

ART AND SCIENCE IN POTENTIA:
ESSAYING AS APPROACH TO ARTISTIC RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

Science must articulate its sources, as well as its relevance and its context, and it must provide clear argumentation. Furthermore, it is strictly bound to academic and ethical rules. Art is not constrained by these methods, ethics or rules. In the relatively new field of Artistic Research, science and art are integrated. However, defining this institutionalized field, and the methods and evaluation criteria of its output, is a subject of discussion. Can there be a hybrid of scientific and artistic approaches, one that balances the methodological aspects of both fields?

The essay form is a hybrid of both artistic and scientific approaches. It drifts between the subjective and the objective, the experiential and the intellectual. The essay form has developed itself outside of the literature domain into other artistic media and genres, but, what if artists were to use the essay as an unmethodological research method? The artistic researcher approaches the topic of investigation, as it were, essayistically; the expression of this act of essaying can encompass all possible artistic media, and all possible combinations of media.

CONTEXT

This academic article and research on which this presentation is based, provides the theoretical underpinnings for a pilot practice tutorial for the research Master Artistic Research at the University of Amsterdam in the context of my educational research project at the Piet Zwart Institute Rotterdam. Through this case study I investigate how an essayistic approach to artistic research could be practically used for developing individual Artistic Research strategies.

It is not my intention to copy-paste the form of the essay to Artistic Research, but rather to extract and deploy an essayistic mode, to merge form and content in a hybrid form, that of art and science in potentia.

ART AND SCIENCE IN POTENTIA

BEGIN PERFORMATIVE LECTURE

- 00:00 [Start video. Count down. Place a white page under the camera.]
- 00:21 essay: “a short piece of writing on a particular subject”.
- 00:30 essay: nonfictional prose texts between 1 and about 50 pages with an elusive multiplicity of forms and themes.
- 00:42 essay: to put to proof, to test or to attempt.
- 00:50 essay: essay of a deer.
- 00:58 assay: to put to the test, to put to the proof, to weigh.
- 01:06 assay: to assault, to attack.
- 01:13 assaio: I taste.
- 01:20 exagium: a standard weight type, a kind of weight, piece of gold, a noble, a crowne; examination, trial, testing.
- 01:37 exigo: to drive out, to thrust out, to take or to turn out, to demand, to require, to enforce; to expell, to shut or draw out, to expresse, to prove, to examine, to require, to take away by force.
- 01:58 ex: out.
- 02:02 agere: to do, to apply.
- 02:08 age: act.
ago: act.
- 02:14 go.
- 02:16 go.
- 02:18 go.
- 02:24 The essay as we know it today starts with Montaigne’s bundle of three books. Various versions of his books were published between 1580 and 1588. The last one three years after his death in 1595. He never truly finished his 107 writings. He kept adding, changing, adapting, essaying.
- 02:49 The word *assai* might’ve referred to *coup d’essay*, translating into “trial run, dummy run or first try”. This might’ve referred to a phrase popular in his time: « Faire son coup d’essai, son chef d’oeuvre, pour passer Maître » meaning: “to make a trial of his skill in order to be made free”. Montaigne could’ve used the word *assai* as an attempt to free one-self from previous thoughts and dominating teachings. He internalizes the arguments and theories of others by embodying their words and appropriating their knowledge. His essays are described as: “thoughts in series upon series of thoughts, feelings, desires, actions and reactions”. These

sequences of long sentences consist of “anecdotes, quotes, thoughts, emotions and observations.”

04:03 The reader follows his train of thought and as thought isn’t linear, its display should be neither. This free structure doesn’t fill in the direct connections between the arguments, but it lets the viewer take part in the interpretation.

04:27 I remember when I bought my first camera. It was in the second year of Art Academy in 2012. To help my decision making process, I made an elaborate Excel-sheet with specs and properties of all the different camera’s within my budget, but on the top of my list was *white balance calculation*.

04:52 [Press white balance calculation.]

The idea of a pre-set white balance mode was unbearable to me. In the end I chose this Panasonic HDC-SD900 full HD videocamera. The downside was that it has a high lux and it wasn’t able to film in nightshot mode. As a consequence this camera can’t perceive light very well in a dark room.

05:24 [Place hand on camera lens.]

05:32 “I have a recurring image of a room. The room is white.

05:40 [Take hand off camera lens.]

05:43 “Now, despite there being no windows there’s light in this room, but strangely no indication of a source for this illumination.”

05:59 End quote.

06:04 Adorno starts his renowned *The Essay as Form* from 1958 with a quote from Goethe’s Pandora: “Destined to see the illuminated, not the light.” The illuminated surface isn’t just influenced by this unseen light source but also influenced by the preset mode of its mediator which perceives the illuminated. Not to speak of the object exposed to these perspectives. Adorno’s essay on the essay is viewed as hybrid of science and art, of philosophy and literature.

06:47 Claire de Obaldia writes that the essay only becomes literature when losing its touch with the scientific. She describes the essay as *literature in potentia*.

- 07:05 The essay's initially described as *almost* literature and *almost* philosophy. However, Adorno states the essay's neither scientific nor artistic. Montaigne's been described as an *accidental philosopher*. Some accidental things aren't accidents in retrospect.
- 07:31 When I was a child I used to love these triangle shaped leaves I found on the ground in the fall. Not just two lines meet in the ginkgo leaf but many lines meet at one point like needles stuck to each other in leaf form.
- 07:51 The Ginkgo's shaped between a pine tree and loaf tree. Unlike a loaf tree the leafs run all along the branches, and unlike a pine tree the leafs fall down in the fall.
- 08:04 Its shape has been relatively unchanged for millions of years; its present form is reflected through its past.
- 08:14 The tree is regarded as a living fossil, an historical object living in the present.
- 08:24 The female produces fruit. The old Chinese name for these fruits is *silver fruit*. The most commonly used name today is *white fruit*.
- 08:37 Although the tree did not change though-out its history, the perception of its color did: from *silver* to *white*.
- 08:51 The Ginkgo isn't only a hybrid between two tree species but also a hybrid of the sexes; its a tree that can change sex. Males are essentially females *in potentia*. Their fruit produces a penetrating smell, and it contains sperm.
- 09:15 Ginkgo sperm was first discovered by a Japanese painter and botanist.
- 09:24 Sperm has potency to reproduce. A high potency is the ability to reproduce and can therefore clone and copy versions which subsequently can clone and copy, and clone and copy versions of itself.
- 09:41 The essay's reproductive mode is its re-writings and reflections. It's a cannibalistic introspective process which devours external substances and internalizes them; it destroys and recreates itself almost compulsively.
- 10:02 Essaying as an approach could be fruitful ground for artistic researchers to create growths of *art in potentia* and/or *science in potentia*. An *unmethodological method*.
- 10:20 [switch white balance mode to sunny.]
- 10:24 Nowadays, *method* is referred to as a *rational procedure*, typically applied in science. In ancient Greek it translates into *pursuit of*

- knowledge*. Pursuit implying that the journey undertaken might or might not lead to knowledge.
- 10:47 The root word of method is *meta*-.
- 10:52 Adorno hints at the essay being *meta-scientific* but this endless meta-behavior can be potentially poisoning as the word potency indicates. Too much can be intoxicating, or even lethal.
- 11:20 Snake venom has the potency to kill but also “contains zootoxins which facilitates the immobilization and digestion of prey”.
- 11:32 There’s a famous Ginkgo tree called the *snake tree*. The legend tells us this tree’s the home to a large snake. The snake is *white*. Most white snakes suffer from a condition called *leucism*, which means *clear* or *light*. The skins of the snakes are almost transparent, like a thin *piece of paper*.
- 12:06 This reminds me of an image from the Pillow book. Pillow book’s perhaps the perfect name for a Zuihitsu; like a *lucid dream*, a hybrid state of sleep and consciousness, it’s thinking and dreaming at the same time. Not fiction, not non-fiction, but something in between.
- 12:32 The essay’s closely related to the classical Japanese literary genre Zuihitsu: both the fragmented form and the presence of the author can be compared to the essay form. Because both the content and the structure are very flexible, like the essay form the genre’s been equally difficult to define.
- 13:03 In the Zuihitsu, the recorded thoughts of the author are central. It consists of “series of loosely connected essays and anecdotes, as well as disconnected sentences, fragments, ideas, word pictures, poems, lists, and snatches of conversations”.
- 13:27 Apart from consisting of many different writing styles, the Zuihitsu also contains drawings and paintings. A modern-day Zuihitsu could incorporate sounds, images, web-links and video’s.
- 13:53 You know, most horses commonly referred to as *white* are actually *grey* horses. They can be born in any color and gradually grey as time goes on and take on a *white appearance* but the skin keeps its initial color.
- 14:14 *When a white horse is not a horse*, also known as the *White horse dialogue* is a famous dialectical paradox in Chinese philosophy.
- 14:27 *Horse* is that by means of which one names the shape. *White* is that by means of which one names the color. What names the color is not what names the shape. Hence, I say that a white horse is not a horse.

- 15:56 Perhaps a white page is not a page. Perhaps a white cube is not a cube. Perhaps white is not white at all but just the reflection of light on a surface with any color *in potentia*, depending on its observer.
- 15:17 Perceiving this light requires a recalibration of your perspective, a re-adjusting your focus, a reset of the balance, a critical reflection of what's perceived. Perhaps this is what essaying is, it's indeed a balancing of a blank space but not *with walls*, not an *anything goes*.
- 15:50 The students use the performative space for essaying at Café Chercher, and the digital space for essaying on the Research Catalogue show page on the internet. The digital *bright white space*.
- 16:20 But what happens when we find ourselves in a dark room and we shut our eyes? What's the darkness we see at that moment?

16:32 [Start turning brightness down.]

Sometimes we need to turn *on* our *off*-cells to perceive this darkness. Sometimes we just need to be left in the dark.

16:45 [Image is dark.]

END