

# What is Artistic Research?

Text: [Angelika Boeck](#) and [Peter Tepe](#) | Section: [On “Art and Science”](#)

*Summary: To make the topic “artistic research” more accessible to an audience as yet less familiar with it, Angelika Boeck presents her understanding of artistic research and recommends texts she considers particularly important. In addition, Peter Tepe provides general information on the topic and attempts to determine its defining characteristics.*

In order to prepare an ongoing pros-and-cons discussion on positions of artistic research, two further articles will be published based on Angelika Boeck’s *List of Journals* that also belong to this field. The present article aims to make the topic more accessible to readers less familiar with it. Angelika Boeck is responsible for sections 1 and 3, and Peter Tepe for section 2. In a further article, w/k’s core editorial team will outline the framework for the discussion which involves formulating *questions for artistic research*.

## 1. Angelika Boeck: my understanding of artistic research

Since 1999 I have been carrying out research using the means and methods of my artistic practice. My dissertation, titled *De-Colonising the Western Gaze: The Portrait as a Multi-Sensory Cultural Practice* (2019), is also committed to this position. Artistic research is a broad field; it encompasses many different concepts. I prefer to use the term *art practice-based research*, as I consider it to be research founded on a particular art practice: firstly, on the artist’s activity in pursuit of a concrete question or a set of not yet clearly defined questions by employing artistic means and methods, and secondly, on the presentation of the process and/or outcome in the form of an artwork. The proximity to scientific strategies and practices lies in the “not-yet-knowing” (Klein 2011: 1); in the desire to show and understand; and in the fact that artists often use ethnographic, sociological, collecting/archiving or laboratory work practices; that they experiment with processes that produce images or deal with new media and technosciences (for example the Brazilian media artist and theorist Eduardo Kac, who manipulated living organisms according to aesthetic criteria as part of his Bio Art or Transgenic Art in the early 1990s). Thus, artistic research can be considered as a means of approaching human subjects (including oneself), objects and contexts (current or historical) — an examination often combined with an interest in gaining concrete experiences in an endeavour to convey these in a sensorially perceptible form (to incite reflection, amusement, disturbance or provocation). Artistic research is therefore not just a matter of *analysing* a given circumstance or certain emotions.

Reflection takes place during artistic production. Other forms of knowledge production (particularly in the natural sciences) require the use of approved methods, being part of a theoretical discourse and a verifiable, generalisable and comprehensible depiction of the research process. Artistic research functions differently: methodological and the theoretical aspects can often only be identified retrospectively, through a process of *reverse engineering*. This means that the creation process of the artistic works is examined and put in relation to the works of other artists, scientists and theorists in order to extract the components of which they are made. A written reflection of the artist (formulating the question, identifying the context and conditions, providing information on the method and theory,

self-reflection) is possible, but not absolutely necessary; though I do consider it to be profitable.

## 2. Artistic research: information and definitions

To get started, Peter Tepe takes an exemplary approach with limited scope: he selected various meaningful quotes from the book *Kunstforschung als ästhetische Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur transdisziplinären Hybridisierung von Wissenschaft und Kunst* (Artistic research as aesthetic science. Contributions to a transdisciplinary hybridisation of science and art; Bielefeld, 2012) published by Martin Tröndle and Julia Warmers, which is also relevant for the upcoming discussion. The selected quotes convey general information on artistic research, on the one hand, and the attempt to determine its defining characteristics, on the other. Tepe presents his selected quotes in the following format: quote — page number in brackets — author(s). The source of the quote can be found in the table of contents (see below). In some cases, the same essay is quoted more than once.

Inhalt	
Jean-Baptiste Joly und Julia Warmers Künstler und Wissenschaftler als reflexive Praktiker – Ein Vorwort	ix
Martin Tröndle Zum Unterfangen einer ästhetischen Wissenschaft – Eine Einleitung	xv
<b>Die Organisation anderer Wissenspraktiken</b>	
Wolfgang Krohn Künstlerische und wissenschaftliche Forschung in transdisziplinären Projekten	001
Karen van den Berg, Sibylle Omlin und Martin Tröndle Das Kuratieren von Kunst und Forschung zur Kunstforschung	021
Heike Klusmann und Thorsten Klooster BlingCrete: Materialentwicklung als transdisziplinärer Forschungsprozess	049
<b>Klassisch kritisch</b>	
Henk Borgdorff Künstlerische Forschung und akademische Forschung	069
Hannes Rickli Kunst und Forschen. Arbeit am Partikularen	091
Elke Bippus Modellierungen ästhetischer Wissensproduktion in Laboratorien der Kunst	107
Mari Brellochs IRRTUMSFORSCHUNG – Sprechen Sie mit uns, sonst sprechen wir mit Ihnen!	127
Julian Klein im Gespräch mit Martin Tröndle Wie kann Forschung künstlerisch sein?	139
<b>2 x scheitern Die Kunst der Theorieproduktion/eine Theorie der Kunstproduktion</b>	
Maren Lehmann Grau   Grün – Die Kunst der Theorie	151
Martin Tröndle Methods of Artistic Research – Kunstforschung im Spiegel künstlerischer Arbeitsprozesse	169
<b>Entwurf – Technik – Diagrammatik</b>	
Claudia Mareis Methodische Imagination – Kreativitätstechniken, Geschichte und künstlerische Forschung	203
Adelheid Mers Transfer-Diskurse Zu Künstlerpositionen, Kreativindustrien, Kreativität, Innovation, Ästhetik und Diagrammatik	243
Simon Grand Design Fiction: Theorie als Praxis des Möglichen	267
Ursula Bertram Künstlerisches Denken und Handeln	293
<b>Körperlichkeit des Denkens</b>	
Gernot Böhme Ästhetik als Wissenschaft sinnlicher Erfahrung	319
Lydia Schulze Heuling Mit Kopf und Körper – Zu einer möglichen Leiblichkeit in der klassischen Mechanik	333
Jens Badura Philosophie als Performance	345
Hagen Betzwieser Post Artistic Research	357
Biografien	359
Dank	367

Table of contents from *Artistic research as aesthetic science. Contributions to a transdisciplinary hybridisation of science and art*

(2012). Photo: Till Bödeker.

Let us begin with five more general points:

*Quote 1*

“Artistic research (and other variations of the term) have become oft-quoted and scrutinised keywords that have found entry into the theoretical discourse and practice of art schools, scientific institutions as well as (European) policy guidelines for culture and creative industries. They lead to the establishment of new institutes, journals, societies, subsidy programmes etc. At the same time, natural scientists, social scientists, humanities scholars and artists are critical towards, or even reject the concepts, forms and programmes of artistic research.” (IX) J-B. Joly/J. Warmers.

*Quote 2*

“[...] art research, artistic research or art-based research are popular terms at the moment — but we may speculate what exactly is meant by them. If we follow international debate [...], we may identify a whole range of concepts. (XV) M. Tröndle.

*Quote 3*

“Within the tradition of scientific engagement with the arts, the question as to which forms of knowledge can be gained through art — and solely through art — continues to be of great interest. What does artistic practice convey; what *cannot* be conveyed through scientific research? What is the epistemological contribution of art?” (21) K. van den Berg/S. Omlin/M. Tröndle.

*Quote 4*

“The incentive for art schools to use the term ‘artistic research’ in order to be PhD-worthy and to survive in the face of global competition under pressure from the Bologna reform is understandable. [...] The many discussions as well as the high-cost institutional memberships of the Society of Artistic Research, founded in Bern in 2010, clearly show us that we are dealing here with politically shaped motivations. Moreover, the subsidy programmes in the field of art research are too attractive for applicants to exclude themselves from them [...]. Art theorists also profit from the new terminology as it opens up new channels of communication and areas of influence. (27) K. van den Berg/S. Omlin/M. Tröndle.

*Quote 5*

“‘Artistic research’ is a fashionable term. It offers us the chance to put a new attractive label

on our thoughts and actions within current discourse.” (267). S. Grand.

Let us proceed to the various definitions of artistic research:

*Quote 6*

“‘Researching in the arts’, also known as ‘art as research’ or ‘art through research’ is currently referred to as artistic research within the discourse of artists and representatives of art schools. The research goal is to create new artworks or aesthetic processes by which the artists are researchers, or in other words: the image of the artist as researcher prevails.” (24) K. van den Berg/S. Omlin/M. Tröndle. The “*bon mot* ‘All good art is the result of research’ also belongs in this context” (26).

*Quote 7*

“*Artistic research* could [...] be translated as *künstlerische Recherche* without losing its meaning.” (28) K. van den Berg/S. Omlin/M. Tröndle.

*Quote 8*

“‘Research through art’ is sometimes also referred to as ‘art research’ or ‘applied art research’. [...] Understood in this way, art research is more transdisciplinary and practice-oriented. Due to the complex nature of real-world problems [...] one may assume that the research process cannot be carried out by a single person from a single discipline, but must adopt a transdisciplinary approach, and that the outcome does not necessarily have to take the form of an artwork, but should be perceived primarily in a scientific context. Artists research in collaboration with scientists, the research process is carried out as a team, the results take the shape of texts, images, sounds, processes. [...] Art research conceived in this way *combines an artistic research practice with scientific research methods in a transdisciplinary way, thereby changing the social practice of research in itself.*” (25) K. van den Berg/S. Omlin/M. Tröndle.

*Quote 9*

“Artistic research seeks to contribute, in and through the production of art, not only to the artistic universe, but also to what we ‘know’ and ‘understand’. (80) H. Borgdorff.

*Quote 10*

Artistic research contributes “to the destruction of knowledge and knowledge structures; to the dismantling of established truths and boundaries. It is more about a process of unlearning, rather than a reiteration of taught knowledge.” (133) M. Brellochs. “Artistic research allows the state of things to remain fluid, agile, and mutable.” (135)

#### Quote 11

“Artistic research offers above all a fascinating possibility to freely question that what is considered self-evident in art and science [...]. Artistic research enables us to take a closer look at the Other in art and research — not at that what *is*, but rather at that what *could be*.” (269) S. Grand.

#### Quote 12

“*Artistic research*, or how I prefer to call it: artistic thought and action, is different to a scientific way of working [...]. In artistic work, the focus is primarily *on the person* [...]. Point of departure is the personal-authentic artist’s ‘signature’ with recognition value, predominantly in a visual form.” (298) U. Bertram. “A major misunderstanding springs from the assumption that artistic thought must lead to art, and that it does not exist in a scientific context. However, artistic thought and action are brilliantly suited as *instructive marginals* in the process of scientific discovery: ‘Creativity is not a prisoner of the arts’.” (310)

#### Quote 13

What is “really interesting about artistic research” is “the possibility of a research concept that does not imply scientific research, yet still meets the standards of research (i.e. the search for knowledge). (345). J. Badura. “The novelty of the current discussion lies [...] in the explicit and high-profile demand for a cognitive competence of the arts equal to that of the sciences.” (346).

### 3. Literature to get started: personal suggestions

For those readers less familiar with the topic “artistic research”, Angelika Boeck recommends various texts of particular importance to her, which she feels offer access to this way of thinking. She also shares what these texts have taught her.

In his text *What is artistic research* (2011), composer and theatre director Julian Klein points out that, as cultural endeavours, art and science both live “from the balance between tradition and innovation”; that all research, be it artistic or scientific, is a systematic creative activity of knowledge production that, propelled by a “desire for knowledge”, operates from a state of “not yet knowing” (Klein, 2011: 1). According to Klein, artistic research can help to answer current questions such as: how can we understand each other across different cultures, traditions and perspectives? (Klein, 2017). Although I doubt that I can achieve this ambitious goal with my own work, it is very important for me not to lose sight of it.

Billy Ehn, Professor for Ethnology at the department of Culture and Media Studies at Umeå University, shares observations that are similarly motivating to me. He examined the similarities and divergences in the strategies of cultural researchers and artists, and argues that their respective work processes are largely similar to one another: both ask questions, choose methods and read theories, collect material

and gain new ideas by making observations, conducting interviews, surfing the web and taking part in social events — whereby they pursue different questions. He discovers that artists take a more playful approach and follow intuition; that they are more inclined to regard the ordinary as something extraordinary. He considers particularly important their ability to see themselves as actors as well as objects of research, their willingness to live experimentally and the desire to generate their own experiences rather than just analysing them. According to him, scientific research could also benefit from the special nature of artists to expose themselves to unusual circumstances and to pursue unusual ideas (Ehn 2012: 14 ff).

Art and Anthropology are two areas of practice that play an important role in my dissertation. Addressing the points of contact between the two practices are, for example, Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright in their work *Between Art and Anthropology* (2010) and Roger Sansi in *Art, Anthropology and the Gift* (2015). To me, both positions are important for different reasons: whilst Schneider and Wright deal with the kinship that unites both traditions (which lies in the use of visual media as well as in the theoretical engagement with the visual), Sansi also turns his attention to the connection between cultural practices, media and the senses, which is important to me. The works of these authors helped me define more clearly my own art practice-based research, which lies in the field of “art as anthropology” (Sansi, 2015: 29) — an art form in which artists deal with questions and ideas that are also of interest to social and cultural anthropology.

In her book *Artistic Research. Eine epistemologische Ästhetik* (Artistic Research. An epistemological aesthetic, 2019), philosopher and artist Anke Haarmann investigates the original methods, historical precursors, specific forms of articulation and the concrete modes of action of artistic research. Among other things, she reveals that the discussion around artistic research is closely linked to the Bologna Process — a Europe-wide higher education reform that established a uniform system of academic degrees for professional qualification. She argues against the methodical regulation of art and, within the framework of her epistemological aesthetics, advocates finding new terminology for artistic research as a method and a practice. For this it is necessary to shift the focus onto the specific methods and practices of artists rather than just measuring them against those that already exist in the natural and social sciences. Based on the experience I gained during my dissertation, this is a position I support.

Cover image above text: *What is artistic research* (2020). Illustration: Till Bödeker.

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## Literature

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Die bis 2017 veröffentlichte Literatur zum Thema „Künstlerische Forschung/Artistic Research“ ist vom [Zentrum Fokus Forschung](#) der Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien gesammelt worden. Diese Liste lässt sich [hier](#) einsehen.

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#### Tags

1. Angelika Boeck
2. Artistic Research
3. Peter Tepe