# *ON METHODS OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH'*

*By Annette Arlander*

Artistic research and practice-based research in the creative and performing arts are developing fields of study, and they can be understood as methodological approaches as well. The theory-practice divide and the valorisation of textual over embodied knowledge within academia have long been criticised.[2] Researchers turn to practitioners for knowledge. But when artists start to carry out research on their own terms, complications can arise.[3] Every new work of artistic research is important as a potential model for future research. The role of the artwork varies according to context. In art universities it is often considered of prime importance. Practice-based research, like pedagogical research, where artworks and processes are considered more or less as research data for qualitative analysis, has been more easily accepted in traditional universities than practice-led research[4], where creating artworks functions as the basis for the research process, not to mention artistic research, which in the end serves developments in art and tends to emphasise the freedom of the artist. Research is a normal part of artistic work in many areas and research methods should preferably be developed from working methods, not imposed on an emerging field from the outside.[5]

This is what I confidently wrote just a few years ago (2008). Today, one could claim that artistic research is a research field and an area for knowledge production, rather than a specific methodology. Researching artists can adopt different methodologies, qualitative, quantitative or conceptual, as suggested by Smith & Dean in their book *Practice-led Research – Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*.[6] Many equate practice-based research with artistic research (although there are, of course, practices other than those of an artistic nature) and see it as an extension of the qualitative methodology. The question of methodology and more specifically methods is, however, problematic. Brad Haseman, for instance, has defended performative research as a separate methodology, a whole new paradigm, on the basis of Austin's speech act theory, in his *Manifesto for Performative Research*.[7] Different disciplines tend to define themselves through their specific methods. Should not artistic research do

the same? But is it possible to talk about common methods for artistic areas as diverse as music, theatre, literature, visual art, dance, film and architecture? In principle, each art form ought to develop its own methods, based on the working methods employed.

## Theoretical perspectives

One philosopher preparing the way for artistic research in Finland, professor of art education Juha Varto, notes that every field produces knowledge via its own methods: "If we for instance apply the methods of cultural studies to art education research, we get cultural studies as an outcome... There is no such thing as a neutral research method." [8] The same could be expected of the field of artistic research.

In one of the most influential books to discuss the methodology of artistic research in a Nordic context, *Artistic Research – Theories, Methods and Practices* from 2005, Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén (who have, however, not themselves conducted any artistic research) use two metaphors to describe their approach: democracy of experiences and methodological abundance. They emphasise openness, criticality and ethical encounters, indicating that art should have the right to criticise science in the same way that science ought to be able to criticise art. They stress the need for open-mindedness, patience and dialogue; artistic research needs time to develop a research culture. Artistic research is often "a tapestry-like weave of many factors – the read, the known, the observed, the created, the imagined and the deliberated – where the author does not so much strive to describe reality but to create a reality for her work with its own laws." [9] They also note that "the starting point for artistic research is the open subjectivity of the researcher and her admission that she is the central research tool." [10]

As a criterion for the validity of research, following models from qualitative research, the writers stress the convincingness of its rhetoric and point out as the main requirement that the research be intersubjective so that future readers can assess its validity. They name five points that are of prime importance for artistic research: 1) presenting the research context and delineating the problems, 2) credibility and explanations, 3) the internal coherence and persuasiveness of the research, 4) the usability, transferability and novelty value of the results and 5) the meaning and importance of the research results to the artistic and research communities.[11] How these five points are understood in practice depends on the artistic

domain in question and to what extent ordinary artistic practice in that domain is research-based.

Tuomas Nevanlinna, a Finnish philosopher engaged in debates on artistic research at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts from very early on (2002), writes:

> "It is often said that in artistic research the artist researches his or her own works. There are at least two possibilities of interpreting this: either the artist investigates the works as if they were not his or her works at all, or then he or she subjectively reflects on their background and intentions. These are bad alternatives. Actually we should not speak of researching one's own work. The artist does not research his or her works but with (the help of) his or her works." [12]

According to Nevanlinna, artistic research cannot be an exact science, but it could nevertheless be experimental. In experimental research a question is investigated with the help of an experimental arrangement. The initial questions and works in artistic research could be compared with this: we ask, we do and then we write out what the dialogue between questions and works produced. This kind of process produces experimental knowledge but not mathematical knowledge. Thus artistic research differs from empirical research, which tries to find general laws. Nevanlinna suggests, in line with Sören Kjörup's argument[13], that perhaps only artistic research can realise Alexander Baumgarten's plan for "aesthetic research", which he declared in the 18th century: to produce knowledge of the singular. This kind of knowledge concerns the singular and the unique and cannot be generalised into laws, but it is nevertheless knowledge.[14] What it means in practice to conduct research with the help of one's works can however, be interpreted in many ways.

Esa Kirkkopelto, professor of artistic research at Theatre Academy Helsinki, proposes that: 1) an artist changes her artistic medium into a medium of research and 2) as a process of artistic research carries out and displays a certain change, it articulates itself as a medium of invention.[15] He stresses the shared and institutional aspect of artistic research. The inventiveness of an invention is in itself a matter of evaluation (is it something really new and different in relation to previous devices and modes of practice; does it have an impact on these?). But mere originality, or even ingenuity, does not suffice to make an invention research in any institutional or academic sense, to distinguish it from art making and experimental art. "Artistic research done by an artist outside institutions is worthy of its name only if it has institutional consequences and if it can articulate itself in relation

to institutions, if only in order to resist them," [16] he points out. "As a consequence, the criteria for evaluation would consist of considering t*o what extent an artist-researcher is able to present their invention as an institution*. If they manage to do that, their research has significance to everyone, it produces knowledge." [17] The capacity of research to create transformation becomes more important than epistemological or methodological issues.

These philosophers' voices[18] from Finland are just a few examples of the ongoing debate and they show how differently it is possible to approach the issue of methods in artistic research. Most theorists are keen to differentiate between artistic research and artistic practice in general. The core issue is often the role of the artwork or artistic creation within a research project. We can also look at the issue from the other direction: What is the role of research in artistic practice?

## Research as part of the artistic practice

Research is a normal part of artistic work in many areas of contemporary art (in the form of exploration, investigation, trial and error), but only rarely developed into a formal research inquiry. We could even consider artistic research as the latest trend in contemporary art, as I have stated in another context.[19] The issue goes beyond the Bologna Process, where different educational systems in Europe are subjected to the three-cycle model in order to be mutually comparable. There is a clear need for research from the inside of arts practices, but different art forms have different key issues and problems and need time to develop their own methods, based on existing working methods within the relevant artistic field.

Practice-based research often has a practical, critical or emancipatory knowledge interest, while artistic research appears to find contact points with philosophical studies, and shares their speculative freedom, although it inevitably also has an empirical dimension. The motivation for artistic research is, however, rarely the production of knowledge as such. Most artists turn to research because they are dissatisfied with existing forms of practice, because they have a dream or vision, or because they want to experiment and play.[20] Since (at least in Finland) we do not have forms of further education for artists other than the research route (except for purely technical courses or training in applied forms), we cannot exclude the fact that a large proportion of artistic researchers engage in research in order to develop as artists as well.

Many artists are ambitious and artistic research can pave the way for challenging experimentation that is not possible within ordinary "showbusiness". For the critically minded, artistic research provides a space for questioning and criticising the ingrained conventions of the art world. For the more conservatively inclined, artistic research offers an opportunity to formulate and document tacit knowledge and tried and tested methods. For those who want to focus on the reliability and validity of artistic research as knowledge production, the task is to try to satisfy all the expectations that Henk Borgdorff listed in his well-known text from 2006.

> "Art practice – both the art object and the creative process – embodies situated, tacit knowledge that can be revealed and articulated by means of experimentation and interpretation. [...] Art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation. It begins by addressing questions that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world, and employs methods that are appropriate for the study. The process and outcomes are then documented and disseminated in an appropriate manner to the research community and the wider public." [21]

That is easier said than done. Understanding art practice itself as a research project is more common in fine art. Within contemporary art, critical questioning is the basis for art's self-understanding.

> "Art is a creative and intellectual endeavour that involves artists and other arts practitioners in a reflexive process where the nature and function of art is questioned and challenged through the production of new art." [22]

This sounds very much like the traditional self-correcting or self-regulating scientific ideal. Not everyone in the performing arts would probably agree with this since, despite experimentation and questioning being valued, they are not integral to the general definition of the art form. Within the performing arts, or when talking about different art forms, terms formed around the notion of "practice" are often used, such as practice-based, practice-led and practice-as-research.[23] This is due, in part, to differing views of art. Within music, theatre and film, art often describes a genre or quality, as in art film or art music, rather than the field as a whole.

Research that entails an attempt to articulate and theorise an ongoing practice based on acquired (and thus usually more or less unconscious) skills, has a different emphasis and uses different methods compared with research that attempts to develop a new type of art work or design product,

and explain the route to that result. We could even say that artistic research can be practice-based, when the practice of art is more important than an individual work, or design-led (alternatively work-led, since this applies to fine art as well).[24] Such a division cannot, of course, be strictly applied, because there is design within the performing arts (lighting design, sound design and so on), and contemporary fine art often focuses on processes and interaction rather than products and finished works.

The difference can be expressed through the relationship with time. Is the research process planned, documented and forward-looking, is it striving to create something new, or is it rooted in reflection on what has happened and trying to understand and articulate what one does or has already done? In a research context, the former model is usually considered the most desirable. A well-planned project with clear questions and goals and clearly articulated methods is held up as the ideal. In reality, a model where one first does something and then tries to look at it, reflecting on and understanding what one has done and what that means, is much more common in artistic research. Barbara Bolt has argued that we should focus on the consequences of the creative research process, be they material, discursive or affective.[25]

The traditions and conventions of the various artistic fields have a strong influence on research, and on the motivations, questions, methods, discourses and indeed difficulties that apply within the field in question. One of the first tasks for an artistic researcher, regardless of the type of model being applied, is to be aware of and articulate the varied preconceptions and truisms that one has inherited or adopted with one's artistic field.

The role of experimentation and the importance of innovation in everyday art practice, for example, varies widely across different art forms, all the way from classical ballet, where experimentation is of limited significance – via collective improvised forms like jazz or contact improvisation within dance – to industrial design, where innovation is the very raison d'être of the work. This difference in attitudes to exploration and experimentation has consequences for the status of research in the respective art world, and for the change in attitudes and approaches that an artist must undergo when he or she begins an artistic research project.

Experimentation can be understood more formally in the sense of testing a hypothesis, more creatively in the sense of exploring the unknown, or as an ongoing process of observations and analysis. Experimentation is a natural component of art practice for way many artists within fine art.

The interest in theory among artists is general and discussions of art works can be knowledge-oriented and philosophically or politically sophisticated; making "studies" or exploring something are everyday expressions. Problems arise on the question of the objective, because it is taken as a given that the purpose of all research is to help the artist to create a better artwork. The research – be it conceptual research, archive research, fieldwork or experimentation – can be integrated into the creative process, but the outcome being sought is not primarily to increase our knowledge and understanding, but to produce a new work.

In music, theatre, dance and film, however, research is often considered distant from ordinary practice. Traditionally, performing artists have concentrated on mastering particular skills and being able to apply them in live situations. Playfulness is close to experimentation, but can often be perceived as untrustworthiness in an academic context. Seductive and deceptive performances that mix illusion and reality, fact and fiction, are interpreted as the antithesis of a scientific demonstration. And yet many of the preparations for a production involve activities that are similar to research – such as archive research and experimentation. It is only a question of degree that separates them from more formal research processes.

## Art making as method?

Do formal research processes thus mean that artistic research simply applies methods from the social sciences and humanities or indeed natural science? Many artistic researchers borrow qualitative methods with close ties to phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnography, or narrative methods, action research and so on. This is convenient in situations where the artistic work is carried out at the beginning of the process and the questions have changed over the course of that process. Artworks can then be converted into data, material to be studied, instead of research results, and qualitative methods can be used to analyse documentation of the creative process, like data from interviews, for example. However, one can question whether this is artistic research in its true sense. The situation where an artist ceases to be an artist on completing a work, and turns into a researcher analysing the work, has been criticised.[26] To a certain degree this turn is, however, unavoidable, being precisely what reflexivity is about. Stepping back from the work and critically analysing what one has done usually forms an important part already of the regular artistic process. The trick here is to find a rhythm where one alternates between creativity and critical reflection.

Making art can be a kind of research method if it is articulated and systematised, according to commentators such as Shaun McNiff [27], who has worked in art therapy, where the pressure from scientific, method-fixated research in healthcare is strong. Within the humanities, methods are rarely perceived as the be all and end all. (At least in my time, it was perfectly possible to obtain a Master's in philosophy with theatre and art history as core subjects without thinking much about methodology.) Converting artistic working methods into research methods by clarifying what one actually tends to do, in what order and in what way, is a good alternative to borrowing methods from outside the field. Nancy de Freitas has studied active documentation[28] as a tool in art education and suggests that it could also form the basis for developing research methods. Antti Nykyri, a doctoral student in Helsinki who is working on developing more interactive tools for sound design, documented his process by taking photos of his working desk from time to time.[29] For him, it was important to use another medium for documentation than the one he uses for creation.

My own practice could also serve as an example of art making as research method. I video a performance in the landscape from the same position with the same framing once a week for a year and then edit the material into a video work one year later. It is perhaps more a method for studying changes in the surroundings and the weather in southern Helsinki than the creative process. If research methods are developed based on the working methods used within each specific art field, the research processes will have their specific characteristics within these fields.

Creating variations and comparing them is reminiscent of scientific experiments, where a particular element is varied while the other conditions are kept as constant as possible. This analogy can, however, be problematic, since there are often far too many variables in art creation, particularly when it comes to dramatic art or film. My first attempts at artistic research in the 1990s focused on the question of how the space affects a performance, so I conducted my investigations by directing ten versions of the same play for ten different locations. However, I quickly realised that it was more interesting to create variations that were as different from each other as possible, rather than trying to preserve them constant, and thus I reformulated the research question to ask how one can use the space as a means of expression.[30] An artist's entire practice can be based on experimenting with variations on the same problem. Doctoral

student Tuula Närhinen[31], for example, creates art by letting nature (rain, waves, sea salt and so on) form images via various devices and processes that she has developed. In such cases, the methods are much closer to scientific methods than the source criticism of the humanities.

A variant of experimental artistic research is to criticise an earlier theory on the basis of practical experience. It is relatively easy to uncover shortcomings in a model through practical experimentation. In my doctoral work[32] I used Peter Eversman's[33] model for analysing the organisation and use of theatrical spaces, and criticised its limitations taking my own performances as examples. I showed how the model only works in spaces intended for theatrical use and suggested changes to take into account site-specific performances. I only did this, however, having first created a similar model of my own, and then discovered (to my horror) Eversman's model, after which I scrutinised the differences between them.

This type of critical and experimental approach is rarely used today. It is more common to begin with a problem of interest, start off by making art and choose the focus of one's reflections while the work is under way, or even afterwards. Usually, the artwork or the artistic practice become the material to be analysed and reflected upon afterwards, even if one may have wanted to see them as a method or intended them to be research results. Ethnographic approaches can be useful, but they easily turn art making into data gathering and the artwork into data instead of the result, which inevitably places greater demands on the written component, with subsequent analysis of the experiences and conceptualisation and theorisation based on them.

If art making is a method of artistic research, must it also produce art, or is it enough that one uses the same procedures? Can the result be something other than art? Yes, the result could, in principle, be a demonstration, or even a report on why there was no artwork, depending on the goal and purpose of the research process. In technology-based fields, research often focuses on what is yet to work, because "if it works, it is no longer cutting edge".[34] In scientific research, a negative result is as valuable as a positive one; it is as useful to know something does not work as it is to know it does. In art, however, we are used to being forced to succeed. In artistic research too, we like to stress artistic quality in order to keep the central focus on the art and its creation. But this can result in a pressure to create so-called quality art, art that is already established and familiar, which often entails the polar opposite of research. In research one must be free to fail. We

ought to be able to differentiate between a successful research process and a successful artwork as a result, without diminishing the artistic dimension.

This issue is further complicated by the fact that an artwork can traditionally only be created by artists, and it can arise simply out of a decision, as with Duchamp's famous urinal. But art comes into existence when it is exhibited, and a decision to exhibit something as art tends to be made by an institution or curator, as pointed out by Boris Groys.[35] If an artist is used to thinking "this is art because I say it is art", irrespective of whether or not it is exhibited, it can be difficult not to be able to say "this is artistic research because I say it is artistic research". It can be equally odd when curators and institutions choose to declare: "look, this is artistic research" and exhibit their chosen research projects in the same way as art. But this is perhaps a digression...

## Questions and procedures

Questions and methods are interdependent. The method should reasonably be chosen based on the question: what procedures would be best for examining the question I have chosen to study? However, if the starting point is in existing working methods, then the methods are already given. In that case one could try to formulate the questions based on concrete working issues that arise in the artistic work. Questions of why, for example, which concern causality, are often difficult to answer through art making. Questions of how or in what way, on the other hand, are easier to tackle via artistic practice. To take my own practice as an example, over the past ten years I have been working with the question: "How to perform landscape today?" This is far too general a question to be really useful as a research question, but it gives me a starting point, something I can try to answer with the help of artistic practice. And the answer I come up with is actually a demonstration: "Like this, perhaps?" But how then are my works artistic research rather than ordinary art making? What makes them a means of creating new knowledge and understanding, rather than simply tools for creating experiences and insights for a potential spectator? Not much, necessarily, but perhaps something: my willingness to place them in relation to earlier research, to use them as an example in conceptual discussions, to openly document and reflect on the working process and, last but not least, my desire to write about them. For an artistic researcher with a project that is to be reported or reviewed as a thesis, I do not recommend this method. Making art first and contex-

tualising it as research afterwards probably creates more problems than planning a research project that includes art making interlaced with contextualising and reflection.

We might ask: Where does artistic practice sit within a research project? What is its place in the process? Is it something one starts with to create material, or something one shows at the end as a result, or perhaps something one keeps up throughout the process, a way of thinking? The easiest way to avoid the inherent duality of the "do first – write later" model is to alternate between the two. An exhibition or performance leads to an essay, which leads to a new exhibition or performance, and so on. This is similar in principle to the cycle in action research, with planning, which leads to action, which leads to reflection, which leads to new planning, etc. There are other similar models, such as Halprin & Burns' RSVP cycle (resources, scores, valuation and performance) for group processes.[36] Robin Nelson has recently summed up his version of the British model for practice-as-research as a circle with a triangle of artistic practice in the centre (theory imbricated within practice) surrounded by three forms of knowledge: 'insider' close-up knowing (know-how), propositional knowledge or 'outsider' distant knowledge (know-that), and the tacit knowledge made explicit through critical reflection (know-what).[37] And one can go round and round the circle, although all three aspects are involved in most of the things one does.

The most important question, however, usually remains: is there something I really want to find an answer to, is there a problem I want to try to clarify or even resolve? Many initially dance around the question and the actual problem only becomes clear over the course of the work. The research question sometimes changes radically, but progress is more difficult without any questions or problems at all. In such a case it can be a good idea to try to articulate particularly clearly what one is trying to do with one's research project.

We could of course dispense with questions and argue our case with the support of Philip Auslander[38], who states that documentation is performative – it produces what it is supposed to document; for example, documenting a performance as performance art constitutes it as performance art – and we could suggest that the same thing applies to research. Documenting an artistic project as a research project constitutes the project as research. This is not as unexpected as it might sound: If I create a sculpture from recycled materials and carefully document all the stages of the working process, with a little contextualisation I can pre-

sent the project as a research project that produces new knowledge about and understanding of how a sculpture comes about, and how recycled materials can be used. Here, documenting the process is the core method.

However, we could go even further and suggest, with the support of Richard Schechner[39], that practically anything can be seen as research. He suggests that we can study any activity as (if it was) a performance. Even a map can be analysed as (if it was) a performance, an active entity. Similarly, we could consider any artistic process as (if it was) a research process. The research emerges from that very consideration, which then becomes the lead method.

## Conclusion

Rather than repeating what I have said about methods, which, as mentioned, in principle ought to be developed within each art form on the basis of the actual working methods employed, I would like to end with a recommendation. On the basis of the dilemmas faced by the doctoral students I have followed over the years, I recommend that an artistic researcher, whether a post-graduate or a veteran, holds on to at least one of the following in the turbulence of the research process – the question, the method or the material. In choosing which of these one is trying to keep constant, one at the same time also aligns with a particular research tradition. Am I really serious about this simplification? Perhaps we can take it as a thought experiment rather than a guiding principle: 1) If one sticks to one's original question, all means and methods for trying to answer that question are allowable. One can change the methods, the theoretical frame of reference, let the process lead, seek new data, without going off course and losing sight of what one is actually doing. (This attitude is supported by Feyerabend[40] and comes close to common sense – at least in my opinion.) 2) If one sticks to a chosen method, and if that method is accepted within the tradition in which one is working, some form of research outcome will be produced even if one abandons the original question and all the assumptions and goals one started with. A method produces some form of outcome. (This attitude resembles a kind of "normal science" tradition, and is one of the reasons why methods are so talked about. The method is considered to guarantee results or scientific credentials.) And finally, 3) if one sticks to the material, one can change the questions being asked about it or the methods used to analyse it, and let the material take the lead or speak. (This attitude

resembles the way the importance of the material is idealised within qualitative research, and in the humanities in certain contexts.) Attempting to formulate and fix all of them – question, method and material – in advance and keep to the research plan throughout the process is often pure idealism (and sometimes even damaging) in an artistic research process where every aspect can be in a state of flux. Most artists are able to embrace uncertainty in their creative process, and this could be an asset to fall back on.

Although the question of methods is significant – the methods distinguish different disciplines – it is actually a practical question: how to articulate existing (or new) working methods in a way that makes them understandable as research methods. Artists who tend to work systematically or with processes that are easy to describe often find it easier to accept the transparency that research demands. If we agree with Feyerabend that all methods that lead to knowledge are allowed, it is clear that artistic working methods can be as good as any other methods, as long as they are articulated sufficiently clearly. And then the crucial question concerns the purpose. Do I apply these methods to create an artwork, an ambiguous and paradoxical entity, or do I do it to create some form of knowledge, understanding or insight that I can share with others and let others build on? I believe the majority of artistic researchers would choose to answer: *Both*.