

EDITORIAL

Reclaiming Artistic Research – First Thoughts...

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There is a lot of visual noise imposing its presence on top of this text – a caption announcing the status of this text as an editorial, a box counting views and downloads, instructions on how to cite the text provided before one even reads it. Following academic protocol these ‘details’ are superfluous to the text’s content. One should ideally read as a text-crunching machine, largely oblivious to the rest. Art has a different means of enquiry. The form, placement and colour of these words matter. The overall greyness of this page and the absence of images do something to this text. In fact one cannot help but be slightly offended by how the aesthetics of this page read visually as academic, while the text claims to be engaged with the artistic. One wonders whether there is space to openly acknowledge this discomfort. Even as editor of this edition, I feel under pressure to get on with it, rather than ‘niggling’ about these ‘details’, and yet I am aware that all of these structural choices reflect assumptions about how art relates to other forms of knowledge – about the status of the image in relation to the linguistic, about the act of reading as a given sequence and its relationship to other registers of knowledge, material and sensory. The apparent unimportance of this discomfort relative to the weight of the norms of publishing brings us to the core of a power struggle within artistic research discourse to date, in which academic protocol often drown out art’s sensibilities, while claiming interest in art’s epistemological possibilities. The paradox here is that art’s epistemologies open up precisely at the site of representation. They open up through attention to form, and through the ability and desire to question the terms of the discourse, rather than provide supplementary knowledge.

This edition of *MaHKUscript* seeks to re-create space for artists to lead and shape conceptions of artistic research and its place in art. It proposes the need to *reclaim* artistic research in response to a strange paradox; namely the increasing centrality of artistic research within art practice on the one hand, and artists’ widespread lack of identification with artistic research discourse on the other. The very concept of artistic research has been over-associated with academic-led concerns, with several competing understandings of what constitutes artistic research overshadowed by the widespread adoption of the ‘reflective model’ in doctoral programs, in which the artist writes a supplementary text that reflects on their practice and this text largely qualifies the existence of artistic research. The PhD in Fine Art continues to secure a context for artistic practice that is nourishing in many respects, demarcating space for slow research, for reflection and digestion at a distance from the pace of art institutional production and the demands of the art market. Yet the doctoral thesis for artists is viewed by many artists, and arguably by the art world at large, as a form that is alien to the languages of art practice and in tension with the affinities and intellectual sensibilities that inform the very core of what is it to be an artist.¹ Artistic research discourse has in turn become isolated by too often addressing an inner circle of ‘doctoral-artistic-researchers’ and their institutional counterparts, drawing relatively little on current concerns in art discourse at large, and rendering itself of little or no relevance to most artists and art workers. As the PhD in Fine Art model expands beyond Anglophone and European countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, it seems timely to ask whether artistic research will, in its solidification as a field, operate at an ever-increasing distance from the concerns of the wider art world or develop a more dynamic relationship with art discourse at large. And whether the art world will continue to critically neglect the increasing centrality of artistic research in independent artists’ practices or articulate its own discourses around artistic research that are in tangent with the sensibilities and conceptual frameworks of artists and the art world.

¹ Dieter Lesage, ‘Who’s Afraid of Artistic Research?: On measuring artistic research output’. *Art & Research*. Vol. 2. Spring 2009. See <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/lesage.html>.

This journal edition aims to highlight that ‘other life’ of artistic research, when it is not being constituted by or viewed through academic-led paradigms. Seeking the artistic significance of art’s relationship to knowledge, it tries to articulate the specificity and singularity of artistic thinking. It considers whether artistic research articulates a tangible shift in the self-understandings and practices of artists, curators, museum directors and art students. This editorial and the journal’s contents offer some preliminary thoughts from a larger book project entitled *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, which is forthcoming in 2018.² The larger scope of the book enables me to engage more comprehensively with the issues I raise here and present a greater diversity of individual artistic as well as curatorial practices. However this edition already marks a first step towards reclaiming space for art discourse to lead and shape conceptions of artistic research and its place in art.

All of the contributors are artists. Because the day-to-day experience of artistic research *in practice* are necessarily the backbone of any artistically meaningful (re)conception of the term. The publication’s contents are thus composed of six dialogues with artists and six ‘artistic contributions’, whose contents touch each other tangentially, replacing the ‘research essays’ and ‘research reports’ that usually predominate this journal.³ Rather than addressing artistic research as a separable phenomenon from art, the ways in which artists think and engage with materiality and dematerialized forms of knowledge are foregrounded through conversation with artists, who offer self-understandings of their own practices. Taking the very different practices of Liam Gillick, Falke Pisano, Samson Young, Ryan Gander, Euridice Kala and Sher Doruff as their departure point, the dialogues reveal competing perspectives on how art engages with knowledge and with other disciplinary fields, as well as the role of material and sensory enquiry in this relationship. The singularity of each practice presented here signals the limits of the possibility of forming a contained notion of artistic research, which, like art itself, is necessarily re-iterated and always different in each encounter. There are artistic contributions by a further six artists: Tania Pérez Córdova, Dora García, Arin Rungjang, Yael Davids, Grada Kilomba and Yuri Pattison, which range from artworks in their own right to performance scripts and thoughts surrounding an artist’s workshop, thus manifesting artistic research in various states of existence. The presentation of these artists’ work is limited by the technical constraints of this journal’s format, which, among other things, pre-determines the role of image as an illustration of text, and the nature of text as linear, with one contribution having to be left out entirely for this reason. Despite its limitations, I hope that the resulting juxtaposition of works and dialogues can open up a productive field of tension by not illustrating each other, yet resonating in their concerns. Depending on the order of reading and engagement, the presentation of material in this publication opens up a permutating series of ideas of what might constitute artistic research. In my selection of artists I chose to include mostly well-established artists with no investment in artistic research discourse *per se*, to better reflect the relevance and difficulty of the term outside of its dedicated sites of operation. It was important to me that the selected artists produce work that is as sophisticated and interesting *as art*, as it is of interest to a more precise articulation of artist’s thinking and conceptual-material enquiry.

Artists use artistic criteria to establish the parameters and form of their research. The dialogues in this book repeatedly suggest that they are less driven by what the work is ‘about’ than by *how* they approach their areas of interest. Nor, for that matter, does the work of art have to be ‘about’ anything for it to be of interest as artistic research. Rather, as Susan Sontag argued over fifty years ago, all forms of art are “mainly, a form of thinking”. “[E]ach work of art gives us a form or paradigm or model of knowing something, an epistemology”.⁴ I would suggest that the phrase ‘artistic research’ is capable of communicating art as an aspiration, an open-ended process and an open-ended object, which includes, but is in excess of itself as artwork. By not making rigid dichotomies between artistic process and output, artistic research potentially enables art to reclaim the day-to-day experience of the maker (in the widest sense of the term), for whom an ‘art work’ is part of a continuous (thinking) practice. In fact artistic research raises the question of whether the criteria used to evaluate art *as artwork* are adequate to address the full potential and scope of art, offering an alternative paradigm through which the terms of art can be expanded or rethought in ways that do more justice to artists’ endeavors. The fundamental question of what art is, or might be, or could become, is

² *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, edited by Lucy Cotter, is forthcoming in early 2018 in a Spanish-language edition published by 17, Institute for Critical Studies, Mexico City, to be followed by an English-language publication, published in collaboration with *MaHKUscript*, among other partners.

³ There is a certain paradox here as the the artists’ dialogues are no less an artistic contribution, but I have not been able to find a more suitable terminology.

⁴ Susan Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence,’ 1967, *A Susan Sontag Reader*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982, pp. 181–204, 191.

at stake in such an enquiry. Art is changing in dynamic relation to its wider socio-cultural, politico-economic and technological conditions. The very concept of artistic research raises important questions about where to situate art in our minds and in our society. It raises questions about the relative autonomy of art and its institutions from the neoliberalism of the art market and the educational sector alike. It points to the emergence of new destinations and new forms of agency for contemporary art, as well to its fragility vis-à-vis wider socio-economic agendas.

The currency of artistic research as a paradigm through which to approach art relates to a deeper shift within art practice itself, with contemporary art becoming “more a form of approaching something or a form of knowledge that can be ‘used’ to engage with the many different subjects or situations” than an isolated aesthetic enquiry.⁵ It is well known that this is partly as a result of the ‘discursive turn’, which is itself related to wider structural shifts in the knowledge-based economy. However one views the conditions of emergence of artistic research, it is undeniable that artists increasingly draw first-hand on discourses traditionally ‘external’ to art, which includes much material that might equally be the subject of academic reflection. There is currently a greater reciprocity between academic and artistic communities than has perhaps ever been the case in contemporary art, which is one of the reasons why more and more artists refer to themselves as having a ‘research-based practice.’ Yet I want to highlight here that contemporary art’s use of materialized and dematerialized knowledge and artifacts from many fields is almost always incorporated *as part of artistic material enquiry*. Rather than creating an unnatural divide between ‘research-based’ works and art works in general, let us note that this approach marks a shift in emphasis but not an outright difference from the practice of artists who see themselves as primarily medium-based. This acknowledgement is crucial to understanding the ways in which artistic research is embedded in contemporary art practice at large.

Whether or not artists articulate their practice in terms of research, they will think their areas of interest through form. The ideas and form of the work develop and exist simultaneously and inseparably. As curator Natasha Ginwala remarked, young artists today “use archives the way one would conceive a drawing. This is how they conceive their ideas, through other subject fields. It is not separate.”⁶ The work of the artists presented in this journal can also be viewed in these terms. Yuri Pattison, for example, does not only address new digital technologies in the work he presents here as some kind of research topic; he uses those technologies to think the work’s conceptual and material possibilities. As Tania Pérez Córdova’s or Ryan Gander’s sculptural works also make manifest, materiality and narrative necessarily inform each other in artistic practice. As far as most artists are concerned, the desire to hold open space to think something differently calls for a different way of being in the world, both physically and discursively. Here is where language becomes problematic in not offering vocabularies that articulate the indivisibility of those two aspects, an issue that relates to the very deep biases in knowledge-based discourses towards linguistic articulation. This suggests that much more attention needs to be paid to *how* artists create epistemological possibilities, drawing on their aesthetic and material expertise and their intimate knowledge of specific media. Should artistic research discourse not seek to acknowledge and engage with these most difficult-to-articulate aspects of artistic practice? This is important, not only for academics to better understand the ‘languages’ of art, but also for art which engages with research-based concerns to be valued for its artistic qualities.

It is crucial furthermore to take formal intervention and material enquiry seriously if we truly wish to engage with art as a site of thinking. Because this is also where artistic research really becomes a process that is different from academic research, following instead its own inner logic in resonance with the wider languages and sensibilities of art, rather than the logic of any external discipline. Touching on several fields through the associative logic of artistic thinking, and in an experimental manner that pays little heed to their disciplinary conventions, we will see that artists often create areas of thinking that lie outside of formal categorization. From the outset the artwork moreover incorporates into its own intention a dimension that exceeds any of the artist’s preliminary intentions, creating a tension “that allows the form to open itself to its own formation, whatever the idea, aim, or end given.”⁷ The artwork never closes down this dynamic, even when it is ‘finished’. Its radical potential lies precisely in this destabilization of reality as we know it, insisting on this essential incompleteness, which is a non-closure or non-totalizing of form. Contemporary art asks us to be receptive of “the riddle of ambiguity” – “the constant alteration of the relations between

⁵ Steven ten Thije, ‘Autonomy,’ *Art Education: A Glossary*, ed. Tom VandePutte, Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam, 2013.

⁶ Dialogue between Natasha Ginwala and Lucy Cotter in *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, edited by Lucy Cotter, forthcoming.

⁷ I cite Jean-Luc Nancy’s reflections on drawing. *The Pleasure in Drawing*. Trans. Philip Armstrong. New York: Fordham University Press (2013), p. 38–39.

matter and words, time and meaning". It often prompts "a radical reconsideration of the role of language, of straightforward conceptions of how things interact".⁸

This is what makes art so exciting and unique as a site of 'knowledge production,' yet it is also why artists find the term 'knowledge production' so misplaced. Building on the work of Sarat Maharaj, I have introduced the notion of 'non-knowledge' in several dialogues to better describe this open-ended form of knowledge, which remains in flux as a subjective embodied viewing experience. Non-knowledge lies in "forms of knowledge that are often below the radar of our conscious thought and which can bypass our rational minds to incorporate contradiction and intuition."⁹ It is constituted not only by what is not yet known, but also includes what is unknowable, or what *cannot be assimilated* as (formal) knowledge.¹⁰ This is where artistic research becomes antagonistic to academic knowledge as such. Artists work with areas that are not only beyond current thinking on certain subjects and situations, but also off the radar, moving into unknowable territory. They embrace this unknowability, being comfortable with holding open spaces of not knowing that confound traditional research. Artistic research thus revolves around articulating new questions without seeking answers.

If this radical potential of art is taken on board it becomes evident that artistic research signals the limits of knowledge production as such. While academic knowledge production tends towards the expansion of existing knowledge from *within* the terms of its affiliated disciplinary discourse, artists' engagement with other discourses typically neglects, unsettles or rewrites the terms of that discourse. We can consider, for example, how Arin Rungjang's engagement with the contradictions within even one personal account of the Second World War puts pressure on the possibility of establishing history as such. Likewise Samson Young's accounts of war through the medium of sound offers embodied knowledge that diminishes the boundaries between the self and other that underpin the ideological legitimacy of conflict. Art's openness to ambiguity and its encompassing of so many registers of knowledge inevitably pushes towards new ways of thinking. In our conversation Sher Doruff and I discuss how her trilogy of artist's novellas forge a new kind of writing practice to hold knowledge differently, suggesting the possibility of new (theoretical) genres. Artist Grada Kilomba, whose performance *Illusions* (2016) is documented in her artistic contribution, is one of a steady trickle of academics that have gravitated towards the art world to expand the epistemological possibilities in their work. This includes, but is not limited to, academics engaging with questions related to race, gender and sexuality, who recognize that art makes space for bodily experience to more directly inform intellectual enquiry.¹¹ There is also a political undertone in how contemporary art tends to prioritize the minor over the major, the neglected, the difficult and opaque over the transparent and easily accommodated. Many artists work consciously towards a decolonization of knowledge, an issue I elaborate more fully in *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, but which already emerges here in several conversations, including dialogues with Euridice Kala and Falke Pisano, as well as in the artistic contribution of Grada Kilomba, among others. As artist Hito Steyerl once observed, artistic research has marked an aesthetics of resistance for artists across the globe, historically as well as in recent practice.¹²

Much lies beyond the scope of this journal edition. This includes an enquiry into what artistic research means for curatorial practice at large, beyond the easily identifiable trend of curating exhibitions that explicitly engage with research-based art practice.¹³ In my forthcoming book I propose that dOCUMENTA 13 marked the most public moment of artistic research as a viable curatorial paradigm and engage in conversation with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, among other curators. From my perspective there is also much work to be done in terms of seeing how artistic research might be a valuable paradigm to rethink and rearticulate not only contemporary art but artists throughout history, and in particular the oeuvres of artists with multi-faceted practices whose components have yet to be pieced together. At its best the paradigm of

⁸ I paraphrase Chus Martínez's definition of aesthetics in 'Aesthetic Consciousness,' Henk Slager, ed. *Experimental Aesthetics*. Utrecht: Metropolis M Books, 2014, pp. 10–13.

⁹ Sarat Maharaj used this definition in a workshop held during *Cork Caucus* (2005), Cork, Ireland, co-curated by Art/not art, (David 'Dobz' O' Brien and Fergal Gaynor), Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher.

¹⁰ Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 201. I elaborate greatly on the relevance of Bataille's observations in Lucy Cotter, *Art Knowledge: Between the Known and the Unknown*, forthcoming.

¹¹ I am thinking here of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Fred Moten and Paul B. Preciado, among others.

¹² I draw here on Hito Steyerl's proposition in 'Aesthetics of Resistance?: Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict' in *MaHKUzine* 8, winter 2010, pp. 31–37, available online at <http://eicpc.net/transversal/0311/steyerl/en>.

¹³ See Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson's *Curating Research*, London-Amsterdam: Open Editions/De Appel, 2014, for an analysis of more thematic curatorial engagement with research.

artistic research opens space to expand the parameters through which we view art, supporting its organic interconnectivity with other fields of enquiry, and its agency beyond the narrow confines of the art world. It foregrounds the artist as a thinker, while redefining the very nature of what it means to think.

The visually distracting heading, 'Competing Interests,' situated directly under this text, is followed by a default statement that this author has no competing interests to declare. Ironically, the presence of this academic protocol indicates an ongoing investment in the possibility of objective knowledge, which fundamentally competes with the interests and parameters of art discourse. I can imagine Ryan Gander rearticulating these words in a suitably sticky material, following in the footsteps of his Hello Kitty glitter toothpaste sculptures.¹⁴ While institutional interests in the existence of an artistic research discipline have become evident, it is surely time for artists' competing interests in artistic research to be articulated in a more playful and uncompromising manner.

Author Information

Lucy Cotter (Cork, Ireland, 1973) is an independent writer and curator. Among other projects, she was curator of *Cinema Olanda: Wendelien van Oldenborgh*, the Dutch representation at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), with a parallel group exhibition *Cinema Olanda: Platform* at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and events at the Stedelijk Museum and EYE Film Museum, Amsterdam (all 2017). Widely published in books, catalogues and journals of contemporary art, she is currently authoring a book entitled *Art Knowledge: Between the Known and the Unknown*. Cotter has been employed in museums and galleries internationally and lectured at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam. As director of the newly founded Master Artistic Research at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague (2010–2015), she developed an experimental educational curriculum with an extensive exhibition program. Cotter holds a PhD in Cultural Analysis from the University of Amsterdam (2011), an MA in History of Art, and a BA in Fine Art. As an artist she exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions in Ireland, the UK, Germany, Italy and the US.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

¹⁴ Gander once confided that people often tell him they have imagined or even dreamed of sculptures 'by him', so this proposition follows an established tradition!

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