

Onderzoek in kunsten bloeit

Onderzoek in de kunsten is Europees een hot item geworden. Het raakt immers ook de hele gedachte achter 'Bologna' en de drie cycli van Ba/Ma/PhD in hbo en wo. AHK-lector Henk Borgdorff geeft in een gesprek aan hoe deze discussie zich actueel ontwikkelt. "Not everywhere in Europe do people feel comfortable with this, in some quarters - for instance in Germany - there is still strong opposition to 'Bologna'." *You emphasize that the debate on research in the arts has a political as well as a philosophical dimension. Could you briefly say how you differentiate these two? And which dimension do you think was mainly responsible for making research in the arts such a 'hot' and controversial topic?*

The current hype about 'artistic research' cannot be fully understood without taking into account the higher education reforms now occurring all over continental Europe. Consistent with the Bologna process and the establishment of three-cycle structure (bachelors, masters, doctorate), 'research' has been introduced into areas of higher education that used to focus mainly on professional training. 'Research' has now become a central task in former polytechnics, Fachhochschulen and universities of applied sciences, including (in most countries) institutes of higher arts education.

Not everywhere in Europe do people feel comfortable with this, in some quarters - for instance in Germany - there is still strong opposition to 'Bologna'. The issue is whether Bologna, and the introduction of research, is a dictate and threat coming from outside art and arts education, or whether it is a chance and a challenge for art and arts education. My assessment is that introducing artistic research enables a free space to be created within arts education for what might be called 'material thinking'.

This term immediately lands us in the midst of a philosophical controversy. Is it possible to theoretically legitimise artistic research – research in which art practice is central to the research process, and in which art practice is also partly the outcome of the research? It boils down to an epistemological question: what kinds of knowledge and understanding are embodied in artworks and creative processes, and how can these be explored and articulated in artistic research? There is a connection and affinity here with recent developments at the intersection of phenomenology, philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences: an interest in non-conceptual forms of knowledge embodied in skilful, expert actions and tacit understandings. There is still work to be done here.

From a more traditional academic viewpoint, the idea of research *in* the arts is controversial and counterintuitive. And since money and power (funding and licences) are involved, the debate about artistic research runs the risk of getting corrupted from the outset by those who mix the political with the theoretical in order to press their claims.

Now that the debate on research in the arts has been going on for 10, 15 years, in what issues do you feel a consensus has been reached? And where do you think questions have remained open, i.e. which are currently the most controversial issues, and which might become so in the near future?

My guess is that people now agree on the insight that artists in the early 21st century are what Donald Schön has called 'reflective practitioners', and that the programmes in institutions like art schools, conservatories and theatre schools ought to include reflection and theory, always in direct relation to the studio practice of the students. Introducing research at all levels of art schools is in line with that view. It all depends, of course, on what you understand by 'research'. Most research supervisors and theory teachers are trained in traditional ways: they are art historians, philosophers, musicologists et cetera; they are not familiar with reflection, theory and research imbued with practice. Here, too, some work has still to be done.

In my view, three issues are the most pressing in this context: the status and meaning of 'theory' in relation to studio practice; the relation between the discursive (verbal) and the artistic (demonstrable) in artistic research; and the issue of quality. Let me say a few words about each of these topics.

Elsewhere I have introduced four perspectives on the relationship between theory and practice in the arts: the

instrumentalist, the interpretative, the immanent and the performative perspectives. From the instrumentalist perspective, theory delivers, as it were, the tools and the knowledge of materials that are needed during the creative process or in the artistic product. This viewpoint, predominant in professional arts schools, understands theory primarily as a body of technical professional knowledge. Each art discipline thus has its own 'theory' – instrumental knowledge specific to the craft, needed to practise the art form in question. Examples are the theory of editing in film, and the theory of harmony and counterpoint in music. The interpretative perspective holds that theory provides reflection, knowledge and understanding *about* artistic practices and products. This view is associated with academic disciplines such as art history, theatre studies and musicology, which try to facilitate understanding of artistic practice from a certain 'retrospective' theoretical distance.

There is nothing wrong with the instrumentalist or the interpretative perspective, and both have their place in art school programmes. However, the most interesting perspectives in the present context are the immanent and the performative perspectives. These are based on an understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts. After all, there are no art practices that are not saturated with experiences, histories and beliefs; and conversely there is no theoretical access to, or interpretation of, art practice that does not partially shape that practice into what it is. Concepts and theories, experiences and understandings are interwoven with art practices and, partly for that reason, art is always reflexive. Research in the arts now seeks to articulate some of this embodied knowledge throughout the creative process and in the art object.

In all these considerations, we have to keep in mind that artistic research is not so much about 'theory' as about 'material thinking': the articulation of pre-reflexive knowledge and experience, embodied in art works and creative processes. It creates room for that which is unthought: the idea that all things could be different. It actually seeks to postpone 'theory', to re-route judgments, opinions and conclusions, and even to delay or suspend them indefinitely. Artistic research is the deliberate articulation of this unfinished material thinking.

One of the controversies in the debate on artistic research concerns the relationship between the artistic and the discursive, between the demonstrable and the verbal. Most people claim that some form of discursive element must be added to the research in order to make the research process and its results comprehensible and communicable to others. Others claim that presenting and disseminating the resulting art products and practices themselves is enough to communicate the research findings. The issue is linked to the question of whether the non-conceptual content of what is articulated in artistic research can be translated into words without loss. If not, the role of the verbal in research needs to be modest: documenting the research process afterwards, interpreting the results from an outside perspective, or emulating what is at issue in the research in a different medium, language. The central research issues and results can only be 'fully' articulated in art practice itself.

A pressing, but less widely debated, issue is the assessment of quality in artistic research. It is pressing because a sometimes understandable scepticism exists in both the art world and academia about the results of such research – either the art produced or the justification of the knowledge gained. More particularly, if the artistic outcomes of the research should fall short of what counts as worthwhile and meaningful in the art world, artistic research would lose its rationale; one would then be justified in asking what the point of the whole enterprise is. This scepticism is fuelled by experiences with artistic PhD research projects over the past 10 years or so, which have not always been convincing, to put it mildly. This threat to artistic research is even more critical than the scepticism from within academia, where one might expect some resistance anyway (as the emancipation process of other research domains in the history of science has shown us).

It is therefore important that the relevance of both the artistic research questions and issues and of the research outcomes be assessed first and foremost (albeit not solely) by disciplinary peers – that is, by artists. An intimate bond between artistic research, art criticism and the rest of the art world is a *sine qua non* for the success of the research paradigm.

One point that struck me in a definition of research in the arts you recently established was that you said the object of such research was 'art objects and creative processes'. Does that mean that research in the arts is necessarily concerned with art itself? For example, would you exclude social or political phenomena (that are not directly linked to the arts) as an object of such research?

Yes, research in the arts is necessarily concerned with art itself. But that does not rule out that other phenomena may be addressed as well. It depends a little on which art form we are talking about. Material research into specific characteristics

of the medium in ceramics, for instance, does not necessarily pretend to go beyond the confines of the discipline. Or practice-based research in and through the performance practice of early music might be limited to an informed interpretation of that music, without any further pretence of addressing social or political issues. On the other hand, much of the visual and performing art nowadays is engaged with other life domains, such as gender, globalisation, identity, environment or activism. More philosophical or psychological issues might be addressed in artistic research projects as well.

This type of research that combines the aesthetic project and the creative process with questions and topics from broader areas of life may be characterised as 'transdisciplinary' artistic research. The synthesis achieved in the artwork has something additional (or different) to offer, both conceptually and perceptually, than the outcome that would have resulted from a purely disciplinary approach. The difference between this and social or political science, critical theory or cultural analysis lies in the central place which art practice occupies in both the research process and the research outcome. This makes research in the arts distinct from that in other academic disciplines engaging with the same issues. In assessing the research, it is important to keep in mind that the specific contribution it makes to our knowledge, understanding, insight and experience lies in the ways in which these issues are articulated, expressed and communicated through art. Here lies a connection to what I have just said about quality in artistic research.

Concerning the particular topic of the upcoming Zurich conference, namely the difference between research in the arts vs. art as such, you have argued that research can be defined through its aim of 'broadening our knowledge and understanding through an original investigation'. However, doesn't every work of art attempt to reach such novelty and originality? And if so, would that mean that research in the arts simply is a means to increase the quality of art as such?

The issue here is not so much originality, but knowledge and understanding. I start from the generic definition of research as 'an original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding'. Art as such is not created with the aim of producing knowledge, but rather to enhance what could be called the artistic universe; this involves producing new images, narratives, sounds or experiences, and not primarily the generation of knowledge. Although knowledge may well emerge as a by-product of artistic projects, that is not usually intended from the beginning. While research intends to further the discipline by increasing the stock of knowledge, innovation in art is achieved in the dynamic interchange between artists, critics, the art market and the public, in which aesthetic evaluations are more important than rational justifications. Artistic research aims at both: at increasing our knowledge and understanding – and, one might add, our insights, comprehension, experience – as well as at enriching our world with new artefacts: compositions, choreographies, installations, images.

As to the second question: yes, artistic research might indeed enhance the quality of art as such, or at least have some bearing on the art, on the way it is produced, documented, communicated, disseminated and evaluated. I would not exclude the possibility that introducing artistic research might, in the near future, alter our understanding of what art is or could be.

One distinction I have not found in your writings is the one between the arts and applied arts. Do you think this difference is not relevant for the debate on research? Would you say that the challenges for research in the arts are comparable in, say, graphic design and fine arts?

There are differences, of course, just as differences exist between performing music (as a form of applied art) and writing a film script, between movement research in dance and research by design in architecture. In all these areas, the challenges are different, dictated by the state of the art in the field, by the material demands of the discipline and by what the artist feels to be urgent.

Within a particular discipline, too, the subjects and methods might vary from project to project. Some artists aim to research specific difficulties within their field through technological means, using research methods of natural science provenance. Others use tools and techniques stemming from social science research traditions, such as action research, participant observation and qualitative analysis. Still others draw on research practices from the humanities: critical interpretation, cultural analysis, historical investigations. In this respect, one could make a case for methodological pluralism: there does not seem to be a sole privileged and exclusive route to take when doing artistic research. By and large, though, the common factor in all such artistic endeavours is the deployment of art practice itself. Again, this methodological prerequisite makes artistic research different from other research traditions. And in that sense there is no essential distinction between applied arts and more autonomous art forms.

I understand from your writings that you are a strong supporter of research in the arts as a specific form of research, which is distinct from academic research and therefore should be pursued outside of academia. However, I'm not sure what your stance is on the question of PhD vs. PD ('professional doctorate'). In your opinion, should artists who successfully complete a research project be awarded a PhD or rather some sort of PD?

I'm afraid you have misunderstood my position here. Yes, I am a strong supporter of research in the arts and, yes, I think there are good reasons to maintain that artistic research differs in some respects from other academic research traditions. But with equal emphasis I argue that artistic research must have a place in academia, whether at universities or art schools (if there is still a distinction). That does not mean that no tension exists in the relationship between artistic research and academia. That tension could be a productive tension, however. I have written more about that elsewhere. The introduction of artistic research into academia might even modify our perception of what the university or the academy actually is.

As for the PhD versus PD discussion, with others I am in favour of the 'inclusive' model. That is, to avoid an unnecessary proliferation of titles (PhD, DMA, DFA and other doctoral degrees), I argue for one single degree for the third cycle in Europe: the PhD. That degree would no longer be an indication of having successfully completed a specific kind of research training programme, but a manifestation of a level of competence, irrespective of its domain and with due regard for the specific nature of the research objects, claims and methods that are prevalent in the domain in question. The entire spectrum from theoretical research to design research, from the natural sciences to classical studies, from dentistry, food quality management and civil engineering to theology, fiscal law and creative arts, could all be encompassed in that PhD degree.

I can imagine that some people would be satisfied for the time being, and for strategic reasons, if they were to gain the authority to award a professional doctorate, but in due time that would inevitably lead to undesirable inequality and to a reinstatement of the outdated divide between thinkers and doers. And although a professional doctorate might somehow seem right for researchers who are inclined to compare their research in the arts to endeavours like technical, applied research or design research, those who would stress the kinship with critical theory or cultural studies research would feel more at home with a PhD.

But let me say in closing that, apart from the access the PhD affords to certain professions or jobs, I consider the issue of doctoral degrees not so important. What is important is that talented artists – like their colleagues in chemistry, musicology or theology – should be facilitated by government to do state-funded artistic research for three years at the highest level in academia. That is why I always commend the research fellowship programmes in the arts that now operate in the UK and in Norway.