

Debate on Artistic Research 1. Summary

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Summary: This article provides an in-depth commentary on Henk Borgdorff's pivotal essay The Debate on Research in the Arts. The central thesis is that research in the arts fulfils the criteria of independent scientific research. But this strong thesis cannot be sufficiently substantiated and should therefore be replaced by a less forceful claim. The full commentary has been published in Mythos-Magazin and is available [here](#).

The proposal is first of all to clarify what individual artists understand by *research in the arts*: here we encounter activities such as preliminary research for artistic projects, reflection on the prerequisites of one's own artistic practice or the endeavour to generate innovative work. This can be referred to as research in the *broader* sense, as more frequently encountered in a pre-scientific, everyday context, which also includes experimentation in the sense of simply trying things out. In the case of *empirical* experiments, *additional controlling parameters* are required in order to better attain certain epistemic goals; this is how we define research in the *stricter* sense.

Critical Theses

(1) Both "research on art" and "research for art" are *new labels* for disciplines whose existence and *raison d'être* are indisputable; they do not have any greater significance in relation to art theory. However, what is meant by the term "research in the arts" remains unclear from its initial exposition.

(2) Borgdorff draws on one definition of research and aims to show that it can also be applied to research in the arts. According to this definition, research is "an original investigation conducted with the aim of gaining insight and knowledge". He derives four criteria from this. These criteria are tailored to empirical knowledge that is capable of fostering new insights in regard to the particular object of research, thereby expanding our knowledge and understanding. By contrast, innovative artworks make a contribution to the artistic universe: they add something new to art as already exists. It is misguided to think of such works as enhancers of empirical knowledge by dint of offering contributions to original empirical research.

(3) Borgdorff builds on a second definition of research which suggests three interpretations:

The first deals with a question relevant to educational policy: how can the funding of art projects be regulated in a manner analogous to the funding of empirical research projects? A funding application for an empirical science project is expected to show that the issues addressed are relevant to the current context of scientific research. A funding application for an artistic project that uses the same template may well demonstrate that the artistic issues addressed are important for the current artistic context – but this does not necessarily show that the project involves research in the stricter sense. The same goes for the other aspects.

The second interpretation also refers to a question relevant to educational policy: what requirements should be met in order to graduate at an art school?

By way of contrast, the third interpretation amounts to a recommendation for a new type of fine arts programme. This is about implementing a *new direction in art* which ought to proceed in a historically reflected way. The realisation of an art programme to which there will always be legitimate alternatives does not constitute a branch of science in its own right.

(4) If we take artistic research to mean scientific research of a new kind, it makes sense to raise the ontological question “what is the essence of the object of research in the arts?” By contrast, if we take into account the many different conceptions of research in the arts in the broader sense as are pursued by artists, then this question need not even be asked. Carrying out research of a certain kind, reflecting upon the prerequisites of one’s own actions, viewing artistic experimentation as simply trying something out, thereby giving rise to new artistic phenomena – these are activities that need to be distinguished from one another.

(5) In his epistemological elaborations, Borgdorff *changes his principal conceptualization*. Whereas he previously referred to research in the arts as “contributing to what we currently know and understand”, he now speaks of “practical knowledge that as unuttered, implicit knowledge cannot be communicated in a directly discursive or conceptual way”. By this he above all means beliefs that operate as tacit, underlying assumptions. Firstly, such beliefs do not constitute knowledge in the sense of more or less reliable empirical knowledge, and secondly, the *dependence on implicit beliefs* is not specific to the scientific realm but rather applies to all aspects of life. Therefore, the legitimate observation that artistic practice always embodies or articulates implicit beliefs of some sort or other does not imply that we are dealing with research in the stricter, scientific sense. To claim that some forms of art are aimed at the *acquisition* of new knowledge of a specific kind is something distinctly different from claiming that they are *rooted in* implicit knowledge or unspoken beliefs.

(6) If research in the arts is understood as a new category of science that can only be carried out by artists, then it would seem imperative to jettison our customary notion of scientific objectivity, or at least to limit it considerably. It is a different matter if “research in the arts” serves as the label for a new *art programme* that conducts research in the broader sense. Research in the *broader* sense does not mean that we must change the established norms of research in the *stricter* sense.

(7) “Artistic practice – both the art object as well as the creative process – embodies embedded, implicit knowledge that can be revealed and articulated through experimentation and interpretation.” Statements like this must be *reformulated* in order to stand as statements about an art programme of artistic research: artistic practice is based on implicit beliefs that require further definition and these are expected to be articulated with the help of artistic experimentation and self-interpretation.

(8) Characteristic of Borgdorff's theory of artistic research is the strong affiliation of theory development with educational policy considerations. In contrast, I argue that the classification of research within the arts should – initially at least – be performed exclusively according to scientific criteria. The question “is it ‘PhD-worthy?’” belongs to a different discourse: one whose procedure depends on “government policy decisions” or on plans for such decisions.

(9) Since research in the arts is not research in the stricter sense, its *PhD-worthiness* cannot be directly deduced from it. However, it is possible to interpret the goal of “introducing a comprehensive ‘three-cycle-system’ that consists of the bachelor, master and doctorate cycles” in such a way that, when it comes to arts education, one should also ask whether a convincing concept for a practice-based doctorate can at all be developed.

(10) Research in the arts has a different status than the one Borgdorff ascribes to it: it is indeed legitimate research in the broader sense. Artists who identify themselves as artistic researchers are therefore advised to adapt their self-image accordingly. If they explicitly identify with research in the broader sense, then many of the reservations raised against artistic research that considers itself science will become redundant.

(11) Art does not have to be considered research in the stricter sense in order to achieve the same status as science. Whilst empirical sciences continue to employ specified means in order to gain reliable empirical knowledge as manifested in everyday life, art ties in with efforts to shed light on the respective aesthetic value system that shapes how people e.g. decorate their own homes, choose clothing, deal with their own bodies. The dependence on empirical knowledge is as much a part of the *condition humaine* as is our conformity to a shared value system regarding the aesthetics of our homes, clothing, bodies or artistic phenomena. Art and science are equal because both are equally important in defining the form of human life. Empirical scientific research is research in the stricter sense, whereas research in the arts is research in the broader sense: like other forms of artistic production, it grapples with conformity to an *aesthetic value system*.

Image above the text: *Debate on Artistic Research* (2021). Illustration: Till Bödeker.

Tags

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