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The informed performer : towards a bio-culturally informed performers' practice

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Chapter 8: Micro-level: Artistic Research [AR]

It is within the context of a European Higher Education Area that the notion of ‘Artistic Research’ [AR] takes root. Artistic research is here broadly and pragmatically understood as “research conducted by or with Artists for the Arts” (AEC/polifonia third cycle workinggroup, 2007, p. 14). The concept is grounded in a European vision for higher education as a unitary combination of theory, skill and competence (as indicated in the previous chapter), and as a three-cycle process whereby mainly the third cycle conforms to actions that produce new knowledge.

We could learn from Machlup’s inclusive model (6.2.4) that knowledge production allows for a broad interpretation in terms of practical, intellectual, small-talk, spiritual and incidental forms of knowledge production. In academic circles, however, ‘research’ is mostly considered to be the concept with exclusive rights to the domain of knowledge production in the strict sense. It is within this continuum of, and negotiation between possibilities that artistic practice aims at defining its position with regard to research.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] provides a general point of reference by defining ‘research’ very broadly as:²⁸⁵

Any creative systematic activity undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this knowledge to devise new applications.

Includes fundamental research, applied research in such fields as agriculture, medicine, industrial chemistry, and experimental development work leading to new devices, products or processes.

In this definition, research is still a very malleable term that allows for a vast array of interpretations. Within this permissible context, one of the primary reflexes of the arts (education) world has been a territorial one, in the sense that institutions opted to validate and develop a type of research based on a re-interpretation and re-conversion of an existing situation. Such an orientation can be inferred from statements such as: “visual artists and musicians have always researched, without it being named as such”²⁸⁶; or

My playing is my research. More simply, my playing is reading – physicalized reading. And that close reading has led to some thoughts which do not comprise fully realized analyses in the conventional musicological sense, but do, it seems to me, offer empirical evidence that performance – with its attendant reading, hearing, and rereading, and rehearing – constitutes research. (Brubaker, 2007, p. 67)

²⁸⁵ <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=2312>.

²⁸⁶ <http://www.koncon.nl/en/departments-study-programmes/master-specialisations/master-artistic-research/> consulted November 2016.

These particular views, often very meaningfully labelled by the term ‘Practice as Research’, take as a basis for AR a methodological and systematic amplification of an already inherent musical search behaviour (where the prefix intensifies the activity itself) and are primarily directed at contributing to niches and models of knowledge development that are not covered by traditional academia (Cobussen, 2007). The approach to AR has further developed and evolved in the last decennium and in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (2012) Henk Borgdorff comes to a representative definition of AR that is useful in differentiating between art practice-in-itself and art practice intended-as-research.

Art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes. Art research begins by addressing questions that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world. Researchers employ experimental and hermeneutic methods that reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes. Research processes and outcomes are documented and disseminated in an appropriate manner to the research community and the wider public. (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 53)

However, Borgdorff, in an earlier statement, declares that a notion such as ‘appropriate’ leaves ample space for a range of divergent opinions and approaches.

In the editorial of the inaugural issue of the *Journal for Artistic Research* [JAR] (2011), Editor-in-Chief, Michael Schwab, also points to this state of indeterminacy by positing that ‘artistic research’ is “a term that has been, and still is, suspended in its definition” (Schwab, 2011).²⁸⁷

Given such a potentially chronic definitional deficit, several options seem viable in order to come to grips with an element that seems to play a pivotal and transformational role in the development of musical practice. We will not opt for a full overview on the ‘short’ history of AR nor attempt to develop a definition. Hereafter, we will limit ourselves to outlining the directions that AR has taken by proposing three archetypical modes of AR and follow that up with a more punctual understanding of the informational mode as a supportive context and *condition sine qua non* for GIP.

8.1 Three modes of Artistic Research

In “Lighting from the Side” (Nyrnes, 2006) arts researcher Aslaug Nyrnes proposes an alternative to strict definitional approaches to AR via an interactive and processual organization of three ‘topoi’²⁸⁸. She distinguishes between three languages that are implied in a process of artistic investigation:

²⁸⁷ <http://www.jar-online.net/index.php/issues/editorial/480>.

²⁸⁸ ‘topoi’ in this AR-context point to the typical places in a landscape that are frequented by artist-researchers.

1. One's 'own language' (including body language): "The artistic process is always, in various ways embedded in the researcher's own words and expressions. That verbal language includes a wide range of forms: everyday phrases, concepts from more or less internalised theoretical knowledge, phrases from prose and narratives [...] as well as forms such as metaphors, analogies, parts of narratives, fragments of different kinds" (Nyrrnes, 2006, p. 14).
2. 'Theory' or 'systematic language' which is characterized by the use of functionally related concepts, "an artificial, constructed way of viewing the world as opposed to natural or organic" (Nyrrnes, 2006, p. 16).
3. An 'artistic language' which develops into an artistic object or production. This *topos* is concerned with the artistic material itself which by the process of drawing, of writing poetics, of composing, of writing a film script, or of developing a dance production or a performance evolves into an artistic product (Nyrrnes, 2006, p. 17).

Nyrrnes further claims that artistic research is not about choosing between one of these three languages but rather about integrating them by moving around in this topological landscape in a non-linear way and without a fixed starting-point or finish-line. Artistic Research, perhaps in contrast to art, should be about finding a balance between the three *topoi*; research that simply combines the researcher's own language with theoretical language "is bound to be dull and dry" (Nyrrnes, 2006, p. 20) and research that cuts short the discussion of theory implies a lack of interest in "moving beyond the private sphere of experience into an inter-subjective language" (Nyrrnes, 2006, p. 20). Nyrrnes' approach is inherently balanced but does not bar the possibility to make meaningful distinctions between three archetypical types of practitioner-researchers based on a primary emphasis on one of the *topoi*.

Hereafter, we propose three AR-orientations based on their topological emphasis.

A first orientation focuses on the product of artistic action ('material language') and connects the research largely to the claim that musical knowledge can be articulated and communicated "wholly in sound" (Lawson, 2007, p. 64), and thus that the artistic product is at the centre of the original contribution to knowledge and understanding:

[...] knowledge can articulate itself outside of discursive practices, outside spoken and written language, and that this kind of knowledge cannot be generated otherwise than in or through the production of art. The art work is not a practical aid which rushes in to help the discursively presented conclusions; it is itself the statement and the conclusion. (Cobussen, 2007, p. 19)

Within this AR-subclass, artist-researchers enrich the field of musical practice by focusing on the production of new musical artefacts (compositions, new instruments or instrumental techniques, new

performance style, new repertoire). It is an action-based, hands-on approach that is closely and implicitly connected to the experimental and creative habitus of the musician-craftsman who brings into existence new musical things. For future reference, let us call the researchers that comply to this orientation Artistic Experimental Researchers [AERs].

The second archetype of artistic researchers, let us entitle them Artistic Reflective Researcher [ARRs], does not focus on the product but rather on the artistic process and the tacit knowledge implicit in the creative act. The researchers representing this archetype have an artistic practice that they intend to scrutinize and verbalize via a process of self-reflection:

Musicians have highly specialized knowledge and highly specialized skills, but as a rule these competences remain within the individual artist who possesses them. At best we hear the products of these competences when we hear the artists' performances or compositions. Research should be committed to making this enormous treasure of implicit knowledge and skills of artists explicit, to bringing those things into the open for all of us to see, to understand and, hopefully, to use. By helping implicit artistic knowledge to become an object to be shared and discussed by others, research will be able to make a large contribution to the understanding of the art among a larger population and, consequently, to the promotion and development of the arts in general. (AEC/Polifonia Third Cycle Working Group, 2007, p. 13)

The epistemological *ratio legis* that accompanies this orientation is to be found mainly in the work of Ryle (1949) and Polanyi (1958), as well as Schön (1983). These authors claim that human action implies a kind of knowledge that is non-discursive and hidden: a knowing-how (Ryle, 1949), personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966), reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). In *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön typically identifies this kind of knowledge that is implicit within skilful action (reflection-in-action) and that can be made explicit by reflecting on that action (reflection-on-action). Schön's glorification of this type of epistemic 'artistry' is often referred to as a legitimate basis for the existence of this particular strand within AR. One of the prime examples of an ARR would be sociologist and jazz-pianist David Sudnow's reflections in *Ways of the Hand* (Sudnow & Dreyfus, 2001).

A final and third strand of AR which is clearly present in the field but not so prominently discussed in the meta-practical discourse on AR, represents AR-projects with a topical focus on exploring new sources of information as a basis for further artistic implementation in process and product. Within the context of information-oriented AR, the focus of attention has until now predominantly been on the integration and retrieval of historical information (see 2.1). Historically Informed Performance [HIP]). We claim however that under the umbrella of this third strand a new subcategory of enquiry can develop, one that is more inclusive in its informational scope. It concerns AR with no primary interest in elucidating an existing artistic situation through reflection, nor in creating new situations via a process of experimentation of production, but research that is primarily directed at integrating

and assessing the information originating from a variety research fields. While it addresses research questions that arise from cognitive gaps within practice or from demands for guidance and inspiration, this third research strand prioritizes an outward look and explores and hunts the information galaxy for locating potentially relevant insights to then translate these into an artistic discourse. It is an action that requires the interpretation and analysis as well as the creation of new information from blending the incoming elements. In a 2007 AEC-document, an implicit acknowledging of this type of research can be found:

Artistic Research is – not unlike environmental science or medical research – a research field with an overall purpose in need of collaboration and support from different established research disciplines. Therefore, Artistic Research cannot be dissolved into or identified completely with any combination of its component disciplines. Artistic Research should be able to make use of any research tool, method, or knowledge base across the entire range of traditional research disciplines and methods. (AEC/Polifonia Third Cycle Working Group, 2007, pp. 15–16)

Let us identify this group of researchers as Artistic Information Researchers [AIRs].

With this tripartite framework in mind, it is now possible to link each of these three Artistic Research Archetypes, to specific mental spaces within musicianship, namely: The Reflective Practitioner, the Creative and Experimental Artist, and the Informed Musician²⁸⁹ (see Fig. 8.1). The Artistic Reflective Researcher [ARR] amplifies the drive of artists to reflect on what and how they produce and create and does this in a systematic way allowing a discourse to evolve regarding shared processual concerns. Artistic Experimental Researchers [AERs] use the research space offered by AR to transgress boundaries that a standard artistic practice sets with regard to investment of time, support and resources. Finally, Artistic Information Researchers act as an embodied information system between a galaxy of information and the challenges that present themselves to informavorous artists; they hunt, digest and recontextualise information for presentation to an artistic community.

Via this framework, a direct link between practice and research becomes apparent and offers the perspective of a supportive, cumulative and intricate dialectic between the two domains. Moreover, since we are aware that the underlying processes of experimentation, reflection and information do not operate in isolation (Nyrrnes, 2006) but rather in concordant or cyclical terms (Kolb, 1984), both in practice and research, we can also imagine crossing connector lines (see Fig. 8.1) where for instance reflective practitioners build on knowledge generated by the field of AIR.

²⁸⁹ The adjective 'generally' is omitted here because this category also involves HIP.

The existence of cross-area interests further indicates the possibility of establishing topical and dedicated research teams as well as mixed research-teams where research topics are approached from the three specialized angles.

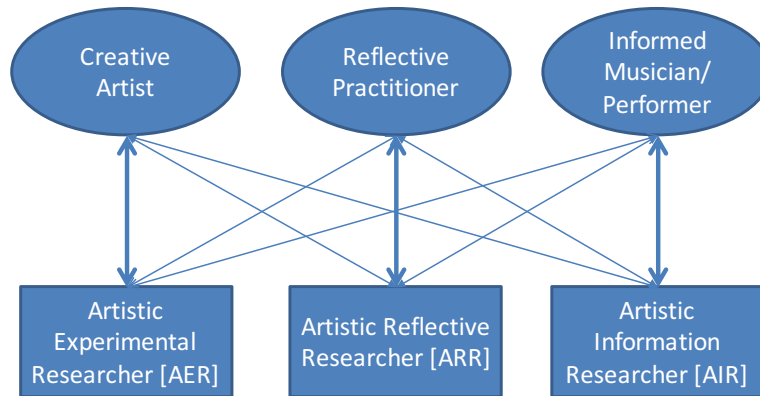


Figure 8.1. Artistic orientations and their research environment.

From the previous chapter, we concluded that considering the extent of the information galaxy, GIP is in need of transpersonal support. By sketching the contours of Artistic Research in terms of three archetypes we indicate a research space that is ideally suited to develop such a supportive function. In general, it is believed that the development of a space within AR where AIRs can build a knowledge-base of extra-disciplinary seminal source material that addresses directly or indirectly the concerns of performers, artistic researchers of all kinds will be able to find a contextual focus much earlier in the course of their research and will be able to concentrate more on their essential and punctual contribution to knowledge and understanding. More specifically then, it is maintained that without AIR's a Generally Informed Performership is close to a utopia and deemed to be restricted to personal development. Combining a full-time artistic practice with an extensive information horizon simply exceeds the human processing capacity if one is not able to rely on the shareable fruits of research in this area. The Artistic Information Researcher seeks to explore the informational horizons for valuable bits of information, integrates them in an artistic discourse and relates them to the efforts of her/his fellow AIRs. Although the Generally Informed Performer is always free to direct her/him directly to the information galaxy, AIRs contribute to a mediating information system.

Within the discourse on AR, experimentation and reflection have enjoyed the focus of attention in the construction of a practice-based research agenda for the 'last scion in the family of research' (Coessens, Crispin, & Douglas, 2009, p. 44) and may have led to a neglect towards a scholarship of cross-disciplinary integration (Boyer, 1990, p. 18). We argue however that this is not due to a general lack of interest per se or any shortage of interesting 'stuff' in other fields of enquiry such as philosophy, psychology, physiology and neuroscience. The prioritising of a look inward is rather related to the

absence of a supportive environment and understanding that indicates and facilitates the opportunities of information.

8.2 An extended definition of GIP

In this chapter, we discussed three contexts that seem to be supportive of an informational turn in musicianship. On a *macro*-level, a dedicated framework regarding the Information Age was configured which allows for openness and emergence but also indicates the historical opportunity that an information and knowledge society offer to musicianship. The aspect of *scientification*, or the dominance of scientific theory in the political and socio-cultural debate, led to the conclusion that the Information Age not only facilitates the development of a Generally Informed Performership but also necessitates it with a view to creating a common ground for debate and discussion. From an operational and *meso*-level point of view we further analysed the role of a European Higher Education Area in the development of GIP. By going back to the rough grounds of music education we could identify three tracks of development (theoretical, practical, productive) that historically merge in the 21st century and are conducive to an integrative turn in musician- and performership. Finally, and on a *micro*-level, we claimed a research space for GIP within the structure of Artistic Research where Artistic Information Researchers are focussing on a look outward and on mediating between the concerns of artistic practice and the information galaxy. The need for such a dedicated context follows from the ambition to transgress the personal level of extra-disciplinary search behaviour.

These new considerations enable us to review and refine the definition of GIP that we developed by the end of PART I. The following approach is now proposed (the new elements are underlined):

A Generally Informed Performership [GIP] is a mental space within the broader category of musicianship where a score-based performer looks in an active, prospective, and systematic manner for information originating from extra-disciplinary fields as a complement to intra-disciplinary paths of artistic training, learning, and development, and allows this information to potentially make a difference to her/his Image of music-making, and the actions and imaginations that build upon that Image.

The effectuation of a GIP builds on the increased transfer-capacity of knowledge in an Information Age, on the integrative turn in education and on a dedicated research space within the framework of Artistic Research.

Definition 3: Generally Informed Performership [GIP], (extended definition).