

Debate on Artistic Research 2.2. 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. The summary of part 2.2 for w/k only discusses the texts by Kathrin Busch and Dieter Mersch – the articles covered in chapter 3 Discussion of individual aspects are omitted here. The full commentary is published in Mythos-Magazin and is available [here](#).

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. Kathrin Busch: *The art of knowledge. Artistic research and aesthetic thought*

In the summary, I particularly focus on *critical* comments.

(1) Whilst the theory of artistic research outlined by Elke Bippus draws on critically inclined science historians such as Bruno Latour and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Kathrin Busch relies on philosophers: in particular Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Theodor W. Adorno.

(2) It is right to criticise a clear division between art and science. One argument against a complete separation of the two fields is that there are various *individual connections* between art and science, which in w/k are referred to as science-related art: by this we mean artists who draw on theories/methods/results of a certain science and process these scientific elements as part of an individual art programme. Following this theory, it is mistaken to consider the processing of scientific knowledge within an art programme, which is primarily oriented towards specific artistic goals, as the *production of a particular knowledge through art*. The existence of art-and-science connections does not preclude the fact that, *in other aspects*, both proceed differently and are easy to distinguish from one another.

(3) According to Busch, the emergence of artistic research coincides “with the philosophical critique of reason and its search for another definition of thought, which, like artistic research, is not so much guided by strict scientific standards”. Artistic research appears here as a *(new) art programme based on certain forms of philosophical critique of reason*. Busch strives to provide a theoretical basis for this kind of art – she distinguishes herself from the art that Borgdorff, Bippus and Schenker mean when they speak of artistic research.

(4) Busch claims that a “redefinition of the relationship [...] between science and art” is needed. The general observation that “the field of science is reconfiguring itself” is indisputable; however, there are

several ways to theoretically permeate this reconfiguration; on a scientific level, one must weigh up the different alternatives. For example, the fact that some “transdisciplinary research alliances” take shape does not necessarily mean that *all* existing scientific disciplines *disintegrate* in such alliances, nor does it mean that the understanding of science *fundamentally changes* in the empirical sciences.

(5) If we understand the *research arts* to be “transdisciplinary research alliances” with artistic involvement, then these represent a third area “alongside the arts and sciences”; the question then is what tasks artists fulfil in the context of such an alliance.

(6) According to Busch, art plays “a substantial role in the formation of theoretical knowledge”. When discussing such theses, I recommend dealing with *concrete examples* in each case. It should be indisputable that artists, with their “painterly experience and knowledge”, can contribute to “rectifying important aspects of art history research”. However, the fact that artists who are competent in art history can contribute to the correction of art historical misjudgements is not yet proof “that art should be seen as playing a substantial role in the formation of theoretical knowledge”.

(7) Busch advocates a “philosophical critique of reason”, which includes a “critique of the modern sciences” as developed by Heidegger; her concept centres around a new way of thinking – and a new society shaped by this new way of thinking. By ‘actual’ artistic research she evidently means a kind of art that relies on this kind of background theory. Busch’s stance on this makes it easier to understand why she writes that artistic research should not be “subject to academic standards”: after all, these standards belong to the modern sciences that are to be *viewed critically*.

(8) Similar to Bippus, Busch opposes artistic research that is oriented towards purely “scientific standards”:

“It is therefore necessary to distinguish between a mutually challenging relationship between art and science, which leads to new hybrid forms with completely different fields of knowledge and research procedures, and the application of scientific criteria to artistic productions”.

(9) Busch is oriented towards the “philosophical critique of the sciences”, which practices forms of thought and research “that do not allow themselves to be subordinated to the sciences”. Heidegger and others do indeed claim a “difference between thought and science”. These type of concepts are based on the assumption that ‘true’ or ‘actual’ philosophy reaches a level of knowledge that is *fundamentally superior* to that of the sciences; a *higher* knowledge. Especially in the case of Heidegger, some people (myself included) see specific *patterns of religious-theological thought* at work that are pursued in a novel way.

(10) Philosophies and other theories that break away from the sciences and claim for themselves a higher knowledge of some kind share an affinity with those art forms that are based on the same or similar underlying beliefs.

(11) One can be open-minded about the use of literary styles within philosophy without advocating that philosophy *as a whole* be pursued “as an art form”. I believe that philosophy, at its core, consists of theses and arguments that draw on certain issues, which can be subjected to a rational, critical

examination that often also includes the empirical dimension. The use of literary-artistic elements can especially help communicate new theses and arguments, not only to an expert audience, but also to a broader public. On the other hand, the use of artistic means can also *gain the upper hand* and have the consequence that the new theses and arguments are not worked out as clearly as they could be, making their critical discussion *more difficult*.

(12) The philosophical essay embodies *one of several* legitimate forms of philosophical writing. A theory of the philosophical essay becomes problematic when it subscribes to the idea that a *higher knowledge* is attainable, which the sciences are allegedly deprived of since they follow the misguided “compulsion to systematise”.

(13) “An openness to what exceeds the boundaries and conditions of what has been possible thus far” is also possible beyond the position taken by Busch. An openness to *being*, as understood by Heidegger in relation to religious-theological traditions of thought, is to be distinguished from an openness to new experiences or to yet unfamiliar dimensions of reality.

2. Dieter Mersch: *Epistemic Practices of the Arts*

(1) Like Elke Bippus and Hannes Rickli, Dieter Mersch advocates a theory of artistic research that relies on more recent approaches of science theory and history.

(2) With critical intent, Mersch presents a view of scientific cognitive processes that has long prevailed, to which the “recent history of science has applied a series of necessary amendments”. These amendments form the basis to a particular theory of artistic research. Some points require clarification and discussion among experts for science research: one should distinguish between the specialist discourse of the history of science and science theory, where the research results of A, B, C, etc. are critically examined, and the discourse on concepts of artistic research. In the first case, the following questions may arise: how do experts gauge the theses and arguments? Which objections do they have? Are there attempts to invalidate them?

(3) Now, if a theory of artistic research draws on results from science research, then we are faced with further questions. Let’s take, for instance, a research result of studies carried out in the history of science: does the theory of artistic research, relying on these studies, also adopt its result, or do additional aspects arise, such as special interpretations or radicalisations, which are to be discussed separately?

(4) A further distinction must be made between science researchers who largely stick to their discipline and those who also comment on the relationship between art and science – like Hans-Jörg Rheinberger and Bruno Latour, for instance – and even advocate a certain theory of artistic research themselves. Such an art theoretical position can affect research in the history of science in a way that should be clarified in further detail.

(5) The results of science research may lead to a need to restructure the production of scientific knowledge.

(6) Mersch considers art to be “closely related to philosophy”. However, some generalised statements

about philosophy are problematic: for example, only *some* forms of philosophy aim to achieve a *wisdom* that is connected to an ethos.

(7) Different belief systems develop different conceptions of *wisdom* as their desirable goal. For example, religious belief systems develop different understandings of this than areligious ones. Upon further inspection, every concrete conception of wisdom proves itself as *bound to a belief system*: by wisdom we always mean the *consequent implementation of the respective belief system's key values*. We should therefore refrain from calling those forms of philosophy that appear as wisdom teachings a *form of knowledge* – it is rather a matter of *conveying an orientation to life that is always bound to a particular belief system*, and this orientation varies.

(8) Mersch's statements about philosophy as a form of knowledge or cognition mainly serve to *establish art as a form of knowledge*. Like Mersch, I believe that "the concepts of knowledge and cognition" are not necessarily bound to the (natural) sciences, however I also distinguish between *empirical knowledge* and a *life orientation based on a certain world view and a value system*: we already acquire empirical knowledge in the multiplicity of everyday life. To talk about cognition, or knowledge, in relation to one's life orientation fosters the misunderstanding that it is *merely another form of reliable knowledge*.

(9) According to Mersch, "art is closer to philosophy [...] than philosophy to the sciences". Generalisations about *art* are to be taken with just as much caution as generalisations about *philosophy*. According to the cognitive art theory, each concrete art phenomenon is shaped by a certain art programme; so general statements about art that secretly orient themselves to a certain art programme should be avoided.

(10) In generic terms, *art* is not closer to *philosophy* than *philosophy* is to *empirical science*. Rather, several forms of art, philosophy and empirical science share some similarities that are to be further defined. Science-related art, which draws on a theory of physics, for instance, is closer to this empirical science than most forms of philosophy. Art that is primarily concerned with reinforcing a certain life orientation is more closely related to the respective philosophy that develops this life orientation than to the empirical sciences.

(11) If, in Mersch's work, statements about art that follows a certain art programme appear as insights about *art in general*, then the corresponding theses are to be reformulated as *specific statements for a certain art programme*. Over great stretches, Mersch propagates a specific art programme disguised in the form of general theses about art, which relates to position 3 of artistic research.

(12) Mersch rightly points out that, for example, "the art theories of German idealism [...] attested to art's extraordinary cognitive modes". I have fundamental reservations towards these kinds of art theoretical approaches. Hegel's reconstruction of art history, for example, is based on the conviction of the *evolving Absolute/divine*. The core idea is that in artworks, the respective state of development of the evolving Absolute *finds expression in a sensory way*. Hegel's philosophy in general and art philosophy in particular is ultimately upheld by a variant of religious faith. Concepts of artistic research that tie in with the art theories of German idealism usually exclude the religious worldview of, for example, Hegel and Schelling.

(13) Whilst Mersch's statements about the "scientific-ness of science" come close to the theory of artistic research (position 3) outlined by Bippus in her introduction, his remarks on Nietzsche show a kinship to Busch's more radical theory (position 5).

(14) The fact that art "can be reduced neither to scientific knowledge nor to philosophical thought" does not necessarily mean that art, or aesthetics, is a "cognitive practice in its own right"; the goal "to bring art, science and philosophy on a level playing field" can also be achieved without this thesis.

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

Tags

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