

HENK BORGDORFF VISITING PROFESSOR OF AESTHETICS
AT THE FACULTY OF FINE, APPLIED AND PERFORMING ARTS UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Art and Academia

The Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts at the University of Gothenburg occupies a special place in the university as a whole. It is a real honour to be asked to speak here about our distinctive place in the university community, and especially about the distinctive nature of the research we do in our faculty – research in the creative and performing arts.

This creative arts faculty is relatively new to the university. Not so long ago, arts education in Sweden, as in the rest of Europe, had an independent status in the education system. The creative arts faculty here in Gothenburg was founded just ten years ago. Many Swedish degree programmes in the arts, such as those in Stockholm's arts academies, are still organised into independent institutions. The fact that arts education has now been 'promoted' to the university level is part of a wider development. Programmes of training that were formerly called 'vocational' or 'professional' are now acquiring university status. This 'academic drift' (as it is sometimes pejoratively called) is a worldwide phenomenon. We have seen it earlier in technical schools, such as the 'industrial school' here in Gothenburg, which is now the Chalmers University of Technology.

One could say that the Gothenburg creative arts faculty has assumed a place at the margins of the university. Art departments like the Academy of Music and Drama or the Valand School of Fine Art now have one

foot in academia, but they are also still firmly rooted in the 'real' world outside – in the art world, the world of the concert halls, the theatres, the museums and galleries. The creative arts departments maintain ties with all sorts of cultural venues, both locally and further afield. The contacts are not just with the cultural establishment; they are also with innovative, experimental workplaces like Atalante here in Gothenburg.

Academia's relationship with the outside world, with society, is an issue of growing importance in the rest of the university community as well. It would now be a commonplace to say that society, alongside education and research, is one of the pillars on which the edifice of higher education is founded. In the research domain, this development manifests itself in the increasing involvement of outside stakeholders in setting research priorities and in funding the research. It is also seen in the phenomenon known as Mode 2 knowledge production – research that is more context-driven, problem-focused and transdisciplinary. I would say that the rest of the university might be able to learn something from our faculty, because right from the start we have emphasised the relevance that research has for the art world.

What kind of research are we talking about, then? In the lively international debate about the fundamental principles of research in the arts, our research is often described as 'practice-based research in the creative and

performing arts'. In the Nordic countries, and increasingly across the European continent, it is now often called 'artistic research' (konstnärlig forskning). It is research performed by artists which furthers the artistic development of the disciplines.

Now artistic research – operating on the borderlines of art and academia – unites the artistic and the academic in an enterprise that impacts on both of those domains. Art thereby transcends its former limits, aiming through the research to contribute to thinking and understanding. Academia, for its part, opens up its boundaries to the types of thinking and understanding that are interwoven with artistic practices. And this is what is central to research in the arts: the focus is on knowledge, understanding and insights that are embodied in artworks and are enacted in art practices. This knowledge – which is often tacit, unspoken knowledge – is articulated first and foremost through the making of art – not through theoretical reflection on art, but in and through art practice itself. This does not mean that no discursive justification, contextualisation or documentation is needed. It is definitely needed. But the distinctiveness of artistic research derives from the central place that artistic practice occupies within the research, not only as the subject and context of research, but also as the research method and the research outcome.

This focus on the practice of creating and performing as the locus of new knowledge and understanding is part of what has been called 'the practice turn in contemporary theory'. The new focus in the philosophy of science seeks to emancipate the 'context of discovery' and the 'context of application' from the 'context of justification'. After the practice turn, practices and things take the place of theories and mental states. Embodied, situated and enacted forms of cognition become more important to our understanding of research than world-mind representations and detached forms of rationality and objectivity. The practice turn is manifest in many fields, including the cognitive sciences and science and

technology studies. Sometimes called the 'performative turn', it is also apparent in humanities research – for instance in the field of cultural studies.

Artistic research is the domain par excellence where the epistemological and methodological consequences of the practice turn become manifest. Research in the arts is the ideal place to test the scope and fruitfulness of this contemporary research agenda. And here, too, the rest of academia might learn from us. The creative arts faculty may well export some of its insights and working methods to other parts of the university. At the very least, there are opportunities for collaboration between similar types of research programmes. The cooperation between our faculty and the Heritage Studies programme is one example of this in Gothenburg.

Yet at the same time, research is still a relatively new phenomenon in the field of the arts. The recent research evaluation project REDIO has shown that there is still much work to be done, both to strengthen the artistic research culture and infrastructure and to improve the focus and the substance of research. I hope to contribute to those efforts during my work in Gothenburg. My own research will focus on the theoretical rationale of research in the arts, and in particular on the exceptional status that works of art have as 'epistemic things' – to borrow a term from the microbiologist and historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Anna Lindal and Johan Öberg for inviting me to teach in Gothenburg. I hope I can live up to their expectations. My wife Barbara and my son Hans have to get along without me in Amsterdam for one week every month. That is not always easy. So I am happy that they can be here today, to give them an idea where I have been hanging out.

Thank you for your attention.