

# The Delight of Giant-Slayers or Can Artists Commit Their Lives to Paper?

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## Memories of Gothenburg

*Half of the people can be part right all of the time,  
Some of the people can be all right part of the time.  
But all the people can't be all right all the time  
I think Abraham Lincoln said that.  
"I'll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours,"  
I said that.*

*Bob Dylan<sup>1</sup>*

*That which is seen as an end in itself will almost always  
become a means to yet another end.  
Such is the fate of research; such is the desire of art.*

*Raimi Gbadamosi*

Against an opening backdrop of passionate calls for inclusion and social responsibility firmly rooted in a self-satisfied hierarchy which places western authority at the pinnacle of progress whilst locating Africa and blackness as a constant wretched supplicant, and privileged students are set projects to seek

1. Dylan, Bob. 'Talkin' World War III Blues' on *The Freewheelin'* Bob Dylan. Columbia Records. 1963.

and find an enslaved person, I find myself engaging with the nutty questions of artists researching, artistic research, artists' writing, artists producing art, and artists querying the validation of practice and practitioners.

Taking its starting point from the curated exhibition *Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Something - Four Perspectives of Artistic Research*, the reality of research as a basis for art practice, and a validation of that practice formed the focus of four intriguing presentation and discussion panels.

Criticised as falling into an institutionalised, Cognitive Capitalistic endeavour, submitting itself to the demands of the Bologna Proclamation, Art-based research was initially treated as a suspect commodity. This was in the face of realising that formalised discussion *has* proven itself incapable of addressing the realities of Artistic Research.

Artistic research therefore needs renewal as a matter of course, where the artist is the lightning-rod between the resultant art object and the object or subjects of Artistic Research.

The vexing question of the material distinction between 'art' and 'art research' continuously reappeared, perhaps because there is an uncomfortable understanding that the institutionalisation of yet another form of art practice will stifle its desire and ability for innovation and development.

The almost automatic production of content generated by research, initiates queries of the very necessity of the artist at all in the creation of the eventual artwork. One can only conclude that the artist is not one singular manifestation of unique ability, but many.

#### **Question: Artistic practice or Research practice – which is desired?**

The focus on art, rather than on theory or theories of artistic production certainly helped to forge an opinion or understanding of what the emerging problems associated with artistic research were. But this in turn led to the perplexing contradictions on what the role of research is within the arts: Is the research being carried out for itself or for the unspoken desire for the acquisition of a doctoral degree and recognition within the Academy.

Personally, the focus on the sociological and anthropological as emerging valid methods and subjects of research, not to mention the voyeuristic reliance on the representation of the physical, racial, social, sexual, and economic other as source material (even when this is an extension of the 'self' as a form of self-exoticism) do leave questions on the acceptability of form, which veers towards the tame inevitability of video and photography in the framing of 'truth' so carefully collected.

The subsequent abdication of any responsibility to make 'art' out of the gathered material seems to be one of the reasons there are difficulties in defining and accepting 'artistic research' Even if one is sympathetic to the attempts made by artists to not make artifice out of life. And yet this is what art does, it fixes the mental moment (of varying lengths and intensity), and seeks way to re-present them.

#### **Now comes a series of Notes of Contradictions:**

1. The artist is presently being treated as an anomalous specimen where research is concerned. The understanding is that artists make things, other people produce the material artists rely on.

The gathering and categorisation of original material is not deemed the artist's forte.

2. There is confusion amongst practitioners about the role of what is deemed 'artistic research' as a new departure within the visual arts. If artists research as a matter of course, what is it these artists set aside as carrying out 'artistic research' are doing that is so special?

3. The reification of the artists' amateur status is overly applauded and invoked as markers of 'authenticity' and lack of an agenda, beyond the gathering and display of material. Editing and selection is treated as benign accidents, leaving the 'pure' substance in full view of the reader. All of this is in place, conveniently forgetting that the artist is still performing their professional role of artist. This duality simultaneously reifies and diminishes the artist and their contribution. One is left with a backhanded compliment that leaves a sour taste in the mouth.

4. Artists are being lauded as the new humanists, being able to pose questions the less-than-human 'professional' inquirers seem no longer capable of.

But back to the beginning and the grand vision of academic inquiry: When these wretched slaves are found, what are the students to do?

That was the response to the ELIA conference, since then, there have been more thoughts to dwell on.

## Possibilities of autonomy

Artistic Research needs to be truly autonomous of institutional agendas to enrich the Academy, otherwise research will simply become an institutional point gathering exercise, with projects perceived capable of bringing in the highest number of immediate grading or assessment points receiving enthusiastic support. This will also over-determine the type of researcher allowed in; candidates with a track record of exhibiting, attracting publicity, and securing funding will be the first in, while less appealing innovative research may not be supported by the institution because its immediate point gathering applications may not be apparent.

This is not saying that successful researchers should not be encouraged to engage with the Academy, it is just that the Academy is there to provide freedom for and to research, not endorse extant activity in an attempt to second-guess success. It is understandable that institutions need formulae to address who will, and who will not be allowed into the Academy to carry out research, but formulae can not address the realities of Artistic Research.

## Arguments

Research<sup>2</sup>, as an activity, is an undeniable and recognised fundamental element of art production. As such, researching is simply part of what an artist does. What quality of research does an artist need to engage with to in order to qualify as an Artistic Researcher worthy of reward by position or research degree has become the vexing question. Is the continuation of research needed by an artist

2. Research is a process of investigating a subject from different points of view. Research is attached to an idea of 'truth'. As complicated as this may seem, there is an implicit understanding that what is discovered can be used by others as the basis for their own research, allowing them to assume that what they are relying on is thorough and 'correct' as far as is possible. Research allows for the formation of a relationship between a subject and the person through the level of interaction engendered in reading up on it, reflecting, playing with the ideas, living the experiences, then latching on to specific areas of interest and following up on them. Research is a way of educating the self and others

to enrich their practice in the first place deserving of accolade beyond its mere existence? Is there a morality to research that demands it be done for the benefit of others if it is to be rewarded? Is the academy finding a way of revalidating art practice beyond the marketplace, where artists are supposed to hone their craft? How does the artist express their research beyond the art object? How is knowledge transferred when the unique art object is not continuously available for scrutiny? How can an artist enter into a truly reflective space when they are looking at themselves? Is artistic navel-gazing the logical, if absurd, onanistic endpoint of a desire to call whatever an artist does, research?<sup>3</sup>

## Thoughts

The cult of the individual, or the 'star system' endemic of the art system at large, has made the presence of research almost invisible for most people. It appears preferable that artworks are simply brought into being through the 'genius' of the maker. The idea that considerable amounts of research (relying on the knowledge of others) may have gone into the production of an artwork seems to diminish the impact of the artwork, and reduce the inspiration of its maker. Consequently research has been played down, and brilliance played up. The domination of 'mystical creativity', and 'personal experience' as the bedrock of artistic cultural production has been one of the reasons why research, as an activity within the arts may be having a hard time being recognised as a valid activity by other branches of the academic tree. The art world wants all things its way. It wants to say that research need not, or can not, be reproducible or questionable by any authority other than the artist carrying out the research (In essence the artist is allowed to validate their own activity and retain the aura accruing to unique objects.), while at the same time it wants the academy to recognise the research being done using measurements wholly separate from the artist as maker, in order to benefit from the gravitas only the academy can give research activity. (If the exact same research were being done through commercial gallery funding, no one would expect accolades beyond sales and press for the artist involved.)

## Creation

Research requires negotiation as a matter of course as there seems to be a desire to create a 'Artistic Research' movement within art practice. Creating movements are difficult in our post Post-Modern epoch. The death of the adamant manifesto, and recognition of diverse voices makes it hard to convincingly propose "Art-Researchism" for instance, with revolutionary demands of research for all, the abandonment of intuition, and the reification of the record. This will herald the moment in history where funding bodies are seen as the true artistic collaborator, and the academy takes centre stage for being more than a repository of knowledge, but the place where art is created for society at large. The Academy will not be the place to disagree with and depart from, but the ultimate desired destination of cultural production, where the garland awaits for achievements reached within cultural reach of the Academy itself.

Of course, there is artistic discourse, of which the Academy is a very important part, but being an important part is not the same as being the point from which all things radiate. Consequently the Academy may find itself in an awkward position of being the place artists return to, rather than the place they

3. Research made manifest:  
The fact that artists carry out research for the simple reason of making artworks helps to qualify what the research is all about. Artists, like any other professional, will carry out research for their own pleasure, and like other professionals will accept this as a norm. Questions therefore emerge as to how research carried out by artists can be made manifest if not through produced artworks? If the result is any type of written text, what is the research's position in this context?

emanate from. It may have the impact of removing the ability of the Academy to function as safe haven for ideas and experimentation as it finds itself in competition with the market it simultaneously supplies.

## The difference

What is the difference between an artist researching and artistic research? The crux of this dilemma is the impossibility of defining what each of the significant parts of the question is. Any attempt at defining 'art' will soon ail, so will attempting a definition of 'artistic research'. And yet one thing is appearing, artist researching and artistic research are not one and the same. The former is what artists 'do' to 'make', the latter is what artists 'do' and show'. Now one can do research, but making it will lead to some unanswerable questions. Similarly 'doing' art as activity is not impossible, but the act is still construed as making. Thankfully the impossibility of making one into the other means that a distinction will remain in place, and this separation of means and end will remain significant. Any attempt to collapse the two categories will lead to an uncomfortable alliance between that which informs a work and the work itself. I suppose the emerging problem is that material gathered to make 'work' has become the material shown as 'work'. Perhaps some editing takes place, but the research has become the product. The conundrum facing an earlier generation articulated by Marshall McLuhan of the medium taking over the message has reared its head yet again.

Art and Artistic research are best seen as two separate categories that meet through and within the artist. Artistic Research may exist as an archive, and art may exist as commodity, but they can and still only relate to each other through the active agency of the artist. There is a danger in seeing the possibility of either aspect without the involvement of the artist. Paradoxically it is the Academy<sup>4</sup> and those artists seeking validation through the Academy who are making arguments for the 'death of the artist', by asserting that Artistic Research can exist in its own right. Emerging as a valid riposte is the contention that anyone at all can carry out artistic research, as long as they are carrying out research. The desire to retain control over the territory of Artistic Research, separate from research as activity available for engagement and completion by anyone suitably intellectually and financially equipped, with the 'right' motivation, becomes a contradiction in terms.

So what is the use of the artist in Artistic Research? Perhaps all that is needed, as mentioned, is a good researcher, versed in the codes of academic research methodologies, a researcher able to explain why they have done what they have done. And why artistic research in the first place, if research is research is research, whether done by a chemical engineer or psychiatric doctor? And to further complicate matters, if Research Artists choose to carry out research almost always within some other discipline (perhaps to separate the activity as research rather than continuation of their own artistic musings), why should anyone from within the invaded discipline take the artistic intervention seriously, when the artists' next research foray may very likely be in some other discipline altogether?

The intention for research by the artist is art, not information: If the intention were simply informative, the process becomes journalistic. There are parts to Artistic Research: It can be seen as comprising two strands: Artistic Practice

4. Safety in the Cloisters: The Academy needs to present the possibility of research safe from marketplace pressures. The paradox is that Research is time sensitive, the sooner Research makes its way to the market the better. Coinciding with potential obsolescence is the need to extract immediate value from Academy-based Research. As few intellectual proprietary commodities are capable of refreshed marketability, managing Research within the Arts takes on new importance.

and Research Practice. Both merge together to form something uniquely artistic. Where Artistic Research is located is difficult to determine; whether in the artwork (which ultimately emerges) or the mass of material gathered in search of information (raw material for knowledge) is one still not answerable. As focus shifts to Artistic Research, striving to prove that art activity is valid as research, and deserves to be taken seriously (meaning that artistic research should be seen as any other kind of research), little can be made of the creative process (this being the unique quality of the artist carrying out any kind of research in the first place).

## Statement of intent

The overarching desire of Europe to create itself as the birthplace of the University underpins discomfords the present Academy suffers. The three main documents which form the fundamentals of the European impetus: Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum of 18 September 1988, The Sorbonne Declaration of May 25 1998<sup>5</sup>, and The Bologna declaration of June 19 1999<sup>6</sup> have all striven to express the desire for Europe to be seen as the basis of World knowledge. While worthy of attainment, the treatment of Higher Education as a competitive element, stressing governmental controls over academic idiosyncrasies, means inevitable demands for award standardisation will create a loss in unique research capability. Fears of the East, and dismissal of the South point to an academic extension of Fortress Europe, but that is another story altogether.

## Artist as specimen

In a situation where the artist is presented as an abnormality for being involved in 'research', scrutiny is needed. The artist is rendered suspect for having the wherewithal to step outside the mythical studio and engage with actualities. Foray into the 'real world', a hallmark of artistic research, keeps the 'researching' artist under the inquiring gaze of 'non-researching' artists and non-artists alike.

Demands made on Artistic Research rely on notions of truth, that what is seen is truth, or if it is a falsehood, the falsehood has to be also true. Markers are necessary to make these truths apparent, so that art can retain similar authority for the viewer, akin to the authenticity of the 'traditional' artwork. While the elements that make up authenticity will remain in a state of flux, there remains a certain vestige of cultural continuity, which allows the resultant object the status of art.

An over-emphasis on research as a form in its own right will create work that will soon only be identifiable as 'institutional art'. The inevitable collapse of research method into Art does not want to acknowledge that art is discussion-based and context-specific.

There has been an abdication of the responsibility to make art. What has occurred is the presentation of 'authentic' material as the finished art-piece, or finished art-pieces as holding/being the 'authentic' research material (or evidence of the research). Artists are possibly involving themselves in some sort of faux social action that makes an implicit claim of morality, which invalidates any questioning of the resultant object. But then this may be the intention, to produce work that does not rely on pre-production reflexivity.

5. Universities were born in Europe, some three-quarters of a millenium ago. Our four countries boast some of the oldest, who are celebrating important anniversaries around now, as the University of Paris is doing today. In those times, students and academics would freely circulate and rapidly disseminate knowledge throughout the continent. Nowadays, too many of our students still graduate without having had the benefit of a study period outside of national boundaries. (The Sorbonne Declaration, May 25 1998)
6. We hereby undertake to attain these objectives – within the framework of our institutional competencies and taking full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of University autonomy – to consolidate the European area of higher education. To that end, we will pursue the ways of intergovernmental co-operation, together with those of non-governmental European organisations with competence on higher education. (The Bologna declaration, June 19 1999)

## Research and the artist<sup>7</sup>

There is much the artist has in common with Jack and his magic beanstalk, the artist seeks their fortune, swaps their valued cow for 'magic beans', and steadily climbs the consequential growth, striving to reach the clouds and their fortune. (This includes 'confusions' of discovery, and the magical and pecuniary rewards of concerted inquiry.)

The reification of Artistic Research may be the Academy instinctively fighting back, striving to recall the Avante-Garde firmly back into the boundaries of educational establishments from the marketplace. Innovation will become synonymous with the power of accreditation. It may however be a desire to return art practice to a basis of research and development.

What is the artist to do? Research has become the new way to go. It is not that art is not in the place where it ought to be, it is just that art does not know where it ought to be, so the possibility of a new approach to making and disseminating art has landed on the shoulders of research. Where is art to go? What is it to do? What is the fate of art? The future is unknown, which will only become visible through thorough investigation, and ironically research of the unknown is the answer.

## Telling stories

There is a relationship between folk tales and artistic research: The initial moral query; the need to engage an audience; creating relevance for the audience; production of knowledge; possibility of alternative endings; the ultimate art piece. *Jack and the Beanstalk* is a good metaphor that will allow a sidelong look at the questions Artistic Research has raised as being a possible new discipline within the arts, I feel a lone character emerging from obscurity into self-awareness, undergoing a transition from not knowing what they actually want to do, to discovery and self awareness might provide some pointers. Telling a Folk Tale, (or is it a Fairy Tale) has become the best way to end this critique.

## This could be Jack and the beanstalk

Once upon a time, Jack was either the idle or spoilt unemployed son of a widow suffering from fever and ague living in abject poverty together in a cottage somewhere, or in a village far from London. After a hard winter there was either nothing left to sell, or their cow, Milky White, who had stopped producing milk to the point that they resolved to sell the cow to raise money for food. The mother sent Jack to market with the cow, where he meets a man or a butcher along the way who offers him five magic beans in exchange for the cow. Jack happily accepts the magic beans and heads back home to his mother. Mother is either resigned or angry, sends Jack to bed without supper, or shares what is left in the house with him. The beans are then thrown out of the window into the garden or carefully planted. The next morning a beanstalk had grown up to the sky, and Jack climbed up beyond the clouds where on reaching the top of the beanstalk, he arrived at a long broad straight road; or a barren desert; or a finely-wooded beautiful country with sheep-covered meadows with a crystal river running through it. Jack then either walked along till he found a great big tall house; or met with an elegantly dressed beautiful young woman with a white wand topped with a golden peacock; or he met a strange looking woman in a pointed cap of quilted red satin turned up with ermine walking with a staff.

7. Some un-broached questions: How are subjects and material seen and treated? When the research is viewed, who speaks the loudest? Is the relationship between artist and subject where this new art resides? What will be the influence of practice-based PhDs on the general practice of artists? Is Artistic Research only available to PhD research candidates? Is Artistic Research simply an expected continuation of an artist's practice? What is the difference between Art Research (research carried out to make a body of work) and Artistic Research (research which is the body of work)? Is the play on words; Research-based Practice and Practice-based Research a valid difference, or an attempt to diffuse matters? What does one artist write for another artist to reveal their secrets?

After either being told nothing or that a giant had killed his father, a knight or rich man, and who promptly dispossessed Jack and his mother, Jack made his way to a castle or a large house. On arrival he met the giant's or ogre's compassionate wife who took him in and fed him in return for either being a page or out of the kindness of her heart. On the giant's arrival for breakfast, his wife hid Jack from her husband in an oven or a large wardrobe to protect Jack from being eaten. The giant then roared:

Fee-fi-fo-fum,  
I smell the blood of an Englishman,  
Be he alive, or be he dead,  
I'll have his bones to grind my bread.

Or

Fe, fa, fi-fo-fum,  
I smell the breath of an Englishman.  
Let him be alive or let him be dead,  
I'll grind his bones to make my bread.

Or

Wife! Wife! I smell fresh meat!

But his wife disabused him of the possibility of new food's presence, telling him that it was either the fresh steak of an elephant; scraps a little boy had for yesterday's dinner; or people in the dungeon. After his breakfast the giant fell asleep and Jack proceeded to steal or repossess a bag of gold coins. Jack went home, to return either as himself or disguised to acquire a golden-egg laying brown hen, and finally a golden self-playing harp. As Jack was taking the harp it called out to the giant who chased Jack to, and down the beanstalk. Jack made his way to the beanstalk's base where he called to his mother for an axe or hatchet and cut the beanstalk down. The giant then fell from a height and broke his crown, or landed on his head and broke his neck, and died. Jack then either went back into the sky with his mother and booty in a peacock-drawn chariot to take possession of a castle and rule over people, or apologised to his mother for his previous fecklessness and became a dutiful and obedient rich son, or he became very rich and married a great princess and lived happily ever after.<sup>8</sup>

8. Jacobs, Joseph. *English Fairy Tales* G. P. Putnam's Sons and David Nutt, New York and London, 1898. pp. 59-67; Lang, Andrew. *The Red Fairy Book*, Longmans, Green, and Company, London 1890, pp. 133-145; Hartland, Edwin Sidney. *English Fairy and Other Folk Tales*, The Walter Scott Publishing Company, London, ca. 1890. pp. 35-46.