

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/18704> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Borgdorff, Hendrik Anne (Henk)

Title: The conflict of the faculties : perspectives on artistic research and academia

Issue Date: 2012-04-24

Chapter 6

Artistic
Research as
Boundary
Work

Das ist eben die große Frage:
Wo steht die Kunst?
Welchen Ort hat sie?

Martin Heidegger*

* Martin Heidegger 1976, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten' [in conversation with Rudolf Augstein and Georg Wolff on 23 September 1966], *Der Spiegel*, 30.23 (31 May), pp. 193-219 (p. 219). The entire conversation appears in *Antwort: Martin Heidegger im Gespräch*, ed. by Günther Neske, and Emil Kettering (Pfullingen: Neske 1988), pp. 81-111.

Context

Three of my areas of interest intersect in this chapter, which was written as a sort of pamphlet. My interest in the currency of Hegel's thesis on 'the end of art' dates to the early 1990s. The issue of the potential of metaphysics, *after* its fall, engaged my thoughts in the late 1990s. In the same period, I also developed my interest in the newer analytic philosophy, in particular in the wake of the late Ludwig Wittgenstein. It formed the inspiration for my ideas about non-conceptualism, realism, and contingency. In part, these are an elaboration of an older publication of mine entitled 'Holismus, Wahrheit und Realismus: Adornos Musik-Denken aus amerikanischer Sicht' (Holism, Realism and Truth: Adorno's Musical Thought from an American Point of View). An invitation to the conference 'The Difference of Art and Art Research across Disciplines', held at Zurich in April 2009, gave me the opportunity to link these interests to artistic research. In this chapter I argue that artistic research acknowledges the epistemic (and moral) import of art. This chapter likewise required fewer annotations.

The difference between art and artistic research

Asking how artistic research differs from art is a corollary of a broader question: How does the domain of art differ from the domain of science? Or where does art stand in relation to science, or to politics and morality, to the economy or to everyday life?

How art relates to science may seem obvious at first glance. Just as there is an obvious difference between playing sports and studying them in sport sciences, or between politics and political science, the distinction between art practice and artistic research would seem as clear as day. Yet drawing boundaries like these is not always easy. Consider the domain of the courts as compared to the legal sciences, or that of religion in comparison to theology. And the recent financial crisis has made us painfully aware that the distinction between the economy and economics is highly relative.

The attempt to distinguish what belongs to art practice from what belongs to artistic research is reminiscent of what in the philosophy of science is known as the demarcation problem. It involves delimiting what can be considered part of science from what cannot, or distinguishing what qualifies as science from mere pseudoscience. Karl Popper's influential views on this question are well known; he argued that openness to falsification was the quality that distinguished science from pseudoscience.

Demarcating our subject matter would amount to formulating one or more principles that distinguish art from pseudo-art – or rather, that distinguish art from non-art. Arthur C. Danto is one writer who has expressed views on this. One of his insights is worth highlighting in our context: no essentialist definition is possible of what art is. The distinction between art and non-art is a construed one, and it depends on what is recognised as such in the 'art world' (the totality of artists, art criticism, art theory, and art industry) at a particular point in time (cf. Danto 1986). Such constructivism, which we also encounter in post-Popperian philosophy and sociology of science in thinkers like Paul Feyerabend, Pierre Bourdieu, and Bruno Latour, radically qualifies the problem of demarcation. And this should

The 'sport argument' is used more often. It could also be heard during an afternoon seminar on artistic research in July 2009 at the University of Amsterdam's Department of Philosophy.

be a lesson to us as we examine the difference between art and artistic research.

We are interested here not so much in the difference between art and non-art as we are in demarcating the domain of art practice from the domain of science or research, or the domain of morality, or that of daily life. Here, too, demarcations, dichotomies, definitions, and identities are problematic – an insight also celebrated in poststructuralism. The issue of the essence of art has been supplanted by that of the dynamics of the art world, where different life domains may meet and interpenetrate one another. Attempts to address this question may be labelled as ‘boundary work’ (Gieryn 1983). In trying to fathom something of the dynamics of the art world, one cannot assume a stable concept of art; the presumed boundaries of that world are the subject of constant debate.

Artistic research also qualifies as such boundary work – and in two different directions. Artistic research is an activity undertaken in the borderland between the art world and the academic world. The topics, the questions, as well as the results of such research are judged, and have meaning, both in the art world and in academia. And in this respect artistic research appears to differ from more traditional academic research, whose relevance and validity is determined primarily within the community of peers, within the walls of academia, within the world of the universities.

At least that was the image many people had of academic research until recently. That image is now substantially altered. The international debate on the relevance and valorisation of academic research, the advent of transdisciplinary research programmes, and the recognition of non-traditional forms of knowledge production (such as Mode 2; Gibbons et al. 1994) have all shown that the context of justification of academic research lies in both academia and society. The quality of the research is determined by an extended peer group in which stakeholders from the context of application also have a voice. I say ‘also’ because the basis on which research is judged, as well as the final word over that judgment, still resides in the academic community of peers.

Intermezzo 1: On peer review

The peer review system may be regarded as a sign of the independence and maturity of the domain of science. Within that domain, the forum of peers is the first to decide what is relevant and what the quality standards will be. Mutual peer assessment of quality and validity is also required in the case of newer forms of knowledge production, preferably in an open and blind assessment process in accepted academic channels.

So how, then, is the relevance and the quality of art and artistic research assessed? When asked which people judge the quality of artistic research, the head of a prestigious postgraduate art institute in the Netherlands recently replied ‘artists and experts’. By ‘experts’ he meant curators, critics, theoreticians...

It is true that what art is is not determined by artists alone, but is ‘defined’ in the ‘art world’ (to follow Danto and Howard Becker), in the ‘field of cultural production’ (to follow Pierre Bourdieu), in the ‘network of actors’ (to follow Bruno Latour). Yet the question remains: Who are the experts? Who are the peers? Wouldn’t it attest to the maturity of artistic research if the dominant influence of curators and other ‘secondary’ actors were to come to an end? Or, more cautiously perhaps, shouldn’t the artist-researchers themselves accede to the forum of peers that determines what has relevance and quality? Fortunately, we now see the phenomenon of the artist-curator popping up here and there. Emphasising the importance of the artist-researcher as part of the community of peers would greatly benefit the emerging field of artistic research.

The idea of art as an autonomous sphere (and the story of its eighteenth-century emancipation)

The following tale may be told of the relationship between art and the domains of science and morality. Once upon a time, in Greek antiquity, thinkers like Plato emphasised the unity of beauty, truth, and goodness. But over the course of history, the life spheres of art, science, and morality grew apart, until, in the eighteenth century, they became

The commonly used double-blind peer review system is imperfect and subject to bias. More and more academic forums nowadays are opting for more advanced kinds of peer review, such as open name review, published review, and pre-publication or open process review. The *Journal for Artistic Research* has done likewise (see chapter 11).

not only institutionally, but also theoretically, autonomous. This differentiation between aesthetics, epistemology, and ethics – which Kant provided with an impressive foundation in his *Critiques* – still persists today, although ‘the unity of reason in the diversity of its voices’¹ was also emphasised from Kant onwards.

The birth of the autonomous spheres of Art and Aesthetics (duly capitalised) in the eighteenth century was signalled by two publications: Charles Batteux’s *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* (The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle) from 1748 and Alexander G. Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* from 1750. Batteux’s work raised three issues. First, the system of fine arts constitutes an autonomous sphere (for Batteux, it comprised painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and dance). Second, these arts converge on a single principle. Third, that principle is the subject matter of philosophical aesthetics. Here ends our little history of Art’s emancipation in the eighteenth century.

That history has especially made itself felt since Paul O. Kristeller published his two-part article ‘The Modern System of the Arts: A Study

Kristeller is a Renaissance specialist, but his ‘Modern System’ extends beyond his own professional sphere. ‘Classic is perhaps too modest a description, as the leading ideas in Kristeller’s piece were subsequently adopted as established orthodoxy among historians and philosophers of art and by intellectual and cultural historians, and they are now more or less legion’ (Porter 2009, pages 1–2).

in the History of Aesthetics’ in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1951 and 1952. This study, which traces the history of the system of arts from Greek antiquity to the twentieth century, is still broadly authoritative in art history circles today. It often also figures as an implicit assumption in the broader discourse on art. Kristeller’s system of arts, by the way, consists of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry, with dance relegated to the second rank (with engraving, gardening, theatre, opera, and prose) (Kristeller 1951/52).

Very recently (in the spring of 2009), a remarkable article by James I. Porter (2009) appeared in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* entitled ‘Is Art Modern? Kristeller’s “Modern System of the Arts” Reconsidered’. It presents a radical challenge to Kristeller’s ‘system’. Porter claims first of all that ‘the system of the arts’ is a historical construction – and more likely an invention of Kristeller than

1. Jürgen Habermas, ‘Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielheit ihrer Stimmen’ (2009).

an accurate description from the historical sources. He then argues that the bond between the presumed autonomous spheres of the arts and of philosophical aesthetics was not as tight as Kristeller claims, and that aesthetic formalism was a twentieth-century aberration. Finally, he attempts to show that the arts are always, and have always been, linked in one way or another to intellectual or moral content. Interestingly, he supports this with evidence from the likes of Clement Greenberg, who, in his well-known appeal for materialistic objectivity, flatness, and physical quality, refers to the eighteenth century, claiming that the arts concealed their ‘mediality’ at that time by focusing on literature – that is, on intellectual and moral content and meaning (Porter 2009: 4-6).

Intermezzo 2: The end of art (or how art connects to other life domains)

In the discourse on art, the issue of ‘the end of art’ crops up from time to time, for instance in the work of Danto. In the transition from Greenbergian modernist abstraction to postmodernist art that began in the mid-1960s, Danto saw a rupture that signalled the end of the immanent developmental history of art. Post-historical art had become conceptual; assessing it was based not primarily on sensory perception, but on intellectual consideration (whereby Danto assumes that the two are fundamentally separate). This brought the history of the narrative, pictorial tradition to an end (Danto 1986: 81-117).

Danto varies a theme that has accompanied the ‘project of the modern’ since Georg W.F. Hegel. But the distance to Hegel has grown rather wide. Here is Hegel’s (1975, vol. 1: 10, 11, 103) voice in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* in the 1820s:

Art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone.

Art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation, something past.

For us, art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself.

Those ‘spiritual needs’, ‘highest vocation’, and ‘truth’ have certainly slipped away from us in the course of history. Or at least, few people would venture to utter such grand terms today. But Hegel’s ‘end of art’ does not mean that art is not to develop further. Here is Hegel (p. 130) again:

We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit.

Here, ‘the end of art’ is the end of art’s ability to give appropriate expression to the Absolute Spirit. It is a farewell to transcendence, to a glorification of art which had been so celebrated by early-Romantic philosophising intellectuals but a short time previously.

But perhaps it is better to speak of a ‘naturalisation’ or ‘humanisation’ of transcendence. Here is Hegel (p. 607) once more:

Art [...] makes Humanus its new holy of holies: i.e., the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates.

After the end of art, art concerns itself with ‘Humanus’. A bond with our concrete human life now steps into the stead of art’s bond with the absolute, the infinite. The end of art means a reconfirmation of art’s bond with who we are and where we stand – a reassertion of the connectedness of art to our intellectual and moral life. Today we can endorse this, without referring to Hegel.

Naturalisation of transcendence: A metaphysics of art – after its fall

Our current situation lies in the wake of the linguistic and pragmatic turns in theory. The constitutive roles of language and action have superseded ‘reason’ and ‘reality’, which, in traditional epistemology and metaphysics, were the foundations on which the edifice of our knowledge rested. We find ourselves in the wake of the farewell to the *grands récits* (Lyotard) – in the wake of postmodernism, understood as a poignant, melancholic farewell to modernism, or as a cheerful inau-

guration of Nietzschean perspectivism. We have discarded our naive belief in meta-narratives, and have grown more modest about our potential to get a grip on physical and social reality. We are now in a time that follows the clean-up work done by deconstructivism and ordinary language philosophy. The remnants of the once stable framework of meaning, knowledge, and reality that buttressed the edifice of art, science, and morality have now been permanently abandoned on the junk heap of history.

What we now need is a metaphysics of art, after its fall. Also after Hegel's time, naturalisation of transcendence means both taking leave of overly high pretensions (which still linger today in the minds of many) as well as preserving the awareness that art has the power, or gives us the power, to critically transcend the reality in which we find ourselves and which we are. That is metaphysics as it is possible after its fall. There is a sense in which the task is to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which the task is to continue metaphysical discussion (cf. Putnam 1990: 19).

Cognizant of the bond between art and our intellectual and moral life, artistic research seeks to achieve a reflective articulation of that critical transcendence. It thereby concerns and affects our relationship to the world and to ourselves. That is what I have elsewhere called the 'realism' of artistic research.

In all this, we should keep two things in mind. First, we experience more than we can say. That does not just apply to art, of course, but to our whole relationship to the world and to other people. Art has no exclusive rights here, but this pre-reflective immediacy particularly manifests itself in creative processes, in works of art, and in artistic experiences. The early-Romantic echo in this wording is no accident. Of course we can no longer fall back on an uncritical understanding of art, and of course art has become reflexive. But here, too, there is a sense in which we are now beyond the vaulting claims of early Romanticism, and a sense in which we are still the heirs of this now naturalised realm of thought. The reflexivity of art – its quality of both questioning itself and giving food for thought, and of thus also showing a 'concep-

'Metaphysics of art – after its fall' refers to Theodor W. Adorno, who concluded his book *Negative Dialectics* with the statement 'There is solidarity between such thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall.' Cf. my annotation in chapter 5, page 122.

tual' dimension – must not be construed in *opposition* to the, in a philosophical sense, non-conceptual content that lies enclosed in it. In artistic research, we are concerned directly with that pre-reflective, non-conceptual content, as enacted in creative processes and embodied in works of art. In this way, art invites us to critically transcend what is. Artistic research is the acceptance of that invitation.

But at the same time we should bear in mind that we might be wrong in our critical transcendences. That is the fallibilism of artistic research. After all, it offers a fundamentally open perspective on what is or could be. That is the contingency of artistic research – a contingency that derives directly from the fact that the content of art cannot entirely be captured in any epistemological project whatsoever.

Metaphysics of art – after its fall, after the end of art, after post-modernism – means an understanding of art as a critical reflective practice, encompassing non-conceptual content, which sets our aesthetic, intellectual, and moral life into motion. It also means an understanding of artistic research as the practice of that fundamentally unfinished critical reflection.

