

The Debate on Research in the Arts

The current philosophical and political debate in Europe on practice-based research in the arts is sketched. After clarifying some terminological issues – especially the distinctions between research on, for, and in the arts – the question ‘when does art practice count as research?’ is addressed by looking into different aspects of art practice (i.e. product, process, context) and different definitions of research. A more elaborated discussion of the ontology, the epistemology and the methodology of practice-based research in the arts leads to a concise characterization of the intrinsic nature of research in the arts. Finally the questions of the legitimacy and PhD worthiness are addressed.

If the urgency of an issue can be measured by the ferocity of the debates surrounding it, then the issue of ‘research in the arts’ is an urgent one.¹ Under labels such as ‘art practice as research’ or ‘research in and through the arts’, a discussion topic has arisen in recent years that has elements both of philosophy (notably epistemology and methodology) and of educational politics and strategies. That makes it a hybrid issue, and that does not always promote the clarity of the debate.

The crux of the matter is whether a phenomenon like research in the arts exists – an endeavour in which the production of art is itself a fundamental part of the research process, and whereby art is partly the result of research. More particularly, the issue is whether this type of research distinguishes itself from other research in terms of the nature of its research object (an ontological question), in terms of the knowledge it holds (an epistemological question) and in terms of the working methods that are appropriate to it (a methodological question). A parallel question is whether this type of research qualifies as academic research in its own right, and whether it appropriately belongs at the doctoral level of higher education.

The present urgency of the issue is partly due to government policies affecting this field. As a result of higher education reforms in many European countries, research has now become part of the primary function in higher professional schools as well as in universities. Research in higher professional education differs from that in university education in the degree to which it is oriented to application, design and development. As a rule, ‘pure’ or fundamental scholarly or scientific research (if indeed that exists) is and remains the province of the universities. Research at theatre and dance schools, conservatories, art academies and other professional schools of the arts is therefore of a different nature to what generally takes place in the academic world of universities and research institutes. What that difference exactly entails is the subject of controversies – and not only the opinions, but also the motives are highly divergent here.

1 This text is based on lectures and presentations on research in the arts, held in the autumn of 2005 in Ghent, Amsterdam, Berlin and Gothenburg. I am grateful to the participants in each of those sessions for their constructive commentary. An initial exchange of thoughts on this issue took place in a lively expert meeting entitled ‘Kunst als Onderzoek’ (‘Art as Research’), held at Felix Meritis in Amsterdam on 6 February 2004. The streaming video recording of the meeting (including lectures and discussions) can be found at <http://www.ahk.nl/lectoraten/onderzoek/ahkL.htm>.

The first thing worth noting about the debate is that many of the contending parties tend to opt for the rhetorical force of knowing you are right above the gentle power of convincing arguments. It is not entirely coincidental that people's personal opinions usually correlate with their own affiliations. Many contenders on one side are inclined to entrench themselves in established institutional positions, portraying themselves as defenders of quality standards on which they seem to have a patent. Some on the other side put up resistance against any form of 'academisation' (as it is sometimes scornfully called) – afraid of losing their own distinctiveness, wary of the perceived 'stuffy' confines of academia. The term 'academisation' refers here both to the dispirited reality of university bureaucracy and to an objectionable 'academic drift', whereby some of the vital spirit of artistic practice at the art academies has to be betrayed in order to 'cash in' on the greater social status and respectability that our culture still ascribes to intellectual work.²

The shift in government policies is not the only factor that has put the issue of 'research in the arts' onto the agenda of public and academic debate; developments in art practice itself have also played a role. For some years now, it has been a commonplace to talk about contemporary art in terms of reflection and research. Although reflection and research were closely tied to the tradition of modernism from the start, they are also intertwined with art practice in our late modern or postmodern era – not only in terms of the self-perception of creators and performers, but increasingly in institutional contexts too, from funding regulations to the content of programmes at art academies and laboratories. Particularly in the last decade (following a period when 'cultural diversity' and 'new media' were the watchwords), research and reflection have been part of the verbal attire sported by both art practice and art criticism in public and professional fora on the arts.³ And so it could come to pass that 'research & development' are no longer an issue just for universities, businesses and independent research centres and consultancy agencies, but that artists and art institutions are also now increasingly calling their activities 'research'. It is no coincidence that the art exhibition Documenta in Kassel presents itself as an Academy, and that post-academic institutes like the Jan van Eyck Academie and the Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten in the Netherlands are labelling their activities as 'research' and their participants as 'researchers'.⁴

One of the issues figuring prominently in the debate about research in the arts is: When does art practice count as research? (And its possible corollary: Doesn't all art practice count as research to some extent?) Can criteria perhaps be formulated that can help to differentiate art practice-in-itself from art practice-as-research? And a concomitant question is: How does artistic research differ from what is called academic or scientific research?

In the discussion to follow, I will try to introduce some clarity into the issue of research in the arts. I start (I) by tracing the debate so far and citing the relevant sources. I then (II) explore several terminological matters (a) and the concept of 'research' (b). My analysis of the central question (III) – the intrinsic nature of research in the arts, especially in comparison to the currently more mainstream academic research – is based on the three perspectives referred to above: the ontology (a), the epistemology (b) and the methodology (c) of research in the arts. I have already argued elsewhere in the Dutch context for direct

2 In Flanders, the 'academisation of higher professional arts education' is now being promoted under that very label. Collaborative arrangements between universities and professional arts schools are developing joint research programmes in the arts.

3 Another theme that has drifted ashore in the past decade is a rediscovered 'artistic engagement'.

4 The importance attached to R&D has been diminishing lately in the business world. Is the art world soon to follow?

and indirect public funding of research in the arts.⁵ In the present paper, I will conclude my discussion by commenting on the aspects of this issue that pertain to educational politics and strategies (IV) – focusing primarily on the legitimacy of this type of research and on its implications for possible PhD programmes in professional art schools.

I – The debate

The granting of masters or doctorate degrees to artists (composers, architects, designers) on the basis of their art work is nothing new. It has been possible for decades in the United States, where a degree of this kind is often a prerequisite for appointments at professional arts institutions.⁶ It is common knowledge that these institutional constraints are not always beneficial to either the level of artistic practice on campus or the scholarly level of the staff. In the Netherlands it is possible to obtain a PhD at a university on the basis of a ‘doctoral design’ (*proefontwerp*), but up to now artists have made little use of this option. A new development, at least in terms of the European context, is that the current institutional integration of research into professional art schools has made the distinctive nature of this ‘practice-based research’ into an item of debate.

This debate on art practice-as-research, and on the degree programmes in which that type of investigations can be carried out, has received a significant impetus from the university reforms made during the 1990s in the United Kingdom and in Scandinavia. The academic and policy debates about research in the arts have therefore mainly taken place in those countries. In the UK, the reforms involved assigning the polytechnics (higher professional schools) official equal status to the universities, thus enabling art schools to secure direct and indirect public funding for research.⁷ Comparable reforms occurred in Australia.⁸ In Scandinavia, some research programmes in professional arts schools now receive structural funding. Not all governments are ripe for these types of reforms just yet, and in some cases they are still tenaciously clinging to a rigid divide between academic education with research and professional training without research.

A second impetus, mainly relevant to the European continent, is the so-called Bologna Process – the ambition of the various member states of the European Community to forge a single framework for higher education, in three ‘cycles’ made up of bachelors, masters and doctorate degree courses. The requirements in terms of learning outcomes that the three cycles will have to satisfy are currently being formulated, including the ones for arts education. One issue to be addressed in this process is the status and nature of the research in the creative and performing arts.

The first thing that is noticeable about the exchange of views about practice-oriented research in the arts is that the discussion mainly takes place within the fields of visual arts and design. It is less of an issue in the fields of theatre and dance education, architecture, and film and new media; and in music there was virtually no debate at all about practice-based research until recently.⁹ The reason for that is pure speculation, but the fact remains

5 Borgdorff 2004a, 2004b and 2005.

6 For criteria applying to practice-based masters and doctorate degrees in the USA, see, e.g. for the field of music, NASM 2005.

7 Candlin 2001.

8 Cf. Strand 1998.

9 Some discussion does seem to be stirring in the field of music in recent years. In 2004, a European network was set up consisting of music institutions with doctoral arts studies (MIDAS), and the AEC (European Association of Conservatoires) has also recently launched a working group to consider the doctoral (third) cycle.

that in the past 15 years both the theoretical and philosophical dimensions of arts research and its more policy-related aspects have been the most widely debated in the world of visual arts and design.

The discussion – which, as noted, has been dominated by the situations in the UK and Scandinavia – has led to various forms of activity. An important source of information is the papers and reports produced by organisations involved in research funding and/or assessment, such as the UK Council of Graduate Education,¹⁰ the Arts and Humanities Research Council¹¹ and the Research Assessment Exercise,¹² all in the UK. A number of conferences on arts research have also been convened, and their proceedings form a corpus of texts that have fed the debate. More and more journals are now publishing articles that deal with ‘practice as research’, and several collections of articles, monographs and even manuals on research in the arts, and its methodology in particular, have appeared.¹³

Two electronic mailing lists, PhD-Design and PARIP, are also worth mentioning. PhD-Design is entirely devoted to discussions and information on developing practice-based doctoral degree courses in the field of design. PARIP (Practice as Research in Performance) is a project sponsored by AHRC at the University of Bristol, that focuses mainly on topics involving practice-as-research, mostly in theatre and dance. In October 2002, a lively discussion took place on the PARIP list on a range of issues (institutional and organisational as well as more theoretical and philosophical) in relation to such research.¹⁴

The debate about research in the creative and performing arts has reached the rest of Europe in recent years. Not everyone, though, seems to realize that the issue we are just starting to confront has already been carefully considered in other countries. This is not to say that the correct answers by definition come from abroad. The art is always to learn from the insights and experiences already gained by others.

II – On terminology and research definitions

(a) Terminology

The article that Christopher Frayling published in 1993 entitled ‘Research in Art and Design’ introduced a distinction between types of arts research which has been referred to by many ever since. Frayling differentiated between ‘research into art’, ‘research for art’ and ‘research through art’.¹⁵ I, too, will employ this trichotomy, albeit with a slightly different twist: I will distinguish between (a) research on the arts, (b) research for the arts and (c) research in the arts.

10 Cf. UKCGE 1997 and 2001.

11 Cf. AHRC 2003.

12 Cf. RAE 2005.

13 Among them Gray & Malins 2004; Sullivan 2005; Hannula, Suornta & Vadén 2005; Macleod & Holdridge 2006.

14 See Thomson 2003 for a compilation of that discussion. There are also other projects, networks and institutions focusing on this area. I will just mention two more groups in England that figure in the debate: the Performing Arts Learning and Teaching Innovation Network (PALATINE), based at Lancaster University (see e.g. Andrews & Nelson 2003); and the Research Training Initiative (RTI), based at UCE Birmingham Institute of Art and Design. The PARIP, PALATINE and RTI websites contain broad-ranging bibliographies. Websites for all the projects, networks and mailing lists mentioned in this paper can readily be found via any search engine.

15 Frayling’s distinction referred in its turn to one made by Herbert Read in 1944 between ‘teaching through art’ and ‘teaching to art’.

(a) *Research on the arts* is research that has art practice in the broadest sense of the word as its object. It refers to investigations aimed at drawing valid conclusions about art practice from a theoretical distance. Ideally speaking, theoretical distance implies a fundamental separation, and a certain distance, between the researcher and the research object. Although that is an idealisation, the regulative idea applying here is that the object of research remains untouched under the inquiring gaze of the researcher. Research of this type is common in the meanwhile established academic humanities disciplines, including musicology, art history, theatre studies, media studies and literature.¹⁶ Social science research on the arts likewise belongs to this category. Looking beyond all the differences between these disciplines (and within the disciplines themselves), the common characteristics of these approaches are ‘reflection’ and ‘interpretation’ – whether the research is more historical and hermeneutic, philosophical and aesthetic, critical and analytic, reconstructive or deconstructive, descriptive or explanatory. Donald Schön has used the expression ‘reflection on action’ to denote this approach to practice.¹⁷ I have previously described it as the ‘interpretative perspective’.¹⁸

(b) *Research for the arts* can be described as applied research in a narrow sense. In this type, art is not so much the object of investigation, but its objective. The research provides insights and instruments that may find their way into concrete practices in some way or other. Examples are material investigations of particular alloys used in casting metal sculptures, investigation of the application of live electronics in the interaction between dance and lighting design, or the study of the ‘extended techniques’ of an electronically modifiable cello. In every case these are studies *in the service* of art practice. The research delivers, as it were, the tools and the knowledge of materials that are needed during the creative process or in the artistic product. I have called this the ‘instrumental perspective’.

(c) *Research in the arts* is the most controversial of the three ideal types. Donald Schön speaks of ‘reflection in action’ in this context, and I earlier described this approach as the ‘immanent’ and ‘performative perspective’. It concerns research that does not assume the separation of subject and object, and does not observe a distance between the researcher and the practice of art. Instead, the artistic practice itself is an essential component of both the research process and the research results. This approach is based on the understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts. After all, there are no art practices that are not saturated with experiences, histories and beliefs; and conversely there is no theoretical access to, or interpretation of, art practice that does not partially shape that practice into what it is. Concepts and theories, experiences and understandings are interwoven with art practices and, partly for this reason, art is always reflexive. Research in the arts hence seeks to articulate some of this embodied knowledge throughout the creative process and in the art object.

Various terms and expressions have been used in the literature to denote artistic research. The most common of these are ‘practice-based research’, ‘practice-led research’ and ‘practice as research’. *Practice-based research* is a collective notion that may cover any form of practice-oriented research in the arts. The AHRC currently prefers the term *practice-led research* to denote research that is practice-focused, and many are now following that

16 In recent years these disciplines are also addressing what we might call the ‘performativity of the theoretical gaze’. An example in theatre studies is the conference entitled ‘The Anatomical Theatre Revisited’, Amsterdam 5-8 April 2006. (<http://www.anatomicaltheatrevisited.com/>.)

17 Schön 1982, 49 ff, 275 ff)

18 Borgdorff 2004a and 2004b.

example. The most explicit term of all is *practice as research*, as it expresses the direct intertwining of research and practice as discussed under (c) above. The expression ‘artistic research’, which is sometimes chosen to highlight the distinctiveness of art research, evinces not only a comparable intimate bond between theory and practice, but also embodies the promise of a distinctive path in a methodological sense that differentiates artistic research from the more mainstream academic research.

It has been argued from various perspectives that the trichotomy proposed above – research on, for and in the arts – does not exhaustively describe the possible forms of artistic research.¹⁹ After all, isn’t one distinctive characteristic of the arts, and hence too of the research tied up with it, their very ability to elude strict classifications and demarcations, and to actually generate the criteria – in each individual art project and every time again and again – which the research is to satisfy, both in the methodological sense and in the ways the research is explained and documented? In this particular quality, it is argued, lies one of the major distinctions vis-à-vis what is customary in the academic world – a fundamental openness for the unknown, the unexpected, which can also form a corrective to what is currently regarded as valid research.

This argument is based on a specific and limited concept of what scholarship and science are. More particularly, it assumes that mainstream scientific research is always based on an established protocol, and that universal criteria exist for the validity of research. This derives from a misconception. Not only do academic researchers often develop the appropriate research methods and techniques as they go, but the rules for the validity and reliability of the research results also do not derive from some standard that is external to, and hence independent of, the research; they are defined within the research domain itself. Science at its best is less rigid and constrained than some participants in the debate would like to believe.

Obviously this overarching differentiation of three types of art research does not yet say very much. In the case of ‘research in the arts’, to which we are confining ourselves here, we still have to answer the question of *when* art practice qualifies as research. What do we mean here by ‘research’, and what criteria can we formulate to distinguish art practice-in-itself from art practice-as-research?²⁰ Before addressing the question of what we should understand by research, I would just like to comment briefly on the classifications used in art practice itself.

In the arts we are accustomed to differentiating in terms of activity or role (music, theatre), dimension (visual art) and various other aspects. The musical world distinguishes, for example, between composing, performing and improvising;²¹ the theatre world distinguishes between actors and directors, playwrights and stage designers; in the visual arts we can differentiate between two-dimensional, three-dimensional and audiovisual work, and so on. In the debate about art research, it has proven fruitful to employ a different distinction – that between object, process and context. *Object* then stands for

19 My colleague Marijke Hoogenboom, for example, in her remit at the Amsterdamse School of the Arts, attempts to approximate what research could potentially be, starting from current artistic practice and arts education practice.

20 The idea that all art practice is by definition research might sometimes be useful for underlining the reflexive nature of art, and it may arise in the uncertain quest contained in the creative process, but it is not fruitful for bringing clarity into the debate about research in the arts. If everything is research, then nothing is research any more.

21 A fourth category could be called ‘hybrid activities’, inasmuch as, especially in the case of contemporary music, no clear distinction can be made between composing, performing and improvising.

the ‘work of art’: the composition, the image, the performance, the design, as well as for the dramatic structure, the scenario, the stage setup, the material, the score. *Process* stands for the ‘making of art’: creating, producing, rehearsing, developing images and concepts, trying out. *Context* stands for the ‘art world’: the public reception, the cultural and historical environment, the industry etc.²² Especially in the assessing (and funding) of research in the arts, it makes quite some difference whether one exclusively examines the results in the form of concrete art objects, or whether one also looks at the documentation of the process that has led to those results, or at the context which is partially constitutive of the meaning of both the object and the process.

(b) Research definitions

The Research Assessment Exercise and the Arts and Humanities Research Council both employ research definitions (albeit different ones) that enable them to judge research projects in terms of eligibility criteria. I am intentionally drawing here again on the UK situation, because the official bodies charged with funding research there are explicit about their assessment standards. The definition of the RAE is briefly: ‘original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding.’²³

If we also take this broad definition of research as a benchmark for research in the arts – and I see no reason not to do so as of yet – then we can use it to derive the following criteria:

(1) The investigation should be *intended* as research. Inadvertent (fortuitous) contributions to knowledge and understanding cannot be regarded as research results.²⁴

(2) Research involves *original* contributions – that is, the work should not previously have been carried out by other people, and it should add new insights or knowledge to the existing corpus.²⁵

(3) The aim is to enhance *knowledge and understanding*. Works of art contribute as a rule to the artistic universe. That universe encompasses not only the traditional aesthetic sectors; today it also includes areas in which our social, psychological and moral life is set in motion in other ways – other performative, evocative and non-discursive ways. Hence we can speak of research in the arts only when the practice of art delivers an intended, original contribution to what we know and understand.²⁶

22 As the visual artist Robert Klatser pointed out to me, object, process and context cannot be, or at least not always, distinguished from one another in the experience of the artists themselves, in their practice of art creation. Yet such a counterfactual distinction is an aid to clarification, and it helps to guide and regulate research practices.

23 RAE 2005, 34. The full text is: “‘Research’ for the purpose of the RAE is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, and to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction.’

24 Cf. Dallow 2003.

25 For a problematisation of this criterion, see Pakes 2003.

26 The Dublin Descriptors 2004, which set out educational criteria under the Bologna Process, define research in a comparable manner: ‘a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge.’ Later, when the requirements for PhD research are discussed, this ostensibly broader definition of research is narrowed down to read ‘original research that extends the frontier of knowledge.’

The AHRC works with a different set of criteria to assess research proposals.²⁷ This stems from the fact that the AHRC, in contrast to the RAE, does not judge the results of research in retrospect and does not assess outcomes, but looks primarily at what the research is to involve and how the study is to be designed (hence, assessment in advance). Four criteria are set as parameters:

(1) The research must address clearly articulated *research questions* or problems.

(2) The importance of these questions and problems for a specified *research context* must be explained, including the contribution the project will make and how the study will relate to other research in the area.

(3) One or more *research methods* are to be specified that will be applied to address and possibly answer the questions and problems.

(4) The results of the research study and the research process are to be appropriately *documented and disseminated*. It goes without saying that research questions, context, methods, documentation and dissemination are all subject to change in the course of the study, but the assessment is based on the proposal for the study design at its inception.

Taken all together, the definitions above provide discriminating criteria for assessing whether activities qualify as research: intent, originality, knowledge and understanding, research questions, context, methods, documentation, dissemination. We can now employ these criteria to address the question of how art practice-as-research can be distinguished from art practice-in-itself. I shall do this in the form of a proposition which I hope others may see fit to challenge:

Art practice qualifies as research when its purpose is to broaden our knowledge and understanding through an original investigation. It begins with questions that are pertinent to the research context and the art world, and employs methods that are appropriate to the study. The process and outcomes of the research are appropriately documented and disseminated to the research community and to the wider public.

This 'definition' itself is little help as of yet. How do we know in our research, for example, what methods are 'appropriate to the study', and what 'appropriately documented' entails?²⁸ Opinions diverge on points like these in the debate on art research. The definition does at least furnish us with a *negative* criterion that we can use to distinguish art practice-in-itself (or protect it, if need be) from art practice intended-as-research. The next question is at least as important: In what respects does this type of research differ from the more mainstream academic research?

III – The intrinsic nature of research in the arts

The issue of the intrinsic nature of research in the arts can indeed best be addressed by also asking how that type of research differs from what we normally understand by scholarly or scientific research.²⁹ That does not mean we ought to conform in advance to the frameworks defined by traditional scholarship or science, but it also does not mean we should counterpose something to that form of scholarship that eludes those frameworks by definition. Perhaps it does mean that we, in dialogue with that type of scholarship, will arrive at a modified notion of what academic research is. And there is nothing new about this: the history and

27 AHRC 2003.

28 Does a visual portfolio suffice for a visual art project, for example, or is a verbal report or explanation always necessary to explain the study?

29 Cf. e.g. Eisner 2003.

theory of science have taught us that principles once considered absolute standards can be tempered under the influence of ascendant domains of knowledge, after which they remain as standards for one particular form of academic scholarship.

There are three ways to ask what makes art research distinctive in relation to current academic and scientific research: by posing an ontological, an epistemological and a methodological question.

The ontological question is (a): What is the nature of the object, of the subject matter, in research in the arts? To what does the research address itself? And in what respect does it thereby differ from other scholarly or scientific research?

The epistemological question is (b): What kinds of knowledge and understanding are embodied in art practice? And how does that knowledge relate to more conventional types of academic knowledge?

The methodological question is (c): What research methods and techniques are appropriate to research in the arts? And in what respect do these differ from the methods and techniques in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities?

Obviously one should not expect all these questions to be answered within the confines of this article. What I shall do below is to define the space within which the answers can be given. These parameters could be an aid in the struggle for legitimacy and autonomy for the research domain of the arts.

(a) The ontological question

As I argued above, it is useful to distinguish objects, processes and contexts when dealing with art practices. But the practice of art involves more than that. Artistic practices are at once aesthetic practices, which means that matters such as taste, beauty, the sublime and other aesthetic categories may be at issue and could form part of the subject matter for study. In addition, artistic practices are hermeneutic practices, because they always lend themselves to multiple or ambiguous interpretations, and even invite them.³⁰ Artistic practices are performative practices, in the sense that artworks and creative processes do something to us, set us in motion, alter our understanding and view of the world, also in a moral sense. Artistic practices are mimetic and expressive when they represent, reflect, articulate or communicate situations or events in their own way, in their own medium. By virtue of their very nature, artistic practices are also emotive, because they speak to our psychological, emotional life. So whenever we have to do with artistic practices, all these perspectives could be at work. Not every artistic investigation will deal with all these points of view at once, but theoretically any of them could figure in the research.

As noted above, the focus of research in the arts may lie on the artwork itself or on the creative, productive process, in both of which cases the signifying context also plays a role. In the debate about artistic research, there is a tendency to emphasize the productive process, because it can potentially be replicated, or in any case documented. This spotlight on the process also derives from the requirements that some funding bodies set for the studies – in assessing proposals, they are often chiefly interested in what the study design will be like, whether the work will be methodologically sound, whether the research questions are meaningful in the research context, and how the research process will be documented and the results disseminated. The artistic outcomes in the form of concrete works of art are, after all, more difficult to ‘objectively’ assess than the rigour with which the research process is designed and documented. The risk is that

30 Cf. Strand 1998, 46.

works of art will totally disappear from sight, as if research in the arts has nothing to do with the art itself.³¹

With respect to ontology, different types of academic research are concerned with different kinds of facts. Scientific facts differ from social facts, and both differ from historical facts. Artistic facts have their own intrinsic status, which cannot be conflated with scientific, social or historical facts, and which has been described in a range of different ways in philosophical aesthetics. One element of that status is its immateriality. More precisely, what is characteristic for artistic products, processes and experiences, is that, in and through the materiality of the medium, something is presented which transcends materiality. This insight, which recalls Hegel's sensory manifestation of the idea (*sinnliches Scheinen der Idee*), is also valid, paradoxically enough, even there where art professes to be purely material and resists any transcendence, as witnessed by the evolution of movements like the historical avant-garde or like minimalist or fundamental art. Research in the arts devotes attention to both: to the materiality of art to the extent that it makes the immaterial possible; and to the immateriality of the art to the extent that it is embedded in the artistic material.

Beyond the object and process of art research, the importance of context should also be underlined. Artistic practices do not stand on their own; they are always situated and embedded. No disinterested understanding of art practice is possible, or even a naive gaze. And conversely, no art practices exist that are not saturated with experiences, histories and beliefs. Research in the arts will remain naive unless it acknowledges and confronts this embeddedness and situatedness in history, in culture (society, economy, everyday life) as well as in the discourse on art.

To summarize, art research focuses on art objects and creative processes. This can involve aesthetic, hermeneutic, performative, expressive and emotive points of view. If the focus of investigation is on the creative process, one should not lose sight of the result of that process – the work of art itself. Both the material content and the immaterial, nonconceptual and nondiscursive contents of creative processes and artistic products may be articulated and communicated in the research study. In all cases, art research should examine the embeddedness and situatedness of its object of investigation.

(b) The epistemological question

With what kind of knowledge and understanding does research in the arts concern itself? And how does that knowledge relate to more conventional forms of scholarly knowledge? The short answer to the first question is: knowledge embodied in art practices (objects, processes). The answer to the second question will provide a closer understanding of what 'embodied knowledge' may be.

A first avenue of approach derives from a tradition, extending back to Greek antiquity, which distinguishes theoretical knowledge from practical knowledge. As early as Aristotle, the concept of *episteme*, intellectual knowledge, was contrasted with *techne*, practical knowledge required for making (*poiesis*) and doing (*praxis*). The concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, in particular the knowledge of how to conduct oneself (particularly in a moral sense), can also be understood in opposition to intellectual knowledge, which was known to be deficient when it came to worldly wisdom.³² In the 20th century, this opposition was thematized in analytic philosophy as that between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', between knowledge and skill. Notably Gilbert Ryle, and after him Michael Polanyi and

31 Cf. Biggs 2003, and especially Pakes 2004, who, citing Gadamer, urges a return to the work of art as an object of research.

32 See Carr 1999, and Kessels & Korthagen 2001.

the art theoretician David Carr elevated practical knowledge – which, being tacit, implicit knowledge, finds no direct discursive or conceptual expression – to an epistemologically equal footing, and Polanyi even saw it as the foundation of all knowledge.³³

Since Alexander Baumgarten, the knowledge embodied in art has been a subject of speculation and reflection in philosophical aesthetics as well. The nonconceptual knowledge embodied in art has been analysed in many different ways: in Baumgarten as ‘*analogon rationis*’, through which great art is able to manifest perfect sensory knowledge; in Immanuel Kant as ‘cultural value’ (*Kulturwert*), the quality through which art gives food for thought and distinguishes itself from mere aesthetic gratification of the senses; in Friedrich W.J. Schelling as the ‘organon of philosophy’, the art experience that rises above every conceptual framework and is the only experience that can touch on the ‘absolute’; in Theodor W. Adorno as the ‘epistemic character’ (*Erkenntnischarakter*), through which art ‘articulates’ the hidden truth about the dark reality of society; and also in postmodern contemporaries like Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze, who, each in their own way, counterpose the evocative power of that which is embodied in art to the restricting nature of intellectual knowledge.

Some contributors to the debate on the specificity of research in the arts entertain the belief that art comes into being purely on the basis of intuition, on irrational grounds and via noncognitive routes, and that this makes it inaccessible for investigation from within. This misconception arises when the nonconceptual content of artistic facts becomes confused with their presumed noncognitive form, and when the nondiscursive manner in which that content is presented to us is presumed to betray its irrationality. Yet the phenomena at work in the artistic domain are decidedly cognitive and rational, even if we cannot always directly access them via language and concepts. Part of the specificity of art research therefore lies in the distinctive manner in which the nonconceptual and nondiscursive contents are articulated and communicated.

The epistemological issue of the distinctive character of art knowledge is also addressed by phenomenology, by hermeneutics and by the cognitive sciences. In the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, embodied knowledge is also concretely ‘bodily knowledge’. The *a priori* of the body assumes the place of the *a priori* of intellectual knowledge, making the prereflexive bodily intimacy with the world around us into the foundation of our thinking, acting and feeling. In the context of the current debate, Merleau-Ponty’s insights have had strong influence in theatre studies³⁴ and also in gender studies.

I already mentioned hermeneutics as a vehicle for accessing what is at work in art. The fundamental ambiguity of art works renders interpretation an unfinished process in which the interpreter and the interpreted temporarily melt together in ever-receding interpretative horizons. This ‘effective history’ (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), as Hans-Georg Gadamer has called it, enables the productive interpretation of art research to generate new meanings, embodied in concrete works of art.

Embodied knowledge has also been one of the focuses of research in the field of cognitive psychology, as in the work of Howard Gardner on multiple intelligence, or that of Herbert Dreyfus on artificial intelligence.³⁵ The zone between cognition and creativity is now even under exploration in collaborative projects between scientists and artists.³⁶

33 See Ryle 1949, Polanyi 1962 and 1966, and Carr 1978 and 1999.

34 Particularly dance studies; see e.g. Parviainen 2002.

35 Cf. Gardner 1985, Dreyfus 1982.

36 *Choreography and Cognition*. <http://www.choreocog.net/>.

In sum, the knowledge embodied in art, which has been variously analysed as tacit, practical knowledge, as ‘knowing-how’ and as sensory knowledge, is cognitive, though nonconceptual; and it is rational, though nondiscursive. The distinctive nature of the knowledge content has been analysed in depth in phenomenology, hermeneutics and cognitive psychology.

(c) The methodological question

Before I turn to the question of which methods and techniques of investigation are appropriate to research in the arts, and in what respects they may differ from those in other scholarly domains, it seems wise to draw a distinction between the terms ‘method’ and ‘methodology’. In the debate on research in the arts, the term ‘methodology’ is frequently used at times when one simply means ‘method’ in the singular or plural. Although ‘methodology’ may sound more weighty, the procedures it refers to can usually be less mystifyingly called ‘methods’. I am following here the suggestion made by Ken Friedman in an exchange of views about research training in the arts, when he proposed using ‘methodology’ exclusively to refer to the comparative study of methods.³⁷ A ‘method’ is then simply a well-considered, systematic way of reaching a particular objective.

The central question here is: Is there a characteristic, privileged way of obtaining access to the research domain of art practice and the knowledge embodied in it, a route that could be denoted by the term ‘artistic research’? Under what premises can such research be done, and, in conjunction with this, should such research orient itself to or conform to approved academic (or scientific) standards and conventions? Here, too, opinions in the debate differ widely, and it is not always clear whether a person’s stance is informed by considerations pertinent to the issue or by motives that are essentially extraneous to art research. Individuals and institutions that have an interest in using partly institutional means to protect their activities, for example against the bureaucratic world of the universities, may be more inclined to adopt an ‘independent’ course than those who are less afraid of selling their body and soul.

One distinction from more mainstream scholarly research is that research in the arts is generally performed by artists. In fact, one could argue that *only* artists are capable of conducting such practice-based research. But if that is the case, objectivity then becomes an urgent concern, as one criterion for sound academic research is a fundamental *indifference* as to who performs the research. Any other investigator ought to be able to obtain the same results under identical conditions. Do artists have privileged access to the research domain, then? The answer is yes. Because artistic creative processes are inextricably bound up with the creative personality and with the individual, sometimes idiosyncratic gaze of the artist, research like this can best be performed ‘from within’. Moreover, the activity at issue here is research *in* art practice, which implies that creating and performing are themselves part of the research process – so who else besides creators and performers would be qualified to carry them out? Now this blurring of the distinction between subjects and objects of study becomes further complicated by the fact that the research is often of partial, or even primary, benefit to the artist-researcher’s own artistic development. Obviously there must be limits. In cases where the impact of research remains confined to the artist’s own oeuvre and has no significance for the wider research context, then one can justifiably ask whether this qualifies as research in the true sense of the word.

37 See Ken Friedman’s contribution to the PhD-Design list on 9 April 2002.

Just as with the ontology and epistemology of research in the arts, the issue of methodology may also be further clarified by a comparison with mainstream scholarship. Taking the broad classification into three academic domains as a reference, we can make the following rough generalizations about the different methods associated with them. As a rule, the natural sciences have an empirical-deductive orientation; that is, their methods are experimental and are designed to explain phenomena. Experiments and laboratory settings are characteristic of natural science research. The social sciences are likewise empirically oriented as a rule; their methods are usually not experimental, however, but are primarily designed to describe and analyse data. Quantitative and qualitative analysis exemplify social science research. One method developed in the social science disciplines of ethnography and social anthropology is participant observation. This approach acknowledges the mutual interpenetration of the subject and object of field research, and might serve to an extent as a model for some types of research in the arts. The humanities are as a rule more analytically than empirically oriented, and they focus more on interpretation than on description or explanation. Characteristic forms of research in the humanities are historiography, philosophical reflection and cultural criticism.

If we compare various fields of scholarship with one another and ask (1) whether they are exact or interpretive in nature, (2) whether they seek to identify universal laws or to understand particular and specific instances, and (3) whether experimentation plays a part in their research, then we arrive at the following schematic structure.³⁸ Pure mathematics is generally an exact, universally valid and nonexperimental science. The natural sciences likewise seek to generate exact knowledge that corresponds to universal laws or patterns, but which, contrary to mathematical knowledge, is often obtained by experimental means. These can be contrasted with art history (to cite just one example from the humanities), which is not primarily interested in formulating precise, universal laws, but more in gaining access to the particular and the singular through interpretation. Experimentation plays virtually no role there at all.

The distinctive position that arts research occupies in this respect now comes into view. Research in the arts likewise generally aims at interpreting the particular and the unique, but in this type of research practical experimentation is an essential element. Hence, the answer to the question of art research methodology is briefly that the research design incorporates both experimentation and participation in practice and the interpretation of that practice.

In summary, research in the arts is performed by artists as a rule, but their research envisages a broader-ranging impact than the development of their own artistry. Unlike other domains of knowledge, art research employs both experimental and hermeneutic methods in addressing itself to particular and singular products and processes.

If we now take together these explorations of the ontological, epistemological and methodological facets of research in the arts and condense them into one brief formula, we arrive at the following characterisation:

38 I am indebted here to Nevanlinna (2004). I agree with the author in acknowledging that the comparison is rather rough. Moreover, especially in view of the evolution of modern science and recent insights in the philosophy of science, classifications like these should definitely be viewed with scepticism. For example, it is very common today, particularly for non-physicists, to point to the incommensurable paradigms of quantum mechanics, relativity theory and classical mechanics in order to emphasize the interpretive nature of scientific knowledge.

Art practice – both the art object and the creative process – embodies situated, tacit knowledge that can be revealed and articulated by means of experimentation and interpretation.

In conjunction with the earlier answer to the question of how art practice-as-research can be distinguished from art practice-in-itself, we now arrive at the following definition:

Art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes. Art research begins by addressing questions that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world. Researchers employ experimental and hermeneutic methods that reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes. Research processes and outcomes are documented and disseminated in an appropriate manner to the research community and the wider public.

IV – Coda: legitimacy

Research on the supervision of practice-based research projects in the arts³⁹ has shown that one difficulty experienced by both PhD candidates and their supervisors lies in the distrust and scepticism of those around them – individuals in their own institutions as well as those in wider circles – with respect to research of this type. Those involved in art research often have to ‘sell’ their research as a credible endeavour, and to consume much time and energy in being forced to repeatedly explain to all sorts of individuals and authorities what the research involves and what the rationale of this type of research is. Overcoming institutional barriers and persuading other people claim a disproportionate amount of time, quite apart from the fact that this usually has little to do with the actual topic of research. And the burden of proof always rests with the ‘novices’, whereas the legitimacy of mainstream academic research is seldom fundamentally challenged.

The issue culminates in the question of whether research in which the creation of art is intermeshed with the research process is indeed serious scholarly research, and whether it is PhD-worthy.⁴⁰ Some would argue that although research-like art practices in themselves can or do have value – a value comparable or even equivalent to that of scholarly research – we are nevertheless dealing with two unlike endeavours: true research on the one hand, and on the other hand an activity that must be kept distinct from research, even if it might be of equivalent value from a societal or other viewpoint. In the debate on practice-based doctorates in the arts opinions differ on this point. Frayling (in UKCGE), Strand and others have argued in this connection for introducing the concept of ‘research equivalence’.⁴¹ I would suspect that one motive of the ‘research equivalence’-proponents may be that practice-based research, with its nondiscursive, performative and artistic qualities, will then no longer have to be ‘sold’.

Because art practices, irrespective of whether they present themselves as research, are considered of value to our culture, another argument goes, the practitioners perhaps deserve to be rewarded with a higher education degree as well as with funding – but the *name* of that degree ought to make clear that it is not based on ‘true’ scholarly research; in other words, it should not be a PhD but some sort of ‘professional doctorate’. The distinction between PhDs and professional doctorates has existed in the United States for some time. Basically one could argue that the research-oriented academic world in that

39 Hockey & Allen-Collinson 2000; Hockey 2003.

40 Candlin 2000a and 2000b.

41 UKCGE 1997; Strand 1998.

country regards professional doctorates as inferior, whereas the professional art world tends to look down on the more 'academic' degrees like MAs and PhDs.

In addition to equivalence, another theme in the PhD-versus-PD debate in the arts involves the nature and orientation of the doctoral degree. Those who are inclined to compare research in the arts to endeavours like technical, applied research or design research will be more likely to argue for a professional doctorate than those who would emphasize the kinship between art research and humanities or cultural studies research. Another proposal, partly aimed at avoiding an unwanted proliferation of titles and to keep the system of degrees transparent, is to introduce a so-called inclusive model.⁴² The PhD would then signify that its holder is capable of conducting research at the highest level, but would leave open whether that was 'pure' academic research or practice-based research. The entire spectrum from theoretical research to design research, from the natural sciences to classical studies, from dentistry, food quality management and civil engineering to theology, fiscal law and creative arts, could all be encompassed within that PhD degree.

The misgivings about the legitimacy of practice-based research degrees in the creative and performing arts arise mainly because people have trouble taking research seriously that is designed, articulated and documented with both discursive and artistic means. The difficulty lurks in the presumed impossibility of arriving at a more or less objective assessment of the quality of the research – as if a specialized art forum did not already exist alongside the academic one, and as if academic or scientific objectivity itself were an unproblematic notion. In a certain sense, a discussion is repeating itself here, which has already taken place (and still continues) with respect to the emancipation of the social sciences: the prerogative of the old guard that thinks it holds the standard of quality against the rights of the newcomers, who, by introducing their own field of research, actually alter the current understanding of what scholarship and objectivity are.

If the comparison with the emancipation of the social sciences is at all valid, then there is still a long way to go. Even after two centuries of debate about the fundamental premise of social science, some people, both inside and outside the universities, still question the autonomy (and legitimacy) of that domain of knowledge. On the other hand, the rapid development of a new discipline like cultural studies may also give cause for optimism. Perhaps I would be going too far to call for a paradigm shift, but I do know for sure that a shift in thinking is needed in the minds of some people. We knew we would face tough resistance, and though that may dampen our spirits from time to time, it is a challenge we can meet.

42 See e.g. UKCGE 1997, 14ff, 26ff.

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