Subjectivity and Synchrony in Artistic Research

Ethnographic Insights

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Culture and Social Practice

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[transcript]

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Chapter 1: Approaching an elusive field

Is Artistic Research a sign
of contemporaneity?
(Caviezel & Schwander, 2015, p. 44)

Let me start with an observation. Or better still: with an impression. Artistic research seems to be everywhere. Once you start looking for it, fields that deploy a combination of both scientific and artistic approaches are almost innumerable. They include, to name a few, geography, architecture, urban studies, physics, biology, technology, politics, criminology, design, and medicine. Additionally, artistic research exists in many formats and diverse locations: exhibitions, performances, and sound installations take place in museums, theaters, galleries, and independent project spaces sometimes specifically founded to present artistic research approaches. The regular activities of university research projects, education programs, and artists who work in laboratories and other cooperative research settings often include conferences and symposia. The latter are accompanied by publications such as catalogs, journal articles, edited anthologies, and monographs. Unsurprisingly, the publications and publication formats in the field of artistic research have become almost innumerable.

This is also linked to the recent foundation of various online journals. Some of these journals, such as *Studies in Material Thinking* (launched in 2007),[1] are discipline specific, which is why they are difficult to find if searching for simple keywords such as "artistic research." Journals such as *Research Cultures* (launched in 2015)[2] were initiated to commission trans-

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1   See https://www.materialthinking.org.

2   See https://researchcultures.com.

disciplinary research contributions in and on the broader field of artistic research. Others were established as independent or institutional peer-review journals based on submissions. The first of these journals was the *Journal of Artistic Research,* initiated in 2011.[3] It maintains a pioneering role due to its database, called *Research Catalogue*,[4] which was established to archive and enable open access to publications in the field. In addition, it encourages contributions from both academic research contexts and artistic-experimental settings. Comparable independent journals are *continent.* (first issue published in 2011) and *Glass Bead* (initiated in 2016).[5] University-based journals in this field include, for example, *activate* (launched in 2011); *RUUKKU* (launched in 2013), which uses *Research Catalogue* as a storage system and format for its issues; *PARSE* (first issue published in 2015); and *ELSE* (first released in 2016).[6] Finally, some artistic research projects publish their research output on a specifically designed website in addition to or as a conscious alternative to print versions.[7]

Most of these journals were founded as open-access platforms. This is not specific to the field of artistic research; rather, one can note a general trend in academia to contribute to the democratization of access to research results. What is noteworthy, though, is that the presentation formats and dissemination strategies of artistic research projects are increasingly individualized and adapted to the content. That is, they are not limited to, for example, an exhibition or an edited volume anymore. In addition to these formats, the participating researchers create online manuals, publish journal articles, and develop festival contributions to reach out to their corresponding peer group. This means that according to the various disciplines involved in artistic research endeavors, specific channels are used and developed to disseminate the research results within various distinct communities, and, hence, to spread artistic research approaches across disciplines.

If ubiquity is an indicator for contemporaneity, then Caviezel and Schwander's question that opens this chapter deserves an affirmative an-

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3   See http://jar-online.net.

4   See https://www.researchcatalogue.net.

5   See http://continentcontinent.cc/ and http://www.glass-bead.org/journal.

6   See http://www.thisisactivate.net; http://ruukku-journal.fi/en/;
    http://parsejournal.com/journal/; and http://www.elsejournal.org/.

7   See, for example, http://windtunnelbulletin.zhdk.ch.

swer: artistic research indeed seems to be the current mode of research and production in many socially relevant fields. One could also speak of a trend. As such, this is where I would like to elaborate on my impression that artistic research is deployed in so many different ways that it becomes almost indistinct. The various labels used to denote artistic research initiatives tend to blur their content, and the individual projects' contributions to the field often remain unclear. This not only makes the field difficult to grasp, but it makes an evaluation of artistic research exhibitions, presentations, or publications difficult.

The conclusion I draw from this impression does not aim at an increased number of categorical differentiations already so frequent in the literature on artistic research. Taking into consideration the distinction between "research into art and design, research through art and design, research for art and design," Frayling (1993, p. 5) proposes a predetermined scheme applicable to many different projects in the field of artistic research. Developing Frayling's typology further, Dombois' (2009) two-directional differentiation between "research on / for / through art" as well as "art on / for / through research" (p. 13) provides a qualitative orientation for both artistic and research endeavors in congruence with the prepositions and working modes he lists. These and other definitions can be interpreted as attempts at delineating and clarifying, yet simultaneously homogenizing, the field. Even though some definitions offer qualitative classifications, their determinate character is somehow equivalent to muting the field. These typologies seem to eliminate the necessity of negotiations and confrontations on subjects, theories, terms, and methods. Yet, artistic and academic practices include critical inquiry and constant boundary pushing, moving between different subjects, switching fields and roles, and testing, adjusting, and discarding material, theories, and methods. Both artists and academics pick up current discourses and question inherent categories; put forward hypotheses and new notions that become the subject of discussion, criticism, dismissal, and redefinition; and raise questions instead of providing predetermined typologies, all while addressing varying communities and looking for publication formats that are suitable both for specific content and distinct audiences. Therefore, ongoing negotiations, discussions, and confrontations are and will persist in being characteristic for artistic research projects, that is, especially where several fields intersect.

Against this background, my impression of artistic research as an omnipresent mode of inquiry and knowledge production evoked the following research questions: How do artistic and scientific disciplines actually work together? What are the topics, practices, politics, chances, and problems at stake? And which criteria can be used to individually and qualitatively evaluate artistic research projects? One approach useful in examining collaborative work in artistic research contexts is that of *boundary objects* (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Studying a group of museum practitioners with varying professional backgrounds and experiences, the authors found that the joint development of boundary objects such as maps or labels helped in translating between distinct interests and different practices inherent to collaborative work processes (p. 396). Therefore, the research questions underlying my study can be broadened as follows: Which role do boundary objects have in the context of artistic research projects? Which kind of knowledge do they evoke? And which indicators determine the quality of the impact boundary objects have in such research projects?

To get a better understanding of artistic research processes, I decided to carry out a long-term ethnographic study based on the above research questions (see "Chapter 2: Ethnographic field research"). The aim of my study is to offer an in-depth perspective on the procedures, potentials, and risks of collaborative artistic research settings. To this end, two exemplary research settings are analyzed in greater detail in "Chapter 3: Recounting the field": one stemming from the field of digital musical instrument design, and the other from the field of computer-controlled, responsive environments. A look at previous studies on artistic research and at the field's more recent developments underlines both the necessity and the added value of a long-term ethnographic field study on artistic research environments.

1.1 PREVIOUS STUDIES AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

This chapter's introductory quotation is just one question from the *Eighty-Seven Questions on Artistic Research* published by the Swiss Artistic Research Network (SARN) (Caviezel & Schwander, 2015). Artists, curators, gallery owners, researchers, and art critics contributed to this publication to

raise questions about the field's current issues and delineation. The contributors investigate topics that several volumes in the field of artistic research have extensively touched upon over the past decades. Without trying to approach exhaustiveness, these topics include, for example:

- General synopses of the field and its transdisciplinary methods (Badura et al., 2015; Caduff, Siegenthaler, & Wälchli, 2010; Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2005, 2014; Holert, 2011; Jürgens & Tesche, 2015; Tröndle et al., 2011; Tröndle & Warmers, 2012).
- The institutionalization of the arts in academia in relation to the artistic PhD (Buck, Hofhues, & Schindler, 2015; Dombois, 2009; Elkins, 2014; Nilsson, Dunin-Woyseth, & Janssens, 2017; Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014; Shanken, 2010; Slager, 2013; J. Wilson, 2018; M. Wilson & van Ruiten, 2014), as well as critical voices toward this tendency (Holert, 2010; Lynen, 2011; Maharaj, 2002; Sheikh, 2009; Steyerl, 2010).
- The acknowledgment of artistic and aesthetics practices as modes of research and pedagogic methods (Ambrožič & Vettese, 2013; Bippus, 2009; Butt, 2017; Dombois, Bauer, Mareis, & Schwab, 2012; Haas, 2018; Mersch, 2015).
- More specific foci on embodied, performative practices (Dertnig et al., 2014; Douglas & Coessens, 2011; Fentz & McGuirk, 2015; Johnson, 2011; Klein, 2007; Pakes, 2004; Snowber, 2016; Zembylas & Niederauer, 2016).
- Concrete examples of artists working in laboratory settings, cooperative research projects, and the distinction between and the complementary aspects of "artistic" and "natural scientific" practices (BridA, Kersevan, Mango, & Pavlica, 2009; Daniels & Schmidt, 2008; Duscher, Sachs, & Schulz, 2017; Eisner, 1981; Maeder, 2017; Puncer, 2008; Scott, 2006, 2010; Witzgall, 2003).
- The promotion of the arts' epistemological potential and thence the democratization of knowledge production (Biggs & Karlsson, 2011; Borgdorff, 2010; Busch, 2009; Gibbons et al., 1994; Holert, 2014; Krohn, 2006; Mareis, 2012; Peters, 2013; Schwab, 2015; Stemmler, 2014; Zembylas, 2012).
- Overviews on epistemic practices in artistic research (Biggs & Karlsson, 2011; Caduff et al., 2010; Schindler, 2015), as well as the

description and discussion of different forms of implicit knowledge inherent to artistic and academic research practices, such as "pre-reflective" (Borgdorff, 2010), "experiential" (Biggs, 2004, 2007; Mareis, 2012; Niedderer, 2007; Niedderer & Imani, 2008; Zembylas, 2012), "embodied" (Johnson, 2011; Tröndle, 2012), "sensuous" (Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2006 onwards), "material" (Zembylas, 2012), and "practical" (Mareis, 2012; Zembylas, 2012).

Such a literature mapping cannot but be contested, since most of the publications mentioned above tackle more than just one of the above-mentioned topics. It follows that the methods and theories the authors refer to are very diverse. The discussion about epistemic practices is frequently linked to Polanyi (1983), because he lay an important foundation for reflections upon implicit forms of knowledge. The latter have been thoroughly discussed in regard to both their practical and theoretical implications (see literature mapping above). Publications with a focus on production processes in artistic research settings describe and reflect upon the translating function of boundary objects in reference to Star and Griesemer (1989) (see also "1.2.1 Boundary objects"). Discussions about research practices often stem from experiences of specific research projects. In these cases, Rheinberger (1997) and Latour (2005) are the most frequent references to describe laboratory settings or the interdependence between researchers, the materials they use, and the objects they produce.

However, it needs to be stated that in-depth theoretical discussions about the research results are rather unusual. Instead, the reports often state that the projects requested increased project management and communication to strengthen mutual understanding (Damm, Hopfengärtner, Niopek, & Bayer, 2013; Könnemann, 2014). Secondly, the reflections emphasize that exchange about different practices proved to be enriching for the researchers involved (Fentz & McGuirk, 2015; Jürgens & Tesche, 2015; von Borries, 2015). Thirdly, they stress that the combination of artistic and scientific approaches enabled more encompassing and unexpected research results, which they could not have achieved with just one participating discipline (Chandler, 1999; Jürgens & Tesche, 2015; McNiff, 2008; see also the manifesto by Root-Bernstein, Siler, Brown, & Snelson, 2011). The reports sometimes remain on a descriptive level and emphasize that including the arts into the projects provoked aesthetic experiences and sensuous percep-

tion (Rogers, 2015; Stemmler, 2014). In this context, the similarity between artistic and scientific practices is used to legitimize and affirm the fruitful combination of both (Engler, 1994; Legin, 2013; Mandelbrojt, 1994; O'Riley, 2011; Soto, 1994; von Borries, 2015).

In sum, these case studies offer important insights into as well as reflections on methods and practices underpinning artistic research. Their conclusions, however, take an affirmative stance and do not address tensions or conflicts that arose during the research endeavors. Thereby, these conclusions remain superficial and offer only one rather positive perspective. Even though it is not surprising to experience different understandings of research practices and conflicting theoretical standpoints in transdisciplinary research settings, literature on specific artistic research projects does not tackle this issue.

1.2 ANALYTIC APPROACH OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Instead of taking an entirely affirmative stance, my goal is to add an analytic layer to the current literature on the field with the help of the following three aspects. Firstly, the observation of various project phases in two different artistic research settings (see "2.1 Selecting the cases") enabled me to look at what these projects claimed to contribute to the field and to examine whether their goals were in line with their methodological setup as well as the way these projects presented their outcomes. This analytic approach can be described as ecological in that it considers the entanglement of research processes, practices, materials, actors, and the development of boundary objects in relation to their institutional environment.

Secondly, I will combine this macro perspective with a micro one, and examine how subjectivity influences artistic research settings. Observing the researchers during my ethnographic study quickly revealed that their individuality and respective backgrounds determined my overall impression of the research projects. More precisely, the researchers' distinct competences, behavioral patterns, subjective moods, and reactions toward each other predominated the joint practices. At first glance, this might be a rather usual finding in transdisciplinary research groups. However, the mere gathering of different people who are supposed to collaborate over a certain

period of time does not imply a naturally emerging, common work rhythm. Rather, it is necessary to get accustomed to each other and to become attuned to distinct behavioral patterns, skills, and experiences in collaborative research projects. This aspect has remained undiscussed in the literature on artistic research to date.

Therefore, I will thirdly combine three theoretical perspectives that support the analysis of my findings on both macro and micro levels. One of these approaches is the above-mentioned notion of boundary objects. It was originally put forward by Star and Griesemer (1989) to examine heterogeneous research settings. Subsequently, Borgdorff (2012) adapted it to artistic research environments more specifically. Starting with an elaboration on boundary objects' potential to structure research processes, I will go on to link them with Gibson's theory of *affordance* (1986) to examine the material and practical characteristics of boundary objects, which, in turn, afford a boundary object's uses. The concept is therefore helpful in analyzing how researchers perceive or do not perceive the affordances of a boundary object and in which situations they make or do not make use of them. The combination of the two approaches sustains a thorough examination of organizational structures, as well as of the development processes and potential uses of boundary objects. Both concepts inform the two case descriptions and are therefore introduced below.

To carry out an encompassing analysis that integrates organizational aspects of research processes *and* subjective perception in respect to the examined research settings, I will complement the two theoretical concepts with a third approach from the field of *affect theory*. The latter is suitable to address how human and non-human bodies in a common environment affect each other. A notion brought forward in this context is *affectif* (Seyfert, 2012), which is closely linked to *attunement* (ibid.) and *synchrony* (Koole & Tschacher, 2016; Wheatley et al., 2012). These concepts are useful in analyzing how various researchers' individual moods and corresponding behaviors and reactions can be integrated and composed so as to create a research environment in which the researchers can work productively with their distinct competences and disciplinary backgrounds. Following the two case descriptions, an introduction to these notions and the broader field of affect theories serves as a point of departure into the reflections on my findings ("Chapter 4: Reflections on research dynamics").

Such iteration between theoretical and methodical foundations, concrete case descriptions, and further theoretical reflections are characteristic of ethnographic research processes. In my specific case, the study is based on the above-outlined research questions. At the same time, I remained open and alert toward aspects that were important to the researchers or that I perceived as predominant during my field research. Hence, the structure of the study mirrors the iterative analytic process in that the theoretical concepts are introduced in different chapters.

1.2.1 Boundary objects

Star and Griesemer's (1989) interest in the management of heterogeneous research settings includes the analysis of the historical work records of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, Berkeley. A group of researchers, administrators, collectors, entrepreneurs, and conservationists—in short, practitioners with "different visions stemming from the intersection of participating social worlds" (p. 396)—contributed to the institution's development. The authors' analysis reveals that the development of boundary objects was one possible strategy to mediate and translate between the heterogeneous interests, methods, and practices involved in the interdisciplinary collaboration. Star and Griesemer (1989) conceive of boundary objects as

both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual- site use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. (p. 393)

The definition stresses the internal heterogeneity (see also Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 408) and interpretive flexibility (see also Star, 2010, p. 602) of boundary objects: situated between different social worlds, they represent the different interests of these worlds. Therefore, they facilitate individual use and interpretation within each discipline as well as collective meaning making across the intersecting worlds.

When they first put the concept forward, the authors developed a non-exhaustive typology of boundary objects. These included modular "repositories" such as libraries, vague "ideal types" such as diagrams, objects with

"coincident boundaries" such as maps, and "standardized forms" of communication such as labels (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 410f.). These exemplary forms of boundary objects are useful on an organizational level: they foster exchange between practitioners from various backgrounds and are supposed to reduce potential tensions that can arise in collaborative work settings (ibid.). However, instead of resolving the tensions, "representations, or inscriptions, contain at every stage the traces of multiple viewpoints, translations and incomplete battles" (p. 413). This finally implies that the functions, meanings, and uses of boundary objects can vary over the course of collaboration.

Applications and criticism

The openness of the original concept of boundary objects is mirrored in the diversity of its interpretations, but also in the criticism it generated. For example, Fox (2011) addresses the forms of boundary objects. He states that boundary objects as conceived of by Star and Griesemer are located on a representative meta-level only (p. 82). In comparison, his analysis shows that technological objects themselves—as opposed to explanatory descriptions—could work as boundary objects as well (p. 80). Bergman, Lyytinen, and Mark (2007) take a similar perspective in considering boundary objects as too passive (p. 550). In an adaption of the original concept, they suggest that *design boundary objects* are more active in that they serve integrating stakeholder interests (ibid. and p. 552). However, through focusing on the mediation between producer and recipient, they neglect the fact that boundary objects are jointly developed by the people who simultaneously use them as meaning-making artifacts.

Fujimura (1992) discusses the science-sociological scope of boundary objects. In reference to Latour, he criticizes that the constant need to negotiate boundary objects fosters ongoing construction instead of stabilization of facts. The latter, in his opinion, would be a requirement to generate well-founded, substantiated scientific facts. (p. 174f.) Nevertheless, he acknowledges the "coordination and management of work across worlds" inherent to boundary objects (p. 176) (see also Koskinen & Mäkinen, 2009). While Fujimura considers the discursive need a disadvantage, others emphasize it as the particular strength of boundary objects. G. Wilson and Herndl (2007) analyzed knowledge maps created at a national laboratory. They show, on the one hand, that these maps facilitated the discursive distinction between

different competences involved in the examined collaboration. On the other hand, they support identifying oneself with the team's common interest and motivation (p. 138). The authors conclude that rhetoric oscillation between distinct and joint perspectives along a boundary object executes an integrative function that enables a community of practice to continue with its "shared action" (ibid. and p. 551).

Conceiving of common perspectives in a different manner, Carlile (2004) goes as far as to conceptualize jointly developed knowledge as a boundary object. In collaborative projects, "old" knowledge is used to fulfill tasks, while new knowledge is simultaneously acquired and shared between the collaborators (p. 559). This hybrid form of knowledge then serves as a boundary object, that is, as a means to communicate across boundaries (p. 557).

A more extensive literature review of studies that use boundary objects as analytic framework was carried out by Akkerman and Bakker (2011). Their review reveals that several studies predominantly focus on a boundary object's "bridging function" in work and social contexts (p. 134). Despite the diversity of disciplinary approaches in the reviewed studies, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) distill four learning mechanisms and corresponding processes of boundary-crossing projects that were common to the studies they discuss: (1) identification serves learning about the collaborators' practices as well as about one's own working habits from a different perspective (p. 142f.); (2) coordination through routinized practices or standardized communication methods fosters the ongoing exchange and movement between different, simultaneous practices (p. 143f.); (3) reflection upon the various practices through explicit, discursive "perspective making" and "perspective taking" ideally leads to enriched standpoints upon which further practices are founded (p. 145f.); and, finally, (4) transformation might lead to the development of what could be called a hybrid, third practice; that is, through the constant explanation of the intersecting practices and worlds, new working methods could be enacted in the long run (p. 146ff.).

To fully exploit the learning potential inherent to boundary-crossing endeavors, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) emphasize the following conditions: Firstly, the mechanisms mentioned above need to be accompanied by constant dialogical negotiation to explain and share meaning. Secondly, common meaning making implies neither that intersecting social worlds