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ARTICLE

NODE: "ART AND RESEARCH"

Artistic Research Syndrome

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Abstract

In this essay, I present a heuristic construction that I call "artistic research syndrome", a constellation of loosely associated cultural symptoms that all have to do with displacement of sense. My aim is to open a new perspective on artistic research practices in a wider cultural, theoretical frame. The approach is informed by the hypothesis that there is an on-going destabilisation of the culturally conditioned hierarchies between different dimensions of sense (in all senses of the word "sense") and that artistic research practices play a significant role in this destabilisation. "Artistic research syndrome" indicates a crisis of theory-driven models of research and the revival of pragmatogonic research settings. It is signaling the radical relativisation of human-centered conceptions of the world and the recognition of non-human agencies. It provokes the recognition of previously underestimated forms of cognition. It holds sway on the neuralgic points of today's economies and ecologies of knowledge. I will address some key aspects of "artistic research syndrome" through a set of interrelated questions concerning the relation of aesthetics and arts research. I will formulate these questions in terms of "cultural techniques", "displacement of sense" and "boundary work".

Keywords

sense, cultural technique, boundary work, artistic research practice

El síndrome de la investigación artística

Resumen

En este ensayo, presento una construcción heurística que llamo «el síndrome de la investigación artística», una constelación de síntomas culturales asociados en líneas generales que tienen que ver con el desplazamiento del sentido. Mi objetivo es abrir una nueva perspectiva a las prácticas de investigación artística en un marco teorético cultural más amplio. El planteamiento se informa por la hipótesis de que hay una desestabilización en curso de las

jerarquías condicionadas culturalmente entre las diferentes dimensiones del sentido (en todos los sentidos de la palabra «sentido») y que las prácticas de la investigación artística juegan un papel significativo en esta desestabilización. «El síndrome de la investigación artística» indica una crisis en los modelos de investigación motivados por la teoría y el renacimiento de los marcos de investigación pragmatogónicos. Es una señal de la relativización radical de las concepciones del mundo centradas en los humanos y el reconocimiento de agencias no humanas. Provoca el reconocimiento de formas de conocimiento previamente subestimadas. Domina en los puntos neurálgicos de las economías y ecologías del conocimiento de hoy en día. Abordaré algunos aspectos clave del «síndrome de la investigación artística» a través de un conjunto de cuestiones interrelacionadas concernientes a la relación entre la estética y la investigación artística. Formularé estas cuestiones en términos de «técnicas culturales», «desplazamiento del sentido» y «trabajo fronterizo».

Palabras clave

sentido, técnica cultural, trabajo fronterizo, práctica de investigación artística

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In this essay, I present a heuristic construction that aims at opening a new perspective on artistic research practices in a wider cultural, theoretical frame. My approach is informed by the hypothesis that there is an on-going destabilisation of the culturally conditioned hierarchies between different dimensions of sense (in all senses of the word "sense") and that artistic research practices play a significant role in this destabilisation. I will address some key aspects of this process through a set of interrelated questions concerning the relation of aesthetics and arts research. I will formulate these questions in terms of "cultural techniques", "displacement of sense" and "boundary work".

Cultural techniques

The English term "cultural technique" is a bit odd. It derives from German discussions, where its model, *Kulturtechnik,* is a prevalent term. Originally it was used in the agricultural domain, where it refers to "cultivation of land". More recently it has gained a layered set of meanings (Winthrop-Young, 2013). Since the 1970s the term has been used in media theoretical contexts, where the distinction between culture and nature has been a key point of reference for discussions on the societal impact of technology. Since the last few decades the term has been widely used in the context of *Kulturwissenschaft* in a generalized form, linked to philosophical and anthropological considerations on a wide array of themes such as technologies of perception, discourse networks and posthumanism. Today we could say that questions posed under the label of "cultural techniques" have become questions of "anthropo-techniques".

What do we learn about the relation of aesthetics and research in the arts when we consider that artistic research practices in terms of cultural techniques, is, as a set of operative processes of reproducing,

handing down and passing on whatever remains of human life (traces, patterns, artefacts)? This question would lead us to multifaceted discussions of value, utility, applicability and functionality that I cannot address properly in this short essay. Instead I will try to characterize artistic research practices as aesthetic cultural techniques, which is not an easy task either. Therefore, a schematic presentation might function as a helpful starting point.

I will start by taking up the ongoing re-evaluation of cultural techniques highlighted by Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp (Krämer and Bredekamp, 2013). In their critical account of the current state of cultural techniques, Krämer and Bredekamp describe the discursive concept of culture in polemical terms: "the direction of our changing meaning of culture goes from technique to text, from things to symbols, from processing to interpreting" (*ibid.*, p. 22). They highlight the misjudging of the epistemic power of images, the disavowal of mathematical formalisms, and the lopsided focusing of media theoretical research on the relationship between orality and literacy as the essential features of this textual view of culture that was dominant until the 1980s (*ibid.*, p. 21–22). During the past few decades, however, the textualisation of our culture has reached its limits, and the idea of culture-as-text is currently eroding. This can be discerned at four frontlines: we are successively recognising that (1) culture-creating practices are fluid, (2) there are "silent processes" of knowledge, (3) notions of "mind" and "sense" need to be dehermeneuticised, and (4) imagery has an epistemological dimension (*ibid.*, p. 23–24). All four of these frontlines are strikingly familiar from the discussions around artistic research.

Krämer and Bredekamp summarise their account in the form of an explication of the different dimensions of cultural techniques: Cultural techniques are operative processes that are based on a separation between an implied "know how" and an explicit "know

that". They imply skills and habituation and enable working with things and symbols. At the same time, they provide the aesthetic and material-technical foundation for scientific innovation and new theoretical objects. They open up new exploratory spaces for perception, communication, and cognition (*ibid.*, p. 27).

It strikes me that this concise characterization of cultural techniques could be read as a description of artistic research practices. The emphasis on a separation between an implied "know how" and an explicit "know that" is especially interesting with regard to the transformative potential of artistic research. Insofar as artistic research practices involve heightened sensitivity towards their own mediality (Elo, 2014), they can be seen as transformative activity that tests and contests the criteria of the separation between "knowing how" and "knowing that". This separation that could be rephrased as the distinction between mode and objective, or form and content, reveals the tensional relation between functionality and invention at the core of cultural techniques. A cultural technique that works is a transparent vehicle for the operations it enables at the same time as it incorporates certain opacity or friction that offers a starting point for opening up exploratory spaces.

Living off the critical tradition of the arts, artistic research practices tend to be transformative, which means that they deliberately touch upon their own opacity. Instead of being means to an end – that is how functional, or, "transparent", cultural techniques conceive themselves – artistic research practices complicate the relation between means and ends. In short: they thematise their own mediality. This implies that they do not only *facilitate* cultural processes, but furthermore *embed* them in a setting that shapes and transforms these processes, and, at the same time, *shows* something of the effects of their embedding. Artistic research practices question the conditions of explication – that is, processes of unfolding, foregrounding something with the help of something else. In other words, they engender processual symptoms through opacity and friction.

From this symptomatic point of view, artistic research practices appear as a deliberately dysfunctional set of cultural techniques, they constitute a "syndrome". Analogically to medical uses of the word "syndrome", artistic research syndrome is a cultural condition characterized by a set of loosely associated symptoms that all have to do cultural processes of "making sense". Artistic research practices devote a great deal of time and effort to effectuating shifts in the cultural hierarchies of sense – in all senses of the word "sense". What I call "artistic research syndrome" is a constellation of symptoms making apparent the erosion of textual views on culture that build on a sharp distinction between matter and meaning. It indicates a crisis of theory-driven models of research and the revival of pragmatogonic research settings. It is signalling the radical relativisation of human-centred conceptions of the world and the recognition of non-human agencies. It provokes the recognition of previously underestimated forms of cognition. It holds sway in the neuralgic points of today's economies and ecologies of knowledge.

Let me note that the terms "symptom" and "syndrome" do not refer here to any features that might be seen as pathological, at least not in the medial sense. Rather, they signal that the "issue" or epistemological core of artistic research is not fixed – some even say it is empty (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 120) – and appears only indirectly at intersections or boundaries of different contexts. Further, the symptoms highlighted here point at the successive recognition of medial embeddedness of what in the discussions around artistic research is under the pressure of the neoliberal knowledge economy often called "knowledge production" (Holert, 2015). In fact, a symptom is a rather unproductive form of knowledge, and its "issue", whether unfixed or empty, might be *enjoyment* instead of knowledge.

Displacement of sense

The word "pathology" brings me to my second point of concern: the question of whether and how artistic research practices contribute to the destabilisation of what I tentatively call "architechtonics of sense". Kathrin Bush has recently noted that, in philosophical aesthetics, we can discern a conceptual history of a certain "pathologisation" of *pathos*, "ability to suffer", or "sensibility" (Bush, 2017). The origins of modern aesthetics is marked by a shift from Baroque rhetorics combining the knowledge of the passions with ethics and medicine to a separation of aesthetics from anthropology. As Dieter Kliche has shown, this shift involves a devaluation of the concept of "pathology" (Kliche, 2001). In his diagnosis, the philosophical skepticism towards affectivity gaining a systematic shape in the critical philosophy of Kant marked the point where *pathos* was subordinated to active mental capacities. This shift in conceptual framing – not Kant's philosophy as such – contributed to the fact that *pathos* came to be seen as something pathological, morbid, a lesser capacity of the senses that belongs to the concerns of anthropology rather than those of aesthetics (*ibid.*, p. 201). This change in emphasis led to a diffusion of the concept of aesthetics. In philosophical debates, the hierarchisation of abilities implied in this pathologisation of pathos has been contested in many ways. Various gestures of rehabilitating *pathos* can be discerned in the writings of Nietzsche, Artaud, Blanchot, Deleuze and Agamben, and others (Busch, 2017, p. 51–62). All these gestures, in their peculiar ways, address the ways in which the pathic is constitutive of experience at large. In knowledge-oriented discursive settings, however, the pathic moment tends to become subordinated to knowledge production.

In a wider cultural theoretical context, this "pathologisation of pathos" needs to be related to what Eric Hörl has outlined in terms of "displacement of sense" (Hörl, 2015). Hörl describes, with a media aesthetic emphasis, the displacement of sense in terms of an emerging object culture that operates in micro-temporal regions and makes use of cybernetic processes. In his exposition, this new culture ends up shattering the entire sense culture, which is based on processes of

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signification and a hermeneutical type of subjectivity (*ibid.*, p. 3). Hörl's account indicates the increasing cultural relevance of sense-making processes beyond linguistic signification. This implies that the active mental powers of human beings cannot be seen as the epitome of culture any longer. The pathic aspects of experience gain new weight.

Boundary work

The relative opacity of artistic research practices urges us to ponder sense-making beyond linguistic signification and to consider how these practices contribute to shaping the relation of aesthetics and epistemology. In the current situation, where the so called "anthropocene" with all its implications has become a widely-discussed topic, aesthetic phenomena no longer constitute a matter of subject-centred reflection only. Aesthetics is discussed as one of the key domains where the conditions determining how things in the world become perceptible, knowable and controllable to human beings are at stake. When the medial embeddedness of experience is recognized, questions of whether and how there is an aesthetic moment inherent to all knowledge production seem ever more relevant.

Against this background, the double-bind between *aisthesis* and *noesis*, i.e. the processes of sense experience and knowledge production can be addressed in terms of "boundary work", a term introduced by Henk Borgdorff into the discussions concerning artistic research (Borgdorff, 2010). The encounter between art and academia taking place in the variegated intersemiotic settings of artistic research makes us face two compelling issues: (1) The multi-dimensionality of sense. Sense cannot be reduced to meaning. Neither an author's verbalisable intentions (so-called subjective facts) nor discursively established interpretations (so-called objective facts) can serve as ultimate points of reference. All facts are made; they imply selection and reduction in regard to an excess of sense. (2) Non-human agencies. Artworks have agency of their own. Artistic research gestures do not take place only on the level of (verbal) argumentation or thematic content; and they cannot necessarily be followed back to the author. Together these two issues hint at what Derrida calls the "graphematic structure" of communication (Derrida, 2000, p. 19). They point at the necessity of medial embeddedness and the iterability of all impartable sense and call for generalising the notion of writing. Artworks can become a site of a "revelatory negotiation" that highlights and weighs its own conditions of existence with regard to the prevailing horizon of communicability (Elo and Laakso, 2016). Insofar as artworks have the capacity to effectuate shifts in perspective within various discursive formations, they can be said to function as "boundary objects" that change their ontological and epistemic nature depending on the context in which they are made operative (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 117).

These two insights result in a complication. Questions of writing and documenting, that is, various ways of articulating and converting

sense, become questions of negotiation and legitimation. Here, we have to keep an eye on the multiplicity of senses of the word "sense." Besides rationality and meaning "sense" refers also to awareness, feeling, and perception. What I call "articulating and converting sense" refers to processes of cultural techniques that take place in all registers of sense and between them. Against this background, the negotiation of sense at the interfaces of arts and academia, "boundary work", concerns also the registers of sense and the questions of whether, how, and why some of them are prioritised over others.

The heuristic construction of artistic research syndrome presented in this schematic essay helps us to frame the question of the relation between aesthetics and research in the following terms: We are witnessing a situation where knowledge intervenes massively in the production of aesthetic objects, and where aesthetic forms come to belong to the sphere of interrelated technologies and programming. Artworks are more and more present as part of a "network"; they are integrated in the cultural activities of arts research. Conceptual analysis has become an almost necessary framework for the production and reception of aesthetic objects. Artistic research syndrome is a constellation of cultural symptoms signalling a shift in the very sense of aesthetics.

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