

## ESSAYING ART: AN UNMETHODOLOGICAL METHOD FOR ARTISTIC RESEARCH

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### **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, the definition of this institutionalized field, and the methods and evaluation criteria of its output, are debated. Can the scientific and artistic approaches actually be integrated into one coherent working method?

The essay inherently embraces both the artistic and the scientific approaches. It drifts between the subjective and the objective, the experiential and the intellectual. The essay expresses a train of thought, and critically reflects on those thoughts: it experiments and speculates.

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: *essaying art*. The expression of this act of essaying can encompass all possible artistic media, and all possible combinations of media.

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## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Title and Introduction**

The title of this article is *Essaying Art*. This is a reference to terms used by Peter J. Burgard and Lars O. Erickson: 'essaying science' (Burgard, 1992) and 'essayistic science' (Erickson, 2004). In the article *Adorno, Goethe, and the Politics of the Essay*, Burgard makes a comparative analysis between Adorno's renowned text on the essay, *Der Essay als Form* (1958), and Goethe's text: *Der Versuch als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt* (1792). Burgard asserts that Goethe's text is an essay on science as essay: it is 'essaying science' (Burgard, 1992). The word essay applied in this active form to science implies that it is a way of *doing* science, a method of doing science artistically as well as scientifically. In *The Essay as Form* Adorno's, writes that the essay is neither artistic nor scientific but rather an 'intellectual experience', and hints at the essay being 'meta-scientific' (Adorno, 1984).

Erickson's term 'essayistic science' occurs in his book *Metafact* (2004), where he describes how the essay is used as an unrestrained and speculative space for

scientists, specifically focusing on eighteenth-century France. At that time, the individual scientist used the autonomy and freedom of the form of the essay in order to execute thought experiments and to attempt to break free from the dominant scientific paradigm. The essay thus became an artistic space in which scientists could re-think the contemporaneous paradigm.

The essay is an artistic form not only for scientists, but also for writers in any field. It is often placed between the realms of science and art, its scientific element being its inherent connection to its topic, to research, and thus to the theoretical realm; its artistic element being its inherent freedom of approach. In her renowned study, *The Essayistic Spirit* (1996), Claire de Obaldia positions the essay on the border of literature and philosophy. In fact, the essay is almost always described as a hybrid of an academic and literary text, therefore could be used as a hybrid of science and art (as described by Burgard and Erickson). A notable exception, is György Lukács, who, in his *Letter to Leo Popper* (2010), places the essay solely in the realm of art. A hybrid position between science and art is exactly the place where the academic field of Artistic Research<sup>1</sup> finds itself. Perhaps artists can use the essay's hybrid qualities for the domain of Artistic Research by *essaying art*? The unmethodological method, from which this article takes its subtitle, refers to the description of the essay by Adorno, in the text mentioned earlier, where he describes the essay as proceeding 'methodically unmethodically' (Adorno, 1984); more explicitly, it refers to the phrase an 'unmethodological method' to describe the essay by Obaldia (Obaldia, 1996) and R. Lane Kauffman in his essay on the essay entitled *A Skewed Path* (1988).

This article will investigate the hybrid position of the essay in order to gain insight into the definitional and methodological questions concerning Artistic Research as an institutional field. Hybrid position notwithstanding, all the theorists mentioned so far consider the essay as a textual form. But if the essay is approached as a method, and not merely a form, the question arises of *how* could we use the essay outside the restrictions of its textual domain? The key to this is the use of the word *essay* as a verb: when the word essay is taken as a *verb* it is disconnected from its textual restrictions.

## 1.2 Structure

The next part of this article will discuss the essay, Artistic Research, and their similarities. The third part will introduce and contextualize the unmethodological method. The fourth part discussing the essay and contextualize them and its origin

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<sup>1</sup> Outside of mainland Europe also defined as: performative research, practice-based, art-based research, practice-led research, practice as research, or in architecture and product design: research by design.

as a *verb*.<sup>2</sup> The last part will summarize the practical implications of this discussion for Artistic Research, using the *Zuihitsu* (a Japanese predecessor of the essay, which flourished in the 9<sup>th</sup> century) as a model for artistic essaying in the digital workspace.

### **1.3 Delimitations**

This research focuses on the academic theorization of Artistic Research and the essay. Because the subject of this article is the simultaneous act of theorizing and practicing a field, the literary sources that are used are only *essays on the essay*, namely T.W. Adorno's renowned text *The Essay as Form*. It is not my intention to copy-paste the form of the essay to Artistic Research, but rather to extract an essayistic mode. It must be emphasized that the objective of this article is to investigate, and possibly formulate, a method for artistic research, but not *the* method: one that could potentially be used by artistic researchers to create multiple individual working methods. My hope is to provide a framework which encourages the development of many different varieties of essaying Artistic Research.

### **1.4 Case-Study**

This research provides the theoretical underpinnings for a case-study. With this case-study research, I investigate how an essayistic approach to artistic research could be practically used as an unmethodological method for developing individual Artistic Research strategies. As a result I have formulated an elective course for first-year students of the research master Artistic Research at the University of Amsterdam, in the context of my educational research project at the Piet Zwart Institute Rotterdam.

## **2 The Research Fields**

The main research fields of this article are Artistic Research and the essay. This section will introduce and discuss various definitions of, difficulties with, and similarities between both subjects.

### **2.1 Artistic Research**

What is artistic research? Probably almost every artist today would say that they conduct a form of research in their practice, and almost every art historian would say that research has always been a part of artistic practice (for example, material

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<sup>2</sup> The body of the research into the *Essay as Verb* presented in this article, is partially conducted in the context of my 2016 research master thesis: *PER-FORM, the performative essay and the essayistic performance*. Available at: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/270728/270729/617/53> (supervisors: Miriam van Rijsingen and Jeroen Boomgaard).

research or the anatomy of the human body). The main difference between research in art practice and Artistic Research is that the latter is a relatively newly institutionalized field that is subject to the objectives and criteria of academic research. The artistic context of Artistic Research can include any kind of artistic practice: architecture, design, dance, music, theatre, literature, art, video, new media, and so forth. Most often in Artistic Research, the research topic and question are freely chosen by the artist. Because of this freedom, the field of Artistic Research deals with a vast number and variety of academic fields and topics, an equally vast number and variety of artistic disciplines, and any combination thereof. Given these circumstances, one can imagine that it would be quite difficult to define uniformly the field of Artistic Research, and, indeed, there is very little consensus on the topic. As Annette Arlander stated: 'There is not one form of artistic research but many types' (Arlander, 2016). All theorizations of the field start by acknowledging the debate over its definition and form, and its place within the arts and sciences. The field of Artistic Research is in a state of development, but the theoretical debate has been active constantly since its first steps into academia in the early nineties<sup>3</sup>. In the course of this debate, the rudimentary questions of definition remain present. As summarized by SHARE in the 2013 Handbook of Artistic Research: 'Is research through art practice possible?'; 'What is knowledge? What is art?'; 'What is valorised in artistic research?'; 'What form of labour is being proposed?' (Wilson and Van Ruiten, 2013). There are numerous other examples of texts that imply a continued debate<sup>4</sup>. The dominant topic in the debate is the dichotomy (sometimes presented as a paradox) of the artistic and scientific work methods, objectives and criteria, and, by extension, the position of Artistic Research in relation to these different methods, objectives, and criteria. This is, for instance, noticeable in the introductory statements to the SHARE *Handbook*: 'Living with contradictions is difficult, and, especially for intellectuals and artists employed in academic institution [...] these contradictions seems intrinsic to the role of the professional artist-educator'. It seems fair to say that the field of Artistic Research is struggling with its position between the arts and sciences. This struggle deals specifically with methods, objectives, criteria, and also results: *how* do we do artistic research? *why* are we doing it? *how* should we evaluate it? *what* is its output?<sup>5</sup> There are many

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<sup>3</sup> starting in the UK and Finland.

<sup>4</sup> such as the book *Conflict of the Faculties* by Henk Borgdorff, and the article *What is Artistic Research?* by Julian Klein.

<sup>5</sup> But there is also a danger in attempting to define or restrict output: if research is being used to validate artworks or as a way of getting funding by making artistic results quantitative and output measurable. This also makes up the resistance of some artists towards the idea of research in the arts. On the other hand, there is a resistance from researchers towards the field of Artistic Research because it can be used to validate the abandonment of scientific ethos using the artistic arguments.

helpful texts formulating definitions of different artistic research models<sup>6</sup> and types<sup>7</sup>, with schemes for evaluation, and summaries of methods<sup>8</sup> that can be used by the artistic researcher, but the diversity and application is still so vast that there is no resolution. As the *SHARE Handbook* states: ‘this is a book that is neither final nor comprehensive, but rather a provisional disclosure of the state of the art within a specific constituency at a particular moment. [...] it seeks to disclose the contradictions and tensions that criss-cross the domain of artistic research education’ (Wilson and Van Ruiten, 2013).

The key gap in theorizing the field is, as formulated by SHARE, ‘the absence of paradigmatic works within the space of artistic research’. However, at the same time, this absence might be considered to be productive: ‘the institution of a paradigmatic or canonical work would be counter-productive and stand in opposition to the radical alterity of artistic research’ (Wilson and Van Ruiten, 2013). This encapsulates the tension between the scientific urge to define the field, and the artistic urge to keep the field open. This tension results in a constant quest for alternative approaches to artistic research. Thus, there are artistic researchers who adopt their work to existing methodologies, and also artistic researchers who detach themselves from prescribed work methods and define their own methodologies.<sup>9</sup> Although these approaches seem to be incompatible, they nonetheless are both Artistic Research. Perhaps Artistic Research itself should not try to choose one position in either the arts *or* the sciences, but own the position in-between them.

Despite the debate and definitional difficulties of Artistic Research, there seems to be an increasing interest as more universities are developing Artistic Research educational programs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For instance: ‘the continental model’, ‘the nordic model’, ‘the UK model’, ‘the Japanese model’, ‘The Chinese model’, ‘the lack of a North American model’ (Elkins, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Borgdorff distinguishes ‘research on the arts’, ‘research for the arts’, and ‘research in the arts’. “Frayling differentiated between ‘research into art’, ‘research for art’, and ‘research through art’.” Donald Schön has differentiated between ‘reflection on action’ and ‘reflection in action’ (Borgdorff, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For instance: analysis of media representations and media objects, collaborative case studies, ethnography and interventions, design-based research, mixed methods, artistic research as method and of course experimental methods.

<sup>9</sup> Such as: Rudimentariness as a concept for artistic research (Fournier, 2016) and Schizoanalysis as a method in artistic research (Nauha, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Currently there are approximately 280 institutions around the world that offer PhD’s in artistic research, and many institutions that are developing similar programs (Elkins, 2013). There are also more and more Master programs being developed; the presence of Artistic Research in the Bachelor phase is marginal.

## 2.2 The Essay

What is an essay? Everyone knows what an essay is, or at least everyone thinks they know what an essay is. The essay is widely used, be it as a high-school assignment or a philosophical treatise. But despite its popularity, the essay is, from a historical perspective, notoriously difficult to define. *The Encyclopedia of the Essay* mentions: 'the definitional issues that have marked the essay throughout its history were present at its very birth' (Hesse, 1997). But even today the definitional struggles remain, as Lars O. Erickson states: 'nearly every theorist of the essay begins by acknowledging the difficulty in describing its form' (Erickson, 2004). In the introduction of *The Essayistic Spirit*, Claire de Obaldia states that the essay is a particularly problematic form of writing and that there is a great divergence in descriptions of this marginal literary genre. In the article *A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy* (1989), Kurt Spellmeyer writes that the essay neither belongs to prose fiction, poetry nor any form of academic writing. Despite its caution in attempting to define the essay as literary genre, the *Encyclopedia of the Essay* has nonetheless made great efforts to describe the essay genre and include all its different categories. Apart from discussing a vast number of essayists, it distinguishes both origins and themes of the essay as categories, ranging from British to Spanish-American essays and from autobiographical essays to travel essays.<sup>11</sup> These categorizations used by the *Encyclopedia of the Essay* seem somewhat extensive for a genre so formidably hard to define. One could argue that if the essay does not seem to fit the neatly defined boxes of genres and disciplines, then it puts the use of the term 'essay' as a literary genre into question. One of the reasons why the essay is difficult to categorize into genres is due to the essayists' (i.e. the authors') individual perspectives. The individual perspective is central to the essay: the essayist can come from any discipline and can investigate any freely chosen topic.

Understandably, the essay's definitional difficulties also extend to other artistic forms outside the domain of literature, that use the genre of the essay. The most common use of the non-literary essay is found in film. The essay-film has affiliations with documentary, autobiography, meta-fiction, and experimental film making. The label essay-film offers room for discussion. Apart from film, the essay

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<sup>11</sup> Apart from the British and the French essay, the Encyclopedia distinguishes: the American; Australian; Bulgarian; French Canadian and English Canadian; Chinese; German; Japanese; Polish; Russian; Scandinavian; Spanish; and Spanish American essay., the Encyclopedia also mentions a vast variety of categorizable themes of the essay: the autobiographical essay; critical essay; familiar essay; historical essay; humorous essay; medical essay; moral essay; nature essay; periodical essay; personal essay; philosophical essay; polemical essay; religious essay; satiric essay; science essay; sociological essay; topical essay; travel essay. (Chevalier, 1997)

is used in other forms of art like the photographic essay, the sound essay, and the visual essay.

There appears to be a growing interest in these new essay forms. There are YouTube channels with self-proclaimed 'essay videos'<sup>12</sup>. There are even articles that apply the essay to life-styles, like the New York Times's article *The essayification of everything* (Wampole, 2013). In the words of Emma Cummins: 'In today's hyper-mediated world — where the Internet and digital devices have transformed our experience of reading — it seems salient that there is renewed interest in the contemplative form of the essay.' (Cummins, 2013).

### 2.3 The Essay and Artistic Research

It seems that both the essay and artistic research struggle with definitional difficulties. These are not the only similarities: for example, they both depart from an individual perspective (author/artist), they both deal with a vast variety of disciplines and topics, and they are both positioned precariously between the arts and the sciences. In addition, they both seem to have a strong contemporary relevance.

It is interesting to note that the essay has been able to maintain its definitional struggle throughout its long history, eluding strict definitions, and continually re-positioning and re-shaping itself. The essay as text, as well as in definition, does not have a final form or conclusion: the essay is in this sense truly *un-finished*. The essay seems to provide a form that keeps both the tension and the potential of the artistic and the scientific contexts, maintaining balance in its paradoxical place without relinquishing its claim to either field. Maintaining balance in this paradoxical place is exactly what the field of Artistic Research is struggling with, and suggests that Artistic Research would do well to investigate how the essay deals with this hybrid position, and to consider it can utilize the essay's form to create and maintain a balance between art and science.

The absence of singular definitions is intrinsic to the essay form, and one of the key points that keeps its definition open is the fact that essayists write *essays on the essay*.<sup>13</sup> This multitude of perspectives on *what* the essay is and *how* one writes an essay, is perhaps one of the reasons for the essay's flexible definition and the indefinability of its genre. In essays on the essay, the emphasis is not just placed on theoretically defining a field, but on practitioners defining their own definitions of a field. The essayists on the essay have the essay as topic, and then approach it

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<sup>12</sup> For instance: 'Nerdwriter1'. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Nerdwriter1> [Accessed 25 Oct. 2017].

<sup>13</sup> As bundled, for instance, in 'Essays on the essay' (Butrym, 1989) and 'Essayists on the essay' (Klaus and Stuckey-French, 2012).

from an essayistic (and therefore literary) form. They merge the form and the content with the topic. Can the artistic researcher have Artistic Research as a topic, and then approach it essayistically with an artistic form of expression? That would be the artistic researcher's equivalent of the essayist writing on the essay. Perhaps texts about Artistic Research (Borgdorff and Sonderren, 2012), or artistic researchers defining the field in interviews (Kaila, Slager and Balkema, 2012) are not sufficient. Perhaps we need to *essay Artistic Research*: to discuss, and put into discussion, its form artistically and not only textually. Perhaps we need artistic researchers to *present* how they define artistic researchers in and through their practice: not to create paradigmatic works, but to create a multitude of separate but relatable definitions<sup>14</sup>. This strategy would create a multitude of *experiences*<sup>15</sup> of artistic research.

The second similarity which the essay and Artistic Research share is the individual and personal perspective; the author in the essay and the artist in Artistic Research. This is where the artist and author align: they have the freedom to choose and approach the topic at hand in any manner deemed suitable. This brings us to the third similarity: the individual and personal perspective allows a vast amount of perspectives, topics and disciplines in both fields and is part of the reason why divisions and categorizations are so difficult to apply in both the essay as Artistic Research. The authors of essays come from many different fields, and all these essayists are free to write on any topic of their choosing, artistic researchers also come from a vast range of disciplines. Historically, science and art have been separated into separate disciplines with clear distinctions between the two realms. Nowadays there is a re-merging of the disciplines, with inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary discourses in abundance. A study published in the *SHARE Handbook* showed that a large number of artistic research projects is not just inter-disciplinary, but multi-disciplinary<sup>16</sup>. John Rajchman in particular puts the question of academic 'dedisciplining' (Rajchman, 2013) into the debate.

This brings us to the fourth similarity: even though a vast variety of topics are possible, both the essay and Artistic Research always have a theoretical and an aesthetic component (or, one might even say, both a scientific and artistic component). In the introduction I mentioned that science can be essayed artistically, the essay as in-between the artistic and scientific, then art can be

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<sup>14</sup> This could be related to Goethe's definition of a scientific community in his earlier mentioned text. When an experience consists of a multitude of other experiences, it becomes an 'experience of a higher order' (Goethe, 2010). This multitude also consists of the experiences of others: he insists on working together from individual points of view.

<sup>15</sup> Read as 'intellectual experiences' as described by Adorno (Adorno, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Of the 20 PEEK projects investigated, two consist of a single discipline, three consist of two disciplines, and the rest consist of multiple disciplines, unto 9 projects with 4 disciplines. (Mateus-Berr, 2013, p.161).

essayed scientifically. But that doesn't immediately make art science, nor science artistic. Perhaps we can use R. Lane Kauffman's reference to Eduardo Nicol who described the essay as *almost* literature and *almost* philosophy (Lane Kaufman, 1988). With a similar intention, Claire de Obaldia describes the essay as 'literature in potentia'. Obaldia writes that the essay only becomes literature when losing its touch with the scientific. If the artistic researcher is *essaying art*, it would make the process *art in potentia* and/or *science in potentia*.

One of the most well-known essays on the essay is Adorno's text: *The Essay as Form*. According to Adorno, the presence of theory is one of the most fundamental elements of the essay. It absorbs theory of past and present, but the objective is the 'genuinely new' (Adorno, 1984). As mentioned in the introduction of this article, Adorno declares that the essay is neither scientific nor artistic, in his words: 'the essay is both more free, dynamic and open than traditional thought and at the same time more closed and static than traditional thought' (Adorno, 1984). The closed and static part is the tight bond of the essay with its topic of investigation, since the essayist always has its topic at the center of its attention; the open and dynamic part is the freedom to investigate the topic in any manner that seems appropriate, this freedom can be associated with the freedom of an artist. In bringing the artistic and theoretical components together Hartle and Lijster observe that the essay by Adorno connects art and theory dialectically (Hartle and Lijster, 2015).

There are more characteristics that the essay shares with art: the essay also adopts the emphasis on form, on manner of presentation (aesthetics), from art. In her 2011 paper *Thinking as Gesture from Adorno's Essay as Form* Helena Hogan argues that Adorno's essay, in the arrangement of the text, the sub-textual content, and the aesthetic presentation, is comparable to that of art (Hogan, 2011). As mentioned in the earlier mentioned article by Burgard: Silvia Specht in the 1981 text *Erinnerung als Veränderung: Über den Zusammenhang von Kunst and Politik bei Theodor W. Adorno* arguments: 'Adorno's concentration on "configuration" and "manner" of presentation renders the essay at least analogous to art' (Burgard, 1992). Form influences content: the way content is presented influences how we interpret said content. This influence of presentation (form) on the content can be used by the essayist to create more room for interpretation, and even create deliberately ambiguous content, another characteristic the essay shares with art. Room for interpretation requires an active attitude of the reader towards the text (similarly the perceiver towards the artwork), and therefore invites multiple readings. To summarize Adorno: the essay presents a configuration of elements (*membra disjecta*) (Adorno, 1984) as pieces of a puzzle which are not meant to be solved but could potentially hold a solution. Anders Johansson points out the enigmatic character

of Adorno's puzzle<sup>17</sup>. Johansson describes it as follows: 'All one can do is guess, [...] the persistence in the face of the enigma means that one does not give up, in spite of the insolubility of the enigma'.

As a note of caution: it must be said that the essay as multi-disciplined, multi-topical fields, combined with investigative freedom, creates an obvious pitfall. Because a struggle that both the essay and Artistic Research encounter is the *anything goes* argument. The essay seems vulnerable to dilution of its characteristic form, as Ericson states: the essay has 'the tendency to vulgarize' (Erickson, 2004). This vulgarization in combination with commercial platforms like YouTube, makes the essay vulnerable to losing its critical position and self-reflective mentality, crucial to its form. The essay in the contemporary context seems vulnerable to hyper-individualistic truth declamations, and to very loose and careless forms of making these statements.<sup>18</sup> Essential to the essay, and to science, is the notion of self-critique: to be critical towards the surrounding standpoints as well as one's own. In the academic context of Artistic Research, the use of the word *research* also needs critical self-reflection. As Artistic Research theorist Henk Borgdorff writes: 'If everything is research, then nothing is research anymore' (Borgdorff, 2012). This argument shows the risk of undermining Artistic Research as academic field, as well as providing room for self-proclaimed inclusion into the field. In order to make a claim on the domain of academia, and possibly on science, the artistic researcher needs to be precise about what he means by the term *research* and *what* his position towards science is.<sup>19</sup> If the artistic researcher wants to make a claim on the scientific discourse, then one needs to reveal sources motivations, aims, and work process. Perhaps the only difference between the artist as an artist and the artist as artistic researcher in an academic context, is the artistic researcher has to comply with the theoretical component and, depending on the institutional context, scientific requirements.

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<sup>17</sup> 'As Adorno states (in his *Aesthetic Theory*) art is a privileged form of expression, in the sense that it is a vehicle of truth [...] This truth is not immediately accessible [...] the artwork is a riddle in a strict sense: it potentially contains its own solution. The riddle character is a call for a solution, a demand that the interpretation should reveal the foundation of the enigma. The artwork and the interpretation, the riddle and the solution, do not form a symbiotic relationship; the riddle is not made to be solved, and the interpretation is not the perfect tool for solving the puzzle. On the contrary, from Adorno's perspective the interpreter is bound to fail. In other words, the interpretation is characterized by a fundamental insufficiency. The non-identity and the truth content of the artwork demands interpretation, theoretical reflection, critique'. (Johansson, 2013, pp. 155-156).

<sup>18</sup> YouTuber and self-proclaimed video-essayist Evan Puschak says that a good definition of the essay is as following: 'essays should be short, interesting, and they should get to the truth'. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ald6Lc5TSk8>

<sup>19</sup> At the same time, it is of course equally important to be critical towards the claim on art by Artistic Research.

In balancing the theoretical and artistic component, the tension between the free path of the artist and the rigid path of the scientist, need to be disclosed and guarded. A very helpful metaphor by Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén in the 2005 book *Artistic Research - Theories, Methods and Practices* is: “let all flowers bloom” — as long as tending the garden’ (Hannula, 2005). This implies one does not simply let the nature of the artistic process take its course, but also be selective with the material.

### **3 Unmethodological Method**

A critical and reflective position toward the topic of investigation is central to Adorno’s definition of the essay. Together with the aesthetic and theoretical content they are key characteristics of the textual essay. Defining the essay’s unmethodological method is the first step in applying its mode to Artistic Research.

As mentioned in the introduction of this article: in the text *The Essay as Form*, Adorno names the essay’s procedure ‘methodically unmethodically’ (Adorno, 1984). Contrary to Klaus and Stuckey-French’s claim in *Essayists on the Essay*, it is not just ‘antimethodological’ (Klaus and Stuckey-French, 2012) but rather a methodical avoidance of methods: an intentional way of consciously and constantly breaking from possible constraints of systematic scientific methods, as a method. The unmethodological method is not a scientific method but it is also not as free as ‘anything goes’: ‘(the essay) does not proceed blindly, automatically’ (Adorno, 1984, p.170). The phrase ‘methodically unmethodically’ encapsulates an inherent paradox, or as R. Lane Kauffman describes in his essay *A skewed path*: a ‘dialectical play of opposites’ (Lane Kaufmann, 1988). It entails the paradoxical balance of the artistic and scientific components within the essay form. Hartle and Lijster even claim that *Der Essay als Form* is probably as close as Adorno ever came to giving a description of his philosophy (Hartle and Lijster, 2015) and, one could argue, not a description but a demonstration of an unmethodological method as a philosophy.

The interpretation of method also depends of the definition of the word method. Nowadays it is referred to as a *rational procedure* typically applied to science. In ancient Greek ‘method, n.’ (OED, 2018) (μέθοδος) translates as ‘pursuit of knowledge’. *Method* historically comes from *meta-* ‘after’ (see meta-) + *hodos* ‘a traveling, way’ (see *cede*) (Harper, 2018). For the essay’s method, the perfect description might be *pursuit of knowledge*: pursuit implying the journey undertaken may or may not lead to knowledge. It is because of this searching that its structure is always in process and its form is always complete, because it recognizes its own incompleteness. Or as Adorno puts it: ‘the totality of non-totality’ (Adorno, 1984).

The paradox of the unmethodological method lies in the fact, although knowledge is not the end-goal, it is the driving force of endless attempts of its topic. In the end the essay is never truly finished.

The constant reinterpretation is the effort of the essay to critically reflect on the here and now and speculate on the here and now. This reflection and speculation creates the potential for paradigm shifts as Ericsson describes. If we take this speculative practice and look at Artistic Research, we see a similar usage. Arlander (and Wesseling) also describe artistic research as a speculative practice: 'We can think of artistic research as a speculative practice 'act as an activity engaged in imagining alternatives, as a form of speculation through practice' (Arlander, 2016). Michael Schwab's *The Future Knowledge in Artistic Research* (2014) demonstrates the speculative quality and potential of Artistic Research as well. This *search for future knowledge* is the driving force of essayists and artistic researchers.

Adorno starts his text with a quote from Goethe's Pandora: 'Bestimmt, Erleuchtetes zu sehen, nicht das Licht' (Adorno, 1958) ('Destined to see the illuminated, not the light' (Adorno, 1984)). This references the idea that we cannot see the source but we can see what is illuminated by the source. Not to be blinded by the light of the contemporary but to try and see which things reflect the light of the contemporary.<sup>20</sup> Adorno writes: 'the essay comes so close to the here and now of the object, up to the point where that object, instead of being simply an object, dissociates itself into those elements in which it has its life' (Adorno, 1984). Or, as Graham Good describes: 'to transcend the here and now' (Good, 1988). He describes the contemporary perspective of the artistic researcher and the essayist. This speculative and contemporary practice also connects with the essay which will be discussed in the next part of this article.

#### **4 Essay as *Verb***

*The essay* points to a categorizable genre, the essay as method implies a way of doing. What if we did not focus on the essay as *noun* as its form of expression, but as *verb*, *the essayist essaying*. This differentiation is an important step in order to define what *essaying art* as unmethodological method is and could entail for artistic

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<sup>20</sup> Reference to Giorgio Agamben's description of the contemporariness: 'The ones who calls themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights' [...] 'to perceive, this darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be a contemporary.' (Agamben, 2009).

research. Before the essay was a noun (as literary text) the essay was a verb. I will now look at this etymological background of the word essay.

The naming of texts as essays, or rather 'Essai' starts with Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne's collection of three books (containing 107 texts) were published between 1580 and 1588, with a posthumous edition in 1895. The French *essai*, as well as the English *essay*, come from the late Latin word *exagium*. In Montaigne's time *exagium* was known as 'a kind of weight, piece of gold, a noble, a crowne' (Holyoake, 1640), a standard weight type of a  $1/72$  of a pound (Tombeur, 2017). The word refers to the weighing of the coins to test their weight and value. But *exagium* is also used in a broader sense in: 'examination, trial, testing' (OED, 2018), and as 'a balance' (Lewis and Short, 1879). The word *exagium* descends from the Latin *exigere* (Lewis and Short, 1879). *Exigere* comes from the root word *exigo*, defined in modern translation as: 'to drive out, to thrust out, to take or to turn out', and in a second meaning: 'to demand, require, enforce, performance of duty' (Lewis and Short, 1879). In the first definition of *to drive out*, *drive* refers to driving out, as in: driving cattle, or to be driven, to flee, to chase or to hunt (OED, 2018).<sup>21</sup> Translating the word in a historical context, for instance in a Latin to English dictionary from 1563, *exigo* is translated as: 'to expell, shut, or draw out, to expresse, to prove, examine, to require, to exact, take away by force, to finish, to cast forth' (Véron, 1575; Holyoake, 1640). *Exigo* is a combination of the word *ex-* (meaning: *out*) and *agere* (meaning *act*) (Harper, 2018). The root word of *agere* is *age* or *ago*, *ago* translated into: 'to do, to make, to go about, to labour, to accuse, to apply' (Holyoake, 1640). So, in its most basic meaning *exagium* is *to act out*.

The Encyclopedia of the Essay mentions Montaigne might have used the word *Essai* to refer to '*coup d'essai*' (trial run, dummy run or first try (Kellogg, 2018)) and describes the saying as: 'the apprentice artisan's work as distinct from the master's' (Chadbourne, 1997). A dictionary from 1697 describes it as: 'a trial of one's workmanship that's newly come out of his time' (Miege, 1679). What the encyclopedia of the Essay does not mention is the reference of the word combination *coup d'essai* to the sentence: 'Faire son coup d'essai, son chef d'oeuvre, pour passer Maitre (to make a trial of his skill in order to be made free)' (Miege, 1679). This might also give insight in the intention of Montaigne's use of the word *essai*. Montaigne might have referred to the essay as a trial (or test): an attempt to free ones self from ruling consensus.

The first translation of Montaigne's 'Essais' was published in 1603 by Florio under the title 'Montaigne's Essays'. Since then, the book has been translated into English many times. To understand the transformation of the use of the *essai* from

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<sup>21</sup> Drive as a noun only entered the vocabulary in 1697.

verb to noun, we will take a look at its path in the English language. In 1603 the title of Montaigne's book was translated into the English *essay* meaning: to put to proof, to test or attempt (OED, 2018). In the English language, the word *essay* replaced the original *assay* near the end of the sixteenth century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, the verb *assay* entered the English language around 1300, and was used as a noun around 1330. *Assay* was translated into: 'to put to the test, to put to the proof' (OED, 2018). The verb *essay* was first included in the English dictionaries in 1483, but the noun *essay* only entered the dictionary in 1597. From around 1400 until 1676 the verb *essay* referred to the 'essay of a deer' (Phillips, 1678) which was a hunting term used to describe a deer's brisket. The root word is again *assay*, in this definition relating to: 'to assault, attack, assail' (OED, 2018). So, *essay* and *assay* find their affiliation in the test of strength or to attack anything difficult. Coincidentally, the shift of *assay* as verb to *essay* as noun occurs in the same year in which the English philosopher and writer Francis Bacon (1561–1626) published the first edition of his *Essays* in 1597.

This action of *essaying* (the essay of verb) is the attempt to balance and to test the value of its topic; to examine, to drive it to its borders; to chase and to hunt it; to try to attack it from many different angles and with many different strategies; to try out with different angles, different tactics and strategies. The goal is to *attempt*: to break with the consensus of the topic, to speculate on its current value; to try to free oneself from dominant teachings. Connecting the verb *essay* (as a way of testing) with Adorno's unmethodological method (which focuses on form and content, on the aesthetic and the theoretical, on the critical and the self-reflective), we will now apply *essaying* to Artistic Research.

## **5 Essaying Art**

As this research shows, there is an inherent connection between the essay and Artistic Research, and the potential of *essaying* as an approach to Artistic Research. An approach which can be as diverse in expression as the essay is in form. Just as difficult as it is to define text as essay it will be equally difficult to define Artistic Research. Instead of focusing on definitions, we could focus on the *essayistic* modus, or unmethodological method.

The relatively new field of Artistic Research could be a place where art and science come closer together, and where *essaying* could reach its full potential. The artistic researcher *essaying* chooses the topic of investigation freely and attempts to find different ways of viewing and probing the topic, and ignores the need for structured and linear investigation. The form of expression is artistic, it can entail multiple forms (for example: film, photo, and drawing) in any combination. Text too can be presented in different forms (for example: lyrics, subtitles, lists,

anecdotes, diary entries) or any combination. The fragmented and non-linear arrangement of the form (presented in a conceptual and aesthetic manner) leaves room for interpretation of the content. Both theory and practice are incorporated as equal partners in the investigation of the artistic researcher's topic: *essaying* allows for playful and impulsive elements, for the subjective and objective, for the experiential and the intellectual. The attitude of the artistic researcher *essaying* is relentless and focused. At every moment one must reflect on produced content, as well as being critical towards the produced content. The aim is to let the different modes interact with each other, not to make science out of art or art out of science. A process with the potential of a scientific contribution and the potential of an artwork, or both. The initial intent is not to justify, to conclude, or to prove, but to search and to express.

How can *essaying* in Artistic Research be used in practice? The aim of *essaying* art as an unmethodological method is to encourage artistic researchers to research their topics simultaneously both artistically and scientifically by approaching their topics *essayistically*. *Essaying* enables students and artistic researchers to develop individual definitions and forms of Artistic Research; it stimulates their usage and perspective on the artistic component and the theoretical component in their research (theoretical) and practice (artistic), and to let the modes oscillate. But to allow different forms of expression, different media, we need a different format. Perhaps in the form of a modern-day *Zuihitsu* in an online space<sup>22</sup>.

The essay is closely related to the classical Japanese literary genre *Zuihitsu*, which emerged during the Heian Period (AD 794-1185). One of the most famous *Zuihitsu*'s is the 'Pillow Book'<sup>23</sup> completed in 1002. Because both the content and the structure are very flexible, the genre has also been notoriously hard to define (DiNitto, 2004)<sup>24</sup>. The word *zuihitsu* is made up of the kanji words for 'to follow' and 'brush'. The word comes from the sentence 'fude ni shitagau' ('following the brush' (Rudd, 2011)). It is the act of following a lead: whether the brush paints or writes, it is the path that leads and the author who follows. The genre aims to escape the narrative constraints. For example, in a *Zuihitsu* there are: 'series of loosely connected essays and anecdotes, as well as disconnected sentences,

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<sup>22</sup> Apart from this *online space for essaying*, the case-study Practice Tutorial, also uses a *performative space for essaying* at Café Chercher (<http://www.cafechercher.org/>).

<sup>23</sup> The Pillow Book was written by Sei Shōnagon in 990's and early 1000's in Heian Japan. The book also inspired Peter Greenaway for his 1996 film "The Pillow Book". In a lecture he explicitly mentions he is as much concerned with the structure of the medium film as with the content. Being originally educated as a painter, Greenaway says image becomes before language and cinema is first form and structure. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BluXxpF3OP4> (Accessed 11 Jun. 2016)

<sup>24</sup> DiNitto quotes renowned *Zuihitsu* theorist Linda Chance who calls it a "quintessential nongenre".

fragments, ideas, word pictures, poems, lists, and snatches of conversations' (DiNitto, 2004). In the Zuihitsu, the recorded thoughts of the author are central. Both the fragmented form and the presence of the author can be compared to the essay form. The difference being, apart from consisting of many different writing styles, the Zuihitsu also contains drawings and paintings. A modern-day Zuihitsu could incorporate sound, video, images, and web-links. But new forms of expression seek new places for expression (Schwab and Borgdorff, 2014), and an online environment could provide this place.

A platform which facilitates these new forms of expression is the workspace of the Research Catalogue<sup>25</sup>, which also provides the working format for 'Journal of Artistic Research'. The Research Catalogue provides tools to create an online workspace. In this workspace, one can upload different types of media and place them freely in the exposition space. It is possible to share the workspace publicly, or with fellow Research Catalogue members. One can also self-publish the workspace or hand it in for peer-review. The exposition space creates freedom of thought for the essay and the freedom of incorporating media apart from text. It also allows for non-linear arrangement. To essay freely.

This article has demonstrated relevance for using *essaying* as an approach in the field of Artistic Research. The field of Artistic Research has been analyzed in relation to the essay form and vice versa. By looking back at the essay on etymology as a verb and the usage of the essay as unmethodological method, it has been disconnected from textual restrictions. Finally, by using the Zuihitsu in connection to *essaying* art in an online context has resulted in *essaying* as an unmethodological method for Artistic Research, as art and research *in potentia*.

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<sup>25</sup> Research Catalogue, an International database for Artistic Research:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net>. 'The Research Catalogue (RC) is a searchable database for archiving artistic research. RC content is not peer reviewed, nor is it highly controlled for quality, being checked only for appropriateness. As a result, the RC is highly inclusive. The open source status of the RC is essential to its nature and serves its function as a connective and transitional layer between academic discourse and artistic practice, thereby constituting a discursive field for artistic research. The RC creates a link between (1) elaborated documentation of the work; and (2) expositions and comments that engage with the contribution of the work as research.' <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/portal/about> [Accessed 27 Oct. 2017].

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