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ARTICLE

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Art, Knowledge, and Reflexivity

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Abstract

The essay addresses the manifold relationships between art and research under the perspective of the arts' own way of thinking, separating artistic knowledge-production from science. While in science 'research' means a goal-guided action that has the purpose of developing truth, in the arts research is related to an open 'search' without being bound to gaining results. Obviously, art works neither with concepts nor with propositions, nor does it need any theory or general model or ways of verifying theses and making them valid. There is also no method to follow, nor does art depend on public justifications through critique. Rather, art is based in practices that let something appear and make it perceivable, and by doing so producing new insights. Hence, artistic cognition and recognition is not based in logic, but in certain non-discursive media-'languages' which allow for non-propositional reflections on their own structure and limitations, using actions, performances, images, material objects, compositions and montage or multimedia installations that go against the grain in order to push perceptibility to its limits where contradictions become apparent.

Keywords

research, search, knowledge-production, judgement, perception, zetetic self-reflection

*Arte, conocimiento y reflexividad***Resumen**

El ensayo aborda las relaciones múltiples entre el arte y la investigación bajo la perspectiva de la propia manera de pensar de las artes, que separa la producción de conocimiento artístico de la ciencia. Mientras que en ciencia «investigación» significa acción guiada por un objetivo que tiene la finalidad de desarrollar la verdad, en las artes, la investigación se relaciona con una «búsqueda» abierta sin estar obligada a obtener resultados. Obviamente, el arte no trabaja ni con conceptos ni con proposiciones, ni tampoco necesita ninguna teoría o modelo general

o maneras de verificar tesis y hacerlas válidos. Tampoco hay ningún método a seguir ni el arte tampoco depende de justificaciones públicas por medio de las críticas. Más bien el arte está basado en prácticas que dejan aparecer algo, lo hacen perceptible y de esta manera se producen nuevas ideas. Por lo tanto, la cognición y reconocimiento artísticos no están basados en la lógica, sino en ciertos «lenguajes» mediáticos no discursivos que permiten reflexiones no proposicionales en su propia estructura y limitaciones, mediante el uso de acciones, performances, imágenes, objetos materiales, composiciones, collages o instalaciones multimedia que van a contracorriente para provocar la perceptibilidad a sus márgenes, cuando las contradicciones se hacen aparentes.

Palabras clave

investigación, búsqueda, producción de conocimiento, juicio, percepción, auto-reflexión zetéica

1.

Art research and *artistic research* – a difference of five letters has been the occasion for considerable debate for over more than a decade. *Art research* – mainly used to signify research *about* art – brings together two concepts that in themselves seem to have nothing in common, kept apart by a space or combined with a hyphen or a slash. Using a hyphen or a slash produces multiple meanings because it confronts us with different relations or conjunctions, which, as the ‘con’ signifies, at once bring together and separate. *Art-research* or *art/research* then puts the practice of research face to face *with* art, so that we are not only dealing with research about art, but also with research *through* art, which reveals the use of art as a medium *for* research. The different prepositions that come into play here mark the different relational modalities between the concepts. The fact that each contains distinct possibilities shows us that the notion of ‘art research’ can mean a number of things. In contrast, if we look at the concept of *artistic research*, art or artistry only figures as an adjective, a feature of research. Nevertheless, the combination raises the question of the *genitive*, because every adjective form can be transformed into a noun with the double *genitivus subjectivus* and *objectivus*, which is to say: research of art (as a medium), and the art of research in terms of research as artistry. On the one hand, this makes research itself into an art, altering our understanding of research, while on the other, art becomes in itself research, thus opening the doors to a new approach to art in the postmodern era.

The terms thus open up a labyrinth of possible relations between research and art. When talking about ‘research in the arts’, we have to clarify what we mean by ‘research’. Research is usually understood as a tool or practice – again two different modalities – of *knowledge production*. It is worth noting that the latter notion implies that knowledge is not given, but made or constructed – a thesis pioneered by *Science and Technology Studies* with its ideas about epistemic things, their networks of agencies and the genuine

creativity of empirical research. Over the past ten years, these ideas have come to be projected onto the arts, though seemingly without any justification. One side effect has been that scientific work and its erratic search for truth have taken on the nobility of a pseudo-artistic effort. Again, it seems to be necessary here to clarify the inner relationship between art and knowledge, which produces meanings that are as diverse as the aforementioned relations between art and research. In other words, *art research* and *artistic research* as well as *artistic knowledge* or *knowledge production through the arts* cannot be taken for granted, *not only* because expecting to derive knowledge from art is a highly questionable endeavour, but also because the vocabulary itself is ambiguous. Thus, in order to make sense of ‘art research’ and ‘artistic research’, we have to carefully distinguish and define the various concepts involved.

2.

Let us first elaborate on the notion of ‘research’. It is among the most ambiguous terms in the entire debate. Its haziness begins with its use in the sciences, especially if we distinguish the natural sciences from the humanities. This is not the fault of an imprecise scientific discussion, but is simply a consequence of the fact that the term cannot really be defined. Obviously, from an etymological point of view, research is related to *search*, and both questioning and searching belong to the most basic of human practices. However, we should consider what the prefix ‘re-’ in ‘re-search’ means. ‘Re’ hints at the action of looking back, the act of reconsideration, taking a second view or reflecting; indeed, in trying to describe ‘re’, we use it again in the words ‘re-consideration’ and ‘re-flection’. Hence, we can explain the ‘re’ only in reference to the ‘re’, which is an act of ‘repetition’, a fundamental semiotic activity. We have to repeat or reiterate the search in order to become aware of it, in order to use it properly, and in order to become aware of its foundations or conditions, its

medium, or at least about the way we are conducting the search. The 'way' – in Ancient Greek *hodos* – makes itself apparent here: we are trying to understand *how* we are following the traces of the concept of 're-search'; we are trying to learn about its function, its trajectories, its results and so on. Our 'method' is *meta hodos*. Thus, the 're' in 'research' hints at its methodological approach. However, this methodological attitude is not necessarily connected with peculiar rules or distinct orders, but with the *ability* to follow the path *again and again*. Repetition and reconsideration turn the search into *significance*, a *precise procedure*. As Sigmund Freud taught us, repetition is one of the most pestering desires in human life. According to Jacques Derrida, repetition is necessary to transform a thing or an event into a signature or scripture that makes it readable. Thus, the 're' in research makes the search into a systematic practice that produces a distinct conclusion or outcome that can be judged or discussed and re-discussed. This makes clear that the 're' in research is indeed essential. It is not only crucial for the methodological process, but also fundamental for that which we call 'cognition' or 'knowledge', be it given or produced. Thus, to turn art into research necessitates a kind of reflexivity that affects the research results themselves. Indeed, the concept of 're'-sults brings us back to the mysterious 're': every 're'-sult is a reconsidered problem-solution that we might also conceive of as a form 're-cognition', which we usually call 'knowledge'.

3.

But is knowledge in itself the result of a process of production? If we view knowledge as the product of 'production', then we're talking about *poiein*, the creation and practices of revelation, its procedures or operations and their impact on knowledge – in other words, we're talking about processes of construction. Historically, however, research has not always been seen as a form of production. This brings our attention to the fact that all the terms we are using here have undergone considerable changes throughout history, which makes it difficult to compare our understanding and use of the terms 'research' (a term nearly unknown in Antiquity), *episteme* and knowledge with their usage in earlier eras. They are incommensurable, and it is only from early modernity on that knowledge has been associated with things like *objectivity* in the sense of proven knowledge. In the seventeenth century at the latest, 'research' came to be seen as a *goal-guided action* that had the purpose of *developing truth*, even if we don't know what 'truth' means, are skeptical about it as a concept in general, or reject its significance in the human realm because we view it as a mere construct. As both a methodological and a goal-guided practice, knowledge and research were considered to be *exoteric practices* that were open to the public, in contrast to esoteric practices, which were meaningful only for the illuminated few. This means that knowledge as a normative principle was considered to

be *open to public reasoning*, while art was often accused of being the opposite, an *esoteric*, and thus largely arbitrary and irrational practice. *Esoteric* and *exoteric* deal with oppositions: *exodos* means 'exit', *eisodos* 'entrance', reserved for those people who were insiders or close members of the circle or community of truth-seekers or artists, while *exoterism* was *open to the public* by nature of the fact that it was based on things both *plausible* and *comprehensible*, which guarantee its 'publicity' (in its literal sense).

Thus, knowledge is first and foremost an *act of communication* and is therefore based in *language* as its *ruling regime*. Knowledge and research in traditional fields like science, mathematics, the humanities and even philosophy are *based in discourse*. Even if scientists use images, diagrams, material models or samples as proof, their doing so is always already embedded in discourse and its textuality, because every sample or epistemic thing serves as a sign. Thus, 'knowledge' and 'research' are articulated in *propositions*, which means that both are based in reasoning and publicity. This makes results debatable, because everyone who has the faculty of reason should be able to make a judgement about them. Only that which can be expressed in the form of propositions can be recognized and categorized as *discursively meaningful* and *therefore worthy of being called 'knowledge'*. Thus, when using terms like 'knowledge' or 'research' in relation to art, we often tend to rely on traditional meanings, which is to say scientific understandings. However, I would like to propose that we shift the discourse and define these terms anew when using them to describe artistic practices – otherwise, we run the danger of getting lost in contradictions, making the whole attempt to discuss art within the rubric of cognition and research pretty unproductive.

4.

The main question then is: how is it possible to apply these interpretations of 'knowledge' and 'research' to art? Can art be conceived of as an alternative way of producing significance? Or of gaining insights? Or even a kind of wisdom that differs from knowledge? *Art research* and *artistic research* are modes of reconsidering or reflecting on a search that reflects or reconsiders itself in terms of 're-search' *as search*. My suggestion here is that the arts bring research back to its roots, which is to say: *searching*. In other words, the question of research in the arts is about *searching*, thus leaving out the 're'. There are two reasons for this: *first*, art does not achieve clear 're-sults' in terms of reconsidered outcomes or solutions, but rather produces *singular paradigms* or *models of comprehension that exist only once*. *Second*, art does not speak in the medium of claims or propositions, but uses different media such as *actions, performances, images, material objects, compositions, montage* and *multimedia installations* with their own structures or

dispositifs. Art expresses itself in 'aesthetic' forms, and the crucial question is if and how it is possible to gain 'knowledge' through these *aesthetic* or *non-propositional modes of mediation*. In other words, if we claim that art is a mode of knowledge production, *what kind of 'knowledge'* is gained *through* these media, that is, *through* non-discursive practices?

It is important to consider that artistic labour is of a completely *different nature* than scientific labour. It is obvious that art neither works with concepts nor with propositions, nor does it need any *theory* or general model or ways of verifying theses and making them valid. There is also no *method* to follow. Nor does art depend on public justifications through critique. However, that does not mean that artists are totally *autonomous* or *free* to do anything they please. Rather, art is *based on practices that bring something to the fore, let it appear and make it perceivable*. At the same time, it *reflects on these things, looks at them on their own terms*, at their way of doing, their media or, as it were, their 'language'. Art thus *makes the imperceptible visible or audible through perception in order to push visibility or audibility to their margins where contradictions become apparent*. *And contradictions, paradoxes and vexations are the preferred media of cognition in art*. Thus, practices of art are different from practices of science and even from practices of philosophy and the humanities. They differ in their perspective, their treatment of objects, in their processes, in how they deal with material and examples, and so on. Nothing is comparable, and if art is a *mode of searching* and of *taking its own, unique path to knowledge*, then we have to change our vocabulary or use the term 'knowledge' in a completely different way, either as a metaphor or in quotation marks, because artistic argumentation, as it were, articulates itself *through* contrasts, *through* conflicts or *contradictions* and not through statements, clear-cut concepts and explicit propositions that can be discussed and debated. The figures in rhetoric that have the most affinity with art are *parallaxes, chiasms* and *catachresis*, not description or explanation. Indeed, art manifests itself and its knowledge in these figures.

5.

Thus, the normal *scientific ordering of arguments or justifications* in discourse and their use of *distinctions and determinations* cannot serve as a guideline for aesthetic research. Rather, *they are ruptured by art* or inverted and converted into something that resists logical form and linear expression. Art elides propositional logic and the order of language and withdraws from unambiguous determination. This also holds true for the relationship between knowledge and truth, because no art can be pressed into the straitjacket of the 'true/false' binary, just as little as art can be rejected for being 'false'. Instead, artistic events *show*, or more properly: they articulate themselves *through* the conflicting and unstable double-sidedness

of showing an object and self-showing. Every act of showing is affirmative. Thus, showing allows no true/false distinction and hence no discrimination or differentiation; rather, it works in the space of revelation and deception. With respect to knowledge, the main difference between science and art is that the latter is related to concealment and un-concealment, while only the former deals with truth and falsehood.

However, if this is the case, then one might ask whether it makes sense to speak about '*knowledge*' *at all when discussing aesthetic practices of searching as practices of showing, presenting, manifesting, exposing and exhibiting*. In other words, is there a *non-propositional episteme*, a knowledge-practice *beyond* propositional determination or judgement? Let us answer these questions very briefly with three ideas.

Firstly, we analyzed the 're' in research as denoting the act of repetition, and instead of applying this to art, we underscored the fact that artistic knowledge production has to be seen as a *practice of searching without 're'*, which means as a *practice without repetition or method*. In contrast to science, the 're' in artistic 're-search' can be related to certain modes of *reflexivity in searching*; in other words, it entails a certain critical attitude that doubts itself to the point of obsession, poring over every single detail. What does this mean? The style of searching in art – and this the thesis here – is a singular process of questioning, which at the same time questions its own quest, its conditions, the artist's own mode of desire or his or her hidden agenda, the possible violation of the sanctity of hidden things involved in the search, its medial constellation, context, framework and so on, sometimes even in an ironic manner. In short, rather than talking about research, we should look at the peculiar form of *thinking articulated in art*, the way in which art, as a medium and practice, produces insights. Thus, the first point I would like to make about the debate on *art research* and *artistic research* is that we need to shift our perspective from the goal-driven research practice we find in the sciences to the *peculiarity of artistic thinking*, a way of thinking that is different from scientific and even philosophical thinking, that is *otherwise than thought or beyond thinking*, to rephrase Emmanuel Lévinas' famous book title *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*.

Second, we also have to take a different approach to *knowledge*, because its traditional use is too narrow to adequately characterize the process of art's 'otherwise than thought'. As discussed above, the true/false distinction does not apply to art because art *reveals*. Revealing is not a form of knowledge production that *constructs* knowledge, but is instead an *opening*. Strictly speaking, an opening cannot be produced. Openness reveals itself. Therefore, instead of speaking about production or staging or construction, we should look at the ways in which art reveals or discloses phenomena that were beforehand unknown, overlooked, concealed, or excluded. In other words, art's reflexivity is able to open up new perspectives, uncover hidden phenomena, and disclose latent, displaced or suppressed parts

of the real. Thus, rather than producing knowledge in its common meaning, art produces *awareness*. This is why it is better to talk about art's *wisdom*, which is, quite similar to philosophy, *prior to science and older than it*.

Third, art's knowledge serves, as it were, as a window into the unknown, but it does not necessarily aim at progress, neither in the sense of doing 'better' art nor in the sense of prodding on art's development, because there is no evolution in the arts, only *alteration*. Hence, there is no end and no outcome. The only process of knowledge art is involved with is a form of knowledge-as-opening, disclosing, or unveiling that which is concealed; art is a witty way of introducing us to new ways of thinking and acting in the world. Analogous to skeptical philosophy, we might call this a 'zetetical' process: It is not an 'inquiry' or 'investigation' in terms of proceedings, but a *search that also researches itself, its medium or 'language' as well as the*

researcher itself. And while doing so, it constantly *exceeds borders* and finds *new divisions and partitions*. Zetetic searching is endless. In contrast to scientific 'heuristics', it is based on fundamental openings, which includes openness to the unknown or unexpected, into which it is drawn and in which it allows the searcher herself to become entangled. Thus, *artistic research is always 'in becoming', a bold adventure – it addresses the artist's life, his or her imagination, and seeks to transform his or her being-in-the-world, his or her entire mode of understanding, thinking and acting.*

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