

# Practice-based Research in the Arts

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<http://www.ahk.nl/ahk/lectoraten/therorie/arti/index.shtml>

based on an interview with

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## Research groups in the Netherlands

In 2002 research groups were introduced throughout the Dutch system of higher vocational training (*hogere beroepsonderwijs*, HBO), including arts education. There are now approximately 400 research groups, 30 of which are in the arts, focusing on widely diverse areas. In arts education, the head of each research group, the lector, is expected to do four things:

1  
Conduct research: there is a fixed budget for research that can be carried out by teaching staff and by individuals from outside the school. The lecturers are assigned a budget they can use to conduct research themselves and to fund research by the research group in the academy;

2  
Encourage innovation in education;

3  
Improve the relationship with the outside world (specifically professional practice), in our case the arts world;

4  
Professionalise teaching staff.

My research group Art Theory and Research – the first of its kind at the Amsterdam School of the Arts (*Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten*, AHK) – was formed in 2002, and more followed in subsequent years. The first three of the now five research groups at the AHK have a supra-faculty position. Ours is a large art school with six faculties, the largest of which

is the Conservatorium van Amsterdam; the others are the Theatre School, the Netherlands Film and Television Academy, the Academy of Architecture, the Reinwardt Academy (museumology) and the Academy of Visual Arts Training (*Academie voor Beeldende Vorming*, teacher training for visual arts and design). We do not have an autonomous visual arts department; in Amsterdam that role is filled by the Rietveld Academy, which is independent but with whom we frequently collaborate. The supra-faculty lecturers thus work for the organisation as a whole.

My research groups and I work closely with Marijke Hoogenboom and her research group Art Practice and Development. We collaborate as ARTI (Artistic Research, Theory & Innovation<sup>1</sup>), an interdisciplinary research group composed of teaching staff and research fellows (from outside the Academy) who all participate in research projects; some of these projects are truly practice-based, while others have a more classical approach. Several of the people involved are conducting doctoral research.

1  
<http://www.ahk.nl/ahk/lectoraten/theorie/arti/index.shtml>

### Research in the Arts

My own work in this context is meta research that examines the rationale behind what research in the arts is, or could be. To what extent, for example, does this form of research differ from scientific research? And how does it relate to the field, art and practice? Several of the articles I have written on the subject have been published online.<sup>2</sup> My other activities include teaching and involving myself in matters of policy development in the Netherlands and abroad, and I am a member of the HBO board's strategic working group on research.

2  
<http://www.ahk.nl/ahk/lectoraten/theorie/publicaties-theorie.shtml>

### Research as a trend

An examination of funding applications confirms that research is a hot topic at the moment. In the Netherlands we have several channels for research that are not education-related, the cultural funds, for example. This is something we observe on an international level too: it's a separate field financially stimulated by the government. In principle, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has separate channels of support for culture and education. Sometimes, however, the division is unclear, especially in the case of post-academic institutions such as the Jan van Eyck Academy and the Rijks-academie voor Beeldende Kunsten. In addition, there are production houses and workspaces that also conduct a certain amount of research, but the traditional home of research is academia: universities and, increasingly, the universities of applied sciences. It was only with the advent of the lecturers and research groups that the universities of applied sciences started becoming involved, but research now ranks high on the agenda. Abroad, academies are nowadays called 'universities of applied science', and research is one of their core activities, along with education.

In fact, it is a three-pronged approach, because the academies are required to focus on education, research and professional practice. In the Netherlands, the precise definition of what is and can be called 'research' is still being contested. A couple of years ago the Advisory Council on Science and Technology Policy in the Netherlands (*Adviesraad voor Wetenschap en Technologiebeleid in Nederland*) published a report *Design and Development. The function and place of research activities in universities of professional education*, a title that underscored their opposition to universities of applied sciences using the term 'research' to describe their activities. The report maintains that what we describe as research only amounts to design and development, and that true research is the exclusive preserve of traditional universities. The advisory council had to concede defeat on this point because research does have a high priority at the universities of applied sciences, including those involved in art education. We are, however, still lagging behind comparable institutions abroad.

### The dissolving boundary between universities of applied science and universities

Internationally, and especially in Europe, there is an increasing tendency for the distinction between universities of applied sciences and universities to become fuzzy. Sometimes these changes have been far reaching, as in the UK where former polytechnics are now regulated in the same way as universities. In practice there are still differences, but in principle it means that they have an equal claim to research funding through so-called primary and secondary financing.<sup>3</sup> This means that in the UK there are basic financial resources available for research staff members. Until recently, this was not the case in the Netherlands. If you were appointed to an academy, you were paid to teach, not conduct research. The arrival of the lecturers and the research groups has created a little room for manoeuvre. Just a little. Research is not included in the tasks assigned to those employed by the universities of applied sciences. The situation is different in the UK, where it is an integral part of the basic funding of the universities of applied sciences (the primary financing), putting them on level footing with the universities in this regard. And then there is secondary financing, which is guaranteed because of the funds in the UK, funds that are in fact research councils. These funds invite competing applications for the funding of research projects, including those within universities of applied sciences. Because of this equal treatment, universities of applied sciences can apply for basic research funding. In practice, however, most of the money goes to the universities because the universities of applied sciences have not yet been able to prove themselves. We see similar developments taking place in Scandinavia, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland and Germany, where there are now third-cycle post-Master, or doctoral, programmes.

3

'Primary financing' comes from the Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 'secondary financing' comes from independent public organisations such as the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (*Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*, NWO) and 'tertiary financing' is project-based and may come from private institutions or government departments.

In the Netherlands we still make a clear distinction between universities and universities of applied sciences. There is university education with research, and vocational training without or with little research. Government legislation still strongly regulates the separation between HBO institutions and universities. I don't know how long we can maintain this situation when it is changing elsewhere in Europe. Of course it is related to the Bologna Process, which seeks to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) from 2010, the underlying principle being that it would simplify the comparison of diplomas. The mobility of teaching staff and students plays an important role in this context. Another important contributing factor is the intended region-wide implementation of a parallel three-phase structure, comprising Bachelor, Master and doctorate degrees. This means that in time there will be a third phase in art education too, as already exists abroad. Last year, I organised a two-day conference on the third phase, in the Felix Meritis, Amsterdam.<sup>4</sup>

We are really trailing behind when it comes to infrastructure and facilities for practice-based research in higher arts education. Much has to be achieved before 2010.

### The old guard steps on the brakes

Various forces influence the situation in the Netherlands: the old guard still rules the roost at the art academies and are stepping on the brakes, while all manner of developments are taking place beneath the surface. A year ago, a national platform called the Platform for Doctoral Studies in the Arts (*Platform Promoties in de Kunsten*) was set up to tackle the issue of PhD studies in the arts and advocate a place for the third cycle and its financing within arts education. It consists of people from the arts education sector and the universities, especially the various art studies. Over the intervening year we have worked on constructing a framework for doctoral research which we presented to The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (*De Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*, NWO), which has in turn collaborated with the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (*Fonds Beeldende Kunsten Vormgeving en Bouwkunst*, BKVB) on starting a pilot PhD programme for two (visual) artists. Although such programmes exist elsewhere, this is a first for the Netherlands. It is a breakthrough, a small breakthrough certainly, but an important and positive development.

A key issue in practice-based research is the relationship between the artistic and the discursive aspects, between the practice (what can be shown, displayed, demonstrated, made) and the theoretical, verbal aspects. Some people regard the artistic component as sufficient (proof of ability/degree of competence) for the third-cycle level. Others think a written,

4

*De derde cyclus. Artistiek onderzoek na Bologna (The Third Cycle: Artistic Research After Bologna)*. International conference on the third cycle in higher education in the arts, Amsterdam, 10 and 11 October 2007. <http://www.ahk.nl/ahk/lectoraten/theorie/conferentie3/programma.shtml>

discursive component should be produced that can stand on its own: a dissertation. There are differences of opinion about the relationship between these two.

In summary, the encouraging developments taking place beneath the surface are: the breakthrough at the NWO, a national platform, consideration of a third cycle as an extension of the conference, and lecturers focusing on research. On the downside, there are many people in the Netherlands who happen to be in controlling positions who are applying the brakes and not prioritising research.

**'Artistic research is not one of the academy's core activities'**  
The Amsterdam School of the Arts recently organised a meeting involving the Board of Governors, all the faculty heads, and those responsible for policy within the school. It emerged from this meeting that artistic research is not among the academy's core activities. In other countries there is explosive growth in prioritising practice-based research in arts education, while people in the Netherlands are wary, concerned perhaps that we are getting ideas above our station. To quote one leading figure at the school, 'We are a technical school'. Some research is allowed, but it isn't given a prominent position. It is a fair point of course, because we are in the first place an institution for vocational education, and research isn't everybody's cup of tea.

#### **Collaboration on a European level**

There is an official, contractual collaborative relationship between the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, the Conservatory in The Hague, Leiden University, the Orpheus Institute in Ghent and Leuven University: DocArtes; they collaborate on a practice-based doctoral programme in the area of music for composers and musicians. This collaborative relationship has been extended to an alliance including the Royal College of Music in London, Oxford University and Royal Holloway, University of London. This robust collaboration, funded by the European Community, intends to develop a type of joint programme in the field of music education. In the Netherlands a doctoral studies course has also been initiated in the visual arts – it's the first in the Netherlands and is a collaboration between the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and the PhD Arts course at Leiden University.

There are good contacts with the Norwegian Research Fellowship Program, which provides artists with the opportunity to conduct full-time research. These are mid-career artists with substantial track records. This makes for a win-win situation in which the pressure to produce work on a day-to-day basis is removed, giving time to pause, reflect and develop, while providing benefits for the educational establishment through exchanges that occur during seminars.

### The characteristics of practice-based research

There is no universal methodology; you have to adapt to what the project needs. People wrestle with the term 'methodology', but I prefer to avoid it and talk about 'a method'; there are various options and the choice depends on the subject, the framing of the question and the goal. I'm very open-minded in this respect: anything goes as long as it deals with the subject in an effective way. In the case of practice-based research this means that:

1

The practice of making, creating (studio-based), is key to the method – so there's no sitting behind a desk; it's all about getting into the studio and getting your hands dirty. In this respect it is comparable to experimentation in the natural sciences: in a laboratory, as it were;

2

The results of the research must be practical and not just a written treatment of acquired knowledge; not just words. Something tangible has to be produced.

It's up to the artist which additional method is selected. Some cases might require a method derived from techniques applied in the humanities: interpretation, hermeneutics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, critical theory or cultural studies. Other cases might require a method more oriented towards techniques used in the social sciences, such as engaged ethnographic research or observational participation, or it could be research based on a more scientific or technological approach. Any of these could apply, depending on the subject.

What distinguishes this research from standard academic research is that it focuses on arts practice – as distinct from research *into* the arts. Of course there is an element of reflection, and the research will involve a certain amount of contemplation and writing, but the resulting written work will not always fit into the framework of a classical academic thesis. The most important factor is that it is appropriate for the practice: the practice is paramount. A great deal of the practice-based research conducted at the AHK is done on an individual basis, but there are also interfaculty and interdisciplinary collaborations.

### The future: money (f)or the Arts

We are expecting (at the time of interview) a letter from the Minister of Culture, Mr. Plasterk, in which he is expected to have stern words for the arts education sector in the Netherlands or announce planned cutbacks. So, this is not the moment to propose all manner of new initiatives to the ministry. The higher arts education sector (the SAC-KUO, the HBO board's advisory council for the arts education sector) has prepared a position paper, which includes responses to rumours and attacks by the press on art education ('Artists are

being trained for unemployment') and also mentions research.<sup>5</sup> In fact, research as a key task of the universities of applied sciences features fairly prominently in the position paper, contrasting the current situation in the Netherlands. The paper was originally going to contain a lot of far-reaching ideas but these were omitted for political reasons, for example, a proposal to follow the lead of Norway and the UK in setting up a research fellowship programme and a third cycle programme. And not everyone within arts education is behind it: 'Let the cobbler stick to his last; we are a technical school'. A certain amount of information about research is included in the position paper, but Dutch decision-making is based on the 'polder model', which means it takes a long time before decisions are made at national level. Although the Netherlands is a small country, it is just too big for us all to merge forces and speak with one voice.

There is a fine example of this happening in Austria. Last year, the six rectors of the art universities there collaborated on writing and publishing a leaflet entitled *Money (f)or the Arts*, which declares that 'fundamental artistic research, independent of market-focused art production, is the future of Austria as a cultural nation'. We need research in the arts. At the moment, it is inconceivable that statements like this could be made in the Netherlands. There are too few managers in control in this country who think in such a visionary way. The problem with a new development such as this on the European mainland is that it meets a great deal of resistance. It is understandable that there is a certain degree of scepticism. Some think it is passing phase; there is also some scepticism about these developments within the art world. But the fact is that arts practice became reflective by itself; we have to discard our naivety, even if only because of external pressures. Artists have to position themselves in society and contextualise their work. They have to account for their activities to funding bodies and the general public. But something is going on within art itself: it has become reflective – and not only conceptual art, because modern art has had a tendency to be reflective since the end of the 19th century. Reflection is inherent to art, and this generates a need for artists to have the space to pause and reflect on their work, not only produce. That space simply does not exist within the current framework of higher education, or at least not at the third-cycle level. The universities are unconvinced because they see their own funding shrinking. In the end it's always about power and money. These two factors can be said to corrupt existing developments, developments that have a certain intrinsic validity, necessity and urgency.