

# Experimental Art as Research

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A number of recent developments, particularly in higher education in the arts across Europe, have resulted in the theory and practice of research in art gaining new momentum.<sup>1</sup> The underlying reason is simple: academic higher education, whether technical or purely scientific, can only claim to be academic when supported by scientific research and insofar as the institutions that provide such education pursue their own research. Education that consists mainly of learning skills is for this reason not academic: it is craftsmanship. In a great many European countries, the decision has been made—partly in imitation of the Anglo-Saxon model—to include higher education in the arts in academic education. And this very phenomenon—besides creating hilarious phenomena such as teaching piano, trumpet, or violin by “lecture”—has saddled us with a considerable problem. The difficulty is apparent in all sectors of art education: the fine arts, music, performing arts, and even literature, although academic training in the latter is pretty much non-existent in most Western countries. In recent years, research competence has become one of the aims of education and, like the thesis-based doctorate, has become a fundamental condition for gaining tenure in institutions of higher education in the arts.

Clearly research *in* art is not the same as research *about* art. The latter, after all, belongs within the humanities (art history, musicology, literature studies, etc.), which have had a solid place among our university courses for years. Their academic nature is seldom questioned, even though the claim of studies in the arts to be scientific can be contested on the basis of the artefactual nature of their object of study. This is because the research deals with artefacts made by humans, which all too often are directly influenced by the research itself.<sup>2</sup> This area of conflict approaches the self-evident when artists—assuming that they have any of the required skills—start practising the humanities with respect to their own work. The distinction between subject and object becomes so

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1 I wrote an initial, concise version of this essay in October 2003 in Barcelona for publication in *Reflexief*. The Dutch-language original of the present essay, which is somewhat more extensive than the original, was written in Ghent in January 2011 at the request of the Dutch magazine *Kunstzone*. It appeared in February 2011. This English version, again somewhat extended, was intended for this ORCiM publication.

2 Michel Houellebecq’s most recent novel (*La carte et le territoire*, 2010) is very enlightening on that issue, although he is certainly not the only one to point out the manipulative aspect of the art world. Incidentally, one should put this into perspective here by mentioning the relatively recent emergence of disciplines such as systematic musicology, which is not so much directed towards specific artistic artefacts, their makers and their history, as towards the general issues surrounding the phenomenon of music and its conditions of existence; in doing so it only uses scientific research methods.

blurred at that point that the research results can be considered purely egotistical. An artist can indeed, with perfect legitimacy, take his or her own work as the object of all kinds of reflections, but it can never be a valid object of academic research. It is clear that making arts education academic cannot be intended to link it to, let alone merge it with, the humanities. The big question remains: what is research in the arts?

Research automatically implies that there is something being researched and that a question, a problem, exists with respect to that something. But not just anything can be the object of research: the need for a rational research method to exist and for the results to make a verifiable difference are obvious requirements. Moreover, it is also necessary for the object of research to be problematic and for the problem to have a demonstrable significance. The latter must certainly supersede the significance it has for the individual researcher. A painter wrestling with perspective, a composer tying him- or herself in knots over problems of orchestration, a performer struggling with a highly complex score . . . these people are searching, but not researching. That is, and remains, a fundamental distinction. Creating art, practising it, with whatever degree of excellence, cannot simply be conflated with research in art. Art and research are not the same thing, although they may occur together.

However, art that is not problematic, hence art that does not research anything, is something I believe I can only reluctantly call art, since it would limit itself to purely reproductive, at most somewhat interpretative, craftsmanship. This forces us to use a somewhat more restrictive definition of art than the customary definition as understood by common sense. Even one that is a bit elitist, perhaps. An artist who limits him- or herself to craft is like a laboratory technician who uses test tubes, measuring scales, and reactions according to the rules, regulations, and rituals, but does so without asking any questions, to no purpose that is clear to him or her. Or like musicians, whether or not they have instruments to play with, who attempt to interpret a score as well as their fine motor control will allow for the entertainment of their fellow human beings. They are performing, but in no sense does this entail research, as it lacks problematic content. Following this line of reasoning, therefore, relevant art—art that poses relevant problems—is by nature experimental. The problem, the question, is the most important force that drives it. In this respect there is no fundamental difference whatsoever between art and science. The main difference lies first in the rigidity of the research method and second in the nature of the problems investigated in art. With respect to the former, the rigidity of the research method, I would like to point out that the experimental arts world has made considerable progress in the last quarter of a century and its methods do indeed correspond to methods in contemporary scientific research. The existence of scientific journals such as the *Computer Music Journal*, *Leonardo*, *Organised Sound*, and others, bears witness to this.<sup>3</sup> As to the latter, the

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3 The conception of research in the arts defended here corresponds closely to a tradition that has been prevalent in the progressive contemporary music world since the second half of the twentieth century. We only need to think of the many variants of the “Centre de Recherches Musicales” in French-speak-

nature of the problems investigated, the problems mainly have to do with what I would like to call expression (in the broad sense). Experimental art searches for and develops means of expression. If the results of this research are considered significant enough, the artistic results in which they are embedded simply become art. The mere use of means of expression, however innovative they may be, is by no means sufficient to call a project “research.” These means of expression may be highly individual and specific, but may also be suitable for use in general and relevant to many others who are confronted with similar problems of expression. The development of means of expression does indeed occur within the art form itself. After all, it is only within art that they can be evaluated. At least in the case of experimental art.

To understand expression too narrowly in this context would be a misunderstanding: expression is by no means the unique preserve of art! Of course scientific researchers must also be capable of expression in order to put the results of their research into the forum where it is ultimately to be tested. Communication skills are clearly necessary to make the researcher’s expressions comprehensible. In the case of science, it is also desirable to be as unambiguous as possible. However, in the case of expressing affects and/or concepts, the primary requirement is that the expression is able to invoke affects and/or concepts in those to whom it is potentially directed. A lack of ambiguity is not necessarily a requirement here, although high levels of convergence may occur. It is clear that this happens from the simple fact that a large number of artistic expressions are classified in the same way by large groups of people. A requiem is not cheerful dance music. That is quite objective.

Music is pre-linguistic, as it were, since it precedes or at least displaces conventional semantics. This is why its syntax cannot be set out in a system of fixed rules, let alone prescribed. The pre-linguistic nature of artistic expression means that it must by definition concern itself with a search for an adequate syntax and, in that if nothing else, it is experimental. This adequate syntax is primarily expressed in the coherence of the form: the architecture of the artwork. Whatever form it takes, it can only be shown and performed by realisation in a material form or a substratum of energy. The production of form in this substratum again requires from the latter a certain suitability that is not an a priori given. Research in art is therefore primarily concerned with the development of substrata or media in which and with which the syntax can be realised as optimally as possible. Of course experimental research into the pos-

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ing areas, the “Untersuchszentrum für Neue Musik,” “Laboratorium für Klanggestaltung,” “Studio für Tonuntersuchung,” “Studio for Electronic Music,” “Artistic Research Centre,” “Institute for Psychoacoustics and Electronic Music,” and so on, whose names alone are a symptom of this phenomenon. I have observed that a few peculiar people are currently trying to misuse the concept in a recuperative and reactionary sense for purely reproductive and historicising purposes, a bit like the way the opera world embraced the trendy term “music theatre” in the last quarter of the twentieth century, although the term was thought up by the avant-garde (Kagel, Cage, Stockhausen, etc.) specifically as an antidote to the decrepitude of opera. It is painful to observe how certain institutions are now even making funding available for the recuperation of scores by old, rightly forgotten, and totally insignificant conservatory directors in the guise of “research into the arts.”

sibilities for processing these substrata, including tools and instruments, also belongs to research in art.

The main difference between scientific research and research in art lies in the fact that artistic research does not build up a coherent theory within which and on the basis of which initial hypotheses are proven as theses. Research in art, or experimental art, does not necessarily prove anything. Instead it has to show, demonstrate, and extend possibilities, and, where possible, convince.

Of course one might object that this sort of artistic research is completely superfluous, since art in earlier times did not go hand in hand with artistic research. However I have serious doubts as to whether this is true. What is more, there might be evidence for the statement that until a long way into the nineteenth century, a substantial proportion of artistic production (and, at that, the segment of artistic production that upholsters art histories to this day) was indeed fundamentally supported by research but that this link all but disappeared during the nineteenth century under pressure from the general capitalisation of artistic production, which led to art becoming largely a vulgar and reproducible commodity: the commercialisation of art. Indeed, it is certainly not in the work of Johann Strauss or the music of Jimi Hendrix, Herman van Veen, Arvo Pärt, or Radiohead (the examples have been taken at random from commercial music) that we can detect committed artistic research. It is aberrant, to say the least, that precisely where people today express themselves, they do so by imitating handed-down examples (the veneration of corpses in the classical music world) and by using tools and means of expression that come from a past in which there was still research into the arts (orchestras and traditional instruments). A healthy contemporary culture develops its own means of expression that are adequate to its expressive needs, and ongoing research in art is essential for it to do so. Historicism aimed at reproduction is gradually coming to an end. I will not mourn its passing.

If we wish to create space for genuine research in art, the first condition for doing so is the creation of permanent arts laboratories: sanctuaries from which experimental art can connect to its contemporary environment and to the resources provided by both science and technology within that environment. The importance of these bridges and the interdisciplinary skills required to use them cannot be emphasised enough: is it not unhealthy and aberrant that most canonical means of expression, whose use is still taught in our educational institutions as a craft, are derived from periods in history that are at least a hundred to five hundred years behind us? It is as if our own time were incapable of coming up with resources and insights that could serve as a basis for considerably more adequate means of expression. If this is not yet clear as a general principle, it boils down to a honest question as to how and why our conservatories are still teaching students to play violins, bassoons, and oboes, but only seldom how to use contemporary means of expression, let alone how to construct and develop them.

To put forward a utopian thought, I believe that higher arts education as a whole should be conflated with permanent laboratories of this kind. Currently such labs do exist in a prototypical form. Our knowledge of them is limited

to the field of means of musical expression, an area for which governments across Europe have provided a certain minimal funding in recent years. This is of course a logical consequence of the implementation of the Bologna agreements, which stipulate that all academic education must be linked to research, and consequently to the necessary resources to bring this about. The Logos Foundation, based in Ghent (Flanders) has surely played a pioneering role here, if only in the field of music: it has been constructing and developing new musical instruments for over forty years, including an entire orchestra of robots. In the Netherlands, pioneering work on electronic interfaces has been done by the STEIM in Amsterdam, and naturally examples can also be found in France (IRCAM, Grame, and others) and Germany. For now, however, I only wish to plead for such laboratories as academic islands, as a starting point for research in the arts, which are understood exclusively to be the experimental arts.

Only in recent years have we seen the creation of doctoral schools that also support artistic research. Universities started special training programs for PhD students, but do not have specific curricula for experiments in the arts. The ORCiM program at the Orpheus Institute, restricted to music, is a prototypical example of a serious attempt to meet the needs of doctoral students in music. In general, there is still a lot of ambiguity as to the definition of experiment and research, as these notions are often fairly ill defined. The Schools of Arts have a tendency to take a rather reactionary position in following a strategy of preservation in an attempt merely to upgrade their existing activity. Much of the “artistic research” conducted there, following the criteria outlined in this paper, would fall through completely. Often one will hear them proclaim the statement that the doctorate in the arts should be given to those who excel in their art. This undermines the notion of both experiment and research. Awarding doctorates to artists for mere excellence not only devalues those doctorates but also undermines them. I hold that doctorates should only be delivered to artists after proof of research competence and proof of relevant results.

#### REFERENCES

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