

Artistic Research Does Not Exist

...And How She Managed Not to Be Afraid

Julian Klein

"Fine, then," fluted Fay, "sing me the reasons why you don't exist, and I will whisper to you why you don't have to be afraid – as long as you accompany me on the guitar." – "But I can't play the guitar!" answered Artistic Research. – "If you don't exist," continued Fay, "then you can also play the guitar, because you actually do exist, otherwise you wouldn't be afraid of not existing, and from one such a false premise follows the entire universe." And so she played and played, sang her favorite fears and listened to Fay's eleven chords of consolation.

Fear No. 1: Artistic research just tries to pass ordinary art off as research

Consolation: There may be good reasons that could speak in favour of seeing some art or works of art as research.¹ However, there is an immanent difference between searching for those reasons and asking what allows research to be deemed artistic. To put it differently, the debate surrounding "art as research" is a decidedly art-theoretical undertaking, one largely occurring post hoc; the term "artistic research," however, focuses on particular qualities in the research and rather poses the question as to when, where and why there is, was or should be the intent to employ the artistic mode throughout the working process of that research.² The artistic mode of perception (also designated at times as "artistic experience") distinguishes itself from a simple aesthetic sensation in that it simultaneously encompasses multiple layers of reality, demarcating each layer from the next via framing (mental decoupling). Perception within the artistic mode – as opposed to non-artistic multiple framing (such as pre-stable representation) – is specifically constructed around this simultaneity, which accords it a character that is present or opaque in nature and thus able to be consciously experienced.³

Fear No. 2: Artistic research produces art and is hence not research

Consolation: This premise is only partially accurate; as with all research, artistic research first and foremost yields research results and, in the best case, accompanying insights. This is its primary purpose; otherwise, it would not be research. Admittedly, those results could, for their part, make their appearance in the form of art (though that is not an exigency). It may, hence, be better to state it thus: Artistic research *can also, among other things*, produce art. The conclusion that artistic research is not research, on the other hand, is either false in a trivial sense, using the term "research" as does the premise – or it is aiming at something along the lines of artistic research not being *scholarly or scientific* research. Setting aside the fact that the artistic research mode has also been used for quite a long time now within the sciences and humanities, this statement is true in a trivial sense; were it not so, the attribute "artistic" would be superfluous (see Nos. 7 and 8 below).

Fear No. 3: Artistic and scientific research preclude one another

Consolation: Not everything that can rightfully be called artistic is completely unscientific merely because it is artistic (one is reminded, for example, of anatomically correct artistic drawings). By the same token, not everything that can rightfully be called scientific or scholarly is wholly unartistic simply because of that qualification (one is reminded, for example, of artistically excellent anatomical drawings). Artistic experience, scholarly and scientific argumentation, hence, are rather independent dimensions within a shared cultural and epistemic space that quite decidedly allow themselves to be combined on different occasions in various relationships.⁵ So it is that procedures and methods are found within scholarly and scientific research allowing the artistic mode to contribute actively to the gleaning of new insights (see No. 7 below).

Fear No. 4: Artists want use the term "research" to upvalue their art so they can unrightfully seize hold of research funding

Consolation: At present – at least in Germany – it is only in exceptional cases that research work in the arts is remunerated with additional income or other financial means. Instead, the lion's share of research work must be carried out on a purely voluntary basis (in contrast to scientific and scholarly research, which in general is able to offer its participants the basic means of earning a livelihood, at least in the short term). The research work includes such tasks as project development, penning journal articles and book chapters, lecturing at conferences, participating in peer review, and the like. In terms of content, research work necessitates both engagement in the theoretical discourse regarding the methodological and epistemological basis of the respective research as well as the publication of study results, essays and research reports – all beyond the artistic work itself. As a general rule, teaching and mentoring students and postgraduates is, if at all, remunerated with comparably low compensation in comparison to the efforts taken (a practice equally widespread in the sciences and humanities). To round it all off, research-oriented funding proposals in the arts carry with them the systemic disadvantage that projects and applicants are often measured by entertainment

industry standards (such as circulation, average viewing numbers, viewer ratings, amount of press coverage) and in reality can only in rare cases be granted merit as research projects. All of this leads, if anything, to the tendency to *devalue* art that publicly acknowledges a research approach. In any case, an artist who wishes to upvalue her art via an external entity, standard or other criterion would generally be ill advised to engage in research just for the sake of achieving that end. Undertaking alternative strategies such as social work with street children showing significant behavioral problems, the public mediation of environmental, educational and health issues, or even purely virtuosic or other more highly intellectual fribble holds substantially more promise of success in that regard (and these are also the rightful object of generous support via arts funding – whereby such endeavours are also often suspected to be hiding behind the term “artistic research”).

Fear No. 5: Artistic research pursues not research but rather artistic development

Consolation: It is undisputed that projects directed toward artistic development are just as important and relevant as research projects directed toward attaining new insights. In its word choice, the production industry generally draws a stringently clear distinction between “research” and “development”; and “artistic development” can mean at least three things within this context: First, the personal development of individual personages in the arts (an essential in any given case); second, a development in the marketing of artistic content for the sake of better public perception (this is also always needed); and third, the development of artistic content, methods and procedures for the sake of innovation in various artistic genres and forms (this too is an undisputed and continuous necessity). While all of these development projects and programs are legitimate for various kinds of progress in the arts, they initially have little in common with the specific goal of gleaning insights within research. There may be research that can, among other things, serve to bring about artistic development, but the artistic development cannot per se contribute to the research or always be the sole goal of every research project pursued with artistic methods; nor can each and every newly won insight emerging from artistic work always contribute to artistic development. As a general rule, artistic development has the task of further developing the arts, while artistic research can also be directed toward gaining other insights that often rest partially or completely outside the actual sphere of the arts. Artistic research and artistic development are thus two different focuses, emphases which can converge but which do not necessarily always do so.

Fear No. 6: Artistic research is research of the arts and hence self-referential

Consolation: As with all research, artistic research, too, is free from the very beginning to choose its subject matter. That focus can, but does not have to, originate from the artistic sphere. Hence, artistic research could

potentially include research of the arts, focusing on a topic it shares with artistic theory of some kind (such as music theory) or artistic studies of some kind (such as theater studies) – even, theoretically, in a self-referential manner (this would then be the artistic research of artistic research). However, it is also free to pursue other research objects, topics or phenomena outside the artistic sphere, which may just as possibly overlap with other scholarly or scientific disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, psychology or physics. It is good practice to distinguish between the terms “artistic research” and “research of the arts.”

Fear No. 7: Artistic research is only undertaken by (less gifted) artists

Consolation: Research can be deemed artistic when it employs the artistic mode as a tool for gaining new insights. It is not only artists that do this; scientists or scholars, for example, do this too. A defining use of the artistic mode is just as clearly part and parcel of the repertoire of scientific and scholarly research as is the use of three-dimensional modeling, thought experiments, simulations, argumentative narration, sonification, games and (re-) enactments.

Art sometimes is produced in the sciences and humanities, such as when philosophers present exhibitions or theatre performances. The artistic mode in this case, however, generally serves the ends of presentation and the performative rather than any gains in new insights. The following truth applies in equal measure to those at work in the sciences and humanities, and those at work in the arts: When and as long as they produce art, they are not necessarily researching. However, when they research – that is to say, when they are searching for new insights – and draw others or themselves into the artistic mode in the process, then their research is (also) to be called artistic.

Fear No. 8: Artistic research is just trying to look scientific

Consolation: Artistic research sometimes faces the imputation that it terms itself so because it wishes to contrive for itself some sort of “honorary title” of being scientific or scholarly in the sense of the sciences and humanities. This may have been true in some dubious cases, but it fails to apply to the large majority of artistic research projects. The subtitle to this fear also overlooks the fact that artistic research, by designating itself as such, is not even claiming that its goal is to be scientific or scholarly, but rather is expressly aiming for designation as “artistic” – almost despite it all.

Moreover, it also overlooks the fact that the honorary title of “artistic” can be at least equally as eminent as that of “scientific” or “scholarly”. But whatever the case may be, this imputation misses the most important thing of all, namely, that in using the adjective “artistic,” the ways it departs from the various scientific and scholarly research methods are actually emphasized. This, on the other hand, does not prevent interdisciplinary research, which is better able to make an equal commitment to both artistic

and scientific or scholarly research in their (sometimes even converging) interest in new insights and thirst for knowledge.

Fear No. 9: Collaborative interdisciplinary research between the scientific and artistic disciplines is impossible

Consolation: It generally holds true that difficulties rooted in content and method do exist between various disciplines – also internally, within the sciences, humanities and the arts respectively. At the same time, the differences between the disciplines in the humanities on the one hand and the natural sciences and arts on the other often appear to be greater than the differences between disciplines within the natural sciences and the arts.

This may be due to the fact that scholars in the humanities are much more accustomed to speaking *about* artists than *with* them. It may also, however, be due to the fact that a natural sciences laboratory more closely resembles an artistic studio or a rehearsing stage in its epistemological structure than the scholar's "armchair". What is more, scholars in the humanities often work hermeneutically. As a positivistic pursuit, however, hermeneutics is more like a complement and thus serves more as an antagonist than a partner in its relation to the arts, which generally rather emerges from a constructivist and relativist model of reality. In this, too, there is a close resemblance between the modeling schemes of the natural sciences and the artistic mode. The empirical working methods of the natural scientist are marked by a similar, ideally unbiased curiosity regarding the diversity to be found in reality and are as equally schooled in conceptualizing paradoxes and furnishing them with constructs as the arts are often said to be.

The quintessential difference, on the other hand, however, is at the level of observation. The primary focus within the natural sciences is directed at the typical, the general, the representative, the paradigmatic, the average, the usual – the primary focus within the arts, on the other hand, is often leveled at the individual, the idiosyncratic, the puzzling, the extraordinary, the exemplary and the original. It is precisely here that we can find abundant potential – in the collaboration undertaken between artistic and scientific disciplines.

The arts allow for an approach of unrestricted subjectivity, something that can at times present an advantage in comparison with the characteristic objectivist or intersubjective approach of the sciences, particularly when the goal is to reap the greatest possible amount of insight within a given collaborative framework. Numerous examples show that the scientific and scholarly disciplines in particular can profit from artistic collaboration, as the arts can offer them access to insights that would remain inaccessible without such an artistic component.⁶

Generally, the necessity of delineating a viable interdisciplinary arena for communication and methodology in the first place is often underestimated in the evaluation of interdisciplinary undertakings. Without this initial investment, which often means also working out – at least to a large extent – the

fundamental competencies of the other respective discipline, collaborations risk the danger of limiting themselves to a simple division of labour and a rather superficial interchange of ideas. In interdisciplinary research that has rightfully earned its name, the disciplines always tend to disband with their own content- and personality-based boundaries in order to merge with one another on the level of a higher "indiscipline."⁷ At present, it is only in especially serendipitous cases that projects have exhibited a sufficient prerequisite amount of strength, time and opportunity for this.

The existence of *interdisciplinary* artistic research in particular thus most depends on the availability of such possibilities and infrastructures. Conversely, as long as it has little to no opportunity to prove its potential and benefits, further allegations about its merits are unfair and self-fulfilling; if research is denied the necessary support as soon as it becomes artistic, the proof that there is no relevant artistic research is already provided even before such a diagnosis has to be made.

Fear No. 10: Art would have to undergo fundamental changes in order to be called research

Consolation: Artistic research can *also* be scientific or scholarly research, just as scientific or scholarly research can *also* be artistic research. For this reason, it is thoroughly unnecessary to make changes to the arts themselves, or to the descriptive term "artistic," or to the term "research," or even to research practice in and of itself. Rather, the significance lies in recognizing the (thankfully diverging) definitions of these terms and then positioning them in sentient relationship with each other wherever it becomes clear that this is fitting.

Fear No. 11: The term "artistic research" is only needed to distract attention from the deficient quality of the artistic work

Consolation: Even before "research" is introduced as a qualifying term, and even if it is not used, the prerequisite artistic work flowing into the respective research can be enriching, satisfying and of high quality. The "research" label simply qualifies it as being driven by the motivation of gaining insights, something it can certainly still do unaltered even without the label. In the end, what has to be convincing is the artistic work and the assistance it provides in terms of gaining insights. In any case, projects and the creation of artistic end products will hardly be undertaken merely in the interest of defending a term under attack. Rather, the term should help to clarify the character of projects, namely, whether they dedicate their efforts primarily to the investigation of questions, phenomena and problems – while of course, also possibly aiming for the sublime, or to entertain an audience. Anyone more disturbed than enriched by the term may and should omit it without greater loss. Artistic research will continue to exist even if it is not termed as such.

Annotations

- 1 | Such reasons are found, for example, in Schmücker, Reinold: *Künstlerisch forschen. Über Herkunft und Zukunft eines ästhetischen Programms*. Unpublished manuscript accompanying lecture at the Universität der Künste Berlin, January 23, 2015.
- 2 | For a more comprehensive overview, see Klein, Julian: "What is Artistic Research?", Research Catalogue (2011), also [<https://www.academia.edu/9983441/>]
- 3 | See Klein, Julian: "The Other Side of the Frame: Fundamental principles of the aesthetic theory of relativity." in: Flach, S., Söffner, J. (Hg.): *Habitus in Habitat II – Other Sides of Cognition*, Peter Lang Verlag Bern 2010, or in German in: J. Klein (Ed.), *per.SPICE! Wirklichkeit und Relativität des Ästhetischen*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2009. See also [<https://www.academia.edu/1576688/>]
- 4 | See e.g. Klein, Julian: "Das !KF – Institut für künstlerische Forschung Berlin," in: *Aussichten – zur Öffnung des Unverhofften*. DASA Dortmund, 2013. See also [<https://www.academia.edu/9353396/>]
- 5 | Cf. Klein, Julian: "What is artistic research?" (Research Catalogue, 2011).
- 6 | Cf. e.g. Klein, Julian (in dialogue with Martin Tröndle): "Wie kann Forschung künstlerisch sein?" in: Tröndle M, Warmers J (Eds.): *Kunstforschung als ästhetische Wissenschaft*. Transcript, 2011. See also [<https://www.academia.edu/10138528/>]
- 7 | According to Rancière; see Klein, Julian and Kolesch, Doris: "Galileis Kugel oder das absolut Relative des ästhetischen Erlebens," in: J. Klein (Ed.), *per.SPICE! Wirklichkeit und Relativität des Ästhetischen*, Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2009.

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