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Three Phases of Artistic Research

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About 30 years ago, new research approaches based on artistic practice began to emerge alongside traditional art research. A lively debate took place, especially at art schools that had gained university status, about various combinations of art and research in which art was not just a research object; this debate later grew in different directions. The vocabulary for these new approaches and their institutional analyses in international contexts was complex: *practice-based research*, *practice-led research*, *art-based research*, *artistic research*, *research creation*... In Finland, the term *taiteellinen tutkimus* (artistic research) has become an umbrella term that is used when the focus is not on a specific methodology. The choice of words in Finnish is at least partly based on the fact that the sense of the word 'practice' is difficult to render in Finnish.

For me, the term 'artistic research' (*taiteellinen tutkimus*) as a linguistic expression is problematic. It seems to ask for an 'academic' counterpart (in Finnish *tieteellinen tutkimus*, i.e., 'scientific research') and lead to a fruitless debate about art versus academia. This confrontation and debate, then, is likely to capture too much attention, dismissing the diversity of research in and through the arts and leaving it without the attention it deserves.

Examining the discussions about artistic research from a distance – from a type of bird's-eye view – we can perceive three phases. It is obvious that – for institutional, cultural and political reasons – these phases look different in different countries and for different art forms. My analysis describes the situation in visual arts from a Finnish perspective.

The first phase of artistic research took place around the turn of the millennium. The focus was on what artistic research is or what it could be. This question was discussed for over a decade from various angles, particularly in relation to doctoral studies and the universities as an institution. An early milestone in these discussions was the anthology *Taiteellinen tutkimus* (2001) edited by Satu Kiljunen and Mika Hannula (translated into English by Tomi Snellman as *Artistic Research*).

In this phase, artistic research was positioned on the interface between art and academia. The attempts to define artistic research were influenced, on one hand, by the pressures exerted by financing mechanisms and institutional frameworks and, on the other, a certain internal ambivalence. Both the art world and academia perceived artistic research as, at the same time, a threat and an opportunity.

This phase was well described by Dieter Lesage's article "Who Is Afraid of Artistic Research?" published in 2009 in the journal *Art & Research*, a central platform for discussion at the time.¹ According to Lesage, artists and researchers are afraid of artistic research for similar reasons, but their points of view are different. Both artists and researchers are concerned about the blurring of the boundary between art and research. Artists and arts advocates are concerned that art will become academic. At the same time, researchers and other members of academia are afraid that the ideal of scientific rationality will become obscured.

A notable fact is that a corresponding ambivalence of demarcation is at the core of the humanities' self-understanding. In his 1985 article "Ambivalence, the Humanities and the Study of Literature", Samuel Weber, a renowned literary scholar, highlights the fundamentally ambivalent role of the humanities as part of the university institution.² Defending its position as a serious academic endeavour, research under the title 'humanities' has always been forced to justify its special nature in relation to and in distinction from the natural sciences. According to Weber, the burning question in the field is how obtaining (general) knowledge of something particular is possible. In philosophical terms, it is a problem of a "reflective judgment" articulated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, a work to which Weber also refers. In short, when there are no preconceived laws or rules, one must proceed as the situation demands, feeling one's way. Artistic research shares this ambivalence with art research.

Approximately ten years ago, the debate about the identity, justification and institutionalisation of artistic research began to become saturated. It did not any longer feel relevant to reflect on what artistic research is or is not. The attention was directed towards questions of what artistic research does and what its potential in the multidisciplinary field of research is. This was the beginning of the second phase of artistic research. In addition to doctoral studies, the focus now shifted towards postdoctoral research and multidisciplinary collaborations. Methodological pluralism was recognised as an intrinsic element of the marriage of art and research. It became clear that artistic research exists in many forms and that it can be linked to various contexts as well as to research in other disciplines. The central themes in this phase were "expositionality", "boundary work" and the guidelines concerning the development of peer evaluation practices within artistic research. *Journal for Artistic Research (JAR)* internationally and *RUUKKU* in Finland developed into key publishing platforms. *Society for Artistic Research (SAR)* grew into the most extensive multidisciplinary network of artist-researchers in Europe.

¹ Lesage, Dieter 2009. "Who Is Afraid of Artistic Research? On measuring artistic research output." *Art & Research*, 2:2.

² Weber, Samuel 1985. "Ambivalence, the Humanities and the Study of Literature". *Diacritics* 15:2, 11–25.

Dieter Mersch's *Epistemologies of the Aesthetic* (2015) summarises the debates and main lines of argumentation in the second phase of artistic research in a helpful way.³ Mersch outlines four main lines.

A widely spread view is that art is research as such and that the only thing that is new in artistic research is its connection to the university institution. According to this interpretation line, art as artistic research is aesthetic-oriented basic research of a sort.

The second argumentation is that artistic research is, above all, a reformative art-pedagogical movement and an aesthetic enlightenment project established in western arts universities with the intention of reforming the arts and presenting implicit criticism of science.

According to the third line of argumentation, both science and art are creative activities, and their mutual difference is a historic variable. Artistic research promotes the convergence of sciences and arts by dismantling the hierarchies between the different processes of knowledge production and by joining in multidisciplinary collaborations.

The fourth argumentation is that artistic research seeks to introduce scientific principles to the arts and art making following the models set by academia. This alleged agenda is regarded either as a disastrous scenario of trying to raise art to the elevated ivory towers of academia and subduing the free line of aesthetic thought or as a welcome development towards disciplined and independent artistic research.

Even a brief summary of these four lines of argumentation reveals a dramatic difference in views on artistic research and what might be at stake in it.

Currently, we are moving on to the third phase of artistic research, with the earlier questions now being accompanied with questions about artistic research's societal connections. It no longer seems relevant to reflect upon the new discipline's identity on the interface between the art world and academia. The new key questions concern the research environment's sustainability: How should artistic research be organised to ensure its viability in the current circumstances, in a way that promotes sustainable development?

As I see it, the current third phase of artistic research is about the ecologisation of disciplinary thinking.⁴ The focus has shifted from the formation of a discipline, institutionalisation and multidisciplinary to situational specificities, functional connections and societal framing conditions – in Isabelle Stengers's terms, to the "ecology of practices".⁵ In this context, 'ecology' must be understood widely, in the spirit of Félix Guattari's "three ecologies", to include the natural environment,

3 Mersch, Dieter 2015. *Epistemologies of the Aesthetic*. Berlin and Zürich: diaphanes, 28–50. Cf. Elo, Mika 2021. "Isabelle Stengersin kosmopolitiikka ja taiteellisen tutkimuksen tiedolliset sitoumukset". *Tiede & edistys* 4/2021.

4 See e.g. Arlander, Annette & Elo, Mika 2017. "Ekologinen näkökulma taidetutkimukseen". *Tiede & edistys* 42:4. 335–346.

5 Elo, Mika 2021. "Isabelle Stengersin kosmopolitiikka ja taiteellisen tutkimuksen tiedolliset sitoumukset". *Tiede & edistys* 46:4.

social relations and mental structures. Regarding research and its organisation, the question is how tensions between specific and limited epistemic claims are approached and what kind of research frameworks are implemented and enabled.

This new phase has introduced new dividing lines which, consequently, have reactivated the old controversies. The question of the arts and artistic research's autonomy is raising its head again. Now the dividing line and tension run between basic research and applied research. Should artistic research be understood as independent basic research that – above all – serves the arts? Florian Dombois, for example, argues along these lines in his speech recently published on the JAR "network activities" page.⁶ Or should artistic research focus on promoting integrative societal processes as part of the educational and welfare services and creative economies? This line of thinking can be found, for example, within the framework of the ArtsEqual research project conducted at the University of the Arts Helsinki⁷.

Another force challenging the methods of artistic research in a revolutionising manner is the debate about decolonisation. This debate is shaking the entire western university institution and compelling artistic research, as well, to reconsider its premises. In their article "What Is Wrong with the Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research?"⁸ Florian Cramer and Nienke Terpsma, for example, challenge the institutions and advocates of artistic research to re-examine their research and education policies and the entire formation of the canon of artistic research. Is artistic research a western bubble about to burst or a genuinely pluralistic and transformative movement?

As I see it, the new polarisation seen in the discussions about artistic research is a vein of the cultural shift described by Erich Hörl as "general ecologisation"⁹ which adds weight to and politicises the complex questions of relations and functional connections.

In this context, I find the thematics of ambivalence highlighted by Samuel Weber in the 1980s a challenge that should not be ignored if the goal is to develop artistic research towards pluralism, responsibility and aptness. In his interpretation of Kant, Weber emphasises the partial and partisan nature of reflective judgment and the resulting sociability. In the current situation, it is worth noting that the problem of reflective judgment that combines art and its research is a fruitful basis for explicating why and how art research and artistic research produce social adhesion and cultural sustainability. In the ecologised research culture, it is sensible to underline "part" and "practical skills" (in Finnish *osaamista*, literally "part-

6 Dombois, Florian 2022. "On Our Way to the Venice Obligations. A Speech". <https://www.jar-online.net/de/auf-dem-wege-zu-den-venice-obligations-eine-rede> [accessed 21 August 2022]

7 Taideyliopisto (2021). "ArtsEqual". <https://www.uniarts.fi/projektit/artsequal/> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

8 Cramer, Florian & Terpsma, Nienke (2021). "What Is Wrong with the Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research?" <https://onlineopen.org/what-is-wrong-with-the-vienna-declaration-on-artistic-research> Accessed 14 July 2021

9 Hörl, Erich 2017. "Introduction to General Ecology. The Ecologization of Thinking". Translated by Nils F. Schott. In Erich Hörl and James Burton (eds.) *General Ecology. The New Ecological Paradigm*. London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic. 1–7.

ability") within artistic research – its partial and partisan nature – in terms of specificities, situational awareness and radical limitedness, instead of focusing on issues of general identity.

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