

## On Concepts of Artistic Research 7

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

*Abstract: This commentary examines Silvia Henke, Dieter Mersch, Nicolaj van der Meulen, Thomas Strässle, Jörg Wiesel: Manifesto of Artistic Research. A Defense Against its Advocates. Zurich 2020.*

The subtitle enables an initial classification: A specific concept of AR is defended and positioned against another. A better AR concept is played off against a worse one that is criticized. The *established* AR (Model 1) is contrasted with the *actual* AR (Model 2).

The manifesto’s argumentation differs significantly from our approach, which we first recall. We distinguish three discourses. In Discourse 1, AR represents a reform of *education at art colleges*; some of these AR concepts advocate for establishing artistic doctoral studies.

We support trying out several reform concepts. Competition of this kind stimulates development. Regarding Discourse 1, we only strive to *identify* and *distinguish* between multiple higher education policy AR concepts. We do not vote for any particular concept of this kind.

In Discourse 2, a *theory of artistic research* with scientific claims is advocated, which views AR as art of a certain kind that can be distinguished from other types of art.

In Discourse 3, the *positions of individual artists who identify with AR* are more precisely defined. These artists understand very different things by it, e.g., certain types of research, reflection on the prerequisites of their own artistic practice, experimenting understood as trying things out. We strive to *identify* and *distinguish* between these different AR understandings but by no means want to discourage artists from pursuing the artistic goals associated with them. Thus, we have no objection to the fact that a *plurality* of artistic AR concepts has developed.

We relate some theses and arguments of the *manifesto* to the higher education policy Discourse 1; this is addressed in the first part. Other passages we relate to the art theoretical Discourse 2 in the second part. Since the text does not discuss individual artists in detail, Discourse 3 can be neglected. In going through the text, we limit ourselves to what we consider the most important points, thus proceeding selectively. We largely concentrate on the first half of the text. The critical examination of the manifesto’s argumentation is made more difficult by the fact that it does not engage with texts by relevant theorists.

### First Part

“After a number of phases of contouring and consolidation, artistic research has largely become established in terms of its educational, institutional, research, and funding politics.”  
(5)

We make the connection to our considerations through the assumption that the theoretical foundations of established AR (Model 1) can be found in the texts of Henk Borgdorff and others who represent

related positions. Of this kind of AR, one can say that it “it derives its self-understanding essentially from its engagement with academic research” (5). Compare this with the detailed discussion of Borgdorff’s essay *The Debate on Research in the Arts* in [Delivery 1](#) and the [summary](#) published in w/k.

The first critical thesis states:

“Artistic research [Model 2] can only become permanently established by emancipating itself from university research. Instead, it [Model 1] subjects itself methodologically, theoretically, and institutionally to an academic university regime.” (6)

It is legitimate to fundamentally criticize Model 1 of AR from the perspective of Model 2; however, we take a different path that emphasizes the fundamental legitimacy of *several* reform concepts for art education (at art colleges or other institutions) and advocates for the *coexistence* of models to be elaborated in their distinctiveness. We are not concerned with completely eliminating either Model 1 or Model 2.

In our view, while Borgdorff’s theory has some serious cognitive deficits, it is one of several reform strategies for education at art colleges worth trying out. According to our interpretation, this reform strategy is oriented toward an art program that shows a certain proximity to science. The *manifesto*, in contrast – according to our diagnosis – advocates for different kinds of art programs.

### **Regarding Individual Theses**

“The people who engage in art research [according to Model 1], contribute to the formation of theories, and lead research departments at art schools themselves originated in the university system and possess high-level academic qualifications [...]. They often behave like apostates from the academic world and yet reproduce its working methods.” (11)

We do not dispute that this constellation exists. However, within the model pluralism, we point out that the composition of personnel in Model 1 is *changeable*, e.g., so that artists who competently represent the respective art program are also given leadership positions. It is not necessarily an uncorrectable weakness.

“Another research paradigm [according to Model 1] is advanced by the qualitative and quantitative ‘surveys’ and ‘observations’ as borrowed from the social sciences—with the hope of being able to objectify the vaguenesses of artistic research through the voices of the many.” (11)

Here too, the manifesto confines itself to establishing a critical thesis. Model 1 is not first thoroughly analyzed in order to then elaborate problematic elements on this basis. Upon closer examination, the recourse to social science components in final theses, for example, may prove meaningful – but it may also turn out that this covers up a weakness in the respective artistic work concept.

Furthermore, a problematic “refuge in fashionable theories” is claimed: Preferred thinkers

“are not so much read and criticized as used and exploited as citation sources” (12).

No evidence is provided. Upon closer examination of individual cases, such a criticism may prove justified, partially justified, or unjustified.

Model 1 is portrayed extremely negatively: “Artistic research [in the sense of Model 2] is not a playground for failed academics. Nor for failed artists.” (12)

Artists “enjoy collaborating with scientists and academics, particularly in the natural sciences, with an eye to drawing level with them. New words like ‘artscience’ or ‘scienceart’ arose to emphasize the transdisciplinary potential which mainly exists for art to provide new ideas to science, to present them with another form of creativity, or to outline perspectives that had not been considered before.” (13)

From our perspective, cooperation with sciences represents a legitimate artistic option. This also applies to higher education policy Discourse 1, especially when there are alternatives to science-oriented or science-like education that one can choose.

There “is a pervasive conviction that artists are primarily active as researchers when they are gathering and processing as much information as possible. This leads to an art qua ‘research art’ which is no longer accessible without displays, roundtables, and accompanying publications” (17).

Our intervention is not one of *art criticism*: We are not concerned with criticizing forms of art that deviate from a specific normative understanding of art. If ‘research art’ is produced within art education or in free artistic practice after education, we are first concerned with elaborating the underlying concept and the background convictions on which it is based. This kind of knowledge can then, of course, also be used to identify conceptual weaknesses in individual projects.

An “understanding of research prevails which imitates the granularity and specialization of academic knowledge generation in order to affix an artistic signature to far-fetched or marginal questions which aim at nothing more than miniature shifts in the fabric of something which has already been shown, said, or analyzed a hundred times” (17).

Here too, we proceed according to the principle “First understand, then criticize.” Certainly, artistic results “that do nothing but make miniature shifts of something already shown or examined a hundred times” are unsatisfactory. However, first the artistic concepts of this type of work must be grasped and located in the AR context.

Research applications made in the context of Model 1 are also critically examined:

“Applicability and praxis-relevance are [...] the key factors for the success of research proposals. Preformulated hypotheses, methods, and anticipated objectives serve to normatively sanction the conventions of knowledge-generation, to keep them controllable,

and to channel their procedures in a results-oriented direction.” (23f.)

If specific institutions for funding artistic research projects develop in the context of Model 1, it becomes apparent sooner or later which type of applications are promising; certain patterns emerge. However, the same applies to other funding applications.

“Practice-based research has nothing to say to artistic research [Model 1] if it rejects reflection and reflexivity.” (25)

It would have to be shown that the refusal of reflection is uncorrectably embedded in Model 1. Perhaps the discussion is being shifted here. One thing is to criticize the excessive academization and adoption of scientific standards in Artistic Research, another is to oppose pure practice orientation without theoretical reflection. It is not proven that Model 1 of AR is *fundamentally* associated with a “dichotomization of theory and praxis” (25).

“It is [...] misleading to suppose a ‘knowledge’ on the part of the arts which enters into competition with discursive or scientific knowledge in order to emulate its predicability.” (31)

It remains unclear whether this actually applies to Model 1.

## Second Part

Some passages of the manifesto can be assigned to Discourse 2, in which a *theory of artistic research* with scientific claims is advocated, which views AR as art of a certain kind that can be distinguished from other types of art.

Artistic Research [according to Model 2] is “characterized by its own form of thinking as distinguished from that of established artistic and scientific praxis.” (13)

To support this thesis, the postulated “own form of thinking” would need to be more precisely defined at a theoretical level, which does not happen in the text. Such an explication can then lead to critical discussion. The same applies to the following thesis: “artistic research [Model 2] calls for a genuine concept of praxis and knowledge.” (27)

“Artistic research [Model 2] justifies itself in those places where it intermittently intervenes in scientific discourses as well as in everyday worlds, with the purpose of further developing these, transforming them or causing shifts in them and, in surprising and sometimes incomprehensible ways, driving them forward.” (18)

Examples are not given. Therefore, it also remains unclear whether Model 1 of AR is fundamentally incapable of achieving comparable results.

“Aesthetic thought [as Model 2 conceives it] is not subordinate to philosophical or scientific thought, or its explication through language; it simply uses other medial forms and types of

expressivity. It calls for a particular kind of validity which does not comply with discursive demands for validity and yet is also not subordinate or inferior to them.” (32)

The *manifesto* also confines itself here to assertions. This includes the largely complete absence of examples. This also applies to the thesis that artistic research [according to Model 2] is capable of claiming “a concept of knowledge of its own, one which neither postulates a specifically practical knowledge nor invokes theoretical knowledge gained elsewhere.” (32) However, this concept of knowledge is not adequately explicated so that its legitimacy could be examined.

Artistic Research in the sense of Model 2 largely coincides with a normative understanding of art in the *proper sense*. Connections to other concepts of artistic research are not established in the process. In our assessment, the manifesto is an *art theoretical* text that elaborates peculiarities of some art programs and distinguishes them from misconceptions for which Model 1 of AR stands.

### Tags

1. Artistic Research
2. Peter Tepe
3. Till Bödeker