

# Thinking through Artistic Research and Pathic Experience

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## Biography

Leena Rouhiainen is Professor in Artistic Research at the Theatre Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki. She is a dancer and choreographer whose research interests lie in somatics, performance, experimental writing, phenomenology of the body and artistic research. She has published many articles in these areas. She has likewise co-edited the books *Dance Spaces: Practices of Movement* (2012) with Susanne Ravn, *Tanssiva tutkimus: tanssitutkimuksen menetelmiä ja lähestymistapoja* (2014) with Hanna Järvinen as well as *Choreography Now* a special issue of *Dance Articulated* (forthcoming) together with Tone Pernille Østern. Her recent artistic research addresses breathing and the element of the air.

## Abstract

**This article discusses artistic research as a transdisciplinary art and research practice in which the singularity of artistic processes and the interest in knowledge production entail a tense relationship. To address this tension and to offer arguments for the necessity of artistic research to give space to the unknown, and thus be open to creative potentials and engage in non-normative research processes, it explores the relationship between the non-thought and**

**the thought, pathos and logos. This is done firstly through notions introduced by philosophers Jacques Rancière and Dieter Mersch. However, the main focus is on Bernhard Waldenfels' phenomenology of the alien and pathic experience. He details this experience in a manner that shows it to be pivotal for creative thinking and germane for understanding the processual and heterogeneous nature of undertakings in artistic research.**

## **Keywords**

**Artistic research, phenomenology, pathic experience, thinking, knowledge**

## **Introduction**

This article introduces notions about the kind of thinking art and artistic research have recently been considered to entail.<sup>1</sup> It is a brief addition to my previous attempt to think about artistic research and the kind of epistemic dimension it entails (Rouhiainen, 2017). While I carry on with addressing the thematic by tackling the non-thought and the thought, pathos and logos, this text specifically aims to discuss pathic experience in order to further the opportunity that artistic research has in appreciating the unknown, being open to diverse creative possibilities and engaging with non-normative research processes. To start with the article discusses artistic research as a threshold project involving diversities and examines the kind of knowledge art has been considered to entail. Here I somewhat eclectically and passingly draw on notions by proponents of artistic research (Borgdorff, 2012; Kirkkopelto, 2012; Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014; Manning, 2015; Varto, 2017; Dempster, 2018) and focus in more detail on some insights forwarded by philosophers Jacques Rancière (2009, 2011) and Dieter Mersch (2015, 2017). In so doing, my intention is to simply establish that art is an inquisitive and critical endeavor with epistemic dimensions to it. Then and more importantly the text explores pathic experience,

on the basis of the phenomenology of Bernhard Waldenfels (2007, 2011). His thinking offers inroads into understanding the not-known and the not-thought operative in art, in ways I have not encountered elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Waldenfels details pathic experience in a manner that shows it to be pivotal for creative thinking and germane for understanding the processual and heterogeneous nature of undertakings in artistic research. I believe his phenomenology of the alien offers means to substantiate the potential of artistic research to be open to and moved by the unfamiliar in a constructive manner.

## **The Context and the Problem**

Artistic research has, by now, evolved into a complex approach to doing research. While the skills and creative undertakings of artists is at the core of this kind of research, in the academic context specifically, knowledge generation has been understood to belong to its tasks as well. Among other things, this has begged the question as to how art in itself is epistemic, knowledge bearing or a form of thinking, and through what kinds of modalities should artistic research be conducted and communicated (e.g. Borgdorff, 2012; Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014; Varto, 2017). What has been argued is that the art-making that artistic research encompasses is both reflexive and reflective and that it is often framed by conceptual interests and contextual points of view that orient the articulations generated. This entails that the outcomes of artistic research are at least in part art. Additionally, this occasions the possibility that theorizing arises within and from artistic practice itself and is not simply about explicating art-making and art works from the point of view of existing conceptions. For these reasons, the research procedures and outcomes often combine different formats of articulating, sharing and reflecting that among others include exhibitions, concerts, live performance, digital and material artefacts as well as experimental and conventional academic writing. The specific realizations of artistic research thus are interdisciplinary and interlink different fields of speciality, procedures, material mediums and means

of communicating as well as audiences and contexts.

When interrogating and configuring artistic practice in the above-described varied manner, artistic research challenges the known borders of art and has generally been understood to carry the prospect of renewing the arts. It has the opportunity to generate novel approaches to art-making and original artwork as well as to create new understanding about the arts. It likewise can give rise to inventive forms of artistic agency and community. Indeed, one of the functions of artistic research has been considered to be that of instituting new modes of relating to reality by exploring the potentials of the sensible through art-making (Kirkkopelto, 2012). In my experience it is not uncommon that artists engage with artistic research in order to solve problems they have in relation to their art-making. In so doing, they aim at unearthing something new, something that has not yet taken form, on the basis of what they already know and are skilful in. The speculative orderings they come up with are a form critique as they show alternative solutions to and a re-thinking of preceding art, their own and others. Typically then artistic research to some degree resists and transgresses previous conventions of art.

The above already points to an understanding that art evades stable definitions and evolves through processes of transformation. In such a view, art persists through diversifying, it is not simply limited to any given content, form or material, even if it is subtended by artistic conventions and institutional processes. Art is open to interrogating and appropriating conceptions and approaches operative within different fields including research and the sciences. As art and artistic research both transcend the conventions of specific fields and approach problems in collaboration between different social and societal agents, their transdisciplinary nature has been increasing underlined (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014). In operating on the basis of that which is between the disciplines, across different disciplines, and beyond any individual discipline, artistic research has even been noted to be an undisciplined endeavour (Brown & Longley, 2018; Dempster, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

The evident hybridization of contemporary art further specifies that art is not tied to specific rules or hierarchies. Art is rather identified by its singularity. In producing new material formations as idiosyncratic suggestions of ways in which reality can be addressed and arranged, art works involve excess, something not quite recognizable and graspable. This makes it difficult to define art's exact realm. (Rancière, 2011; Varto, 2017) What is important for the discussion of this article is that one of the main tasks of artistic research is to serve the arts: create new art, generate new artistic practices and new knowledge about the arts and its social and societal prospects. This implies that the nature of artistic research is thus importantly qualified by the contemporaneous challenges art and art-making deal with, while simultaneously guided by the more scholarly discourses and procedures artistic research topically promotes. However, it is the singularity belonging to art that especially establishes a tension with the scholarly investment in knowledge production and generalizability that research involves. This tension is notably tangible in academic artistic research.

## **Thinking the Non-Thought**

Jacques Rancière alludes to the above-mentioned tension between art and knowledge in different terms in his book *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (Rancière, 2009). In it he contemplates the notion of art as a mingling of unconscious production and conscious procedure or the combination of both non-sense and sense, *pathos* and *logos* (Corbussen, 2014). While appreciating Freud's involvement with the unconscious, Rancière criticizes the hermeneutic interpretation of the sensible or unconscious dimension at work in art that Freud is inclined to. Following a perhaps a somewhat narrow view of Freud's thinking, Rancière is of the opinion that Freud acknowledged that artists know things that scientists do not. However, in his view, Freud did not consider artists themselves to have offered the unconscious a strong or clear enough status. Freud's attempt was to give this meaningless life a meaning and integrate it into scien-

tific rationality. Important for this article's discussion is that in contrast Rancière suggests that "The voiceless power of the Other's speech must be valorized as something irreducible to any hermeneutics" (Rancière, 2009, p. 88). He supports a view in which pathos and logos are not subsumed into each other, while also accepting that *logos* is always at play in pathos and vice versa. He formulates this by stating that "art is the territory of a thought that is present outside itself and identical with non-thought" (Rancière, 2009, p. 6). Here non-thought relates to what in the tradition of western aesthetics has been described as the indistinct or confused sensible knowledge that stands in opposition to the distinct knowledge of logic. He also states that "confused knowledge is no longer a lesser form of knowledge but properly *the thought of that which does not think*" (Rancière, 2009, p. 6.) At the end of *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Rancière comes to the conclusion that "the power of art lies in the immediate identity of contraries, of *logos* and *pathos*." (Rancière, 2010, p. 86). What is detectable in his writing is that it is the friction between the two that in his view affirms the specificity of art.

Rancière thus suggests that art in itself involves a thinking without erasing its involvement in the non-thought and thus the not-known. It is no surprise that this is something artistic research has been said to importantly deal with as art-making is at the core of this kind of research. For example, Henk Borgdorff (2012) proposes that artistic research does not produce knowledge in the usual sense of the term by explicating the implicit knowledge enclosed in art. Rather, it is directed towards a not-knowing that sets our thinking in motion and invites us into unfinished reflection (Borgdorff, 2012). Philosopher Dieter Mersch (2015, 2017) discusses a similar view in more detail when addressing artistic research as a form of aesthetic thinking and contemplating the manner in which art can be understood to comprise knowledge. He argues that art involves epistemic significance that cannot be expressed through other means. As art has to do with the perceptual, he opines that the knowledge that art produces deals with what is perceivable by the senses before it is expressed. Art aims at portraying both the perceptible

and imperceptible through perception so as to question their borders and reveal their inner conflicts. Here art is tied to a reflexivity, that Mersch (2017) finds to be related to a second order perception. Such perception makes the perceptual visible in a way that simultaneously reflects our prejudices concerning visibility. The power to induce reflexivity, that he considers to be at the core of artistic thought, can happen through paradoxical and indirect practices of art that allow the unseen or unheard to be experienced through their other – through that which makes the visible visible but is not itself seen or makes hearing possible without being heard (Mersch 2015, 2017). This implies that the epistemic nature that art entails does not follow propositional thinking nor the logic of language. Rather the knowledge that art produces is an outcome of such differentiating activity that enables reflexivity and the generation of second order approaches to perception.

Based on these insights Mersch further argues that “art portrays, exhibits, presents, and performs, but the decisive epistemic modus of these varying practices is always *showing*” (Mersch, 2015, p. 14). Showing in turn is plural in that it both points out and exhibits simultaneously. “Showings reveal something and show themselves while in showing, hold themselves back” (Mersch, 2015, p. 170). According to Mersch (2017) Showing therefore underlines the relationship between presentation and presence, manifestation and the manifest. Showing oscillates between the showing and the shown, and owing to this interplay, showing is instable as identification. And exactly such events of appearing that include contradictions and instabilities and that resist resolution or closure call for a reflexivity. They cause unrest, question the senses and trouble the very foundations of our thinking. Showings of art entail a polyvalence, but they occur as singularities in the present, as well. These differentiating activities involve singular paradigms as each artwork generates its own medium – begins a new, in a new way, through a new problem and orientation (Mersch, 2017). Mersch (2015) concludes that artistic thinking explores the unexpected and strange and addresses threshold phenomena that disassemble con-

straints and preconditions in ways that open up for alternative experiences. He relates artistic knowledge to phronesis, an ability to make connections and an intelligence of the moment without appeal to the rational (Mersch, 2015). To understand what this can entail, I will now turn to how Bernhard Waldenfels describes pathic experience.

## **Pathic Experience**

The phenomenology of Bernhard Waldenfels pivots around the problem of the alien through exploring the nature of experience, that for him fundamentally is about pathic encounter. Researcher Sami Santanen points out that “Derived from the Greek *pathos* the pathic is a matter of contact in the sense of “being-affected-by (something or someone)” (Santanen, 2018, p. 218). For Waldenfels *pathos* indicates “those events which are not at our disposal, as if merely waiting for a prompt or command, but rather happen to us, overcome, stir, surprise, and attack us” (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 26). What is specific to this notion of the pathic is that it signifies exposure to the alien, to something unpredictable, which exceeds or falls short of such possibilities that belong to the sphere of the predictable (Santanen 2018). When we are so affected, something is done to us that we ourselves do not initiate and that comes from elsewhere. We are affected against our own expectations, intentions and experiential possibilities. Indeed, the alien is contagious and its effects precede any thematization (Waldenfels, 2011).

Waldenfels writes that “Pathos does not mean that there is *something* which affects us, nor does it mean that something is understood and interpreted *as something*. It means both less and more than that; it evades the alternative of causality and intentionality in all its traditional forms” (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 26). Therefore, pathic experiences occur prior to or beyond intentionality and to have a pathic experience is to undergo being affected without clarity or representation as to what is influencing us. We are then exposed to something that does not so much manifest itself through a conscious experience than as a bodily stirring or motion (Waldenfels 2011;

Santanen, 2018). For Waldenfels (2011) the alien does not appear as a “what”, it appears more as a “where”. The alien is from elsewhere and comes with an appeal that calls for our inevitable responsivity. Indeed, without answerability and a response, pathic experience would not occur at all. While the alien is not identifiable as it cannot be attached to any one object or specific meaning, it is experienceable across a threshold. In this in-between or distance in proximity, we move beyond ourselves and our experience becomes alien while the alien itself retains its location in an inaccessible non-place. In the end, the alien shows itself only by eluding us and therefore Waldenfels characterizes it as a hyperphenomenon (Waldenfels, 2011).

Pathic experiences are based on unfinished contact which occurs as an event that constitutes the parties involved. As Santanen writes “Af-fects create a time and space of their own” (Santanen, 2018, p. 283). In pathic experience we are already moved outside ourselves, before becoming aware of being af-fected, thus our response to the affect is likewise deferred. While it is rooted in af-fect, it is distinct from it. However, antecedent pathos and the deferred response do not linearly follow one another, they form one and the same experience that is “shifted in relation to itself” and contains “a genuine time-lag” (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 31). Nonetheless, responding constitutes what we do, but this doing arrives from elsewhere. Santanen clarifies this succinctly:

What matters is the following: that to which one responds (i.e. the demand), is not identical to that something one was originally affected by, even though the demand has a pathic undertone owing to the surplus of af-fect. These two do not converge – a hiatus remains between them – and thus it is impossible to work through the experience exhaustively. . . . To put it more generally: for pathos and the deferred response to be thinkable together in their mutual split, so that the hiatus is not closed, the response must be a creative or inventive gesture. (Santanen, 2018, p. 298)

Waldenfels himself continues on the creative response:

The response is creative as a response i.e. as a form of saying and doing which begins elsewhere, without being grounded in a given sense or in existing rules. Creative responses are responses that are not pre-given, neither in the realm of things nor in the realm of words. . . . This means: whenever we respond, we invent to some extent that *which* we respond, but we do not invent that to which we are responding. (Waldenfels, p. 2007, 34)

As there is an antecedent pathos and a deferred response and the call and response do not converge, pathic experience does not have a graspable origin or foundation. Pathos confronts us with a surplus that is both sense- and goal-less. It disrupts “the familiar formation of sense and rule, thus provoking the creation of new ones” (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 36). In opening a singular event, pathos finds a new order, even if the event itself does not function as part of the order. Such singular events deviate from the familiar and inaugurate other ways of seeing, thinking and acting, for example. Thus, pathic experiences have effects, sometime even as key events, as events that we do not forget as they instigate responses, create new obligations and in the end establish meanings. Therefore “Happenings not only lead us to think, but they also force us to think” (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 31). In this sense thinking too is indebted to what comes from elsewhere and calls for our attentiveness.

What perhaps requires underlining is that in the above-discussed singular events previous conventions are not simply bypassed. They are interrupted exactly on the basis of the evidence of that which happens to us and forces us to respond. It is in this sense pathos, which is traditionally associated with the illogical and irrational, is at work in logos itself. Pathos is about an original heterology that has the potential to strike forth new sensible trajectories (Waldenfels, 2011). If the task of artistic research is to initiative new sensible modes of relating to reality and artists aim at unearthing something new, this potential of pathos is specifically important.

## Some Conclusions

Waldenfels (2007) gives some insight into how art and artistic research could proceed in such a manner that allows for pathic experience and an answerability to the alien as alien. For one thing, he considers phenomenology of the alien to require a responsive approach that begins “at the point where something challenges us and puts our own possibilities into question, even before we get involved in a questioning, in striving for knowledge, and in a will to know” (Waldenfels, 2007, p. 24). I believe this to suggest that artist-researchers should remain faithful to the pathic stirrings that move them, to the key events in their art-making that silently obligate them to continue and in the end make them question and perceive their art-making differently. After all, the alien behaves like ideas that occur to us, like obsessions that haunt us, dreams from which we never fully wake up. However, we cannot bring about such stirrings and responses volitionally. Waldenfels notes that “Only if we start elsewhere, in a place where we have never been and will never be, can we testify to such happening” (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 84). Thus experimenting with the not-yet-known, as has been argued by proponents of artistic research, seems imperative if artistic research is to offer space for the pathic to have an impact. Also, as the excess the pathic comes with is never consumed, the pathic calls for renewed contact and calls to be responded to. As an inaugurating event, pathic experience continues to be evident only through an endless series of replacements, repetitions or aftereffects. Waldenfels describes this situation concretely by stating that:

The “from what” of being affected turns into a “to what” of responding as somebody relates to it in a speaking and acting fashion, rejects it, welcomes it, and brings it to expression. The ability “to say what I suffer from,” which the poet emphatically declares to be the gift of a god, designates a saying of a special kind in everyday life as well. It is a saying and also a doing which does not begin with itself, but

elsewhere, and which therefore always bears traces of some alien influence. This ownness without which nobody would be him- or herself can only come about because of an openness to the alien which nonetheless evades us. It is exactly this which I designate as answering, a response. (Waldenfels, 2011, pp. 27–28).

While Waldenfels' phenomenology aims to "show by words what does not permit being directly said", he also acknowledges that what "philosophy demonstrates art can perform in colours, sounds and movements" (Waldenfels, 2007, p. 56). What I believe that Waldenfels' thinking brings to the fore, is that pathic experience is important to creative undertakings in art and artistic research. The singular events such experience involves cannot be fully grasped and the way they are grasped occur as aftereffects. For them to emerge requires the cultivation of a responsiveness, an open-ended process including unintentional pausing and remaining faithful to key events. Consequently, pathic experience also interrupts and defies the linearity of conventional time and in best cases is generative of a multitude of responses. This suggests that artistic research should be crafted from the very experience and reality of creative processes and emerges through the sensibilities involved in art-making and accounts for various articulations of the sensible.

Finally, responding to the alien through that by which we are affected implies a process of transformation. In pathic experience responses are always indebted to something ungraspable. While we do not make up what we are responding to, responding is inventive since we devise what we respond and in what way we do so. Therefore, responding to the alien can give rise to formative articulations of interrelationships in the form of gestures, acts and material traces that change the customs and conventions directing artistic processes. Indeed, Waldenfels (2007, 2011) implies that no order emerges without silent traces or shadows of alienness. Still he forewarns of the risk that a process of articulation and ordering can sever the connection between pathos and logos and produces the repetition of redundant norms or a blind and violent attack

against convention. In the first case the enlivening affect and contagion of alien experience is lost and in the latter it is destructive. For artistic research, at least two things ensue: For artistic research to be responsive and generative it is imperative continues contain inarticulate features and artist-researchers continue cultivating such sensitivity to pausing and disorientation that allows for a constructive interplay between pathos and logos. Additionally, the process of encountering alienness, and pathic experience, involves a processual ethics that artistic research should pay attention to. I would like to conclude the article by noting that if exploring how art involves thinking about that which does not think is important to artistic research, addressing and allowing space for the alien and pathic experience seems necessary. By continuing to respond and relate to them through both artistic and scholarly means can offer artistic research further opportunities to substantiate art's ownmost power to think further.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Throughout the writing, the term artistic research is used to denote such research undertakings that involve art practice and generate artistic outcomes and that in other contexts are related to as art research, practice as research, performance research, research creation and the like.

<sup>2</sup>Waldenfels' phenomenology was introduced to me by researcher Sami Santanen in the project The Body and the Other (<https://www.uniarts.fi/en/ruumis-ja-toinen>). This Kone Foundation funded project that I am working in explores corporeal strangeness as a phenomenon and experience, focusing particularly on the notion of the uncanny.

<sup>3</sup>Here it is worth noting that philosopher and artist Erin Manning argues that to escape instrumental knowledge and to re-introduce a processual aesthetics of experience, a transversal engagement with relational fields of thinking and doing is required in artistic research (Manning, 2015, pp. 53, 65, 67).