

In-between Research-based Practice and Practice-based Research

“Talkin’ Loud and Sayin’ Something”,
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In our conference platform we stressed that questions about quality and good practices within artistic research must always be decided within the specific forums that this form of research invents for itself in the course of its own development process.

The symposium intended to be such a forum. And in order to make the whole thing work, a significant and relevant link between artistic practice and reflection was established through the exhibit that framed the symposium.

On show, at the exhibition *Talkin’ Loud and Sayin’ Something! Four Perspectives of Artistic Research*, were five participating artists/researchers:

Sopawan Boonnimitra, Thai filmmaker, activist, and visual artist who defended an artistic dissertation at the Malmö Art Academy in 2006 with Sarat Maharai as her advisor.

Jacqueline Donachie, Scottish artist, with roots in both Glasgow School of Fine Art and IASPIS. Jacqueline has developed research practices in dialogue with natural science and genetics, in a project funded by The Wellcome Trust.

Heli Rekula, Finnish visual, lens-based artist. Doctoral candidate at the Academy of Visual Arts in Helsinki, her project is about difference, dialogue, and conflicts between artistic processes and works.

Annica Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg, visual artists whose work includes research and social engagement, with a focus on questions of gender and human rights. The three works *Resonance*, *State of Mind*, and *Code of Silence* will also form the basis of Annica Karlsson Rixon's dissertation at The Academy of Photography in Gothenburg.

A thorough presentation of their works, along with the artists' statements about artistic research, introductory essays, and interviews, can be found in the exhibition catalogue that also formed a foundation for the symposium, and is available on www.elia-artschools.org

Thus we wanted to give advanced artistic practice a marked, complex, and not pre-determined presence in the seminar discussion. To clarify further: The intention was to stress the fact that artistic research is "artistic" if it is devoted to the solution of *problems within the framework of an advanced artistic practice* - problems and questions that are also relevant to reflect on within a supplementary reflecting practice that can be named "the academy".

This approach is hardly controversial for those who are active within the field, and who have seen what kinds of approaches are productive and rich in perspectives, and who have realised that *there is no antagonistic opposition between artistic process, theoretical work, and examination/research*.

A lack of insight into the nuances of this interrelationship creates a real risk that artistic research will be adapted according to assumptions that tradition stakes out, and in danger to become both artistically meaningless and under-financed.

And surely the Dutch philosopher and art theoretician Henk Borgdorff had this apparent risk in mind during the symposium, when he aired his anxiety that artistic research, and consequently also art, risked being the losers in the encounter with "the process of making scientific":

There is a tendency within the artistic research debate to stress the art-science collaborations, and to go away from the focus on the creative process. I think we have to come back to focus on the creative process because that is finally the business we are in.

At the same time, it must be said that within our seminar culture in Gothenburg, as in contemporary art in general, there exists a discourse-rich, theory-based, text-based, socially and politically engaged art that refuses to live up to play the role of *a radically different stranger*.

The romantic position was also well represented in the symposium, and it was logically opposing some of the research work that was represented in the exhibition (and during the symposium). For example the Thai artist/researcher dr. Sopawan Boonnimitra (more of her work can be seen at www.leavetoremain.com), and her understanding that artistic research could be a form of *qualitative social research* – in a way that is reminiscent of Mika Hannula's argumentation in his book *Artistic research – methods, theories and practices* (Göteborg, 2005), was encountered by some as a real threat to art.

The results of the symposium/exhibition could be summarised in the following three points:

1. The importance of autonomous forums for critical judgment and evaluation

Without a doubt, the symposium functioned as a step on the way towards realising the idea of an “artistic seminar” as the central place for evaluating the results of artistic research. Small cornerstones were laid for the foundation of a critical culture - a culture that is not art criticism, and is not critical humanistic research of the traditional kind, but rather a new genre that we might call “evaluation of artistic research on its own terms”, that is, mainly based on the assumptions that those who are involved know what this type of research can reasonably be expected to yield. Making prominent artistic practices visible in dialogue with researching practices opened up a critical potential and the intensive listening, the feeling of absolute attention that characterized the meeting was intermittently replaced with sharp, critical comments.

Here a solution suggested itself to the problem of how to create a critical culture around artistic research, where the most specific, personal, individual, its I, can be protected, while the “persona” of artistic research can be critiqued, evaluated, and officially ventilated.

Maria Hirvi-Ijäs, art historian and the new director of the Academy of Fine Art in Helsinki, saw a continuity here between the art academy culture that has existed in Europe since the 16th century and the practices of artistic research that are now emerging in Helsinki, for example.

In Gothenburg, we see how instruments of critical evaluation are being developed within the culture of studio conversations at the Academy of Photography and Valand, and especially within the “culture of textual conversation” that has grown strong within the field of Literary Composition, Poetry and Prose and that will soon be presented in a large project, supported by the Swedish Research Council, under the direction of Staffan Söderblom and Gunnar D. Hansson.

The question arises, what happens when these closed forums for conversation and critique of art, this kind of elitist conversation spaces, also become public forums – research is a public affair.

Is the quality of the research, which, to use Jan Kaila’s words, is focused on a narrow group of specialists, possible to maintain, or will it give in to the imperatives and possibilities of the rhetorical and discursive strategies that characterise traditional academic debate?

The question is an open one, but it is important and possible to solve. We believe that we took a small step toward its solution in Gothenburg.

2. Artistic research provides a new view of history

A meaningful consensus appeared during the conference about the fact that *today’s artistic research reveals research practices and artistic processes of the past*. It is therefore time to re-write the history of the arts!

Mark Nash pointed out in his keynote that it is now very important to write a new art history:

We need a history of research-based artist practice, from Renaissance Leonardo to the present day, in which the centrality of this notion is argued for.

And he made a comparison – in a way that surprised me, at least – to Julia Kristeva’s and Michail Bakhtin’s exposing of an underlying, carnivalesque tradition in literature as a contrast to its dominant narratives. Along with the establishment of an “artistic seminar”, such a “history of research of the arts” might perhaps give artistic research more than the textbooks and collections of rules that are currently created to control and govern its activities, whose productive core we have so far only scratched the surface of?

3. The place of artistic research: In-between research-based artistic practice and practice-based research

The polarity between a “research-based artistic practice” and a “practice-based research” as a base for the discussion about artistic research seemed sustainable and productive. The artistic research projects that the exhibition built on were situated in the energy field between these poles. Concerning this there was a consensus.

This implies – once again inspired by Nash’s keynote – that all contemporary art builds on a process of knowledge gathering, reflection, and production - that is exactly what makes it contemporary (and this perspective, by the way, is also the point of departure for the 2009 Venice Biennial (*“Fare mondi / Making Worlds”*)).

This “research” may be science-based (as in Jacqueline Donachie’s case – her work with genetics), theory-based (or roughly expressed, are located within a groove of legitimate theoreticians that might be called Butler-Jameson-Deleuze-Foucault-Derrida-Rancière, etc.), relational, or “research-led” in general; or be an examination of “existence” or “reality”.

“Practice-based research”, on the other hand, is a concept which expresses academia’s way to understand, manage and process practice.

At one pole, contemporary artistic practice. At the other, academic reflexivity. At one pole, expansion, challenges, and confrontation. At the other, the defence and deepening of an artistic identity. These two, according to Nash, should never be separated, for then both research and art will become meaningless; but neither should they be forced to coincide with each other - for then one closes off the possibility of an encounter with people who have other competencies than those of the artist. One should, instead, imagine a third space that includes the two others, that is linked together in a temporal sequence, perhaps the space of a life, of an artistic career.