

Debate on Artistic Research: The Series Programme

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

Summary: This series examines anthologies published in German on the topic of artistic research. The texts also seek to promote participation in an on-going discussion on contrasting positions of artistic research.

In spring 2021, the online journal *Mythos-Magazin* (www.mythos-magazin.de that I myself publish) launched the series *Debate on artistic research*. New contributions will be published every 2-3 months: a summary of the full text will appear concurrently in w/k.

Preparations

The on-going discussion of contrasting viewpoints in w/k was kick-started by three preceding articles:

- [Artistic Research: Journals, Platforms, Databases](#)
- [What is Artistic Research?](#)
- [Questions for Artistic Research](#)



Another article, providing information on doctoral opportunities for artists in Ireland, can be added to the list:

- [Socially Engaged Practice-Based Research: A PhD Pathway for Artists](#)

Discussion

The issues can be debated in both online journals:

- In w/k, the comment section following each summary provides a forum for discussing the new text as soon as it has been published.
- In 2021, *Mythos-Magazin* will introduce a more flexible format, meaning that it will also publish individual texts in the future. This option will apply to further instalments of the series *Debate on artistic research*, as well as being available for lengthier discussion contributions.

Objectives and approach

For my investigations on positions of artistic research, I adopt the following approach: I will examine each anthology published in German on the topic of artistic research in the order of their publication. The first is *Künstlerische Forschung. Positionen und Perspektiven* (Artistic Research. Positions and Perspectives), Zürich 2009, edited by Anton Rey and Stefan Schöbi. Following this procedure, a wide range of theoretical approaches, propositions and arguments can be examined, over time providing an informative overview of developments in the German-speaking world thus far, thereby helping to form one's own opinion.

I do not examine *all* texts of a certain anthology. I limit myself to those that advocate a *theory or methodology of artistic research* – even in the form of a sketch – and/or endorse a certain *art programme of artistic research*. I exclude artistic contributions that take a different approach, as well as scientific articles that deal with problems of a different kind.

In terms of my specific research, I distinguish between texts of *greater* and *lesser* importance within the relevant articles of an anthology. Whilst I devote an entire chapter to the texts I consider more important, the others I deal with in a more concise form in the *Discussion of individual aspects*.

My position

My investigations stem from theoretical convictions that have developed and crystallised over time. Here I would like to point to recent w/k articles on the relationship between art and science, and on the theory of aesthetic experience:

- *On: Art inspires Science*
- *Beauty in Everyday Life. On the Theory of Aesthetic Experience*
- *On Paul Feyerabend: Science as Art*
- *Art and Science: On the theses of Alexander Becker*

Art-theoretical discussion

The discussion revolves around the various theories of artistic research – provided they can be considered primarily *theories of art*. The first question is how individual propositions and arguments are to be understood. If necessary, clarifications can be made. The actual critical discussion then consists of introducing alternative propositions and arguments in order to ascertain which perspective is preferable on a scientific level: does thesis A stand up to critical examination based on general standards of empirical-rational thought, or is the alternative thesis B more convincing? Such an art theory should be compared above all to other art theories: in what regard does it reach beyond other theories? Does this also give rise to important advances in knowledge? It goes without saying that my own assessments will not go unchallenged on a scientific level.

Some artists have, to a certain extent, well-formed ideas that can be considered *elements* of an art theory. I would classify such thoughts in the following way: if an art-theoretical proposition is advanced with a claim to be universally valid – in other words, if it is not just a proposition *tailored to one's own art practice with limited claim to validity* –

then it enters the *scientific* realm. The art-theoretical discussion should of course still take into account the artists' own considerations. However, such propositions and arguments cannot lay claim to any *special right* for themselves: they are to be judged by the same criteria as the art-theoretical statements made by scientists: a certain art-theoretical proposition is not correct simply because an artist has voiced it, relying on their own artistic intuition.

Identification with artistic research and clarifications

When artists devote themselves to artistic research this can also be seen as *identification with a certain art movement*: so "I am an artistic researcher" might be equated with "I am a conceptual artist", "I do land art" etc. Such forms of identification should be respected.^[1] Scientific debate is required only when a certain proposition is advanced that claims to enhance knowledge; in that case, it makes sense to subject it to critical examination. The same goes for scientists who identify with artistic research; this amounts to *identification with a certain scientific discipline* which likewise should be respected and is comparable with "I am a fan of discourse analysis".

Artists who, contrary to their respective self-perception, are associated with artistic research by others should be dealt with individually. In principle, each case should be examined separately to determine whether such a classification is appropriate.

A need for clarification

If artists regard their own work as artistic *research*, in many cases this does not warrant criticism. However, research in general and artistic research in particular carry different connotations. This is because artistic research has become a fashionable term – a trend many are eager to follow. Hence there is a need for clarification – especially on a scientific level. In individual cases this can provoke criticism if artistic research is considered problematic in factual terms or if clarification yields problematic conclusions.

Here are three different ways in which artistic research can be interpreted: when asked, artist A states that for specific art projects, they *carry out investigations they themselves would categorise as research*. Artist B says that they *reflect upon the prerequisites of their artistic practice; this is what they consider research in art*. Artist C *experiments with diverse materials, an activity they consider in itself artistic research*. In my analysis I will try to define the different meanings of "artistic research" that arise amongst artists – also in order to determine their relation to one another.

Beneficial on a scientific level

For those artists who identify as "artistic researchers", it is generally accepted that they don't further define what they mean by the term. On a scientific level, however, this is considered a *hindrance to the process of gaining knowledge*. Unclear use of the central term frequently spawns the illusion that the parties involved in a discussion all believe they are talking about the same thing, when in reality *they are talking at cross-purposes*. Thus, for a scientific discussion on theories, methodologies and art programmes of artistic research it would be beneficial if our central term were used consistently. One key to such consistency would be a sufficiently precise *demarcation from other theories of artistic research*.

, which in part, at least, can be regarded as *competing* theories.

From an empirical and rational perspective, however, there is often a need for clarification – not only with regard to the central concept of artistic research, but also to *individual statements*. For example, art is said to have a certain *cognitive potential*. On a scientific level, the question arises: what exactly is meant by the “cognitive potential of art” and how does this differ from the cognitive potential of science (especially the empirical sciences) as well as from pre-scientific perceptions in everyday life?

Reforming arts education

In some cases, the catchphrase *artistic research* stands for art movements that set new accents in one or another art form, and there are theories of artistic research that support such new art movements and want to help establish them.

By contrast, other theories of artistic research stem from *educational politics*: their main aim is to reform arts education in some way or another – for example, by restructuring it along the lines of the Bologna Process and its three-step system of bachelor, master and doctorate, in order to create, among other things, options for achieving a PhD in art. Many theories of artistic research primarily pursue educational goals.

The coexistence of art-theoretical approaches and approaches based on educational policy adds to the complexity of the debate. I would argue that theories of artistic research that are primarily theories about art should be distinguished from theories that primarily pursue educational goals, and *by and large be discussed in strict separation*. If an anthology contains texts that mainly address educational policy, I will still examine their propositions and arguments, even though questions of art theory constitute my core focus.

I conclude that three salient points of interest characterise the widespread debate on artistic research: the first concerns a new kind of art movement or several movements of this kind; the second regards theories/methodologies of artistic research that pass off as art theories; the third is about concepts of educational policy, whereby the propositions on artistic research serve as instruments towards achieving political goals. This constellation is unusual – perhaps even unique – within the trajectory of art history, which is what makes the debate all the more exciting.

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

Translated by Rebecca Grundmann.

[1] However, criticism can be made on a secondary level: there are circumstances in which an artist may consider themselves a surrealist, for example, but where their artistic work actually predominantly follows the principles of another art movement. In this case, their self-identification should, partially at least, be regarded as misleading.

Tags

1. Artistic Research
2. Peter Tepe