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Chapter 8

Boundary Work: An Interview

Context

This interview, conducted by Michael Schwab, post-conceptual artist and philosopher at the Royal College of Art, London, took place in Brussels on 16 November 2010, at a time when I was beginning to study the theoretical work of the historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (chapter 9). I explicitly qualify here some earlier distinctions I made between ontology and epistemology and between artistic facts and other types of facts. This brought me increasingly closer to the constructivist realism that I had begun to value in actor-network theory.

In a recent text in the Zurich Yearbook of the Arts [chapter 6 above] you mention the concept of 'boundary work' in relation to artistic research. Could I ask you to expand on your ideas?

I took the concept from Thomas F. Gieryn (1983). I did not study his work in detail and just stumbled across the concept of 'boundary object', which is the term he actually uses. I use 'boundary work' in the article to highlight the negotiations that are required along boundaries, but I think the more challenging concept is 'boundary object', which is an object that changes its ontological and epistemological nature depending on the context in which it is used. This is especially interesting along the borderlines between different disciplines, within academia, for instance. 'Boundary object' means that an object has some meaning in a certain research environment and another meaning in another research environment. Moreover, in the sociology of science, where the concept is used, it also has a role to play between academic disciplines per se and fields outside academia. This is interesting for artistic research, because artistic research places itself on the border between academia and the art world. As a consequence, artistic research as boundary work has two contexts: one context is academia, meaning that artistic research has to acknowledge that it is part of academia and its ways of doing; the other context is the art world, where artistic research has to be relevant for things that happen within the 'real world' outside.

Taking this into account, what impact does a concept such as 'boundary work' have on artistic research as a discipline? Is artistic research a discipline; or rather, can it be a discipline if it operates with 'boundary objects'?

The notion of 'discipline' has become contested not only in the case of artistic research but also in other areas of contemporary research. When you ask a question about 'disciplines', you are really enquiring about traditional disciplinary academic research, whereas a lot of advanced academic research nowadays challenges the notion of 'discipline' – it is post-disciplinary or transdisciplinary research. Artistic research is better understood as something that *represents* this kind of border violation, rather than being a new discipline alongside other art-related disciplines.

Part of the notion of 'discipline' is the way in which it safeguards its borders through, for example, reviewing processes or the adherence to certain modes of writing. Is such safeguarding also challenged through the advanced concept of 'boundary work'?

There is a misunderstanding here. When I say that artistic research is not a discipline in the usual sense of the word, I am referring to the old con-

I made this statement at a time when we were just devising such an approach. Schwab and I were in Brussels for an editorial board meeting of the future *Journal for Artistic Research*. The trial issue later appeared in March 2011, and the first peer-reviewed issue in November of the same year (see chapter 11).

cept of scientific research as organised in specific scientific disciplines, which is not the case with artistic research. This does not mean that it is not disciplined – that there is no quality assurance or refereeing process – although no one at the moment knows how to do that in the best possible way. I am just referring negatively to the old concept of what is called Mode 1 science, which is disciplined and organised in a homogeneous way. Chemistry laboratories in Helsinki or Barcelona,

for example, all look the same, and the quality of their research is exclusively assessed by disciplinary peers (that is, academics). This is not at all the case in artistic research: it is more heterogeneously organised, more diversified, with a form of extended peer review – which in our case means that both academics and artists judge the quality and the direction of the research, and even the research agenda at large. This character makes it an example of 'Mode 2 knowledge production', although I will not say that artistic research is *the* example of Mode 2 knowledge production (I have written extensively about this elsewhere [in chapter 4 above]). There are all kinds of problems attached to that. To answer your question briefly: yes, it is not a discipline in the usual sense of traditional, disciplinary academic research; but academic customs, like quality assurance through a refereeing process, are still in place.

Can boundary works be reviewed in the same way as other types of objects? Normally, when you are reviewing something, doesn't it have to have some form of identity? In other words, is there not a potential methodological problem when reviewing processes refer to a shifting object, so that the way you would talk about it has to adapt in some form or other?

I don't think so. The fact that the object is floating, or not a real object at all if looked at on closer inspection, is not a problem within academia. Not even the different perspective (for instance from the artist's side) towards the same phenomenon – as compared to an academic looking at the same object – creates a problem. Once an object is approached in order to review its research quality, it is already inscribed in academic discourse, making no difference whether the reviewer is an artist or not. The whole point is rather that the borderline between artists and researchers is being blurred. The moment you are refereeing or judging the quality of an artwork as research, you brand it within academic discourse. However, there are two other things I want to stress that relate to the concept of 'artistic research' as boundary work. Artistic research is a good example of a form of academic research in which the context is not just the disciplinary environment of university-based research. The outside world, in this case the art world, plays a central role in formulating the research agenda, formulating the direction the research has to take, evaluating the outcomes of the research, and assessing the quality of the research. Thus, artistic research has two contexts, and that makes artistic research a very good example of modern contemporary academic research, where more and more people realise that the quality of academic research is not assessed only within the boundaries of university institutions.

We are so accustomed to making a distinction between artists and academics, between art and science, that we find it hard to think any differently. Yet both these spheres transform (La-tour) as the network of artistic research develops. The point is not to do away with the dualism altogether, but to understand both of these spheres in a new way.

The second aspect has to do with the blurring of art and other life domains. The text I published in Zurich has to do with the boundaries of what art is and what the realm of knowledge and research is, and also what art is in comparison to our moral stance or to issues of daily life. I think that artistic research is an opportunity to address specifically the interrelationship between what is at stake within art and other domains of life. In artistic research projects, things are articulated that bear on who we are, where we stand, what our relation is to other people and the environment. In that sense, artistic research is also transdisciplinary research, because it reaches out to the wider community, making it a good example of what people call Mode 2 knowledge production.

When you say that the 'boundary work' is not a real but a floating object, what are the implications in relation to the work's materiality? Are there particular modes that bring out the 'boundary work'? How can a 'boundary work' appear, and how might it be threatened?

The starting point is: there is no work – at least not in a strict ontological sense. Artworks become concrete only in specific settings, contexts. Artworks and artistic actions acquire their status and meaning in interchange with relevant environments. The art world is one such environment; academia is another. It all depends on what you are looking for. The research context might invite us to identify a work as 'work', either material or immaterial. Again, it all depends on the issues addressed, the questions raised, and the methods used. There are no particular modes that bring out the 'boundary work', but the 'research mode' will bring out the work on this side of the boundary; the 'market mode', for instance, on the other.

There are two aspects I am interested in when it comes to artistic research and the question of boundary work. One aspect is the discipline – it sounds very much like artistic research is a transdisciplinary exercise that transgresses all possible disciplines; the other aspect is that the boundary work as you describe it might equally lack identity, and that only by pragmatically accepting provisional identities such as 'artworks' can we even talk about it. Does a 'boundary work' – in spite of its floating or shifting character – have a stable identity that functions as a point of reference within different contexts; or are there more complex ontological consequences to be drawn from the concept of 'boundary works'?

The distinction I make in the essay 'The Debate on Research in the Arts' [chapter 2 above] between an ontological, an epistemological, and a methodological question served a mere heuristic aim: to differentiate between different aspects of research in the arts, which one might encounter in this emerging research field. In fact, there is no such a thing as an 'ontology of artistic research' independent of its epistemology and methodology. *Identifying* a research object is always at the same time an epistemic act – that is, knowing at least roughly the *kind*

of knowledge the object might convey or embody – and a methodological act – that is, knowing *how to get access to* the knowledge the object is said to convey or embody.

In your question you refer to ‘a boundary work’, thereby already more or less objectifying the ‘object’ of research. In my essay ‘Artistic Research as Boundary Work’ [chapter 6 above], I emphasise the more active use of the term: the work to be done, both on the border of art and academia and on the border of art research and other life domains. Precisely because no sharp boundaries can be drawn between art on one side and academia and other spheres of life on the other, research in art has to acknowledge that its ‘objects’ are fuzzy, preliminary, contingent on the project at hand. One might say that the epistemological core of the artistic research programme is empty, or [more accurately] crowded and heterogeneous – terms used by Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott, and Michael Gibbons (2001: 179) to describe the new production of knowledge – and that it is dependent on the specific perspective or the ‘implication’ of the research project. This fuzzy epistemology of artistic research is in line with recent investigations into the history and epistemology of science. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s notion of an ‘epistemic thing’ tries to capture something of the contingency inherent to research in science:

This active use of ‘work’ corresponds to the interpretation of academia as continually evolving, as ‘science in action’ (Latour).

As long as epistemic objects and their concepts remain blurred, they generate a productive tension: they reach out into the unknown and as a result they become research tools. I call this tension ‘contained excess’. François Jacob speaks of a ‘play of possibilities’. (Rheinberger 2010: 156).

The artistic research programme is a case in point where we acknowledge from the start that the research ‘object’ or ‘issue’ does not have a fixed identity – which invites, in principle, unfinished thinking. Especially due to the non-conceptual content of artistic research – the fact that what is at stake here can only partially be ‘captured’ discursively – it evades any definitive epistemological ‘grip’, while at the same time opening up a possible perspective on what we do not yet know. ‘Artis-

Together with Latour's sociology of science, Rheinberger's epistemology lent support both to artistic research as an undertaking and to my contribution to and explanation of this undertaking.

► 'tic things' are epistemic things par excellence; they create room for that which is unthought. In 'The Debate on Research in the Arts' [chapter 2] I made a distinction between scientific facts, social facts, historical facts, and artistic facts in order to highlight the sui generis nature of the ob-

ject of research in the arts. As with the distinction between ontology, epistemology, and methodology, I would now like to play down that distinction. There are no such things as basic artistic facts on which the edifice of the artistic is build. The realm of the artistic is historically and systematically contingent on where and how it is constituted. Here we can learn something from science and technology studies, for instance from actor-network theory, where the artistic realm is a network and something that is performed through the active involvement of its actors, both human and non-human. To paraphrase Bruno Latour: the artistic research programme is a programme to 'reassemble the artistic', which in itself is an unfinished project.

If the 'artistic' is a project-to-come, what are the characteristics of 'artistic research' that make it different from other forms of research?

When it comes to discriminating or demarcating artistic research from other advanced Mode 2 forms for knowledge production, I would simply say that there are two features that are characteristic of artistic research when compared to other approaches. Firstly, there are methodological prescriptions; and you could say that artistic research takes place *in and through* the making of art, making it distinct from, for instance, humanities research into the same issues. Secondly, there is the outcome of artistic research, which, partly at least, is art. I say 'partly', because people differ in opinion about the extents to which discursive aspects may be added to the artistic outcome. For sure, if there is no concrete practice or artwork as a part of the outcome of an artistic research project, then in my opinion it could not count as artistic research. Here we have two negative criteria which distinguish artistic research from other advanced forms of knowledge production that might address the same issues: one is that the research is done in and through creating or performing; and

the other is that the outcomes of artistic research are partly also concrete artistic products – artefacts, installations, compositions, and so on.

In this case, would you not worry about the potential impact of art market structures – that is, what is counted as art or artwork in the market – on artistic research? Does artistic research not have to buy into limited forms of artmaking then, whilst the more advanced or more ephemeral practices (which might not necessarily produce a work or anything identifiable as such) would actually be disadvantaged? Would we not rather expect the opposite; namely, that artistic research, if anything, would mount a challenge against any traditional definition of art and its objects?

Yes, I see the danger, but then again I think that, by introducing artistic research, we have created, and are still creating, a free space that is also in *opposition* to the demands of the market, to the creative industries, to the daily strains of production – a free space for ‘material thinking’, to use the term from Paul Carter. As a consequence, I am not that afraid that the whole endeavour of artistic research will be corrupted in one way or another by the demands of the market. On the contrary, I think it might be the case that in performing artistic research we can have some influence over what counts as art, and as an interesting outcome not only within academia but also within the art world. That is rather optimistic, I think; but it could well be that not only our understanding of what academia is might change in the future, but also our understanding of what art is.

This was not really an answer to the question. Not only here, but also in other questions (on discipline, identity, materiality), Michael Schwab's intention was to question the 'object' nature of art in the light of artistic research as 'boundary work'. The central place of the 'work' – even when it is 'floating' and epistemologically vague – may serve to obscure art that does not wish to be understood as 'work'. 'Work', however, is not just an 'object', but also 'practice'.

So, you see artistic research as having a strategic role in these transformations?

Well, this is a part of the subsidiary agenda. It is not the first thing I think about, but it might add some extra benefits. Whether or not to call it ‘strategic’, I am not that sure.