

**See it Again,
Say it Again:
The Artist as
Researcher**
Introduction

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‘Research’ is a buzz-word on the international art scene. People everywhere are talking about ‘the artist as researcher’ and debating how research in art relates to academic research. These discussions often revolve around the legitimisation of research in art within an academic framework and it is primarily theoreticians, not the artists, who are driving them. This book is an attempt to change this. It approaches the phenomenon of ‘research *in and through* art’ (to use the most correct and complete term) from the perspective of the visual artist and through the prism of artistic practice. Most of the authors are visual artists themselves and the contributions by theorists also focus on the practice of the artist as researcher.

The exceptional thing about research in and through art is that practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand. The one cannot exist without the other, in the same way action and thought are inextricably linked in artistic practice. This stands in contradistinction to ‘research *into* art’, such as art history and cultural studies.

Master’s courses in the field of research in art are now on offer in various European cities and artists can gain a doctorate at a growing number of universities. This has long been the case in the United Kingdom, but for most European countries it is new. We can justifiably speak of an ‘educational turn in art’ and an ‘artistic turn in academic education’.¹

Political decision-making has thereby given concrete impulses to the institutionalisation of research

in art. However, the phenomenon of research in art is nothing new. The idea of art-as-research flows from *art itself*, in particular from the conceptual art of the 1960s onwards. Conceptual artists oppose the view that art can be viewed in isolation from history and politics, and they assert that art is necessarily cognitive.

In the post-modern era, reflection and research are closely interwoven with artistic practice. In some cases the research has become the work of art itself; subject matter and medium serving as an instrument in the research or ‘thought process’. Artists are increasingly positioning themselves in the societal and artistic field as researchers.

This book aims to offer various points of departure for the advancement of the debate about the positioning of research in art, in the art world as well as at universities. The intention is to inspire artists, art students and lecturers to undertake a critical reflection on their own practices and to promote awareness of research praxis by presenting practical examples.

Research and the Public Domain

The artist-as-researcher distinguishes himself from other artists by taking it upon himself to make statements about the production of his work and about his thought processes. The artist-researcher allows others to be participants in this process, enters into

¹ These developments are a direct consequence of the Bologna Agreements and the Europe-wide reorganisation of education, aimed at establishing a comparable BA and MA framework for all European countries.

a discussion with them and opens himself up to critique. This is by no means self-explanatory; it actually represents a radical shift in the conception of 'artistry'. After all, the romantic view of the artist as a recluse in a studio from which he or she sends messages out into the world was prevalent until far into the 20th century.

The artist-researcher seeks the discussion in the public domain. 'For research to be research it has to be debated in the public domain', as Sarat Maharaj remarked.² This might happen at art academies and at art institutes, as well as at universities. When the discussion takes place in an academic context, within the framework of research for a PhD, then certain conditions are attached. For example, the research needs to yield fresh insights, not merely into one's personal work but for art in a broader sense as well. Crucial is the academic opponent, whose task it is to critically evaluate the new contribution to the artistic domain. If the research fails to produce novel insights, then there is no justification for the research project to lead to an academic dissertation.

There is a wide range of views about the nature of this dissertation as well as a diversity of opinion about the requirements to which it can be subjected, as is also demonstrated by the contributions to this volume. However, almost everyone concurs that language somehow plays an important part in research in art. Without language it is impossible to enter into a discourse, so the invention of a language in which we

can communicate with one another about research in art and through which we can evaluate the research is probably more important than devising a viable research methodology.

When asked about their reasons for embarking upon doctoral research, the response of almost all the artist-researchers is that their aim is to be part of a research community where they can share their thoughts with others and receive constructive, substantive criticism about their work. This research community represents a significant expansion of the possibilities for art and its practitioners, as well as a broadening of art discourse.

Art as (Self-)Critique

The age-old Western paradigm of art as mimesis, that is as imitation of the world, and as an expression of the close unity of the beautiful and true, came to an end around 1800. Friedrich Hegel thought that art had met its apotheosis, by which he of course did not mean that no more art would be produced or that our visual tradition had suddenly come to an end. For Hegel, the end of art meant that art could no longer be seen as the manifestation of truth and that the depiction of the divine, or of the divine in creation, was no longer self-explanatory.

Hegel's cogitations coincided with the emergence of an historical awareness, which is by defini-

² At a symposium about research in art, held as part of 'Manifesta 8' in Murcia, Spain, in 2010.

tion also a critical awareness. Henceforth it would be evident that, because of the diversification of modern life and the increasing fragmentation of what was once a single, all-encompassing worldview, it was impossible for any work of art to continue being the rendering of a *totality*. In art, this new critical awareness assumed a clear-cut form from the second half of the 19th century.

Artists emancipated themselves from the classical tradition and positioned themselves as autonomous creators. One of the ways in which they did this was by responding in an overtly discursive manner to works of art by others. There are many well-known examples of this new, critical attitude: Manet and Titian, Cézanne and Rubens, Picasso and Velázquez, and so on. This critical discursivity represents a shift away from the centuries-old tradition of pupils emulating their masters. By degrees attention shifted from the interpretation of the work of art as a reproduction of reality to the interaction, the active dialogue, between the work of art and the social and historical context in which it was created and the work's beholder. Modern art, which was no longer representational, became self-critical.

In critical terms, modern art took aim at the societal and political fields, and at itself. The artist places every work of art in the context of other works of art, it is *positioned* vis-à-vis other works of art. This does not imply that those other works of art are literally identifiable in the new work (though that may be the case). Works of art embody a meta-element,

a conceptual moment; the work of art is 'aware' of itself, of its own position. One might term this the 'self-awareness' of works of art, which question and comment on themselves and the art of others.

From the 1960s, critique and self-reflexivity were a deliberate strategy in art — take, for example, conceptual art, Fluxus, appropriation art, institutional critique and so on. Artists claimed a discursive space for themselves. However, almost immediately this discursive space came under huge pressure from market forces and the for-profit mentality. In the USA and the UK this shift came about in the late 1970s with the governments of Reagan and Thatcher, twhich were the starting shot for the rise of the art market and, in its wake, a resurgence in traditional, figurative painting. 'Wir wollen Sonne statt Reagan ('We want sun instead of Reagan'), sang Joseph Beuys.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, neo-liberalism has been the prevailing ideology in Western countries and across whole swathes of the non-Western world, and the laws of the market have apparently gained universal currency. Artists are expected to operate as 'cultural entrepreneurs' in the market and within a cultural industry that is to large extent fuelled by biennials, large museums and galleries. Even art journals, which previously played a critical role, participate in this.³

³ See Laurens Dhaenens and Hilde Van Gelder in the introduction to *Kunstkritiek: Standpunten rond de beeldende kunsten uit België en Nederland in een internationaal perspectief* [Art criticism: Viewpoints on the visual arts from Belgium and the Netherlands in an international perspective] (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2010).

So where is there still a place in the art world for art as critical investigation and self-critique? Where can one find a locus, a platform for reflection and dialogue, which is not subject to pressures from the culture industry? Though universities are also being placed under increased pressure by a profit-driven mentality and cost-cutting operations, and though even here there is the looming danger of a cultural industry of ‘knowledge production’, academia nevertheless seems to represent a good candidate for providing the leeway for this.

Art and Knowledge

There is no simple answer to the question of whether research in art generates knowledge and the kind of knowledge that this may be. What do artists know?⁴ Of course they know something about images; they know what it is to produce a ‘picture’. Artists have a grasp of phenomena, how things appear to us in a visible guise — about this they know a great deal, but this is too general and therefore too non-committal. The assumption that artists know how things appear to us can only be demonstrated on the basis of specific works of art and this still leaves us with no answer to the broader question of *what artists know*.

In the context of research in art, perhaps it is better to pose a different question, namely how do artists think? Hannah Arendt’s *Thinking*, the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, might provide a way forward here.⁵

In *Thinking*, Arendt elaborates upon the distinction made by Immanuel Kant between two modes of thinking, *Vernunft* and *Verstand*. Arendt defines *Vernunft* as ‘reason’ and *Verstand* as ‘intellect’.

According to Arendt, the distinction between reason and intellect coincides with the distinction between *meaning* and *knowledge*. ‘Reason’ and ‘intellect’ serve different purposes, she writes. The first manner of thinking, reason, serves to ‘quench our thirst for meaning’, while the second, intellect, serves ‘to meet our need for knowledge and cognition’ (the capacity to learn something). For knowledge we apply criteria of certainty and proof, it is the kind of ‘knowing’ that presupposes *truth*, in the sense of correctness.

‘Reason’ has its origins in our need to ponder questions to which we know there is no answer and for which no verifiable knowledge is possible, such as questions about God, freedom and immortality. Reason therefore transcends the limitations of knowledge, namely the criteria of certainty and proof. ‘The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning’, writes Arendt. ‘And meaning and truth are not the same.’

In the other manner of thinking, cognisance or knowledge, the thinking is a means to an end and that objective is the determination or attainment of truth

⁴ The question ‘What do artists know?’ was the theme of a round-table discussion on art and education, organised by James Elkins in 2010.

⁵ Hannah Arendt (1978), *Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich). *Thinking* was originally published in 1971.

and scholarly insight. *Verstand* wants to understand perceptible reality and operates by applying laws and fixed criteria to phenomena as they are perceived by the senses. *Verstand* is based on common sense, on faith in reality, in the ‘authenticity’ of the world. The scholar approaches the world with the goal of unmasking sensory illusions and correcting errors in scholarly investigation.

Reason, by contrast, has a self-contained objective; it is the pure activity of thinking and the simultaneous *awareness* of this activity while we are thinking. Reason is therefore not merely reflexive but also self-reflexive. The awareness of the activity of thinking itself creates, according to Arendt, a sensation of vitality, of being alive. Reason is the unceasing quest for meaning, a quest that never ends because of constant doubt, and because such thinking is ultimately founded on doubt it possesses what Arendt calls a ‘self-destructive tendency with regard to its own results’.

In order to experience the thinking ourselves, in order to know the possibilities of one’s own mind, it is necessary for us to withdraw from the ‘real’ world. Sensory experience distracts us when we try to concentrate and think, which is why we say that someone who is thinking concentratedly is ‘absent’. To be able to understand the spectacle of the world from within we must break free from sensory perception and from the flux of daily life.

The scientist can also temporarily withdraw from the world of phenomena, but he does that to

solve a problem and with the aim of returning to that world and applying the answer there, to deploy the solution in that sensory domain.

Reason, writes Arendt, is ‘out of order’ with the world. It is a type of thinking that does not chime with the world and that is for two reasons: because of the withdrawal from the world that it requires *and* because it does not produce any definitive end result, it offers no solutions.

It should be obvious that it is primarily reason, *Vernunft*, which is the faculty of thinking that is relevant to art. Reason is the kind of thinking that is stored away in the work of art. Arendt therefore calls a work of art a ‘thought-thing’, and states that art ‘quenches our thirst for meaning’. Art provides no solutions and has no objective beyond itself.

But what about the fact that the activity of thinking (of ‘reasoning’) presupposes invisibility, that it withdraws from the sensory world and turns inward to a place the outsider cannot see, while works of art are objects that are in fact *real*, palpable and visible, objects which are part and parcel of reality?

The work of art’s ‘reality’ is idiosyncratic and diverges from other objects in the world — even in the case of ready-mades or conceptual actions intended to traverse the boundary between art and life. It is the function of works of art to generate meaning or to give direction to the quest for meaning. The work of art is the materialisation of thinking; thinking is

rendered visible in the work of art. In the work of art, that which is actually absent (the invisible ‘reason’, reasoning) is made present. Art questions all the certitudes that are accepted as matter-of-course, even those of and about itself.

The work of art is not the end product of the artist’s thinking, or just for a moment at best; it is an intermediate stage, a temporary halting of a never-ending thought process. As soon as the artist has allowed the work as object out into the world, he takes leave of it. His activity with regard to this specific work now belongs to the past, and at this point the beholder, the public, becomes involved in the work. The beholder picks up the train of thought as it is embodied in the work of art.

The verb ‘to know’ implies knowledge, evidence, and is therefore not applicable to art or to what artists do. ‘Knowing’ harks back to concepts and criteria that belong in the world of exact science and with a mode of thinking that, in essence, is alien to art.

I would not want to aver that there is an unbridgeable gap between scientists and artists. Scientists have important intuitive moments, flashes of insight, when suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere the long-sought solution to a problem presents itself. Conversely, artists carry out research and their research is, at least in part, rationalisable and disseminable. However, the orientation of these activities and the way in which the thinking takes shape differs for scientists and artists.

The Book’s Structure

This volume presents many different and sometimes contradictory viewpoints. The nature of the texts is also highly diverse, ranging from polemical and analytical to performative contributions.

However diverse the standpoints may be, all the authors engage in one way or another with art-as-research. A number of them are conducting their own research in the context of attaining a PhD. Some regard their way of working as a form of research anyway and see no need to do this within an academic framework. Others collaborate closely with artists as exhibition curators or are active in art education and supervise students at BA and MA levels. The theorists featured in this collection are all intensively involved with research in art, in their roles as supervisors of research projects, as professors or lecturers.

Some of the authors are highly critical of research in art. They are concerned about the consequences of the reorganisation of education for the arts and point to the perils of the institutionalisation and academicisation of the *modi operandi* of artists. They think that research in art can just as easily become a commodity of free-market thinking and commercialisation as the art product. Others regard *artistic research* to be an effective instrument to develop their practice further.

The texts by four authors, namely Kitty Zijlmans, Henri Jacobs, Stephan Dillemath and Graeme Sullivan, are reworked versions of the keynote

lectures they gave at my invitation during the two-day ‘The Artist as Researcher’ symposium, which was held in February 2009 at the Royal Academy of Art (KABK) in The Hague. The visual contributions are a demonstration of research *through* images, making manifest what research in art can involve.

All the contributors, with the exception of Dilemuth and Sullivan, live and work in the Netherlands or Belgium. This demarcation is in a certain sense arbitrary, given that the subject of the volume extends much further than these small countries on the North Sea coast and the majority of authors are internationally active. It would, however, be impossible without delineation, and this collection therefore simultaneously presents a overview of research in art in the Netherlands. Yet much more than providing a state of affairs, it is the intention that, with its varied and occasionally polemical stances, this volume will make a major contribution to the debate about research in art and propel this discussion forward.

