

Dancing Sympathy Beyond Human Failure

Artistic Research as Cosmopolitical Defuturing

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Abstract

The article explores the concepts, tools and methods that may be taken on board by artistic researchers when venturing into uncertain futures. The approaching hay-day of Artistic Research calls for a repositioning of this academic and cultural avantgarde that is assuming real power and must thus take clear opposition against dominant politics and corporate capitalism keeping the human and non-human kinds in perpetual crisis. Next to Science and Technology, Art has finally reached a status of an equivalued cornerstone, and within this level playing field a new research-based approach is needed where power relationships, decision-making mechanisms, dominant narratives or prevalent aesthetics are boldly investigated and critically questioned, (re)instituting the importance of artistic disruption and establishing art-thinking as the key to not only question but also design pathways to meaningful change. Deeply intertwined research methodologies ranging from social to natural sciences, from humanities via (critically reflected) technologies to the (technologically emancipated) arts, should be left to safely mingle and mutually inspire. Rather than colonizing it with yet another false supremacy, we should be learning from the Global South, where collective dancing, storytelling or performing still presents a norm of how to generate new knowledge or reach consensus. Artistic Research can contribute to crafting better worlds even once AI entities get accepted as fellow researchers (if not dancers), their agency reflected in an attitude of radical sympathy (re)instituting care, justice and solidarity by ways of sound research activism.

Keywords

Artistic research, interdisciplinary, posthumanism, art-science-technology, critical

1. Addressing urgencies with Artistic Research (Introduction)

In a terrible ambivalence between the planetary and the personal perspective – tired of a persistent epidemic, faced with another war-induced inflation and a tide of collective guilt stemming from the failure of building a better world, shattered by climate disasters and declining biodiversity – we seem to be approaching a similar if not much worse of a *zeitgeist* to the one of the nineteen-twenties that called for the avant-garde art and design school Bauhaus to chime in with a promise of a new social, cultural and creative (re)form. On the other hand it is clear that the mainstream (power) politics and corporate (platform) capitalism have undermined the high hopes and ideas of the *New European Bauhaus* that seems to be turning into its farce – rather a concealment of the crisis of unsustainable development (CAE, 2020).

May perhaps the emerging trend of Artistic Research (AR) pose a kind of contemporary cultural and academic avant-garde that could bring about better future prospects within a new global kinship paradigm, develop a creative cosmopolitanism that could withstand the anthropocene critique (Haraway, 2016)? Can AR be useful to critically question if not surpass the paradoxes of the neoliberally dominated cultural and creative industries (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002)? The challenge is at hand: how does artistic practice-based research relate to the current societal and planetary urgencies? What kind of concepts, tools and methods should be taken on board by artistic researchers when venturing into uncharted territories?

2. Beyond Failures (Discussion)

2.1 A Renaissance of artistic methods

After sifting through just over thirty artistic doctoral programmes across Europe – and there are dozens more to be found in North America, while the trend is clearly picking up across other continents, too – it becomes clear that most of them feature AR as an important or not central conceptual backbone or at least a key methodological approach. One can assume that AR as such has finally moved to a central position both in cultural as well as academic realms, which is further substantiated by a growing number of books, journals and conferences of the kind. Moreover, next to Science and Technology, Art has in the last decade finally reached a status of an equivalued cornerstone in this not long since proclaimed triangular nexus, a kind of new Renaissance:

By addressing the sublime, the cutting-edge, the unthinkable, even ad-absurdum, all along to formal and methodological disturbance, art seems to have finally become an essential and well-balanced ingredient in the established Art-Science-Technology (AST) blend – lately believed to be the world-saving formula par excellence, perhaps a bit too often (Purg et al, 2021). Both science and art operate through questioning, critical thinking, observation, trial and experimentation, evaluation and repetition, however art does employ more radical data-generation methods such as intuition, imagination, inspiration, abstract sensing, embodiment, over-sensitivity, serendipity, storytelling, over-identification, radicalism, over-consistency, non-work, dis-novation, etc. Therefore not only scientific, but also artistic approaches might render themselves the more relevant in early stages of innovation projects or cycles, let alone research projects as such. Not least, Ars Electronica has been nurturing an art-thinking educational programme for over a decade now.

2.3 Art Thinking toward defuturing

With its potential to attract and mesmerize the masses, art is still too often instrumentalized at the lowest possible level – used to render scientific content more interesting, perhaps tailoring it comprehensible (or at least fascinating) to a specific audience. Moreover, scientists collaborate with artists often with an aim to increase their impact on public awareness, create emotional connections that enable memorization, and strengthen learning. (Gewin, 2021) On the other hand artists can take advantage of collaborating with science to add weight (or at least data relevance) to their research process. Even if started by seemingly selfish opportunism, a kind of symbiosis often arises within these *Colliding Worlds* (Miller, 2014) that brings art and science onto the level playing field, supported by technology to reopen perspectives on livable futures. Nevertheless, the artistic realm (the artist) is therein still – as had been the case since the Greek Tragedy – saying, showing or downright performing acts or scenarios that may be unthinkable for the real world and the common man, thereby redefining (but often also instituting) the laws of (co)existence. The artistic practices, lifestyles, research strategies and methods of investigation have by now become an important factor in reimagining business models, particularly in the realm of social, but also increasingly in technical innovation. (Purg et al, 2021)

However, rather than falling victim to science-only dominated future visions and scenarios, AR should better take on the role of *defuturing* as defined by Fry (1999) as the destruction of future by design: as humans on a decaying planet, we seem to allow ourselves to think change only within given limits, and these limits are disguised as Innovation or the New. Because our conditions of existence drastically changed, Fry stresses that we need to radically switch our philosophy of existence and of acting. The alternative to this process of “change so that nothing changes” and mere covering up of the manifold crises, would be “informed futuring” – finding the alternative and acquiring the agency to create something truly different, an actual change. This is also what nowadays the so called *investigative arts* are concerned with in that they pertain less to the domain of contemporary art than to the realm of innovation, permeating different generations and disciplines. They do this not only through socially and technologically meaningful, future bearing yet critical research-based artistic practice, but also via pedagogical programmes and popular culture mainstreaming that use different kinds of holistic (e.g. platform) approaches, not least with considerable public (financial) support (konS, 2023). All the above-mentioned references agree in that an artistically informed redesign of imaginable futures can only come about through deeply intertwined research that pools from all possible realms of (establishing, refining and distributing) knowledge, from social to natural sciences, from humanities via (critically reflected) technologies to the (technologically emancipated) arts.

2.3 Cosmopolitical research symbiosis

In his seminal work Ivan Illich criticized industrial capitalism and productivity, to instead describe a path of human emancipation and autonomy for reaching convivial life that denotes an “*autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment*” (Illich, 1973, p. 11). Any contemporary and meaningful AR that considers different stakeholders (as elements) of an investigated reality (or constructed potentiality) should thus get to reflect the dependence among living beings, which is particularly productive in the field of posthumanism to describe interdependencies and entanglements between different species, human and non-human agents.

Looking across the art-science research that has in the past decade grown to an established cross-field, a certain kind of *symbiotic mutualism* becomes apparent, going against mere inter-species tolerance of the posthuman era. It represents the central point of symbiosis – both physical or factual in scientific terms, and symbolical in the artistic sense. These new perspectives on symbiosis were condensed in the concept of *Cosmopolitics* by Isabelle Stengers (2011) who argues against mere inter-species tolerance but rather for an “ecology of practices,” concluding her philosophical inquiry with a forceful critique of (mere) tolerance, exposing it to be a fundamentally condescending attitude, preventing those worldviews that challenge dominant explanatory systems from being taken seriously. Instead of tolerance, the concept and practice of *Cosmopolitics* rejects politics as a universal category and allows modern scientific practices to peacefully coexist with other forms of knowledge. Thus we might assume that a kind of *cosmopolitical symbiotic mutualism* should be sought in any contextually sensitive AR practice motivated for actual transformation.

2.4 The disruptive Artist Researcher remodernized

Rather than a condition *sine qua non*, AR could thus be entrusted with the daunting mission to profoundly integrate different disciplines, reaching a new level of dialogue between artistic and (traditionally) scientific worlds. A mere multidisciplinary tolerance and optional cooperation does not suffice anymore, deep collaborations should be sought in the spirit of a true interdisciplinarity that surpasses a simple co-opting of different experts working side by side on distributed tasks and puts away with methodological aprioris pertaining to individual knowledge production cultures within ivory *fact-ory* towers that resemble guilds rather than forums, or martial arts rings rather than dancefloors. AR should be possible both within and outside of the safe and sometimes suffocating walls of academia – and even outside of the by now relatively well-funded cultural production sectors of the EU for that matter. At its best, it should be exploring the adventurous realms spanning between and beyond these two worlds!

What seems to be crucially missing in the current debate around the place of AR in society is the acknowledgment of the importance of artistic disruption and the (re)establishment of art-thinking as the key innovative methodology that may provoke radical change and create a meaningful difference from what was (wrong). If post-modernity is understood as the pivotal cultural programme of neoliberalism (Pfaller, 2018), may there be such future bearing vectors of a new avant-garde AR approach that responds to a radically revisited modernity marked by the increasingly notable concepts of post- and de-growth, where the exponential amassing of research(ed) topics is replaced by an ecocritical convergence of divergent tools and approaches into one as-if modernist methodological narrative (or narrowed field) within a clear ethical framework?

2.5 Research for and from the peripheries

AR should be aware of the artist being ever since (the Ancient Greeks) “authorized for deviance by counterfactual reasoning” (Sacco, 2023). However, the artist’s autonomous agency – where artistic activity (be it mere creation, stringent production, or downright research) should not get instrumentalized to serve any kind of social, political or let alone economic agenda – is a concept quite typical of the (north)western and thus (post)colonial position. On the contrary, as Pierluigi Sacco notes, in the Global South the artistic practices still predominantly play a (or even *the*) role of social or political agency (ibid.). There the research-based approach – where power relationships, decision-making mechanisms, dominant narratives or prevalent aesthetics are investigated, if necessary even taking anarchist positions – appears to be delivering the public cause of the artistic activity per default, if not already *per se*. By way of a paradox in decolonizing artistic agency the technologies (e.g. social media platforms) that are being developed in the Global North get nowadays applied more progressively in the Global South, where collective dancing, storytelling or performing presents the social norm, whereas westernized societies suffer from a hyper-atomized stage anxiety. As Sacco notes further, on the contemporary social media platforms only very few users actually produce content (trends, opinions, positions etc.) for the large majority of (media) consumers – which shows the few-to-many mediatization model has still not changed.

It is the far social and global peripheries where art is still (tolerated to be) instrumentalized predominantly to educate people and make positive change in culture as everyday practice, thus replacing the role of democratic politics that are failing or absent exactly because of the trends of global(ized) neoliberalism. And this is arguably where AR should be directed towards – and be learning from at the same time. Moreover, ever since recently the Large Language Models within the soaring Artificial Intelligence (AI) developments have started dominating (the imaginaries of) data interpretation, both the examining as well as the production of outrageous and mind-bending utopian or dystopian scenarios of the future cannot anymore depend on (and derive from) the human (experience) alone.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Worldbuilding with new fellows

In the view of AI turning the tables in the past half a year, it became clear that humans have evolved the(ir) machines into equal if not superior partners in dialogue. Machines create knowledge the architecture of which is not visible anymore in the black (box) void of the neural networks, the process of knowledge making not being accessible even to those who own or build these systems. For their immense capacity of handling big data and not merely simulating but de facto performing creativity in their interpretation and presentation, should these AI entities not qualify as fellow research agents? Even if the agency of which (whom) would need to be always critically reflected as such – being artificial and corporate. They might not appear corpo-real or have emotional or affective capacity for now (and, do we/they really need that?), however self-sustaining robotic AI entities are already being tested in laboratories and even deployed in real-life scenarios. In the face of these greatly accelerated developments in the AI realm and its overwhelming permeation of both the sciences and the arts as well as both the mundane and the corporate realities, the humanities at large need to immediately and thoroughly rethink and shift their epistemological and thus methodological position, not only recognizing kin in animals, plants and the earth as such – that we have finally come to see as a whole – but also the man-made technology that is clearly becoming a stakeholder of capacities (and meanings) beyond reach to the human mind, be it individual or collective.

3.2 Counter-dancing the method

Both academic and cultural production realms, and especially those of the creative industries, have become dominated by the capitalist condition where the value of intellectual creative work of individuals and groups gets extracted by institutions and corporations alike – while clear perspectives over what is actually at stake get blurred by the screaming media machineries of the digital platforms we live (and research) by. Similarly as the digital algorithms that run our tools of knowledge production and dominate our socializing spaces, also AR can and should “*be danced as a counter-dance. (...) We must confront capitalist digitality as an artificial and inhuman structure in an artistic way, that is, as a dance: first, neither purely affective nor purely discursive, but both at the same time, and second, with simulation-modeling, automatic-fictionalization, imagining, dreaming, and designing operativities, and as an affective-technological structure of the counter-algorhythmic.*” (Miyazaki, 2023, p. 64) As perhaps one of the biggest opportunities to contribute to a truly new Bauhaus, the highly developed technological crafts should be joined with the immense disciplinary width (and integration capacity) of the arts, profoundly informed by social and natural sciences as well as (safeguarded by) humanities. However, rather than within a fixed model or curriculum, they should be left to spend safe and ample time together on an open intersectional *dancefloor*, mingling in mutually inspiring choreographies that bring about research events and processes liberating the mind (and the body) in order to generate better ethical frameworks and bring about such collaborative aesthetics that matter anew.

3.3 Research reenacted as radical sympathy

There can hardly be a sincere approach to AR without observing or at least knowing about the postulates of *action research* – its methods deeply embedded into the social or in deed physical realm, its reflections somewhat radically incorporated, and its results frankly enacted (and acted-out) within truly participatory settings and under principles of persistent inclusivity. Any such research must critically self-reflect and should be peer-supervised, as its boundaries (of validity) are consistently challenged by the oscillation between sober reflection and wuthering empathy. This is why a contemporary approach to AR may need to enact (if not downright perform) *Radical Sympathy* as a conscious attitude that moves from personal compassion, and the sharing of immediate relations (which would correspond to empathy) “*to more pronounced enactments of care and justice*” in order to eventually bring about a “*nurturing type of general activism and sensitivity aimed at fostering cultures of solidarity.*” (LaBelle, 2022, p.9)

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