



Issue 5 (2016)

RESEARCH GESTURES

Voice

ruukku.journal.fi

Maturity in Research

TERE VADÉN

The special social status of scientific research is usually justified by referring to the self-correcting nature of science and to the power of experience. Science does not rely on authorities, does not let any claim go without rigorous scrutiny. Scientific research is open and critical. Consequently, people doing research have to demonstrate how their work embodies these ideals. After Thomas Kuhn famously shattered the picture of a unified and cumulative progress of science by pointing out, even in the strictest of natural sciences, the existence of non-cumulative revolutions¹, the term "scholarly" has gotten many new faces. So how do we show that we are good researchers?

Kuhn himself had an idea. He explained that natural sciences are more mature than social sciences because in the former the research community converges around one, shared paradigm.² Outside revolutions, natural science is driven on the basis of one paradigm, making cumulation possible. In comparison, social sciences and humanities are constantly in a state of revolution.

Being committed to a paradigm is not only necessary, but also rational. New knowledge can be produced only if one is willing to take the risk of assuming something that can be shown to be false. However, it is not at all clear that maturity is essentially agreement over a paradigm. One can see this by thinking about two views on democracy or, more generally, discourse. One view – let us call it Habermasian – sees the situation like this. First we have a lot of different views in disagreement. Then we discuss. If the discussions are of the right kind and are persistently pursued, as an end result there will be more agreement. Moreover, according to the view, this increase in agreement is good. It is, as Kuhn puts it, a sign of maturity. Another view – let us call it Nietzschean – draws different conclusions. First we have views in disagreement, and after a successful discussion or a good democratic process, we have even more and more sharply delineated differences of opinion, new views, new disagreement. And, in the Nietzschean view, this is good thing and a sign of maturity.

The Nietzschean perspective lives on the idea that no area of experience is in principle outside the critical reach of any other area of experience. Art can criticize science, science can criticize art, every-day experience can criticize philosophy, religion can criticize every-day experience and so on. This kind of experiential

¹ Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

² Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Road Since "Structure"*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

democracy recognizes that research has several goals and aims, sometimes even contradictory ones. To deny this one needs to constrain one's view of research into a caricature, a fiction. The worry over the unity of science is, in part, a worry over the special status and authority that science enjoys. This privileged status, in turn, is dependent on the ideals of openness and criticality. However, openness and criticality are not the same thing as unity or single paradigms.

So how do artistic researchers show that their research is open and critical? The repeatability at will and maximal control of environment required of natural science cannot characterize the research of or in the arts, not the least because the arts are, by definition, dealing with something unrepeatable and possibly unique. Phenomena of culture, such as artistic practices or works of art, cannot be purified of all of their specific properties: potentially all the specific shades of meaning are important. These phenomena cannot always be analysed into parts or repeated at will. In consequence, artistic research has to attain the ideals through other means

Experience includes areas that are not part of observation or perception. Experience is a continuum from an indistinct and flux-like torrent to the clear and precise structure of reasoning or controlled observation. The flux-like end of the continuum does not support a subject-object-distinction, an observer-observed distinction. This is a good sign for artistic research, since questions about the nature of the subject, the object, of observation, of individuation and of thinghood may be at the center of artistic practices, skills and research. Therefore it is good not to get tied into methodological views that include a decisive and absolute distinction between the (experiencing) subject and the (observed) object as a condition of inquiry. To make such an assumption would be uncritical.

The continuum of experience has to be approached in a way that is thoroughly hermeneutical: in artistic research experience looks on experience and thereby produces new experience. This is the basic gesture underlying something like experiential democracy. In research, experience looks on itself in a circular way, thereby also reorganising itself. In principle, no area of experience is left out of the loop. Not in principle, but in practice, while one has to choose some sort of starting point for research. Everything in experience may, in principle, be scrutinized and reorganised, but not at the same time, and not at will.

It might, at times, be more in line with the ideals of openness and criticality to have a multiplicity of rival paradigms rather than extended periods of research with only one paradigm. The rivalry between the Habermasian maturity-as-unity and Nietzschean maturity-as-divergence is, ultimately, moot. Sometimes what is needed is agreement and sometimes disagreement. It is a judgement call that cannot be formalised.

5.2.2016

RUUKKU – Studies in Artistic Research. Publisher: The University of The Arts Helsinki, Aalto University, University of Lapland. www.ruukku.journal.fi

This voice was originally published in a webpage format. This PDF, created in 2026, has a different layout and visuals.

Copyright and license: The author retains the copyright. The publisher uses the following license statement from issue 15 onwards: All contents of this journal, excluding individual logos, images, sound files, videos and other artistic outputs are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.