

Christoph Schenker

## Insight and Intensification

Some Thoughts about Artistic Research

“Art creates its own set of specifications.”<sup>1</sup>

Peter Fischli

In the following article I shall roughly sketch an aspect of the current debate on artistic research that is rarely addressed. I think it is appropriate to the practice of artistic work, and its significance should not be underrated. Some of the following thoughts were inspired by Michael Hampe’s inaugural lecture given at the ETH Zürich in 2004, in which he distinguished philosophy “as a specific form of activity, as the practice of conceptual and argumentative experimentation”.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007 Harun Farocki and Lawrence Weiner each worked out a project to be installed in public space in Zürich.<sup>3</sup> Farocki made a video film *Übertragung (Transmission)*, which shows people using gestures of touch in an attempt to grasp the unfathomable. By ritually touching monuments, memorials, sculptures and objects, they seek to participate spiritually in the past, in fate and suffering, in ideas and happiness. Weiner’s work also reaches beyond the boundaries that determine our thoughts and actions in the physical present: **BALL BEARINGS OR ROUND STONES / MADE TO ROLL / OUTSIDE OF WHAT THERE IS**. According to Weiner, in contrast to film, which is about the relationships of human beings to human beings, art is about research into the relationships of human beings to objects and of objects to objects in relation to human beings.<sup>4</sup> The execution of the work consists of envisioning a situation differently, redefining it conceptually and, thereby, redesigning it. The works of both artists can be used as instruments for taking a new approach in thoughts and actions to one's own concrete surroundings and one's own existence. As part of the

<sup>1</sup> Peter Fischli in a conversation with the writer about research and art in public space, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hampe, *Denken, Dichten, Machen und Handeln. Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Philosophie, Wissenschaft und Technik*, 2004, <http://www.phil.ethz.ch/de/online-texte.html> (last viewed: 16 November 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Christoph Schenker; Michael Hiltbrunner (eds.), *Kunst und Öffentlichkeit. Kritische Praxis der Kunst im Stadtraum Zürich* (Zürich, 2007), 85–104 and 121–139. See also <http://www.stadtkunst.ch>.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Weiner in conversation with the writer, 1994. Cf. Gerti Fietzek, Gregor Stemmerich (eds.), *Having Been Said. Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968–2003* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2004), 105, 262 and more.

experimental system, we contribute substantially to the consequences of such mental experiments and their real-life implementation.

Artistic work consists of establishing other modes of differentiation in the fields of perception, emotion and intellect; of experimenting with the new types and forms of making distinctions; and of thereby generating new aesthetic, emotional or mental constellations and evaluating their consequences. This is what I consider artistic research. What I here designate as artistic work is, of course, only one of many ways to engage art, and explorative experimentation is, in turn, only one of many ways to define artistic research.

Essentially there is nothing unusual about treating art, not as the subject matter of research conducted, for example, by art historians, but rather as a medium or a research discipline in its own right, especially if we take a look at the achievements and development of art over the past centuries. Nonetheless, the *notion of research* is rarely applied in analyzing the specific achievements of art. In remarks on contemporary art, the term mainly crops up in reference to the use of new techniques, to some kind of scholarship, to -- a usually unspecified form of -- theory, or, pragmatically, to its role as part of a multidisciplinary project in the field of applied research. Art then frequently functions as a means that serves other disciplines and is generally used to illustrate, communicate or -- as a sensual equivalent to findings of reason -- complement epistemological findings, to which it originally made no contribution.

What is it that distinguishes artistic research? Can one speak of a tradition of artistic problems? The tendency is to concentrate on trying to define the essential features of artistic research. This involves inquiry into not only how artistic research differs from but also how it resembles or is comparable to scientific research and philosophical work. As far the pragmatics of research are concerned, there is no fundamental difference between the systems of art and scholarship.<sup>5</sup> And in both fields, it is often no easy task to distinguish substance, i.e. what is essential and intrinsic to the conditions and rules of the research process, from accident, i.e. what factors should be assigned to the external operations of research. One might inquire into whether artistic research works with special methods, whether it makes use of a specific set of tools, whether it typically addresses a specific subject of research, and whether it produces knowledge that is characteristic of art.

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<sup>5</sup> See Christoph Schenker, "Künstlerische Forschung" in: Hans-Peter Schwarz (ed.), *Zeichen nach vorn. 125 Jahre Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich* (Zürich, 2003), 176–181.

Artists all have preferences as to which approach they wish to take in their investigations. But they do not have a body of standardized, collectively acknowledged and generally practiced methods, which would be comparable to the function and status of methods in the sciences. This is one thing artists and philosophers have in common. Moreover, there is no specific method that applies exclusively to art. The experiment, often considered characteristic of artistic research, is also standard procedure for the acquisition of experience and insight in the natural and technical sciences. And finally, the experimental nature of artistic work is similar to the exploration of conceptual spaces of the imagination in writing and philosophy.

We are familiar with the practice of contemporary art which does not define the single artwork as a record of experience or as the representation of knowledge but rather as an instrument to foster experience and insights. The focus is not on the result, on the work as an object or on its presentation, but rather on the process of making, on the work as a tool as well as on participation. This attitude, which is like the point of departure for defining an experimental system, is based not on a method but on tactics. It is an artistic approach that does not join forces with explanatory projects like science and theory, but instead sees itself as a non-explanatory project along with philosophy, writing and music. In art, experiments do not demonstrate or prove; they explore.

If not by method, then is artistic research distinguished by having its own specific instrumentarium? An instrumentarium would be the totality of means, the equipment and the things, the material and the matter, which are used as tools in the process of experimentation or which are worked as objects. In both art and science, it is this material culture of research, the empirical structure of the experiment that enables something new to evolve.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the arts within traditional media still use an instrumentarium that also forms the *specific* instrumentarium of *research* exclusively in the field of art. However, over the past 100 years or so, contemporary art has made increasing use of means that belong not only to other areas of life but also to the research instrumentarium of the sciences.

A further consideration is whether artistic research can be defined through a specific subject matter or matters. No one has expressed this more explicitly than Robert Musil. In his *Sketch of What the Writer Knows*, he speaks of the writer's (the artist's) "specific attitude toward and experience of knowledge, as well as of the material world that corresponds to it". In contrast

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<sup>6</sup> See Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, "On the Art of Exploring the Unknown" in: *Say It Isn't So: Art Trains Its Sights on the Natural Sciences*, eds. Peter Friese, Guido Boulboulle, Susanne Witzgall (Heidelberg, 2007), 82–90.

to the objective world of the natural sciences, which can be systematized and measured, this is the “nonratioid area” of “imponderable” facts, “the realm of values and valuations, of ethical and aesthetic relationships, the realm of the idea”.<sup>7</sup> Secondary literature on Musil correspondingly speaks of “ethical experiments” and of writing as a “labour of feelings”.<sup>8</sup> In approaching the “other condition”, as Musil remarks elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> artists use exactly the same mode and faculty of cognition as do scientists, namely reason. It is perfectly justified to define this realm as a core area of the arts, although it is not exclusive to the arts. Whatever the case, however, there is basically no field of endeavour, no subject matter that is debarred from the arts; they have always dealt with everything. Art cannot be defined as a discipline that is confined to a specific field.

Art refers not only to itself, and it is not its own exclusive source; it makes an impact both outside and inside its own field. The artist as researcher gauges which modes of differentiation are relevant not only in the context of art but also beyond it, in other areas of knowledge and life. This means that he must be equipped with knowledge that goes beyond the knowledge that is specific to art. He operates with precise knowledge of specialised areas not only in art but also, depending on his interests, in the sciences, technology, politics, ethics, economics, philosophy -- and he operates with a knowledge of life forms.

Lastly, does artistic research produce specific knowledge? I think we must be cautious about indiscriminately applying the notions of cognition and knowledge production – which are common in the context of the sciences – to the arts. For John Dewey, the practice-related aspects of research play a crucial role. Dewey makes a distinction between “inquiries which have [scientific] knowledge as their goal” and “common sense inquiries” that are conducted “for the sake of settlement of some issue of use and enjoyment”. The latter requires “good sound practical sense” in dealing with “the ordinary affairs of life” in the broadest sense of living in an environment in which human beings are *directly* involved.<sup>10</sup> This is comparable to the opposition advanced by Jean-François Lyotard between scientific knowledge and

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Musil, “Sketch of What the Writer Knows” [1918] in: *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 61–65, specifically 62 and 63.

<sup>8</sup> Sabine A. Döring, *Ästhetische Erfahrung als Erkenntnis des Ethischen. Die Kunsttheorie Robert Musils und die analytische Philosophie* (Paderborn, 1999), 192.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Musil, “Toward a New Aesthetic: Observations on a Dramaturgy of Film” [1925] in: *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 193 ff.

<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, *Logic – The Theory of Inquiry*, (Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1938), 60 ff., esp. 61.

knowledge as “training and culture”.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge (*savoir*) and science are not identical, and knowledge cannot be reduced to learning (*connaissance*). “Knowledge in the way of training and culture” is knowledge that is characterized by a tightly woven web of various competencies. These competencies refer to acts of thinking, making and doing that are not only geared toward the criterion of truth but also toward criteria of justice and happiness (ethical wisdom), of correctness (beauty, interestingness) and efficiency (technical qualification). As mentioned in a conversation between Lyotard and Bernard Blistène, these “modalities of knowledge [are] other than the book”.<sup>12</sup> Research in art is, to my mind, situated within this fabric of diverse competencies. Art can be understood as a means of generating and assembling “condensed knowledge”.<sup>13</sup> It engages various competencies of ours at once; it grasps us as whole beings.

In consequence, neither a method nor a specific instrumentarium distinguishes artistic research as a special kind of research, and it is not confined to specific subject matters. Condensed “narrative knowledge”<sup>14</sup> may be a characteristic of the arts but that knowledge is not exclusive to the arts. Myths, legends and fairy tales, including their contemporary reformulations and substitutes, and even films as the industrial folk art of our age, all embody that combination and fabric of competencies.

I began by postulating that artistic work consists of generating and then experimenting with new differentiations in certain fields. The painter introduces new chromatic nuances; the musician, a new timbre. They investigate visual and auditory configurations that are new to perception. A filmmaker or a writer work out new distinctions in the realm of feelings, giving them concrete shape and testing them in previously inconceivable contextual situations. A writer or a philosopher invents a new concept, thereby provoking the collapse of an entire system of convictions. An artist drops certain features that conventionally distinguish a work of art as such and, in that way, establishes new criteria for determining not only the constitution of an artwork, but the very definition of art itself.

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (French 1979), trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Blistène, “A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard” (French 1984) in: *Flash Art* 121, 1985, 32–35.

<sup>13</sup> Lyotard 1984 (see note 11).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Artistic work involves generating and testing different approaches to and new ways of dealing with distinctions. According to the philosophy of pragmatism, differentiating habits are treated as concepts.<sup>15</sup> Whenever we make distinctions, we have a specific concept of what it is that we are distinguishing. This ability to distinguish is not inextricably bound to language; the concept does not have to be couched in words. What matters is that it is rooted in perception and in action and since that has consequences, it is also of significance. One may therefore conclude that artistic work consists of generating new concepts and experimenting with them.

Through conceptual experimentation, new and different configurations are established and explored. New forms of behaviour in making distinctions are tried out in relation to conventional conceptual contexts; new orders are tested and their consequences assessed. When ingrained habits of making distinctions are abandoned and a new approach is established, the attendant artistic work studies not only the changes that occur within the narrow framework of its own conceptual and artistic system, but also the consequences they might have within the larger context of our system of convictions and our lives in general.

The kind of artistic experimentation is essentially exploratory. Exploratory experimentation is different from experimentation based on theory or speculation inasmuch as the former does not serve to justify and verify theories but rather to generate or invent a new field of endeavour.<sup>16</sup> Whilst theory-derived experimentation is argumentative, in other words an extension of theorizing through other means, as it were, non-theoretical experimentation uncovers and explores hitherto inconceivable and unimaginable configurations and their effects. However, the explorative enterprise obviously does not dispense with conceptual underpinnings. It too is guided by specific considerations and a knowledge goal; it too is subject to typical rules of conduct on working out an initial idea, expanding an order and assessing the consequences.

However, it is not the explorative character of experimentation that distinguishes artistic work from scientific research. The natural sciences also engage in both explorative and confirmatory experimentation. What distinguishes artistic work is its experimentation with

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<sup>15</sup> See Arno Ros, *Was ist Philosophie?* 1997, <http://www.uni-magdeburg.de/iphi/ar/content/t97a.htm> (last viewed: 16 November 2009); Michael Hampe, *Eine kleine Geschichte des Naturgesetzbegriffs* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), 14 ff. and 158–164.

<sup>16</sup> See Friedrich Steinle, *Explorative Experimente. Ampère, Faraday und die Ursprünge der Elektrodynamik* (Wiesbaden, 2005), esp. 313–320.

concepts, be it in sensuous or intellectual terrain. To my mind it is this specific form of activity, an activity shared with philosophy and writing, that makes the crucial difference in distinguishing artistic work from research in scientific disciplines.

Is this specific form of activity also to be subsumed under research? And does it generate new competencies, new insights? There may well be criteria that prevent the explorative behaviour of art, philosophy and writing from being ascribed to research in the customary, scientific sense of the term. However, the history of science has already queried such criteria in relation to the sciences themselves – in connection, for example, with progress, with the continuity of problems and with problem-solving strategies. The term ‘research’ as used in the vernacular is, I think, fruitful and applicable to art: in exploring a new field, in working out a new perspective and in making an effort to understand something. And beyond epistemic competence, knowledge comprises “good performances” in ethical, aesthetic and economic areas, or as Lyotard puts it, it also comprises know-how (*savoir-faire*), knowing how to live (*savoir-vivre*), knowing how to speak (*savoir-dire*), knowing how to listen (*savoir-écouter*), etc.<sup>17</sup>

In its confrontation with the specific context of a Protestant and capitalistically oriented public in Zürich, Harun Farocki’s video film *Transmission* abandons modes of making distinctions that conventionally underscore the difference between religious, spiritually charged rituals on one hand (film) and the everyday rituals of consumerism on the other (urban context). The fetishism that is significant in this respect is equally apparent in religious, political and economic forms of behaviour, the latter amply demonstrated by the commodity and money fetishism in a global city like Zürich. Standardised body gestures and their reconfiguration are used to illustrate how habitual distinctions fall by the wayside even within the context of religious convictions, cultural behaviour and ethnic heritage. Through the film’s implicit, explorative investigation of ritual and anti-ritual we acquire new insights into both our own and “foreign” lives and modes of making distinctions.

Lawrence Weiner’s artistic project has introduced a new concept to contemporary art, that of use. The meaning of a work is exclusively and radically defined by its use in relation to individual human existence. The establishment of this concept has far-reaching consequences for the entire conceptual system of which it is a part. The individual parts of the system are

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<sup>17</sup> Lyotard 1984 (see note 11), 18, 21.

subjected to new forms of differentiation: the concept of a work, its ontological status in the life world and the object world, its mode of appearance, its language game, its function, its effects, the relationship between author, work, user and owner, the relationship of the work to its conditions and contexts, the relationship between production and reception, etc. This concept of existential use, the use of a work by those who need it,<sup>18</sup> forms the background of Weiner's BALL BEARINGS OR ROUND STONES, a work in three parts and three languages, inserted in the asphalt in three public squares in Zürich. What use do we make of this work? Although infinitely variable and diverse, its use potential will rarely have the effect of inventing new ways of living in the world. Artistic research is closely related to practical exploration of life and life worlds, and it is undoubtedly quite as protracted as its scientific equivalent. It may sound naïve and commonplace to say that the work of Lawrence Weiner makes the senses and the mind receptive to what is not – or rather, what is not *yet*. But the observation is pertinent – and useful. Developing the space of the imagination into a space of real, material occurrences would be the next step. Artistic research is the intensification of life.

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Translation: Catherine Schelbert

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<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Weiner: “Once the work is done, people will have all these associations [...], until they realize that there is also an existential relationship that they can establish. But that only happens when they need it [...].” In: Schenker 2007 (see note 3), 138.