The dialectics of the art text

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> Maybe that's what writing
> is all about, Sid. Not
> recording events from the
> past, but making things
> happen in the future.
>
> Paul Auster, Oracle Night,
> 2004:189

Abstract

In "From Work to Text" Roland Barthes develops a rather challenging view on the status of the literary text. His final statement "The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing." is central to this paper. I will examine the importance and relevance of writing for practice-based research based on my own ongoing experience. A close reading of Barthes' article will lead me to propose the notion of an art text which functions as a discursive counterpart to the actual work of art. In order to show how fictional strategies can serve as a fertile methodological basis for artistic research and writing, three influential works of literature will be briefly explored. The spatial dimensions of these works and the disruptive reading patterns they provoke, give a clear outline of how an art text could interact with the work of art, and how it could discursively open up that work of art to critical readers.

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Preliminary observations

When I embarked on my practice-based PhD, the question of how to go about writing a dissertation was not my main concern. I was more engaged in thinking about the notion of artistic research and the kind of knowledge that it could, or was supposed to produce. Probably because the ontological research problem is a tricky and sticky one to solve, I didn't bother to think about writing a text. I had already completed a Master's thesis

in literature and I thought that the dissertation would somehow evolve along the same lines without causing insurmountable problems. The assumption that writing on the one hand, and art practice and research on the other, were two distinct entities motivated by the "Regulations for the Doctorate in the Arts", that talks about the dual requirements of both an artistic or creative component and a reflective textual component […] The term 'dissertation' covers the obligation to produce a written component distinct from, but reflecting upon the product, a component that opens the research for discussion and verification by peers.

But as soon as I started writing (chapter outlines, ideas, reflections, comments on interesting artists and theories) it became clear that I had been quite wrong in my neglect of the dissertation text. Through the practice of writing I became fully aware of the fact that research, writing, and practice were more intertwined than I had previously assumed.

Writing a text (on serendipity)

The distinction between an artistic and reflective component fails to clarify what the place of artistic research is. If artistic research would only consist of reflecting upon the artistic practice, coinciding with a *reflective textual component*, it is debatable whether the work itself would benefit from it. Reflection is required, but is not sufficient since it does not necessarily influence the art practice. If, on the other hand, the research component were situated in the artistic practice, then the question of whether or not all artistic practices qualify as being research arises. Research is not something that is done before or after the artistic creation or the writing of a dissertation text. The distinction between art practice and reflection is an artificial one. Research is situated somewhere in between, intersecting both practice and reflection, and that is what makes it so hard to grasp.

Academic writing and research, however diverse they may be, rely on a very specific set of discursive strategies. Commonly accepted strategies include objectivity, methodological soundness, logic, chronology, relevance of references and closure. Artistic practice, however, is in some respects quite distanced from this academic research paradigm. Artist rely more on tactical notions such as subjectivity, serendipity and associative connections. It is tempting to conform to a long and fruitful tradition of academic writing, but that conformity might be paralyzing in the long run. The first proposals I made concerning the structure of my dissertation text were in tune with accepted academic standards. As soon as I started to use this structure as a guideline in my writing, however, it started to impose limitations on the development of my artistic work. The fundamental openness of the work was reduced by trying to categorize it. Moreover, some aspects of the work became highlighted, while other, imminent possibilities were neglected. It could be proposed that sound research needs structure and limitations, but in a practice that relies heavily on serendipity, those limitations, and the discursive strategies within academic writing might become paralysing borders.

Traditional academic texts present writing as a transparent medium which gives the reader immediate access to the original thoughts of the researcher/writer. Although deconstructive and poststructuralist theory have critically undermined this idea, the actual writing process (the struggle of looking for the correct word or phrase, and of shifting, deleting and adding chapters) is only rarely visible in the final text. This paradoxical strategy of obscuring the writing process, in order to achieve a high level of transparency, requires that a lot of research material gets lost. The interesting thing is that artistic advancements can be made on the basis of what went wrong in the research process. Serendipity, therefore, calls for a form of writing that credits the failures and doubts inherent in every research project. Not because they have actually led to new insights, but because they might do so in the future.

Art ~ text

The academic world is only slowly adapting itself to the needs of artistic research, where the distinction between the artistic practice, the research project and the textual component is blurred. For a better understanding of the relationship between works of art and text, it is interesting to go back to Roland Barthes' "From Work To Text" that zooms in on the specific qualities that distinguish a literary text from a work of literature. Barthes characterises a work as a static entity aimed at producing meaning. The text, on the other hand is, "a methodological field." (Barthes 1977:157) that can "only exist in the movement of a discourse" (Ibid) Texts are fundamentally open to interpretation. They postpone meaning and defy the notion of closure. By saying that "The Text is plural." (Barthes 1977:159), Barthes does not refer to the fact that several meanings can coexist in one text, but to a fundamental form of plurality that is "an *irreducible* (and not merely acceptable) plural" (Ibid). The "vast stereophony" (Barthes 1977:160) of intertextuality thus created is not something that can be easily interpreted. "[T]o try to find the 'sources', the 'influences', of a work is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations with inverted commas." (Ibid).

Barthes' notion was that the text should not be restricted to literary texts. Works of art can equally be analysed as text, following Barthes' line of reasoning. The art text that I want to propose should be seen as one side of a double faced *Janus*-like construct consisting of both the work of art and the art text *around* it. Works of art and art text thus become actors in an intertextual play, based on an ongoing dialogue. Artistic research, then, is situated at the writing intersection between these two actors. It is the process of writing that is at the core of artistic research, for only in writing can the artist transcend the boundaries of his medium to communicate what he is doing to a broader audience.

> This is also an essential requirement for academic research projects in contrast to other art, architecture, or design projects: a research project must, in some way, open up for discursive encounters. By developing a critical perspective on her or

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his work, the author/architect behind a project invites others to participate, not in awe, but in critical discussion. (Grillner, 2003:246).

Research ~ Fiction

> [F]iction is a kind of writing in which you can neither lie, tell the truth nor make a mistake. You cannot lie in fiction, because the reader does not assume that you are intending to be truthful.
>
> Eagleton 2003:89

Although it is tempting to remove Barthes' notion of the text from its original context altogether, it might be interesting to go back to the literary setting Barthes used as a background. His description of the text as "a methodological field" hints at an intricate relationship between research and fiction. An account of this relationship can be found in Julian Bleecker's *Design Fiction: A Short Essay on Design, Science, Fact and Fiction.* Bleecker zooms in on the dialectics of science fiction and future-oriented design, but his account can be broadened to other types of fiction and design or art practices. Indeed, his list of "terms familiar to science fiction" (Bleecker, 2009:17), which consists of indirection, distraction, disruption and displacement, can equally be applied to the kind of art text that I have in mind (as to a number of literary examples apart from the science fiction genre). Bleecker explicitly refers to writing as an indispensable part of creative design research:

> Design fiction is a mix of science fact, design and science fiction. It is a kind of authoring practice that recombines the traditions of writing and story telling with the material crafting of objects. (Bleecker, 2009:7).

Design fiction, in Bleecker's view, has a double goal: it "creates opportunities for reflections as well as active making" (Bleecker, 2009:8).

Grounding art text in literary fiction (*research fiction*) is partly based on Bleecker's and Barthes' observations, but also on the insight that fiction as a writing practice might be a valuable method for practice-based research. Though Bleecker does not focus on the methods proper to science fiction writing (he concentrates on the end result and how that interrelates with design innovations), I want to find out how literary strategies can be used as a means to make abstraction of an artistic oeuvre and to communicate what is happening in it by fundamentally different (literary) means, to come to new metaphors, to understand and create visual art.

Research fiction, as a writing strategy, always creates meta-texts. Barthes points out that the meta-textual level should coincide with the text itself.

> [T]he discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst,

confessor, decoder. The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing. (Barthes 1977:164)

This meta-textuality might seem like a recipe for illegibility, it doesn't have to be. It is to avoid overtly idiosyncratic writing that the art text relies on narrative strategies. *Research fiction* involves the creation of characters and settings that mirror or challenge what is happening in an artistic oeuvre. Research fiction requires a dialectical mode of writing in which different protagonists exchange views and opinions.

I will briefly present three literary examples that have heavily influenced my PhD research. The literary works are linked through encyclopaedic scope, formal experimentation with writing as a discursive strategy, the importance of spatial representation and mixed fictionalized accounts.

Mark Z. Danielewski: *House of Leaves*

House of Leaves combines different narratives and narrations into one novel. The combination of the novel's encyclopaedic scope, graphical experimentation, intra-textual play, and page-turning storylines, turn it into a source of inspiration for developing *research fiction* strategies. Danielewski's novel makes clear that every act of writing is an exploration of the medium of writing. Part of the novel attempts to disclose *The Navidson Record*, a movie that appears to exist in the mind of a blind man; an attempt to "capture the products of the imagination"(Bachelard, 1994:158). The haunted house bigger on the inside than it is on the outside, is not only mirrored in the meticulously designed page layout of the novel, it also serves as a metaphor for a text that always contains so much more than words.

Nicholson Baker: *The Mezzanine*

The Mezzanine lacks the ambitious scope that characterises Danielewski's writing. However, Baker convincingly integrates a fictional meta-textual level in his short novel. *The Mezzanine* depicts a character on an escalator ride in an office building. During the ride, the protagonist starts thinking about the tearing of his shoe-laces. His thoughts are continuously interrupted by footnotes by the protagonist himself, thus blurring the distinction between his status as a character and as a writer/editor of his own story. The novel is an experiment in text editing and the footnotes function as an ideal tool for digression. Through these digressive acts, Baker literally and typographically creates space to highlight what is often taken for granted.

> *The Mezzanine* is constantly self-reflexive about its own forms of typographic textuality. Thereby it articulates what is normally taken for granted and not seen, and reflects upon this overlooked typographic layer of the reading process. (Pold, 1994:143-144)

Georges Perec: *La Vie Mode d'emploi*

Perec's novel juxtaposes a number of stories and characters that are only related to each other because they live, or have once lived, in the same apartment building in Paris. Some of the characters are clearly linked to each other, while others have little or nothing in common. *La Vie Mode d'emploi* combines different registers, modes, and writing constraints in an oddly structured polyphonous event. The novel's setting is not unlike a studio or laboratory where different distinct works of art become related to each other through spatial proximity. By mapping the daily routines of the inhabitants and their inner relationships, Perec succeeds in rendering an overall picture without neglecting inherent discrepancies and disruptions.

The architecture of dialectics

> Research is another form of architectonic practice, as is writing
> Hughes, 2006:284

The art text is often difficult to grasp. It can often change shape. Protagonists that seem highly important in the beginning might suddenly disappear from the scene. Initially marginal aspects might gain prominence. The impermanent nature of the art text's layout, however, does not mean that there are no architectural strings attached. As Grillner points out:

> Critical writing is in effect inherently architectural, or topographical, in this respect. Whether explicitly or not the text establishes, draws, a room, or a landscape, to house objects and critical reflections (Grillner, 2003:239).

The architecture of the art text is like an impermanent housing project, not unlike the labyrinth-like house on Ash Tree Lane that is central in Danielewski's *House of Leaves.* As one of the characters remarks about the structure of the house:

> It would be fantastic if based on footage from *The Navidson Record* someone were able to reconstruct a *bauplan* for the house. Of course this is an impossibility, not only due to the wall-shifts but also to the film's constant destruction of continuity, frequent jump cuts prohibiting any sort of accurate mapmaking. Consequently, in lieu of a schematic, the film offers instead a schismatic rendering of empty rooms, long hallways, and dead ends, perpetually promising, but forever eluding the finality of an immutable layout (Danielewski, 2000:109).

From Danielewski's own comments it becomes clear that the house is not only a literary trope for a labyrinth, but also works as a living space. "All the characters I've been working on *live in this house!* And all the theoretical concepts that I have been wrestling with *are represented by this house*." (Gregory & McCaffery, 2003:105).

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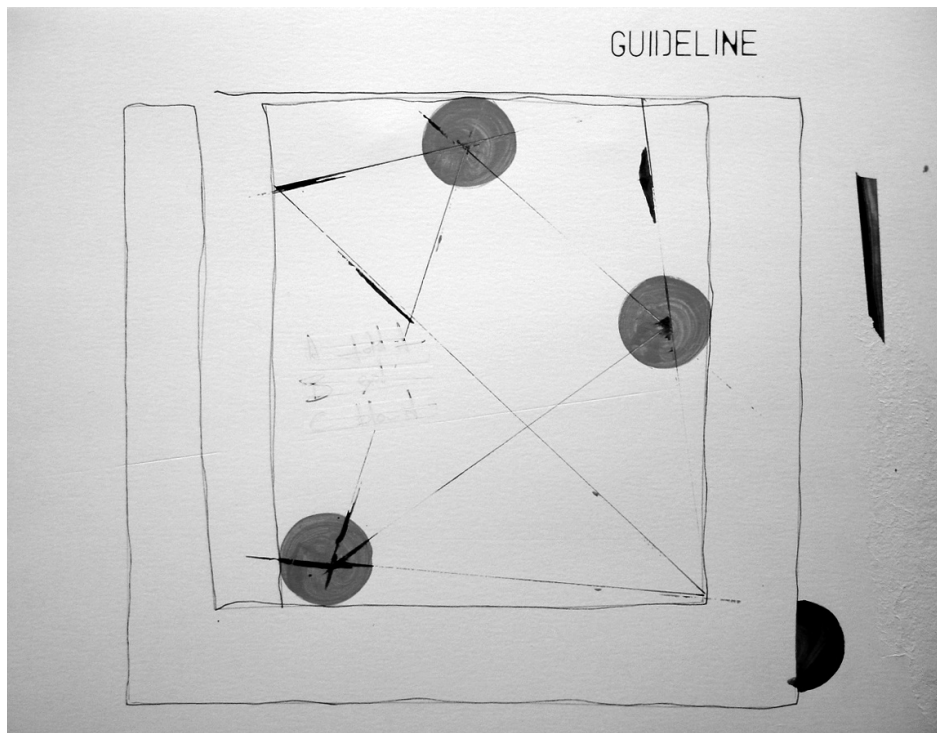
The architecture of the art text will call for a reading strategy that is based on browsing, as opposed to linear reading, and active engagement on the part of the reader. Reading will become an act of deciphering and reconstruction, of critically engaging with the artist's oeuvre. Artistic research should not aim at providing answers to specific questions; it should serve as a fertile basis for questioning ever more.

> They knew that the outer surface of truth is not smooth, welling and gathering from paragraph to shapely paragraph, but is encrusted with a rough protective bark of citations, quotation marks, italics and foreign languages, a whole variorum crust of 'ibid.'s' and 'compare's' and 'see's' that are the shield for the pure flow of argument as it lives for a moment in one mind. […] But the great scholarly or anecdotal footnotes […] are reassurances that the pursuit of truth doesn't have clear outer boundaries: it doesn't end with the book; restatement and self-disagreement and the enveloping sea of referenced authorities all continue. Footnotes are the finer-suckered surfaces that allow tentacular paragraphs to hold fast to the wider reality of the library.
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> Nicholson Baker, The Mezzanine, 122-123

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