

Debate on Artistic Research 2.1: Summary

Text: [Peter Tepe](#) | Section: [On 'Art and Science'](#)

*Summary: Numerous articles from the anthology *The Art of Research (Kunst des Forschens)* are discussed, all of which are very fruitful to the debate on artistic research. The discussion is split into two parts to accommodate the high number of texts. Part 2.1 features texts by Elke Bippus, Hannes Rickli and Christoph Schenker. The full commentary is published in *Mythos-Magazin* and is available [here](#).*

The continuation of the series [Debate on Artistic Research](#), which is split into two parts, examines the anthology *Kunst des Forschens. Praxis eines ästhetischen Denkens (Art of Research. Practice of Aesthetic Thought)*, published in 2009 and edited by Elke Bippus: in 2012, a second edition was published. Part 2.1 discusses: the *Introduction* by Elke Bippus, the essay by the artist Hannes Rickli, which draws on audio and video recordings made in a scientific context, and Christoph Schenker's reflections on artistic research, which amount to a theory of innovation in the arts. [Part 2.2](#) will provide a commentary on the articles by Kathrin Busch and Dieter Mersch.

The article [Debate on Artistic Research: The Series Programme](#) outlines the approach and my goals in detail: from each anthology, I select those texts that firstly develop a *theory and/or methodology* of artistic research – at least to some extent – and/or secondly provide information about any kind of *art programme* of artistic research. My goals also include exploring opportunities for collaboration and contributing to the further development of certain ideas. At the same, I strive to provide a convincing critique of the theses I deem problematic.

1. Elke Bippus: *Introduction*

(1) Bippus begins by speaking of the “cognitive potential of art”, of “knowledge generation” in art, of the “investigative nature” of art, of “art as epistemic practice”. It is difficult for an outsider who is new to the whole genre of artistic research to immediately grasp what it is about: what exactly is meant by each of these terms listed above? Where, for example, does the “cognitive potential of art” lie?

(2) Bippus distinguishes between three positions, which holds relevance for the pro-and-con discussion on concepts of artistic research. The dismissive approach fears “an increasing academisation and scientification of art”; Bippus accuses it of not being artistically up to date. The first conception of artistic research (position A) is oriented “towards scientific standards or practice-oriented research”; she accuses this position of ignoring the “defining characteristics of an artistic practice”. Instead, Bippus argues for a second concept (position B). This understanding of artistic research is said to “proceed in a different way and have different goals than those of the sciences” – position B recognises that it is an “epistemic practice” of a certain kind that is fundamentally different from a scientific practice.

(3) The tasks of position B involve “giving access to unconscious presuppositions in science”. It needs to be clarified what this means exactly and how we are to envision the exploration of such presuppositions by artistic means.

(4) Like the author, I think it is useful to distinguish between several *positions of artistic research* and I

strive to develop this distinction further.

(5) My alternative approach leads to the following evaluations:

- According to the principle of artistic freedom, science-related art is a legitimate option for artists.
- w/k understands itself as an online journal that, among other things, supports science-related art (which includes forms of artistic research) and strives to investigate it further.

(6) Two variants can be distinguished in type B of artistic research, as far as science-related art is concerned:

Variant 1: An artistic engagement with a particular science takes place (i.e. with quantum physics, genetic engineering, etc.).

Variant 2: A certain *critical* theory leads to an artistic engagement with the sciences. Historical examples of critical theories are the different variants of Marxism, the positions of the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault's analysis of power. An artist reflecting on such ideas may, for example, be able to "critically examine" certain sciences. In such cases, it must be clarified which critical theory this strategy is based on.

(7) In the context of the theory I present, some theses of position B can be *reformulated* or *refined* and some issues, which cause difficulties for the related theory, can be *avoided*. The commentary explains this in full detail.

(8) The crucial theoretical difference is this: in my theory, science-related art is not thought of as an "epistemic practice" of a special kind, which attains insights of a special kind, but rather as an artistic practice *guided in each case by a certain art programme*; and certain insights may be *associated* with it.

(9) Science-related artists assigned to type B of artistic research more often receive "investigations in the philosophy and history of science". Thus, art programmes emerge that respond to such investigations. This is a *critical theory of a special kind*: if an artist subscribes to this kind of critical view, then *artistic equivalents* to the investigations of science studies, which take place with critical intent, emerge.

(10) An art programme bound to a certain critical theory aims to motivate the recipients to *adopt the critical stance in question* and to move towards a critical "research practice in the sense of probing, sensing and investigating". In this light, it becomes understandable that Bippus questions whether "the exhibition format provides an adequate space for *Artistic Research*". Hence, novel forms of presentation are being sought that present "an experiment for artists and observers alike".

(11) In terms of the w/k system, Bippus' main line is to be classified as follows: a programme of science-related art evolves that relies on a *critical* theory of science, as developed by Rheinberger, Latour and others. This creates a cooperative environment of a special kind; a compelling total package.

(12) Bippus' approach clearly differs to that of Borgdorff (discussed in the first instalment of this series), who orients himself to a methodology established in the sciences and transfers it to art. Borgdorff wants to establish artistic research as a science in its own right and, for this purpose, turns a methodology that is well established in the sciences into an art programme.

(13) In terms of theories of artistic research, the following applies: on the one hand, it must be worked out on a scientific level which theorists act as lead authors for a certain art programme; on the other hand, with the help of experts – in this case from other historians of science, philosophers of science, etc. – one must clarify whether the claims made can be considered *sufficiently well-founded*. What other positions are held? Are there any attempts to invalidate them?

(14) In chapter 1.6, I present some elements of the theory I advocate in more precise detail so as to identify the similarities and differences to the concept put forward by Bippus.

2. Hannes Rickli: *Livestream Knurrhahn (Gurnard)*

(1) In line with the terminology used in w/k, Rickli falls under the bracket of a science-related artist; he articulates his artistic approach and its rationale.

(2) In some of his artistic works, Rickli draws on “audio and video recordings from the test arena of an experimental system at the Alfred-Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research on the North Sea island Helgoland”. He is interested in “an unintended surplus of signals” and “overlooked symbols”, which he then “makes visible through artistic processes”. Thus, part of Rickli's art programme is to focus on the by-products, also known as *traces*, that unintentionally and inadvertently emerge during certain experiments, in order to trigger a process of *trace reading*.

(3) Towards the end of his text, Rickli also outlines possibilities of *scientifically* engaging with those unintended surpluses of signals that are the subject of his art. This form of science research can keep video footage or records from being discarded and deal with these phenomena in more depth; what's more, the “instrumental film” or the “utility film” can become the subject of film theory. The main difference I see is that artistic activity is always guided by an individual art programme based on certain value-normative premises. In science research, however, such premises generally don't play a role.

(4) Rickli's works on audio and video recordings made in an empirical-scientific context can be classified as *artistic equivalents* to existing or yet to be realised forms of science research.

(5) Rickli's art contains a component that is *critical of science*, as thematised by Bippus. Through his artistic work, he wants to draw attention to "unconscious prerequisites of science" and undertake a "critical questioning of the sciences"; he speaks of the "unconscious of the cognitive process". While Rickli's art programme is to be seen as a legitimate artistic path, the broader thesis presents an *assertion with scientific claim*, which is to be discussed on a scientific level. Experts from disciplines such as the philosophy of science and the history of science are to be heard on the following issue: is it true that the "by-products of experimenting" point to "unconscious prerequisites in science" which scientists usually don't consider – or which cannot even be considered in principle? On a scientific level, an artist's claim that they reveal the *subconscious* of science through their work cannot simply be assumed to be true.

(6) Rickli refers to Kracauer. This recourse also seems to have *socio-critical* implications, but these remain unclear. In relation to the Helgoland project, this means that Rickli does not focus on the "logically operating mind" of the experimenting scientists, but rather that he deals with the by-products of experimenting that are overlooked by them – in the hope to penetrate the "'true' [...] materiality", which the scientists can't control, and to *identify* something that (by necessity?) evades the scientists involved. This, too, calls for discussion: Rickli's orientation towards Kracauer (and Benjamin) can be seen as a recourse to *critical theories* (cf. chapter 1).

(7) Rickli wants to apply Kracauer's concept of *spatial images (Raumbilder)* to the data obtained from the acoustic lab on Helgoland. However, this raises some problems on a scientific level: in the face of a totalitarian society with a fundamentally antisemitic attitude, a radical critical distancing is required on all levels; but is a similarly radical criticism also needed with regard to the empirical sciences?

(8) The essay is not least about "the category of tacit knowledge" in Rickli's artistic work. After the analysis, the following specification comes to mind: the *critical background theory that Rickli advocates*, which relies on Kracauer and Benjamin, functions as his tacit knowledge. "Tacit knowledge discovers" then means "In light of this critical theory, it becomes apparent that...".

(9) The term *tacit knowledge*, often used by theorists of artistic research, should be used carefully as it can be interpreted in many ways. Especially when group specific *values* are involved, to which there are always alternatives, we should not speak of *knowledge*.

(10) That one is to "blindly fumble their way" in the "early phases of experimental activity" does not present a convincing argument. Isn't data collection *always* carried out in light of a certain theory with the goal to bring forth a convincing *scientific explanation* of certain phenomena?

(11) Rickli is an example for the fact that a *well-functioning cooperation* has emerged among artists (who generate multiple individual programmes from a particular hyper-individual art programme), as well as among scientists (who *support* said hyper-individual art programme and provide it with a *theoretical foundation*). In the history of the arts in general, and the history of fine art in particular, such forms of collaboration rarely occur; thus, they serve as a lucrative topic of study.

3. Christoph Schenker. *Inspection and Intensification. Thoughts on artistic research*

(1) In the "current discussion on artistic research", Christoph Schenker wants to point to a certain

aspect that has “barely received attention” thus far. His main concept focuses on artistic work, which consists of “generating new differentiations in certain fields and experimenting with them”: “A painter introduces new nuances of colour; a musician a new timbre. In doing so, they explore visual and auditory constellations that have not yet been perceived.”

(2) Schenker’s use of the term artistic work does not cover everything that artists actually do – his examples demonstrate an interested in *innovations*. This leads to the following proposal for clarification: Schenker refers to *innovative* artistic work, rather than artistic work in general. This enables us to define Schenker’s understanding of artistic research more precisely: he conceives it as *innovative* artistic work of any kind, which consists in “generating new differentiations and experimenting with them”. Thus, *innovations in the arts* are at the centre of the theory he outlines.

(3) Schenker pitches his theory of innovation in the arts as a *theory of artistic research* – and it is this connection that my commentary focuses on.

(4) Schenker comments on the development status of theories of artistic research. Some of these theories claim that “artistic research has methods of a special kind” and/or that “it makes use of a specific toolkit” and/or that “it has a typical object of research” and/or that “it produces a kind of knowledge that is characteristic of art”.

(5) Schenker suggests that some theoretical approaches are not very promising; the commentary discusses this in further detail. Schenker summarises his findings as follows: “Thus, it is neither methods nor specific toolkits that distinguish artistic research as a special kind of research, nor does it limit itself to a particular subject area.”

(6) Schenker strives to achieve the goal of “distinguishing artistic research as a special kind of research” in a way that eludes the objections he raises. For this purpose, he resorts to the thesis “that artistic work consists in generating new differentiations and experimenting with them”, which I have reformulated as a thesis about *innovative* artistic work. We may ask: what other innovation theories of the arts are there? In cognitive terms, does Schenker’s approach exhibit certain advantages and disadvantages compared to the theoretical alternatives, so that theory A is preferable to competitors B, C, etc.?

(7) Let me point out two fields of work in the innovation theory of the arts: on the one hand, the different innovations – e.g. in painting – must be *identified*; on the other hand, one must attempt to *elucidate* the *emergence* of these innovations with the scientific means of psychology, sociology, etc; to *explain* them in a specific sense. If we go by my proposed clarification, Schenker regards the artistic researcher as an *innovative* artist and every new artistic development can then be formally grasped as the *generation and practical application/implementation* of a new differentiation.

(8) In his essay, Schenker presents his theory of artistic innovation as a *theory of artistic research* that avoids the problems he has previously pointed out in other theories of this kind. This has the advantage of increasing the chance for his ideas to gain wider reach by linking them to the attractive discourse around artistic research. For a number of years, artistic research has been *in* and it is easier to get your thoughts heard if you participate in this discourse than if you assign your own activity to other discourses.

(9) Disadvantage 1: The term *innovative artist* is more precise and less misleading than the term *artistic researcher* and therefore preferable on the scientific level. In substance, it is of no benefit to equate the innovative artist with the artistic researcher.

(10) Disadvantage 2: A theory of artistic innovation has, as (7) shows, certain tasks to master. Now, if we *lay out* a theory of innovation as a theory of artistic research, then we reach a situation that *impedes* the further development of what currently is a promising approach to innovation theory. After all, a theory of artistic research should engage intensively with the central issues which theories of artistic research typically face, and situate its respective approach in this context.

(11) Two examples should suffice for this summary: the basic tasks of a theory of artistic research include, firstly, adequately explaining the respective concept of research being used. A theory of artistic innovation does not require such an explanation; it is sufficient for art to be understood as a medium *in which innovations take place*. Secondly, a theory of artistic research must discuss in detail the different answers to the question “what, then, distinguishes artistic research?” in order to prove its own answer superior. This discussion is *unnecessary* for a theory of artistic innovation. Therefore, it is true for the study of artistic innovation that it is *distracted from its central tasks* when asked to grapple extensively with the typical questions that theories of artistic research are to answer.

(12) Schenker outlines a promising theory of artistic innovation. Yet at the same time his aim is to bring attention to an aspect that has thus far been neglected “in the current discussion around artistic research”. This connection hinders or complicates a consistent development of the theory of innovation. In this case, one should follow the particular ‘logic’ of a theory of artistic innovation.

(13) The term artistic research is a *fashionable term*. The following applies to fashionable terms: many people use them due to their current popularity, leading to many different interpretations, some even contradictory to one another. It is thus not the case that everyone is speaking of *the same thing*. Therefore, in order to avoid misunderstandings, I argue that fashionable terms in general and the term artistic research in particular should *never* be used *without explanation* on a *scientific* level; having said that, I am *not* interested in entirely replacing one such term with another.

Details of the cover photo: *Debate on Artistic Research* (2021). Illustration: Till Bödeker.

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Tags

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