"Those who research do not know, but grope their way forward, tinkering, hesitating, holding their decisions in flux." Perspectives of artistic research using the example of an artistic research project on the critical recontextualization of the "commune" at Friedrichshof.
Elisabeth Schäfer

"Ethics is the aesthetics of the few-ture."
Laurie Anderson

Since the beginning of our project on the critical reappraisal of the history of the commune at Friedrichshof[1], we as the project team have been frequently asked what exactly our research approach is and what our research practice or methodology looks like. Our project team is an interdisciplinary research team consisting of a filmmaker (Paul-Julien Robert), an artist (Ida Clay), a social anthropologist and filmmaker (Thomas Marschall) and a philosopher (Elisabeth Schäfer). This concrete interdisciplinary composition of our team can already communicate something about the fact that our research practices are also fed by all these very different expertises – expertises that come from both science and the arts. However, the question of how exactly we do research often confronts us beyond that, often in the same breath, with a concrete image of research as empirical data collection and its evaluation. How does this idea of research come to be associated with a very concretist notion of empiricism? On the one hand, this is certainly since research is mostly associated with notions of objectivity and generalizability, and that for this image of research, scientific research (pretty much exclusively) serves as a model. On the other hand, the research field in which our project is located – artistic research[2] – is still little known to a broader public beyond art universities. For our project website, we have therefore decided to write this overview text, which wants to trace the field in which we are moving with our project and which considerations are being made in this field about how research and the arts, how the practices of research and the practices of the arts have to do with each other and what they can do with each other.

As a starting point, it makes sense to begin with a powerful institutional reform of the past decades, because the intense debate, especially in European art academies, about researching

---

[1] „Performing Primal Communism – PPP", has been a three-year FWF PEEK project [AR 568] based at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (duration: 2020-2023). Project websites: https://fh-timelines.goldblo.cc/peek; https://www.akbild.ac.at/de/forschung/projekte/forschungsprojekte/2020/performing-primal-communism (Last Access: 22.04.2022).

[2] For a basic analysis of this field of research, see, among others: Silvia Henke, Dieter Mersch, Nicolaj van der Meulen, Thomas Strässle, Jörg Wiesel: „Manifest der künstlerischen Forschung". Eine Verteidigung gegen ihre Verfechter, Zürich/Berlin 2020; Anke Haarmann: Artistic Research. Eine epistemologische Ästhetik, Bielefeld 2019; Künstlerische Forschung. Ein Handbuch, herausgegeben von Jens Badura, Selma Dubach, Anke Haarmann, Dieter Mersch, Anton Rey, Christoph Schenker, Germán Toro Pérez, Zürich/Berlin 2015; Henk Borgdorff: The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia. Amsterdam University Press 2013; Sibylle Peters (Ed.): Das Forschen aller. Artistic Research als Wissensproduktion zwischen Kunst, Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft, Bielefeld 2013; Julian Klein: Was ist künstlerische Forschung? In: Gegenworte. 23/2010, S. 24–28. (online: edoc.hu-berlin.de); Elke Bippus (Ed.): Kunst des Forschens: Praxis eines ästhetischen Denkens, Zürich/Berlin 2009.

practices in the arts can be seen in closer connection with the Bologna reform[3]. Not alone, but also. And that's why we start with it, so that we can then leave this institutional aspect behind. The Bologna reform of educational institutions had some drastic consequences, including the institutionalization of art studies, and the introduction of the artistic PhD, for example. From the moment that artists at art colleges can also graduate with a doctoral degree, PhD, the question had to arise: To what extent can an artistic PhD degree be considered equivalent to a PhD in the sciences and humanities? However, this question, triggered by the institutional changes, has furthermore led to a re-perspectivization of art as research and has therefore not exhausted itself in transformation processes of study programs and curricula alone. Rather, the introduction of the artistic PhD has also led to a re-confrontation of our notions of knowledge, its production, and our image of processes of knowledge genesis with all those questions that have long been discussed in epistemological and critical discourses on science[4]: What concrete processes of reflection and aesthetic cognition are always at work in the arts as well? What is aesthetic cognition? What are the differences in the cognition and reflection that accompany artistic processes and the cognition that accompany scientific research processes? Are there parallels, overlaps? Or are we talking about entirely separate spheres of the "division of the sensual"[5]?

As much as one looks for parallels to other disciplines and research practices in the sense of legitimizing the artistic PhD, one quickly encounters the problem that artistic research - whether it works more from the perspective of the sciences or that of the arts (for artistic research always oscillates between these "poles") – does not want to conform to the classical criteria of science, such as the criterion of provable repeatability, rationality and universalizability – all characteristics of a traditional image of science shaped by the natural sciences. The practice of artistic research corresponds to this image of scientific practice, still prevalent and deeply

---

[3] Bologna Reform or Bologna Process is the name of a Europe-wide standardization of courses and degrees as well as a transnational higher education reform aimed at international student mobility, see e.g., http://www.ehea.info/ (Last Access 27.04.2022).

[4] Kathrin Busch proposes in her text *Wissenskünste. Künstlerische Forschung und ästhetisches Denken*: „The interrogation of the common separation of art and science can therefore be pursued from two angles: first, the theorizing of art, and second, the importance of the aesthetic for theorizing." (Kathrin Busch, Wissenskünste. Künstlerische Forschung und ästhetisches Denken, in: Elke Bippus (Ed.), Kunst des Forschens Praxis eines ästhetischen Denkens, Zürich/Berlin 2012, pp. 141–156, here: p. 142, translated by E.S.)

[5] In the book "The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible", philosopher Jacques Rancière defines the aesthetics of politics as a question of the visibility or invisibility of individuals in the community; it is a question of "Who can speak? Who is heard? Who is seen?". Rancière calls these the fundamental, socially mediated forms of sensory experience and asks: who or what is given in sensory experience, or: who or what has a share in the sensory that can be experienced? This question implies at the same time the question of the division of this sensuous, it is about how individuals are perceived within the system of sensuous evidence, how are they seen, heard, felt and if at all, then how and in which way? Against the background of the analysis of this, Rancière subsequently develops the question of the activities that intervene in the general division of a place and in their relations with the modes of being and forms of visibility there. Which aesthetic practices interrupt the "normal division"between doing, being and being perceived, seen, heard? When and under what conditions do such interruptions result in a redivision of the sensual? Rancière refers to democracy as the aesthetic regime of politics, since it is determined, among other things, by the indeterminacy and incompleteness of identities and the deprivation of legitimacy of the speakers positions. See: Jacques Rancière: The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible, Bloomsbury Academic 2013.

inscribed in the social archives, as a practice of formulating generally valid statements, the core of which is the determination of something "as" something, not, not completely, or not restlessly. Artistic research, like art, operates in the singular; it relies on thought and the exploratory process-even on the part of its reception.

In contrast to traditional scientific representation, which uses discursive language as well as, for example, tables and graphs as means of expression, artistic research reflects precisely on the materiality and performance of the semiotic processes of representing its results or ways of knowing, that is, translated into sign systems. When tables and graphics are shown in the context of artistic research, it is precisely this showing and the creation of these graphics that is always co-thematized and co-reflected. The performative and medial reflection can thus be understood as a first very central criterion for the distinction between artistic and scientific research. In the context of traditional scientific research, the co-thematization of the materiality of things, the materiality of measuring apparatuses, etc. is mostly classified as difficult, unimportant, or even negligible. Although the feminist epistemology and not least the findings of quantum physics have given decisive indications here that this co-thematization plays an essential role precisely for the assessment of the interpretive gesture, the gesture of collecting the data, etc.. However - mostly still - the material dimension of the ways of cognition is largely pushed into the background in favor of the conceptual, linguistic translation. It should be noted that a very questionable notion of language also resonates here, namely as a form that is not touched by how and what it is supposed to grasp, nor does it have its own dimension of materiality, something that can no longer be held without question, at the latest since the works of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Hélène Cixous. Recently, however, changes have also been emerging on the side of traditional approaches to science. Increasingly, it is a matter of becoming aware of the importance of recording practices for research processes, of the positions from which researchers look at this or that research object.

With the use of such considerations, even traditional science can no longer be defined solely by its detachment from its objects of knowledge but is described by its connectedness with and its embeddedness in the environment. Bruno Latour's[6] work can certainly be cited here as an example. Latour, a sociologist, and historian of science has shown that things become central in research processes. Feminist epistemology with Donna Haraway, among others, has also been arguing since the 1990s for leaving the subject-object dichotomy behind and thinking instead of its entanglement[7]. In recent work, queer theorist and quantum physicist Karen Barad

---

[6] See among others: Latour (2005), *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press; together with Weibel, Peter (2005), *Making things public: atmospheres of democracy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts Karlsruhe, Germany: MIT Press ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe.

[7] At this point, reference should be made to Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, among others. See: Donna Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, in: Haraway: Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, New York 1991, pp. 149-181. The fictional standpoint of cyborgs sketched by Haraway here and in other of her texts denotes a space „between standardized technologies and local experience, where one falls between the categories yet remains in relation to them." (See: Donna Haraway, Anspruchsloser_Zeuge@Zweites_Jahrtausend. FrauMann_trifft_OncoMouse™, in: Elvira Scheich (ed.), Vermittelte Weiblichkeit. Feministische Wissenschafts- und Gesellschaftstheorie, Hamburg 1996, pp. 347-389, here: p. 364, translated by E.S.). Thus, they are embodiments whose conditions of constitution between the organic-natural and the technical-cultural remain readable in themselves. For Haraway, the dissolution of traditionally valid demarcations between nature and culture offers the chance to make conceivable a more open form of identity, which consists of manifold overlays of differences, refractions, and blurred boundaries. In this way, cyborgs are determined as hybrids: as material-semiotic beings whose identities

calls this entanglement "intra-action"[8]. And with it she has found a catchword for a very current development of epistemogenesis. It is about transformations instead of constructions. In every act of "I explore" I already transform that "what" I explore. Pure objectivity can thus no longer be asserted, but neither can pure subjectivity, because the reverse is also true: in every act of "I explore" that "what" already transforms me as well. Therefore, it becomes necessary to reflect questions of knowledge and cognition in their mutual conditionality. This means to consider experimenting and interpreting practices not detached from the object of knowledge, but precisely from the perspective in their material embeddedness in and with the object as forms of co-existence. It is a complex interplay in which there are no longer pure actors and pure things. The subject-object relationship is radically deconstructed. What may sound "new" at first glance, however, has a history in intellectual history that now goes back almost 50-60 years and even further. Since the 1970s, the (natural) sciences have increasingly been confronted with their social, historical, technical and economic conditionality. The philosopher Michel Serres writes: "Those who do research do not know, but grope their way forward, tinker, hesitate, hold their decisions in abeyance. [...] In fact, in an almost miraculous way, the researcher arrives at a result that he did not clearly foresee, even if he groped for it."[9] Perhaps the activity of research is so promising precisely because it has many sides: it is certainly characterized by a systematic, methodical-scientific procedure and at the same time by events that cannot be anticipated and are surprising, through whose irretrievable entry into the research process precisely new insights can arise and which therefore precisely cannot be avoided.

The practice of artistic research shows in this that it itself takes on an aesthetic form and it is characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity. From the research practice in our research project, we have come to appreciate the enlightenment value of artistic research. Artistic research brings critical competence to an age that, in Jean-Luc Nancy's sad judgment[10], is precisely no longer characterized by critique. What exactly is this critical or enlightening potential? Artistic research deconstructs any claim to a monopoly on knowledge, is this

---

are composed of superimposed and contradictory relations. Haraway here explicitly adopts the concept of the postcolonial hybrid subject as a kind of postmodern "identity" of otherness, differences, and particularities. The ordering patterns of gender, race, and class are to be replaced by political strategies of coalition-building that are no longer based on preconceived identities – which have become fragile anyway – but on "affinity" (Haraway 1991, p. 155).

[8] *Intra-action* is a concept by Karen Barad that takes the place of "interaction," which presupposes predetermined bodies that enter action with one another. Intra-action understands agency not as an inherent property of an individual or a person to be exercised, but as a dynamic of forces in which all designated "things" are constantly in exchange, influencing each other and interacting inseparably. Intra-action also assumes the fundamental impossibility of classically understood objectivity, in which a device (a technology or medium for measuring a property) or a person using a device are not considered part of that process that allows specific "results" to be determined or measured. (See: Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 141).

[9] Michel Serres: Vorwort, in: Michel Serres (Ed.), Elemente einer Geschichte der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt a. M. 1994, p. 11–36, here p. 35. (Translation into English by E.S.)

[10] „Unser Zeitalter ist nicht mehr das eigentliche Zeitalter der Kritik"/ „Our Age is No Longer the Real Age of Criticism" is the title of a lecture by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy on Jan. 28, 2016 at HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, Germany, see: https://www.portalkunstgeschichte.de/kalender/termin/vortrag_von_jean_luc_nancy__unser_zeitalter_ist_nicht_mehr_das_eigentliche_zeitalter_der_kritik-17890.html (Last Access 23.04.2022)

formulated on the part of science, natural science or on the part of a locative perspective on the world, a specific gender, a specific class or group, etc.? It thus shifts our notions of knowledge and expands the field of what is knowable. Artistic research shows us: the more we deal with an issue, the more multi-perspectival we learn to look at it, the more complex the forms of representation must become, the more difficult the research becomes to instrumentalize. Artistic research gains political relevance in the field of the "division of the sensually perceptible" when we begin to think of this perceptible as a system that creates visibilities and, through them, evidences and thus determines what is given to sensual experience in the first place, who can participate in it and who is represented as a participant. In all this activity, artistic research does not exclude the possibility of failure. Failure is not added to it as an accident to be avoided but is constitutively inscribed. We must learn to deal with this. Artistic research, in contrast to traditional scientific research, seems to be carried by the interest in the moment of the intra-action of material and concept, of subject and object. Artistic research then, however, does not in the end – because we like to think from the end, from that: what comes out – produce a general knowledge that can be reproduced again and again in the same way and in the same form and can be reliably verified at all times, but at best it opens up spaces for thinking; it offers itself as a passage through which we can appropriate a concrete activity and practice of research. In artistic research, therefore, no work of art "comes out" in the end, but also no method that can be applied again and again in exactly the same way and not differently, but it is itself the movement between theory and practice, back and forth, exposed to the risk of failing, of having to start again and again, of failing again, and on this path ... to dare an approach to a practice of thinking that can be experienced sensually.

In this way, artistic research eludes the logic of the work in the sense of the possibility of producing a self-contained work of art that stands for itself, as well as an equally solipsistic theoretical work. Artistic research de-values in this sense and opens the perspective on the process as well as the contexts of knowledge productions in the abstract as well as aesthetic sense. With this opening of perspective, the context of processes also comes to the fore and questions about the conditions of production become significant. These approaches seem particularly important to our research project on the critical reappraisal of the history of the Mühl-"Commune", with its call for a recontextualization of Mühl's art. Art that was created in contexts of violence and coercion cannot remain uncontextualized from an artistic research perspective, but demands a naming of precisely this aspect of its genesis. The widespread argument that art "stands for itself" or, if it is good art, can be understood "in itself" without further contextualization, primarily conceals the fact that this argument is indeed accompanied by contextualization, namely contextualization in the canon of art history. Art historical comparisons, breaks and parallels are very well traced when talking about the "in itself" and "for itself" of a work of art. Seen in this light, the fading out of certain, uncomfortable, because painful, complex contexts can probably only be understood as a conscious fading out of the uncomfortable context and an equally conscious fading in of the context ennobling the work of art. Not to do this, however, is the task of our research project. The demand for contextualization does not want to contradict the eventfulness of art.

If there is always the unconditioned[11] in productions of knowledge and art, this does not contradict an ethical-aesthetic investigation of the conditions of the possibility of the unconditioned. We understand the unconditioned here in parallel with Jacques Derrida's "university without condition," whose unconditional freedom is equated by Derrida with the right to deconstruct. Deconstruction is always a double gesture: the dissolution and displacement of inherited concepts and the construction in which new concepts that subvert hierarchies are created. Applied to the unconditional of art, we therefore propose that the right to deconstruct is a subversive practice, that is, a right to resist. Paraphrasing Derrida by substituting "art" in place of "university," we invite reflection on whether the sentence taken from "University Without Condition" remains legible: This principle of unconditional resistance is a right that art itself would have to reflect, invent, and posit at the same time.[12] Precisely the affirmation that there is something like the unconditional in art does not result from or necessarily lead to the attitude that therefore (art, or science, etc.) everything is allowed. It is precisely at the place of the unconditional or even the impossible, where art is exposed to reality, to the forces and vulnerabilities of the bodies and psyches of others, that art is in the world it seeks to think and depict. It is at this boundary that it must negotiate and face its responsibilities.

---

[11] Derrida, Jacques, "The University Without Condition". *Without Alibi*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 202-237.
[12] See: Ibid.