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### Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

CAROLYN BIRDSALL, MARIA BOLETSI,  
ITAY SAPIR AND PIETER VERSTRAETE

When we set out to organise a conference on the issue of knowledge in the humanities, we were curious about the kinds of responses we would receive.<sup>1</sup> If you ask scholars what kind of knowledge their research produces and how they would define knowledge in their respective disciplines, the reactions may include uncomfortable expressions, silences, unclear replies, scepticism or a reluctance to engage with the question. Some humanities scholars might even object to the suggestion that their research should aim at producing “knowledge.” The discomfort that the question of knowledge seems to generate in the humanities in fact enhanced our motivation for the necessity of such a conference and, later, of this volume. The overwhelming response to the “call for papers” for our 2007 conference “Inside Knowledge” was an unmistakable sign of the eagerness of the academic community to address this question. At the same time, the participants also expressed concerns about the nebulousness surrounding the term “knowledge,” especially in its use in the humanities.

Indeed, “knowledge” in the humanities is by no means a clearly defined concept, and even within the same discipline there is rarely consensus on the term’s meanings and applications. The roots of the ambiguous and precarious position of “knowledge” can be traced back to the traditional divide between the humanities and the natural sciences. In this divide—consolidated in the modern university system from the late

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<sup>1</sup> The essays comprising this volume are based on a number of papers initially presented during the international conference “Inside Knowledge: (Un)doing Methodologies, Imagining Alternatives” held at the University of Amsterdam, March 28-30, 2007. This conference theme was inspired by the 2005-2006 Theory Seminar “Ways of Knowing,” organised by Mieke Bal at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). We want to extend our gratitude to ASCA for providing both these forums for academic exchange.

eighteenth century onwards—it was science that was supposed to hold the rights to knowledge production, with “knowledge” understood in terms of objectivity.<sup>2</sup> This divide was consolidated by the claim of hermeneutics that knowledge and explanation are the concern of the natural sciences,<sup>3</sup> whereas meaning and interpretation are the domain of the humanities.<sup>3</sup> The myth of objective knowledge has of course been debunked, particularly since Michel Foucault and poststructuralist thinkers have shown how knowledge production is inextricable from power and ideological mechanisms.<sup>4</sup> The association of knowledge with objectivity, however, has not only been repudiated by the humanities. Recently, it has been questioned within the exact sciences as well, where pragmatist approaches are increasingly informing the epistemologies of scientific research.<sup>5</sup>

The humanities, however, still seem to nurture the idea that knowledge is the domain of science departments. Therefore, humanistic disciplines often do not consider their own undertakings to produce “knowledge” in this understanding of the term. The self-definition of the humanities remains, to some degree, grounded on the ongoing opposition between science (as pursuing “knowledge”) and the humanities (as searching for “meaning”). As a result, the term “knowledge” is, in certain ways, still set apart from the scope of the humanities, especially due to its association with science and objectivity. This would suggest a rather limited notion of knowledge in the humanities, defined in opposition to notions such as meaning, interpretation and understanding, which, as subjective categories, are supposed to better grasp the ideal of the humanities.

With this edited volume, we want to avoid the objectivist connotations

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Lee and Wallerstein, *Overcoming the Two Cultures*; Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge*; Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Knowledge*.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey’s famous distinction between “*erklären*” (interpretative understanding) and “*verstehen*” (law-governed explanation) as the respective tasks of the humanities and sciences is perhaps the clearest formulation of this divide. See, for example, Dilthey, “Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie”; *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*; *Introduction to the Human Sciences*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and The History of Sexuality*; and more recently, Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. For a concise summary of continental philosophy’s contribution to epistemological debates, see Dancy and Sosa, *A Companion to Epistemology*, 76-80.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, see Latour, *Science in Action*; Pickering, *Science as Practice and Culture*; Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*; Megill, *Rethinking Objectivity*; and more recently, Hallyn, *Les structures rhétoriques de la science*; Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*.

of “knowledge” as well as the subjective undertones in the concept of “meaning,” without perpetuating the kind of oppositional thinking that would compel us to choose one of the two as the ideal for the humanities. With this in mind, we propose the alternative formulation “ways of knowing,” which, in our view, excludes neither knowledge production nor meaning and interpretation from the agenda of the humanities. In this volume, we suggest that the humanities could benefit from a renewed, plural conception of knowledge that allows for different modes of knowing, yet also subjects them to constant critique.

The title *Inside Knowledge* is offered here as a starting point for discussion. Working as a scholar in a particular discipline could be perceived as having “inside knowledge” or being “inside” knowledge. This “being inside” can be interpreted as a comfort zone—the insider’s privileged position—or, on the other hand, as being trapped inside a knowledge system that excludes other ways of knowing. As the grammatical ambiguity of the phrase suggests, with “inside knowledge” we explore both options: knowledge as being an influential all-encompassing frame determining academic production, and scholars as agents in the deconstruction or unmaking of different epistemic frameworks.

The issues suggested by this volume’s title are complemented by the implications of the subtitle: *(Un)doing Ways of Knowing in the Humanities*. By introducing the term “knowing,” we seek to unpack ongoing conceptions of knowledge as a given, monolithic construct, or as a representation of an objective, unidimensional experience. Rather, knowledge is always filtered and mediated. It should not be conceived as a collection of “data,” but as an ongoing process. There are multiple ways of experiencing, perceiving or constructing knowledge. All the active components of these processes may be better captured by the present participle “knowing” than by the static noun “knowledge.” Moreover, if we think of ourselves as “doing” (or “undoing”), instead of “having,” knowledge, academic research only offers provisional stops, not fixed or permanent additions to a cumulative construct.<sup>6</sup>

*Inside Knowledge* therefore stresses a plural conception of knowledge, but also the value of bringing practices and theories of knowledge to the foreground. This volume also represents the engagement of humanities scholars in interdisciplinary reflections on knowledge and its modes of production. The contributors to this volume do not only adopt diverse disciplinary approaches, but also seek to interrogate the epistemological

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Michel de Certeau’s articulation of a theory of practice along similar lines in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 61-75.

premises of their respective disciplines. Certain critics have noted that some “interdisciplinary projects” only involve a pastiche of objects and methods, without a synthetic approach.<sup>7</sup> Given the challenges of “an age characterised by the loss of boundaries,” the ability to pay attention to the interrelatedness of objects and to place questions in a larger context is increasingly needed in academic research and practice.<sup>8</sup> While interdisciplinarity can offer productive responses to these challenges, academics with interdisciplinary aspirations should also be mindful of the risks involved in such an undertaking.

Our book does not claim to be interdisciplinary just because each of its authors belongs to a different discipline. Indeed, the contributors to this volume come from backgrounds as diverse as comparative literature, theatre and performance studies, philosophy, art history, cultural studies and musicology. Despite their thematic and methodological diversity, however, the contributions share a common interest in addressing how knowledge figures in social and cultural discourses, cultural practices, disciplinary field(s) or discrete objects. In this way, the contributions to this volume draw on different theoretical and historical frames in order to critically probe issues that cannot be fully dealt with within the constraints of one discipline. The diversity of approaches to the topic of this volume constitutes an integral part of its objective to stage a productive encounter between different ways of knowing.

This volume includes three main orientations for revisiting the issue of knowledge in the humanities, although there are significant overlaps and points of intersection. Section I, “Tropes of Knowledge,” looks closely at a number of common tropes related to knowledge. Through a critical examination of these tropes, it exposes the shortcomings of dominant knowledge regimes and established disciplinary approaches in order to propose either new tropes or productive resignifications of existing ones. Section II, “Resisting Knowledge,” brings the task of “undoing” dominant paradigms of knowledge to the foreground. Each chapter in this section takes a case study that involves some form of resistance or challenge to dominant knowledge regimes or epistemological premises. The final section, “Displacing Knowledge,” picks up from the critical attitude that emerges when challenging normative understandings of knowledge. This section suggests that the question(ing) of knowledge and the resulting displacement of ideas influences the way we subsequently take a new position. The contributions to this section present the reader with

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<sup>7</sup> For objections to practices of interdisciplinarity, see, for example, Benson’s “Five Arguments Against Interdisciplinary Studies.” See also Newell 116.

<sup>8</sup> Bal, *Traveling Concepts*, 4.

alternative models that, in different ways, trace knowledge as it enters historically altered theoretical grounds, to include the moving body, music performance, the senses and non-linguistic, affective modes of knowing.

## **Tropes of Knowledge**

Thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and, later, Paul de Man have argued for the metaphorical nature of all language.<sup>9</sup> Their ideas have changed the conception of tropological language not as a deviation from normal or “literal” language-use, but as language par excellence. An implication of this idea is that all language yields a precarious, ambivalent, unstable kind of knowledge, which never rests on any stable, “literal” ground. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson explored the practical ramifications of this idea to demonstrate that tropes, and metaphors in particular, are not just rhetorical devices.<sup>10</sup> They are cognitive tools that shape our thought and experience, and determine our everyday practices. The social and cognitive functions of tropes, and their role in reinforcing regimes of knowledge and power, have not gone unnoticed by critics. However, what remains an under-theorised area is the potential contribution of tropes to envisioning alternative ways of knowing.

When employing a trope, we say something in terms of something else. In this act, two different frames of reference or narratives meet each other and can displace or imbue each other with foreign elements. In this sense, tropes move between the literal and the figurative, the known and the not-yet-known, the self and the other. Due to their in-between position, they can mobilise meanings and stage encounters between different discourses, languages and even modes of knowing. Tropes can be theoretically and epistemologically productive when they raise new issues and questions, and bring up challenging perspectives. Yet, they could also reinforce authoritative discourses or lead to dead ends and semantical obscurity.<sup>11</sup> The chapters in this section explore both the theoretical limitations and the epistemological potential of tropes related to knowledge.

This first section draws attention to a series of established tropes and exposes their ideological presuppositions. In Chapter One, Derek Attridge starts by posing the question: Can literary works or art works think, and

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<sup>9</sup> For example, see Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense” and de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*.

<sup>10</sup> See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

<sup>11</sup> Bal, “Scared to Death,” 159.

even know? His intention is not so much to provide a definitive answer, but rather to draw attention to the possible implications of the question itself. He therefore explores what it means when the art work is personified as the “knower” than merely the “bearer” of knowledge. Attridge scrutinises tropes that ascribe consciousness and knowing capacities to works of art and literature. He does this by testing them on a wide range of works, from poems and novels to music and abstract painting. What is really at stake in such tropes, as Attridge argues, is the staging of our pursuit of knowledge. A literary work or art work stubbornly refuses to “satisfy the thirst for knowledge that it generates.” And yet, art works constantly engage with our epistemological desires and mobilise a never-ending process of discovering new ways of (not) knowing.

Chapters Two and Three revisit existing and overdetermined tropes. In Chapter Two, Begum Özden Firat takes us to the realm of visual art. Firat draws attention to the limitations of certain architectural tropes in visual theory, and proposes their replacement by other, more productive ones. More specifically, she tests the metaphor of the window in visual art, and demonstrates its inadequacy through a detailed comparison with the metaphor of the threshold. Through a close analysis of a seventeenth-century Ottoman miniature painting, she shows how this cultural object engages with the window-metaphor, but eventually inspires an alternative visual epistemology based on the threshold-metaphor. As opposed to an epistemology of transparency and visibility supported by the metaphor of the window, the threshold, Firat contends, inspires a way of knowing and looking that is “transitional, relational, opaque and precarious.” This unleashes the pleasure of opacity in the viewer, who is challenged to engage with the invisible aspects and the secrets of the image.

In Chapter Three, Maria Boletsi focuses on the trope of the barbarian and the concept of barbarism. She makes a case for the epistemological relevance of the barbarian, by relating this figure by definition to (not) knowing: the barbarian always suggests the unknowable, the unintelligible, the untranslatable. Contrary to a long history of negative uses of barbarism in its opposition to civilization, Boletsi proposes a resignification of barbarism and the barbarian as performative rather than ontological, essentialist categories. Through a reading of a scene in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Boletsi argues that barbarism can incite a “negative” operation of not-knowing, misunderstanding, or mistranslating. In this operation, barbarism can invade authoritative discourses and rupture their epistemological certainties with the challenge of the foreign. Barbarism is thereby introduced as a mode of (not) knowing that can take effect at sites of encounter between different

languages or discourses. This resignification aims at channelling the negativity of barbarism into productive (and, in that sense, “positive”) functions.

Chapters Four and Five explore the tension between the literal and figurative meanings of certain tropes related to falling and exhaustion. In Chapter Four, Michal Sapir looks at the epistemological aspects of physical falling in literary works, in order to propose an alternative physicality of knowledge. She reads Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* and Edgar Allan Poe’s detective tales, through which she introduces an alternative trope of knowledge “based on the physicality of the falling body.” The falling body, as it appears in such “disfigured” literary texts, points to the fundamental instability of the “reality” of human experience that literary language refers to. The epistemology inspired by these unstable bodies destabilises the unshakable grounds of the Cartesian trope of knowledge, typified by a detached human observer. But while falling bodies “in crisis” question the very possibility of such knowledge, they also become tools for the production of a kind of knowledge that captures better the experience of modernity.

In Chapter Five, Asja Szafranec starts with the Nietzschean allegory of the man who wanted to know the leech’s mind, in order to explore the relation of physical exhaustion to “exhaustive” knowledge. At the centre of her argumentation we find the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Szafranec explores Deleuze’s critique of the traditional notion of knowledge as representation, in its relation to an alternative process—“apprenticeship”—which makes knowledge possible through a more complex and intimate relation with reality. Deleuze’s apprenticeship is a necessary process that leads to the final stage of creation: the third synthesis. Here, Szafranec sheds light to one of the least understood parts of Deleuze’s philosophy, by exploring the parallel that Deleuze traces between the physiological exhaustion of Samuel Beckett’s characters and exhaustivity as the aim of genuine thought. This exhaustivity, in unifying being and thought, the passive and the active, takes the form of the “permutation of all possibilities,” which is also the outcome of Deleuze’s “third synthesis.”

## **Resisting Knowledge**

In “Resisting Knowledge,” knowledge can be both the object and the subject of resistance. This section explores both paths that this grammatical ambiguity opens up. On the one hand, it is certainly our contention that a certain idea of knowledge, positivistic, objective or objectifying, needs to be resisted in its claim for universal validity as a



scholarly ideal. And an act of resistance is, perhaps, already triggered by this book's intention to investigate the presuppositions underpinning the pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, some of the articles in this section make the point that knowledge production is not necessarily the most important undertaking of a scholar in the humanities. Other articles explore cultural forms that are not simply resistant, but appear to be even indifferent to knowledge altogether. A number of the chapters here, implicitly or not, draw their strategies or tools of resistance from the example of oppositional fields of study, which ground their definition on their resisting stance to dominant regimes of knowledge. Anti- and postcolonialist discourse, gender and queer studies are cases in point here.

If knowledge becomes the grammatical subject in "Resisting Knowledge," however, new fields of inquiry emerge. For knowledge can also be understood as the agent of different forms of resistance. What if, instead of trying to resist knowledge, the scholar tried to resist conventional wisdoms, power structures and stultified methods with the help of new forms of knowledge? The issue goes well beyond an abstract, philosophical questioning: it is a call for experimenting with novel methodologies, based on new or revised epistemological premises. The articles in this section respond to this call, each in its own, necessarily provisional, way.

A kind of discourse often presumed to be resisting knowledge is poetry, which James Petterson explores in Chapter Six. This chapter outlines the double trap in poetry's knowledge-resisting potential: on the one hand, the instrumentalisation of poetic discourse, reducing it to its "content," and, on the other, the conception of poetry as an aesthetic practice altogether indifferent to questions of resistance, commitment and knowledge. This discussion significantly takes its cue from philosophers (Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou), philosophical writers (Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot) as well as a poet (Jacques Réda). Petterson reflects on meaning and sound, knowledge and materiality, and the complex ways in which poetry and philosophy resist and complement each other's epistemological claims.

Knowledge expressed in words and the issue of language are also at the centre of Jatin Wagle's case study in Chapter Seven. Theodor Adorno's exilic writing in the United States is presented as an example of how knowledge can be both an object of resistance and its most useful tool. Here, too, the specificities and techniques of writing condition the production of knowledge and the resistance to it. Wagle argues that, in prolonging his "intellectual exile," Adorno elaborated an epistemology of resistance to pervasive norms of knowledge production. Cultural alterity

and philosophical idiosyncrasy are thus deemed inseparable in this chapter, as the circumstances of Adorno's life are intermingled with the guiding ideas of his thought.

Chapter Eight involves not only words but also images, and, in particular, the ways in which both media, combined, enhance resistance to normative discourse. In her consideration of militarism in Israeli society, Noa Roei focuses on an exhibition of artistic representations of soldiers. Roei shows how the catalogue cover performs an act of epistemological questioning that exceeds the theoretical scope of the essays inside the catalogue. In particular, it is the paradox of subjectivation—the fact that one is always already acting within the norms of one's society, even while trying to resist precisely those norms—that is acknowledged and dealt with, both by the analysed object and in the self-reflexive position of the article itself.

A self-reflexive approach is also present in Chapter Nine, in Joshua Paul Dale's study of fetish parties—a type of event the author knows from first-hand experience. His is an inquiry “from within” in another sense: the knowledge at the centre of this chapter is not mediated by words or by artistic images, but principally through the physical and social presence of the body itself, both inside the fetish outfit and in its interaction with the other participants. These parties resist conventional social patterns of identity and difference by offering a form of interaction not based on knowledge of the other. The impact of this model on power and desire is the epicentre of Dale's analysis.

## **Displacing Knowledge**

The title of the third and final section, “Displacing Knowledge” implies, on the one hand, that knowledge necessarily involves a placement of ideas and thoughts in concepts, epistemologies or disciplines, as governed by a certain cultural discourse. This placement particularly materialises in the ways that scholars position themselves towards what is shared as “known,” thereby contributing to leading approaches, epistemes and fashions in knowledge production. On the other hand, the act of resistance to those dominant paradigms, as discussed in Section II, results in a call for a displacement of knowledge, which would enable the scholar to take a distance and reflect upon *what* and *how* it is to know through academic research. This displacement suggests a repositioning towards the objects of knowledge, which sometimes requires a search for places outside the academia. We suggest that “displacing knowledge” is a conscious and

necessary movement outwards that scrutinises established positions and situates knowledge production outside “common-places.”

The chapters in this section each “displace” existing arguments, established theories and the contexts in which they are produced. These displacements aim at investigating the potential of alternative positions, the desire to know and the role of the location where “knowingness” comes to practise. In Chapter Ten, Steven Connor calls for a critical examination of a “going out of knowing” in relation to the objects we appropriate through knowing. Through a critique of phenomenology, he relates this exterior direction to intentionality and the desire of taking leave of our senses while being *inside* knowledge. Connor deconstructs the latter idea by considering the phrase “a stirring to meekness,” taken from a fourteenth-century text, which would hold a promise of another type of knowledge than the one that keeps us “inside.”

In Chapter Eleven, Kristin Becker discusses the historical ramifications of taking knowledge outside the academia through a late-nineteenth century case study: the Urania Institute in Berlin. In this project, scientific knowledge was taken outside the conventional places of academic knowledge production and popularised in various theatrical practices. As a significant precursor to today’s “edutainment,” the Urania presented a plethora of means of presenting scientific knowledge about the world through entertaining lectures and a “Scientific Theatre.” Becker proposes to look at the Urania project from two angles. Drawing on the framework of historical theatre and performance theories, on the one hand, she attempts to show how Urania’s spectacle of science can be studied in relation to the historical changes in the spectator’s attention. On the other hand, she shows how the emergence of a new “knowledge society” can be investigated through such popularising practices as the Urania project.

Hanna Järvinen, in Chapter Twelve, also addresses the historicity and cultural dependence of knowledge production, and relates it specifically to theoretical positions towards the dancing body. As a result of phenomenology’s overemphasis on the inside of the dancer’s movements through such concepts as “kinaesthesia” and “proprioception,” taken from nineteenth-century neurology, contemporary scholarship has produced a new essentialism and normativisation of a particular dance aesthetics. Järvinen proposes a historiographical approach that employs a genealogical frame to look at the reasons why the invention of “kinaesthesia” has contributed to new universalising truths about the sensation of dance. In doing so, she deconstructs existing discourses on dance, thereby reclaiming the historical specificity of the perception of movement by a moving subject.

In Chapter Thirteen, Dylan Robinson attempts to reassess both critical and experiential modes of knowing music for the purpose of an interdisciplinary musicology through practice-based research. Taking musicological research outside the academic context and into the performance space, he conceptualises musical meaning within the practice of Western art music as an active exchange of knowledge, based on a productive friction between audience members and performers. For this purpose, he re-evaluates the role of dialogue in giving the audience an increased agency. Through a case study of *Ligeti* (2005-2006), he illustrates how mixed-mode practice in music performance can help us rethink the audience in terms of its participation in creating both critical and embodied knowledge.

The last chapter of this section, rather than offering closure, emphatically posits the desire for knowledge as eternally deferred. In Chapter Fourteen, Tereza Havelková presents a case study of how contemporary opera stages the promise of a knowledge, which it knows it cannot fulfil. Through an analysis of Peter Greenaway's staging of Louis Andriessen's opera *Rosa* (1994), she demonstrates how the construction of opera can provoke the spectator's desire to search for knowledge, while simultaneously staging the impossibility of this knowledge. Taking Walter Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a departure point, she demonstrates the allegorical structure as a mechanism in opera for complicating the spectator's reading of the opera's signs. Havelková argues that *Rosa* performs a deconstructive reading of opera, which in its failure to offer closure, results in what de Man has called an "allegory of unreadability." Havelková ultimately relates this to the performative effects of opera's allegorical structure, which invites the listener to decipher the signs of the opera while forestalling the production of a univocal meaning.

By bringing together diverse approaches and objects, *Inside Knowledge* makes a case for an intersection of modes of knowing that do not just move past each other, but put each other to the test, often exposing their blind spots or underscoring their hidden potential. Staging encounters between heterogeneous objects and theoretical views in this collection does not only unveil interrelations and happy coincidences, but it sometimes also reveals the limitations of certain approaches, their problematic aspects and the hidden ideologies that they sustain. We would like to argue that from this latter process productive insights can emerge too. The encounters among discourses and cultural objects in this volume do not aim to pin down the meaning and uses of "knowledge," but the

exact opposite: questioning the fixity of knowledge as a concept and revealing its potential as an ongoing practice. The chapters in this volume ultimately dare to envision the future of our various disciplines through different ways of knowing. By probing an issue from different angles and exploring its implications across diverse media and discourses, this volume could lead to another kind of understanding of its complexity. The question of “knowing” in the humanities is fascinating exactly because it is mobile, complex, and even controversial. It concerns all scholars in the humanities, and this makes it, by definition, an interdisciplinary question.

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