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I HAD A DREAM...

Last night I was dreaming. This is, in itself, not an interesting opening for a special issue that is supposed to have artistic research and its methods and methodologies as its subject, except that I dreamt about dreaming. I dreamt about dreaming as a precious but underrated method for thinking, a technique or alternate modality to engage with the world. As a, by and large, incoherent event – fragmented, dislocated, proliferative, temporary, co-locative, etc ... Dreaming as a method to somehow engage with the world is excused from the strictures of non-contradiction and consistency. Dreaming disrupts the distinction between fact and fiction, between reality and fantasy, and undermines the myth that knowledge necessarily entails transparency and verification. Dreaming, either at night or during the day, as a method for artistic researchers – that was the topic of my dream.¹

This afternoon I was dreaming, sitting in a comfortable chair in the partial shade in our garden. I was musing at length about research methods, that is, literally, about ways to search and search again. This led me to the thought (it was not more than a glimpse actually) that 'method' – coming from the Greek *meta-hodos* – should be regarded as an activity, as something that needs to be done: to follow a way or a path. Therefore, method can only take shape in the process of its practice, hence in a singular event, although it has to be iterable at the same time in order to qualify as reliable. In academic discourses 'method' is often understood as all steps that need to be taken in pursuance of finding an answer to a predefined question, whereas 'methodology' implies the accountability of the methods being used.

At present, artistic research can draw on many already existing research methods, methods tried and tested in the natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities.² In and through art, in and through artistic research, in and through artistic explorations and experimentations, however, these methods can also be rethought, rethought as a form of cultural cannibalism or *antropofagia*: new paths can be followed, new quests developed. For example, we could dispense with the idea that all kinds of rules and procedures need to be followed as accurately and transparently as possible. Instead, we could roam without a proposed causality that goes from initial research questions, via carefully preselected methods, to sound and solid results and conclusions. We could work from the idea of a continuously mutual influence between these elements as a kind of constant and productive feedback loop: once you run into something interesting, this inexorably realigns or alters the components that together form the research project.

Early this evening I was dreaming. I dreamt that Walter Benjamin was talking to me, actually quoting from his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. This is what he said: “Method is a digression [...] Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, retuning in a roundabout way to its original object.”³ To say that method is a detour is to say that the best way to reach one’s goal is by detours and digressions. It is to say that a method should always be open to unanticipated modifications. It is to say that methods cannot always be fully controlled by a researcher; they should occur and present themselves amidst an assemblage of many agents of which the researcher is only one. What makes for a valuable, what for a useless method? This question can never be answered in general terms, nor can it be decided in advance, as the right method arises in the interactive process that each research is. Yet even the right method will always exclude some and prioritize other data and be incapable of incorporating within its framework that which is excluded.

I sincerely hope that this final remark has not turned my dream into a nightmare and that all readers will be inspired by the rich palette of (reflections on) methods, procedures, and strategies that is presented here. Let’s dream!

Marcel Cobussen

1. See also the *Introduction to Ludic Dreaming by The Occulture* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

2. See Henk Borgdorff’s *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, especially pp. 149-159 (Leiden University Press, 2012).

3. Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, New York: Verso, p. 28.