

The Art of Researching

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There is this Greek word, *cosmos*, that takes us both to the world as an entity and, at the same time, to the way this same world, this entity, is arranged, to its modus of being, to its cosmetics. Just for the sake of argument, and for the time being, let us consider these two versions or sides of the same world as facilitating our curiosity and pleasure in understanding, exploring and broadening this world, as well as our curiosity and pleasure in depicting and broadening this same world artistically, aesthetically.

And let us try to trace our position today within this world, the place where we stand in relation, or rather interrelation, to nature, humanity, identity and language, especially through the critical and expressive achievements in classical Greece, the Renaissance, the age of Enlightenment, the modernist era, and in our times, in which thought and art, in the most radical way ever, approach what we have come to recognise as the other, the ways we picture the other, the ways we have the obligation to affirm otherness, philosophically, morally and aesthetically.

It is this critical and affirming approach to the other that, among many other but not unrelated things of course, has given us a number of new academic disciplines, such as post-colonial studies, gender

studies, sexual diversity studies, animal studies. It is the approach that has criticised logos and the various forms of power that this logos assumes when it establishes structures of influence and violence. This critique of logos has been and always is important in discussing the forms and functions of knowledge, art, democracy, society, justice, metaphysics and truth.

The other has enabled us to question, deconstruct and open up polarities, limits and any closed discourse on substantiality in order to pass from the negative to the affirmative, to that which does not presuppose a metaphysical truth at its origin, to enter an unconditional territory that is accessible by a logos without logos.

It is within this unconditional territory that I would like to re-examine the still new, for us, polarity of scientific versus artistic research. And it is here that I would like now to turn to a number of well known questions: What is research? What is art? What is knowledge? What is form and what is content? Why do we need artistic research? What can artistic research offer that conventional research does not? Could artistic research be done by someone who is not an artist? If yes, why do we need artistic education at all or why should this research be part of an artistic

education? When is the artistic research done, before or after the completion of the artwork? Who is doing the research or for whom is it important, the artist who gives or the one who receives the art work? When does the artistic research transgress its limits (such as those set by the Swedish Research Council or a book like *Konst, forskning, makt: En bok om konstnären som forskare* by Efva Lilja, that the Swedish Government Offices, Regeringskansliet, has published) and become scientific research instead? Should our universities insist on such limits both within its various disciplines, structures and rules, and in its interactions with society? Is not all art already a kind of actualised research, in both its form and its content? Is not the artwork a document as well, one that is generated by and generates knowledge, awareness about its coming into being, arguments about itself and its context within society and the cosmos?

Of course all these questions are inseparable from the ones that pertain to the role of the university, of humanities within the university and of art either as a part of the field of humanities or, as at Linnaeus University, alongside the humanities (“Faculty of Art and Humanities”). They have always been crucial questions, but maybe even more so in our times when

the pressures for restructuring, financing and evaluating our academic fields and work have been bewildering and shaking the very reasons for which many of us teach, do research, write and publish.

What then is artistic research? How is to be done and published and by whom? Must the artist produce a document that discusses her or his artwork? This is the position that many in Sweden support, although in fact the law is more inclusive, leaving open the possibility of either avoiding producing such a paper or encompassing, on equal terms, what is called “konstnärligt utvecklingsarbete”, artistic development or growth. Producing a paper then becomes the position that decides how artistic research will be evaluated and funded. The academic art teachers, according to this position, are expected to do a double job: They must produce both artworks and papers or various discourses about these artworks. I believe no one within our academic world has ever demanded officially that a scientist, a mathematician or geographer, apart from the scientific research which results in a paper or a dissertation, should also produce a piece of art as an illustration, as an artistic gesture or performance of her or his scientific arguments and research results. And it is a well-known topic that

scientific thinking, along with the way it is presented, demonstrates its own aesthetic language, its individual, personal way of forming the knowledge it generates (Jacques Derrida’s and Peter Eisenman’s *Choral Works* gives us an example, while Arthur I. Miller’s *Colliding Worlds: How Cutting-Edge Science is Redefining Contemporary Art* is a good source for more).

Could it then be that form, the aesthetic aspect of our thinking, is secondary to the thinking itself? That cosmos matters more as a being and less as a mode, an arrangement of this being? That there is a truth, a language, that is independent of the way this truth is expressed or the language used? Or that what we know is more important than what we feel or sense? It seems that there must be a number of strong metaphysical arguments behind such a kind of prioritising, behind the decision to expect, indeed to demand, from an artist to analyse, discuss or contextualise his or her work within our newly established fields of artistic research in order to qualify as an academic.

If not in a paper, then where could the research that the artist has done be expressed or present itself? Could it be invested within the artwork itself, within the procedure that leads to its development and realisation? Indeed, yes. And this has been the case

ever since art was produced as such and discussed as such. That an artwork is both a result of knowledge and bears knowledge, that it challenges or breaks the limits of this knowledge, is also a well studied and documented fact (it brings to mind the field of the philosophy of art and the philology of texts, Euripides as a stage philosopher, Plato as both a philosopher and a dramatist, Baudelaire's study of evil in his poetry, Rimbaud's representation of what Ashbery has described as the "simultaneity of all life", conceptual poetry, Derrida as a poet and prose writer in works like *Glas* or *The Post Card*, Simon Critchley's *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, W. G. Sebald's merging of the factual and fictional in the same text – and countless other examples). Why then is this not enough? Why should the artist, unlike the scientist, work twice as much in order to produce, apart from the works of art, a complementary work as well – even though this in itself could be very important, at times even considered more important than the artwork itself, and even though the artist should have both the freedom and the possibility, if she or he wishes, to do so?

One should be justified in thinking that artists living in a democracy should have the freedom to do research

through and within their artwork; and that they should equally have the freedom to produce a paper about this work as well. But should this be a demand, one that will decide one's working terms and academic growth? Is this not the kind of demand that reintroduces the prioritising polarities that otherness has succeeded during the last five decades or so in undermining? Is it not a sort of eugenics that aims at purifying the work of the thinking artist (an expression that is an unthoughtful pleonasm or a trivial truism) and suspending or removing whatever the controlling logos cannot recognise, define, categorise and systematise? Works that are both philosophical and artistic at the same time, or arguments that are expressed in a very personal idiom, or art that demonstrates arguments about intellectual problems, have for years now opened the way we perceive the world, think and create today. Research in a specific work of art or a body of works of art is an intrinsic part of this artwork whether the artist intends it or not.

There is, then, following this line of argument, a certain risk that the departments of fine arts at some universities will produce more artistic research than art, more documents about art rather than art that is also a form of research with no need of a meta-text or a

meta-work to express what it carries within itself. This entails another danger, another aspect at least, which is worth discussing: Are documenting artists going to be considered more important in the university than those who do not write about or contextualise their work? Could or even should the separate research document of an artist become better, more valuable in different ways, than the artwork it is based on? And, as a result of this, is quantity, the number and length and distribution of papers, going to matter more than the quality of the artwork?

At a time when boundaries have been criticised, lifted and crossed, and the exchanging of methods, knowledge and creative resources has been generously beneficial for the freedom of the probing mind and the curious, self-exploring body, when the critique of artificial division into disciplines has generated interdisciplinary studies or new transgressing research fields, it becomes apparent that this return to polarising and categorising pushes us back to an uncritical state that threatens to do violence not only to the university but also to the democracy that sustains it. It is, thus, not only the polarity within the expression “artistic research” (whether it privileges art over research or research over art) that casts a dark shadow

over the freedom necessary for studying and creating within the university, it is also the appearance of various centres of research and the insistence upon excellence in research and of categorising this research. Instead of opening boundaries, removing restrictions, creating possibilities and freeing access to knowledge and experience and the ways this knowledge and experience can be challenged or enriched, new restrictions are imposed and in such a way that they promote a certain eugenic thinking and a certain eugenic activity. It is a remarkable paradox that at our institute at Linnaeus University we have a postcolonial field of studies, which is called a centre while, at the same time, it is supposed to criticise the very idea and the various functions of the centre as a form of colonialism. This centre moreover is an excellent one, in contrast, one presumes, to the periphery within the same institute and the research done there, a territory of lesser importance that the centre could colonise, if need be, and exploit its resources, human and economic. The philosophical, ethical and simply logical implications pertaining to the structure and use of this excellence, like those of the centre, remain of course unchallenged. Equally unchallenged remains the position that the university

in its entirety cannot, indeed it should not, be a place of a de facto and de jure unconditional excellence, especially one that is based in the gains of humanistic and post-humanistic research.

Yet another example of colonial privileging and purifying is the field of intermedial studies within the department of comparative literature of our university, this one too pushing what should be an open study of literature to an even farther periphery. Was the creating and studying of literature ever separate from the visual, the acoustic or the tactile arts and their study (Greek poetry and tragedy for instance)? Have years of critical theory not questioned the confines enforced by a blind humanism, in order to allow our creative, intellectual or sensual faculties to inseminate and nourish each other more freely than ever?

And as if all this restraining activity within the heart of our profession was not enough, we are now under the enforcement of a policy to privilege even more this artificial and violent system in its negative zeal to reduce and divide: We categorise research in a way that does not take into account any discussion of what quality is and the ways this quality matters. What and who decides, for instance, what “high” quality research and publishing is? Why should research that has fewer

chances to be funded be considered less important by the evaluating system that is applied in our university? Why should the international aspect of our research, and soon I guess artistic work too, add value in comparison to research that for various reasons (philological scholarship for instance) does not reach other countries, making national research less important or valuable than international research? And is this not the kind of hierarchy that we ought to question both in itself and for its implications? Is it meant, for instance, that international is what is published in English mainly, and within the English-speaking world? Is publishing in English in Sweden or Greece going to be considered international? Is there a time perspective involved here? Does the demand for internationality consider the fact that it often takes time for research or an artistic opus to become known nationally as well as internationally? (The case of Walter Benjamin comes easily to mind, the fate of his doctoral thesis and the time it took for his theories to reach the status they have today.)

I would like to return now to the fact that it is the term “researcher” that is the deciding one in the new assessing hierarchy at our university that I mentioned above. The terms “artist” and “artistic development”

are not mentioned, and I am not at all sure that they are taken under consideration, just as is the case with the Research Council. Is this approach to research, artistic or scientific, the beginning of an effort to totally control the ways we think? To exercise power and the violence it produces rather than safeguard the freedom of thinking and feeling and of expressing this thinking and feeling? I am a professor of creative writing but others are telling me what research is and how I will conduct it. These others are dictating their restrictive demands on me; they enforce them upon me. As a direct result of these new hierarchies, of this approach, our application for the master's degree in creative writing has not been approved by government administrators (a very surprising decision, as the two appointed experts had evaluated it positively), my own university considers me a second-class (in the best case) professor and administrators are forcing a university, which ought to be autonomous and thus free to establish its own kind of research and affirm the openness of artistic and scientific fields, to comply with new autocratic rules.

For all these reasons it is important to keep as open as possible the discussion about the relation that the work of art has to itself, to its form and content, to its

methods of operation and its intentions, to what makes its birth and functions imperative not only to society but even to the way we relate ourselves to the world, to the way we discover new worlds, to the way science, consciousness and awareness become as much art as they, at the same time, become knowledge.

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