

INTELLECTUAL BIRDHOUSE

Artistic Practice as Research

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Edited by

Florian Dombois, Ute Meta Bauer, Claudia Mareis, Michael Schwab

Koenig Books, London

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INTRODUCTION

“And what calamity dost thou worship?” He said, “O my lord, I worship a god made of dates kneaded with butter and honey, and at times I eat him and make me another.”
*Arabian Nights*¹

No, artistic research is neither a novel phenomenon nor one imbued with an established history. Its distinctness (and lack thereof) has been shaped by historical discourses on the interactions between science, humanities and the arts during the late 19th and 20th centuries. Artistic research has no one essential history that precedes its emergence as a term during the last two decades; rather, it is constituted of many often-conflicting histories that do not tell a coherent story. Depending on one’s point of view and the questions asked, ‘Artistic Research’ becomes legible as an integral part of various narratives—and its agents and outcomes similarly tell us not one but many different stories.

One narrative, for example, might investigate how artistic research is related to scientific research through shared projective practices such as sketching, modelling or designing. It might focus on the concrete material practices of experiencing and knowledge production, which another narrative may link to specific cultures as well as to the contexts of intermediation and application of knowledge. Yet another narrative might focus more on the common or different attitudes, self-perception and images of artists and scientists. Here, one might investigate how these attitudes are influenced and shaped by each other, and how they constantly generate ‘boundary objects’ and demarcation zones between the socio-cultural domains of art and science.

Outside of this relation to the sciences, additional narratives see artistic research as rooted in the history of art. As part of these, more recent conceptual practices might be mentioned, but high modernist artists, and even Renaissance artists, could also be credited as researchers. In fact, for some, all artists are researchers.

A further narrative focuses on the relationship between artistic research and technology, both in the sense that the latter develops and applies techniques for the production of artworks and in the sense of its roots in the Greek term *techné* (craftsmanship)—as an art that has in essence always been

1 642nd night, transl. by Richard F. Burton

epistemologically relevant. Herein may be found the root of another narrative that sees aesthetics as a discourse that in bracketing art and sense has pushed the site of knowledge into non-discursive realms without ever being able to distinguish properly between productive and reflective modes.

By far the most dominant set of narratives has developed around the transformation of art academies into research institutes, i.e. universities. Here, we witness a recent shift from notions such as ‘practice-based’ or ‘practice-led’ research to ‘artistic’ research, indicating that contemporary art refuses to be relegated to a mere basis for research. At the same time, the institutional transformations are so extreme that some narratives may doubt that much artistic freedom will be left once the appropriation of art academies is complete. Narratives put forward by institutional players may focus on quality assessment and impact factors, while their counterparts may concentrate on the exploitative dimensions of present knowledge economies. Aspects of these narratives are embedded in the various research programmes that have been created worldwide over the last few years, introducing extreme diversity into what people study and with whom, how they are assessed and the academic titles that await them in the end. Alternative art schools have recently become an important point of focus, which often either avoid or embrace the notion of research.

Almost independent of any of the above, and lacking cohesive narration, is the increasingly popular notion of research embedded within the work of artists, which in turn has been picked up by curators and gallery owners. In what some might describe as an act of appropriation, these artists and their representatives prefer to replace the still dominant term ‘practice’ with that of ‘research’ when describing their creative activity. Equipped with the luxury of ignoring demands for definitions, artists can transgress and thus challenge what any single narrative may project as research. This transgression in the name of art raises the question of whether to exclude art in order to be able to form a coherent concept of research, or to focus on art and to work out its real or fictitious epistemological standing. Since this endeavour can only fail when new narratives are being erected in order to structure what transgresses structure, approaching what artistic research might be clearly needs to adapt. In experiencing artistic research-practice, one may not arrive at an improved definition, but at an understanding of what is at stake when practice shifts into research.

While the subtitle of our book names its theme, with its main title—*Intellectual Birdhouse*—we want to emphasize that it is not so much a theme as an attitude that we seek. If, in the following pages, we do not offer a definition of artistic research, this is deliberate. We believe that artistic research

should not be seen as a discipline or a topic, nor is it really a method. For us, it is an attitude, a perspective, a manner. Thus we have collected the following voices, which in our opinion speak of this attitude. Listening to them hopefully gives a flavour or atmosphere of the direction in which artistic practices as research are heading: something independent from traditional disciplines, something that tries to overcome prejudices and questions itself, something that successfully interweaves the how and the what.

When planning this book, we initially attempted to design a compendium whose aim was both to explain and to survey the field that artistic research is entitled to occupy in the broad terrain of thought. But this quickly proved to be the wrong path. For in our eyes to claim that art is research opens access not to a field that can be delimited, but to the exploration of the surrounding space. Thus it is not our intention here to provide an overview of today’s artistic-research positions by drawing borders and limits, but rather to give room to a number of acteurs so that their attitudes towards artistic-research production can unfold. The fact that many contributions deal with the issue of borders is perhaps no coincidence. After reading this volume, it seems to us that artistic research is an activity for border-crossers who, when negotiating frontiers, carry out their research somewhat differently from those who expand knowledge by inflating known territories or by registering a new claim in the hope that they will strike gold while keeping others out.

Intellectual Birdhouse suggests that the notion of ‘artistic research’ expresses an attitude towards knowledge that can not only be found in the visual arts, but also in music, theatre, design, literature and even in other disciplines such as science and philosophy. In short, to us, ‘artistic research’ is independent of ‘discipline’ and might occur in all contexts once epistemic expectations have shifted. For in our view, it is both a matter of productive and reflective work on and with the material, and artistic research often involves testing forms of representation other than text as well as engaging in open negotiations with knowledge that may take an unexpected or even controversial course. Thus we hope that disciplinary thought barriers can be left behind in order to remain open to the specific procedures of the authors and to perceive and set into relation their respective nuances amidst the general clamour about this or that notion of research or art. The intellectual birdhouse that interests us is an open architecture that is set up outside, in the field or forest, and brings together many different living things. It is a place in which space is also given to local and material thought, resisting transparent translation. We are interested in deep knowledge, which cannot be skimmed off to be consumed without effort.

Not all of the chapters directly address ‘artistic research’; some do not even mention the term. In contrast to other publications that discuss

the notion head-on, we have tried to give a sense of a position between the present academic and artistic discourses. Just as in our own cases, where despite our different disciplines we share concerns, the authors in this book very often take a stance that is rooted in their own biographies, field of work and interests, from which the bigger picture can emerge. This ‘bigger picture’ traces a research community that is highly diverse, very specific and extremely engaged. Rather than attempting to define what artistic research might be, this book proposes how artistic research may be carried out. Rather than turning the screw yet again in order to force a definition on a certain type of practice that in the process silences that practice, we believe that the deficiency of definition is necessary if a foothold is to be kept in art. It would be absurd to assume that after a long period of modernity that has been very clear about the negativity of art through which it carved out its particular path of meaning, we should suddenly be able to inscribe positivity, and worse positivism, into its practices with the simple switch of a word. The attitude thus remains artistic.

At the same time, this book cannot be a work of art able to afford its own space; rather, it is just part of the emerging discourse on artistic research, which it tries to steer into a direction that is closer to contemporary artistic practices and the challenges they face. And making this a book about ‘artistic research’ is not a claim that those challenges can best be addressed in such a way; rather, the contributions in this book might equally be reconfigured to offer a critical perspective onto art, nowadays often missing, and the way it is often naively complicit in the commodity as well as the knowledge market. This is only possible, however, if the artistic attitude is maintained and art is exceeded.

This amounts to saying that there has to be contradiction at the heart of research in art, which explains why the institutionalisation of artistic research that is perpetuated in processes such as ‘Bologna’ must lose artistic interest if it succeeds. We very much welcome the resistance by which artists refuse to comply with simplistic models by stubbornly continuing to make art. We have witnessed over the last decades the fact that nothing will come out of the shift to research if the rules of knowledge continue to be dictated by a scientism left over from the 19th century. In fact, we would like to state that the waning of this model has created space for art to appear on the epistemological scene. The re-inscription of crude notions of knowledge when politically or institutionally required, such as when a degree has to be awarded or when funding has to be applied for, is nonsensical and does nothing but close down potential. The great transformation that a shift to research in art requires is not only on the side of the arts to make itself absorbed into what has been termed the ‘knowledge economy’; it is also on the side of exactly this economy that has to get seriously interested in what it produces

and what these products might mean to all of us who are affected. There is fictitiousness in the ‘knowledge economy’ as compared with the reality of art, and who would have thought that art would become the link to reality in a world that is losing its grip in the name of knowledge?

So how does one sufficiently limit the definition of artistic research so as to develop epistemic claims while not breaking its own modes of making and thinking? The answer is: we don’t know. We leave it up to the authors to calibrate their approach and to create relationships to practice as research. Having received these chapters, we saw a picture emerging that was not wholly unplanned but which nevertheless came as a surprise to us. First, when it comes to attitudes suitable to approach artistic practice as research, it is not a question of discipline but rather a question of sense, which tends to come when one’s finger is placed on the pulse of practice, whether artistic, scientific, historical, political or otherwise. Practitioners or not, researchers must get under the skin of practice when they write about artistic research. Second, the conflation of knowledge and identity is questioned. An artistic expansion of knowledge includes the differential creation of identity, which ceases to appear as a given and now seems to be made. If all preceding identities are jeopardized—that of the artist, the writer, the work etc.—prejudices become impossible. The suspension of prejudice in research is an ethical, political and artistic necessity, because for too long knowledge societies have been allowed to repeat their own prejudices about what they consider to be ‘rational’. It thus comes as no surprise that in the Intellectual Birdhouse, when attempts are being made towards finding a definition of the phenomenon of research, differential notions have more often than not replaced the customary negative notions that we know from Modernism. If it is possible to sufficiently radicalize these differential notions, we believe that the need to reduce artistic research to a novel identity will simply go away.

Intellectual Birdhouse advocates particular relationships between what has been called ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ (if such distinctions are still valid following the radical questioning by both artists and theorists of the delineation of ‘theory’ as well as ‘knowledge’ during the last decades). What remains in today’s discussion of artistic research are questions concerning the type of models, terms and concepts that might elucidate the processes and outcomes of epistemic-artistic practices and projects. This implies that we must remember theoretical debates full of traditions as well as the ongoing negotiations about and within artistic research. As a consequence, most if not all of the chapters here discuss—from very different perspectives—how borders need to be negotiated as part of the research processes. This includes questions to do with art and science (*Rheinberger, Rickli, Borgdorff, Schwab*), art and politics

(Holert, Slager, Steyerl, Maharaj & Varela, Raqs Media Collective, Green), art and history (Svenungsson, Flach, Haralambidou, Carter, Badger & Upitis) as well as art and philosophy (Hecker & Matos, Steinweg, Ettinger, Miles). Many of the authors see themselves as artists, but it is one of the chief claims of this book that a position is possible beyond the ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ labels. The contributions speak of this position and the difficulties in negotiating it in the context of existing discourses and intellectual frameworks.

The format of the book had to respond to these issues. It proved impossible to create a well-ordered textbook where each section covers particular sub-topics. Rather, using the image of the birdhouse, to which many authors responded directly, we created both an open architectural structure—birds fly in and out—as well as a site for a polyphony of voices. In fact, the book suggests a layering of visual and acoustic metaphors throughout, which is yet another case where distinctions break down and dichotomies are negotiated. At the same time, the book is far from being unstructured. A multitude of themes is developed, often in parallel and with shifting emphases, which we chose not to intersect by adding section headings that prepare and guide the reader. In the end, the Intellectual Birdhouse weaves together a multitude of concerns that crisscross each other as the book unfolds. The colourful polyphony of the birdhouse is neither exemplary nor ornamental, but an implicit critique of the kinds of approaches that one encounters in the sprawling mass of recent publications on artistic research. This is because we feel that in the process of translating artistic practices into something labelled ‘Artistic Research’, many publications *contract*—they breathe in and hold their breath. You may also say that they are trying to close down on their prey, which in the case of artistic research seems to be ever elusive.

We thank the authors for their contributions and committed text work. We also thank Institute Y of Bern University of the Arts, FSP Transdisziplinarität of Zurich University of the Arts, the Royal College of Art London and the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology for their direct and indirect financial support; the Institute for Contemporary Arts Research of the Zurich University of the Arts for their contribution towards the translation of the article by Hannes Rickli; Sebastian Viebahn and Burke Barrett for their translations and editing work; and Sarah Stocker and Wolfram Höll for checking the literary references and for their library research. And last, but not least, we thank Fabienne Meyer for designing the book.

The editors:

Florian Dombois, Ute Meta Bauer, Claudia Mareis, Michael Schwab