

What are you *really* after? – an interview with myself, based on questions by my supervisors.

The questions in the following interview with myself¹ are derived from publications by my supervisors²: Henk Borgdorff: *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*; Sher Doruff: Sher Doruff and Lucy Cotter, 'Writing as Experiment: A Dialogue with Sher Doruff', in: *MaHKUscript, Journal of Fine Art Research*; Janneke Wesseling: 'Why Write? On Writing as Art Practice' in: *Writing: An International Conference on Artistic Research*.



Q: You are a novelist, you design and teach writing courses specifically aimed for doing (artistic) research in and through creative writing. As a PhD candidate and a writer, you hope to develop a different format for making an argument in an academic context.^(JW 16) How do you personally situate your texts in relationship to these different areas of practice?^(SD 1)

A: Are they so different, I wonder? It is love for language, for sure, that underpins and holds together my practices and fields of interest; an empathic curiosity for the human need and desire to create stories in order to understand our confusing realities and to discover, or construct, new perspectives. In my world view, language is a means to connect: to include disparate 'voices' and perspectives - within myself and of others: ideas, oppositions, rivers and trees, the senses, theories, a dream, the imagination, the whole *shebang*. At a certain point I realised how often language is actually put to play as a force to exclude (Foucault is always somewhere in the back of my mind); when it becomes dense with jargonism, its construction strained, opaque. I developed a desire to inquire into the possibilities of writing as a means to open up worlds and 'correspondences', transparent exchanges of the whole *shebang* I mentioned above. On the level of the imagination, of

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- 1 'myself' = me as a writer and novelist pursuing a PhD in the arts at Leiden University. The objectives of my studies center around the question how writing as an art form (not necessarily limited to Literature or 'creative writing') and as a performative gesture can be made productive for artistic and academic research, other than its usually limited application as a commodity for justification and explication. To do so, I presently work on an Academic Novel, merging the research, the imagination, the language, the knowledge, the stories and the ethics of academia and the arts between the covers of one single book.
- 2 Henk Borgdorff is emiritus professor of theory of research in the arts at the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts, Leiden University, and emeritus lector at the Royal Conservatoire, The Hague. Sher Doruff, PhD, is an artist, writer and theorist, coordinating third cycle research cohorts at DAS Graduate School, Amsterdam University of the Arts and at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy of Art and Design, Amsterdam. Janneke Wesseling is emeritus professor in the practice and theory of research in the visual arts at Leiden University. She was until recently director of PhDarts (doctorate programme) at the Academy of Creative and Performing arts, and lector in art theory and practice at the KABK, University of the Arts, The Hague.

knowledge, of ethics and aesthetics. Hence my motivation to experiment with what I provisionally call 'academic fiction'.

Q: It is said that, before setting out, there is an idea of what one wants to explore or explain in a text, an 'unknown' that becomes clear only through the writing. At a certain point in the process the text takes over and start to 'speak' of its own accord. ^(JW 15-16)

Especially in an academic context, it is a requirement to build an argument based on appropriate sources and research questions *a priori*. These seem opposite, if not conflicting writing strategies.

A: It is fascinating to ponder the underlying assumption of this dichotomy, that creative writing has a 'looseness' and an 'intuitiveness' that academic writing has not. And, *mutatis mutandis*, that 'logic' and 'rigour' as in academic texts is not necessarily considered a property and prerequisite for creative writing. The more I study these aspects of the writing process, the more I realise that it is in fact in intuition and in logic where the two different writing strategies meet: the allowance for 'things' (ideas, insights, weird lines of inquiry etc.) to emerge of their own accord, to let them happen to you, *and* the demand for deep thought, for rigorous thinking and reflecting to make a meaningful and significant statement. It is the soundness of the underlying structure that renders a text conviction, in literature / fiction / creative writing as well as in academic writing.

When, for example, you work with a certain concept in an academic text, the 'genealogy' of the concept must be made evident, hence for instance the use of footnotes. It must be clear, first to you as an author and then to the reader, what exactly is meant by that particular concept, where it comes from, how you intend to use it in your argument, *et cetera*. If you transfer this principle to a character in a novel, the mechanism is quite similar: one must follow more or less the same procedure in order to create a convincing creature. I don't see the fundamental difference between the two, except maybe for the footnote [and even there, now I come to think of it: a footnote is a genealogy limited for the benefit of economy; in a novel whole paragraphs can be understood as 'footnotes'.] – so why not work with concepts *as if* they were characters? It is a strategy that makes the writing a lot more fun, and allows for a certain looseness or playfulness in your ways of thinking.

Q: Artistic research, being the domain you work in, seeks not so much to make explicit the knowledge that art is said to produce, but rather to provide a specific articulation of the pre-reflective, non-conceptual content of art. ^(HB 143) **Since writing is simultaneously the**

medium of your art practice and the common commodity of communication in academia, you need to circumvent the tautological predicament of doing writing-as-practice and reflect on doing it through writing a thesis. Even this question seems to suffer from circularity. How do you set about?

A: Haha! I set about with great zeal and went headlong into the rocks of your tautology. The difficulty was twofold. First, as Henk Borgdorff has pointed out, writing cannot escape what he calls the “gaze of rationality”. Language in itself is conceptual by the sheer metaphorical quality of the medium, that relation between word and metaphor (or concept) is idiosyncratic. Where most, if not all other art forms can evade that rational gaze, language invites, *incites* interpretation. Period. The second problem I encountered was that a lot has been written about the position of so-called creative writing in the context of artistic research, and / or about some of its features that should or could be made productive in academia. (It’s not a lot-lot by the way, but the subject is really coming into being recently, as an afterthought in the discourse on artistic research and academia.) Anyway, after gathering a thorough collection of publications on the subject, I began writing sort-of *academically* about ‘writing as artistic research’ – which of course was neither what I wanted as a writer, nor what was asked for as a researcher. I will spare you all the digressions ...

Q: Let me get you back on track. Indeed I remember you said earlier you would like to compose an anthology or a volume on the subject of ‘creative’ writing within artistic research, since that is what you missed most on the outset of your PhD research. We might come back to that later if time allows. What interests me most *now* is if, and if so how, you found your way out of the problem. Did you find a ‘specific articulation of the pre-reflective, non-conceptual content’ of *your* art?

A: As a matter of fact, I think I did. It was writing itself that showed me the way. By which I mean: my strong belief and trust in the power of language and the imagination to create a *novelish* text based on the research I had done on the subject, made me just do it. I switched language, that was important: English is the language of ‘academia’ – where my knowledge and reasoning on the matter resides. Dutch to me is the language of the imagination, of the association, of memory and desire if you like – the sheer happiness of creating stories. In short: I started writing a novel on doing artistic research on the subject of writing. I know that doesn’t sound sexy, I need to find better words for it.

To return to what we discussed earlier: the merging of the intuition and apparently disorderly working methods of the novelist with the rigour, the logic, the systematic approach of academic thinking *seems* to open up new possibilities. One is for instance the possibility to expose in the actual text the process of writing and of researching (thinking through writing). What I hope to come up with is a ‘wordly’ manifestation of the non-conceptual content of a writing practice. And above all, with a f*cking good read.

Q: My last question couples with what you say just now: I have the feeling you work with words and concepts as materiality. Below the surface is a kind of theorisation of the *material* aspects of something as ephemeral and invisible as writing. I wonder to what extent we can talk about how the materiality of the artistic process informs these conceptual interests.^(SD 2)

A: Words, language, of course is material to the writer, as is stone to the sculptor or light to the photographer – don’t we all work with tangible and intangible stuff to a certain extent? I am not ready yet to fully answer your question though. It is at the heart of my inquiry because I feel it is somewhere on that plain of materiality where the possibility resides for the ‘specific articulation of the non-conceptual’ in writing. To treat concepts as characters (sympathetic, taciturn, coarse, cute), to ‘think’ with theories or scholars as if they are my friends (argue, quibble, distrust, question, please) is, to me, a way to materialise, to bring to life concerns of the mind. The same with memories, or a poem, a novel, a painting: by writing *through* them – rather than: about them – they become more than mere objects and our relation becomes reciprocal. The poem and the painting creep literally under my skin while I try to construct a narrative through their ‘lives’. Well, there you are: materiality is important and yet I cannot get a real grip on the significance... Work in progress. Same with the physicality of the writing process, the body mediating the work.^(SD 3) Same with the performative element of writing, that is: besides hammering away on my laptop, the meaning of scribbles and notes and handwritten elements and comments in the margins... they are not just part of the actual process, but part of what writing actually *does* as a tool for doing research. But if I had all the answers to this beautiful question I would by now be ready for the “Hora Est”.
Quod non.

Bibliography:

Henk Borgdorff: *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, chapter 7: 'The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research', Leiden: Leiden University Press 2012, 140-173.

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