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ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Knowledge in its current form is not identical to the knowledge of the sciences. Scientific knowledge is a specific kind of discourse that is set off from the discourse genres of other, non-scientific areas of competence. In concert, they all form a diversity of essentially equivalent and equally necessary systems. Nonetheless, the currently prevalent style of thinking is that cultivated by the sciences and the humanities. And it is primarily scientific technology that has proven to be the most efficient contributor to contemporary society's focus on innovation. Scholarship and the sciences also constitute the last bastion of a culture that exists exclusively as high culture. Scientific research is a curious mixture of ideology and practice, of realistic procedures and unreal demands. The need to resort to scientific support in order to reinforce the relevance or status of a given area of competence has become obsolete.¹

In the following I shall outline a few thoughts on the character of research in the fine arts. The concept of research is closely allied with the sciences. Even so, it is fruitful to apply this term to the pragmatic context of artistic endeavour although it is not possible to address the concepts of research and art in greater depth in this context.

During the winter semester of 2001/02 we organised a series of colloquiums at the School of Art and Design, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Zurich, on "Research in the Arts" with scholars and artists as guest speakers.² These helped define and outline both congruencies and differences in the pragmatic rules that underlie scientific and artistic research. Once again, it became clear how difficult it is slough off the long-time and now obsolete myths that obstinately cling to scientific and artistic endeavour. The colloquiums attempted to analyse how the arts function as disciplines of independent research, where their interests lie and what subject matters constitute their specific fields of research.

The Pragmatics of Artistic Research

In determining the acceptability of research findings, the sciences and the arts obviously make use of the same basic criteria. The form in which the findings are presented makes no difference: whether in the conventional scientific form of texts expressed in words or – in the field of art – as works of art.³ However, the findings of artistic research are not formulated exclusively as works of art. Today, what constitutes the findings of artistic research is not always clearly defined. The work of art can be seen as an instrument that allows specific experiences or provokes certain acts and reflections. As such, the physical work is not the actual goal of an artistic project. But it *is* the decisive factor in the research process. The findings of research in the narrower context of art may consist of having modified a field of discourse or created a new artistic concept. In the larger context of life in general, artistic intervention may even explode the formulas of previous perspectives. Only through the thoughtful and considered reading of the context of the work can one determine whether an effect (and which effect) has been achieved as the goal of artistic research.

Testing the results of research is subject to a sophisticated mechanism in the system of the fine arts, which does not deviate substantially from that of the sciences. The art system is closely intertwined with social structures, with other aesthetic and cultural fields, with the economy and politics, with the judicial system and the sciences. This multiplicity of interlocking aspects testifies to a highly diversified system of experts. Experts in the art system have a variety of interests and competencies; they take action and pass judgement from standpoints that are at times mutually incompatible but nonetheless intertwined, and often cover great distances in time. The discourse on artistic research – in the form of immanent⁴ or reflexive discourse – is, of course, debated primarily among artists. But the community of research experts is not restricted exclusively to artists; it equally involves those who work with them, and engage in a mutual relationship of “inventive complicity”.⁵

This inner circle of experts also defines the internal framework of the research. (It defines the axiomatics, the method, the language, etc.) In addition to experts who are actively involved in the research process, there are other “experts” who are invested with a direct or indirect decision-making capacity as regards the *external* framework (the means, the infrastructure, etc.) of research and researchers. These experts exert a substantial influence on the research process; they decide on specific research projects or on the very possibility of research as

such. They are active at academies, universities, museums, galleries and Kunsthallen (and their alternative variants), in state, semi-public and private facilities for promoting the arts and in the field of journalism (newspapers, art magazines, trade publications). In the broadest sense experts also include not only artists but also philosophers and professors, curators and cultural managers and, by way of further illustration, dealers as well as critics.

Artists who conduct research are no different from other researchers inasmuch as they too must be qualified for what they do. The community of researchers expects them to be cognisant of what has already been achieved in their particular field of interest. However, artists rarely offer systematic insight into the knowledge, standards or methods of their work – and even less so when they engage only in research and do not teach. As demonstrated repeatedly in our daily work with artists and in our colloquiums as well, they cite the names of other artists and the titles of works; they refer to social theories, scientific discoveries and literary as well philosophical texts. In other words, they circumscribe the sphere of their interests and inspiration. They specifically name sources of inspiration and antagonistic approaches and point out this or that advantage or weakness with respect to interesting projects and proposals by colleagues. They reveal the patterns that are of significance for their work, offer insight into their own decision-making processes and outline the state of research in their particular field. Making projects accessible to the public implies that they are different from and go beyond what has previously been achieved. Artists consider the new experiences and the new commentaries provoked by their work. They lay claim not only to creating relevant works but also to redefining the criteria of artistic relevance.

Researchers in the sciences must be able to submit evidence of the relevance of their findings. In the art system, there is a division of labour in this respect. Generating a relevant question (i.e. a work) and arguing the relevance of the question (i.e. critique) are separate skills that each obey the language games to which they are subject. This division of labour between artists and commentators is de facto a collaborative venture.

In the final analysis, artistic assertions, like scientific theories, are never fully justifiable or verifiable, but that they are nevertheless testable.⁶ Conventionally, public institutions are the authorities that exercise argumentative criticism (intersubjective testing), in particular curators and writers (commentators), critics and ultimately art historians. In order to test the findings of research and to endorse their relevance and their argument, the field of research must be

accessible to other experts, to those who produce the art, those who mediate it and those who appreciate it. The work and its significance must be available and understandable within the framework of critical debate. This is one of the essential arguments for the necessity of exhibitions.

The long-term criterion of the acceptability of the result of research, i.e. the work, is its aesthetic and ethical relevance. Investigation into the value and meaning of existence, its parts and its totality, is a constituent of genuine artistic work. The art market and political power, operating on the basis of different priorities (such as economic efficiency, ideology, etc.) may briefly blur the presence of this relevance.

Individual Artistic Research

In the field of art, we distinguish between individual artistic research and institutional research. Institutional research designates research programs launched and maintained within the framework of art schools and academies. Individual research constitutes a vital aspect of what artists traditionally consider their own artistic work. In this connection, I'm thinking of artists who know what they did the day before yesterday and are therefore cognisant of the framework in which they are placing their work today.

Artists are very much part of a network; they cultivate exchange and seek contact with both colleagues and professionals from other disciplines. They compare and enrich their knowledge with knowledge from outside the arts.⁷ Their work might be described as part of a large fabric with neither beginning nor end, i.e. the present day. But they alone are responsible for their work and, in the experimental phase, are accountable only to themselves. As a rule, they also lay claim to exclusive authorship of their work. The works of art themselves are the principal evidence of artistic research. However, additional insight into the tradition of artistic query can be gleaned from artists' texts, interviews and literary and philosophical writings in discursive though not necessarily scholarly form.

Let me return to the colloquiums mentioned above. All of the invited artists, without exception, placed their work – only partially, of course, but with discriminating precision – in the context of general cultural or specific interests. In the presentation of their works, they

elucidated the central issues and outlined their working methods. Occasionally, they spoke about their own store of knowledge especially when commenting on or criticising the artistic findings of colleagues and writers. On the basis of this information, we tried in conversation to clarify and to delimit the concrete fields and specific subjects of their research. The subject matter that defines the character of their artistic research may be roughly divided into three types.

The complexity of the three types is more or less familiar and will be outlined here in simplified and isolated form. Generally speaking, they all play a simultaneous and combined role in artistic endeavour. The first type addresses research into subject matter of a concrete, material and aesthetic nature. It is linked directly to the work, the analysis and investigation of which is – to a certain extent – a relatively manageable undertaking. The subject of investigation can be the medium. In the medium of painting, for example, one might explore the application of the paint, its extension on the picture plane or the composition. But one might also address the feeling of the colours or any of a host of other aesthetic aspects. Subjects of research can also be the materials, the connections between them, the structure of events, the rhythm and the speed of moving pictures and sounds, and furthermore the physical aspect of verbal and graphic signs. Studies in the field of concrete objects are frequently considered basic research.

The subject matter of the second type of research is not as physically tangible, namely the content and meaning of artistic works. These investigations focus more on content but are still inseparably linked with the development of formal and material aspects.⁸ The subject of research might be the pragmatics of the works (their application in specific situations)⁹ and, conversely embracing the use of any medium, “logical operations” on cultural terms.¹⁰ The subject of research may be the relationship between language and worldview, specifically the revaluation and renewal of this relationship. Another object of study may be the system of value judgements. Finally art works always create new premises for and variations on solace,¹¹ happiness,¹² and amazement.¹³ These two areas of – basically – aesthetic and ethic experience cover what Robert Musil describes as a “nonratioid area”. The imponderables of these areas correspond to the cognitive attitude and cognitive experience of the writer (the artist).¹⁴

The third type of research is reflexive, its subject matter being the artist's own artistic activity. It is, of course, also closely allied with the two preceding types. Ranging between the pursuit of knowledge and ethical demands, this type of research poses such questions as: What is video? What does being a painter mean today? What can art achieve? What is the field of art, of the artist? How can art contribute to the necessary enhancement of complexity (today's organisational forms of aesthetics, society, knowledge, etc.)? How can the invisible be made visible, the ineffable be given a voice? How can the reality of the imaginary assert itself as a domain of research, inventions and discoveries – independently of direct application in the context of practicality and pragmatism?¹⁵

In none of these three areas does the artist pursue the goal of making new statements about objects or issues. The work of art is not a statement. Rather, the work of art and its instrumental character in artistic research is associated primarily with the pursuit of change. These changes may affect spatial conditions, modes of perception, the relationship to time, the relationship of people to things or of people to other people. The work wants us to respond; it calls for interpretation. The laboratory of art is its context.

Institutional Research in the Field of the Arts

At the Colloquium, Aant Elzinga listed the following criteria as being essential to research at academies and art schools, if it is to be invested with the same credibility and relevance as research at universities.

“Research in academy as university – 10 criteria:

- good orientation over artistic problems
- ability to discover, identify and formulate artistically relevant questions
- ability to focus and demarcate topics for artistic projects
- originality and integrity in choice of work methods
- ability to select fruitful problems and follow through
- ability to trace and systematise sources
- ability to bring together material, analyse and clarify in interpretative synthesis
- ability to organise projects and document in stringent and communicative way
- (ability to) deepen interpretation in the subject

- written documentation to articulate reflection on choices made, and possible lines of interpretation of work produced by oneself, as well as the method used to achieve it.”

As a rule, artists who base the pursuit of their interests on thorough reflections and well-founded specifications will have most of the capabilities listed above even if they are not doing research within an institutional framework and do not claim to be designated as researchers. Outside of that framework they do not need to provide explicit proof of their qualifications. However, artists working through an institution on publicly funded research projects usually do have to provide evidence of their capability as stipulated in the above 10 points.

In Great Britain, Northern Europe and North America, research is largely carried out on an individual basis within the institutional framework of art colleges and it is customary for graduates to be able to earn a PhD on the basis of their research.¹⁶ In Switzerland, institutional research in the field of the arts is generally performed by a team rather than by individual researchers. Research activities are usually carried out as linked projects involving two or more research partners. The objectives, scope and cost of the projects are defined and the projects are largely carried out within the framework of interdisciplinary research programs. The teams generally consist of professionals from various disciplines and often from different institutions. Since it is not (yet) possible to distinguish oneself through research conducted at universities of applied sciences, titles and academic careers play a secondary role.

Hence, research conducted at universities of applied sciences is defined as applied research, referring primarily to product-oriented and “local” research. It is carried out in cooperation with economic (financial) partners from private industry and with financial support from the state (e.g. the Swiss National Fund or the Innovation Promotion Agency CTI, a department of the Federal Office of Education and Technology). Basic research at universities of applied sciences is in the early stages of development, and it does not necessarily have to be opposed to purpose-oriented, local and transdisciplinary research.

The style of the current production of knowledge, the transdisciplinary approach and the concrete context of application are becoming increasingly interdependent. The notion of progress is no longer restricted to models of chronological, linear progression. Instead,

synchronistic, topological structures tend to characterise research today. The decisive mechanism for innovation, according to Helga Nowotny, Professor of Social Studies of Science, is attentiveness.¹⁷ Both precondition and effect of this “extended perception” is a ‘deregulation’ of the disciplines.

On the other hand, a transdisciplinary approach is required when the subject of inquiry is so complex that satisfactory findings are unlikely to result if research is restricted to a single discipline.¹⁸ Transdisciplinarity is the logical consequence of the combined efforts of a heterogeneous circle of researchers working on the shared definition of a problem anchored in a specific and “local” context. The knowledge that is produced is tailor-made for a concrete case. Three factors – system-specificity, finality and transdisciplinarity – are indicative of the fact that, in our disassociated world, it is no longer possible to achieve consensus on what constitutes fundamental and generally binding knowledge.

Obviously, the disciplines involved in transdisciplinary research projects do not all carry the same weight. Subjects of research of overarching significance are derived almost exclusively from nonartistic concerns, even in the case of projects within the arts. Research projects at the Institute for Visual Media at the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe – to name just one representative example – most always focus on media technologies and not on specifically artistic issues.¹⁹ Projects labelled “science and art” are largely devoted to scientific inquiry, to scientific modes of procedure and to scientific findings. Art becomes a medium or instrument in the service of other disciplines. It adopts the role of illustrating epistemic findings to which it originally made no contribution or to complement them as the sensual equivalents of the findings of reason.²⁰ The Faculty of the Fine Arts at the HGK Zurich treats art as a self-contained discipline, albeit one that is widely interlocked, and focuses its transdisciplinary research on the meaning and specific performance potential of art.²¹

The mutual insemination of art and science – in style, method and content – enjoys a long tradition. The growing complexity of “highly developed” societies and the increasing plurality of their centres mean that cultures, forms of life, discourses, institutions, languages and many more aspects will inevitably overlap and become enmeshed. Transdisciplinarity does not simply entail one discipline addressing objects of study that another discipline had hitherto considered its exclusive domain. Given the assumption of specialised disciplines, it also entails the capability of communication and cooperation among different disciplines. The

public sphere is treated like a discipline in this new perspective. For the sciences as well as the arts, the dialogue with the public sphere is an increasingly central factor in their work.

For the German version of this text, see Hans-Peter Schwarz (ed.), *Zeichen nach vorn. 125 Jahre Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich*, Zurich 2003, pp. S. 176–181 and Präsidium der Hochschule der bildenden Künste Hamburg (ed.), *querdurch. Kunst + Wissenschaft. Veranstaltungsreihe der Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg*, Hamburg 2006, pp. 147–156.

Translation: Catherine Schelbert

¹ Cf. Paul Feyerabend, *Wissenschaft als Kunst*, Frankfurt a. M. 1984; Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon, 1982; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984; Helga Nowotny: “Grenzen und Grenzenlosigkeit. Kreativität und Wissensdistribution” in: Jörg Huber, Martin Heller (eds.), *Konturen des Unentschiedenen. Interventionen 6*, Basel, Frankfurt a. M., Zürich 1997, pp. 151–171; Helga Nowotny, “Die Bilder der Wissenschaft verändern sich. Zwischen Wissensproduktion und Wissensvermittlung” in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2 May 2001, p. B 14.

² “Forschung im Feld der Kunst. Kolloquien mit Gästen” organised by Prof. Christoph Schenker. Faculty of the Fine Arts, School of Art and Design, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Zurich, WS 2001/02. Guest speakers: Prof. Dr. Aant Elzinga, University of Göteborg, Sweden; Peter Fischli and David Weiss, artists, Zurich; Thomas Hirschhorn, artist, Paris; Barbara Köhler, writer, Duisburg; Michael Lingner, Prof. of Art Theory, University of Fine Arts, Hamburg; Dr. Dieter Maurer, Project Manager of Research and Development at the School of Art and Design, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Zurich and scientific consultant at the University Hospital Zurich, Paris; Christian Philipp Müller, artist, New York; Sibylle Omlin, art historian, Zürich; Adrian Schiess, artist, Mouans-Sartoux (F); Dr. Walter Siegfried, artist, Munich.

³ “Research for art [...] has been described as: ‘research where the end product is an artefact where the thinking is [...] embodied in the artefact, where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication.’” Ron Dearing, “Higher Education in the Learning Society. Report of the National Committee”. § 11.48. Norwich, Middlesex 1997. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

⁴ In his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault speaks of the “latent discourse of the painter” and of the “implicit philosophy” of the work of art (see note 1), p. 193.

⁵ Theo Kneubühler, “Die Kunst, das Ungleiche und die Kritik” in: *Malerei als Wirklichkeit*, Berlin 1985, pp. 12–20, here p. 19.

⁶ See Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Routledge Classics, London/New York, 2002, p. 22.

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- ⁷ For example, Aldo Walker. See: Christoph Schenker, “Zum Werk von Aldo Walker” in: *Aldo Walker*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel 1987, n.p.
- ⁸ Cf. Barnett Newman, who closely linked the subject matter of painting with the development of its formal and material properties in the process of prolonged and extended inquiry into his artistic concept.
- ⁹ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, “Notes préliminaires sur la pragmatique des œuvres (en particulier de Daniel Buren)” in: *Critique*, No. 378, Paris 1978.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Rosalind E. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” in: *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, 1985, pp. 276–290, here p. 288.
- ¹¹ Adrian Schiess (see note 2).
- ¹² See Peter Sloterdijk, “Die Kunst faltet sich ein” in: *Kunstforum* 104, 1989, pp. 178–184.
- ¹³ Peter Fischli (see note 2).
- ¹⁴ Robert Musil, “Sketch of What the Writer Knows” in: *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, edited and translated by Burton Pike and David S. Luft, University of Chicago Press 1994, pp. 61–65.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, transl. by Georges Van Den Abbeele, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 83–102.
- ¹⁶ For example, at Chelsea College of Art & Design, London. The Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (School of Art), London, permits “Individual Research Projects” to be conducted as “Interdisciplinary Projects”. And in: Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Fantasized Persons and Taped Conversations*, Helsinki 2002, we learn that “The exhibition and the book ‘Fantasized Persons and Taped Conversations’ are parts of Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s Doctorate in Fine Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki.”
- ¹⁷ Nowotny 1997 (see note 1).
- ¹⁸ Daniel Buren observes that the *extra muros* situation (art in public spaces) has become so complex that artists can no longer handle it on their own and must rely on the expertise of specialists from other disciplines. Daniel Buren, “Kann die Kunst die Strasse erobern?” in: Klaus Bussmann, a.o. (eds.), *Skulptur. Projekte in Münster 1997*, Ostfildern-Ruit 1997, pp. 482–507.
- ¹⁹ In conversation with one of the directors of the zkm in April 2001, we asked about the reasons for this. The answer is familiar: it is easier to acquire funding for research that addresses *technological* concerns. In response to the question as to what he considers *artistic* research, he replied indifferently, “That’s what an artist does in a studio.”
- ²⁰ For works of art that play a supplementary, subsidiary or illustrative role of this kind, Umberto Eco coined the expression “epistemological metaphor” while Klaus Heid and Ruediger John use the term “transfer art”. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, transl. by Anna Concogni, Harvard University Press, 1989; Klaus Heid, Ruediger John (eds.), *Transfer. Kunst, Wirtschaft, Wissenschaft*, Baden-Baden 2003.
- ²¹ Cf. Christoph Schenker (ed.), *Public Plaiv – Art contemporanea illa Plaiv. Gegenwartskunst im Landschafts- und Siedlungsraum La Plaiv, Oberengadin*, Zurich 2002 (Publication in conjunction with the research project of the same name at the HGK Zurich 2001/02); Jörg Köppl (Project manager), *Now – Das Paradox von linearem Zeitmodell und nichtlinearen Bewusstseins- und Gedächtnisprozessen als Ausgangslage für neue Ereignisstrukturen in der Audioskulptur*. Research project HGK Zurich 2003.