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Artistic Research: a co-presentation of papers with Henk Borgdorff

Artistic Res/Arch: The propositional experience of mattering

Introduction: the zoomed-out situatedness of research practice

Henk and I approach the topic of artistic research from very different points of departure. That said we often arrive at consensual thinking through the precarity of the slippery, shifting terrain of artistic research discourse. Henk has offered us an examination of the relations between artmaking and the production of knowledge in artistic research that manifests in a variety of modes of articulation. He has suggested three terms, non-conceptualism, realism and contingency as possible ontological routes of exploration in the emerging topology of artistic research. I have decided not to address his terminology directly, preferring to speculate on the situatedness of research practice in the arts. My comments and responses today generate from the perspective of a telescopic zooming in and out of artistic research within academia. Though a fully zoomed out perspective is not a topic of this talk per se, it must be said that the behind-the-scenes machinations of the Bologna Process¹ and its manifestation of the neo-liberal ideals of flexible and subjective education effects all involved in this practice, directly and indirectly. The reciprocal co-existence of educational policy and individual practice provokes, in the very least, a recognition of the knowledge/power dynamics that underscore our experience of the emerging “field”² of research in the arts.

Driven by the exponential corporatisation of academic institutions and the ethos of consumption education, the Bologna Process has its defenders and detractors. Applauded by many ten years ago as a quantum leap in transnational educational exchange it is now vilified as the operative mechanism of the privatization of knowledge production. By way of example, the Edu-factory Collective³, a global assemblage of student activists, political theorists, sympathetic faculty,

¹ <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

² “Field” is in scare quotes here because it alludes to both an emerging discipline of artistic research and the situated experience of artistic research.

³ <http://www.edu-factory.org/edu15/>

manifestos, sit-ins, petitions, listservs and assorted international blogs - entertain a 'Bologna Burns' approach. They call for an autonomous university of the commons, freed from homogenized, profit-driven interests. Their concerns enfold the specificities of local engagement as they unfold to a translocal milieu. These concerns include open access to knowledge archives, learning models, refreshed exchange techniques and affordable tuitions. Their demands don't necessarily collapse institutions of learning but rather aim to refocus them from their industrialised tendencies. It is impossible to ignore the momentum of this movement. I quote a text from Brian Holmes that expresses the confounding ambiguities surrounding this resistance from an arts practice vantage point:

The deeper problem is that in order to survive as exploratory and transformative practices [...] the contemporary arts have to throw off their blatant or subtle dependence on the new corporate-oriented institutions that promote an opportunistic and flexible subjectivity [...] This is easier said than done [...] Because it's easy to invest in a little anguish over the biopolitical instrumentalization of one's own creativity, in order to produce a new niche product for the originality markets. And it's just as facile to criticize that investment. (2009)

I hope to elude a 'facile' critique by simply backgrounding these tensions as affective tendencies that situate various other debates encompassed in artistic practice as research. Through a wider lens, these issues are brought to an exemplary full force by the recent closure of Middlesex University's philosophy department and the endangered Contemporary Thought Seminar at Goldsmiths among other familiar tales of cut-backs, firings and tuition increases. The transdisciplinary synergies between theoretical discourse and artistic research practice are made palpably affective when vibrant intersecting channels are threatened. Ironically, these transdisciplinary relations could be viewed as a by-product of ramped up neo-liberal economic logic in the first place. If we follow Deleuze's move from Foucault's disciplinary society to the flow market of a control society we find ourselves consumed by the double-sided coinage of transdisciplinarity. This adds another ethico-aesthetic register to the conundrum Holmes points to as the ontogenetic relations between power and knowledge become increasingly supple and complex.

Zooming-in to practice

Within this too-large scope, I would like to offer my zoomed-in developing thoughts on the wonderfully nebulous *how* of practice as research in the arts with the back channel of how this *how* is situated, the bigger picture or context of the ethical, social, and political transformations of education in our present cognitive capitalist reality. It's interesting that the ontological pursuit of

what artistic research 'is' remains a persistently divisive issue even though art practice is endemically evasive of categorization. Reciprocally, art's epistemological relations - its generation of, participation in and contribution to knowledge commodities remains a contested, political terrain. Both the ontological and epistemological discursive domains are multifaceted, convoluted and complex. The textured strands of these issues unsurprisingly construe a more operative aesthetic approach for situating artistic practice as research. Two highly speculative and motley propositions will emerge here from a revisit to the very word **research** itself.

Re-Search

For this shared keynote with Henk, I decided to go back to basics and look up the word **research** in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).⁴ It originates from the Middle French *recercher*, meaning 'to look carefully'. The root word 'search' generally means to make a thorough investigation of, or explore something, to come to know or learn. The prefix 're' means go back and do it again perhaps with a bit more intensity. As both a verb and a noun it has the flavour of a hybrid. It moves as *researching* in the present progressive while it also positions itself with the quasi stability of an immersive thing. Perhaps then, as a word, it's not exactly straightforward, but more elliptically indirect. Ambiguous. It moves with the jerk rhythm of a scratch - one step back two steps forward. With the word research we get a spatiotemporal feeling, a noun/verb vibratory effect whose prefix suggests a slowing down from normative, breakneck, fast-forward rates of consumption and production, suggesting a paradoxical affiliation with the turbulence in our present economic airspace. Its nuanced processual qualities resonate with other cultural 'slow' movements (slow food, slow media⁵) in which careful selection of ingredients/elements and their considered preparation/assemblage potentially contribute to its most effective functions.

There is one clue in the single etymological reference in that OED entry that associates research with art. Apparently, in the 18th and 19C a musical prelude for piano and organ was called a *research*. I quote here from the OED:

1728 *Research*, in Musick, is a Kind of Prelude or Voluntary... Wherein the Composer seems to Search, or look out for the Strains, and Touches of Harmony, which he is to use in the **regular Piece to be play'd afterwards**.

⁴ And here it must be noted that the online limited subscription access to the OED is emblematic of privatisation issues. Anecdote: my faculty permissions failed from two separate institutional accounts: one due to the fact that the university is not a subscriber to the OED (!?) and the other due to administrative complications for adjunct faculty access. Henk mailed me the entry etymology.

⁵ <http://www.slowfood.com/>; <http://www.slow-media.net/manifesto>

1876 an **extemporaneous performance** on the organ or pianoforte in which the leading themes or subjects in the piece to which it serves as a prelude are suggested and employed. (my emphasis)

Conflating phrases from each of these entries, artistic research emerges as a *prelude and extemporaneous performance of the regular Piece to be play'd afterwards*. Though this definition tends to exert undue emphasis on a linear temporality, it's noteworthy that the pre-modern arts were able to liberate *research* as a performative act that both precedes and is embedded in the guts of a "regular" composition as a singularity immanent to the artwork.

So when it comes to the great debate, the fascinating and perplexing bit is that prefacing the word *research* with the word *artistic* continues to incite confrontation as though research *in* the arts, by artists, exhibits a total betrayal of the intuitive and inexorably now *requires* of artmaking some form of explicit discursive expression. It additionally incites resistance in a perceived betrayal of the 'autonomy' of art practice and its positioning outside of institutional structures in the making phases that has been a driving force of modern and postmodern eras. Misunderstood, misconstrued or simply a misnomer, the specificities of *artistic research practice* framed within educational models remains controversial on several planes. Its *raison d'être* and its eccentric processes and methods subject to intensive interrogation.

A couple of arguments stand out as topics that bridge these debates. Few would question that 'looking carefully,' the dictionary descriptor of research, has a formidable place in the arts. What is questioned are the multiple forms of articulation artworks now take on and the tangible friction between process and product that emerges in artistic *practice* as research. How do we document the eventness of a process coming-to-form? How is it *performed*? Can the process itself be construed as an object, an autonomous artwork? Can we identify the emerging parameters of documentation? Can it become an artwork and not relinquish its processual qualities, so maintaining its research aspects? By what criteria are these issues addressed?

From the perspective of *practice* as that vibratory in-between of process and product, it is precisely the multiplicity of articulations, the multiple modalities of expression, that emerge in research activities that both excite and confront artists, curators, funding bodies, programmers, publics and academics. The British experiment over the past sixteen years or so, regarding practice-led PhD's, has provided polemical fodder for European educators pressed to make policy decisions over their own readings of research in the arts. In many countries there continues to be clamorous objection to the very premise of artistic research within the university and the art academies (polytechnics), spilling over to affect academically unaffiliated artists, and indeed the

entire Art Umwelt. This debate constitutes an emerging discourse on both the ontological justification AND epistemological viability of academically situated artistic research in relation to professional art practice that always already enfolds creative *making-of* processes. As a means of deflecting unwanted debate, synonyms for artistic research are regularly employed as alternatives. Artistic *development*, is often a favoured less controversial substitute. It doesn't encroach upon, dilute or terrorise the esteemed methods of the sciences. It avoids an isotropic relation with scientific methodologies and the pitfalls of the epistemological imperative of contributions to knowledge. But situating and problematising artistic research, development and creation obviously involves much more than semantics. The debate simmers. And though tiresome after all these years, all the degrees awarded and all the discursive intensity conjured, that simmering resistance is a healthy signal in many ways, that the practice of art, in its many modalities, remains elusively indefinable.

In 2007 Henk simply and importantly stated in a paper entitled "The Debate on Research in the Arts":

The crux of the matter is whether a phenomenon like research in the arts exists – an endeavour in which the production of art is itself a fundamental part of the research process, and whereby art is partly the result of research.

This is the very reciprocal relation between process and product that research puts at stake. One might ask: when is improvisation a research experiment? Is art practice in itself discursive? Does a compositional decision or choice abort or terminate the processual quality of a re-searching? How does the coming-to-form of a research proposition constitute an art object or alternatively, could we call the many articulations of practice as research 'research objects'? And if so, how do these research objects of processual capture participate in the zeitgeist polemics surrounding object theories/ontologies? Questions such as these foreground dynamic relations: the relations of *processes* to *things*, the *making-of* to the *thing-made*, backgrounded by the relations of power to knowledge. Within the bandwidth of this specific discourse alone, artistic research as practice has much to offer by way of point/counterpoint through its multiplicity of methodologies, its inventive documentation techniques, its ethico-aesthetic concerns.⁶

⁶ Referring broadly to the speculative realist turn that entertains a variety of ontological propositions on object-oriented concerns. Though fractious, this discourse has discernable roots and associations in Whitehead, Heidegger and Latour.

The Research Proposition

I would first like to characterise the term *proposition* from a Whiteheadian point of view as he does this interesting thing with propositions. He **aestheticises** them. He states that “at some point” in the entertainment of a proposition “judgment is eclipsed by aesthetic delight.” For Whitehead propositions are hybrids between potentialities and actualities. (215). He says:

The primary function of theories is as a **lure for feeling**, thereby providing immediacy of enjoyment and purpose. Unfortunately theories under their name of propositions have been handed over to logicians who have countenced the doctrine that their one function is to be judged as to their truth or falsehood.

(Whitehead, 1929,1969, 214).

To quote from Steve Shaviro's book on Whitehead, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze on Aesthetics*:

[...] **propositions** are neither actual nor fictive; they are “the tales that might be told about particular actualities,” from a given perspective, and that enter into the construction of that very perspective [...] “A **proposition** is an element in the objective lure *proposed for feeling*, and when admitted into feeling it constitutes *what is felt*” (Shaviro, 2009, 2; Whitehead, 217).

Whitehead's insistence that a theoretical proposition must be felt as it constructs a perspective is perhaps the best argument in the artistic research debate for an integrated yet differentiated theoretical practice. A turn from the reasoned, logical, ubiquitous research “question” that often haunts artist PhD candidates, to the *thinking-feeling* of a research proposition points towards a new attitude of defining artistic practice. To quote Erin Manning:

[...] to know it is to feel it. Communication through words will always fall short. Yet there is no question that articulation through language *is* capable of conveying a certain complexity, bridging the worlds of sensory eventness with the affective tonality of language in the making such that a dialogue between these *co-arising worlds* can begin. (2009, 256)

To what degree these co-arising worlds need to be addressed as modes of articulation *in* artistic research remain singular to the research project as it's likely that the language in formation might itself elaborate the contingent qualities of an artwork.

Two propositions on artistic research

I would like to distinguish two approaches to artistic research. One side speaks to the in-itself of researching through the notion of framing. It's a kind of bracketing proposition that zooms-in as it unpacks the experience of practice. Call it **Re/Search**. The second proposition must then necessarily approach research practice from a zoomed-out context, the larger scenography of its relations inclusive of an immediate and expansive meshwork of actants that it affects and is affected by. Call it **Res/Arch**. Though this doesn't exactly roll off the tongue and tries too hard to be clever, there is fuzzy logic worth pursuing in this re-naming.

Proposition 1: *Artistic Re/search is itself a proposition that reciprocally frames known unknowns as it deframes the experiencing of unknown unknowns.*

This proposition is inspired in part by Elizabeth Grosz, William James, A. N. Whitehead, Brian Massumi, Gertrude Stein and Donald Rumsfeld.

Artistic research is an unruly, indefinably variegated and indeterminate practice. Nonetheless we ask **how** practice as research happens, with all its attendant known-knowns, known-unknowns and unknown-unknowns. Referring of course to the former US Defense Secretary's contribution to epistemological discourse. There is a kind of comfort zone of *known knowns* (what we know we know) when we enter a research trajectory. They bridge the possibilities of *known unknowns* (what we know we don't know); the posing of the research question or proposition. While it is this *possibility* of uncovering intuitively perceived *known unknowns* that drives most activities that describe themselves as research practice or development in the arts, it is the surprise encounter with *unknown unknowns* (what we don't know we don't know) that is the hinge of the *potentiality*, of the indeterminate contingencies of artistic research practice.⁹ Here is the Whiteheadian potentiality of the proposition as a *lure for feeling*, as the felt experience of knowing in those "co-arising worlds" of sensory eventness and language tonality. Though this dimension of practice is by no means entirely descriptive of artistic research as a 'disciplinary' field of endeavour, it does offer a constructive transductive modulation between the concept and the percept/affect that can be useful in distinguishing its qualities.

⁹ It's worthwhile to mention Zizek's 2003 retort to Rumsfeld that in fact it is the uncategorized "unknown knowns," those unconscious beliefs and assumptions we are not aware of yet adhere to that are more 'dangerous' than Rumsfeld's unknown unknowns.

All that said, one tries to ascertain the consequence and resonance of the proposition within artmaking as practice. Elizabeth Grosz argues in her book *Chaos, Territory, Art* that *framing* is art's method of establishing a territory, of demarcating a fragment of chaos as sensational. Grosz describes framing as an act of constituting a territory that is:

[...] the fabrication of the space in which sensations may emerge, from which a rhythm, a tone, a colouring, weight, texture may be abstracted and moved elsewhere, may function for its own sake, may resonate for the sake of intensity alone. (2008, 13)

Extrapolated to the specificities of artistic research, her framing process is to the making of an artwork what Whitehead's proposition is to luring feeling. Framing fabricates a space of sensation as it composes chaos much as a research proposition enframes a piece of a larger practice. The emphasis here is on the experience of making as *encounter*. This is a kind of radical empiricism extolled by William James, in which the relations that connect experiences are every bit as 'real' as the things or terms of that relation. James' radical method is emblematic of artistic approaches to discovery, vindicating relational experience as 'real' as any scientific matter-of-fact. It's what Brian Massumi has referred to as *speculative pragmatism*. This approach to creative research practice in the arts tends towards the experience of relational processes, every bit as real as its products.

If we can think and feel the framing of experience through practice as a predominant research method, we insist on sensation and intensity as real *facts* of experience. The making of artwork, from a research perspective, then could be said to employ a framing process that has scratch-like tendencies, a back-and-forth re-searching or *slowing down of chaos* to abstract qualities, intensities and assemblages of meaning through sensation. But any research process must necessarily **deframe**, to resonate with its milieu, its Umwelt, its ethico-aesthetic political situatedness, its participatory audience, to insure that its framed territory is a "space contained or bounded but nonetheless always open to the chaos from which it draws its force." (Grosz, 20) One example of that deframing, of the research becoming artwork in the context of presentation is often apparent in 'the piece play'd afterwards'. This is movement between framing and deframing is an oscillation. Deframing then, functions as a kind of hinge to the all-important chaos of context as "[...] framing becomes the means by which the plane of composition composes, deframing its modes of upheaval and transformation." (13)

It's appropriate to include an artist's perspective at this juncture and the brilliant Gertrude Stein, a student of William James at Harvard and a friend of Whitehead, is a good example. She was no

stranger to lure of feeling of a radicalized empiricism. The compositions of her lifelong practice as research continuously fled the delimited space of their rigorous constructions. The following quote from *Everybody's Autobiography* strikes me as especially relevant to this proposition and the back channel of the educational crisis:

Ever since Cezanne everybody has painted has wanted to have a feeling of movement inside the painting not a painting of a thing moving but the thing painted having inside it the existence of moving. I am always hoping to have it the picture be alive inside in it, in that sense not to live in its frame, pictures have been imprisoned in frames quite naturally and now when people are all all peoples are asking to be imprisoned in organization it is quite natural that pictures are trying to escape from the prison the prison of framing. For many years I have taken all pictures out of their frames, I have never kept them in them, and now that I have let them out for so many years they want to get out by themselves, it is very interesting. (1937, 131)

Proposition 2: *Res/Arch practice constructs a port of entry to a matter of concern.* This proposition is predominantly inspired by William Burroughs and Bruno Latour.

This proposition posits a restructuring of the very word *Research* itself. By cutting up its grammar matter, we arrive at another understanding of research that anticipates its contemporary position within art practice. Instead of prefix/root construction of 're' and 'search', let's construct two new root terms: I propose **res** and **arch**. It means erasing that darling 'e' vowel in-between but we can do that with a confident forward slash that prompts its departure and opens a bi-directional passageway. **Res/Arch**. I'm not suggesting a neologism but rather, the construction of a rethinking of research through the dynamic de-framing and re-framing of an etymology.

First we cut to Res. Res is Latin for a thing, an object, matter, a matter, an affair, a circumstance that can be physical, conceptual, or linguistic. Think of the multiple renderings of 'thing' (that thing over there or that thing you said yesterday). For that matter, think of 'matter' as unformed concrete substance and the substance of thought. It's a beautiful little word 'res'. It resonates with parameters of research in and of itself. When combined with the root word *arch* it gathers the power of movement through the inflection of a curve as a passageway, gateway, opening or port of entry.

A snippet of a conversation between Brion Gysin and William Burroughs sympathetically contextualizes an archway's function relative to artistic research:

Brion Gysin: How do you get in [...] get into these paintings?

William Burroughs: Usually I get in by a **port of entry**, as I call it. It is often a face through whose eyes the picture opens into a landscape and I go literally right through that eye into that landscape. Sometimes it is rather like an **archway** [...] a number of little details or a special spot of colour makes the port of entry and then the entire picture will suddenly become a three-dimensional frieze in plaster or jade or some other precious material. (Wilson, my emphasis)

This archway is a frame de-framing; becoming hinge. Closing in on the chaos it composes as it opens to forces of chaotic transformation. It's not unlike the way in which Massumi and Manning described an *opening* in their keynote example of walking quickly down a busy sidewalk. Here the openings between bodies and things create a field effect of affordances and an expression of how everything "integrally relates at that instant."



So here is yet another amalgamation. If the initial conflation of OED entries on *research* in an artistic context as 'a prelude and extemporaneous performance of the regular Piece to be play'd afterward' is unsatisfying, we can attempt to translate Res/Arch as: *a port of entry to a thing that matters*. Latour has a name for a thing matters. He calls it a **matter of concern**.

Were we to think of art objects themselves as processual, affected and affected by a meshwork of surrounding objects inclusive of air, cotton, quarks, taxis, fictive protagonists, typos, funding bodies, banks, beer and ticket takers, the *opening* then becomes a relational assemblage of these objects. Latour's turn on the situated 'thing,' the Res and its Publica, suggests an ethical,

political and aesthetic forum for matters of concern in an object-oriented democracy. I'd like to read a quote from his 2005 Spinoza lecture "What is the Style of Matters of Concern?" in which he passionately speculates that there is no matter of fact apart from its complex relations. He pleads a strong case for moving from a zoomed-in empiricism of matters-of-fact, something he alternatively calls the *object*, to a zoomed-out perspective inclusive of all entangled objects. It's that scratch-like movement again, this time from object to thing, from object to res, from a matter of fact to a matter of concern. From *artefact to artaffect*. It excites a passage through a point of entry to things that matter. This sensibility simply alludes to what artist researchers have been doing all along: concerning themselves not just with facts and not necessarily with 'truths' as they navigate their questions, explore their propositions, experiment with their materials, document their processes, discover and/or generate their discourse. It is rather the immersive quality of an entry to a thing that matters; to the relational events and sensations of what is given in experience. Just as Whitehead's proposition is aesthetic, Latour also posits matters of concern as *aesthetic*. I will let him speak:

A matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre [...] Instead of simply being there, matters of fact begin to look different, to render a different sound, they start to move in all directions, they overflow their boundaries, they include a complete set of new actors, they reveal the fragile envelopes in which they are housed [...] *they have to be liked*, appreciated, tasted, experimented upon, mounted, prepared, put to the test. It is the same world, and yet, everything looks different. Matters of fact were indisputable, obstinate, simply there; matters of concern are disputable, and their obstinacy seems to be of an entirely different sort: they move, they carry you away, and, yes, they too *matter*. (2005)

He concluded his paper with this remark:

I believe it is the responsibility of Europeans to refuse to live in the ruins of the modernist scenography and to have the courage, once again, to put their skills to work in devising for matters of concern a *style* that does justice to what is given in experience. (Ibid, my emphasis)

So in conclusion, I think its well worth considering that the *style* Latour calls for can be aesthetically expressed in the practice of artistic research as a matter of concern. It's as Deleuze views style as a creative stuttering in which saying becomes a doing that pushes language to its

musical limit, a becoming-other of language.¹⁰ So by way of a final summation I'll submit this definition of artistic practice through a Res/Arch lens:

Artistic research practice proposes to frame what is given in experience as a port of entry. It fields an opening as a creative affordance, composing a fragment of chaos to a scratch-like stuttering rhythm that in turn overflows its boundaries as a mattering, as a matter of concern.

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¹⁰ See <http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/ABC3.html#anchor814350>