

Artistic Research between Language and Aesthetics

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Is artistic research more than a utopia and what exactly is artistic research? This question will be explored here in the course of three articles. The first examines the relationship between science and art, and thus also with language and aesthetics. The central question concerns, first of all, how aesthetic and language-based cognition relate to one another and what this might signify for artistic research.

The end of the liberal arts and the universal genius

From a historical perspective what first needs to be pointed out is that the boundary demarcating science from art has not followed a strict course but blithely meandered between the two. Besides music and rhetoric, the seven liberal arts of antiquity comprise arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, grammar and logic. For a long time, the scientist acted as an artist whose capacities were also founded on the assumption that these should be formulated (written and spoken) in a cultivated manner.^[1] Universal geniuses from Leonardo da Vinci to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe embodied this alliance of art and science, even if – as in Goethe’s *Theory of Colours* – his scientific inquiries were no longer abreast with the times. Goethe is known to have rigorously rejected the theory that light is composed of prismatic colours as had already been formulated by Newton.^[2] Maybe this describes a criterion in which the first divergence between art and science can be discerned. As science (and perhaps art too) grows more and more specialised, the “universal genius” becomes an increasingly impossible notion. With this specialisation the reference to the “seven liberal arts” of antiquity also seems little more than an anecdotal aside. Besides which, the concept of the “genius”, constructed by the nineteenth century as an autonomously creative original spirit, appears somewhat inappropriate given that, even in the combination of art and science, creativity is thought to build on previously accumulated knowledge as opposed to being generated by the original spirit within himself. So the question remains, where do science and art interact today – beyond all the universal geniuses and beyond antiquity?

The inception of the fusion

Henk Borgdorff divides this terrain of encounter into 1) research about art, 2) research for art and 3) research within art. The first category examines artistic practice as the object of research and is consequently a facet of the history of art, literature, music and so on. The second realm of “research for art” concerns the kind of art that generates research of its own, into certain materials for instance, enabling these in turn to be employed in an artistic creative process.^[3] To take an example currently featured in w/k, the artist thereby becomes an “engineering artist”.^[4] The final category that I will be primarily discussing in the following comprises the connection between research and art as a process. Unlike the first category that presupposes an analytical division between subject and object (the artist and the scientist studying the other’s practice), or the second category in which artists and scientists cooperate, this third category is concerned with an individual who covers both fields. Unlike the case of the universal genius, here it is not a question of both-one-and-the-other (today colour theory, tomorrow *Faust*) straddling science and art, but of a single fused, symbiotic procedure. How can we envisage a

fusion of this kind?

Disciplined aesthetics

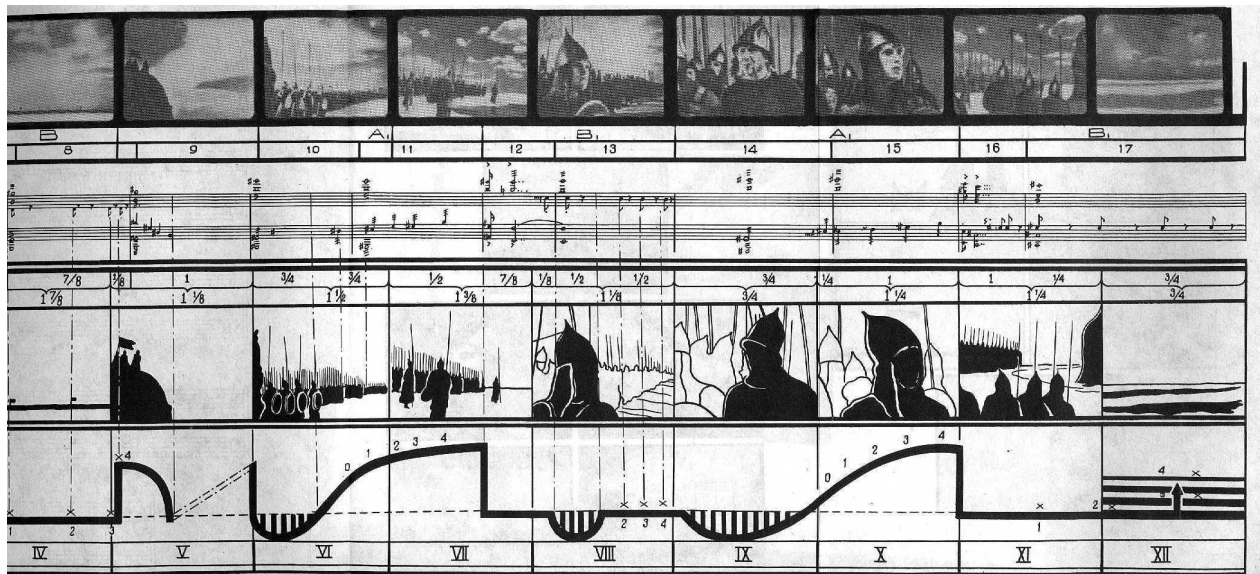
In the following this fusion will be described in its ideal form. Research in art is based on an interdisciplinary interaction between science and art. However, lodged in the term “interdisciplinary” is already an impossible premise: it somehow assumes that art functions as a discipline alongside science. Yet art seldom proceeds with the kind of “discipline” that rigorous science does, instead tending to invoke artistic freedom, originality and innovation, even in its means of expression – in contrast to science, which in formal respects is highly regimented.

Art is supposed to act as a critical corrective and a challenge to (and for) science. If one assumes that artistic approaches are defined by concurrent multiple framings, then art has the task of giving scientific knowledge new framings. As, for example, the Surrealists did in their attempt to address psychoanalytical findings in their art.

Such new framings come about in artistic research through aesthetic approaches. As we know, Cartesian logic separated the subject from the object and separated sensorial perception from understanding. Launching his *Meditations* with the famous “Cogito, ergo sum” Descartes’ inquiry into the unshakeable foundations of his own being does not conclude that he feels or perceives something, but that he thinks – however much fraught with doubt. Baumgarten’s *Aesthetics* from 1750 was the first attempt to highlight the significance of our sensorial experience for our (even if only) “lesser” cognitive faculty.^[5] In the meantime, our senses as means of cognition have arguably been broadly rehabilitated. The belief that we also possess a sensory form of understanding obtains – it has been formulated theoretically (namely in language) on many occasions and can at any time be understood subjectively as well.

An interesting contribution to this is made by the avant-garde film director Sergei M. Eisenstein who, as we know, not only produced films but also subjected his own films posthaste to analysis. This becomes apparent when he raises the obvious question as to whether in the course of shooting a film he was in any way conscious of the complex compositional principles he retrospectively postulated as theory (such as his notion of polyphonic montage).^[6] He answers this by describing a state of aesthetic, non-verbal consciousness during filmmaking:

“Build your thought not through inference, but lay it out directly in frames and in the course of composition. [...] The artist thinks directly in terms of manipulating his resources and materials. His thought is transmuted into direct action, formulated not by formula but by a form.”



A vertical montage by Eisenstein (1938). Photo: Sergei M. Eisenstein.

So on the one hand, Eisenstein undertook research into art, in this case his own. Furthermore, he was also actively researching within art, developing ideas about the formal composition of his films. By then reformulating this form in his self-analysis Eisenstein is explicating his principles of aesthetic education. To begin with, he works with nonverbal presentative symbols in order to lend expression to things on this side of verbal consciousness.^[8] Subsequently, in a second step, he then verbalises them in his theoretical essays after all. Put trenchantly, the entire realm of aesthetic education is based on the fact that aesthetic study exists and that, should it prove to be of pedagogic value, it would require establishing some form of verbal communication.^[9] In other words, sensorial experience ends up being expressed in words; what is sensory is made into sense.

Halfway between aesthetic education and artistic research is Helga Kämpf-Jansen's concept of aesthetic research, which combines everyday experience with artistic strategies and scientific methods. In this approach, which is addressed mainly at visual art, language is ascribed a central role. "What cannot be grasped in language and thereby defies being transferred into acts of consciousness, does not exist."^[10] But language is not only a condition for perception but also responsible for imparting "aesthetic events and processes".^[11]

Hence, taken in conjunction with scientific strategies, aesthetic and artistic research is generally the attempt to develop a nonverbal, aesthetic, if not indeed artistic, approach to a subject, only then, in a second step, to finally return them to a verbal form. Similar to how religious mystics start by emphasising the ineffability of their experiences before then describing them after all (how would we otherwise ever hear about them?), the person performing artistic research must find a point of access either beyond or on this side of language and become engaged in this research in order, ultimately, to verbalise these insights again.

However, if one takes this idea of the primordially of nonverbal approximation seriously this would in fact presuppose that artistic approximation occurs without ulterior motive towards or pre-emption of the subsequent verbalisation. In this regard, artistic research remains a utopia which one might succeed in getting closer to but can never fully reach. Is it still possible after reading this article to actively engage

in artistic research? Or does one have to choose between reading and practice, just as utopia remains an unattainable non-place for readers?

Yet on this side of this aporia it still needs to be pragmatically clarified whether and how artistic research can be dissociated and differentiated from aesthetic research. What turns an aesthetic approach into an artistic one? This on the one hand raises the question as to the (twofold?) anchoring of artistic research in the world of art and science, and further to a proposal as to how artistic research could proceed along methodological lines. And there is another question: can artistic research also be performed through the art of language and how would the antinomy between verbalisation and aesthetics be manifested in the medium of language itself?

Post picture above the text: Sergei M. Eisenstein (1927). Foto: [Dailygeekshow](#).

- [1] Jochen Brüning, "Auftakt", in: Hermann Parzinger, Stefan Aue, Günter Stock (eds.), *ArteFakte: Wissen ist Kunst – Kunst ist Wissen. Reflexionen und Praktiken wissenschaftlich-künstlerischer Begegnungen*, Bielefeld, 2014, pp. 19–24, here: 20.
- [2] Emil Staiger, *Goethe und das Licht*, Munich: Akademie der Schönen Künste, 1982, p. 50.
- [3] Henk Borgdorff, "Die Debatte über Forschung in der Kunst", in: Anton Rey and Stefan Schöbi (eds.), *Künstlerische Forschung. Positionen und Perspektiven*, Zürich, 2009, pp. 23–51, here: 29–30.
- [4] <https://wissenschaft-kunst.de/thomas-schoenauer-wissenschaft-technik-kritik-des-linearen-denkens/>
- [5] Christian G. Allesch, *Einführung in die psychologische Ästhetik*, Vienna, 2006, p. 30.
- [6] On this, cf.: Fernand Hörner, *Polyphonie und Audiovision. Theoretische und methodische Aspekte einer interdisziplinär ausgerichteten Musikvideoanalyse*, Baden-Baden: Nomos (forthcoming).
- [7] Sergei M. Eisenstein, "Vertical montage", in: Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, (Engl. translation: Jay Leyda) London: Faber and Faber, 1970, p. 167.
- [8] Jutta Jäger and Ralf Kuckhermann, "Ästhetik und Soziale Arbeit", in: Jutta Jäger and Ralf Kuckhermann (eds.), *Ästhetische Praxis in der Sozialen Arbeit. Wahrnehmung, Gestaltung und Kommunikation*, Weinheim, Munich: Juventa-Verl, 2004, pp. 11–82, here: 17.
- [9] Ibid. p. 40.
- [10] Helga Kämpf-Jansen, *Ästhetische Forschung. Wege durch Alltag, Kunst und Wissenschaft. Zu einem innovativen Konzept ästhetischer Bildung*, Marburg: Tectum, 2012, p. 13.
- [11] Ibid. p. 18.

Tags

1. Artistic Research
2. Fernand Hörner
3. film
4. Sergej M. Eisenstein