

# Artistic research and the "Butterfly Effect" <sup>1</sup>

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I have a background in literary criticism, literary translation and editing/publishing, and I am not very comfortable with the role of 'expert' in artistic research. I do not even trust experts in this field (Could there be any?), when they teach us about establishing a 'discourse' of artistic research, 'research questions', and other Pyrrhic methodological solutions.

In my practice, I always try to keep an identity of 'amateur', in a good sense of the word. The identity of a sympathetic, yet critical spectator, with a stronger interest in art, politics, and literature, than in the artistic research activity itself. This insider/outsider perspective is also the grounding for my evaluation of the results of 'artistic research'.

My main concerns are thus: will artistic research deliver some *interesting* results, some interesting comments on, or metaphors for those burning questions which arise today in the arts, politics, literature or general fields of knowledge with reference to concepts like dis-embedding, globalisation, identity, and subjectivity? And how could academia promote that interest?

We often try to design models for artistic research and evaluation, but something important is apparently often lost in this process of 'normalisation' that usually leaves the decisive artistic problem out of sight.

The central, unbearable or at least uncomfortable, quality of art is its insatiable desire *to include the world* (even worldly phenomena such as 'artistic research'), *to change the world*, and to *change with the world*. Art, and therefore artistic research, will happily have a tendency to happen outside the spatio-temporal boxes that methodologists try to impose. That is art's main quality: to change the rules of the game.

Art, as an aesthetic activity, has no territory of its own. It is materially, concretely, situated in a completely unique place from which it cannot be separated, without being torn into pieces. At the same time, it is 'global': it includes all there is, if only by trying to exclude it.

But traditionally speaking, there is one element that art (though 'carnival' by nature) cannot devour (as different to revolutions): it's own creator.

1. This text was completed, thanks to intense discussions during a conference on PhD education for research students and tutors at the FAPAGU – (Faculty of Fine, Applied And Performing arts of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden) in February 2010. In the 1952 short story by Ray Bradbury, *A Sound of Thunder*, the killing of a butterfly during the time of dinosaurs causes the future to change. . . Do we, by the way, still live in the time of dinosaurs?

According to common metaphysical assumptions, God, The creator, can only be represented (not seen) in the world through worldly creations. In the same logic, the artist can never be seen in the painting, the writer in the text, the composer in the music, or the performer in the performance.

They will, as 'real authors', always remain outside their work. Sometimes, in the periphery of a painting, you may perceive a glimpse of the real artist *through a glass darkly*<sup>2</sup>, but that kind of provocation is generally performed only in order to strengthen and confirm the rule of this very law: The art work is created by the author, and is different from the author herself, or himself.<sup>3</sup>

But ours is a time when all main representations of art, religion and knowledge decontextualise and recontextualise, deconstruct and come under fire from new kinds of practises, and amongst them, as in our case, from language, conceptualism and artistic research.

Artistic research pushes this deconstruction process even further, in the form of action research, participant observation, and chronicler through some mainly symbolic activities: reconnecting artworks to authors, concretising the 'situated-ness' of the artwork, reclaiming the ties between the inside and the outside of the artwork, testing it with new kinds of 'software', and breaking the modernist taboo on the mutually exclusive, hierarchical relationships of creators, implied authors, and created worlds.

So, if the modernist artwork (and here conceptualism is for apparent reasons only partly an exception), consisted of a closed universe, from which the biographical 'real author' and the 'biographical intentionality' were excluded, and replaced inside the work by an 'implied author', things are much more unstable today: The hero and the author (and the spectator) try to travel on the same seat through the fictional landscape of postmodern reality.

For artistic research, the subdivisions 'author', 'implied author' and 'hero' (which all equal 'the other'), are necessarily a 'real fiction', which the 'meta-fiction' of research will construct and deconstruct, establishing its research reflective process as a parallel process to 'authentic' creation.

Thus, artistic research puts at least two, conventionally speaking, incompatible discursive universes in dialogue: the universe of the 'biographical' author (the researcher), and the universe of the 'implied'<sup>4</sup> author (the universe of the 'work'). In the new space created by artistic research, the two universes will freely exchange new things. The *thick*

2. Refers to the English translation of Ingmar Bergman's movie *Så som i en spegel* – "As if in a mirror", which was actually the words I had on my lips when writing this.

3. In this sense, with the words of Duns Scotus and Mikhail Bakhtin, the artist, in relation to the work, is *natura non creata quae creat*, and the "implied author" in a work of art (and in life: man) is *natura creata quae creat*, differing thus from the "hero" or the created world within an artwork, which is *natura creata quae non creat*.

4. From Wayne C. Booth, in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, University of Chicago Press, 1961.

walls of the university, will guarantee artistic practise a specific form of extraterritoriality from the artistic field. And with that freedom, that goes far beyond Adorno's idea of *Gestaltung des Gestalteten*, comes an immense responsibility that can be an all-too-heavy burden, because, modernity and metaphysics never died, and artistic work is still about creating meaning (even in the era of artistic research).

As one Swedish professor in artistic research recently put it: How much text can an artwork stand? And: How much art can a text stand? (Or: How do we avoid making artistic research into 'normal science'?) And he continued, with reference to the great Swedish novelist Lars Ahlin:

The artist is a lover. His love is canalised through the artistic medium. Therefore, the medium must be solid. He must believe that it is. He must feel that the medium is solid, that it can carry him further on, lead forward. If the medium is broken the love will get lost.<sup>5</sup>

The artistic medium must be tested. But the question is: How can artists conduct artistic research without breaking their medium? Without getting lost? Maybe you will stand there with a nicer title, but with a broken medium?<sup>6</sup> And who is actually interested in a broken medium? Not even bureaucrats or ministerial advisers.

In questioning and dialoguing researching artists transform their practice into an "other" practice by granting themselves access to the artwork. Their identities as artists also change, at least for a period, within the new academic framework, into something very sensible and difficult, that we may call 'artistic researchers'. An auxiliary supportive position from which the 'solidity of the medium' can be tested.

The artistic researcher will, on the basis of this new kind of endless alogical and a-hierarchical complicity with her or his implied author (a threat to the conventional unity of the artwork), take practice further. This development process ("artistic research"), we might call *poetics*, whereas the semi-artistic, semi-scholarly work, which is the reflective work accompanying the development process becomes *le discours d'accompagnement*. (This will have a form that we may call an *essay*, in the tradition of Lukács and Adorno.)

So, in a certain way, artistic research confirms and departs from a very contemporary situation that we might call the *porosity* or *situated-ness* of the artwork, and the need to find new un-solid/solid authorial positions.

The process and reflective work require seminar forms where artistic value and theoretical issues might be discussed simultaneously, where *experience* might coexist with *perception*, and *history* with *creation*, in a situation of curiosity and not-knowing. A paradoxical place, a seminar environment (in the Humboldtian sense), and an open space for conversation owned by no one (in the Michel de Certeau sense).

5. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lars\\_Ahlin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lars_Ahlin)

6. Thanks for that insightful comment, Gunnar D. Hansson.

The unique mix of essay, poetics, and conversation that artistic research engenders will not only contribute to strong artistic research and practise, but actually (and that might be of even greater importance) to criticism and critique of the given (the dominant) situation in the arts. The chain of concepts sketched above: essay, poetics, conversation and critique, may well be characterised as a foundation of a new generation of 'humanities' that will sooner or later step into dialogue with traditional humanities. In a common reflection, this may be the butterfly effect of what we are doing right now in the field of artistic research.

### Institutional considerations

The research strategy to adopt, by an institution supporting and developing artistic research, must be based on an idea of open doors and avoiding bureaucratisation of the research education process. (Too many courses, too many exams, too much bureaucratic fright.) And it must give support to artistic quality as a part of the research process.

In Europe, in the beginning of the 1990s, research based art forms and exhibition formats were already an established practice. It existed in the form of the Art and Language Movement, land art, Situationist theory and practice, in complex music, advanced literary practice and in many other art forms. Let us recall the turn Jean-Luc Godard's films took in the 1980s, the artistic fields were ready to take up the research gauntlet.

But finally, when the gauntlet was thrown and artistic research was introduced as a scholarly discipline, it was not done in dialogue with interested artistic practitioners themselves, and very often the intellectual and artistic baggage of the political and bureaucratic *élite* that appeared as heralds of artistic research was of quite another kind than what you would find in the art world.

Here, on the level of political, scholarly or administrative power, among the stakeholders who were, and are, shuffling the artistic research field around the Scylla and Charybdis of art and science, ideas for artistic research were often based on rather simpleminded discussions on similarities and differences, on comparing art and science, and art and technology in a pseudo-utopian way, where bureaucratic necessities and funding interests seemed more relevant than critical thinking and competent orientation in the fields of art production. I think this critique is equally valid in countries like Sweden and Britain. Now, things are getting more serious and the aims of artistic research, and PhDs in the Arts, have become better defined with regard to realities in the Arts. Still, it is my practical experience that artists entering the university to do research, as PhDs or externally funded researchers, fight a lot to defend their integrity and the integrity of their 'medium' which is continuously at risk within the bureaucratic university context.

As stressed above, there was, and there is a need and a 'market' for artistic research. It is a relevant and much-needed activity in the fields of artistic practice. And it is no

exaggeration to state that artistic research *intra muros* has a big group of allied artists outside the institutions who do extra institutional research and experimentation, for which the development *intra muros* is of a decisive importance as a source of inspiration: in new music, painting, theatre, or dance.

*To summarize:* Artistic research essentially remains an *unstable and contradictory, and therefore creative activity*, reflecting on moves made within artistic fields and society during the last few decades, a period we might call 'de-modernisation'. The field is subject to re-negotiations and intensive transactions between the interest groups, initiators, and stakeholders of the field (mainly, up to this day, administrators, sponsors and politicians). It is in the interest of researching artists to take the floor and get more influence in order to make new research spaces and funding more compatible with relevant questions and needs in the artistic fields. And, in the long run, save artistic research from bureaucratisation.

Strategic issues for artistic research to address: the relationship to the humanities; the problem of artistic quality and the risks for a tautological concept of research:

#### 1. The relationship to the humanities.

The inclusion of artistic research, with a multidisciplinary profile or a purely artistic profile, into the traditional university (in close vicinity of a whole range of authoritative humanistic disciplines dealing with the arts), is problematic from the point of view of humanistic knowledge, and has been correctly interpreted as a sign of the weakened positions of humanistic, critical and theoretical knowledge, at a time when techno-science and growth enhancing knowledge are penetrating the university, reducing its autonomy, and evaluating its productivity with values that are alien to the values the university was founded on.

It is my conviction that artistic research ought to take distance from the superficial discourses on creativity, growth, and productivity (which have been imposed on universities by companies and policy makers). It is in the long-term self-interest of researching artists to ally themselves with the 'core' of the traditional university: with critical humanistic disciplines and philosophy, and other forms of 'fundamental research'.

Such an alliance of critical thought and practice-based knowledge would be of immense value, not only to artists who always profit from genuinely free, reflective spaces and theoretical mirrors, but also to the traditional university, whose weakened role as a producer of 'non embodied' and 'non legitimate' interpretations of the arts and of pure theory may be fruitfully confronted with one of the main questions of contemporary thinking. The question is, to loosely quote Alain Badiou: What is the consequence of theoretical thinking on the existence of art today?.

No doubt, the future is great for such difficult meetings and mutual questioning. This would, in the best of worlds, mean a return to the serious questions raised by György Lukács and Theodor Adorno in the first half of the Twentieth century; What did

humanity, and the humanities, lose when scientific thinking ‘liberated itself’ from art and started to deny art as a meaningful and productive part of human knowledge? The reconnection of the two was, for Lukács, to become a new artistic essay form, whereas Adorno added (something that should not be forgotten by those who develop artistic research) that the re-connection of art to science was doomed to a provocation, that the spirit of the essay form was equal to *heresy*. Heresy is a way to approach taboos, and here, in the essay form, in the intersection of knowledge production, heresy, artistic practice and criticality, we find some indications of what artistic research might develop into in the future.

The creation of a non-authoritarian space for artistic, philosophical questioning, and common research, which is by no means an easy task, ought to be one main concern for policy makers in the field of artistic and humanistic research. On the European level we have seen timid efforts to highlight this problem by some ERC-HERA announcements, but on national levels we still see too much identity politics and prejudice among artists and theorists.

And this is not only to be considered an institutional problem. The necessity of renewed ties between the humanities, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and the arts is a consequence of the direction society is taking towards ‘de-modernization’ (where aesthetic strategies become a part of medialisation, identity shaping, urban planning and political struggle). All this merits serious and responsible consideration from politics, artists, artistic researchers and researchers engaging in the central problems and conflicts of our time.

## 2. The problem of artistic quality and the risks for a tautological concept of artistic research

Within the field of artistic research all sorts of symbolic investments, trajectories and personal careers evolve. Within this complexity there is an indication that it is a strong initial artistic identity that will guarantee a positive result of research education, the research project for the researcher, and her or his institution<sup>7</sup>.

This situation, which lays out a possible path for artistic research to follow in order to ‘deliver’ a positive pay back to investors and policy makers, may also be considered less unequivocally positive in a longer perspective, where other fundamental philosophical and artistic questions (including the relations of art and philosophy, may be seen as challenges to artistic research, and be potentially considered as a field for new kinds of multidisciplinary research.

Yet, until now we have not seen a ‘big leap’ of any serious kind, in this direction. Productivity within artistic research is based on high quality artistic practice as defined

7. When I polled the 15 research students attending one of our research conferences, all of them said that they were on the PhD program in order to continue as artists afterwards. Not one required an identity as ‘artistic researcher’. This result confirms the supremacy of artistic value as the main value of artistic research, though this situation is rarely reflected in curricula, structure of the research schools.

within the practice fields. Artistic research is thus to be considered an extension, almost a dependency of contemporary art practices.

For good or ill, this is the way artistic fields and practitioners have reacted to that 'utopian' construction of coexistence of 'science' and 'art' negotiated by initiators and stake holders. A concept for artistic research that might, in many cases, endanger the 'medium' of the researching artists<sup>8</sup>.

Our 'everyday experience' of artistic research tells us that good and positive results of research co-occur with two factors: artistic quality with close links to the artistic fields, and the 'research' element (or written part) could and should be limited to reflections about how a certain level of quality was achieved, materialised, and how the public reacted.

If the 'artistic ground' is weak, and focus will be on the 'research question'. There will, according to the same tautological logic, be no interesting or relevant 'research questions' to elaborate on within an artistic research project. If you have PhD students and researchers who actually do not know from their own experience what an advanced artistic practise is about, there will be no interesting conversations and seminars either.

And then the question of the definition of artistic quality will immediately emerge. Whose definition? What is quality? Symbolic power? And the reply will always be the same two-fold answer: Students attend art schools because art schools help them develop artistic quality, thus 'we', the schools, necessarily know what quality is about. And the value systems underpinning artistic quality in research is a question of those who are the peers, or of the quality of the peers, at the researching institution.

### Some tentative conclusions

We know that in order to bring about interesting questions and 'survive' artistic research, the artists engaging in it must have strong artistic identities. That is a *sine qua non*.

We have also identified a problem: if the artistic research project's only quality is to reproduce an already acquired 'artistic quality' (and not to develop, solve problems or change the rules of art), it is doubtful whether it could be called an artistic research project.

We also know that to do artistic research is to work in a deconstructive, experimental part of the art world, where taboos about both art and reflection are broken. Where the 'author' and the 'implied author' engage in dialogues and conversations that often 'heretically' transgress the rules of *bienséance* in artistic fields.

And we have seen how a specific philosophy grows out of the artistic research activities. A philosophy, which is often intended to support the autonomy of art within academic

8. In Gothenburg some PhD students organised a resistance seminar against 'academisation' based on Jaroslav Haseks novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* in WW1 as an allegorical reading reference when talking about 'art at the university'.

institutions: you must learn the language of your enemy.

But we also see positive expressions of theoretical thinking grounded in artistic practice. An example of this is the well-thought *bricolage* of concepts: *essay* (form); *poetics* (content); *conversation* (method); and *critique* (research results) that are being developed within literary composition.

Here, the concepts have the advantage of covering exactly what is going on, from the point of view of artistic practice. At the same time the concepts are perfectly understandable to the interested reading and general public, they also reflect strong trends and lines of thought in the humanities. Here, a high level of transparency, clarity and functionality coincide in a way that could challenge other branches of research.

But this way of working also seems to go against the tendency of isolation within artistic research: *Artistic excellence* is also *hard core artistic development*, and *artistic development* coincides with what we identify as central *research concepts* in the humanistic and philosophical tradition, though the 'essayistic' reunification that built up the method is still *scandalous*, a *heresy*, from the point of view of many humanists.

This example is also a testimony to the promise and potential of the reconnection of the arts and humanities, if it is managed with sensibility and respect.

This concrete example of research methods, and the two decades experience of European artistic research indicates that there is a strategic possibility able to build new structures based on a critical re-appropriation of the academic traditions of the past. (Why not of Fichino's Fifth century Florentine free academy?) A mutual critical re-appropriation of the past (of artists and humanists) combined with a more active reaction to the challenges of the future mentioned above (individualisation and globalisation, identity and crises).

So, the *ad hoc* conclusion is: Artistic excellence must be the point of departure for all research activities in our field. The process of developing mutual curiosity of artists and theorists that we perceive here and there, is an expression of what I would call 'the butterfly effect' of artistic research. Of something intended and yet unintended, something that is presently not really promoted by the structures that frame artistic research and research education in the arts. But this effect will only grow in importance for the arts, the universities and social life, over years to come.