

Artistic Experimentation in Music

An Anthology

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© 2014 by Leuven University Press / Presses Universitaires de Louvain / Universitaire Pers Leuven, Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium)

ISBN 978 94 6270 013 0

D / 2014 / 1869 / 57

Distributed by Leuven University Press

<http://upers.kuleuven.be/nl/book/9789462700130>



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Artistic Experimentation in Music

INSTITUTE

Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore (eds.)

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SERIES

Reprint from *Artistic Experimentation in Music* - ISBN 978 94 6270 013 0 - © Leuven University Press, 2014



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Association-Based Experimentation as an Artistic Research Method

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Artistic work processes are neither “rational” nor linear, and they cannot be planned. They’re dominated by selection, variation, and stabilisation.¹
—Martin Tröndle (2012, 191, my translation)

Even though there be a mental spontaneity, it can certainly not create ideas or summon them *ex abrupto*. Its power is limited to *selecting* amongst those which the associative machinery has already introduced or tends to introduce.
—William James ([1890] 1983, 559)

Questions of methodology are of major importance to all inquiry claiming to be research.² It is only with knowledge of the method applied in a certain research project that the research outcomes can be appreciated and—crucial to all scientific research—can be verified or falsified by other researchers. Therefore, any new research field will have to cope with questions of methodology at an early stage. Due to the lack of specific knowledge in the new field known as artistic research, researchers from other fields will not be able to judge the quality of the outcomes in most cases, but they will make interim assessments about the research field by evaluating its methodology. Artistic researchers may or may not accept this approach, but they are unlikely to build up a field worthy of respect within the research community if they do not respect the “rules of the game” by presenting clear methodologies.

In artistic research discourse, three basic possibilities for connecting art and research have been established within the past few years: research into art, research for art, and research through art (Frayling 1993).³ The first category

1 In the original: “Künstlerische Arbeitsprozesse verlaufen weder ‘rational’ noch linear, und sie sind auch nicht planbar. Sie sind durch Selektion, Variation und Stabilisation gekennzeichnet.”

2 “Scientific method is the process whereby scientists, working concurrently and over time, investigate and acquire knowledge with the aim of obtaining a clear and precise representation of the world in ways that translate back to the world and shape its manner of operation” (Coessens, Crispin, and Douglas 2009, 50).

3 The three basic approaches are widely used in artistic research discourse.

covers traditional research in the humanities about the arts. “Research for art” can develop new artistic means through extra-artistic research practices—often applied in design, for example. In this article, I shall limit myself to “research through art.” This is “the most recent, and without doubt also the most controversial approach . . . carried out within the arts themselves . . . in which the object of research is the artist’s own art or artistic process” (Coessens, Crispin, and Douglas 2009, 46).

If the artist is simultaneously the researching subject and the researched object (or at least part of it), standard scientific research methodologies cannot be applied to research through art, because the “exclusion of the observer” as one of the basic rules of scientific research is not respected (*ibid.*, 50). Objectivity is not a primary goal of artistic research. This profound difference in methodology makes it necessary to redefine research methods if they are to bring any results in this new field.

ASSOCIATION

“Association” as artistic resource has not yet been sufficiently appreciated. It has been discussed in philosophy and psychology, but it is not yet prominent in artistic research discourse. Nevertheless, I claim that association in the sense of William James’s ([1890] 1983, 549, 556) “voluntary association” is already a broadly applicable and accepted method of art practice and artistic research.

James, an American philosopher and psychologist, developed a neurobiological concept of association *avant la lettre* in chapter fourteen, “Association,” of his magnum opus *The Principles of Psychology* (*ibid.*, 519–569). He does not agree with the formerly applied categories of association by similarity, association by contiguity, association by habit, etc., but sets up his own approach in clear contrast to the overview given of the association discourse that started with Aristotle,⁴ came to life in seventeenth century English philosophy, and was broadly discussed in the so-called English School⁵ of the nineteenth century. “I shall try to show, in the pages which immediately follow, that there is no other *elementary* causal law of association than the law of neural habit” (*ibid.*, 533).

The amount of activity at any given point in the brain-cortex is the sum of the tendencies of all other points to discharge into it, such tendencies being proportionate (1) to the number of times the excitement of each other point may have accompanied that of the point in question; (2) to the intensity of such excitements; and (3) to the absence of any rival point functionally disconnected with the first point, into which the discharges might be diverted. (*Ibid.*, 534)

In its reliance on brain processes rather than on terminological similarities, this “mechanical” model works for any category of association. James uses it for two different association settings: spontaneous and voluntary association. Whereas in spontaneous association “the train of imagery wanders at its own

⁴ See Aristotle (1984).

⁵ See James ([1890] 1983, 565–568).

sweet will” in “revery, or musing,” “great segments of the flux of our ideas consist of something very different from this. They are guided by a distinct purpose or conscious interest” (ibid., 549). This conscious interest—James uses the German word *nachdenken* to make himself clear—uses *voluntary association* for the solution of problems and for the recollection of forgotten things.

PART OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

In the James quotation at the beginning of this article, James relates the process of solving intellectual problems to the selection of the “right” elements from among the many objects association brings up in our mind as we think about something. This model is fully applicable to creative processes in the arts and even encloses embodied processes, as it sets (any) neural habit in the centre. If we adapt James’s theory to creative processes, we might summarise: *Association is the neurobiological mechanism generating variants in thought and behaviour, from which we are free to select elements fulfilling our (artistic) needs.*

Clearly, the selection process itself would be a broad field for discourse and would depend upon our creative domain, our criteria applied to distinguish “better” from “worse” and our artistic goals. It is open to different methodological approaches. Yet, no matter how we select later on, this creative process of generating variants and selecting from them is a highly experimental setting. However, we are not able to relate to scientific terminology at this point: any non-replicable experiment within scientific research loses its credibility. In total contrast, the experimental quality of the associative process in artistic research is not only inimitable, it must also necessarily lead to different results if carried out by different researchers. This is due to a very different measure of quality: if we strive to judge the quality of artistic research carried out by association-based experimentation, we may only do so by including the researcher, who, with his or her “associative machinery” is one central, non-replicable part of the research. Quality in artistic research can only be measured with regard to coherence.

Interestingly, in the other quotation at the beginning of this article, Martin Tröndle uses Jamesian terminology to describe the artistic process. He stresses the point just discussed: “The traceability of the ‘experimental setting’ is of no interest—even though it would be crucial to any scientific experiment—only the coherence of the whole is”⁶ (Tröndle 2012, 190, my translation).

ART PRACTICE OR ARTISTIC RESEARCH?

I have discussed the meaning of methodology within a research field and the incompatibility of some principles of scientific methodology with artistic research. Furthermore, I have demonstrated a modified understanding

6 In the original: “Dabei ist nicht die Nachvollziehbarkeit der ‘Versuchsanordnung’ von Interesse—wie es von einem wissenschaftlichen Experiment gefordert würde—, sondern allein die Stimmigkeit der Gesamtheit.”

of “experiment” and have introduced association-based experimentation as a method for artistic research. Yet, voluntary association is a broadly applied method in art practice. How can we distinguish association-based experimentation in art practice from its application in artistic research? There is not yet a generally accepted answer to this question within artistic research discourse. I claim that artistic research cannot limit itself to applying methods in order to generate works of art. Tröndle (ibid., 191, my translation) writes: “[Artists] ‘feel,’ when they are right, meaning that they have embodied their methodological know-how. Artistic research is *embodied*.”⁷ We should challenge this statement, because it makes artists synonymous with artistic researchers.

Since the method of association-based experimentation (including various techniques of selection) is a basic creative process, I argue that it has always been an essential work approach in the artistic domains. It only becomes a method of artistic research when association-based experimentation is no longer a simple method (unconsciously) applied in order to generate an artistic product of any sort, but becomes itself one focus of our interest. Still I do not want to extract the “associative machinery” to submit it to scientific research. Association-based experimentation within an artistic research context is part of a process that includes the artist *and* the art practice, trying to consider the “coherence of the whole.” Artistic research has to develop a multifocal approach. If our goal is the emergence of an “epistemic thing” in the sense used by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (1997), then this epistemic thing cannot be a mere product of art; it has to include the whole (process) and render it communicable to others.

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⁷ In the original: “[Die Künstler] ‘fühlen,’ wann sie richtig liegen, das heisst, sie haben ihr methodisches Wissen verkörpert. Künstlerische Forschung ist *embodied*.”