
Does Artistic Research Produce Knowledge? A Five-Fold Distinction

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Abstract

"Artistic research" is the buzzword that seems to bring contemporary art practices to new forms, which are more academically respectable and closer to the empirical and social sciences and humanities. The introduction of doctorates in art schools and the normalisation of school curricula in Europe because of the Bologna Process have been crucial here. Such urgencies have created enormous confusion over the meaning of "artistic research". I would like to help bring some order to these often-contradictory voices. The value of art lies in what sets it apart from religion, science, philosophy and all other forms and products of human thought, and I believe that anyone who seeks academic recognition and the erasing of differences is confused. In this paper, I distinguish between five different concepts in the use of the expression "artistic research":

1. Research *for* art, i.e. for the production of art.
2. Research on social, historical or anthropological subjects, which runs in parallel to research in the social sciences and humanities.
3. A kind of curatorial research.
4. Artistic research *through* art or *in the medium* of art, as a production of disturbances of knowledge and sensibility.
5. Last but not least, the fifth meaning is eminently philosophical and refers to the consideration of the work of art as a device for the emergence of what is not thought or said and aims to create new ways of thinking, to produce a place for what is not yet thought or said.

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The question of whether art is a form or knowledge was first posed as a philosophical problem by Plato in one of his dialogues, especially in Book 10 of *The Republic*. Aristotle, Ficino, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Gadamer, Danto, Goodman, Deleuze and Badiou are some of the most important philosophers that defended some kind of cognitive value of the arts against different forms of emotivisms, formalisms and sentimentalisms, which denied such a value to artworks. However, like all philosophical problems, the problem of the cognitive value of art does not have a general solution, so the controversy has continued to the present. And now the problem is posed in a completely new way because of the recent evolution of art, which has taken unexpected paths that re-enact our old problem. Today, our problem has the name of a spectre, a spectre that is haunting the world of contemporary art – the spectre of artistic research. Just ten years ago the idea of artistic research was a new expression spread only among a few art and design schools in northern Europe, mainly in Scandinavia and Holland. But then some education system reform programmes began. Ten years ago the new PhD programmes in art in the United States created a need for legitimating a practice-based doctoral thesis. This fostered a new line of publications on a not so new topic based on artistic education and knowledge, because if art can be taught and learned there should be knowledge to convey. Simultaneously in Europe, the so-called Bologna Process to unify the European space of higher education forced an adaptation to the formative programmes of arts, design, dance and theatre, which used to be outside the main academic structures and the protocols of the scientific faculties. This adaptation process brings about a visible anxiety for acknowledgement, and a search for legitimacy of the professional status and studies of “artists”, apart from the classical figures of academia. There is an

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important discussion taking place about “artistic research”, notably involving James Elkins (2014) and Graeme Sullivan in the USA, and Henk Borgdorff, Tom Holert, Julian Klein and Henk Slager in Europe. In spite of the importance of this discussion, however, philosophers have remained silent to the present day, with only a few exceptions such as Henk Borgdorff (2012) and Dieter Mersch (2015). But this is a great opportunity to reconsider the old problem of cognitivism in art.

“Artistic research” is a term to emphasise an interpretation of the cognitive value of art. Art has several kinds of values. An artwork is usually a market product with economic value; sometimes it is a symbol for social identification like a Rolex or a tattoo, and occasionally it is a means of self-expression and self-therapy used by artists. At the same time, artworks can also be considered a device for thinking with some kind of unclear cognitive value. But common assessments about artistic research as a way of knowledge production in contemporary art raise many questions that have been answered and discussed over the last few years (Biggs, 2011; Schiesser, 2105; Badura, 2015). A controversial tendency is now clear: the blurring of differences between art and sciences, arguing that art is a path to knowledge production that is equally as legitimate as the traditional sciences. But is that a good strategy in the skirmishes to gain more legitimacy in the space of academic institutions of higher education and get access to funding? And, is it true that artistic research is comparable to or homologous with scientific research in the field of experimental, social or human sciences and that herein lays the cognitive value of art? Is “artistic research” a sign of submission to the new cognitive capitalism? (Moulier-Butang, 2012). I will try to provide a preliminary answer to those questions by introducing a five-fold conceptual distinction in the use of “artistic research” expression.

Five Concepts of Artistic Research

The current anxieties that one can perceive in educational art and design institutions to homologate and attain academic legitimacy have fuelled a great deal of confusion on the use of the expression “artistic research”. For that reason, it is appropriate to try to establish some differences, as is mandatory in philosophy. I will try to identify at least four main meanings or uses of that expression.

Research and production

The first most obvious and oldest art research concept is one that refers to the process that leads artists to produce their work. Any search for new techniques, materials, forms of expression, language, symbols, and so forth, is a form of artistic research. This concept brings together the research performed by cave painters, Renaissance artists on perspective, Russian constructivists from the last century, and contemporary artists working with multimedia installations. From the point of view that concerns us here, this concept of artistic research poses no problems. Any artist who has an idea has to deal with more or less imagination to pursue the process of putting it

into practice. There are many ways artists can carry out their research but, as an example, we could highlight the research linking art, science and technology. All art and research employs a technique, but not all art has been engaged in the kind of scientific and technical research conducted by contemporary net artists and bioartists. In many cases today, the old studio has become a lab, such as artists like Eduardo Kac or Gerfried Stocker, working with bioengineering, and body artists like Stelarc or Nina Selars, who find in bioart a platform from which to re-think the body, or, to be more precise, to rethink the concepts that we refer to the body. Other artists who work with nature include Lisa Roberts and the composer John Luther Adams, who use cognitive and technical resources of the natural sciences to produce their work. Roberts draws on environmental science to produce pieces that address ecological conscience in order to sensitise it; Adams draws on geology to produce its hypnotic metamorphosis of seismic waves in minimalist musical compositions.

These cases show us that we have to distinguish research *in* the medium of art from research *for* art. Research for art is what is done to produce an artwork. This is not our concern here but rather the former: research in or through art, which would be, or is parallel or analogous to but distinct from, scientific research and is therefore *another form of cognitive production*.

The artist as a social researcher

Another common meaning today of “artistic research” refers to investigations of social, historical or anthropological issues parallel to those common in social sciences and humanities. This happens in many cases of artistic projects on traumatic memory, gender discrimination or oppressed and marginalised minorities, the redefinition of ways of life, even philosophical questions. In a way, this research tends to converge with social and human sciences. These kinds of research projects *sometimes* result in forms of knowledge about forgotten historical facts and events, misunderstood situations of injustice and disrespect affecting some social groups in the present, or unconscious forms of ideology and social control, and so on. Investigations of this type are, for example, some of Harun Farocki’s movies and videos or Hito Steyerl’s philosophical installations. These kinds of artworks deal with the same subjects as academic history or sociology, and the main difference is that artists present their results in an aesthetic display, and social scientists write scholarly articles and books claiming to be true theories. This difference is decisive because it raises the question of when art is research or where the artistic can be found in it. Perhaps in the display? Historians or anthropologists are sometimes curators of exhibitions on the outcomes of their investigations, but they are not considered artists. So whether most of this kind of research is really artistic in the sense of research in or through art is an open question.

This form of artistic research is perfectly legitimate. However, it can be understood in a distorted way bringing about some embarrassing consequences. As I said earlier, the *bolognicisation* of university undergraduate and master studies, as well as the introduction of PhDs in art schools and colleges, has invited many teachers to academically dignify artistic practices

by placing them on an equal footing with the humanities, social sciences and even the experimental sciences. Thus, there are artists and critics working on the same topics as anthropology, psychology or sociology and defending the same legitimacy for art as scientific discourse as a way of producing knowledge. But if you conceive artistic research in this way then you have to assume that research outputs can be evaluated in a way similar to what is done in the social sciences and humanities. This means introducing quantitative scales that measure artistic projects, and so on. The problem then is that no one knows for sure when an art project deserves a magna cum laude and when it should merely receive a pass. Moreover, and in any case, it will be judged by a committee of experts, as in traditional doctoral theses. And experts are not just any minority; they are a professional elite. This entails a neat means of intellectualisation in contemporary art that seems to radically undermine the republican principle of everyone's right to judge because it concedes the authority to judge to an intellectual elite. Thus, art is being returned to an authoritarian stage before the democratisation that has taken place over the last century.

Curator as researcher

“Artistic research” is also used in a third sense to refer to a type of exhibition project that is designed in line with those initiated by the curator Harald Szeemann in the seventies. In this regard, some names are authentic international curatorial researchers: Catherine David, Robert Storr, Daniel Birnbaum, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Maria Lind and Roger Bürgel, who either work as “independent curators” or are temporarily employed by an art institution. These curators have made memorable contributions in that hybrid territory between theory, history and art itself, to the point that a good exhibition can be a work of art itself in the sense of embodying an aesthetic idea, of being a place for aesthetic reflection, while being simultaneously a contribution to the history, theory, criticism and philosophy of art. The history of contemporary art is being built with stones from important research exhibitions, such as “When Attitudes Become Form” by Szemann in 1969 or the DOCUMENTA (13) in 2012.

Research as Disturbances of Reason

Artistic research in this fourth sense must be understood as the critical activity of questioning our dictionary of received ideas. Disturbances of reason is a metaphor to point out the critical and subversive activities of modern art since 1900, activities that have a logical continuity in the contemporary practice-based ways of research. Accordingly, here artistic research means research through art or in the medium of art, and production of disturbances of knowledge and communication, and disturbances of sense and sensibility. Although they may contain knowledge, works of art in themselves are not at all contributions to knowledge in any strong sense. They ask questions, encourage questioning, troubling our common sense, and induce us to look for new certainties and beliefs while forcing us to reject the old ones. And that is what distinguishes contemporary artistic research, what makes

it uncomfortable and difficult to integrate into the academic and university system. Artistic research understood in this way does not produce statements in the language we already share, but “hesitations of knowledge”, “trips to scepticism”, disorganisations of language and the system of disciplines, shifts in the rules of the game that allow us to bring that which cannot be expressed to our languages.

Research as exploration of the Great Outside

Art per se does not usually produce knowledge but is a way of thinking. An artwork can include new information about certain aspects of the world but it does not pretend to be true. “Artistic truth” has little to do with epistemic truth. Artworks are illuminating, revealing, disturbing, interesting, and even beautiful. When artworks are real research, they illuminate, reveal or show something really new, but non-propositionally. So, the fifth and most important meaning of “artistic research” we can contemplate here is eminently philosophical, and refers to the consideration of the work of art as a device for the emergence of something not yet thought or not yet said. It involves the alteration, transformation or even sometimes the revolution of prior artistic languages and media *and* the introduction of new elements. It is the research of the *Great Outside* or *Grand Dehors* we hardly intuit or perceive through the *Inside Media*. It aims to create new possibilities of thinking and sensing, a production of a space or place for something that, appearing for the first time, questions disciplinary, institutional or mental apriorisms. So artistic research here means exploring otherness through art, that which is on the outside of established thought and discourse. Artistic research thus understood does not produce sentences in the languages we already share but generates new meanings, new possibilities for thought and reflection. Thus, we have what Heidegger called *Welterschliessung* or disclosure of the world, and today what some French theories of art, such as those of Lyotard, Deleuze and Badiou, call *événement* or event. Unfortunately, we do not have any consolidated categories to think about and describe this kind of research, or “boundary work” (Borgdorff and Schwab, 2012), apart perhaps from Adorno’s terminology. Successful research of this type is infrequent and rare. We find it, for example, in some works by William Kentridge, Rachel Whiteread and Thomas Hirschhorn. This fourth, philosophical concept is prescriptive, unlike the previous three that are descriptive; that is to say, it is the standard that many contemporary artists would meet but not always achieve. And, very importantly, it is something that will never be available to the training programmes in art schools. In art many things can be taught, many skills and abilities can be fostered, certainly, but you cannot really teach someone to be a researcher in this regard. This will always be something out of reach of the academic and university system, and an essential difference between arts and sciences that should be preserved.

Thinking and Knowing

Let us now return to the problem posed at the beginning on the relationship between art and knowledge, or what some directly call “artistic knowledge”. It is pertinent here to distinguish Thought from Knowledge, as Kant did in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (B -XXVII). The arts are ways of thinking about the world, but rarely of knowing it in a strong sense. Thinking the world or about the world is trying to fish for elements of the world using the nets of our languages. Nothing can be thought or known without casting our nets. Thinking is always casting a net of sense on a fragment of the world. But knowing is only a way of thinking about the world. Thinking is much larger than what is known. Art, religion, philosophy and science are forms of thinking about the world, ways of trying to make sense of it, to establish meaning. But thinking and knowing do not necessarily coincide. There is a visual thinking, a thinking with the ears (Adorno) or gustatory thinking difficult to communicate because of its non-propositional content.

So, first of all, knowledge is communicable while thought is not always so. We may think things we do not know how to communicate, because they are difficult to express or because no propositional forms of communication are at all satisfactory. That is why art, literature and music are so necessary because they allow us to communicate something in non-standard ways that we cannot communicate otherwise. There are even thinkable experiences that resist artistic communication, as is often argued in the case of the Holocaust and other boundary phenomena, as those who have lived such experiences may think them but not communicate them. Hence some notable thinkers, such as Kant or Adorno, argued that art (and literature and music) may have a cognitive character but it is not knowledge communicated in the public sphere in the usual way. In the words of J.F. Lyotard, it is “something like communication without communication” (1991, 108). In this sense, art is disruptive. It breaks the ordinary communicative fluxes.

Secondly, as Plato asserted in the *Theaetetus*, all knowledge is somehow justified true belief, but only some of our beliefs are true and justified or based on reliable information. Of course, since the time of Plato we have been discussing what it means for a belief to be true and to be justified, and significantly only the most dogmatic positivists consider that these criteria are still valid. However, in the last two centuries we have made good progress in this discussion. The Greek legend about the origins of the goddess Aphrodite was a way of thinking about love, sexuality and eroticism, just as the famous picture painted by Botticelli in the late fifteenth century was. Similarly, the Christian legend of the passion and crucifixion of Christ is a way of thinking about the world, as also are the representations of the legend painted by Velázquez and Dalí. Every religious representation, whether artistic or literary, is a way of thinking about big questions of human life. However, we cannot say that both these legends and their overall artistic representations express knowledge about reality. As legends or representations are, if anything, expressions of a way of seeing the world, they provide us with knowledge on how certain people or certain communities of individuals think. And for those

who do not believe in myths and legends, these representations may make more or less sense but lack the properties of knowledge, i.e. they are not true or justified, at least no more than any other esoteric belief. If artworks have to give us knowledge, then we need to change how we look at things, and scrutinise them as theoretical objects from the historical-sociological perspective considering artworks as a reflection of an era. Thus, an ethnological gaze on the *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir is a document that testifies certain festive customs of the Parisian human community around 1876, while for the aesthetic look it is a place to think about love and happiness. Calling the various and divergent thoughts that viewers of this work have been generating over fourteen decades of existence of this canvas “artistic knowledge” is very confusing. Someone has appropriated Arthur C. Danto’s formula that every work of art is an *embodied meaning*, and reformulated as any work of art that involves an *embodied knowledge*. But even if you call it “liquid knowledge”, this is false and contrary to the Kantian intuition also defended by Danto: artworks embody aesthetic ideas. Kant wrote in paragraph 49 of his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*: “By an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.” One reads the expression “artistic research” too often associated with knowledge production. Researchers in art do not produce knowledge, they produce devices for thinking.

Nelson Goodman and others, reaffirming the cognitive nature of artistic practices, preferred to speak of understanding or comprehension, not knowledge (Goodman, 1978; Elgin, 1993). That is what I would argue to clarify the cognitive nature of art, namely that artworks are at best devices dealing with understanding. *Artworks are gates or portals that can open paths to knowledge*, of course. They may contain knowledge but they are not knowledge without what Hegel called the *Arbeit des Begriffs*, the work of concept, either discursive, or by montage, or whatever it be. Artworks may lead to historical, political, anthropological or philosophical knowledge but someone has to be critical with this work. This is evident in contemporary art projects presented under the label of “artistic research”.

Under the term “artistic research” what is being defended is very often a domestication of the questioning and subversive power of art, its ability to generate disorder and show that being can be said in many ways. Precisely what so many have feared from art from Plato to the Pope. It was once said that art is illusion. “We all know,” said Picasso in 1920, “that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given to us to understand.” I think, almost a hundred years later, these words are still accurate. Artistic research means a new historical phase in the cognitive enterprise called art. But some versions of it are a disguised form of disciplining subjectivities, of neutralisation of disruptive and antagonist energies of art in compliance with cognitive capitalism. The necessary art in our time is not that resulting from the domestication of artistic research but a resistant art, loyal to the differences and contradictions.

I would like to conclude by emphasising my wish not to be interpreted just as the unfriendly philosopher who comes to tell others what to do and how to think. Nothing could be further from my intention than dismissing art teachers and, even less so, artists. I do not understand philosophy as the queen of the sciences, but as a rather parasitic servant of practices that really matter. In contemporary societies of our post-global world the arts are a central way of thinking what we are and what we want to be. Art helps us to understand ourselves and to be aware of the alternatives in every order of life. Philosophy, again, is only a servant of this great adventure in the task of understanding itself. My position is thus that art is too important to be dissolved in a pseudoscientific practice under the misunderstood term of “artistic research”. The value of art today lies in the cultivation of the heterogeneous, inducing disturbances in knowledge, communication and sensibility. And aesthetics is here to give it a philosophical voice, to think and to defend it. For the rest, the reality of the practice-based research known as “artistic research” challenges philosophical aesthetics to redefine concepts such as “aesthetic thinking”, “aesthetic truth”, and even the very concept of “art”.



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