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Dream Project

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The question of a dream project for me is not about a specific object of study, or even a particular mode of production, but about the scale of inquiry. I dream about an undertaking that would compel me to learn and stretch and grow the way I did as a graduate student, when I was overwhelmed and energized by the fear and pleasure of so many unknowns. The stakes of intellectual pursuits felt high in those years of the culture wars, the Cold War, the first Gulf War, the Rodney King riots, and the AIDS crisis. To be clear, I also felt acute angst about work and life on an almost daily basis during that time, and I do not miss the strain and uncertainty that came with not knowing if I would ever have a job. But I also remember the rush of intellectual expansion, the feeling of my mind stretching to accommodate a new understanding, the thrill of an insight gleaned in the fog of confusion, the sense that it all mattered.

Many of the crises have escalated in recent years: poverty, police violence, murder, racism, war, displacement, migration, and climate change. I want to pursue new ways of thinking that are adequate to the scale of current cultural, political, and ecological calamities. As a full professor at a private art school, I have the luxury to consider such things at a time when so many academics are working part-time in precarious positions, for inadequate pay. But even under conditions of relative ease, the traditional structures of the academy often encourage and reward small thinking—incremental inquiry and knowledge accumulation—ways of knowing that circumscribe the ability to

see the problems at an appropriate scale, much less to rethink them fundamentally. One is invited to become an expert, to deliver an argument, to stake a claim. One is asked to specify learning goals and measure outcomes. One is summoned to evaluate the work of colleagues and rank its contribution to the field.

I value expertise and beautifully crafted arguments and organized course plans. But right now I want to hold out for the political promise of not knowing and the intellectual pleasures that risk entails. I want to resist the impulse to develop lines of inquiry in a relatively known terrain. I hope to continue to cultivate curiosity as Irit Rogoff describes it: “Curiosity implies a certain unsettling; a notion of things outside the realm of the known, of things not yet quite understood or articulated; the pleasures of the forbidden or the hidden or the unthought; the optimism of finding out something one had not known or been able to conceive of before.”¹ I aim to hold on to curiosity about things that matter, to read and think and struggle to formulate thoughts that are beyond me.

I want to embrace and encourage transformational learning in camaraderie with colleagues and students and friends. I want the rush and pain and pleasure of feeling myself growing and believing that the world can change too. I want to resist the academic impetus toward compartmentalization and competition by continuing to invite collaborations in teaching and writing that push me beyond my limitations. For me the dream of being a professor has always also been the dream of being a student. Today that dream endures, but I want to amplify the stakes of the endeavor and pursue inquiry on a scale that is self- and world-changing in a moment of crisis.

Notes:

¹ Irit Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 18.
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