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Can You Make Art without Research?

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You can probably do most kinds of *research* without art - even if the phrase "the art of research" may sometimes be useful. But can you make *art* without research? My answer is "no" – at least not art that is interesting, relevant, excellent. Maybe the amount and nature of the research involved in the artistic process is just the decisive factor for the quality of the final result, the artwork.

The title of my text is put up as an appetizer for people involved in discussions about the aim, content, and format of artistic research. Sometimes artistic practice seems to be regarded as a more or less marginal supplier of material to artistic research. In my question, research is given a position as a tool for the arts, not the other way around.

Making art – what is it?

Contemporary art practices include a broad range of focuses and issues, from the interpretation of ancient music through socially related projects to mute objects. I will here simplify reality by talking about Art as a general phenomenon and not go more specifically into current tendencies and changes in the various art fields. However complex and diverse, we still use "the Arts" as an umbrella for several practices which have something in common. In various combinations, a shortlist of qualifications that are necessary to be a professional performer in the arts still seems to make sense – for dance as well as for video or relational art. The list of competences includes technical skills and hands-on experience, creativity, courage, curiosity, attention, reflection, concentration, patience, knowledge of and insight into the field, knowledge of and ability to make use of relevant theory, notions of context, and notions of quality criteria in the peer community. Abilities to set up methodical experiments relevant to the project are needed, as well as competences of organization: locating and staging, communicating with partners, assistants, sponsors, and producers. Methods are individual as well as field-based. Processes are run by single persons in their personal way, or in settings for cooperative settings like theater or concert rehearsals. For all contemporary practice, challenging methods and settings will be part of the work.

The intention of this incomplete listing of capacities necessary for artistic work is to draw attention to the puzzle of the many refined, specialized, and professional qualities involved. Artistic practice has for centuries been based on investigation and experiments – research –and so have other inquiring activities, which later have been institutionalized into Research and recognized as such.

Research with small *r* or big *R*

"To do research" on something you need to know more about is a common phrase. You can do research on bus timetables as well as on food recipes. In this sense it means to gather information, to provide a basis for taking a decision or performing an action.

The process of institutionalization of research includes continuous negotiation within the field about standards for working methods, standards for formats of presenting results, and standards for quality assessment. Research with the big *R* is executed in a variety of specifically designed programs and organizations and is funded from certain bodies. It is one of the main missions for higher education, the academic top level of many professions.

As described above, research (with small *r*?) is definitely included in artistic practice. It is done with advanced and field specific means, combining analysis based on extensive knowledge as well as activated senses to detect differences in sensuous qualities. The cello performer as well as the painter begin their work with some sort of concept or aim – it could be to challenge a school of interpretation, it could be to investigate the expression of content through color/texture/format. The starting point may be formulated as some sort of hypothesis – but more often as an area of interest, a point of departure for an ambitious journey. Very seldom a so called research question will be formulated because many artists do not experience this as a useful tool. Sometimes the answer (the work/product) in some way reveals the question. But quite often the artistic result of high quality may be so complex that the simplified questions will reduce the optimal perception of the quality and strength of the work. When artists are asked about how they made their work, they often demonstrate in their answers the limitations of what can be explained within a classical logical discourse. Somewhere, an unexpected decision has been taken, for reasons that can hardly be articulated, only proven by the quality of the work in the end. The continuing flow of analysis will in many cases not be specifically verbalized – but nevertheless be absolutely present, and decisive for the result. So – is this research with *r*, not *R*?

Artistic research as an institutional affair

The debate about the identity of artistic research that have been going on internationally for decades has had neither its origin nor its encouragement from the professional art scenes and art environments. An artist can certainly make art without having to reflect on the notion of research, and the artist's public or agent or curator does not have to deal with this question of category either. The peer reviews in the art community, the theoretical reviews, and the commercial dynamics of contemporary art are not much involved in the discourse of artistic research as such. It belongs to and has been developed in art education institutions and their funding bodies, mainly as a consequence of adjustments to higher education in general.

Since 1995, in the very first paragraphs of the Norwegian law for higher education, artistic research is established as an equal of academic research. Artistic research is here given the role as the main resource and foundation for art education, parallel to the way academic research provides the foundation for science and humanities. This gives arts education an open position for refining their special responsibilities on their own terms, and it gives art an exceptional position in society. The question of "what is artistic research?" is not discussed in the law. This challenge still has to be met by the arts educators themselves.

Artistic research including art

Artistic research covers artistic processes that lead to a result that is publicly accessible. In this work also an explicit reflection on the development and presentation of the result may be included.

This statement was published in 2007 in a national report ordered by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions, a report called "Focus on Artistic Research."¹ A committee of professors from all fields of art was asked to investigate potential indicators for result based financing of artistic research in higher art education in Norway. To understand what the indicators were supposed to represent, a thorough work was done to define artistic research in this context. Several scenarios were imagined, and the following one became crucial for developing the final statement: if you exclude artistic practice as such from the recognized foundation for teaching art on

¹ The report is available in Norwegian: *Vekt på kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid, Innstilling fra Universitets- og høyskolerådet til Kunnskapsdepartementet, 23. februar 2007*. Translation by the author.
http://www.uhr.no/formidling/kunstnerisk_formidling/

a high level, the remaining artistic research may appear as drained of qualities which are essential to the field it is supposed to feed and develop.

The committee's definition is based on the view that

A strong element of reflection is embedded in all artistic practices, performing as well as creative: ideas and actions are tested out and developed in a steady flow, methods are involved and applied or refused, and results are assessed according to intentions and ideas. This is all based within a large field of knowledge and skills. Reflection is always implicit in the artist's work –sometimes also explicit.... Presuming that the artistic outcome is up to a standard of excellence, the capacity beyond is very complex, very exclusive, very personal, and sophisticatedly articulated in the language of the specific area, may it be sound, picture, or movement. The work of art is independent and a conveyor of meaning in its own language and form, and its discursive relation to other works and its cultural contexts. Artistic expressions can be read by peers just as, for example, philosophy can be read by philosophers. Artistic expressions are intellectual, creative, and skilful on their own premises and do not need translation to other languages to communicate meaning and context.²

Critical reflection as a vital part of artistic research

As mentioned above, an artist can certainly make (good) art without making explicit reflections. The institutions of education, however, have other responsibilities. In these environments critical reflection is expected. All the why's, what's, and how's should be asked in the dialogue between staff and students. There is a need to expose and dissect as much of the processes as possible, to understand and go into discourses, to address references, to filter information, and to discuss alternatives. It is also about addressing internal standards of a field – shedding light on areas eventually protecting themselves against interferences and challenges. There are very good academic reasons for art education to promote critical reflection, and to push this in projects of artistic research. One criterion for artistic research in this context should be to what extent it actively feeds the field with new perspectives.

In the performing arts as well as in object design, deadlines, funding bodies, market demands, etc. can of course be constructive limitations for projects. Still, the conditions for research, in the sense of going deeply into a project, may often be restricted in the professional world of art and design. This is notable because these fields have a widespread reputation for being "free." Highly qualified practitioners experience in many settings that contracts with producers and galleries – or the free lance situation as such - include far too little space and time for thorough artistic investigations and critical reflection. The educating institutions, however, have the responsibility, even the mission, to question and enrich practices from other angles, and should expand and take advantage of this role. For the future this position seems to be more and more important – not only for the institutional vitality but for the development of the arts.

What is excellence?

The fields of art and design actually do have criteria for quality. The method here is just the same as in science: peer review. The notion of research demands visibility, access. Works and projects must be published, through exhibitions, publications, shows, and other venues. The standards for peer review will not be quantitative, but develop within a moving discourse –as within fields of theoretical science. All our professional experience concerning quality in the arts must be must also be applied to projects of artistic research; if a project deals with painting, it cannot escape from painting discourse within the arts by calling itself research.

² Ibid.

Stimulated or forced by the institutions' demands for results and the ways funding is available, during recent years artistic research projects have been organized not only as art projects as such, but as thematic investigations, as collaborative projects between artists and as arenas where artists, theorists, and scientists may work together. This development offers an important potential for the arts, and an opportunity to examine processes as well as outcomes more closely. These research projects may contribute to highlight the differences of the various expertise – as well as blurring the borders through mutual influence.

Artistic research needs to have a double relevance and relation: to the educational environment *and* to the art environment. If projects within the frame of artistic research do not gain legitimacy – and more than that: enthusiastic interest - in the professional art community, the whole genre is seriously in danger.

Our educational institutions' focus on artistic research may lead to a displacement of the exclusive resources and qualities embedded in artistic practice, if art itself is not in any way included in the notions of research. Art provides a great capacity for formulating broad life experiences, including the more irrational parts of life. If we do not manage to bring with us the openness and values related to these distinguished powers of art into research and development, this may become a rather self-righteous, predictable, and uninspiring activity. Artistic research must be grounded in the arts and the qualities of art, and be an important contributor to their growth.