

Henk Borgdorff

The Conflict of the Faculties

On Theory, Practice and Research in Professional Arts Academies¹

This essay develops a line of reasoning containing three elements:

- (1) To understand what research in the arts involves, we must be fully aware of the tension and interaction between artistic practice and theoretical reflection which are characteristic of the creative and performing arts.
- (2) Contrary to widespread belief, the unique nature of knowledge in art (as compared to more conventional forms of scholarly knowledge) does not justify any unique methodology of research. ‘Art knowledge’, as embodied in the practices and products of art, is accessed by artistic research through both cognitive and artistic means.
- (3) Research *in* the arts is of equal value to research *on* the arts, and should therefore be treated equally at the institutional level.

1. Theory and practice

To understand what artistic research is, it is vital to explore the relationships between practice and theory in the arts. By outlining four ideal-typical (but not mutually exclusive) perspectives on the relation between artistic theory and practice, I will try to elucidate and refine the various viewpoints one can encounter in the world of higher arts education. I distinguish (a) the *instrumental* perspective, (b) the *interpretive* perspective, (c) the *performative* perspective and (d) the *immanent* perspective.

a) The *instrumental* perspective suggests that ‘theory’ serves the creative process or performance practice in the arts. This viewpoint, predominant in professional arts schools, understands theory first of all 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, the theory of harmony and counterpoint in music, or Stanislavski’s psycho-technique in theatre.

¹ This is a revised version of an article previously published in Dutch under the title ‘De strijd der faculteiten: over zin en onzin van onderzoek in de kunsten’ (The Conflict of the Faculties: on Sense and Nonsense in Art Research) in the arts, culture and policy journal *Boekman* (58/59, Spring 2004, p. 191-96).

Yet beyond the technical know-how and professional knowledge often referred to as theory, the instrumental perspective also embraces theory or theoretical research of an exploratory or applied nature. This might, for instance, involve research into a specific use of materials in visual arts, dramaturgic research into a theatrical text, or even the current fad of applying information technology in artistic practice. In all such cases, theory or theoretical research, just like the body of technical knowledge, is used *in the service of* artistic practice. Theory, as it were, furnishes the tools and material knowledge that are applied to the artistic process or product.

The primacy of this instrumental understanding of theory in higher professional art schools today also colours the discussions there on the relation between theory and practice. As a consequence, it influences beliefs about the relationship between art and science, as well as the ways that people perceive ‘research in the arts’. In my view, the instrumental perspective reinforces the notion that artistic research should consist primarily of applied research, and that any results of theory development should serve artistic practices and products. Often this view is pervaded by what I would call the technical-scientific paradigm – a frame of thought in which the laboratory, the conventions of the exact sciences, and the empirical cycle of discovery and justification form the benchmark for experimentation in the arts. I will return to this later.

To a considerable extent, the opacity and indeterminacy of the discourse on theory and practice in the arts, as well as on artistic research, derives from not knowing whether particular standpoints are drawing on the instrumental perspective and on the technical-scientific model, or not.

b) The *interpretive* perspective holds that theory provides reflection, knowledge and understanding with respect to artistic practices and products. Historically, this view is associated with academic disciplines like theatre studies and musicology, which try to facilitate understanding of artistic practice from a certain ‘retrospective’ theoretical distance.²

In this sense, ‘theory’ basically involves any form of reflection on artworks, or on the production or the reception of art, that rises above the level of the craft itself. Such reflection

² The model and inspiration for this perspective and attitude is the Greek *theoros*, from which our word *theory* derives. A *theoros* was an official envoy sent by Greek cities to observe and report back on public festivities and ceremonies. His participation in social and religious gatherings consisted of distancing himself from what was going on, absorbing it and mentally registering it, so that he could later report on it in a particular way. *Theoria* – which involves consideration and contemplation, a scientific, philosophical or more generally intellectual task – is equally a part of artistic theory as *technè*, the received or acquired talent to practise the artistic profession on the basis of technical know-how and professional knowledge.

has gained wide currency in the ‘grand theories of the humanities’ like hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, pragmatism and critical theory.

In contexts such as fine arts academies or artists’ workspaces, the central focus is on research *in* the arts, rather than *on* the arts. Such practice-based research does not stand in isolation, however, from theoretical reflections as referred to here. An understanding of artistic processes and products from a philosophical, ethical, historical, hermeneutic, reconstructive, deconstructive or generally contextualising point of view is (or should be) part of any artistic research. That is why so many people are now arguing the importance of cultural studies.

In educational practice at schools for the arts, the amount of emphasis put on ‘theory’ in the interpretive sense seems inversely proportional to the amount of time spent on ‘theory’ in the sense of professional training. Music theory as professional and instrumental expertise, for instance, dominates musical training at the Dutch conservatoires, which have never developed any tradition of theoretical reflection that extends beyond the level of the craft. In developing and planning practice-based Masters and PhD programmes in the arts (which I will return to below), one needs to devote far more attention to theory from the interpretive perspective, not least with a view to future academic accreditation.

c) Whereas the interpretive approach addresses, in a sense, the ‘world-revealing’ nature of art theory and research, the *performative* perspective focuses on their ‘world-constituting’ quality. I am suggesting here the metatheoretical insight that theory is not ‘innocent’, and that the instrumental perspective, as well as the theoretical distance with respect to art that I subsequently discussed, both foster an understanding of art which *itself* constitutes a fertile ground and starting point for new art practices and products.

By highlighting this metatheoretical perspective, I wish to emphasise more specifically that *theory itself is a practice*, and that theoretical approaches always partially shape the practices they focus on. Whether we are dealing with the theory of linear perspective, classical rhetoric, the twelve-tone technique, set theory in serial music, or insights into the cultural meanings and societal functions of art, the performative power of theory not only alters the way we look at art and the world, but it also makes these into what they are.

That art practitioners can be sceptical about theory – even to the point of developing a misplaced aversion to it – is perhaps not just because some theories seem far afield from the actual practice of art, but also because the performative power of theory *competes* with the performative power of art. On the other hand, thinkers about art who take unnecessarily

reticent or aloof attitudes towards artistic practice (especially that of the present day), and who develop their own codes to institutionally protect their ‘profession’ from artistic practice, may be exhibiting a similar perception. Both sides show a limited understanding of the interaction and reciprocal influence of theory and practice. Not only do thinkers and doers need each other, but in a certain sense thinkers are also doers, and vice versa.

d) The *immanent* perspective hence reminds us that there is also no such thing as ‘innocent’ practice. Practices are ‘sedimented spirit’ (Adorno). Action theory, phenomenology and philosophy of science have taught us that every practice, every human action, is infused with theory. Naive practice does not exist in this respect. All practices embody concepts, theories and understandings. Artistic practices do so in a literal sense too – no practices and no materials exist in the arts which are not saturated with experiences, histories or beliefs. There is no unsigned material, and that is one reason why art is always reflexive. There is no ‘natural law’ of art; its nature is second nature, preshaped by history, culture and theory. This gives the lie to that modernist view in the arts which once championed the purification of the medium.

An additional consideration that applies in the arts is that the knowledge and experience embodied in their media will always, to some degree, manage to evade the identifying and levelling gaze of rationality, thereby escaping discursive translation. Philosophical aesthetics has always acknowledged this, from Baumgarten to Adorno and Derrida. Nevertheless, the unique nature of knowledge in art must not tempt us to oppose art practice to art theory. Doing is also thinking, albeit an exceptional form of thinking.

Common to artistic practice and theoretical reflection is that both relate to the existing world. But art knowledge is always also embodied in form and matter. Creative processes, artistic practices and artworks all incorporate knowledge which simultaneously shapes and expands the horizons of the existing world – not discursively, but in auditory, visual and tactile ways, aesthetically, expressively and emotively. This ‘art knowledge’ is the subject, as well as partly an outcome, of artistic research as defined here.

2. Research in the arts

The frequent plea for convergence between artistic and academic research is a stark reflection of the equally lamented schism between those two spheres of activity. But in spite of the many recognised areas of contiguity and overlap, some observers continue to insist on the

(both theoretically and institutionally) sui generis nature of research in the arts in comparison to that in universities. This is justified as follows: Even though the institutional division between university and art education is an unnatural one, and does not do justice to a field of practice in which thinking and doing are interwoven, the link between artistic research and artistic practice at schools of the arts is a very direct one. Artistic practice is already ‘in house’, as it were – embodied by the artists that teach there and in the practical training on offer. Art education thus already maintains intimate links to the world of art practice – to orchestras, ensembles and theatre companies, to production companies and artists’ workspaces, to galleries and studios.

An additional argument is that the largely historical focus of the traditional academic humanities severely curtails any attention to the contemporary arts – and hence also to the creative process in the arts – whereas those very themes are central to both the training and the research in art schools. It is rightly pointed out that research and theory development in art academies and workspaces, by its close proximity to current artistic practice, makes a vital contribution to the discourse on art. It can also positively influence the nature and level of the public debate on the arts.

The sui generis nature of artistic research also fuels the international debate³ on whether to conform to the conventions of academic research, such as standards of methodology, verifiability, replicability and reporting. Opinions on such issues are underlain to a significant extent by beliefs and misunderstandings about the supposed uniqueness of artistic research methods. I would argue as follows: Even if one accepts that the knowledge embodied in art is of a different order than the more ‘conventional’ forms of academic or scientific knowledge, that does not mean the methods for accessing, retrieving and disseminating such knowledge are also different.

Both those who would welcome a convergence of artistic and academic research, and those who would oppose such a development, frequently show a limited (if not short-sighted)

³ See e.g. Alan Davies (ed.), *Enhancing Curricula: Exploring Effective Curriculum Practices in Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education*, CLTAD / London Institute 2002; Peter Dallow, ‘Outside “The True”?: Research and Complexity in Contemporary Arts Practice’, paper at the ELIA Comhar Conference, Dublin, October 2002; Ute Meta Bauer (ed.), *Education, Information, Entertainment: Aktuelle Ansätze künstlerischer Hochschulbildung*, Selene, Vienna 2001. For the debate in the UK, see also *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*, UKCGE 1997; *Research Training in the Creative & Performing Arts & Design*, UKCGE 2001; *Report of the Review of Arts and Humanities Research Funding*, 2002; *Practice as Research: Regulations, Protocols and Guidelines* (including: ‘Draft “Best Practice” Guidelines on Practice-as-Research PhDs’, and ‘Ten Steps to a “Perfect” Practice-as-Research PhD’), Palatine / LTSN 2003; and *The RAE and Research in the Creative & Performing Arts*, AHRB 2003.

awareness of the broad diversity of methods and techniques in systematic research. The limited scientific notion commonly held on both sides is that of the empirical-deductive approach. To make matters worse, both sides depict it in the form of an obsolete empiricist caricature. One of them would like any experimentation in the arts to be comparable to laboratory trials, while the other argues against submitting to the presumed constrictive frameworks of this scientific model. It is not really surprising that both sides have failed to take heed of recent trends in the theory of science, which have led to a ‘liberalisation’ and diversification of research approaches and to a critique of the ‘fact-value dichotomy’ (Putnam). Most of the disputants come from the world of the art schools and are not yet sufficiently informed in this area.

In raising the issue of the specific place and quality of artistic research, we should not seek confrontations with experimental research in the empirical-deductive exact sciences, nor with socially engaged empirical-descriptive research in the social sciences, and also not with the cultural-analytical, aesthetic or critical-hermeneutic interpretive approaches in the humanities. However, to adopt one-sidedly the ‘natural science’ model, the ‘social science’ model or the ‘humanities’ model, as some Dutch researchers have done, will produce a myopic understanding of what is really going on in the arts. The many divergent approaches to artistic products and processes each have their own *raison d’être* – and that is also reflected in the widely varied research mandates of various professors who have begun doing research in art schools in recent years.

Not only experimentation *in* practice, but also reflection *on* practice and interpretation *of* practice, may be part of research in the arts as defined here. The *sui generis* place and nature of artistic research is legitimised in part by the four perspectives on theory and practice in the arts discussed above, as well as by the institutional intertwinement of theory and practice in art schools. This special position is legitimised more specifically by the exceptional nature of ‘knowledge in art’, as well as by the exceptional ways in which research findings are articulated and communicated.

When the familiar frameworks of work analysis, production analysis and reception analysis are transposed from research *on* the arts into research *in* and *through* the arts, that reduces the distance to the object of research to such a degree that the work of art, the creative process and the signifying context themselves all become constituent parts of the research. In the medium itself – in the creative process, the artwork and its effects – perspectives are revealed and constituted, horizons are shifted, and new distinctions are articulated. The specific nature of artistic research can be pinpointed in the way that it *both cognitively and*

artistically articulates this revealment and constitution of the world, an articulation which is normative, affective and expressive all at once – and which also, as it were, sets our moral, psychological and social life into motion.

This demarcation of research in the arts – extending from abstract knowledge to instrumental capability – now brings me to three recommendations for conducting such research. I hope they will provide a stimulus to further discussion.

1. Artistic processes or products are essential components of and in artistic research. The choice of research methods is free and will vary with the research questions. The methodological diversity referred to above, however, is always complementary to the use made of the medium itself.
2. Research results consist partly of one or more artistic productions or presentations. The results communicate the artistic outcomes both cognitively and artistically. Far from being a mere illustration accompanying the research, the artistic outcomes thus form an indispensable component of it.
3. Critical reflection on the research process, and documentation of it in discursive form, is also part of the research results. The researcher is obligated to the research community to situate each study in a broader research context and to elucidate both the process and the outcome in accordance with customary standards.

3. The conflict of the faculties⁴

In 1798, Immanuel Kant published his pamphlet entitled *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (The Conflict of the Faculties), in which he urged an end to the subordination of the ‘lower faculties’ in the universities to the ‘higher faculties’. The lower faculties of Kant’s day and age, which studied the natural sciences, humanities and philosophy, were only entitled to award Masters degrees, whereas the higher faculties, which dealt with theology, law and medicine, could offer doctorates. The higher faculties were accountable to the church or the state, just as today the practice of religion, law and medicine still falls under the jurisdiction of clerical or secular authorities, which protect the professions and regulate professional practice.

⁴ I am indebted to Ken Friedman, “Design curriculum challenges for today’s university”, in: Alan Davies (ed.) *Enhancing Curricula: exploring effective curriculum practices in art, design and communication in Higher Education*. CLTAD 1st international conference 2002.

When the late 18th-century authorities tried to interfere with the content of Kant's philosophical treatise *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason), published in 1794, he resisted such interference, arguing vigorously for freedom of research in the lower faculties, which were oriented primarily to pure scientific research rather than to professional qualification. Kant's appeal helped to foster the intellectual climate that made possible the founding of the Friedrich Wilhelm (later Humboldt) University in Berlin in 1809. Besides lending institutional legitimacy to freedom of research, the university also granted the lower faculties the right to educate students for the doctorate.

The time has now arrived to make a similar appeal for the liberation of what we might provokingly call the 'lowest faculty' – that of art education and research. Just as the implicit hierarchy between fundamental and applied research was abandoned some time ago in the Dutch academic world – as reflected in the renaming of the Netherlands Organisation for Pure Scientific Research (ZWO) to Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) – it is now time to grant equal opportunities to artistic research as conducted in art education institutions. As a corollary, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) should receive back its old name, the Royal Institute of Sciences, Literature and Fine Arts, by which we would acknowledge that science and art make equally vital, if dissimilar, contributions to culture.

In concrete terms this would mean, first of all, opening the existing direct and indirect academic funding mechanisms to support research in the arts as defined here. In other words, structural funding for research in higher professional art schools – which is now only available in limited amounts from the Lectorenfonds, the Dutch funding mechanism for professorships at higher professional schools – needs to be broadened, and augmented to a similar level to that available to other institutions of higher education. In addition, professional art schools must be eligible to compete for NWO grants and other funding, to create research traineeships and to allocate staff to assessment committees. The 'lowest faculty' should further be enabled to set up properly funded 'practice-based' Masters and PhD programmes in the arts.

The faculties of the human mind are not subject to a value hierarchy. The institutional faculties, in which those human faculties are challenged and utilised, therefore have the right to equal treatment.

Henk Borgdorff is Professor (Lector) of Art Theory and Research at the Amsterdam School of the Arts.

(h.borgdorff@sb.ahk.nl)