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12. From Social Relevance to Public Intervention: Cultural Analysis in and out of the Classroom

Aylin Kuryel

Abstract: One of the defining features of the practice of cultural analysis is its insistence on testing the bearing of concepts by putting them in dialogue with the contemporary in order to produce socially relevant analysis. I propose to "test" the concept of social relevance itself by attending to its travels across contemporary contexts, and bringing another concept, intervention, into the conversation. While "being relevant to" implies a prior knowability of a context according to which the (ir)relevance of analysis can be measured, "intervening into" suggests the possibility of reconfiguring that very context through analysis. To unpack this, I focus on "public intervention" as a pedagogical tactic and offer examples of students' interventions from the courses I taught in the last few years.

Keywords: public intervention, social relevance, knowledge production, social struggles, classroom, critical pedagogy

It was the very first class I taught, "Against Culture," in the Cultural Analysis program at the University of Amsterdam in 2015. This elective BA course was thrilling for me as it covered my long-term enthusiasm for theories of the avant-garde, aesthetics, and resistance.[1] As the coteacher and I set foot in the classroom in the Bungehuis, the central humanities building, and started introducing the course that centered around the work of the

1 I am grateful to Joost de Bloois who initially designed this inspiring course, and Daan Wesselman for being a great coteacher who made it a pleasure to go through the worries and excitements of first-time teaching.

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Situationist International, its prehistories, and afterlives (Marx, Althusser, Dadaism, Frankfurt School, Dutch Provos, Invisible Committee, culture jamming, etc.), a student passionately voiced his objections. This was a pretentious course that hypocritically claimed to cover radical theories and practices in a crumbling neoliberal university, he said. Was this not an act of co-option? Could there be any relevance in talking about radicality in these institutionalized spaces of critique?

It was a few sessions later that the same student caught the coteacher and me at the door and handed us a bumpy envelope. Inside: a typewritten text—a manifesto?—with a small, toyish dynamite taped to it.[2] The text said things like we, the lecturers of this course, could only be as radical as Lady Gaga, and that "the society of the spectacle" should be dismantled in its totality, including its universities. I recall some thoughts we shared after the student quickly left the scene: Was this a creative gesture provoked by the theories and practices covered in the course, calling for the integration of art, politics, and everyday life? A Dadaist collage; a "created situation"? An act akin to the young rebel who interrupted Jacques Lacan's lecture in 1972 by spilling water and flour over his notes, while talking about the remains of the avant-garde and the decaying spectacle? (Could we keep our calm like Lacan who smoked his cigar as he watched the action and then continued lecturing?) Or, akin to the students who bared their breasts to protest Adorno for calling the police during the occupation of the University of Frankfurt in 1969? Yet, didn't the coordinates of our present cast the "dynamite" in a different light: a rather empty gesture without the backdrop of an unfolding collective history? Was it even something to report as we were not sure whether the explosive was real? Or, should we take it as a foreshadowing of the "public intervention exercise" we had planned for the end of the course performed by an impatient and prescient student? Here is my intervention, here is my object of analysis! If so, shouldn't we incite him to take this act as a relevant object of analysis and read it closely in the spirit of cultural analysis?

Some months later, the building in which we were teaching was occupied by a group of students and staff members protesting the university's plans to sell the building and the planned budget cuts that hit humanities the hardest. One of the banners hung on the building echoed the student's sentiments: "Free university in a capitalist society is like a lecture hall in prison." During the occupation of the Bungehuis, and later the Maagdenhuis (the administrative headquarters that was first occupied in 1969), some of

2 The text with the dynamite was hung on the wall of my house for some time, but I sadly lost it as I moved so many houses in Amsterdam over the years.

the theorists we read in classes came to be part of the general assemblies (Mieke Bal, David Graeber, Jacques Rancière). Two members of the Dutch Provos were there, too, speaking about the (dis)continuities between theory and practice, in the very room we taught "Against Culture." Now the fancy Soho Club, which has a swimming pool on its roof, stands in the place of the Bungehuis. The old sign is still at the entrance and the queries that this anecdote encapsulates for me persist: How to think of the social relevance and political context of "doing" cultural analysis, as well as the critical pedagogical tactics that can help revisit these questions?

The larger field of cultural studies, and the practice of cultural analysis situated in it with its distinct object-oriented and concept-driven methodology, have been haunted by the question of relevance—the traffic between inside and outside of text, classroom, academia. As Mieke Bal formulated it, the practice of cultural analysis is envisioned in constant conversation with a contemporary living culture where both the critic and the objects of analysis are situated (*Double Exposures* 11). The knowledge produced not *about* but *with* objects is an integral part of the present—hence, analysis is socially relevant; it matters now and for now (*Travelling Concepts* 9). From this vantage point, theory cannot be treated as a master discourse and the relevance of concepts needs to be "tested" by putting them in dialogue with the living culture, the contemporary. In line with this methodology, I propose to "test" the concept of social relevance itself, defined as one of the principles of cultural analysis by Bal ("5 Principles"), by putting it in dialogue with the contemporary—the social and political coordinates in which the practice of cultural analysis takes place—and while doing that, to bring in another concept, intervention, into the conversation.

Despite the meticulous and inspirational methodological premises that surround social relevance, the notion itself is often not comprehensively unpacked and it appears as a rather broad concept that implies some form of contemporaneity, connectivity, and functionality. In its varying connotations, it seems to suggest a preexisting social field to which analysis is pertinent and applicable, and in which what is relevant can be known in advance. To be "relevant *to*" implies a prior knowability of the tenets and needs of a context according to which the (ir)relevance of knowledge/analysis can be measured. Perhaps this is also what makes social relevance, beyond cultural analysis, a useful term for the administrative bodies to talk about how knowledge/research/departments contribute to the (cultural and economic) vibrancy and prestige of the institutions. In this sense, relevance comes rather closer to other beloved notions of the neoliberal university such as efficiency and impact.

By contrast, "intervene *into*" might allow putting the emphasis on being/becoming part of what is engaged with, without assuming a preexisting context. It is suggestive of the possibility of a rupture, a reconfiguration, a gathering of that very context through analysis itself. By proposing an ongoing scrutiny of what relevance itself might be, the notion of intervention puts forward the process rather than the outcome, redirecting attention to the political context(s) of doing cultural analysis. What I suggest is not merely replacing one term (relevance) with another (intervention), but taking the latter as an epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical means to revisit and insist on the "practice" aspect of cultural analysis. Revisiting cultural analysis through the conceptual lens of intervention can be a way to attend to not only how the object "speaks back" to the analyst (Bal), but also how our involvement shapes the object and its context. In this sense, it is indicative of a certain temporality for analysis: not only thinking of the past as part of the present, but also the present as part of the future. This can also help thinking further on the ways in which our modes of doing research, teaching—which we tend to talk less about[3]—and students' productions are moved by and move with the world, step in and out of institutional spaces, resonate with the urgencies of the present.

In what follows, I will first visit some of the theoretical, social, and political contexts to which the concept of relevance travels, then provide and reflect on a number of "public interventions" students conducted in the context of Amsterdam from the courses I taught within the last few years. These examples help to unpack the concept of intervention by providing little gateways between the inside and outside of the classroom (without assuming neat distinctions but attending to transitions and many other possible positions in between), resonating with a much larger history of attempts not only to take theory outside of the classroom but to put the classroom itself out of the university. Rather than being illustrative or prescriptive, they help revisit the position of analyst/teacher/student: one less akin to a detective looking for relevant meaning by meandering the world of texts/objects and closer to subjects active in meaning making in the spaces they inhabit, relations they shape, realities they contest.

3 There are attempts to address teaching more often in our program in recent years: "mixed classroom workshops" in which the most productive aspect, in my experience, was not the neat teaching methods offered by the organizers but the rather messy reflections we shared as colleagues; as well as our recent discussions on revisiting course names and content; the program committee meetings; unplanned moments of sharing teaching experiences in the university corridors, or over drinks.

"The Point, However, Is to Change It"

Perhaps it all starts with Karl Marx's famous words, also inscribed on his tombstone: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it." Cultural analysis—and the larger field of cultural studies—is likely to be the field in which the tension between interpreting and changing has been the most rampant. Since its emergence at the Birmingham School in 1964, cultural studies was imagined as a political and pedagogical project that aims to "interrupt the ideological field" (Hall 112). Theory was envisioned not only as a skillful flaneur of semiotics detecting ideological mechanisms, but also a comrade in the anti-hegemonic historical struggles.[4] The desire, as formulated by Stuart Hall, was to create "some kind of organized intellectual political work, which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges, within the institution" (275). Hall perceived pedagogy as part of this intellectual production and teaching as the ongoing work of an intellectual practice. Since then, cultural studies has been imagined as a fundamentally critical pedagogical project (Aksikas et al.). A pedagogy that is disruptive of the functionalist approaches (Miller), akin to Deleuzian "minor" practices based on collective work (Calvente et al.), a struggle over political agency (Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*). A pedagogy of hope that sees the classroom as part of the struggles against social injustices (bell hooks). The aspiration to interrupt and transform the political realm through intellectual work, a unifying element in the early days of cultural studies, according to Andrew Ross and Paul Smith, has later turned into "something like a phantom limb" (246).

Increasing institutionalization and professionalization were already among the troubles Hall recited while reflecting on the legacies of cultural studies in 1992 in his "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies." In the current landscape where these processes not only lingered but took wild turns, humanities/social sciences are increasingly forced to defend their "relevance" by administrative/funding bodies that assess, valorize, and grant resources. Meanwhile, critical theory and theorists are attacked in different forms and diverse contexts where right-wing, authoritarian, and neoliberal

4 I recently encountered the call for the Socialism 2023 conference in Chicago in which "culture" is a separate subject category, standing next to other categories such as Climate Justice, Gender–Sexuality–Liberation, Housing Justice, Racism and Anti-racism, Labor Movement, Socialist Strategy, etc. It seems to be telling of how other disciplines producing "politically useful" knowledge come to regard "the analysis of culture" in a way that is in stark opposition with cultural studies/analysis's self-definition.

elements take varying combinations, increasingly so in the last two decades. A quick enumeration discloses the disturbing connections in this global map: protests are organized against "cultural Marxism" and critical race theory in the US; feminist academics are accused of spreading gender ideology and climate activism in Brazil; "wokism" and gender-neutral pronouns evoke moral panic for the French government; gender/postcolonial theories are held responsible for threatening heteronormative family and national unity in Denmark, Romania, Hungary, and in many other places where programs are shut down or faced further budget cuts. Not only effigies are burnt, as happened to Judith Butler's in São Paulo, but scholars themselves are targeted in myriad ways: academics are declared to be "terrorists" and put on trial in Turkey for showing solidarity with the Kurdish struggle, put in prison in India for criticizing the caste system, doxed in the Netherlands where the right has labeled humanities as a "leftist hobby." All these incidents mark a strange moment in which, on the one hand, critical knowledge production is in need of self-defense to prove its "relevance"—most of all, for institutional survival. On the other hand, while its producers are attacked, knowledge itself seems to be ominously "relevant" in creating contemporary villains, fabricating moral panic, and reproducing hegemonic discourses. In both cases, a rather instrumental role is cast to knowledge in a social field that is tried to be maintained as it is, attempting to prevent the capacity of knowledge to intervene into the course of things.

Meanwhile, theoretical sound bites travel from classrooms to YouTube philosophy channels[5] and Netflix series; they become tweets, hashtags, wall writings, slogans; pop up in discussions among friends, around family dinner tables (or in the refusal to join those tables). At times too easily employed to the extent of semantic satiation, or reduced to instruments, and other times mobilizing contexts politically and affectively. The world unfolds as we teach—wars, climate crisis, pandemic, migration, wave of protests—perpetuating the need for revisiting existing theoretical models, concepts, and pedagogies. The question of relevance comes forward in the lives of students (of cultural analysis and beyond), too, tied to these developments, and often to an unease about their future and the applicability of knowledge produced in the university to the world out there ("What will I do with all these?"). What I often observe is that when theory meets practice in the lives of students, enquiries on relevance become less heavy, change

5 Last year, a student of literary and cultural analysis told me that they chose the program after watching the videos of ContraPoints, the amazing cultural critic of YouTube, and searching for an academic program where similar conversations would happen.

shape, and the level of passion in engaging with theory, as well as the rigor of analysis increases. Not only a sharper light seems to be cast on concepts in these moments, but close reading becomes more patient, scrupulous, and creative. Analysis then turns into a form of "engag(ing) the world as an object of both critical analysis and hopeful transformation" (Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* 14). The fact that there is no outside position from which to read, analyze, and interfere is acknowledged and theory starts accompanying processes that students are part of, while organizing around issues as diverse (and connected) as hikes in tuition fees, universities' ties with fossil fuel companies, privatization, decarbonization, gender equality, or structural racism.[6]

These transitions and negotiations (of ideas, actions, and bodies) between inside and outside of the university make it arduous to settle on a definition as to when and to what extent something produced in a classroom is relevant to the outside, and the other way around. It becomes essential then to ask how these dynamics unfold in particular localities in ways that can intervene into the assumed margins of relevancy and carve out a space for a more vigorous traffic between the so-called inside and outside of the classroom. In the context of an international cultural analysis program with a growing number of students, what does it mean, for instance, to attend to the living culture of Amsterdam as our shared context—while reading decolonial theories in a city whose colonial history has become an increasingly visible (and surprisingly delayed) subject for scholars, while governmental and cultural institutions carry out mostly ostensible maneuvers to stay in the conversation? Or, what falls short when we analyze the intricacies of one's encounter with a work of art today without addressing how these institutions (fail to) respond to the unfolding political unrest? How to avoid a form of reading, say, on creative industries without talking about students' unpaid internships, or on ecocriticism without discussing the university's ties with

6 As I write this, a discussion night about alternative visions on the future of universities at Pakhuis de Zwijger in Amsterdam (June 5, 2023) was introduced as following: "This May alone, around 70 schools & universities in Europe were occupied, of which at least 8 took place in the Netherlands. They call for radical change in their educational institutions concerning various topics ranging from decarbonization, gender discrimination, decolonization, democratization, and the overall way in which knowledge is produced and distributed. The occupied spaces were filled with colorful banners, and autonomous areas where students and staff could learn together, debate, craft, rest, and eat free food. And it's ruffled some feathers already, as the Vrije Universiteit reacted by cutting all ties with fossil fuel companies." As a sign of the desire to "connect the dots" that permeates the call, the following words are remarkable: "Why are the End Fossil occupations also holding banners against capitalism, against cops on campus, and for a Free Palestine?," https://dezwijger.nl/programma/whos-education-our-education.

Fig. 12.1. Public intervention: *Rent a Room*. Photograph by Adela Wagner.

fossil fuel companies? How to shorten the distance between the texts on politics of space we read in class and the Voku/queer nights at a legalized squat five minutes away? I want to continue with a—rather long—list of student interventions from last years' literary and cultural analysis courses to keep thinking on critical pedagogical tactics that can help tackling these questions and can perhaps rid us, to a certain extent, of having to choose between unviable expectations about the political efficacy of theory, on the one hand, and the rather totalizing views on the co-option of the academe with its "phantom limbs," on the other.

Making of and Moving with Objects[7]

A group of students sit on cartoon boards in front of the university building with a sign that reads: "To Rent: Room with assistance from UvA, max. stay:

7 I am thankful to all the students in the courses "Against Culture" (2015), "Case Studies: Cultural Analysis" (2018), and "Introduction to Literary and Cultural Analysis" (2022) who are behind the "public interventions" some of which are mentioned here. In addition, I want to thank

14 days. Apply now, get the room in 2025, decided by bingo tournament." They start and record conversations about the housing crisis with passersby with whom they share experiences and tactics.

Sixteen students collectively compose a handwritten poem on a large piece of paper, titled "SLAMsterdam," which starts with the following words: "For UvA student housing I applied; but my hopes and dreams, they quickly died."

Arrows, words, and tape are placed in the university building to investigate which parts of the building are used and by whom, making invisible borders visible.

Price tags are placed on the not-for-sale objects in the recently privatized canteen (lamps, tables, etc.); chalk is used to write on the recently painted walls that host the canteen's feel-good slogans as if they were blackboards; quotations from Guy Debord, Mark Fisher, Nancy Fraser are left on the tables. (Isn't capitalism "the master category or framing concept for all serious social theorizing?" Fraser asks in one of them.)

Students dressed up like municipal workers approach passersby in the city center and introduce their project while handing out a flyer: "The project changes parts of the city from seventeenth-century infrastructure to modern and vibrant shopping streets. The renewal means more space for tourists and more space to enjoy Amsterdam. With this project, the canal will be drained, filled, and rebuilt into the new Singelgracht." They distribute small bottles filled with canal water as a souvenir which people mostly enthusiastically accept.

Posters promoting "In Defense of Amsterdam's Ugliest Buildings" are pasted on the walls of certain Amsterdam buildings, including P.C. Hoofthuis, which has been listed on the "ugliest places in the world" website. According to the students, these are in fact cheap real estate or educational organizations that provide shelter amidst the housing crisis, which have a unique ability to escape gentrification due to their "ugliness." The posters invite people to come into the buildings, take pictures, show them affection, and contemplate why they are excluded from the map of cultural sites in Amsterdam, which mainly consists of eighteenth-century houses of rich merchants, monarchy-sponsored museums, and concert halls. ("Wasn't culture 'ordinary,' as Raymond Williams said?" they ask while presenting their intervention.)

the coteachers of these courses, Daan Wesselman, Jeff Diamanti, and Irina Souch, who were enthusiastic about incorporating public interventions as a course component and integrated it in their groups.

Fig. 12.2. Public intervention: *Singelgracht*. Photograph by Aylin Kuryel.

Students are in Cuyperspassage, the tunnel at the Amsterdam Central Station, with its tiles depicting the warship Rotterdam and the Herring Fleet. They wear red clothes, which, when combined with the blue/white of the tiles, form the colors of the Dutch flag. They sing children's folk songs, which later become their objects of analysis to discuss where the "cultural

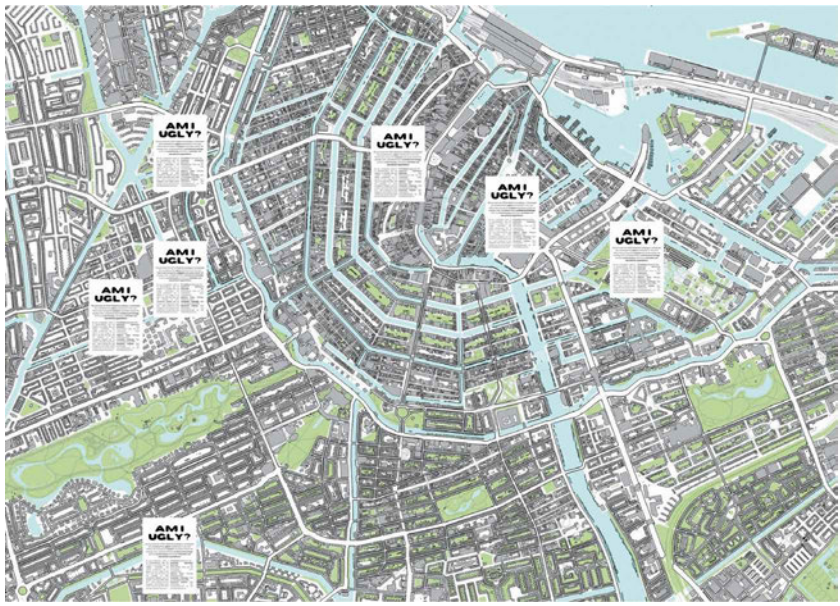

Fig. 12.3. Public intervention: *In Defense of Amsterdam's Ugliest Buildings.*

memory" that Edward Said and Gloria Wekker talks about can be found and how it can be interfered with by reconfiguring urban spaces.

Students are at Max Euweplein, where the first prison in Amsterdam was built in 1850, which was later used as "waiting rooms" for Jews during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. They invite volunteers in this now highly touristic space to circle around the square by walking just like the prisoners once did. After a while, they reveal the history of the space to the participants. This becomes their case to explore the capacity of bodily performances to reshuffle what is visible and what not in the city.

Students stand in front of the Bushuis/Oost-Indisch Huis, which is currently the Humanities Faculty of the University of Amsterdam (UvA), and hold handmade posters on the building's history of colonialism. They put up stickers on public statues and houses to make the history visible.

Tampons attached to public toilets become the starting point to discuss urination inequality, unequal distribution of accessibility, and the patriarchy of things. (There are thirty-five toilets designed for use while standing up, but there are only three for sitting—and none have wheelchair access.)

Old images of buildings that were once squatted in are printed and pasted on their now mostly privately owned walls by a group of students. The images

are brought into class as objects for analysis by another group of students (without them knowing it was the work of their classmates). "Can we look at the city as a living archive and walls as media?" they ask.

A student reads a "climate poem" out loud in the heart of Amsterdam, which later becomes an object to be unpacked through concepts such as ecocriticism, metaphor, and externality.

A poster of Putin is hung on the walls of the Hermitage Museum with a caption underneath, "Ceci n'est pas un saveur," the image of which becomes the case through which the relationship of language and ideology is discussed in class.

Students take pictures of human-made lakes, fountains, parks, and canals in Amsterdam to explore the nature/culture divide; they hand out seeds to strangers in small envelopes to be spread in the city.

A flyer distributed in the school corridors as a conversation starter on spaces that make people comfortable to talk about gender, love, right-wing discourses, prescriptions for hormones, and Dutch policies on transgender rights.

Museum politics is discussed by taking as an object of analysis the huge blank poster students stretched on the grass, in front of the Van Gogh Museum, inviting people to sit and collectively draw.

Students discuss how the nation is "flagged" through the Palestinian flags they distribute on the spots where they see Israeli flags in the city.

Starting from the Middle

These public interventions are designed, realized, and reported in class (in forms students choose) in groups of three to four people as a pass/fail course component.[8] To realize the interventions, students pick an issue in their proximity and start from the middle. They frame their case through the theories discussed, set up a scene, decide on a form, negotiate risks, and devise ways of acting together and communicating with others. They go in and out of the classroom to "make" their objects, try out different media to frame their analysis: creative writing, storytelling, performance, collective drawing, video, photo, flyer, poster, tape, sticker,

8 The paradox remains of having to "assess" public interventions academically, which I try to reduce by keeping grading out of the conversation. In rare incidents of a student not participating at all, I told them they can do an intervention in the future and send me a report, postponing "failing the assignment" to a future where failing would not matter anymore.

bottles, tampons. Roles vary—student, analyst, activist, inhabitant of the city, poet, performer, friend, guest, host—and the diversity of tactics activates different senses—vision, hearing, smell, touch. They switch between anecdotal and theoretical in framing their interventions, or close reading some elements that emerge from the interventions, as their object of analysis. Their own involvement in the making of objects facilitates dwelling on the affective aspect of analyzing: joy, shame, fear, boredom, hesitations, obsessions, compassions, failures, and jokes. For me, these moments help immensely to have an understanding of us, students and myself, as complicated entities with engagements, curiosities, confusions, skills, emotions, with histories and aspirations, not as beginners but as situated in myriad theoretical, political, affective trajectories, who start from the middle.

Adding public interventions as a course component—perhaps a way of intervening in the course manual and flow—for me, stemmed from the urge to seek ways in which students dwell on the idea that they are the subjects of politics on which theory contemplates, instead of being exposed to theories that will reveal the hidden ideological mechanisms for them. I see them as small-scale experiments on becoming "border-crossers" in the sense that Giroux's critical pedagogy envisions students, teachers, theorists as "moving in and out of the resources, histories, and narratives" (*Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope* 251). In this sense, these are not so much moments when ideas are simply transferred to the public, or tested there, but processes in which ideas take shape as they move in and out, as they touch different surfaces and are fine-tuned.

I put some questions on the table in advance, adjusted to the content of the course and in dialogue with the particular texts we read: What makes you curious, attracted to, disturbed in your surroundings? Why do you move, move closer or away, get less or more involved in these? If Amsterdam is an archive, what would you search in it and by which means? How to zoom into the mundane, throw a rather awkwardly long glance at what seems to be ordinary, explore clichés, which "might be tropes with complex genealogies" (Berlant 110)? What about the dynamics of belonging and refusal in analysis—as Bal says, referring to Spivak, analysis often involves "saying no to what you inhabit," but "the dwelling makes the 'no' more complicated, just as much as the other way around" (*Double Exposures* 11)? If analysis takes place in a context, in which ways do you imagine the analysis to be shaped by and in turn shape the context? What does the context and the way we move in it tell us about the concepts through which we step in it in the first place? Can these interventions serve as entry points into further

research, fieldwork, collective action, through the insights they bring (or fall short in doing so) on the localities and urgencies?

These attempts to nurture the collective and processual aspect of doing cultural analysis, with a focus on involvement, interaction, and intervention, suggest a different temporality of doing theory—not only thinking of the past as part of the present, but also present as part of the future. It also propounds a different status of the object as not only "listened to" while doing some kind of detective work in search of meaning that is relevant to an outside, but as something to move together with an insistence on the desire to intervene into. The potential of an intervention to alter things, leave marks, or revisit the assumptions on what is (ir)relevant surely stands next to the limitations it is bound up with the given theoretical, institutional, and political coordinates. Yet, the notion of intervention itself remains an epistemological guiding principle. Berlant asks: "[W]hen scholars study the present how can anyone know whether they know anything that counts, that matters, that should survive its utterance?" (110). We probably can't. Yet, we can keep asking what it means to count and matter by intervening into the assumed margins of relevance through theoretical, practical, pedagogical means.

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