknowledging Ingold and Bruno's descriptions of knowledge as movement, we follow our line back to Blanchot's description of research as a state of 'fascination' in which searching and error are akin: 'to err is to turn and return, to give oneself up to the magic of the detour. One who goes astray, who has left the protection of the centre, turns about, himself adrift and subject to the centre, and no longer guarded by it'.[59] Following Blanchot, to err and stray, to risk failure, may be fundamental to any conception of creative practice and creative research. We have drawn a line from practice to philosophy and back. Epistemology, figured here as intuition, may be more fundamental than an ontology. In error, we may sometimes mistake that too, just as practitioners may sometimes mistake the pause with the terminus. Artists intuitively recognise practice itself as a continuous journey, where process can never be conflated with method. Yet it is precisely this kind of equivocation that the practitioner-researcher is often obliged to perform.

Performance is judged efficacious when it does something. Performance often risks doing something less, something more, something other than we intend. But as McKenzie asserts, performance emerges 'as the efficacy of certain activities, activities capable of challenging social norms and symbolic structures'.[60] Efficacy is perhaps the defining term of performance as practice, as discipline and as paradigm. 'Performance had to institutionalise itself'.[61] In doing so, McKenzie observes, performance is the overarching paradigm of all academic research, a power formation and a mode of governance. Resistance is circumscribed. The researcher is instructed: *perform or else*. In the academy, efficacy is typically judged according to method. Yet between modes of efficacy – the transgressive, the resistant – we might find the basis of a very modest proposal. In attending to performance, what we might seek to recover, against the rigours of method, is a turn towards the efficacy of process. We recognise the efficacy of process when we consider process 'always already new'. In turning against method and toward efficacy, we can recognise what performance has been trying to teach us all along: that experiment and innovation emerge in the turn from method. If properly attentive, we might produce a context for creative research where singular movements of thought and practice can be understood and accepted as such.

Conclusion: Messy methods, mistaken methods

In opening to process, to intuition, we admit mistakes. In admitting mistakes, we admit complexity. Like John Law in his 'Messy Methods', we admit that the world we research is largely messy,[62] and also largely based on mistakes. If Eco granted falsity the same agency as the truth, we may as well grant it with the same complexity. The production of knowledge has been engaged in a long rear-guard action, insisting that reality is definite and singular. Yet, as Whitehead proposed through his process philosophy, reality is a constantly evolving multiplicity composed of an infinite constellation of singular events that are never stable but are always becoming. We cannot make our way into this multiplicity, into this mess except by way of mistake, or rather by attending with care to whatever might seem mistaken.

Indeed, dominant approaches to method work with some success to repress the very possibility of mess. Simplicity, for simplicity's sake, will not save us, or guide us, it will not help us to understand messes or mistakes we make, and perhaps we should resist the learned temptation to clean them up, 'to eat your epistemology greens' and 'wash [...] hands after messing with the real world'.[63] Instead, we detour, we err, we make mistakes.

Here, it may also be tempting to go too far, to turn, as Paul Feyerabend famously turned, *against* method. The limits of method have already been described articulately. Feyerabend proposes an 'anarchism' in research, in epistemology, finally.[64] The objective scientific account is only one way of presenting one's case. For Feyerabend, a play, or a novel, or indeed an atlas of emotions, may be just as efficacious a form. For why, he asks, 'should knowledge be shown in the garment of academic prose and reasoning?'[65] Why do we not walk our research, like Bruno does, through a psychogeographical map of erring? Formalists suggested that mistakes can form a methodological base for analysing this messy world – its constructive principle. One hundred years from them, by embracing mistakes in methods, can we ask if the method itself is already always a mistake?

We have only begun, here, to consider method more imaginatively. To imagine what method – and its politics – might be if it were not caught in an obsession with clarity, with specificity, and with the definite. From practices and theories of the Russian avant-garde, Bruno, Blanchot, and Etchells, we observe new directions for creative practice and research, emerging in processes of hesitant, uncertain movement. In building up his methodology as a 'mess', Law also suggests that 'contemporary social science methods prove

hopelessly inadequate in knowing mess', and 'our research methods necessarily fail'. [66] Here, in admitting mistakes in and as method, we start calling method 'performative'.

A constellation is an imaginative assemblage, a line drawn between points. The stars forming this constellation produce a desire for difference. It is the task of research to elaborate upon this desire. Conceptions of pure methods belong to another time, revealing too little of the depth of duration in which intuition itself flows. Now, draw a straight line, and follow it.

Authors

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Notes

- [1] Several parts of this article are the continuation and revision of the ideas expressed previously in other works on mistakes and miscommunications by one of the co-authors. See Barker & Korolkova 2021; Korolkova 2021. Both authors are grateful to their MA students of Research Methods in a Cultural Context course for inspiration to write this article; to Hannah Lammin and Jana Melkumova-Reynolds for having gone through the earlier drafts with such care and attention; and to two anonymous peer-reviewers for their very helpful comments.
- [2] Eco 2002. More on discussing Eco, see Barker & Korolkova 2021, pp. 7-9.
- [3] Hampton 2018.
- [4] <https://ars.electronica.art/export/en/berlin2018/> (accessed on 14 July 2020).
- [5] <https://www.berlinale-talents.de/story/69/469.html> (accessed on 14 July 2020).
- [6] Zimdars & McLeod, 2020.
- [7] <https://timetchells.com/projects/institute-of-failure/> (accessed on 22 November 2020).
- [8] Bailes 2011.

- [9] Saito 2017.
- [10] Krapp 2011; Nunes 2011; Kennedy 2020; Kelly 2009.
- [11] Wark 2004; Parikka & Sampson 2009.
- [12] Rutten 2009, 2019.
- [13] Korolkova & Barker 2021; Kemper, Kelly & Rutten, forthcoming.
- [14] Blanchot 1993, p. 26; Bruno 2018, p. 15.
- [15] Mayo 1996.
- [16] Makri & Blandfort, et al. 2014; as well as Eco 2002.
- [17] This field was introduced at the 2018 Critical Pedagogies call for papers, with a subsession on pedagogies of failure, which asked the question 'How can we bring failure back into our pedagogies?' See <https://acgs.uva.nl/content/events/conferences/2018/10/global-critical-pedagogies.html>. The authors are grateful to the anonymous peer-reviewers of NECSUS for pointing us to this conference, as well as to several works mentioned in two previous endnotes.
- [18] Huges 2014.
- [19] Foucault 1998, p. 374.
- [20] Bal 2002.
- [21] Virilio 2007.
- [22] Gitelman 2008.
- [23] Phelan 1993.
- [24] Ibid., p. 146.
- [25] Auslander 1999.
- [26] Ibid., p. 45. It is fair to note, mistaken as it may be, Phelan's ephemeral ontology has remained influential in the field of performance studies, notably in Fischer-Lichte's concept of 'bodily co-presence' and Muñoz' treatment of the persistent materiality of ephemeral events.
- [27] McKenzie 2001, p. 267.
- [28] Wynants 2019.
- [29] Pearson & Shanks 2001.
- [30] Shanks et al. 2012.
- [31] Barker 2012, p. 35.
- [32] Whitehead 1925/1997, p. 58.
- [33] Barker 2012, p. 35.
- [34] Compare: 'All metaphysical theories which admit a disjunction between the component elements of individual experience on the one hand, and on the other the component elements of the external world, must inevitably run into difficulties', Whitehead 1929/1978, p. 189.
- [35] Law 2003.
- [36] Huhtamo & Parikka 2011.
- [37] Tynianov 2002, p. 179.
- [38] Ibid., p. 184.
- [39] Ibid.

- [40] For a broader discussion on the state of press in early Soviet Russia, particularly on the Moscow anarchist periodicals in the context of the avant-garde, see Gurianova 2014. For similar shifts from the periphery to the centre based on Tynianov's principle, but in wider media contexts, see Korolkova 2020.
- [41] See Kruchenykh.
- [42] Shklovsky 1925. On the concept of defamiliarisation see also Boym 1996.
- [43] Bruno 2018, p. 15.
- [44] Ibid. Author's emphasis.
- [45] Ibid.
- [46] Halberstam 2011.
- [47] Bruno, p. 71.
- [48] Muñoz 2009, p. 81.
- [49] Etchells 1999, p. 18.
- [50] Ibid., pp. 48-49.
- [51] Ibid., p. 49.
- [52] Deleuze 2004, p. 33.
- [53] Ibid.
- [54] Massumi 2002, p. 30.
- [55] Grosz 2005, p. 12.
- [56] Ibid.
- [57] Ingold 2011, p. 59.
- [58] Ibid., p. 29.
- [59] Blanchot 1993, p. 26.
- [60] McKenzie 2001, p. 38.
- [61] Ibid., p. 45.
- [62] Law 2003, p. 3.
- [63] Ibid.
- [64] Feyerabend 1993, p. 9.
- [65] Ibid., p. 265.
- [66] Ibid., p. 11.