

Artistic research — why and wherefore?

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Abstract

The notion of ‘artistic research’ is a buzzword in contemporary cultural policy, scientific and artistic discourses. This text is not trying to add another note to the polyphony of attempts to define the concept. Rather, it aims to trace and analyse some possible backgrounds of emergence, suggesting that the myriad of definitions and descriptions of artistic research is rooted in the most varying and to a point contradictory motivations

For a few years now, the notion of artistic research is “haunting” cultural policy, scientific and artistic discourses and has been discussed extensively at exhibition projects and symposia. Even though there is a wide range of definitions of what artistic research is or could be, all definitions have one thing in common: artistic research is research done by artists as or as part of their artistic practice. This essay is not trying to add another note to the polyphony of attempts to define this concept more precisely, but, from the perspective of someone who teaches at a German art school, reflects this relatively new phenomenon within the context of its emergence and thereby aims to trace and analyse its possible backgrounds. For the myriad of definitions and descriptions — so the hypothesis of this approach — are rooted in the most varying, and to a point contradictory, motivations, fuelling or meant to fuel artistic research. The following thoughts concentrate on the development of this discourse within the German academia and art scene.

**Research at the
Art School**

Art schools play an important role in the contemporary hype around artistic research. Three institutional aspects can be distinguished: an impact of the Bologna Process on art schools, a general need to legitimise theoretical approaches in arts education and an attractive funding environment.

The Bologna process and its impact on art schools in the German higher education system

With the Bologna Accords, a European Higher Education Area was created in 1999, and degree courses were subsequently restructured in the national higher education systems. In Germany, art schools had to face more profound changes than universities. Most notably, they lost traditional degrees such as the prevalent “Meisterschüler” without being able to replace these degrees with equivalent ones

— except where they try to adopt the concept of postgraduate education. As a result, several German art schools initiated doctoral programs, which have to be legitimised artistically as well as scientifically. Admittedly, this does not establish artistic research by itself, but its institutional necessity.

Legitimation crisis of theory

This development meets another, less obvious but latently existing need for legitimization of many theoreticians teaching at art schools. Theory at many art schools is not a major but a minor subject. The degree's aim is art, not theory. Many courses — philosophy, art history — taught at art schools are their own major degrees at traditional universities, and therefore associated with much higher esteem. The perspective of genuine artistic research, which is only possible at art schools, would potentially provide the theoreticians teaching at art schools with positive distinction, and enhance their standing with regard to the traditional universities where they themselves once studied. Again, this does not establish artistic research per se, but another institutional interest.

Funding opportunities

A further institutional inducement is grant money. Scientifically recognised artistic research ideally opens up access to scientific third-party funds — which are often greater than those for the arts. The year 2013 saw the — ultimately unsuccessful — attempt of a few scientists to open their own section for artistic research within the German Research Foundation (DFG), a major German grant agency. The wealthy Volkswagen Foundation also engages with the topic of artistic research. Admittedly, this does not establish artistic research, yet demonstrates its economic expediency.

Research within artistic practice

Having said this, it would obviously be cynical to insinuate that the prolific field of artistic research only exists because these institutional interests exist. This would indeed be inaccurate, as the field is fed by artistic practice, which I will try to sketch in the following paragraphs. Again, three aspects can be distinguished in a first approximation.

New Technologies as artistic instruments and media

With the use of technological innovations as artistic media or as artistic instruments, the boundary between art and research has become increasingly blurred since the 1970s. The classic example is the use of computers in cybernetic art. A pioneering institution for encounters between arts and sciences was the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, founded in 1967 by the artist György Kepes and led since 1974 by the German artist Otto Piene. The main purpose of the new center, located at one of the world's top research universities, was to absorb "new technology as an artistic medium" (<http://act.mit.edu/cavs/history/>) by way of encounters between artists, scientists, engineers, and industry.

New Responsibilities

Likewise in the second half of the 20th century, artists began to leave the “safe” exhibition space of the “white cube” and relocated their artistic practice to other spaces — be it land art or art within the public space. Along these lines, a new self-conception regarding the function of art developed, which claimed for itself a new realm of expression and enabled new impacts to unfold — as ecological art or as a new form of social work. It was this aspiration for impact that brought artists in contact with scientists; an artist who intervenes in an underprivileged neighbourhood may cooperate with social scientists, an artist who wants to clean toxic soil or polluted water needs help from ecologists, soil scientists and biologists. Through this new form of responsibility, artistic practices opened up to scientific processes and methods, adopting these and transferring them in their own — then known as artistic research — form of investigation.

Scientification as object of artistic reflection

A third domain of artistic involvement with scientific processes is an artistic practice that focusses on scientific knowledge production as an essential feature of our society. It resorts to archives, creates archives, collects and uses data, in a nutshell: it employs the scientific method to reflect the scientification of our world.

This form of artistic production is certainly not a niche, but deeply affects the discipline’s identity. A case in point was the *Dokumenta 13* in 2012, the most recent version of an exhibition of contemporary art which has taken place every five years in Kassel, Germany, since 1955. The director of *Dokumenta 13*, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, had artistic research not only discussed at a number of symposia, but placed it center stage in the exhibition as a form of knowledge production: “Contemporary scientists and artists have in common that they are researchers, that they do basic science”, said the director in a media interview (<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/documenta-leiterin-carolyn-christov-bakargiev-ueber-die-politische-intention-der-erdbeere-1.1370514-3>). Consequently, a range of exhibits illustrated relations between knowledge production in art and science: you could meet Konrad Zuse’s computer Z1 as an historic artefact, explore his drawings and paintings, and listen to talks given by quantum physicists, all of which made Zuse — posthumously — an author and quasi-participant of the *Dokumenta*. Even though this approach was heavily criticised, *Dokumenta 13*, which is the most important contemporary art exhibition in Europe, indicated a paradigm shift in the self-conception of both artists and curators.

Art in the scientific system

In sci-art projects, artistic research in all its diversity meets science as an institution that itself has a number of interests in art. Again, I will focus on two aspects, science communication and outreach and, more towards the core of the scientific enterprise, epistemic questions.

Scientific Communication and outreach

The first is an interest in scientific communication in general and public outreach in particular. This interest starts fairly unspectacularly with questions of

representation or visualisation of scientific results. Cases in point are the 'Mandelbrot trees' and other fractal geometries that, as "scientific images", found their way into the imagination of popular culture. More serious is the question of legitimation. Science is increasingly held accountable by its funders and science policy, and a major source of legitimation is public outreach. Science is asked to communicate in popular ways. What could be a better tool to achieve that aim than artistic presentation, which seems to have the curious competence — though understood by few — to be received by many? Institutional interests in science and art may join forces especially when art and science investigate the same issue, as in the case of climate change. Transdisciplinarity is expanded to art and a communicative surplus is hoped for. A look at the numerous projects, which are anchored and created in this highly politicised field, seems to reveal that a wish to collaborate with artists, on the science side, is less based on the content than on strategic communication goals.

Epistemic Questions

But there is another approach to make artistic-scientific cooperation fruitful, and that is, where science is reaching the limits of its knowledge production. If, for example by different methods, data and results are generated that do not confirm but contradict prevailing wisdom — a phenomenon quite well known within big research clusters —, basic epistemic questions arise. Here, the superposition of scientific and artistic forms of knowledge production can open up new horizons for scientists beyond the sphere of immediate instrumentalisation. The simple reason for this assumption is that in the world of artistic production, contradictory "results" are not understood as an error or an attack on one's own methodology: unlike science, art is not afraid of being contradictory in itself.

Instrumentalisa- tion

So one is faced with the, in and of itself pleasant, phenomenon of having an increasing number of cooperations between art and science. Nevertheless, results, especially those stemming from art, are often critiqued from both the art world and the scientific community. Whilst the scientific community is afraid of distorting simplifications of their research, one of the concerns of the art world is that the instrumentalisation of artistic production for purposes that lie outside of art (such as visualisations of climate change) decreases the quality of artistic work. Yet the — ultimately mutual — instrumentalisation cannot alone be the cause of this critique. Art has a long history of instrumentalisation, be it in the context of political interests or market logics, both phenomena that one stumbles upon in the past and the present of art. Along these lines, science may well exploit art for its communicative self-interests or to reflect its own research practice, yet the vice versa also arises, artists makes use of scientific methods, collaborates with scientists or use scientific results as a point of departure for genuine artistic work. This does not harm anybody, but, ideally, benefits everyone.

The question of quality control has another facet: the successful communication of scientific results with artistic means is not art per se, and high quality art must not necessarily communicate scientific facts and interests well, just because it was created within a scientific context. How to handle this difference is a problem with which many projects at the science-art interface struggle to cope. Tackling this

challenge is important. Yet it should not be the only focus. Otherwise, basic epistemic questions that are relevant outside of the concrete occasion of the research, are short-changed. Therefore, the (differences of) interests of instrumentalisation are not the biggest danger for qualitatively valuable cooperations between art and science, but an overemphasis that obstructs the view of what is essential in any research practice — be it scientific or artistic: the gain in insight, the openness to the unexpected, the willingness to call into question everything — including itself.

Author

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