

On the Concept of Knowledge in Artistic Research. Summary

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Abstract: Some theories of artistic research (AR) assume that AR can generate specific knowledge that is equivalent to scientific knowledge. How this claim is justified is traced and critically examined on the basis of the theories of Jens Badura, Anke Haarmann, Dieter Mersch and Henk Borgdorff. The entire article was published in German in the journal Mythos-Magazin and can be accessed [here](#).

As Peter Tepe shows in the series [On Concepts of Artistic Research](#), there are very different, partly contradictory interpretations of what AR is or should be. In the current issue 5.2 of his series, he distinguishes more than 10 positions, some of which make knowledge claims of a specific type or assume that AR produces certain knowledge that is equivalent to scientific knowledge. Exemplarily, I examine the AR theories that make such a knowledge claim and also justify it theoretically. I try to show what problems arise from this and why this claim may be dispensable for the continuation of the debate about AR altogether.

The following AR theories are addressed: Jens Badura's theory of *sensory cognition* (2015)^[1], Anke Haarmann's *epistemological aesthetics* (2019), Dieter Mersch's theory of *art as epistemological practice* (2014), and parts of Henk Borgdorff's AR theory (2009, 2015). It should be noted beforehand that these theories often deviate from the standard interpretation of analytic philosophy, which analyzes propositional knowledge as true, justified belief. Propositional knowledge as AR knowledge is either entirely or partially rejected, or a terminology is used that deviates from the terminology of epistemology. I divide the different strategies to justify AR knowledge into two types:

- Theories of *extended* AR knowledge: These theories aim to extend a general notion of knowledge that can be applied to the specific requirements of AR. It is often assumed that the current (scientific) understanding of knowledge is not sufficient to adequately describe AR practices. Such approaches typically involve a critique of science or reason and call for reforms of the knowledge order.
- Theories of *specific* AR knowledge: These theories focus on the specificity of AR knowledge within established understandings of cognition and knowledge, without fundamentally questioning them. Often, they draw on existing alternative knowledge concepts.

1. Jens Badura: *Erkenntnis (sinnliche) (sensory cognition)*

Badura's theory belongs to type 1, as he advocates for an extended conception of knowledge. Central to his concept is that the *conceptual-rational* or also called *discursive* cognition, prevailing in his view, is to be supplemented by the concept of an intuitive cognition – based on the aesthetics of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. The *practical* aspect of knowledge acquisition should then relate to both intuitive and discursive aspects of a broadly understood general knowledge practice.

To demonstrate this, Badura first criticizes the current dominant *discursive* concept of knowledge as being incomplete, in the sense that it excludes non-conceptual moments of knowledge. A weakness in

his argument is that the definition of knowledge as *discursive* or *intuitive* determines whether discursive or intuitive objects of knowledge are permissible or not. Since the validity of this claim depends on how knowledge is defined *beforehand*, it is a circular argument.

Badura also discusses the difficulty of justifying intuitive knowledge. This is due to the fact that intuitive insight lays claim to general validity, i.e. it is supposed to apply to others, while at the same time it cannot be grasped conceptually and exchanged with others. Since linguistic justifications are thus rejected in principle, a proof procedure based on co-execution is proposed, which is not further elaborated.

In principle, a non-propositional justification of intuitive cognition would be conceivable. In epistemology, such justification theories as developed by John Pollock (1986) or Paul K. Moser (1989) are called *non-doxastic*; Badura, however, does not link to these theories.

Perhaps due to the difficulty of finding a convincing justification, Badura argues that the epistemic question should become political: What do we agree on as knowledge? I find this conclusion problematic, assuming that no definition of scientific knowledge should depend on political majorities.

2. Dieter Mersch: *Kunst als epistemologische Praxis* (*Art as Epistemological Practice*)

Mersch's theory also aims to attribute a specific way of knowing to artistic practices that is equal to the scientific one. His type-1 theory (extended knowledge) has some weaknesses:

- Mersch's assumptions about the nature of art, philosophy, and science are problematic because they are impermissibly generalizing as essentialist statements; in fact, individual art programs and scientific disciplines can differ greatly from one another.
- Mersch postulates an inherent way of knowing in art, which he characterizes as *experimental* and *reflexive*. Since his description of artistic-experimental practice differs so fundamentally from scientific knowledge, the use of the term 'knowledge' in his theory appears implausible overall.
- No distinction is made between AR and art. Thus, it is not possible to show what the special cognitive potential of AR is in distinction to other art.
- Artistic and scientific knowledge are conceived as fundamentally different, so that any exchange is prevented. Both ways of cognition are *blind* and *meaningless* for each other. It follows from this, however, that art/AR cannot in principle meaningfully refer to scientific knowledge. In an attempt to expand the cognitive possibilities of art, his theory narrows the boundaries of what is accessible to art/AR.

3. Anke Haarmann: *Eine nachdenkliche Methodologie* (*A Reflective Methodology*)

Anke Haarmann's extensive publication, intended as a foundational work on the subject, *Artistic Research. An Epistemological Aesthetics* (2019) is discussed only in excerpts. The focus is on Haarmann's concept of what is called a "thoughtful methodology" that aims to prove the "scientific

tractability” of AR practices. The approach of providing a methodology for AR differs from previous approaches to justifying art or AR knowledge, even though a similar goal – to make the knowledge claim of artistic research – is pursued. What is important for understanding Haarmann’s theory is that she conceptualizes AR knowledge in a *practical* way, which is why she calls her theory a *praxology of knowledge*. However, what distinguishes this practical knowledge from propositional knowledge and how it can be philosophically classified or justified remains open.

First, Haarmann distinguishes two types of methodologies that could be candidates for AR: The *regulative* methodology which deals with the foundation of a canon of scientific methods, and the *reflective* methodology: for the latter, reflecting on the case-specific conditions of individual procedures is essential. According to Haarmann, this thoughtful methodology is compatible with AR because AR, like art, does not have to orient itself to any “fixed sets of authoritative research methods” and would thus be free or not “disciplined”. In fact, a reflective methodology dispenses with any method in the conventional sense. Instead, in the case of individual AR practices, the “path of knowledge sometimes becomes recognizable in its purposeful systematicness and consistency only in retrospect and in concrete execution.” Haarmann thus calls for a methodology that does without generally applicable methods and instead recognizes each individual case of AR implementation as consistent in retrospect.

This approach is contradictory: Since methods are commonly understood as rule-based procedures and the reflective methodology rejects rule-based procedures, the individual reflections on artistic research cannot be called *methods*. A rule-based method cannot be derived from the singular insight into an artistic research practice if it is to be valid for other cases with general claims, as always starting from the individual case, which must not be transferred to other cases. However, research in the narrower, scientific sense requires rule-based methods. It is therefore not convincing to speak of artistic research knowledge if (only) insights into artistic research are produced.

I agree with Haarmann that individual scientific analyses of AR practices can be very fruitful/interesting and that insights can be gained from the results of AR. Thus, in w/k, the science-related art is analyzed from a similar motivation. However, it should be distinguished that the assumption that AR practices or results themselves are a form of knowledge.

4. Henk Borgdorff: *Die erkenntnistheoretische Frage (The Epistemological Question)*

Borgdorff is considered an important AR theorist and argues for a theory of specific AR knowledge. He characterizes position 1 as the assumption that artistic research qualifies as an independent field of knowledge production and that its techniques can be adopted by the empirical sciences. AR should proceed in a *scientific-like manner* in its research and knowledge acquisition. Specifically, he represents, among other things, the concept of a specific artistically embodied and non-conceptual knowledge produced by AR in *The Debate on Research in the Arts* (2009). This knowledge should be *cognitive, non-conceptual, rational, and non-discursive*.

A main thesis is that this knowledge has already been addressed in other scientific debates, such as the discussion of the difference between *knowing that* and *knowing how*, or as implicit or practical knowledge. However, he does not show how these alternative concepts of knowledge can be integrated

into his concept: While knowledge-that is also called *propositional* knowledge, since it states that something is the case, i.e., a proposition *p* is true, knowledge-how (also called *procedural* knowledge) refers to activities and intelligent action. Borgdorff implies that his AR concept of knowledge also includes knowing-how. However, attempting to demonstrate this may encounter the following difficulties: Knowing-how is not intended to generate scientific knowledge, but is conceived as distinct from it. It may not be possible to access content of experiential knowledge because it cannot be verbalized if it is completely separate from propositional knowledge. Thus, such knowledge would have to remain anchored in pure practice.

Similarly, there is Polanyi's concept of *tacit knowledge*, which some AR theories refer to. This is defined as a kind of embodied knowledge that cannot be fully accessed during intelligent action, but is unconsciously underlying it. Since it is excluded that implicit knowledge can be consciously accessed – as it would no longer be implicit – it also seems unsuitable as a basis for AR knowledge.

Another of Borgdorff's texts, *Artistic Practices and Epistemic Things* (2016), contains reflections on the relationship between validity and genesis of knowledge. Among other things, he argues for the fact that the context of discovery, i.e. genesis, cannot be separated from the context of justification, i.e. validity. Thus, Borgdorff wants to show that AR knowledge can be freed from validity issues, which is not convincing.

5. Summary, Alternatives & Outlook

The examined theories of extended cognition generally try to establish a new concept of cognition that goes beyond or replaces propositional knowledge. It is to be doubted that there are valid reasons for discarding propositional knowledge in order to be able to classify artistic research as a knowledge-acquiring discipline.

Some theorists see it as advantageous that extended knowledge of AR does not have to be aligned with any scientific methods in order to be able to attribute knowledge to the insights gained. However, the distinction between scientific knowledge and artistic insight does not imply that one is superior to the other, but merely that they are two different things. AR by no means has to produce scientific knowledge; as a science-related art form, it can also produce interesting artistic insights that address scientific knowledge without being inferior to science.

On the other hand, Borgdorff's specific epistemology typical for Position-1, has the opposite problem: In order to explain the specificity of a AR knowledge, Borgdorff has to resort to existing scientific or epistemological concepts, which cannot be integrated into a unified AR theory due to their diversity. He does not resolve the central contradiction between AR as a discipline oriented to scientific methods and concepts and at the same time detached from them.

More promising AR approaches could be those in which AR is understood as an autonomous art program that conceives research not as genuinely scientific research, but as research in a broader sense. In the same way, AR as well as AR theories can become the subject of scientific, e.g. art historical and theoretical research, and interesting possibilities of exchange and inspiration between scientific and artistic disciplines are conceivable.

Image above the text: DALL-E illustration of Artistic Research (2022). Photo: Till Bödeker.

[1] The bibliography and references of the quotes used can be found in the more detailed essay in the Mythos magazine.

Tags

1. Artistic Research
2. Cognition
3. Epistemology
4. Knowledge
5. Till Bödeker