

## Artistic Research – challenges in a new academic field

*This essay describes some of the conditions and circumstances leading to the recent emergence of “artistic research” as an international academic discipline and field in general, and the establishing of the doctoral level Norwegian Artistic Research Programme in 2003 in particular. The ideological trends and political changes preceding the reforms of education structures during the 1990s serves as a backdrop for discussing the challenges that the artists entering this new and still evolving field are facing. Both regarding questions of relevant content, methods and formats, but also to gain a better understanding of the underlying premises and foundation for this practice based research discipline.*

### Societal and political changes

Before dealing with the challenges of the emerging field of artistic research itself, it is necessary to take a closer look at the historical development of education policies and the political and societal changes that have taken place in Europe the last 70 years, and which can shed some light on the foundations and inherent challenges of this new field.

According to Guro Hansen Helskog’s account of the historical changes ahead of the far-reaching reforms of education structures in Norway during the 1990s (Helskog, 2003), several factors that can be seen as influential on the political need for these reforms. Similar changes took place in the rest of Europe after World War II, so to some extent this can be seen as representative of a general trend in many countries. Factors include the huge rise in students completing higher education during the 50s and 60s, dramatically increasing government expenses for education. In addition to the prevailing ideas of equal access to education, personal growth and democratic development, this was perhaps also due to the overall emphasis on economic and welfare growth after the war, and the technological competition with the Soviet system for which the space race during this period can serve as an excellent example. In Norway, a number of new colleges were established to cater for the huge rise in student numbers, often built in small towns scattered around the country in accordance with the political ideal of decentralisation. After growth started slowing and industry started declining, economic uncertainty made itself a reality during the 70s and 80s and several things happened. One thing was the post-industrial introduction of the idea of the *knowledge society* that were to follow the previous industrialised one, and another was the now all too familiar talk of the need for *austerity policy* to keep expenses down in the new economic reality. This need to keep costs down while still giving priority to education meant that education structures had to be organized more efficiently. From the late 80s on and through the 1990s this led to a series of extensive education reforms in Norway, inspired by the ideas of new public management spreading through all parts of state administration. As part of this still on-going process of increasing efficiency by mimicking corporations, most small colleges were merged into larger entities like universities and university colleges. Thus, former small specialized and independent knowledge cultivating colleges were turned into bigger centralized knowledge production

facilities, resulting in standardisation of education structures, goals and organisation. The affordance of still growing student numbers were surely helping to democratize higher education, but in the new knowledge economy the stated political goal was now to serve the businesses' need for qualified workers. These changes involved a shift in the view of education and knowledge. From the late 19th century humanistic formation viewpoint – education as a right for individuals and better knowledge for the greater good of democracy, towards a view of higher education as a way of making sure the workforce's full potential could be exploited, at the same time turning knowledge into a commodity that could contribute to the overall production and economic growth. This is illustrated by the title of the Report to the Parliament (Stortingsmelding) no. 43 (1988/89): "*More Knowledge to More People*", by then minister of education Gudmund Hernes.

These events using knowledge as an economical driving force can also be related to the changes in academia and research communities described by Michael Gibbons and colleagues in "The new production of knowledge" (Gibbons et al., 1994). They identified a shift towards what they dubbed a "Mode 2" way of conducting research, differing from what they saw as a traditionally autonomous *basic research* kind of knowledge production, which they then classified as "Mode 1". According to this description, the traditional Mode 1 research is characterised by being carried out in an academic context (without concern for practical application), within individual disciplines and by homogenous groups of participants, autonomously and without social accountability, and assessed through traditional quality control with peer reviews. In contrast to this, the authors claimed that there was a major shift towards research that is highly interactive and socially distributed. Characteristic of this mode of knowledge production is that it is carried out in context of application, is often trans-disciplinary in scope, produced by a diverse and heterogeneous mix of organisations both inside and outside academia, reflexive and accountable in their relation to society, and assessed through novel forms of quality control not only limited to disciplinary peers.

This trend and its description has been widely debated, and though the concepts have been adjusted by the original authors and critiqued and reconsidered by others (Hessels & van Lente, 2008), it seems to be consensus that there is a general trend towards a more diverse mix of different ways, places and actors engaged in research. The debate was also somewhat affectional as there seemed to be a conflict of values involved, threatening the hegemony of "proper" scientific basic research. As Donald E. Stokes points out (Stokes, 1997) this view that the pure basic research is of a somehow higher standard and hence higher value, can be traced to the research policies laid out in post war America. According to this account, the success owing to the scientific progress during World War II especially in nuclear physics inspired policymakers to keep and further increase funding for basic research during peacetime. This was both to encourage economic growth and to gain the upper hand in the ideological and technological competition with the soviets. Vannevar Bush, director of the wartime Office of Scientific Research and Development was the one tasked with working out the post war science policies by US president Roosevelt. He was the one who coined the term *basic research* and he postulated its superiority by insisting that the creativity of basic science would be lost if hindered by practical ends. These thoughts had an important influence on the scientific boom during the 50s and 60s and set the premises for later policies and

ideas about science, where basic research is the supplier of the knowledge taught in universities. This applies still after the turn to more diverse and application oriented research and when knowledge is seen as rivalling industry as an economic factor – research is still seen as the knowledge basis for higher education.

### Emergence of a New Field

Following the events described above, the new and larger education structures that resulted from the 1990s college mergers in Norway brought about a whole new institutional environment for higher education in the field of visual arts, music, dance, theatre, and design and crafts. This is also true for the development in many other European countries.

In Norway, many private run arts schools had been professionalized as colleges a few decades earlier during the 70s and 80s. In Trondheim for instance, Trøndelag Music Conservatory became a college in 1973 when the former privately owned Trondhjem Music School founded in 1911 was split into a municipal music school for children of school age and a state-run Music Conservatory for higher education. Similarly, the Trondheim Academy of Fine Arts established in 1951 became a state-run college in 1979. As the education reforms of the 90s attempted to find more efficient ways of administering the many colleges that had been created in Norway from the 60s on, arts colleges were included in the mergers into larger entities and because of that also affected by the law of 1995 on higher education, specifying that universities and university colleges should provide higher education *and research* on an international level. Thus in Trondheim, Trøndelag Music Conservatory and Trondheim Academy of Fine Arts became parts of the newly created Norwegian University of Science and Technology with the 1996 merger of the Norwegian Institute of Technology, the Norwegian College of General Sciences, the Museum of Natural History and Archaeology, and the Faculty of Medicine (“NTNUs historie,” n.d.).

Part of the process of increasing efficiency was standardizing the different education structures of the former independent colleges, and so the former art colleges comparable to professional schools were transformed into university departments subject to the university education system where research was now one of their duties.

This process of standardization of higher education was mirrored by a political drive within the European Union to include education in the free flow of a common inner market. With the economical aim of “facilitating mobility” of work forces, education ministries in Europe started a process of harmonizing the structures of higher education in the late 1990s, creating a framework for standardizing education credits, levels and grades. This process is known as the Bologna Process, named after the initial accord signed by the European education ministers in Bologna in 1999 (“BOLOGNA - an overview of the main elements,” n.d.). Part of this standardization was the specification of a three-tier division of higher education into a first cycle (bachelor degree), second cycle (master’s degree) and third cycle (doctoral degree). This meant that by definition, higher education was to include doctoral degrees based around research, and so the higher art education institutions had to come up with ways to implement this.

According to Torsten Kälvmärk's account in his chapter on University politics in "The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts" (Kälvmärk, 2010), this was the direct cause behind the establishing of many doctoral programmes in artistic research in Europe. In the US, a system with "professional doctorates" had been practiced for decades, awarding doctoral degrees based on artistic achievements when hiring professors and treating professional work in the arts as a *research equivalent*.

In Europe and Australia, the move was instead to try to broaden the definition of research. This was however controversial both in academia and the field of arts education. For one thing, in the authoritative classification of science disciplines developed by UNESCO in 1979 to facilitate comparison of science statistics, the definition explicitly excludes *artistic research of any kind*. This classification became the de facto standard and lived on in the framework used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as laid down in the *Frascati Manual* that in its latest edition from 2002 still explicitly excludes artistic research of *any kind* (Borgdorff, 2012). Based on this it is no surprise that many academics were critical of artistic practice being classified (and even worse – funded) as research. On the other hand, many in the field of art education were likewise sceptical of having artistic practice adhere to academic requirements. From a broader perspective, the trend of treating artistic practice as research was perhaps not so foreign to artists, at least for the visual arts field that have been working conceptually for a long time. To explore new frontiers was an important part of modernism, and the term 'research' was already being used by curators and other actors in the art world to describe what artists were doing. Still, as Kälvmärk concludes, the establishment in Europe of a full-fledged artistic research field *within* academia was by and large, with the possible exception of Finland, primarily a consequence of the reforms of education structures described above (Kälvmärk, 2010).

Following these developments, doctoral and research programmes in the arts started to appear in many countries such as the UK, Sweden, Norway, Holland, Austria as well as the ones already established in Australia. All followed different paths in the challenging task of trying to protect the requirements of artistic practice while at the same time adhering to academic standards. In Norway, the Ministry of Education directed two studies during 1999 in order to work out how to establish a doctoral degree in the arts. Representatives from the Art academies considered the programmes in place in Sweden and the UK, and then proposed to establish a national fellowship programme for artistic development, common for all arts education institutions. Cautious that the standard academic PhD model would provide too strict a framework for doing research through art practice, they instead recommended to set up an independent programme, *on level* with the doctorate but not linked to any degree. This position at the outskirts of academia helped ease potential tension between the two spheres that were to be brought together. In 2003 this turned in to reality when the Norwegian Programme for Artistic Development was launched, admitting about 6 fellows a year drawn from all arts fields and giving associate professor competence though without awarding a formal PhD degree – at least for the time being (Malterud, 2012).

## Artistic Research, *why, what and how*

As these accounts show, establishing *artistic research* as an academic field in Europe was a pragmatic result of the changing education policies and of a general professionalization of society giving more people higher education, as well as the inner market standardization of education structures within the European Union. So, without really having to address *why* artistic research should exist as a field, artists in academia now face the questions of *what* artistic research is supposed to be and *how* it should be carried out. This has been constantly debated for the past 15 years or so, among others by Henk Borgdorff who was involved in setting up art research programs in Holland and who has taken upon him to review the relation between artistic research and academia and map out a framework for the new field. Through his articles written between 2004-2011 and compiled in the book "*The Conflict of the Faculties*" (Borgdorff, 2012) he paints a thorough vision of what artistic research ought to be and, at least from a theoretical point of view, how it can be conducted in academic terms. In addition to argue for the inclusion of art education amongst the PhD-awarding "higher" faculties (paraphrasing Immanuel Kant's call for inclusion of natural sciences, humanities and philosophy amongst the then higher faculties of theology, law and medicine in 1798), Borgdorff goes to great lengths to define when art practice should qualify as research as compared to other artistic practice and traditional academic research. He bases his criteria on the existing definitions of research used by funding bodies such as the UK Research Assessment Exercise and Arts and Humanities Research Council, which in short describe research as '*an original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge that is then effectively shared*'. This is similar to the ideas in other official definitions such as the one used by OECD and in the set of definitions set out in the Bologna accord's so-called *Dublin descriptors*, and which then again is reflected in the current Norwegian law on universities and higher education.

Following these undertakings of Borgdorff and other academics in the field during the last decades then, a coherent theoretical framework seems to be in place for this emerging field of practice based artistic research. There is no need to keep arguing for its legitimacy as its existence is now a fact. For artists and scholars involved though, having artists conform to academic standards without reducing the artistic validity still poses a series of challenges, and there is still much tension involved in both directing and describing such research.

From a practical point of view there is the lack of defining previous work usually to be found when a new field is established from within. With few preceding examples, there is also little common methodological knowledge to draw upon and artists are instead encouraged to invent their own methods, as each project is so different. Having to inventing everything from scratch leads to high risk when it comes to the success of the result, both as art and research, and the newness of the academic framing can still inflict much uncertainty as the focus of the masters and bachelor tiers of arts departments is still more akin to the professional schools from which they originated.

Theoretically and from a philosophy of science point of view, there is the problem of identifying with either of the two modes of knowledge production described by Gibbons et al. It is also an open question if the field can relate to the ethical norms originally formulated by Robert K. Merton and known under the acronym *CUDOS*

(*communism, universalism, disinterestedness, originality, scepticism*) (Merton, 1973), which otherwise can be seen as hallmarks of the success of the scientific method. Even the term 'research' is still difficult. The Norwegian programme avoids this science-laden term in its Norwegian name and instead uses the less controversial 'Development' ("*Program for Kunstnerisk Utvikling*"), while native English speakers seem to prefer the descriptive *Practice Based Research* over the perhaps pretentious sounding *Artistic Research* used elsewhere in Europe. Also, practical questions about how such research is to be assessed is not completely clear. Borgdorff points to the academic model of peer review, but who are qualified peers in a completely new field? Finally, even Borgdorff concedes that even after the shift towards Mode 2 and more diverse ways of conducting research has made it possible for academia to include the non-conceptual insights articulated through artistic practice, there is still a fundamental unease in the relationship of art practice and academia that is not simply transitory. He relates this to the fact that art in being a reflective practice might have more in common with a more *un-academic speculative philosophy*. Art invites much thinking but carries no definite thought expressible in language. This he calls the *radical contingency* of artistic research – the possibility of the un-thought, that which is unexpected, and this is what makes it so difficult of having it conform to traditional academic conventions and definitions.

### Back to the *why* of artistic research

Even if this debate about what artistic research is and how it can be conducted has been going on for the last 15-20 years and the issues is by many seen as settled (interestingly enough mainly by academics like Borgdorff), I still want to dwell a bit more upon the fundamental basis for this new field. Perhaps that is just a necessary exercise for an actor in the middle of an artistic research project in order to navigate and prioritize in this new and unfamiliar academic landscape with few points of reference. But maybe it is also necessary to still keep an eye on the justifications of *why* we should have something called *artistic research* in the first place, even as the field establishes itself and becomes more mature.

This might be repeating some of the arguments heard in the aforementioned debate, but the intention is to once more reflect on the very foundations of the field. First of all, something that is very foreign to the themes normally associated with artistic practice is the economic goals and market ideology present in the ideas about *production* and knowledge as a *commodity* in the efficiency reforms leading to the creation of *artistic research* as a discipline. But aside from that, the field is established on the academic premise that *research* is the basis for development of the knowledge and the teaching and training in a field. While this might be true for most other academic disciplines, is it really applicable for art practices? Do not innovative artists drive the development within their field regardless of framing their art as research or not? Can perhaps all art practice be seen as research then? There are already several mechanisms in place for funding artists in Norway and elsewhere that also encourages innovation and artistic development, and there is also the American concept of *research equivalence* to deal with this more institutionally. In that light, the introduction of artistic research into academia could be seen as having more to do with the political-bureaucratic need to measure and systematize, and the spread of the so-called "*Management by Objectives*" system originally developed by



the Australian organisation consult Peter Drucker and now spreading to all spheres of society after being introduced as a management principle by the Norwegian government in 1990s (Helskog, 2003).

But if we accept the present way of organising society by defining artistic development as research and assigning it to academia, does artistic practice really have to adhere to the official definitions of research requiring that it must be an original investigation leading to new shareable insights in order to qualify as the basis for teaching and training? Are not these characteristics already a part of all artistic practice, which to a certain extent always is an original expression of a content (*knowledge* if you will) that is shared with an audience? On the other hand, if these definitions are really needed to discern *artistic research* from other artistic practice, is there not a danger that this will lead to an artificial divide between *academic art* on one hand and something perceived as *real art* on the other, or that you could have the situation where a work is deemed good as research but not very interesting as art? One could also argue that if we are to take the premise of research as basis for knowledge and training really seriously, then artistic research should perhaps also be open to those leading artists who are unable, unwilling, or just not interested in adjusting to traditional academic conventions, such as the practices of reflecting and discoursing through words. Unlike other academics, artists often have less interest of articulating their insights through spoken or written language, as their artistic medium is perceived as much better at both dealing with and communicating this (for instance, painting is a much more nuanced tool than words when it comes to dealing with colours). It is also not, as some academics seem to think, just a matter of artists picking up some theory at the door when entering academia. Thinking, conceptualizing, and the academic craft of reading, reflecting, writing and discoursing critically is a *practice* of its own, and an altogether different one than the *artistic* practice. Professional artists that have spent years training and developing their work cannot simply slide into this language based tradition unnoticed, the same way that a highly trained academic cannot just pick up some musical scales and then walk on to a concert stage and perform.

For this reason, the decision to establish the Norwegian artistic research program outside of the traditional university system and PhD degree seems like a good idea, at least for a start, to try and define for itself what artistic research can and should be. It might also be that the perceived differences are not that fundamental. Maybe it is just a case of striking the right balance between practice and reflection, and that this holds true even for art outside academia. As James Pritchett recounts in his excellent book *"The Music of John Cage"* (Pritchett, 1996), the American composer John Cage was at first dismissed by critics when departing from the likeable style of his early prepared piano pieces. But after the publication of his essays and lectures giving a direct account of his thinking and the rationale behind his music and development, the critics praised his efforts even if they personally did not like the music.

As these thoughts illustrate, there are so many similarities between artistic and academic practice yet they somehow seem to be very different. That makes it hard to say something definitive, and that is precisely why it is important to keep these things in mind when shaping the field from within through practical artistic research work.

Now, what the academic frame of artistic research *can* offer the otherwise competitive and sometimes overly individualistic world of art (in addition to some much-needed funding and long-term working conditions), is the institutionalized tradition of constructive discourses with fellow peers, of playing with open cards so to speak, sharing insights and being honest about inspirations and indebtedness, also raising awareness about both one's own and other disciplines. This can result in very different and broader presentation of artistic practice than traditional venues and channels, and as such it can constitute a welcome addition to the traditional art practices.

Science and research have always been changing, and this new field claiming its own methods of knowledge production and quality control, is perhaps just representative of the general professionalization and the shift towards new contexts of knowledge production in our society, as described in the concept of a "Mode 2". In fact, the creation of a new yet not fully defined discipline is seen as an advantage by some, as in the editorial statement of the "Journal of Artistic Research (JAR) in 2011: *"Not knowing what exactly artistic research is, however, is a good thing for a number of reasons"* (M. Schwab, 2011).

To conclude this essay into the challenges and opportunities of the new academic field of artistic research, only time will show if it can mature into a format consistent with academic traditions without breaking off from the rest of the art world. The field is anyway already well established, so now it is up to the artists involved to grapple with the tension and unease arising from the construct, and work out in practice *how* it can be conducted and *what* it can be.

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