

Debate on Artistic Research 3. Summary

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

Abstract: Part 3 of the series Debate on Artistic Research discusses the volume Art and Artistic Research published in 2010 in Zurich and edited by Corina Caduff, Fiona Siegenthaler and Tan Wälchli. The full commentary is published in Mythos-Magazin and is available [here](#).

The article [Debate on Artistic Research: The Series Programme](#) outlines the general approach and my goals in detail: I select those texts that - at least to some extent - develop a *theory and/or methodology* of artistic research, present an *educational concept* of artistic research or provide information on any kind of *individual 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 time, I strive to provide a convincing critique of the theses I deem problematic.

1. Nina Malterud: Can You Make Art without Research?

(1) Nina Malterud makes two claims: firstly, that it is easy to distinguish *good* from *bad* art, and secondly, that it is *research* - artistic research - that makes art good: without artistic research, there is no good art.

(2) Both assumptions are problematic. Anyone who claims that one can distinguish between good and bad art in a universal way must present and justify on a scientific level the foundations of their evaluative art theory. In particular, it must be discussed whether there are cases in which the application of different aesthetic value systems leads to *varying* results that are worth serious consideration. Malterud does not address these issues.

(3) If research - artistic research - is what makes art good in the first place, then on a scientific level we require a *coherent definition* of research that is capable of supporting this strong thesis. For example, one would have to prove that no good art can be made unless artistic research (in the sense yet to be specified) is present. However, Malterud makes do with vague statements. It does not seem very feasible to advocate the thesis 'without artistic research there is no good art' in a way that meets scientific requirements.

(4) Malterud distinguishes the act of "*research*" with a small *r*, which is assigned to artistic practice, from "*institutionalised Research*" with a big *R*. For example, the implementation of "standards for quality assessment" on specific exhibitions or performances belong to *Research*. The "debate about the identity of artistic research" belongs to institutionalised *Research*.

(5) Over a longer period of time, the debates on artistic research have taken place primarily in the context of education policy and the reforms to be undertaken at art schools. However, since a growing number of artists are explicitly assigning themselves to artistic research, the discussion has also been taking place in "the professional art scenes and art environments."

(6) The Norwegian Higher Education Act is a text of education policy which incorporates in the

legislative procedure the goals and interests of the parties involved. The claim is that “artistic research is established as an equal of academic research”. However, on a scientific level, it is first of all necessary to clarify what exactly is meant by artistic research, in order to then approach, with an open mind, the question of whether this understanding of artistic research *actually* represents the “main resource and foundation for art education” or for the arts. So far, there don’t seem to be any definitions of the term “artistic research” that define it as the “main resource and foundation for art education” or for art in general.

(7) The Norwegian Higher Education Act and other such texts seem to rely on the premise that there is only one way to establish a *parity* between science and art, which is by assuming *that research in general is inherent to both*. In contrast, I argue that the *anthropological basis* to empirical science and art are different.

The empirical sciences subsist in the dependence of the human form of existence on reliable empirical knowledge about conditions relevant to life. The arts, on the other hand, subsist in the bond between human life and varying systems of belief and (especially) of value. According to this view, art and science are equals *because the two different areas are equally as important for the human form of life – and not because they have something in common from which one can logically deduce parity*.

(8) The concept of the peer review is typically associated with academic journals, where competent experts review the submitted articles prior to publication. Journals that operate strictly according to the criteria of *empirical science* practice a particularly rigorous form of quality control. Here I am referring to peer review in the *stricter* sense. “The fields of art and design” have always worked with certain quality criteria which are applied to “exhibitions, publications [or] shows”, for example. This I regard as peer review in the *broader* sense.

(9) Despite all the disputes between competing trends and theories, the empirical sciences share some *common* criteria to assess the scientific value of, for instance, an essay submitted to a journal. These include: a clear line of argument that allows for substantial criticism, an explanation of the theoretical assumptions used, a definition of the central concepts and the fundamental verifiability of the theses. In the arts, there are no comparable *general* criteria for defining, say, a certain work’s artistic worth. In fact, each art form led by an art programme has *specific* normative quality criteria *that are not recognised by competing art forms and programmes*. Thus, the peer review system practiced in the spectrum of the empirical sciences cannot, in a stricter sense, be *directly* applied to the artistic spectrum.

2. Marcel Cobussen: *The Intruder. On Differentiations in Artistic Research*

(1) Marcel Cobussen is more interested in the question ‘how does artistic research work in practice?’ than the ontological question ‘what is artistic research?’. This touches on my own view, which focuses on the artists’ understanding of artistic research. Artistic research, according to the definition a, b, c, etc., exists in many areas and new forms are constantly emerging. In the discourse of education policy, however, it is one authority that determines what artistic research *actually* is; in this sense, the question ‘what is artistic research?’ has been asked and answered.

(2) “Is art always already affected or infected by research? Are there criteria which allow one to distinguish artistic research from art? Said differently, is research an inextricable aspect of all art production?” These questions belong to an *art theoretical* discourse. Cobussen understands artistic research to be an inseparable component of all art production. However, his conception of research is *too broad*. The fact that artists *explicitly or implicitly ask questions* such as ‘which clothes would increase my chances of success?’ or ‘which colours are best suited for my next painting?’ usually does not count as *research*. Art production – like any other production of something – is connected with explicitly or implicitly dealing with certain questions: for example, “preparing a new theater play” often involves the question “which audience do we want to address?”. Besides, explicit and implicit questions arise in *all* areas of life. On a scientific level, it is a disadvantage to classify every activity that has a question or a problem as *research*, because this makes the *premature assumption* that without research, there can be no art production.

(3) Cobussen deals with “artistic research in an academic context”. His remarks largely coincide with the position taken by Borgdorff, which essentially uses the term “artistic research” to define a profile for *work at art colleges* – especially for *graduation works*. This position is based on an understanding of scientific procedure accepted in many scientific disciplines, which is then applied to different art forms.

(4) I argue that educational concepts of artistic research are to be distinguished and discussed separately from theories of artistic research, which should be classified as theories of art. A particular art theory does not automatically imply that “an artistic researcher has, in principle, the right to obtain a PhD degree.”; this would require judgments and evaluations of *educational policy*. Cobussen’s understanding of academic research – also in line with Borgdorff – is that artistic research constitutes a part of it.

3. Corina Caduff: Literature and Artistic Research

(1) Corina Caduff states that “out of all the debates on artistic research so far, none of them have dealt with the literary art forms”. Now, if we understand artistic research to mean a certain art programme, then this is not an issue: general goals of an artistic nature can be pursued in *all* art forms. For example, an expressionist programme can be implemented in all the arts. In this regard, the inclusion of literature in the debate on artistic research seems unproblematic.

(2) “How should we conceive of artistic research in terms of literature?” If we want to “legitimise literary research, we need a research concept that is clearly defined”. I support this approach.

(3) Caduff elaborates her understanding of literary research on the basis of the novel *Blueprint. Blaupause* by Charlotte Kerner. The cloning-related “question is clearly evident in the literary text itself

and is also outlined in paratexts such as the publisher's catalogue, blurb, preface or epilogue." For instance, in the epilogue, the author informs us "about the biological history of cloning and in a final acknowledgement she lists the scientific publications she used for the novel." "The novel calls into question the massive identity issues that human clones may face."

(4) Caduff's approach is consistent with w/k's notion of science-related art in general (in this case applied to literature). This refers to literature in which the author has drawn on scientific theories and/or methods and/or results from any discipline during their production process, which always takes place within the framework of a specific literary programme. I therefore suggest to assign the novel *Blueprint. Blaupause* to science-related literature; this is also a proposal to clarify Caduff's notion of literary research.

(5) I would like to suggest some modifications regarding general statements about science-related literature: for example, we may expect to encounter literary texts containing references to science, which are presented in a convoluted form so that only readers with specific prior knowledge are able to establish a connection between certain passages of text and a science. Likewise, we must also reckon with the possibility that the scientific references of a literary text are not "set forth in paratexts such as the publisher's catalogue, blurb, prologue or epilogue." In short, there is always an "examination of non-literary knowledge systems" in science-related literature; but this need not be "clearly discernible." In terms of Caduff, however, we may conclude that "literary research [= science-related literature, P.T.] is a literary exploration of a knowledge acquired by the writer outside of literature, with which they pursue a specific question, and which they in turn enact and deal with in literary form."

(6) It is pretty obvious that science-related literature existed before the rise of the term artistic or literary research. Caduff points out that Goethe's "various activities as a naturalist also manifest themselves in his novels"; a further example is "the musical narratives of E.T.A. Hoffmann, who also composed and decidedly dealt with musical expertise in literature".

(7) Caduff is right to point out that it is "possible for all arts to engage with subject matter that is conveyed non-artistically". In principle, the proposed definition does indeed make sense: "The explicit engagement with a subject matter that is conveyed in a non-artistic way is an integral part of artistic research [= science-related art in general, P.T.]." This definition, however, must take into account that in terms of the art programme and the artistic practice that follows it, there are *multiple* programmes that assign themselves to artistic research. Caduff's definition can thereby be seen as a proposal for specification, but only for *some* programmes of artistic research.

(8) The transition to the broader concept of *science-related art* also proves beneficial in the search for predecessors, because earlier forms of artistic research – like those mentioned by Caduff – didn't always follow "a clear line of inquiry that, on the one hand, is clearly visible in the artwork itself and, on the other, is also explicitly referred to in paratexts".

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

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