ART AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH

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PLACES, PROJECTS, UNIVERSITIES

FIRST, THE SECOND

THE SUPPLEMENTAL FUNCTION OF RESEARCH IN ART

Michael Schwab

Artistic research poses a problem in the context of art education. While during the BA and the MA students are taught to make good work and to establish a relevant practice, a PhD requires confronting this practice with the question of research. This confrontation is by and large perceived as artificial, because it breaks with the expectation that it is art that confronts, violating an established understanding of art—its primacy, its originality, and its autonomy. Stephen A.R. Scrivener, director of research at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, describes this violation as a historic "experiment" carried out on the living body of the art academy. In his opinion, the question that is pursued by this approach is: Can a wedge be driven into the art world that splits off a "professional research class"?[1] Naturally, since it is an on-going experiment, we do not know the outcome at this stage. However, the description of artistic research as an experiment on art appears to be highly fitting: it implies an interest in something that is not yet known about art. At the same time, understanding the introduction of artistic research as experiment allows a delay in finding a definition of "artistic research," since as long as it has not established itself, what it is may be in doubt.

FIRST …

From a practitioner's position, the description of artistic research as an experiment on art is also valid, although negotiating work as a research contribution does not come naturally to an artist; time and again I have seen artists struggle to communicate even very good work in the con-

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1   Stephen A.R. Scrivener, "Visual Art Practice Reconsidered: Transformational Practice and the Academy," in *The Art of Research: Research Practices in Art and Design,* ed. Maarit Mäkelä and Sara Routarinne (Helsinki, 2006), pp. 156–79: 164.

A

text of research. More often than not, this struggle is not the result of individual failures but a consequence inherent to the experiment. What artistic forms and practices can be found in response? What does the experiment actually mean artistically? Why should art not be sufficient in itself?

My first research presentation took place as part of the 2003 show *Treason* at Café Gallery Projects in London, which was the first time that the fine-art research students at the Royal College of Art were given a space to display their work collaboratively. Being new to research at the time, and thus not quite knowing what to contribute, I showed with *Face of a Woman I and II* (1999/2003), an older diptych that I had re-worked.[Fig. A] Re-contextualizing existing work as research is one of the basic strategies with which inexperienced students approach the practical problem of research. In my case, without being quite aware of it, I chose this work not because it was particularly good, but because I was not convinced of its quality. Research, I thought, would allow me to open up this problem, but I failed to do so on at least two counts. Firstly, the work and the way it was presented only displayed rather than opened up the problem. Secondly, the actual problem was not a problem of research, but of artistic practice; i.e., how good is this work and how can I make it better? As a result, I preemptively declared the work's failure. I realized that I could not make a case for research with this work; repackaging a work is not enough.

I was not the only student at the Royal College who had problems with placing artworks into the context of research, and thus the following year we decided to create a "research studio" and resulting

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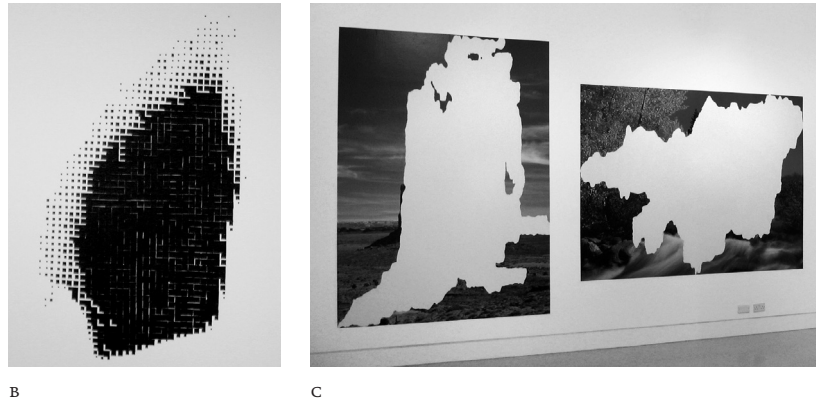
show, which we named *Re-hear-sals.* My contribution *Negative Light* (2004) was essentially worked out during the event.[Fig. B] As a consequence, it was more of a performative and social activity than a display of art. This important shift, however, was lost in the closing event to which the public was invited. From the public's position, the exhibition was a "messy" group show, comparable to an open studio, while the idea of research remained inaccessible. In fact, we may have talked about research during the setting up of the show, but the whole process was too organic and too social to produce a concrete proposition. Important to me, however, was the thought process, which I believed required representation.

What followed in 2005 was an exhibition that again focused on artworks, but this time in an attempt to represent modes of thinking visually. For example, the pieces that I contributed, *Grand Canyon* and *Wildwasser,* consisted of image layers and ripped-out shapes that trace and partially destroy the image.[Fig. C] The tracing, deformation, or transformation of the image form an interrelationship that can be classified as research, since it is a visual investigation resulting from conceptual operations that the work itself showed but did not explain. I am not sure if a lack of explanation matters when it comes to research, but what I perceived to be a problem with the work was that the aesthetics of the piece had "the last word"; that is, its success as artwork implied that research was no longer the issue. It was not, however, just this particular conclusion that troubled me; it was also the fact that in the work an aesthetic conclusion seemed necessary, as if without it the research and not just the work would have failed.

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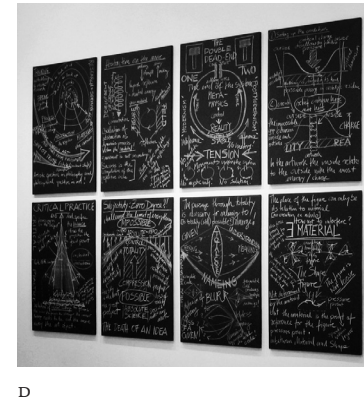
I see *Inventory,* which I showed as part of the 2006 exhibition *Too Dark in the Park,* as a transitional piece to my practice, because using words and diagrams it made explicit the horizon of knowledge with which it was concerned. In a number of panels, for example, thresholds, membranes, and gaps were negotiated using different diagrams to show the operators at work.[Fig. D] Although, in a similar way to the 2005 piece, the aesthetics of the work (the monochrome grounds as well as the panels hanging in a grid) remained unchallenged, *Inventory* used philosophical concepts and told a different story. If in *Grand Canyon* and *Wildwasser* the concepts appeared inserted into the visual practice, in *Inventory* visual practice was inserted into text. Without claiming that a text always needs to be written, one could say that the con-text of artistic research needs its own textual site. In a paper presented at the 2007 SAIT conference in Paris,[2] I went as far as to say that in artistic research, practice has to *become* writing, despite the fact that what this writing is cannot (yet) be defined. It must certainly be able to offer more than the use of language adopted in conceptual art, which if anything curtails visual practice.

My final Café Gallery participation was *Elastic Tree* (2007). The work consisted of a construction made of string and elastics that partially obscured the text behind it. Some of the strings were attached to the text, indicating that it was not so much a background for, but part

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2   "Artistic Research: The Differential Relationship between Art and Writing," presented at the conference "Writings on Art," organized by the Société des Amis d'Intertexte (SAIT) on March 16–17, 2007 in Paris.
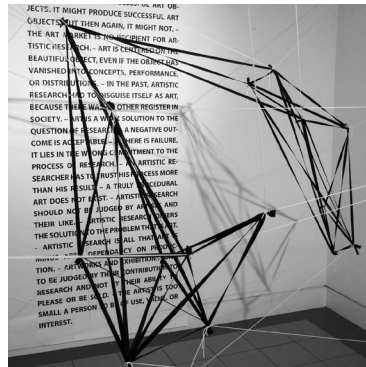
E

of the installation.[Fig. E] The text discussed the relationship between art and research in the style of a manifesto and declared a program of difference. The installation enacted that difference while fencing off the text by making it physically inaccessible. In this way, the concrete site, which was measured and reconstructed in string and elastics, and which in earlier pieces would have been the purpose of the investigation resulting in "a work," lost its importance. The true investigation became the question of how to present research *as research.*

… THE SECOND

The identification of a project *as research* is an integral component of that project; without such identification, any work could be labeled "research." Thus, for a practice to be seen as research in the UK, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) "expect[s] this practice to be accompanied by some form of documentation of the research process, as well as some form of textual analysis or explanation to support its position and to demonstrate critical reflection."[3] In short, without support, practice cannot be seen as research.

Scrivener's idea of creating a "professional research class" in the arts appears to fit this description. In his argument, he is careful to make clear that what he considers a "transformational" activity—i.e.,

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3   AHRC, *Research Funding Guide,* p. 18, http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/
FundingOpportunities/Documents/Research%20Funding%20Guide.pdf (accessed
7/10/2009).

art that does something like "research" in terms of breaking new ground—can already be seen as part of artistic practice. As he puts it, practice "has changed in the past, it is changing now and we can expect it to change in the future."[4] If, as argued by the AHRC, research can be demonstrated in a practice, this demonstration automatically qualifies that practice as "research," giving it the institutional seal of approval.

Assuming that an artist does something that may be counted as research, the problem for the artist is not on the side of investigation. Since the potential for research is part of art, the artist should, by making art, already have a practice that can *in principle* qualify as research. Seeing particular practices as the driving force behind changes in the arts or the visual culture in general, however, utilizes a modernist perspective on art that emphasizes avant-garde practices.[5] As a consequence, Scrivener's list of recognized transformational practitioners is highly selective: "Leonardo, Dürer, Rubens, Goya, Constable, Monet, and Picasso."[6] Such a perspective is questionable and has, in fact, been questioned through discussions of both the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde: it is *not* the question of transformation that is at stake, but that of progression. Thierry de Duve, for example, makes the case in his book *Kant after Duchamp* (1996) that Clement Greenberg has almost single-handedly "taken the pungent taste of negativity out of the avant-garde" and "wronged those [avant-garde] artists when he cut their works off from their words."[7] Focusing on this negativity, Thomas McEvilley goes so far as to say that cognition actually resides not in art, but in anti-art, a fact that had become apparent once the late Modernist "flood recede[d]."[8] Both positions can be used in support of the transformational but not the progressive part of Scrivener's argument.

For Scrivener, and equally for the AHRC, the primary discourse is art, while the secondary discourse identifies something in art *as research.* If the secondary discourse is successful and a practice can be acknowledged as research, there appears to be no problem. The secondary

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4   Scrivener, "Visual Art Practice Reconsidered" (see note 1), p. 164.
5   I am referring here in particular to Benjamin Buchloh's discussion
of the notion of a "Neo-Avantgarde" as introduced by Peter Bürger. See Benjamin H.
D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American
Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2000).
6   See ibid.
7   Thierry De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1996), p. 456.
8   Thomas McEvilley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism* (Kingston, 2005), p. 50.

discourse, however, can fail to identify research in a practice when (1) the practice could be but is not identified as research, or (2) when the practice makes it impossible to identify it as research. If transformation is as essential to artistic practice as Scrivener makes it, and is at the same time the force behind research, option two does not really matter because it would cover only those practices that do not have any transformational aspects; if these are lacking, it is likely that on a more fundamental level a case for *artistic* practice could not be made.

As long as we are dealing with what can be considered art, the identification of something as research is thus only dependent on the secondary discourse. What is perhaps strange in my particular case is the fact that the project focused on this identification *in practice;* that is, within the primary discourse, which was supposed to be a secondary affair in relation to research. Scrivener mentions what might be a necessary radical split between the two discourses, since they would be "undertaken for different purposes." Although a distinct possibility, he adds that "This scenario is perhaps unlikely, however, as most artists will probably not be prepared to sacrifice art making for research."[9]

This is an interesting comment because not only does it assume that research is different from "art making," but it would also have us believe that there could be no *artistic reasons* for research—that is, for art to *become* research. Would art necessarily have to be sacrificed if it approached an external perspective of understanding? I agree that it may be difficult to do this given that the primary and the secondary discourses are necessarily distinct, while art is confined to the former, but I would say that an *artistic* definition of "research" has not been considered. Because of this oversight, what Scrivener describes as institutional experiment may have a strong impact on practice—an implication missed when institutional questions are pointed up.

If artistic research is, as proposed, firmly based on a transformational theory of art, and if it is confronted with the question of "the development of knowledge and understanding," to use the official British definition of "research,"[10] can one not reason that an artistic response to that challenge might lie in the transformation of artistic practice

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9   Scrivener, "Visual Art Practice Reconsidered" (see note 1), p. 166.
10   I am referring here to the definition of research as used in the Research Assessment Exercise in Britain. See "Annex B: Definition of research for the RAE in RAE 2008," *Guidance on Submissions,* http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2005/03/rae0305.doc (accessed 7/10/2009).

into a practice of (visual) understanding? A statement like "identifying practice as research" thus combines two possible perspectives. The first —theoretical—perspective can be seen in the AHRC's definition that associates research with secondary discourses: "textual analysis" or "critical reflection" applied to art. The second—practical—perspective, however, can appear when the primary discourse of art strives to identify itself as research. Both possible perspectives accept the differential structure between art and research, while only the latter sees in it a challenge for art to transform.

This leaves us with the question of "progression." If a particular practice *becomes* research—that is, develops itself towards knowledge and understanding—can it not be said that it *at the same time* fulfills a transformational function for art? This is the way in which I understand Scrivener's argument, since a "professional research class" makes sense only if a discipline benefits from professionalizing research and progresses through it.[11] However, if practice is transformed while not making any statement about art but instead only about understanding, the discipline will not be affected. In the most extreme consequence, practice that has become research will in a sense have stopped being art.

THE SUPPLEMENTAL FUNCTION OF RESEARCH IN ART

Both the practical and the theoretical approaches to research define it as a supplementation of artistic practice. "Supplementation" is a notion central to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive philosophy and is used to describe a structure elementary to knowledge. Because of this structure, what is known is always antedated and seen as the origin of knowledge, while by the same token one could also see the origin of knowledge in knowledge itself as that which identifies what it knows as its origin. This fundamental difference, or *différance,* is at the productive heart of knowledge.[12] Knowledge here, however, does not only refer to academic knowledge, but to any form of knowledge—for example, when we know something as art. When we try to define "artistic research" in

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11   Such conflation between transformation and progression is, obviously, modernist in nature.
12   For Derrida's discussion of *différance,* see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London, 1997). I discuss the benefits and limits of deconstruction in artistic research in "The Power of Deconstruction in Artistic Research," *Working Papers in Art and Design* 5 (2008), http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/vol5/msfull.html (accessed 7/10/2009).

relation to art, it is not that we impose a supplementation that hitherto did not exist. The question of research, if anything, makes explicit how our knowledge about art is constructed, opening up the possibility of engaging precisely with this construction, which often goes unnoticed in art.

What I called the "theoretical perspective," which approaches knowledge through the secondary discourse, is, however, hampered in this respect because it has to refer to a practice as its origin, which makes it difficult to focus on itself as a practice that produces what it knows. In the UK, officially preferred notions of "studio-based" or "practice-led" research[13] demonstrate the belief that knowledge can be had *about* practice, but not *as part of* practice. The notion of "artistic research," on the other hand, may be used to indicate what I called the "practical perspective," which attempts a practice as knowledge.

Although difficult to do, it is crucial to keep the practical perspective that transforms practice through research distinct from the theoretical perspective, where practice feeds into knowledge (and which, following Scrivener, in return can feed back into practice), because what is called "practice" in each case is different. The notion of "tacit knowledge,"[14] for example, referring to cognitive processes in making, accepts making as the origin of knowing, a process of knowledge creation that can eventually be formalized. Although apparently practice-driven, in "tacit knowledge" practice's primacy is the consequence of a *known* relation. Benjamin Buchloh refers to this as "the interdependence between artistic and ideological formations in the practices of the postwar period,"[15] which supports a progressive, avant-gardist idea of art. In other words, what practice *is,* before it is theoretically identified as such, is beyond "tacit knowledge," which repeats the original supplementation inherent to knowledge.

The practical perspective on research puts forward the idea that what practice is in relation to knowledge is in fact not known and can be made known only through a transformation in which practice accepts the function of supplementation as already at play in its own identification. The shift of attention towards the function of supplementation, i.e., the shift toward the meaning of knowing, which can also be called the "methodology" of a research project, requires that practice should not even be known as art; it can only be research, that is, the working out of a practice that questions its own being. The experiment that we are witnessing, which Scrivener rightly identifies, is thus not just institutional but also artistic. For good reasons, the definition of "artistic research" needs to be delayed, because its becoming is part of the transformation of practice. As a consequence, artistic-research practice is as yet unidentified; what it is must be a continually delayed art and non-art at the same time.

FIGURES

A   Michael Schwab, *Face of a Woman I and II* (2003)
B   Michael Schwab, *Negative Light* (2004)
C   Michael Schwab, *Grand Canyon* (2005) and *Wildwasser* (2005)
D   Michael Schwab, *Inventory* (2006)
E   Michael Schwab, *Elastic Tree* (2007)

Installation views, Café Gallery Projects, London
Photography: © Michael Schwab

13   According to Michael A.R. Biggs, the notion of "practice-led research" is currently preferred by the AHRC. M.A.R. Biggs, "Modelling Experiential Knowledge for Research," in *The Art of Research: Research Practices in Art and Design* (Helsinki, 2006), pp. 180–204: 185.
14   For a discussion of "tacit knowledge," see Michael A.R. Biggs, "Learning from Experience: approaches to the experiential component of practice-based research," in *Konsten genomskådad? Forskning, Reflektion, Utveckling,* ed. Henrik Karlsson (Stockholm, 2004), pp. 6–21: 13.
15   Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde* (see note 5), p. xxvii.