

Oh happy day – what makes research count as research

Mika Hannula

Use of language, like so many other things in life that presupposes human interaction, is a difficult matter indeed: very difficult, to be precise. It is so difficult because language, as an elastic matter, does not stand still. It slips away. You cannot control it. Words are used and abused, twisted and distorted, caressed and catapulted into discursive orbits where they either feel at home, abandoned, or alien.

We are all familiar with everyday frustrations. The moment when anxiety breaks loose when you repeatedly confront a site and situation in which words (as concepts) are being treated without the desired care and commitment. Words, contrary to that bizarre bad schlagersong, do come easy. Often, they come too easy.

One of the current catch-all phrases in discourse on the production of culture is that real deep down and dirty word: research. All of sudden, regardless of what it is that is being tried to achieve, the talk that both defines and describes these acts is using a great deal of time and space to dress itself up as research. If there is nothing else to say, habit tells us to label it as research, then either fade away, or in the more active version, sprint towards the nearest emergency exit.

The basic motivation behind the loose and inaccurate talk on research this' and research that' is not that awkward to track down. The internal logic and the inherent 'newspeak' of post-industrial societies turning and churning themselves into network societies are very strongly focused on the creative class and knowledge production as a source of, that ever-important, extra value. At the same time, we are reminded how we are surrounded by research, because when you break it down and take away all the layers of window dressings, research is like breathing: you breath in and then out. A process, during which the magic of the 3 Ts are present: we witness how something is translated, transformed and transmitted. Something has changed, something new, interesting and doubtlessly important is produced.

However, unlike breathing in and out, research (when it is to be counted as research), is an activity that is grounded on our ability to critically, yet constructively relate to and reflect upon our being-in-the-world. In other words, it does not take place automatically and it is not automatically what it wants or claims to be. To put the finger where it is expected to hurt: not everything we do is in itself great, meaningful and successful. And no, not everyone is supposed to be doing it either. A set of cruel realisations that, for many reasons and through many seasons, comes across as a horrible surprise. What? Research is not the answer to everything? Whaaaat? Isn't everyone everywhere supposed to do magnificent research all the time?

To confront this train of thought, collecting material from this particular contemporary version of a wishing well, is not a task to be done light-heartedly. It is evident how swiftly this kind of critique is labelled conservative or mean-spirited. But no, the task is not to turn ourselves into a sort of language police that clubs people on their heads when connotations run amok. The task is to take seriously the presuppositions of careful and grounded ways to use language. This is to say: there are good, and less meaningful ways of using language. What must be done is be aware and highlight these grades of comprehension and confusion. It is a task based on our willing comprehension that we must speak 'from', not 'of', or 'about'. We see, feel, talk and listen from a certain position, and that position should be grounded and used one at a time. We are all part of the game, part of the mess and part of the problem. *How and to what discourses do you want to participate in?*

However, and this is an even more dangerous proposition, in arguing for what makes research count as proper research – which contains elements that, by their character, are strictly limited in time and availability – is to go head on against some of the main beloved post-1989 illusions. These are the models and modules for comprehending and compressing everything into the language of: volume, speed and price. Adding insult to injury, this train of thought also screams that research as a solid solution and cure to all problems, is there for everyone regardless of their background views and visions, education and experiences, professional interests and inclinations.

But what then? How can we even assume to be able to go against dominant assumptions of our times, the conditions of our conditions? As ever, if we decide to play with the rules of the so-called hegemony, we are taking part in the shouting competition, or passive-aggressively supporting the taken-for-granted apathy, we have no chance of survival, not one gram of self-respect left to rely on. Therefore, we need to figure out a detour. Not denying the daily institutional structures and the historical prerequisites, but finding ways to exist, despite the over-determined logic of the above mentioned volume, speed and price. For this, let's recall a version of an ideology. A principle based on the active potentiality embedded in situated, committed and ongoing practices.

“...what is mostly needed is a politics of self-defense for all those local societies that aspire to achieve some relatively self-sufficient and independent form of participatory practice-based community, and that therefore need to protect themselves from the corrosive effects of capitalism and the depredations of state power. And in the end the relevance of theorizing to practice is to be tested by what theorizing can contribute, directly or indirectly, to such a politics.” (MacIntyre 2006, 155)

A statement that provides guidance and a direction to aim at. But it is a statement that begs for further inquiries and complications. What is this practice? And what about politics? Finally, what are the dangers of corrosive effects of capitalism and state power?

To reflect on the content of a practice, this is, to ask with another group of words: what

do you do when you do what you do? Like a lullaby, it is a set of almost rhyming words that invite us to laugh at them, but carry with them a great deal of urgency. A saying that implicates how practice is: it is about doing and achieving something that is specific to the very practice in question, not to something else. What's more, it states how 'doing' by inherent necessity, must be an activity with a long-term trajectory of coming from somewhere, being activated in a current fashion right here, right now, and also with the aim of stumbling towards something. An act that is conscious of its *Wirkungsgeschichte* (History of effect), and an act that steers away from claiming something to be in its essence (stable and solid), but tackles the task of being in existence (becoming). It is to see with, and feel for language and understanding as event, something that becomes (Gadamer 2004, 308).

The politics here, especially when keeping an eye on the needs for the making and shaping of a discourse, is about a very particular balance. It is the never-ending tug-of-war between the quality and quantity of what is said, done, left unsaid, and forgotten. It is the classical reminder of a set up which is not only about how we comprehend and try to actualise one or the other, but how two sides of the same entity constantly affect each other, and create that temporary, but always shifting, balance between them.

This leaves us facing the dangers of a queer couple: capitalism and state power? Why would we want to do the utmostly heretical thing and speak about them in the same sentence? The reason is to take our situatedness and our existence very seriously within the structures, not as outsiders and not as detached viewers. We are in a mess, and we are truly part of a mess that does not go away looking for the perfect enemy, be it imagined in the current fashionable bashing of liberal market-driven economy, or something else. It is not a secret that the vulgar 'take no hostages' capitalism deserves to be kicked in the head, but it is always, and ever, our own head we are kicking at. We are not suffering from the vile strategies of a conspiracy theory. We are doing it by ourselves. Not necessarily amusing ourselves to death, but coming close to it by adding yet another white lie on another pile of white lies, lies that tell that same unified story: I am innocent.

But what about the state power? One could ask: what power? But since our discourses and practices happen within a wide variety of institutions supported and sponsored by the state, it is obviously an accurate proposition. Here, state power, and its corrosive impact, lies in its current state, in its deep-seated inability to stand up and protect argued-for and previously fought-for values and rights. Because, whether the institution admits it or not, or if it uses much of its energy to deny it, institutions always support one thing while closing out something else. They are not neutral, nor innocent, but part of the game, part of the politics of what's what in any given field. In the words of a modern classic:

All forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others, because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out (Schattschneider 1960, 71).

In its sweet and sour way, this is a perfect reminder of a version of that ancient blues song: if you do not stand up for something, you will fall for anything.

Standing up requires a transparent structural clarity and a commitment to something (as in quality of a practice), which consequently closes its domain to something else. Thus, the greatest illusion of make-believe tolerance of a contemporary institution is that: anything and everything is possible and wished for. A version of being-in-the-world that is like a game show. Everyone wins, everyone is included, and everyone has so much fun, all the time, and forever and ever.

In the end, the difference is that while the former is fairly open about its strong bias (vulgar one-dimensional capitalism that efficiently closes down the chances for alternatives and robs us of plurality), the latter is pretending to celebrate the opposite (not being biased) while only supporting the story of neutrality that is believed to be inevitable and admirable. A neutrality that one would love to call cynical, but which is unfortunately nothing but common sense.

Thus, to repeat: what is the alternative? The alternative does not come from the shelves of the supermarket (be it a discount or bio-model market); it is not hidden in the reports of the government. It is embedded within the practices. Not as an answer, nor as a ready-made, but as a hint of potential possibility to do something differently. It is an alternative that comes across in three steps: slow, community, and only for a few.

To start with the list, let us focus on 'slow'. Slow as in a slow song, as in slow food, or as in slowly travelling down the road? Yes and no. Indeed, if there ever was a concept in great need of clarification, it is the concept of 'slow'. Because it would be simple if it was only about reducing the speed we do whatever we do. You know, do it slower, take your time, don't hurry and remember to take enough breaks in-between. And if you don't eat all on your plate, you will not get any pudding.

But slowness as a quality that we are after, in whatever we do, is not a prepaid description. The slowness of a practice is only meaningful when it is defined and recognised as a need from within the activity itself. It is a version of slowness that stresses the necessity to allow time for anything worthwhile to sink in. Consequently, it is slowness as realising the importance of holding back and not producing just for the sake of production. Instead of cutting corners, and running around at seemingly full steam, it is about looking for, and then also taking, those side steps and detours, luring oneself to gain distance in order to get another new look into the intimacy of a practice.

This slowness is not the same as the motto 'less is more'. It is not slowness as quantity or the lack of it. As said, it is the quality of doing something that requires a certain

slowness. A certain attitude of caring and learning how to let things evolve instead of forcing them into previously recognised and expected forms and formations. What we face is slowness as in the required task of repetition and the acts of practicing anything we do (ranging from playing a violin, to a walk in a park and rebounding back with the act of placing word after word in a specific order). It is the necessity of a repetitive act that has been comprehensively studied. The numbers might alter from one field to the next, and while everything is based on individual cases in the end, the estimate of what it takes for us to master any complex skill (and for that skill to become ingrained into our practice), is the golden rule of ten thousand hours. A number which lurks as a sign of what it means to become an expert, translating into doing what you do when you do it, for three hours a day for ten years (Sennett 2008, 172).

This is slowness, as in a strategy for building space for the chance of surprise, surprises within acts and activities. Especially when addressing the ways and means of producing culture, it is to avoid the logic of yet another new product that does exactly this and that. It is a small gesture that breaks loose from the spell of speed. A gesture that turns the handle and opens the door so that in comes something that has suddenly become possible. There are no illusions of a great leap forward. Just an endless series of try-outs to moves sideways. Not linearly but in circles, over circles, over circles. Today, not tomorrow, since time does not wait, it will only accelerate.

It is a slowness as in the ability to let the nuances of our acts gain confidence. It is to be ready and open for impulses and interventions. Instead of trying to covet and get it all, slow is to focus and to gain integrity and situatedness both with the material and the context. To borrow from another set of terms, the type of a slow act we are after can be highlighted with the differentiation between volume and intensity. (Barenboim 2009, 105) The wished-for effect and result will not be gained through the simple increase of volume and power. If anything, quality is approachable in and through the inherent logic of the practice that produces integrated knowledge with its integrity and intensity.

Slow is not the act of just talking and talking, but in very concrete terms, is slowing down and listening. Not to what you think they are saying, but listening to what is said in the terms and means laid down by the other, not by you. Here we already have a notion that is not a self-fulfilling prophesy, but a practice that generates its own slowness. Since the act of listening, and the aim of listening to the others voice and his/her ways of describing the same and similar reality, requires you to change perspectives and let loose from your own positions, this alteration and shift of balance takes time. There are no fast-forward solutions, just the reality of moving away from something that you are familiar, towards the third space of something that is about to happen and to become. A slowness without which a meeting between A and B is not meaningful and possible. A meeting that never is but is always potentially happening, if and when both sides allow themselves to take the risks, and to go towards shaping together that yet

unknown third space that is created there and then, during the give and take, push and pull conversations and negotiations (Hannula 2009, chapter 3).

We recognise that when research becomes the process-based activity that it needs to be, to be counted as research, it is not an individual act done in solitude. It is by its elementary character, an activity that must have a collective dimension at the heart of it. A collective sphere that gathers together all the acts done individually that are shared and cared for. Not as acts of human kindness, but as acts based of the purest type of self-interest. A collective reciprocal set-up, that becomes a necessity for anything to develop, and gain a momentum of actualisation. Acts that are therefore no longer just whistling in the dark, but which are brought into an organically growing context where these acts are taking place next to each other, not oblivious to each other, nor just one after another.

This is the site and situation of clashes and collisions. A collective as in a crash-course of comparisons and competitions. Not as a zero-sum game where the winner steals all, but a constantly evolving frame that is never even: it spills out and gets caught with a draught. There is never a fixed balance, but always a search for unattainable calmness. Something is happening and getting done. Something is produced in the interaction between various versions of the same and similar realities. Versions that tickle and bounce, they burn and they heal. They get challenged and get knocked down. But they do not get hurt. Certainly, they get bruised but those spots are there to be healed, to be taken care off.

It is a collective that does not strive for a unity. A collective that becomes more than a sum of its parts because it does not want to put an interfering lid on its activities. It is a collective that seeks to keep the carousel up and running. An invitation to take part, and be part of. You are within a process where you are driven with the need to invest into it. An investment that does not mean you own the issue. It is research into what is it that makes these acts meaningful and important. A continuous set of acts based on commitment and responsibility, which at the same time knows that it can't control the process nor should it guard it too enviously. Borrowing from the parlance of another field: research as research is not about owning. A collective of researchers is not a group of shareholders. It is a loose, but active association of stakeholders.

What's more, it is these stakeholders, in and through their participation, that maintain, renew and re-define what exactly is it when they do what they do when they do it. Not in a locked-up position, but always in interactions with other versions of the practice. A bunch of stakeholders that consciously take part in the processes during which the criteria and the quality of the activity is described and actualized, it is made and shaped while doing it. A kind of collective act that is based on the idea of difference talking to a difference, while yet another difference keeps knocking on your shoulder and you keep trying to find enough energy and time to listen carefully. A disposition that allows us to point out the necessary limitedness of each of these collectives. They are not vast bodies

of persons, but rather small entities that by their numbers are not drowning, not waving, but seriously engaging with one another in the acts of research, both the process of it and the articulations of its results.

What is missing in combination with the principle of slowness and the collective dimension is the range and scope of those involved in research activity. Due to the over-expansion and lack of respective resources, this is the point that has caused most damage from the side of the institutions. A point that is connected to ever-increasing demands by contemporary society for knowledge-based extra value. But what then is knowledge? In the same breath, what is the difference between information and knowledge? It is a point of departure that does not do what so many institutions desperately seem to wish for. It does not include. It excludes. The range of research as research that is situated, committed and an ongoing investment of time and energy is not a mass phenomena. It is, by its core character, a very exclusive activity. And this causes a huge problem since it goes diametrically against the 'common as muck' institutional self-image.

But why is research as research only for the few? Not only because it is a slow process, and not because research does not materialise in interactive groups much more than a dozen people. There is more to it. This is the essential and non-negotiable difference between information and knowledge. In short, even if both types of cultural capital share the same frame and context, the former is and stays a tourist, while the latter is only achievable by staying put and getting closer to the inherent and internal logic of the given practice. To recall, it is the ten thousand hour rule.

This is to say that while information flies around and is detached; it is not possible to separate knowledge from the experiences that generated it. Information follows the binary logic of any product that is there to be produced *ad finitum*. This is the logic of toothpaste. Regardless of where you buy it, you expect it to do what it promises. But knowledge is not only about what it promises. It must be more and less, and it must try to take place simultaneously. It is more and it is less since it is not static, it is a process. The process of knowledge is anchored and embedded. It is never fully translatable, but neither does it suffer from certain inclinations of magical mysteries. It is not a closed up process. It must insist on being as open as possible, open for collisions and critique.

But how can research as proper and countable research be open, but only to the few? At its core, it is about the combination of what knowledge is and how knowledge needs information, but information in itself is not yet placed within the practice. To follow up the example of the toothpaste, we have an example of a dentist. A dentist who has, in order to be able to operate in most of the OECD-countries we live in, an item called a certificate. This proves that this dentist has studied this practice. It implies a certain level and background of competence and commitment. He or she now has information of the field. But as we know, this particular practice as a dentist is structured so that one cannot graduate without a long-term try-out season. You must practice under the guidance of a

more practiced and experienced colleague. A time frame from within which this about-to-be-released new dentist is willing and able to apply the information in and through the practice that is constantly on the move and in the making, not a frozen zone of things already known-of. This is the part when information turns into experience based knowledge.

A practice, where the dentist looks down into a mouth every day. A practice within which he/she witnesses a cavalcade of mouths opened and closed. Entities that we all possess, and entities that tend to have a pretty solid set of elements that are the same from one version to the next. But here is a main point in the difference between information and knowledge. While each mouth is elementarily the same, it is also always different. Not only is it different from one person to the next, the condition of that single mouth changes from one visit to the next. With only information, our dentist would be a very poor dentist indeed, with patients hurt in their faces and mouths. This type of a dentist would force down detached information into the singular cases of practice that require practice-based knowledge, supported by practice-driven grounded and connected information.

But why then is research so prone, especially in younger fields like practice-based artistic research, to tsunami-like attacks guided by a wide variety of information with often enough no practical knowledge of the domain and its inherent characteristics, needs and necessities? Why is it such a freely available hunting ground for all colours of opportunists and populists to gain access and voice, screaming and dreaming of categories and limitations instead of openings and interventions? Why is it that the same people would never even think of challenging the fundamentals of a dentist's practice, nevertheless very loudly and self-congratulatory do so when talking about artistic research practice?

To tackle this issue we must face the ultimate challenge of the most dominant signs of our times, which certainly very effectively takes away all the needed possibilities for research to be counted as research practice. This sign of the times reads: everyone and anyone must be able to do anything and everything always and anywhere.

How do we fight this contemporary illusion as a pyramid-sized lie? An illusion that is not only completely coloured by its infantile attitude, but which is burdened by the even scarier notion of its full and aggressive lack of localised place and situation bound responsibility. How can we have any significant chance of prevailing against an enemy that possess both the logic of the capitalist market (turn everything into the binary logic of a product) and the state power (the logic of institutions that are characteristically lost and not found in their inability to decide what they stand for)?

I do not know. But what I do know is that if there is any hope, that hope is embedded within the given practice that is there, day in, day out, rain or shine, trying to keep on keeping on. A practice that is defined in and through the commitment to slowness, collective perspective and the necessary exclusiveness of it. But something is still missing.

Something without which that word and concept of hope will not survive. What is missing is passion. A passion play that throws in compassion and empathetic involvement. A standoff that means we are not shyly standing at the sidelines of a practice. We are not just, to introduce yet another image, watching the waves, but making them. We jump in. We throw ourselves to the sea, into the game, into the practices. And yes, we might not swim that elegantly, but we sure as hell are not sinking either.

A passion play of compassion that always luckily comes in disguises that you cannot control or guard. A compassion that by necessity must be homebound, but not home-grown. We can find it from very different sources, but when we find it, we have to make it close ourselves, to make it grow into our version of a practice.

My not-so-accidental friend and dear companion in the field of compassion comes from the world of so-called literature. It is a book of essays that I seem to have firstly read when they came out in Finnish in 1997. Dating my first reading is deduced from my old notes, taking me back to a trip somewhere out there (must have been north of Norway) that I have now completely forgotten. It is a book that came out not so long before the author passed away. An author who was awarded the 1987 Nobel Prize for literature. This author published a collection of essays in 1995. In its original version it came out in English since this author was bilingual. Ever since his deportation from the now extinct entity that was called The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, he wrote in two languages: poems in Russian, essays in English. In an essay called *Kleion profili* (The Profile of Kleio) this author talks about compassion, acts that this author connects to the necessity of avoiding the security and lure of clarity, of objective views and truths.

In this essay, the author, Joseph Brodsky, puts forward a theory. A theory grounded in a belief that when one must choose between passion and objectivity, the only intellectually honest decision is to go with passion. We must choose passion since that is only what matters because objective, and therefore immaterial, views and wisdoms have no substance, no gravity. What Brodsky suggests is a theory that is based on experience. In his case, it is the experiences of reading books. Not just any kind of books, but books that take time and are difficult. Not impossible, but books that you can't read while watching the Television Shopping channel. These so-called classics that Brodsky lists, unsurprisingly includes writers such as Melville and Dostoyevsky, Proust, and Musil.

Brodsky's theory claims that those who have read much Charles Dickens, find it a bit more difficult to go on shooting other human beings because of their beliefs, than it is for those who have read less of Dickens. This is a theory about knowledge, not about information. It is not about what we read, but how we read. Not about our ability to read or the level of our education. It is how we read and especially what we allow to get through. In one word: compassion. Feeling for being-with.

Brodsky was very clear to underline that this thought of his was a theory. It is not based on empirical evidence. It is a theory based on a belief. And a belief based on a

hope. A hope without which we never have any chances for fighting in a game that should not be the only game in town, but which must always be part of a whole lot of co-existing games that clash and collide with each others. Turbulence while reading and hearing, while seeing and feeling. Turbulence that is essential if and when research is really to be counted as research practice, an act that truly plays the part instead of only dressing up for the part. A play that only succeeds if it stays close to the inherent logic and qualities of that evolving practice: focusing on quality, insisting on criteria and pushing them forwards while always being ready to admit that you will never get it fully right or ready.

When put into another set of words, and following the foundations of a critical and constructive practice on both an individual and collective level, the task of any research that counts as proper research is to focus on and rely upon three activated practice based acts: to localize, to question and to open up (Sennett 2008, 277). It is a list that lacks one more element: crime of passion that does not square the frame, but shapes the context into a give and take process of a fantastically noisy playground. An element of a collective call and response that provides the scene and setting for constantly evolving shared experiments that could perhaps give us the chance to join in and sing: Oh Happy Day, Oh Happy Day ...

Literature:

Daniel Barenboim, *Music Quickens Time*, Verso, 2009

Joseph Brodsky, *Keräilijän kappale*, Tammi, 1997, (Original *On Grief and Reason*, 1995)

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum 2004 (Original *Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 1960)

Mika Hannula, *Politics, Identity and Public Space – Critical Reflections in and Through the Practices of Contemporary Art*, Expothesis, Series in Art Research and Public Space, 2009

Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, Selected Essays, Cambridge, 2006

E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1960

Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2008