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

Janneke Wesseling (ed.)

# The Chimera of Method

Jeroen Boomgaard



Research in the arts is making great strides and seems to be heading towards a glittering future. Nevertheless there is still enough opposition from those who believe that art ought to maintain a healthy distance from the formalisation that is typical of the path to a doctorate, as well as from sceptics who think that artists have always carried out research, thus making a PhD a meaningless endeavour. To a large extent these sceptics and objectors are correct: the combination of art and formal research is troublesome and perhaps even superfluous. It is therefore worth considering what is feasible and whether this involves a new manner of research that actually yields something meaningful.

The resistance to art as research often focuses on the question of the method. If artistic research wants to establish itself as a recognised discipline, then a clear-cut and distinctive method seems necessary. But if art really wants to remain art it can never surrender to a straitjacket that seems to constrict each and every basic principle, method of working and outcome *a priori*. In short, the method is the hallmark of true science, while its absence or avoidance, or indeed its subversion, is the hallmark of true art. This contradiction is, however, overly simple. Though scholars rely on established methods to gain recognition for their findings, the methods they employ are never undisputed.

The primary concern of the theories of Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend was the need to establish

a broadly recognised basis for research as well as the impossibility of fixing that basis for the longer term. While Popper wanted to provide science with a dependable basis with his 'principle of falsification' (i.e. a theory can only be regarded as truly proven when it is in principle possible to prove that it is incorrect), Kuhn demonstrated that scientific principles are constructs (paradigms) which stand until they are replaced by another outlook, often after a long and bitter struggle.

With his *Against Method*, Feyerabend believed that he could actually dispose of every form of overarching procedure. Feyerabend was somewhat overly optimistic about that, because every researcher is still expected to account for his or her working methods meticulously, even though the chosen method is seldom employed unquestioningly. Within a discipline there is often no question of a single, generally recognised method; usually there are several conflicting ways in which research can be conducted. On the basis of a difference of opinion in this sphere, academics within the selfsame discipline can whole-heartedly reject each other's research conclusions. So method has something to do with power as well: it is a manner of doing research but also a manner of speaking and/or writing that by definition structures the research and furnishes it with its power base. All the more reason, you would say, for art to resist this with might and main.

The only way in which art would be able to maintain its unconditional and a-methodical charac-

ter in a formal research environment must therefore lie in the very emphasis of this rejection of a fixed *modus operandi*. The artist chooses his or her own way of working or the artist's method calls into question all the other methods. Research in the arts would then primarily distinguish itself by employing a research method that is much more open, much more focused on questioning the method and its limiting aspects than is the case in existing disciplines. Such a critical stance is not, however, the exclusive preserve of the arts. Every branch of learning that takes itself seriously reflects on its own *modus operandi*. It is therefore a fundamental hallmark of any scholarship that on the one hand the method is employed as a guiding principle and a guarantee, while its implicit premises and the effects of embedding it in a framework are called into question on the other. That has been the basic assumption since the critical, neo-Marxist scholarship of the 1960s, and in most disciplines Foucault's analysis of the power of discourse has only reinforced that self-critical tendency. It has long been accepted that there is a critical tradition that inevitably leads to new dogmas, which will in turn be questioned and stretched by a new generation of cutting-edge research.

Research in art is in turn not as a methodical as is sometimes suggested. Since the advent of conceptual art in the 1960s, more or less every work of art has been the product of rules that the artist personally formulates in order to subsequently carry them

through to their ultimate consequence. In that sense every artistic production follows a rigid method, and even a decision such as 'returning to landscape painting' inevitably falls into this category. Yet every artist determines that method for himself and the idiosyncratic character of the rules lends art the aura of freedom and arbitrariness. All these specific methods combined means that the method for the arts is general. Art is identified and acknowledged on the basis of the fact that the work of art is the result of a set of rules, a system of guiding principles and procedural precepts chosen by the artist that lead to 'something' being created — a painting, an installation, a process, a course of action, possibly even a discussion or a performance — a result that therefore manifests itself as a work of art. Though the method often remains undefined and the rules are rarely formulated explicitly, it is a system that is peremptorily present *a priori* and is the basis for schools and movements which can be as at odds with each other as the various methods in the sciences. For no matter how idiosyncratically the rules are formulated, groups or systems of kinship and exclusion emerge. The country's various MA courses turn out different kinds of students who base their practice on highly diverse forms of rule-making. For example, while one academy prioritises a theoretical basis, another proceeds more from traditional forms of artistic practice. The disciplines in the arts are therefore shaped by these often implicit systems, or combinations thereof, rather than by the time-

honoured division into painting, photography, video art and so on. However, this does not mean that this system can automatically form the basis for artistic research: this is the method for the creation and acceptance of art; for artistic research more is needed. In exactly the same way scientific disciplines renew themselves by critically examining the tenets of their own research, research in the arts that takes itself seriously will have to reflect on these regulatory systems.

So what are the implications of this situation for artistic research? How can an artist who wishes to gain a PhD deal with a scholarly approach that in one breath calls itself into question and in the next breath advocates a compulsory but individually customisable system of rules as a means of production for art? How can artistic research derive its own methodology from this? Like all nascent disciplines, artistic research will for the time being primarily borrow its procedures from other disciplines. To make it patently clear that research is involved, this form of research will often fall back on the disciplines which have long been associated with certain artistic disciplines (art history, theatre studies, musicology), but it will more often make use of branches of learning which have a more umbrella-like character, such as philosophy and cultural studies. But actually all branches of learning are at its disposal, because no single field has been demarcated on which the research must focus.

As the name already suggests, artistic research

is primarily characterised by its specific angle of approach and not by the presence of a field framed specifically by discipline within which the research is conducted. Artistic research can encompass everything, because it employs a method that differs from that in other fields of scholarship. The question of the method, which is often timorously avoided in discussions about research in the arts, is in fact axiomatic. And the crux of that as yet undefined or indefinable method is that very conjunction of scientific methodology and the rules of art as outlined above. The outcome of artistic research can therefore only be a result that has been achieved using this specific method and it can be judged only on that basis. Artistic research renders something visible, or furnishes an insight or knowledge that another form of research cannot accomplish, and that 'something' resides in the fact that art plays a pivotal role in the research.

This may sound self-evident, but it raises issues that go to the very core of the *modi operandi* of artistic research, in asking how a method of research focused on dissemination can be combined with the non-dispersive power of the work of art. How can research in the arts meet the need for formulation and generalisation that scholarship requires of it while at the same time carrying out research through works of art that systematically want to avoid a general formulation?

The question is also therefore important because it touches directly on the role that a text, an account or a report fulfils in this form of research.

The question of whether or not the method of artistic research and especially how it is reported requires a textual component sparks heated debate, but questions about the role of text are broached all too rarely. While objectors are of the opinion that writing a research report overly compels artists to step outside their usual territory, its proponents see it as the only possible means of ensuring that artistic research counts as true research.

Yet there is still something remarkable about when it comes to the relationship between the method and the written research report. Apart from a few exact sciences in which the formulation coincides with the research itself, there is in effect a two-fold requirement or expectation. The mode of research — asking questions in order to find answers — is complemented by a working method which prescribes how the research — the questions and the answers, the process and the outcome — is written up and disseminated. This notation ensures that the research gains recognition, and not simply because the correct procedure has been followed but also because it has been written up in the correct manner. The way in which the research must or can be communicated thus determines to a large extent how it is conducted, which questions are asked and which are ignored, how detailed it must be, or the breadth of perspective that is expected.

As yet, this conclusion does not seem to have prompted much reaction within the praxis of artistic research. It nevertheless has far-reaching consequen-

es for the textual component. When artistic research is chiefly defined as an investigation in and through the arts and when the textual component is also regarded as a justification of the research — a description of what was done as well as an appraisal in the light of existing studies or other art projects — then that textual notation functions as a precept that structures the research in advance. It is a text that is drafted in retrospect, yet it is compellingly present from the very start. And so the problem for many artists is not that they do not know how they must package their research according to this formula, but rather the fact that their research proves to be incapable of escaping this formulation during the process, so the text is no longer an elucidation of the work but the work of art inevitably follows that text, albeit contrary to the will of the researcher.

Would it not therefore be appropriate to choose to omit such a text altogether? The research then takes place in and through the work; the work of art is itself the reporting mechanism. The question, however, is how exactly it would then establish itself as research in the public domain. How can it be discussed, received and evaluated as research? How is it different to other process-oriented, open-ended works of art, which may indeed investigate something but do not want to be recognised as research?

To return to what is set out above, how can the rules for creating art be distinguished from a method of research? A confusion of these two systems is

evident in works that display forms of research while remaining within the artistic domain. Hallmarks of research, such as text, diagrams, statistics, documents and reports, then form part and parcel of the work of art. Although these works involve an attempt to save the work of art from its solipsistic perspective and its isolation, in my opinion it is sooner an instance of the 'rhetoric of research'. The work wants to be visible as a form of research, but primarily to be seen and discussed as a form of art. It thus becomes part of a recently formulated system of rules in which methods and forms of research are deployed in a more or less indiscriminate manner to create art. In relation to the text this is the converse of what was described: the research serves as an illustration of the work of art but any coherent statement is unforthcoming.

The work of students following the MA in Artistic Research at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) provides an example of the way in which you can try to avoid these two pitfalls and maintain a balance between the two aspects — science and art — that together form the core of the artistic research. The students following this MA, which is open to creators from the worlds of dance, music, theatre and the visual arts, are from the very start primarily interested in the questions and problems that are intrinsic to fundamental aspects of their respective disciplines. While the visual arts students are keen to explore notions of representation and visibility, for the students

from the worlds of theatre and dance it is more about performativity and embodiment, while for the musicians representation plays no part whatsoever and their focus is on temporality and displacement. This means that the methods they choose for their research are directly linked to this presentation of a question, being the ways of working that best allow them to answer the questions their artistic discipline raises. The students therefore generally 'borrow' their research methodology from the discipline which concerns itself with the art that they produce, as well as from disciplines which enable them to reflect upon their practice at a more philosophical or theoretical level.

The only 'method' in which the students of the MA in Artistic Research are trained is the combination of scholarship and art that is typical of artistic research. That is why they on the one hand acquire knowledge of existing research methods and are trained to write texts which can be discussed and accepted as accounts of research within the humanities, while on the other hand their artistic practice is stimulated and evaluated as a system of personally formulated rules. The two aspects of their research are thereby set within a clear-cut framework. On the one hand there is the research within the existing traditions of the humanities and on the other there is the framework of existing forms of art production. They must establish a link between these two aspects in their personal research. Formulating a research question which can be investigated with the aid of existing



scholarly disciplines as well as by means of their own artistic production is a way of preventing one of the two approaches predominating. In order to clarify why the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts and what the added value of artistic research can represent, I will outline a couple of graduation projects.

Maartje Fliervoet completed her MA in 2010 with the *Zero Panorama* project, which consisted of an exhibition at the Dutch Foundation for Art and Public Space (Stichting Kunst en Openbare Ruimte, or SKOR), several posters that were distributed in the venue's vicinity, and a text bearing the title *Nulstructuren. Het onbebaalde in het werk van Robert Smithson* ('Zero structures. The non-specific in the work of Robert Smithson'). The whole project formed a reflection on several texts and projects from the 1960s and '70s by the American artist Robert Smithson, texts in which he had called into question the effect of exhibition spaces. However, in a certain sense the graduation project also constituted a reflection on artistic research itself. The thesis clarified the theory about the non-specificity of spaces to which Smithson subscribed, but in an installation it simultaneously demonstrated that such explanatory texts must leave a lot unsaid. The danger of such an investigation is that it is over-ambitious and that some of the tacit intentions fail to live up to their promise. But perhaps that emphatically incomplete, that non-solution-focused, is a crucial quality of research in the arts.

More complex still is the shift that Johannes

Westendorp's project set in motion. He created a music installation with the title *Inside Mount Lu* for his final project, for which he collaboratively developed eight objects that most closely resemble the walkers in which toddlers learn to take their first steps. Participants in the project had to install themselves in these walking frames, surrounded by electronics, with something resembling an upturned bucket above their heads and frosted goggles before their eyes. When the participants started to move around the units produced sound, the loudness and pitch modified by the distance from other units. Westendorp's accompanying thesis does not address this complex installation but examines the notions of 'territory' and 'transposition' under the title 'Verplaatsingen' (Transpositions), exploring these notions in five essays. One essay is a philosophical reflection, another is a text that strikes one as literary, but the most important part of the thesis is an analysis of the work of the composer Brian Ferneyhough. In this project, too, the artistic research itself takes centre stage, but Westendorp is more emphatic than Fliervoet in wanting to demonstrate that the transition from one field of experience to another is impossible. You reflect on transposition, you read a literary text, you follow the analysis of a composition or you experience a piece of music by being part of it. All these elements are brought together as different forms of experience and, by extension, as just as many irreconcilable outcomes of the research.

In the model I propose here, the different knowledge systems continue to exist alongside one another. The basic premise is that the academic research and research through art can complement or even comment on each other, but they cannot converge. Scholarly research is always reflexive and draws conclusions; it always reports on 'something' that is itself not present in the account, and no matter how self-critical the methodology may be, the text of the research almost always reads like a final destination.

Researchers in the field of artistic research have a double-edged-problem: they not only investigate an 'object', but they also investigate with the aid of the 'object'. In addition, they first of all investigate with the means that their artistic discipline makes available to them. The research is pursued with the aid of photography, with the body or with a musical instrument, and thus takes the form of an image, a choreography or a piece of music. However, a work of art is never conclusive. The work of art presents itself as a straight fact, as a given, and in that sense you might term it affirmative, but it is at the same time it is always open in character: the path that the work has taken is not yet fully travelled, and the beholders must pursue that path further for themselves.

This open-ended quality of art leads to the stock remark that the work of art 'provides no answers but poses questions'. That formulation does little justice to art, as it reduces art's implicit meaning to an explicit intention. The work of art does, however, com-

bine a closed form with an open end, and it can therefore prompt an investigative direction of travel, but can never take it to a conclusion. The method of research in and through the arts is in this sense a game in which different systems can be played off against each other. On the one hand this results in a research report in which a novel insight is formulated, while on the other the experience of that insight is laid bare again in the work of art. This causes the conclusions that were apparently drawn in the text to be suspended again, with the work of art's complexity forcing open the hermetic methodology of science. For its part, the linking of art's arbitrary system of rules with an existing research tradition provides a proof of exigency. Artistic research is a method that facilitates critical reflection on science as well as on art, without denying the respective strengths of these domains.

**Colophon**



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