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Essaying art: An unmethodological method for artistic research

ABSTRACT

Science must articulate its sources, as well as its relevance and its context, and it must provide clear argumentation. Furthermore, it is strictly bound to academic and ethical rules. Art is not constrained by these methods, ethics or rules. In the relatively new field of artistic research, science and art are integrated. However, the definition of this institutionalized field, and the methods and evaluation criteria of its output are debated. Can the scientific and artistic approaches 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.

KEYWORDS

essay
art and science
artistic research
performance
unmethodological
 method
Adorno

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Title and framework

The title of this article is 'Essaying art'. This is a reference to terms used by Peter Burgard and Lars Erickson: 'essaying science' (Burgard 1992) and 'essay-istic science' (Erickson 2004). In the article 'Adorno, Goethe, and the poli-tics of the essay', Burgard makes a comparative analysis between Adorno's renowned text on the essay, *Der Essay als Form* from 1958, and Goethe's text, *Der Versuch als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt* from 1792. Burgard asserts that Goethe's text is an essay on science as essay: it is 'essaying science' (Burgard 1992: 183–87). 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 writes that the essay is neither artistic nor scientific but rather an 'intellectual experience', and hints at the essay being 'meta-scientific' (Adorno 1984: 170). 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 rethink 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 posi-tions 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, there-fore 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[1] finds itself. Perhaps artists can use the essay's hybrid qualities for the domain of artistic research by *essaying art.* According to Obaldia (1996) and Lane Kauffmann (1988), Adorno's method in 'The essay as form' *is* 'unmeth-odological'. Adorno himself describes the essay as proceeding 'methodically unmethodically' (Adorno 1984: 161). The subtitle of this article is inspired by this secondary literature on Adorno's work.

This article will investigate the hybrid position of the essay in order to gain an 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. On Essaying, a lecture performance

This article theoretically researches the potential of *essaying* for the field of artistic research; it is an academic article and does not claim to be essayis-tic itself. However, parallel to writing this article, I also developed a lecture

performance series: *On Essaying*. These lecture performances researched the concept of essaying for artistic research *essayisitcally*. These lecture performances have been performed multiple times; the final form consists of a video and a script (included in this volume).

1.3. Structure

The next part of this article will discuss the similarities of the essay as a literature form and artistic research as an institutionalized research field. The third part will introduce and contextualize the unmethodological method mainly using 'The essay as form' from 1958 by Adorno. The fourth part discusses the history of the essay genre and the etymology of *essay*, investigating its origin as a *verb*.[2] The fifth part summarizes my conclusions. In the sixth part, I elaborate on the relation between the essay form and performance and discuss my lecture performance *On Essaying*. Finally, in the afterword, I suggest using online spaces and performative spaces for essaying and sharing the variety of forms that essaying could shape.

1.4. 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 practising a field, the literary sources that are used are only *essays on the essay*, namely Adorno's renowned text 'The essay as form'.

With reference to *essaying* and the concept of *lecture performance*, I recognize that a lot can be gained by looking at the field of philosophy of communication and performance studies, as well as diving further into film studies. In reference to the *unmethodological method*, a lot can be gained, too, by digging deeper into the philosophy of science. As a next step in the research, these can be fruitful additions.

Finally, 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 that encourages the development of many different varieties of essaying artistic research.

2. THE RESEARCH FIELDS

The main research fields of this article are artistic research and the essay form as theorized by various academics. 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 (e.g. material 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

2. The body of the research into the *essay as verb* presented in this article was conducted in the context of my 2016 master research thesis, 'PER-FORM, the performative essay and the essayistic performance', available at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/270728/270729/617/53 (supervisors Dr M.I.D. van Rijsingen and Dr J. Boomgaard). Parts of an early verison of this article have been published in the context of the conference: *Artistic Research Will Eat Itself. Proceedings of the 9th SAR International Conference on Artistic Research*, Research Catalogue (2018).

3. Starting in the United Kingdom and Finland.

4. Such as the book *Conflict of the Faculties* by Henk Borgdorff, and the article 'What is artistic research?' by Julian Klein.

5. 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 artistic arguments.

6. 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).

7. 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 differentiated between 'reflection on action' and 'reflection in action' (Borgdorff 2012).

8. 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.

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, '[t]here is not one form of artistic research but many types' (Arlander 2016: n.pag.). 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 1990s.[3] 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 valorized 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.[4] 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*: '[l]iving with contradictions is difficult, and, especially for intellectuals and artists employed in academic institutions […] Contradiction seems intrinsic to the role of the professional artist-educator' (Wilson and Van Ruiten 2013: II). 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?[5] There are many helpful texts formulating definitions of different artistic research models[6] and types,[7] with schemes for evaluation and summaries of methods[8] 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: III)

The key gap in theorizing the field is, as formulated by SHARE, 'the absence of paradigmatic works within the space of artistic research' (Wilson and Van Ruiten 2013: 31). 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: 31). 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.[9] 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 programmes.[10]

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 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: 221). But even today the definitional struggles remain, as Lars Erickson states: 'nearly every theorist of the essay begins by acknowledging the difficulty in describing its form' (Erickson 2004: 40). 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.[11] 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. Original essayist Michel Eyquem de Montaigne even makes the individual aspect explicit in the introduction of his bundle of essays: 'I have no respect or consideration at all, either to thy (the reader) service, or to my glory […] for it is myselfe I pourtray […] myselfe am the groundworke of my booke' (Florio 1603, Preface). But, Screech justly adds that Montaigne's words are not to be mistaken for egotistical or narcissistic: 'not merely subjective indulgence' (Screech cited in Motaigne 1987: xxxix), because by investigating one man, Montaigne aims to investigate all Man. Here, the personal becomes the universal. The essayist is completely focused on the individual experience and, therefore, paradoxically also becomes universal.[12] The essay does the same thing in relation to its audience: on the one hand, the essay does not concern itself with the audience, thus the essay is not didactical; on the other hand, the essay is made public to an audience, thus the essay is not soley a private endeavour. Peter Uwe Hohendal says that the essay is a 'performative act of writing regardless of the audience' (Hohendal 1997: 226).

9. Such as rudimentariness as a concept for artistic research (Fournier 2016) and schizoanalysis as a method in artistic research (Nauha 2013).

10. Currently there are approximately 280 institutions around the world that offer Ph.D.'s in artistic research, and many institutions that are developing similar programmes (Elkins 2013). There are also more and more master programmes being developed; the presence of artistic research in the bachelor phase is marginal.

11. 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).

12. References to Goethe's text can be made. According to Goethe, when an *experience* consists of a multitude of other experiences, it becomes an experience of a higher order. This manifold also consists of other people executing the experiments. Goethe insists on working together

from individual points of views. Only if we unite a manifold of unique – but relatable – experiences of the experiments, we can verify the experience to a certain level, and start to relate them in order to reach the experience of a higher order.

13. The *Pillow Book* was written by Sei Shōnagon in 990s and early 1000s 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. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BluXxpF3OP4. Accessed 7 August 2020.

14. DiNitto quotes renowned Zuihitsu theorist Linda Chance who calls it a 'quintessential nongenre' (DiNitto 2004: 252).

15. For instance, 'Nerdwriter1', available at https://www.youtube.com/user/Nerdwriter1. Accessed 25 October 2017.

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 filmmaking. The label essay-film offers room for discussion. Apart from film, the essay is used in other forms of art like the photographic essay, the sound essay and the visual essay. But these are all singular forms of expression; we can find historical examples of hybrid forms that predate the essay form.

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 Zuihitsus is the *Pillow Book*[13] completed in 1002. Because both the content and the structure are very flexible, the genre has also been notori-ously hard to define (DiNitto 2004).[14] 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: 42–43]). 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 a 'series of loosely connected essays and anecdotes, as well as disconnected sentences, fragments, ideas, word pictures, poems, lists, and snatches of conversations' (DiNitto 2004: 256). 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 weblinks – a modern-day media to communicate the essay form.

There appears to be a growing interest in these new essay forms. There are YouTube channels with self-proclaimed 'essay videos'.[15] There are even articles that apply the essay to life-styles, like the *New York Times*' article 'The essayi-fication of everything' (Wampole 2013). In the words of Emma Cummins, '[i]n 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: 414).

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 start 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 contempo-rary relevance.

It is interesting to note that the essay has been able to maintain its defi-nitional struggle throughout its long history, eluding strict definitions and continually repositioning and reshaping 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 *unfinished*. The essay seems to provide a form that keeps both the tension and the potential of the artistic and the scientific contexts, maintain-ing 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*.[16] 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 in 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 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 Sonderen 2012), or artistic researchers defining the field in interviews (Kaila et al. 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.[17] This strategy would create a multitude of *experiences*[18] of artistic research.

The second similarity that 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 remerging 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.[19] John Rajchman, in particular, puts the question of academic 'dedisciplining' (Rajchman 2013: 125) 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 an 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 essayed scientifically. But that does not immediately make art science, nor science artistic. Perhaps we can use Lane Kauffmann's reference to Eduardo Nicol who described the essay as *almost* literature and *almost* philosophy (Lane Kauffmann 1989: 221). 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.*

16. As bundled, for instance, in *Essays on the Essay* (Butrym 1989) and *Essayists on the Essay* (Klaus and Stuckey-French 2012).

17. 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 views.

18. Read as 'intellectual experiences' as described by Adorno (1984).

19. Of the twenty PEEK projects investigated, two consist of a single discipline, three consist of two disciplines and the rest consist of multiple disciplines, unto nine projects with four disciplines (Mateus-Berr 2013: 161).

20. As Adorno states (in his Æsthetic 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: 155–56)

21. YouTuber and self-proclaimed video-essayist Evan Puschak says that a good definition of the essay is as follows: 'essays should be short, interesting, and they should get to the truth'. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ald6Lc5TSk8. Accessed 16 July 2020.

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: 169). 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: 165). 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 centre 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 Horgan 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 (Horgan 2011). Silvia Specht in the 1981 text, 'Erinnerung als Veränderung: Über den Zusammenhang von Kunst und Politik bei Theodor W. Adorno', argues: 'Adorno's concentration on "configuration" and "manner" of presentation renders the essay at least analogous to art' (cited in Burgard 1992: n.pag.). Form influences content: the way content is presented influences how we interpret the 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: 169) as pieces of a puzzle that are not meant to be solved but could potentially hold a solution. Anders Johansson points out the enigmatic character of Adorno's puzzle.[20] 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' (Johansson 2013: . 155–56).

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 a dilution of its characteristic form, as Ericson states: the essay has 'the tendency to vulgarize' (Erickson 2004: 46). 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 hyperindividualistic truth declamations, and to very loose and careless forms of making these statements.[21] 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: 40). 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.[22] 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 an artistic researcher in an academic context is that the artistic researcher has to comply with the theoretical component and, depending on the institutional context, scientific requirements.

In balancing the theoretical and artistic components, the tension between the free path of the artist and the rigid path of the scientist needs 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: 73). 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 towards 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 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: xx) 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 not as free as 'anything goes': '(the essay) does not proceed blindly, automatically' (Adorno 1984: 170). The phrase 'methodically unmethodically' encapsulates an inherent paradox or – as Lane Kauffmann describes in his essay on the essay 'The skewed path' – a 'dialectical play of opposites' (Lane Kauffmann 1988: 231). 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 on 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 2020) (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: 165). The paradox of the unmethodological method lies in the fact that, although knowledge is not the end-goal, it is the

23. Reference to Giorgio Agamben's description of contemporariness: '[t]he 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' (lecture by Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the contemporary? Kishik and Pedatella', 2009: 39–54).

24. 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 2020). The verb *essay* was first included in the English dictionaries in 1483, but the noun *essay* only entered the dictionary in 1597. Coincidentally, the shift of *assay* as verb to *essay* as noun occurs in the same year in which English philosopher and writer Francis Bacon (1561–1626) published the first edition of his *Essayes* in 1597.

25. The word *exagium* descents 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). Translating the word in a historical context, for

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 also describes artistic research as a speculative practice: '[w]e can think of artistic research as a speculative practice [...] as an activity engaged in imagining alternatives, as a form of speculation through practice' (2016: n.pag.). Michael Schwab's *The Future Knowledge in Artistic Research* (2013 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.[23] 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: 162). Or, as Graham Good describes, 'to transcend the here and now' (Good 1988: 25). This 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 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) was published between 1580 and 1588, with a posthumous edition in 1895. 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. The transformation of the use of the *essai* from verb to noun can be traced in the etymology of the word in the French and English language. In 1603, the title of Montaigne's book was translated into the English *essay*, meaning; the action or the process of trying or testing, proof; eperiment; the result of an attempt (OED 2020).[24] The French *assai*, as well as the English *assay*, 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 coins to test their weight and value. But exagium is also used in a broader sense as 'a balance' (Lewis and Short 1879).[25]

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: 1203). A dictionary from 1697 describes it as 'a trial of one's workmanship that's newly come out of his time' (Miege 1679: n.pag.). 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: n.pag.). This might also give an insight into 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 oneself from ruling consensus.

This action of *essaying* (the essay of verb) is an 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 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 FOR ARTISTIC RESEARCHERS

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 that 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, 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 (e.g. film, photo and drawing) in any combination. Text too can be presented in different forms (e.g. lyrics, subtitles, lists, anecdotes, diary entries) or any combination. The fragmented and nonlinear 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 the 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 proof, but to search and to express.

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

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* translates 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*.

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.

It is important to note that 'approaching' a topic is a mode of *doing,* and that essaying is not just a private endeavour; an essential part of essaying is *externalizing* (sharing). In order to express ourselves, we must materialize our thoughts; in order to reflect, we must first express. Therefore, essaying is inevitably connected to sharing and communicating with an audience. By sharing research process in essayistic forms, we can gain an insight into the artistic and scientific entanglement in artistic research projects. Not the perfect conclusions, but finding combinations of forms for sharing the train of thoughts on a specific topic. All these individual examples together could define the field as a multitude of expressions.

This article has demonstrated relevance for using *essaying* as an approach in the field of artistic research. The field of artistic research has been analysed in relation to the essay form and vice versa. By looking back at the essay's etymology as a verb and the usage of the essay as unmethodological method, it has been disconnected from textual restrictions, ultimately enabling artistic researchers to use essaying as an unmethodological method for artistic research. But the question remains – how can *essaying* in artistic research be practised, shared and taught as an unmethodological research method?

I attempted to *practice* essaying in the lecture performance series *On Essaying*, which I will elaborate on in the following section. I will further research sharing and teaching essaying as an unmethodological method in a second article and lecture performance, mentioned in my afterword.

6. *ON ESSAYING*, A LECTURE PERFORMANCE

As mentioned in section 1.2 of this article, the lecture performance *On Essaying* researches the concept of essaying for artistic research *essayistically*. This was my first attempt to practically experience and experiment with essaying as an unmethodological method in artistic research – doing what I talk about.

In practising essaying as an unmethodological method, I choose performance as an artistic medium. In this context, *performance* refers to performance art; an aesthetic and conceptual act. The reference to *lecture* is not to a lecture in an educational context –that would be opposite to the intent of essaying – but rather as an oration. The word *performance* refers to the artistic element of essaying, and *lecture* to the theoretical. Both combined into one form (lecture performance) could be considered a form for artistic research. There are multiple reasons for choosing performance as medium for essaying; first of all, I am a performance artist mainly working with video performances; therefore, performance was a logical medium to start from. Secondly, there are qualities to performance that make it highly suitable for essaying: performance has an 'individual' element; it embodies the presence of the artist; performance has a 'live', a 'physical' and 'repetitive' element, allowing for multiple expressions and interpretations; and performance has a (potentially) 'public' element in connection to its audience. Apart from these considerations, there are also strong theoretical arguments for using performance, because the essay is considered inherently performative.

6.1. Performance and the essay

The *OED*'s definition of performance as noun is 'the doing of an action or operation' and 'something performed or done; an action, act, deed, or operation'.[26] Performance is a combination of *per-*, meaning 'through, throughout',[27] and *-form*, '-like, -shaped'.[28] Earlier we established an etymological definition of *essay* as *attempt*, and in its primary form as an *act*. Both the essay and performance are an act in essence. Besides the formal affiliation of the words, the essay is also theoretically understood as performative. In discussing Adorno's essay on the essay 'Der Essay als Form' from 1958 and Goethe's essay on the essay 'Der Versuch als Vermittler zwischen Objekt und Subjekt' from 1792, Peter Burgard describes points at the meta-level of the texts: they do not just explain something, but they are doing what they are talking about while they talk about it. Burgard calls this merging of word and action a 'performance of paradox' (Burgard 1992: 175).[29] The paradoxes are acted out in the text instead of simply being stated or explained. In reference to Adorno's essay, Peter Uwe Hohendahl says, 'Adorno's essay on the essay – a performative salto mortale (risky, or dangerous undertaking) – must be taken very seriously' (Hohendahl 1997: 223). Sarah Pourciau makes the point that Adorno is 'performatively demonstrating' (Pourciau 2007: 363) equivocations; he purposefully evokes different interpretations of the words he uses. As a result, words, as well as the object of investigation, are given back their enigmatic character. Anders Johansen says that the essay's attitude of constant self-reflection and over-interpretation is a performative act: '[t]he essay starts performing its own gestures, presenting its own enigmas, its own images' (Johansen 2013: 166). These gestures are performed in the course of writing.

As for the other considerations: performance has an immanently 'individual' element because of the embodiment of the artistic act; this is comparable to the individual role of the author in the essay. But where text is the medium of the essayist, the performer (through the performed) is also its own medium. Through this medium, other media and elements can be incorporated. There is also a 'live' aspect to performance: the performer can follow a thought process, and reflect in the process of performing. There is a direct relation between the reflective and the active, embodying the self-reflective attitude of essaying. While performing, the performer can incorporate luck, play and intuition – to improvise. But, this improvisation should not be misunderstood for automatic or subconscious acts. Even the elementary bodily reactions need to be reflected upon. Additionally, there is a 'physical' element to performance: because the essaying aims to push something beyond its initial status, the performer can potentially even approach the object of investigation literally: by weighing, by testing, by experimenting. The performer works *with* materials and media. There is a 'repetitive' element to performance: The essayistic performance can be revisited and reformed in a series of attempts or reinterpretations. The performances can be acted out by reinterpretation and reforming of the works. Finally, there is a 'public' element to performance: performance has a strong connection to its viewer as the essay has a strong connection to its reader, because for the performed there is often an audience involved.

6.2. On Essaying, *a lecture performance*

I created a lecture performance series based on the research behind this article. To take the final argument in the previous paragraph at heart, these lecture

26. See 'perform, v', https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/view/Entry/140780?redirectedFrom=perform. Accessed 16 July 2020. Performance descends from the verb *to perform* from Old French *parfornir* (to do, carry out, finish, accomplish) from per- (through, throughout; thoroughly; entirely, utterly) and *-form* (word-forming element meaning '-like, -shaped, in the form of').

27. See 'per-', https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/view/Entry/140485?rskey=Ru019p&result=3&isAdvanced=false. Accessed 16 July 2020.

28. See '-form', https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/view/Entry/73425?rskey=6my5Ab&result=5&isAdvanced=false. Accessed 16 July 2020.

29. For example, 'truth in untruth, unity in disunity, topicality in anachronism, methodical unmethodicalness, polemic against polemics, &c; in other words, that description arises through performance, is already performance […] his performance of paradox' (Burgard 1992: 175).

performances have been performed multiple times to a variety of audiences. I adapted the form and the content of the lecture performances according to different contexts. The first time was for peers at the Piet Zwart Institute (Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2017); then with a more academic approach at the 11th Society for Artistic Research (SAR) International Conference (Plymouth, United Kingdom, 2018); with a more didactical approach at Didactic Art (D'ART) Second International Biannual Symposium (Vienna, Austria, 2018); then in a combined form at Gallery Witte de With (Rotterdam, 2018); and in its final form for the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA) at Art_Research_Convergence (The Hague, The Netherlands, 2018). Each time the essaying was performed over the course of a year, it changed, incorporating new research and the replies from the audiences. For instance, in referring to white balance calculation on a video camera, one of the comments was that technology of video cameras can be discriminating; I incorporated this suggestion after my first performance (04:50 minutes).

The public iterations continued until the topic was saturated, eventually settling into an archived form: a video and a script. In the final video file, my voice is recorded; during the lecture performances, I performed the text live. The video in its final form is horizontally 3840-by-720 pixels, with three parallel video streams running next to each other. In the live lecture performances, these video streams were screened on separate video screens (two horizontal screens and one vertical screen). I used one screen for the videos, one screen for the references and footnotes, and one screen for the images and etymology. However, in two occasions I had to compress the videos into one screen size because of facilitation restrictions, and in one occasion I had an additional projected image from my video camera present.

In creating the lecture performance series, I followed an unmethodological method of essaying, structurally incorporating different perspectives on the same topic. I incorporated the following perspectives from the essay and Zuihitsu: dreams (the lucid dream and pillow book at 12:28 minutes); personal anecdotes (reference to my first video camera at 04:18 minutes and to my early childhood love for Ginkgo tree leaves at 07:57 minutes); quotes (literally quoting Robin Deacon at 05:54 minutes); poems (dialectical paradox at 14:52 minutes); lists (listing the etymology of essay at 00:15 minutes). I also decided to include a non-human perspective (a tree at 08:17 minutes, a snake at 11:44 minutes, horses at 05:13 and 14:10 minutes) and a technological perspective (video camera white balance calculation at 04:50 minutes). Besides these perspectives, doubt and speculation is an essential element in lecture performances, emphasizing the unfinished character essaying. By using these different perspectives, I gained an insight into the topic from completely different angles. In the fragmented form of the lecture performance, I loosely connected the perspectives, explicitly leaving room for the interpretations and associations of the viewer.

Essaying is a method for me as a researcher to investigate a topic, but by having an audience, the essaying temporarily takes shape into a solid form – in my case, a lecture performance. Externalizing and sharing this temporary form allows for new interpretations and adaptations in the research process. On the other hand, the audience also *experiences* essaying instead of having it explained. This also requires the viewer to actively participate in the interpretation; therefore, it is not always easily accessible for all viewers. In the academic context, the form might be too artistic; and in the artistic context, it might be considered too academic. But this might be inevitable, as both

essaying and artistic research fall between these two fields. I was excited to hear positive feedback from viewers unfamiliar with either field. Especially the unfinished character and the use of both objective and subjective perspectives made the lecture performance (at least partially) relatable and accessible for different audiences.

This lecture performance series was fully created and scripted beforehand in a way that neither incorporates the improvisational potential of the 'live' element nor fully utilizes the 'physical' and bodily aspect. Besides that, I see potential participatory elements that can be added to the lecture performances. Furthermore, I would like to incorporate artistic works and investigate different perspectives (for instance, snatches of conversations and actual dreams) and try out unfamiliar academic fields (like biology and mathematics). The negative aspect (performing paradoxes) and the aspect of equivocation could also be investigated further. In a new series, I already stared incorporating footnotes as subtitles and adding a bibliography at the end credits of the video. Though Montaigne originally did not include any references, they were researched and included by his translators. Montaigne also used different languages together without explanation. This could be a consideration for not using references and footnotes.

In creating – but mainly in sharing the process of – these lecture performances, I developed my individual form for essaying, and I am continuing to develop this form. An ever-shifting balance of form and content. I hope to inspire and stimulate others to find their own form for essaying.

AFTERWORD

This article and the associated lecture performance investigate, respectively, the historical underpinnings of the essay and how essaying as a method could be practised and shared by artistic researchers. For this, I propose a performative space and an online space. A performative space provides a platform to share spatially and timely, incorporating the body, the voice and allowing physical space for different artistic media and disciplines (such as dance, theatre, music, performing arts and architecture). Public events like conferences and symposia might provide a suitable format for sharing essaying in this way, although informal (self-organized) events or educational settings also could. An online space for essaying provides a platform for incorporating different (digital) formats as well as different sorts of arrangement thereof (linear and non-linear). A good example of an online space that enables this possibilities is the exposition environment of the Research Catalogue[30] developed by the Society for Artistic Research. These two (semi-) public spaces together could provide platforms for many different artistic research forms, as well as for a diverse group of peers and public.[31]

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30. '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', available at https://www.researchcatalogue.net. Accessed 27 October 2017.

31. http://egahuurdeman.nl/2020/empedocles-2020-on-essaying.

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