

Knowledge Production in/through/for Art: The Challenges of Artistic Research

Author: Vincent Meelberg

Introduction

Artistic research continues to be a rather problematic term. Is not all art also research, and artistic research thus a pleonasm? After all, creating art is about the exploration of new expressive possibilities, a research into how materials and/or media can be used in order to create an object, a performance, a collection of sounds and or images, an entity created by one or more artists that has the potentiality to affect anyone that is exposed to it in some way or another. In short: research is an integral element in all artistic practices, and thus to call some of these practices artistic research seems to be senseless.

Why, then, has the notion of artistic research been introduced? Or, to put it differently, what is the use of artistic research? This question was addressed during the Art Research Conference, held at ArtEZ University of the Arts in Arnhem on 18 and 19 November 2016, and one of the speakers at this conference was Peter Sonderen, professor of Theory in the Arts at ArtEZ. In his talk, he asserted that artistic research was introduced in art education for institutional reasons primarily.¹ There was not acute inherent artistic necessity to engage in a practice that we now call artistic research. Instead, it was the academy that saw new opportunities for creating new programmes, and of course also new possibilities to get funding, by introducing the discipline called artistic research. Artist-researchers, for their part, need to find ways to turn this discipline into a practice that may be productive for both the artists themselves as well as for the academy.

The challenge artistic researchers thus have to face is to show the productivity, or perhaps even the necessity, of artistic research. At the Research Festival Music and AIRs Meetup on 13 September 2017, again held at ArtEZ Arnhem, an attempt was made to do exactly this. During this festival several artist-researchers, including myself, presented their artistic research projects. In the end, this may be the best way to show the value of artistic research: by presenting the actual results of artistic research projects and articulating how an artistic

¹ See <http://studiumgenerale.artez.nl/2016/12/lecture-peter-sonderen-the-third-way-artistic-research-why-leonardo-was-no-artistic-researcher/>

research approach, as opposed to a purely artistic one, has contributed to arriving at these results, results that would not have been possible to attain in any other way.

In this essay, I will discuss the kinds of knowledge artistic research can produce, and what its possible value can be, as well as the challenges it may possibly face. First, I will focus on the notion of artistic practice. What do we mean by the term? What does it entail, what does it allow that other practices do not, or cannot? And how does it relate to research? Next, I will provide a blueprint of how artistic research projects could be designed. In doing so, I will refer to my own research into musical improvisation. Finally, I will explore the kinds of knowledge artistic research can produce, as well as the methods that are typically used in order to attain this knowledge. In this exploration, I will refer to the research projects that were presented during the Research Festival Music and AIRs Meetup on 13 September 2017. One of the main arguments that I will develop in this essay is that artistic research, being research in and through artistic practices, provides insights into these practices from a unique perspective, namely that of the artist, insights that cannot be gained in any other way.

Artistic Practices

Artists engage in artistic practices. They perform actions that result in objects, performances, sounds, or any other phenomena that we call works of art. The primary function of artistic practice thus is to create sensations, affects, experiences, and or ideas through the manipulation of materials such as paint, wood, light, human bodies, sounds, etc. In the case of music, for instance, artistic practices entail the production of sounds or the creation of prescriptions how to create certain sounds, i.e. musical scores. To create these works one needs a method, or a collection of methods. One has to have certain techniques, philosophies, theories, or ideas to be able to create music. Musicians need to know how to play their instruments, musicians and composers need to have certain ideas as to the kinds of music they want to create, as well as the goals they have concerning their musical practices. They have to be clear about what they intend to achieve through their music and be able to realize these.

At the earlier mentioned 2016 Research Conference, Jeroen Lutters, professor of Education in Arts and Culture at ArtEZ, outlined in more detail what artistic practices consist of.²

² See <http://studiumgenerale.artez.nl/2016/12/lecture-jeroen-lutters-contemporary-arts-education-art-as-a-different-way-thinking/>

According to Lutters, these practices require ways of thinking that are characterised by conjectures (abduction), chance (aleatory), relations (association) and similarities (analogy). During that same conference Jeroen van den Eijnde, professor of Product & Interior Design at ArtEZ, added that artistic practices are characterised by creativity and speculative thinking.³ In contrast to conventional academic research, which mainly reflects on existing phenomena, artists focus on what might be possible, on that what is not a reality yet, but what may become a reality in the future, and actualise these possibilities through the production of artworks or designs. Artistic practices thus may be considered as practices in which the possible is made actual, by using techniques, philosophies, and/or theories that allow artists to identify relations and similarities, to recognise the value of chance, and to make conjectures concerning possible futures that have not yet been realised.

Henk Borgdorff, professor of Theory of Research in the Arts at Leiden University, maintains that these practices are central to artistic research (Borgdorff, 2012). Artistic research tries to understand what artistic practice is. What does it mean, for instance, to create music? What does it entail? More specifically, according to Borgdorff practice is the method, content, and outcome of artistic research. As knowledge and experience are accumulated through practice, access to artistic knowledge could be gained via the research of artistic practice. In Borgdorff's view knowledge in art is pre-reflective, non-conceptual, and non-articulated, other than via artworks themselves. This means that knowledge regarding musical performance is conveyed through performance itself. As a result, this knowledge generally remains implicit, except perhaps when addressed in concert program notes. But even in these cases this explication usually remains at a rather superficial level. It is the task of artistic research, however, Borgdorff suggests, to convey and communicate the content enclosed in artistic experience, artistic practice, and artistic products. Artistic research attempts to articulate artistic knowledge, which in conventional artistic practices remains tacit and implicit, in order for it to become shared and open up the possibility for discussion of this knowledge by others than the artists themselves. One of the challenges - one might even say duties - of artistic research thus is to make the implicit explicit in a clear and convincing manner.

The Design of Artistic Research

³ See <http://studiumgenerale.artez.nl/2017/01/lecture-jeroen-eijnde/>

Now that I have established what it means to engage in artistic practices, it is time to address the question of what research is. In a broad sense, research can be described as the investigation or study of a phenomenon in order to arrive at conclusions regarding this phenomenon and to acquire new knowledge. Academic, scholarly research, in turn, is an exploration of a phenomenon according to a specific methodology. The method that is used in this exploration needs to be made transparent and clear, so that other people can understand how new knowledge regarding this phenomenon is gained.

In the case of artistic research artistic practice is a crucial part of its research methodology. Therefore, in the case of musical artistic research, an important part of its research methodology is the practice of creation of music, which includes the writing, recording, and performance of music. In a recent project on musical improvisation that I did the methodology indeed included the creation of music, more specifically musical improvisation, as well as an investigation into the creational processes that resulted in this improvisational performance (Meelberg, 2016).

The design of this research was created by distinguishing between aims, questions, concepts, method, results, and reflection. In artistic research, the aims concern the acquiring of new knowledge regarding artistic practices. In the case of my project, the aim was to gain new knowledge regarding musical improvisation. Furthermore, research questions need to be formulated. These are specifications of the aims of the research into 'manageable' questions. For my project, two main questions were formulated: 1. Who or what is in control during a musical improvisation? 2. Which factors have the potentiality to influence an improvisation? To answer these questions, concepts that appear to be relevant to the research need to be identified and defined. In my case materiality, control, and creativity were the main concepts. Next, the method needs to be selected. The method is the manner in which the researcher intends to address the research questions. For my project, I decided to use auto-ethnography to document, albeit post-hoc, my personal experiences during the improvisation, the act of improvising itself - i.e. the artistic practice this research centres around -, and to use musical analysis of the recording of my improvisation. This set of methods generates results, which are the outcomes of the experiments, the artistic practices, the analyses, etc. Finally, through private and public reflection - including so-called 'armchair thinking' and discussions with other improvisers and scholars - these results are critically evaluated by incorporating theory and prior research. The main theory that was relevant for my project was actor-network

theory, which focuses on the role both human and non-human actants - such as for instance musical instruments or the acoustics of a room - play in human activities. It is at this stage that implicit knowledge is made explicit by juxtaposing the analysis of artistic practices with critical thinking and theory.

This explication can be done in several ways. Traditionally, in academia language, both written and spoken, is the preferred means through which knowledge is made explicit. Writing papers and books, presenting at conferences, and lecturing at universities are the preferred ways of sharing and discussing scholarly knowledge. In artistic research these ways of explicating and disseminating knowledge are also often employed, but other means are explored here as well. Examples are lecture-performances, which are similar to concert program notes in that the performer(s) explain particular issues that are addressed through the performance of music. Language here is thus combined with musical performance. Audio and video are also frequently used in artistic research, as well as other digital technologies that allow the combination of audio, video, and language. The *Journal for Artistic Research* is an example of a platform that provides artist-researchers to experiment with new, multimedial ways to explicate and share the knowledge they gained through their artistic research.

The Practice of Artistic Research

During the Research Festival Music and AIRs Meetup several artist-researchers presented their projects. When looking at the aims that were formulated for these projects, we can distinguish four categories of artistic research. The first category amounts to doing artistic research for the arts themselves. This kind of research aims to arrive at new understandings regarding artistic practices in order to expand these practices, to enrich them with new techniques or approaches. An example of this kind of research is the presentation by Anouk Sanzcuk, entitled 'Studying violin technique to interpret jazz music.' Through the analysis of jazz improvisations by other musicians as well as experimenting with different techniques herself, Sanzcuk aimed to explore the possibilities to improvise on the violin within a jazz idiom and in doing so enrich the expressive possibilities of violin improvisation within this idiom.

The second category of artistic research that can be identified is artistic research that aims to gain new theoretical knowledge about art and artistic practices. In this type of research new concepts or reconceptualizations of existing concepts are developed. Falk Hübner's research

can be considered as one that aims to gather new theoretical knowledge. In his presentation, entitled ‘Hard Times: Artistic Research as Extension of “The Work,”’ Hübner explained how, through theoretical reflection and artistic experimentation, he arrived at a reconceptualization of the notion of the musical work.

Artistic research that aims to produce knowledge regarding the world, society, and or culture is the third category of artistic research that we can identify. This kind of research attempts to arrive at new understandings about the world we live in, or even tries to provoke a change in the way we perceive the world. Adele Varcoe has done exactly that in her research that she presented in her keynote lecture entitled ‘Feeling Fashion,’ also by using theoretical reflection and artistic experimentation as methods (see also: http://airs.artez.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AIRs-Adele-Varcoe_2-april-2018.pdf).

Finally, artistic research can aim at creating tools and solutions that can be used outside of artistic fields. Frans Jan Wind had performed this kind of research, as he explained in his presentation entitled ‘Virtual E-motions: Applied Computer Composition in Practice.’

Although initially this research did have an artistic aim, namely to develop tools that allowed for new ways of controlling musical sounds through physical gestures, he soon realised that these tools could also be used in therapeutical settings. And it was again through artistic experimentation that Wind was able to develop these tools.

Conclusion

During his lecture at ArtEZ University of the Arts’ Art Research Conference in November 2016 Henk Oosterling, Associate Professor of Philosophy of Man and Culture at Erasmus University Rotterdam, stressed that the artist’s body is present in all art disciplines.⁴ The presence of this body, however, is not self-evident. It is part of what Oosterling calls a transformative process in which reflection and action crossbreed. Reflective skills transform both the artists’ bodies and their minds, as well as transforming the audience’s reflections. Oosterling concluded that in order to adequately research these performative interactions, a focus on theory as well as embodiment is needed, while trying to avoid ending up in a binary opposition between mind and body.

⁴ See <http://studiumgenerale.artez.nl/2016/12/lecture-henk-oosterling-threefold-embodiment-researching-performative-reflection/>

Studying the role that the body plays in artistic practices is an excellent example of a type of inquiry that can be done via artistic research. The knowledge that allows artists to use their bodies in artistic practices is generally tacit and implicit. The challenge of artistic research is precisely to focus on artistic practices to make the implicit explicit in a convincing and clear manner, including the ways in which the body is used in these practices. Artistic research provides insights into artistic practices from the perspective of the artists themselves, and produces knowledge about artistic practices by explicating the kinds of knowledge, including embodied knowledge that would remain implicit otherwise. As the presentations at the Research Festival Music and AIRs Meetup on 13 September 2017 showed, the methods through which this knowledge can be gained include theoretical reflection, analysis of artworks, and, most prominently, experimentation, i.e. artistic practice itself. Because in the end, practice is the method, content, and outcome of artistic research.

References

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