

Theory and Research as Incommensurable Metaphors: Ideology of Artistic Research

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Abstract

In this article I focus on the concepts of *artistic research* and *theory* in the domain of artistic research. I discuss the chief elements of artistic research and the way in which these concepts are approached in the policy and principles of artistic research. In the end of the article I propose one possible type of artistic production and the relevancy of its role in research.

KEYWORDS: artistic research, contemporary art, visual art, institutional critique, ideology critique, sociology of arts

Introduction

Throughout the brief history of artistic research, artists and scholars have doubted its meaningfulness, necessity, and status as a scholarly activity. Some artists have legitimized artistic research by claiming to possess special knowledge that only artists have. (See e.g. Mäki 2005, p. 13–14.) Some have been worried about lowered scientific criteria and questioned the role of artists as developers of research, while maintaining an open view on the scientific contribution of art. (See e.g. Nevanlinna, 2001; Kantokorpi, 2001.) The dialectics of scepticism and legitimisation is hard to describe accurately. The discussion on artistic research certainly deserves its own study. I justify the need for research by arguing that research carried out by artists does not invariably represent artistic research. Also, there is no uniform paradigm in this field. To concretise the situation in Finland: what comes to research carried out by visual artists, the policies of the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland and the University of Art and Design Helsinki of the Aalto University seem to differ from that of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. The policy of the University of Art and Design Helsinki of the Aalto University is ambivalent, though. These differences should be studied and analysed. At least I would like to examine the vicissitudes of Finnish artistic research or research conducted by artists. In the article at hand I reconsider two concepts in the domain of artistic research: “*artistic research*” and “*theory*.” I claim that there is a strong need for quotation marks, not only denoting each concept as a word but also emphasizing their metaphorical use. In this conceptual analysis I concentrate mainly on artistic research in the field of visual art in

Finland by asking, can one study through art and how can art play a relevant role in research? I discuss generic issues rather than individual demonstrations of knowledge and skill, which, except for a few preliminary notions, I leave for further analysis.

An artist in the world of science

In Finland, artistic research is composed of a written part and an art production. The art production may assume the form of a product family, a series of exhibitions, concerts, plays, etc. *Artistic research* is an established term signifying doctoral studies carried out in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, the Finnish Theatre Academy, the Sibelius Academy, and to some extent the University of Art and Design Helsinki at the Aalto University. In terms of visual art, *doctors of fine arts* graduate only from the Finnish Academy of Fine arts. Instead of a doctoral dissertation they produce a “demonstration of knowledge and skill.” PhD students in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland and the University of Art and Design Helsinki at the Aalto University graduate as *doctors of arts* by producing a doctoral thesis with or without an art production. The name of the degree is the same as in the case of PhD students in art pedagogy or media research, who defend a doctoral thesis without an art production.

Nevertheless, the differences do not lie in terminology alone. According to Professor in Artistic Research Jan Kaila, head of the doctoral programme of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, “the purpose of the programme was to produce new knowledge based on creative work done by the artist. From the very beginning, the primary focus of the programme was on creative artistic work, rather than adopting any direct model from the world of science. Nor did the programme seek to emulate studio-based or practice-based PhD programmes such as those established in Great Britain.” (Kaila, 2008a, p. 6.) The aim was not to “accept primarily theoretically oriented artists in the programme, but artists whose work and methods display interesting research potential.” (Kaila, 2008a, p. 8.) Kaila (2008b, p. 36) also writes that the original aim of the doctoral programme was to melt theory and artistic practice together.

Such a model has proved to be paradoxical. Despite the aims, among the theoretical parts of the demonstrations of knowledge and skill conducted by doctoral students of fine arts it is easy to find presentations in which argumentation follows the direct and established models of scientific conceptualisation and theorisation. (See e.g. Weckman, 2005; Pitkänen-Walter, 2006.) Having noticed the paradox, Kaila (2008b, p. 36) ended up with the dual model of a theoretical part and an art production. And this corresponds to the combining of theory and artistic expression – or practice – which is common in artistic research.

Theory was not applied as such from the world of science to artistic practice; instead the theoretical part – ergo written part – described an artist’s work through academic concepts and terms. Artists absorbed the academic way of expression into their descriptions. According to the official formulation of the goal of doctoral education in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, the emphasis of artistic research is on artistic work: “Doctoral studies in the Academy are based on artistic research where high-quality artistic work intertwines with theoretical research. Doctoral students are experts in their own field, internationally renowned visual artists who apply research methods to their work. The primary results of artistic research are artistic productions presented publicly. As another important result of their research, doctoral students produce reflective and theoretical knowledge about their own artworks, the process of making and presenting them.” (Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2012.) Is it possible to study some other area than one’s own artistic practice? According to this formulation it is: “In the theoretical part, the author analyses his/her own artistic work and/or produces new information about the research topic in some other form.” (Finnish Academy of Fine arts, 2012.) Nevertheless, the majority of the theoretical parts of the demonstrations of knowledge and skill concentrate on the artist’s own work and the meanings and conventions connected to it. For the individual artist, this is very likely the most convenient approach – or maybe not.

Artistic research or “artistic research,” theory or “theory?”

I find it very intriguing how negatively – or ambivalently – theory is approached in the policy of artistic research. One wonders what is meant by theory in the context of artistic research: presumably something conceptual – spoken and written. Philosopher Toivo Salonen from Finnish Lapland presents a broad understanding of theory. Viewing perception as a problem of the philosophy of science, he writes that perception implies theoretical knowledge and conceptual tools. According to Salonen, theoretical knowledge can be absorbed unnoticed from the philosophical generalisations that live in culture. One can have a theory based on experience without studying theory as such. What comes to the conceptual tools, they are adopted from lingual culture. Both – theoretical knowledge and conceptual tools – can be connected to scholarly work, or not. (Salonen, 2011.) In his short introduction to the philosophy of tools, the first Doctor of Fine Arts in Finland, Jyrki Siukonen (2011), suggests that a peasant – a Romanian sculptor named Constantin Brancusi – perhaps had a theory even though he didn’t write anything. Correspondingly, a theory – or method – adopted by a visual artist can be the result of even decades of work using various tools. Such a theory or method might be non-verbal and lacking in theoretical studies and concepts.

Would not such a theory be relevant in conducting artistic research? Or is it excluded from artistic research for not being discursive and productive enough?

The ambivalence mentioned above seems dubious in the light of Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism. Artistic research is part of the doctoral education of artists and of the increased amount of more or less reflective texts produced by artists from various fields of art, not only visual arts. To the extent that those texts are mainly poststructural, deconstructive, dehistoricizing, detotalizing, antiessentialist, and identity-political, they are part of a postmodern phenomenon that Jameson refers to as a theoretical discourse. "Theory" in this theoretical discourse is far from the conceptual apparatus of hypothesis and experiment of common scientific practice, and of critique. To cut a long story short, such a "theory" is ostensibly academic with an endless avalanche of words. So, besides being part of a theoretical discourse, artistic research is also part of the confining ideological apparatus of postmodernity that Jameson referred to as the cultural logic of late capitalism. (Jameson, 1991; 2011.)

I think that artists continue their previous artistic work in their artistic research regardless of the production of "theoretical" texts. That makes it difficult to find anything that would generate extra value in this research – except for a degree, of course. (Also the statement emphasising the production of new knowledge in artistic research is dubious because obviously in the sphere of artistic knowledge it is not a question of producing scientific knowledge but tacit or otherwise implicit "knowledge" that is far from being intelligible, and I find such knowledge production impossible to evaluate because of a lack of applicable criteria, which leaves us with nothing but incommensurability.) Thus, it seems that artistic research is rather about the politics of science and the institutionalisation of art than about what the term *artistic* denotes. Conscious or not, artists that have chosen to conduct artistic research play an inseparable part in a game that has a twofold ideological function: first, they preserve and bolster the production of "artistic" doctors, and second, their participation in the game follows the general operating mode of the ideology of fragmentation. One strategy of fragmentation is differentiation (Thompson, 1990 p. 60), which in this context means that artistic doctors do not comply with other Finnish academic research and the scholarly principles of the university community because artistic research pursues to create its own "artistic" principles. As a preliminary consequence, incommensurability follows: the criteria of qualitative and quantitative research are of no particular use because artistic research has its own "artistic" criteria. Here, the tautological form of the procedure of artistic research is conspicuous, partly in the same fashion as in the arguments of Joseph Kosuth and Ad Reinhardt in their heyday (though we must remember that they did not claim art to be research, but art). Kosuth (2000, p.170) stated: "Art's only claim is for art. Art is the definition of art." And according to Reinhardt "there is just one art, one art-as-art" (Harrison, 2000, p.205). Whether "artistic-research-as-artistic-research" or "art-as-art," one cannot but acknowledge the striking limitations of these attempts. So, in this philosophical-conceptual context the term "*artistic*" in artistic research confines the research practice to its own tautological form and thereby necessitates the

quotation marks. If the term *research* in qualitative and quantitative research denotes research, then in artistic research it must denote “research” because its nature is mainly metaphorical.

In the typology of the operating modes of ideology, metaphor is a substrategy of dissimulation. According to Thompson (1990, p. 63), metaphor involves the application of a term or phrase to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. “Metaphorical expressions set up a tension within a sentence by combining terms drawn from different semantic fields, a tension which, if successful, generates a new and enduring sense. Metaphor may dissimulate social relations by representing them, or the individuals and groups embedded in them, as endowed with characteristics which they do not literally possess, thereby accentuating certain features at the expense of others and charging them with a positive or negative sense.” (ibid)

In his doctoral dissertation Ilkka Väätti says that in the art discussions of the 1980s he suggested that an artist’s work is analogous to that of a researcher. His thoughts did not evoke much response. (Väätti, 2012, p. 155) Since then, research as an artistic “method” has become a convenient part of artistic jargon, or the “theoretical” artistic discourse. I doubt whether things have changed much in artists’ discussions; with only few exceptions, research was and still is mainly a metaphor in artistic jargon and practice.

According to Väätti, art and science have a common basis: both attempt to express and understand comprehensively the nature of life and the world (p.155). On the other hand, James Elkins (2009, p. 34) argues that art and science are disconnected because they do not share crucial common terms, especially those regarding aesthetics. In light of what Elkins designates as a standard art–science narrative, it is obvious that there are some intersections between art and science, e.g. the empiricism of the early Renaissance, the geometrization of vision of the fifteenth century, the nineteenth-century infatuation with colour theories, and the twentieth-century exploration of computer-assisted painting.

There are, however, at least two arguments for the fact that the standard art–science narrative is not wholly convincing. Even though the main points of it are true, they capture very little of what makes art significant for the majority of the viewers, and the standard art–science narrative overestimates the scientific content of the links that it finds. (Elkins, 2009, p.35)

In aesthetics one cannot escape the idea that art and science share central values such as simplicity, elegance, harmony, and beauty. Elkins (ibid.) calls this an aesthetic argument about science, although it is hardly of any relevant use in research due to its conspicuous ambiguity and generality.

In introductory presentations on the philosophy of science it is common procedure to emphasize the basic criteria of science, such as objectivity and generalizability. Does the research conducted in humanities, e.g. art and cultural studies, and artistic research meet these criteria? Hardly, I would say, at least what comes to artistic research. The most strenuous obstacle in meeting these criteria is that artists who conduct artistic research focus almost exclusively on their own artistic production with some references to mainly postmodern theories – or rather discourses – and to the works of other artists, with whom they feel affiliated or otherwise connected. If I add more criteria, such as distributability and criticality, the disputable status of artistic research becomes more obvious. It is hard to find anything general or objective, let alone of distributable or critical, if artists mainly concentrate on descriptive reflexion on their own artistic work and thoughts during the research process. Such “research” might be relevant in producing biographical and self-reflective data on contemporary art, but it is hard to see how it could represent research or science. That is why “*research*” and “*theory*” are more descriptive morphemic structures than *research* and *theory* in this context.

So with “research” I designate certain scientificity that springs from academic language and from the use of or fascination with technology. According to Elkins (2009, p.38), in the twentieth century artists have been more interested in the applications of science in technology, new media, and engineering than in science itself. “The conceptual apparatus of hypothesis and experiment hardly figures in art, while the technological apparatus of machinery, engineering, architecture, and scientific schemata have been ubiquitous since the ‘machine aesthetic’ first came to the attention of the surrealists in the 1920s.” (ibid)

Has a feeling of scientificity in the vast landscape of technological innovations led to artistic “research” jargon? Let’s take a brief look at Marjatta Oja’s written part of her demonstration of knowledge and skill. Under the title “The works as research” she writes:

The positioning of works in an exhibition venue is a process of actualising, materialising thought. In my research, I have actualised numerous things which are expressed by the processes of constructing and ordering the works. A work should be seen as an (sic) place for free contemplation, a place where one can stop and experience things. The viewer can calm down in the situation and let personal associations flow. There is no attempt to educate or manipulate the viewer, who instead is given an opportunity to express herself in dialogue. Thus Lygia Clark’s idea of works as vehicles for conveying thought to the viewer is analogous to my own conception, just as Michael Fried’s conception of the work as ‘silent presence’ gives the viewer licence to associate. (Oja, 2011, p.123)

This is all she reflects on the issue of works of art as research, as if it goes without saying that artworks *per se* are valid as research. But the scarcity of reflection is not scarce at all. With these few sentences she states implicitly the obvious belief among artistic researchers – the “artistic” viewpoint in artistic research unquestionably means equating art with research. In a recent publication of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts titled *Doing Research* this unquestionable presumption is repeated in a mantra-like fashion. The publication was composed of inquiries with an attempt to arrive at an evaluation of the concept of research. Artists who organised research projects for Kassel Documenta 13 and artists who were engaged in doctoral research in fine art were asked questions about artistic research and the relation between an artist and a researcher. (Kaila & Slager, 2012) Here are some highlights of the booklet. Robin Kahn states: “Artistic research is a part of every artist’s working process.” (ibid, p.82) Sam Belinfante continues: “When asked to think about ‘artistic research,’ the first thing that comes to mind is the simple fact that everything we do as artists is research.” (ibid. p.84) Terike Haapoja notes: “Most of the time, art as such is research. This applies to the concrete process of art making as well as to the general curiosity and research orientation of artists.” (ibid, p.89) And finally, Tue Greenfort maintains: “I believe all artists are doing artistic research at some level.” (ibid, p.97)

Without any explication or methodological account these statements hardly convince anyone. From the perspective of ideology critique, an unquestionable adaptation to the prevailing metaphorical discourse that claims art to be valid as research implies conformism and submission to institutional principles.

Beyond dispute, art can be investigated as any other area of life, but can one conduct research through art or artworks? In defiance of the above-mentioned opinions that clearly bolster the prevailing artistic research – I think that one cannot. At least not in the sense that research has traditionally – qualitatively and quantitatively – been conducted in universities. Artworks can play an important role in research, but in my opinion the discourse on artists studying various issues by means of art lacks credibility. Basically, qualitative and quantitative research is composed of study material, a research question, and a method. In addition, the research is reported according to the conventions of scholarly writing. Artists do not do this. They make artworks that contain concepts from diverse areas of life. They consider various themes and represent the chosen views or other expressions most often visually. Some try to reflect this in writing. Some succeed, others do not.

Art as a concept or a specific means to do research is too unfocused, too vague, and too wide to be plausibly applied in any research practice. For a good reason, methods have names, e.g. discourse analysis, content analysis, grounded theory, case study, action research, participant observation, etc. It does not seem to be

clear that the productive tools, methods, or means (or whatever they are called) correspond to the productive artistic practices, e.g. the chosen materials, techniques, or situations in specific contexts, that are applied when conducting artistic research. As far as this is true, we have a lingual issue at hand, which could in the Wittgensteinian fashion be fixed by concentrating on representation. *Art* as a concept has fragmented and almost lost its descriptive potential. On the other hand, the productive artistic practices mentioned above are tangible evidence of the everyday labour of artists.

One possible way for artistic production to have a relevant role in research

Let's not equate concepts with theory, or a written text with a theory. By theory we may refer to the ways of shaping various sets of things in the verbal and non-verbal worlds. By concepts we may refer to lingual and cultural tools.

Based on my doctoral thesis and a few other dissertations which I will mention soon, I suggest the following three delineations as a functional approach to including one's personal artwork in a research:

1. A written research focusing on an issue connected to the work or field of an artist
2. A written report of an art production – or an artist's text – focusing on the artistic process and the art production's connection to a specific research problem
3. An art production, e.g. exhibitions.

A written research (1.) doesn't deviate much from the conventions of the world of science, but the written report of an art production (2.) does because it is written on one's own artistic work as it is and without an explicit theory or research method or heavy academic concepts. (Lampela, 2012)

The tripartite model that I chose as my structural frame is part of a tradition. The studies contributing to this tradition include a research carried out by Taneli Eskola in 1997 at the University of Art and Design Helsinki and a research carried out by Jyrki Siukonen in 2001 in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. (See. Eskola, 1997a; Eskola, 1997b; Siukonen, 2000, 2001a.) Image 1 contains the written research, the written report, and the art production. The first artist to defend a doctoral thesis in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland was Juha Saitajoki. He can also be considered to represent the tradition mentioned

above, as can Ilkka Väätti who defended his doctoral thesis in autumn 2012, also in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland. (See Saitajoki, 2003; Väätti, 2012.) These four examples deviate from the type of artistic research in which "theory" is sprinkled with text describing an artistic work. (See Kaila, 2002; Pitkänen-Walter, 2006; Ziegler, 2010; Oja, 2011; See also image 2.)

Image 1. The tripartite approach

PART I	PART II	PART III
A written research on an issue connected to the work of an artist Based on the models, methodologies, concepts and theories of scholarly activity (the world of science)	A written report on the artist's own artistic work, i.e. the method, material, approach, themes, etc. (an artist's text)	An art production

Image 2. Artistic research

PART I	PART II
Text on an artist's own artistic work that includes theoretical references, concepts, and discourses familiar from the world of science (An artistic-theoretical artist's text) Parts I and II of the tripartite approach melted together	Art production

Conclusion

Let me go back to Joseph Kosuth and one of conceptualism's distinctive qualities: intellectualism. I do not think this connection is far-fetched because there are strong reasons to approach artistic research from the perspective of conceptual art. Early conceptual art is mainly lingual by nature, so it is not a surprise that many well-known conceptual artists or groups of conceptual artists such as Art & Language wrote and conducted research on lingual and philosophical issues. The first doctor of fine arts in Finland, Jyrki Siukonen, is also known by his conceptual artworks and broad literal production ranging from translations to cultural history and from philosophy to visual arts. Jan Kaila (2002) also pays his debt to conceptual art in the written part of his demonstration of knowledge and skill.

Blake Stimson considers conceptualism's intellectualism to be radical and institution-critical.

The burden of the endless philosophizing about the meaning of art, the burden of the shift from object-based aestheticism to a language- and theory-based anti-aestheticism, the burden of the rejection of the street coding of happenings, the commercial coding of pop, and the industrial coding of minimalism in favour of academic philosophical, literary, and scientific associations, was to aggressively usurp the authority to interpret and evaluate art assumed to be the privileged domain of scholarly critics and historians. (Stimson, 2000, xli)

With this history in mind it is not hard to see that artistic research has its institution-critical dimension, which nevertheless does not presuppose dissimulation and fragmentation as manifested in the programme of artistic research. Artistic research has quickly institutionalised, and the rate of institutionalisation even increased when the University of the Arts Helsinki was administratively built during 2012 – 2013.

Regardless of the institution where research is conducted, one still faces the question of how to include art plausibly in research. I claim that art in research cannot mean merely the art that an artist would make anyway. Based on the tripartite approach above, I claim that art needs to be connected to concrete research questions; or at least the connection – even the thinnest – needs to be explicated intelligibly and believably. Discussing the issue of art's autonomy John Roberts (2007, p. 223) argues that the diffusion of art into a plan, consultancy, or a research programme is an attenuated space where new (internally complex) experiences of art might be constituted. I do not completely share his overtly

positive view regarding the diffusion of art – or applied arts – because I am not convinced that “the immateriality of artistic skills are secured in this way,” as he writes. I would rather see the attenuated space as a space for negotiation and dialogue between the artist and other actors – such as consultants, designers, architects, and urban planners – in a reciprocal and coordinate spirit with a possibility to quit the game if the quintessential interests are not met. In order to realize what art can offer to science or scholarly activity in general and vice versa, would not *that* constitute a fruitful environment in which artists from various fields can conduct research.

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