

# Artistic Paths in Five Images

## Questioning Artistic Research

---

Kathleen Coessens

### Introduction: META HODOS

After more than twenty years of active and institutionalised artistic research in most European countries, we can ask the question of the existence of a specific research community. Is there something like an artistic research environment, in many ways separated from artistic practices? Or is artistic research not, instead of being part of a research community or environment, part of the envining artistic practice itself? If the latter is the case, then artistic practice cannot just be an 'application' of artistic research but is itself the inherent ground, origin, action, goal, and meaning of artistic research.

Some years ago, I presented a lecture on artistic research, *To submit or not to submit: Negotiating artistic research in the academic world* (Coessens 2018), in which I considered the position of artistic research inside the broad world of research – its scientific and academic environments. In those milieus, the envining research traditions, scientific communities, the shared agendas and spaces of disciplines, and broader the history, education and the ideological framework or worldview researchers have inherited and adopted, offer a framework in which 'to research'. The research happens inside an epistemic environment – the production of knowledge – that is different from the ongoing practice – the subject of the research.

Of course, all research activities are also practices: all knowledge evolves from specific ways of doing, behaving, acting, be it by way of analysis, exploration, experimentation, observation and/or reflection. The plane of interaction and negotiation between the ongoing practices and the construction of discursive and epistemic evidence is at the heart of not only a research

community but also of each cultural community, continuously developing skills and knowledge, know-how and know-that.

In this paper, I will not answer the question of a specific separate and defined artistic research community. Sincerely, I do not believe that such a distinct community exists. Artistic research and its practitioners, artistic researchers, are part of an artistic community, a community of artists. Losing the bind with artistic practice, with artists, makes it almost impossible to engage deeply with artistic research. Of course, here artistic research is considered as research through the arts fully embedded in the practice of the arts – different from musicology, art sciences or observer-based research (Frayling 1993).<sup>1</sup> Henk Borgdorff, a theoretician in artistic research, expresses this view very clearly: “We can justifiably speak of artistic research when that artistic practice is not only the result of the research, but also its methodological vehicle, when the research unfolds in and through the acts of creating and performing.” (Borgdorff 2012, 147)

How, then, can we define the way of doing artistic research, its methods and methodology? Does this not depend upon artistic practice itself and the role of research in it, its ways of transmission, its ways of know-how, its processes of intellectual, embodied, sensorial- and tradition- based experiences, often considered as connoisseurship or craftsmanship?

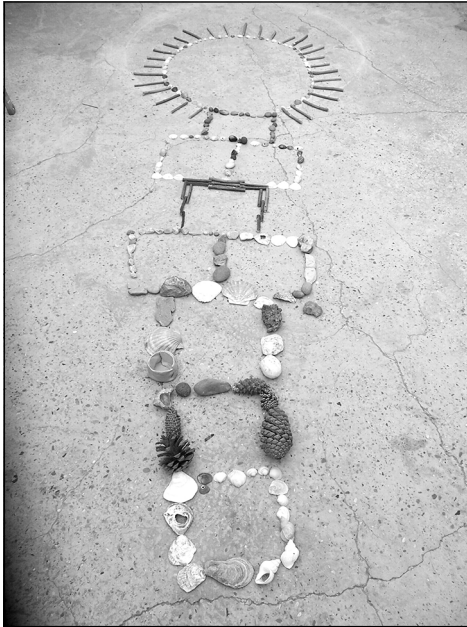
Meta hodos is the etymological background of method, *meta* meaning ‘half, over, beyond’, but also ‘higher, transcending’, and *hodos* referring to a journey, a way of doing, a path. A path is something created by way of a systematic practice. It has a goal – moving from one point to another – and is a path only because many walkers use it. The word ‘metaphor’, another concept in this context, has a shared beginning: *meta*. The ancient Greek *metaphora* means literally ‘a carrying over’, ‘a transfer’, moving from the sense of one word to a different word; it relates to the verb *metapherein* ‘to transfer, carry over’ and further ‘change, alter’, and the word *pherein* ‘to carry, bear’. In

---

1 In *Research in Art and Design* (1993) Christopher Frayling considers three domains covering the broad field of artistic endeavour. The first approach, research into art, considers art from a critical, theoretical point of view. We find these in the established academic curricula and research centres of sciences of the arts and philosophy of art – e.g. musicology. The second domain, research for art, aims to offer instruments and insights for the benefit of the practice of art itself – e.g. instrument builders, acoustics. The third approach is the research inside the arts themselves, often named ‘research through art’, in which the object of research is one’s own art or the artistic process itself and the researcher is an artist.

modern Greek *metaphora* still has its literal meaning, that is ‘transport’ and ‘transportation’, for instance with a bus, but also a bank transaction.

Five metaphorical images will point to the complexity and variety of artistic research as not only embedded and enriched in a practice, but also as inherently embodied, dynamic and reflective, opening a field where method is challenged by its own etymological origins of *meta hodos* – a journey beyond the usual paths.



## Metaphor 1: BAKING BREAD

How to make bread? Practices of baking bread are part of different cultures. One can find instructive videos on baking bread in different languages and cultures, at amateur and professional levels.<sup>2</sup> The implied audience concerns children, housewives, cooks, industrial or traditional communities, and do-it-yourself minded amateur bakers. Whatever these differences, all use

---

2 Books with recipes on how to bake bread lack even more experiential elements.

the same basic ingredients of flour, water, salt and leaven to ferment, and all end with baked bread (Coessens 2018).

The example of baking bread teaches us much about the communication and translation of tacit and performative knowledge. Gestures and verbal explanations are the discursive practices used, ranging from rather abstract, difficult explanations with magic-like tricks (temperature and humidity), via incomplete information because of cultural bias or presuppositions to very pedagogical information (cooking for children, songs in traditional societies). Sometimes the gesture is clarified by the verbal explanation, sometimes the explanation worsens the understanding, or the gestures complicate the comments. These videos offer a cue to understanding how to bake bread. As an observer of that practice, though, one misses out on access to different elements: the malleability or wetness of the dough, the smell, the bodily movements and practice.

While there is a world between artistic practice and a showcase of baking bread, this very simple example tells us something essential about human practices. It reveals the complexity of how to communicate tacit and performative knowledge. There is no guaranteed nor best way to transform and translate a practice into a discourse, turn making into a writing, knowing-how into knowing-that, nor vice versa. The metaphor stresses the tensions between acting and observing, performative experience and discursive expression.

## **Metaphor 2: HAMMERING**

Hammering is the combination of a tool, a practice and a goal. A carpenter uses a hammer. He does not need to think about its use. The tool is totally integrated into the act; the impact of the tool in the hand functions as an internal stimulus; the tool functions as an extension of the hand. The use of the hammer, as evident as it seems, implies not only practice-based knowledge and experience, but is part of a whole epistemic context. Firstly, the hammer is, as a tool itself, already involved in a process of invention and creation – the hammer has been invented. Secondly, the use of the hammer – hammering – is a practice, a know-how that most often occurs at a level of subsidiary awareness. The third level is the goal – the construction of a chair or a house – encompassing the projection of the hammer, linked to imagination, invention, intention, improvisation or plan. Those multiple levels are

only implicitly present. The original 'tool-ness' of the hammer only comes to the foreground once the hammer is defective; the use of the hammer – as focal and not subsidiary awareness – only when the hammer is improperly used (Coessens 2003).<sup>3</sup> The carpenter becomes conscious of this whole web of knowledge when some part of the action fails. The hammer suddenly becomes an object, different from him, useless, but perhaps repairable. The carpenter suddenly situates himself in the whole project, realises the bond between the hammer and the environment: the relation with the nails, the wood, the construction, as well as the relation between physical and social places. He realises, by way of his bond with the hammer, that he can appropriate the world – plans of construction, dreams of living, projects, instruction, identity, choice.

The example of hammering throws more light on the complexity of a practice of knowledge. Not only is any specific or small act of knowledge – such as hammering – part of a larger process and experience of knowing, as a micro-cosmos it also reflects the whole range of the human processes of developing and experiencing knowledge. As such, it stresses the fundamental 'acting' of knowledge. The hammer is but one example, it might have been also a path or a theory:

"Building a theory is travelling; having a theory is being at one's destination. [...] Having a theory is being prepared to make a variety of moves [...]. If a farmer has made a path, he is able to saunter easily up and down it. That is what the path was made for. But the work of building the theory was a job of making paths where as yet there were none." (Ryle 1949, 270-72)

And the path needs to be used and re-used to remain a path. Ryle's quote brings us near to our search for artistic research as a *meta hodos*, a way to practise, a way of practice. The metaphor of hammering forces us to look at this practice embedded in a dynamic web. The hammering itself is an active deed within a broad context of practices leading to or facilitating a specific goal. Like hammering, artistic practice and its concomitant research consist of complex relations, actors and intentions: humans, objects, environments, ideas, both on a horizontal and vertical plane, past and future.

---

3 The philosopher Heidegger (1927) used the act of hammering to exemplify his phenomenological analysis of action.

### Metaphor 3: THE GAME

In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein describes activities or forms of life by considering these as different kinds of ‘games’, language games: bundles of practices that can be classified following the specific kind of materials, actions, rules, and patterns they use. The notion of a game is a strong and dynamic metaphor for human practices. It also involves the creation of a world of specific expectations, behaviour and action. Moreover, the game is never completely defined and is only active when played: when the rules are put into practice.

Together with the metaphor of game, Wittgenstein introduced the notion of ‘family resemblances’. Think of a family picture. All of the members of a family will never share the same trait: different characteristics apply to different members, but overall, they all share something with some others. In a similar way games are part of the same family. Specific and often implicit rules and family resemblances prevail but are never totally fixed or applicable to all of the games of a family. As such, we can never give a final, essential definition of ‘game’, as we cannot find out exactly “what is common to all these activities and what makes them into language or parts of language” (Wittgenstein 1953, §65). We can only think of these as “similarities, relationships, [...] ‘family resemblances’” (Wittgenstein 1953, §66-67). Think of ball games or parlour games: different ball games share different characteristics and rules, but not all share the same. Wittgenstein states that we can participate in such human activities because we know how to play it, how to ‘set it in action’ – of an otherwise immobile set of things and rules. Moreover, for each game to be a game, it also has to be accepted as such by a culture, by its users. The game becomes dynamic and creates a whole world in and of itself, provided it is played by different members as ‘a way of living’ – or ‘form of life’ in Wittgenstein’s words – that involves a commitment, a seriousness, where the ‘relativity’ of the game is suspended.

Wittgenstein’s framework offers us an interesting tool to understand artistic practices and research as having their own rules, family resemblances and commitment. When is something an artistic practice? Should we define artistic research as a part of the game, or as a sub-game? How do we play it, when can we play it, and with whom? The notion of play is inherent to art: music is something you ‘play’, as a soloist or in an ensemble. What are the explicit and implicit conditions of the game to be played? What is

the artist's and – more broadly – the culture's commitment to the game of artistic practice? Which rules, practices and resemblances of research have to be respected? The need for skill, knowledge and experience, for creative and innovative elements, the presence of rather ineffable, implicit elements concerning aesthetics, tradition, intuition and association is proper to the game of art.

### **Metaphor 4: MIRRORS**

In one of his manuscripts, Leonardo da Vinci imagined a specific mirror room, an invention that extends the visual and kinetic experience of the body. His sketches depict an octagonal room made from eight mirror rectangles in which a subject would be confronted with a normally impossible visible revelation of their own body, seeing him or herself an infinite number of times and from different angles. The environment reflects a specific multi-sensorial experience of self-display.

These mirrors create, in the first instance, a disturbing externalisation and 'exhibition' of the body, moving the frontiers of and control of the body towards unknown fields. The actor in front of the mirror will experience what is normally reserved for other people – seeing his/her sides, back and movements. The senses and perceptions of the body are multiplied and the subject needs considerable skill to control, cope with and display these multiple images and movements of the body.

The mirrors disturb the awareness of the limits of the body, its centrality as well as its abounding into the environment. Mental and physical schemata of the body are dependent on sensorial and kinetic relations with the environment, now extended by new parameters of vision and movement. As such, the inner perception of the body is decentred: where does the body start, where does it end? The reflection offered by the mirror room leads the subject to reflection on their own body, its appearance, extension and display.

The octagonal mirror room is disturbing, revealing and relating. It merges the visible with the invisible, the explicit with the implicit, the conscious with the unconscious, background with focus. From the inside, it reveals the vulnerability of the artist – disposure and exposure – as, from the outside, it reflects the potential interpretational multiplicity. The mir-

rors reveal multiple reflections, ‘in-sights’ as well as ‘out-sights’. The artist is confronted with both positions, merging practice with knowledge, reflection with research. The octagonal room interrelates all possible points of view, revealing self-reflection and knowledge and, as such, opens a meta dimension moving from reflection to reflexivity.

The origin of ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ goes back to the Latin verb *reflectere*, meaning ‘the act of bending back’. ‘Reflection’ refers both to a natural process of reflecting light so that objects become visible to us and to a mental process of awareness. Reflexivity refers to circular relationships of awareness and questioning – like in research practices. It is the “process of continually reflecting upon our interpretations of both our experience and the phenomena being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of our previous understandings and our investment in particular research outcomes” (Finlay & Gough 2003, 108). Reflexivity refers to a relation which is bidirectional and in which both parts influence one another.

The difference between reflection and reflexivity is the jump from something outside which happens to you – reflection – just by being and acting in the world, towards the dynamical and personal unique relation in which one engages with the outside – reflexivity. On the one hand, reflexivity is considered as the awareness and experience of the self, as an involvement in concrete practices that implies an anticipation of reflection. Standing in practice means being involved, engaging in a situation of affective and epistemic intentionality, while being engaged in a theory, a tradition, a background. On the other hand, it is also the experience of difference and dissonance, the encounter within other projects of world-construction, questioning all human practices and significance and forcing the individual to strategies and tactics, but also to interaction and dialogue (Sandywell 1996, 5; de Certeau 1980, 1990).

The body in the middle of the octagonal room refers to the artist, his/her intentions, and display. The octagonal room forces the artist at the centre to question relations between artist and public, between inside and outside, ‘in-sight’ and ‘out-sight’, self and other – and the self as other – between the visible and the invisible.

## Metaphor 5: INSIGHT – OUTSIDE

Magritte offers us with *La reproduction interdite* (1937) another painting that moves us beyond the notions of mirror and reactivates reflection and reflexivity. Magritte's art is a continuous movement 'beyond painting', a "desire to situate his practice at the intersection of different discourses" (Brown 2005). He experimented with the formal and artistic boundaries between artwork and artistic identity, with the relation between his subject and himself as the creator of the art manifestation. The notions of 'mirror', 'self' and 'other' are important elements of his painted philosophy, where he explored the dialogue between the self and the other, the artist and the artwork.

An interesting example of self-referential reflexivity depicting the insider's relation to the artistic process is Escher's *Drawing Hands* (1948), where the hands that draw and the painted hands are both in the artwork, painting each other, and blurring the frontiers between who is painting and who/what is painted. It depicts the awareness of one's powers and limits in the artistic process of creation. A confrontation with the self, the self as the artist, as positioned inside a framework of culture and society occurs. The self is a self and at the same time it is another.

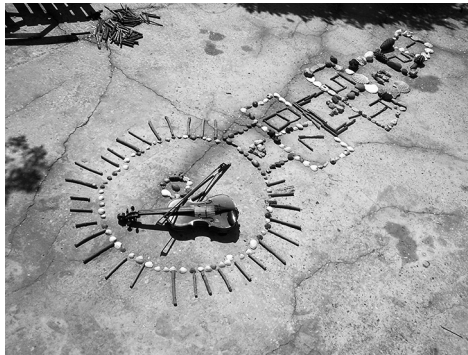
This self-other relation is at the heart of Magritte's *La reproduction interdite*, showing the back of the head of a person looking in the mirror at the back of his head, which surpasses immanent reflection and even self-referentiality. Here we have the next level of reflexivity – the performer representing the performer – merging an insider's view with an outsider's view. A transcendent reflexivity surges, urging the artist to consider a third view reflection, an 'other person' influence on the artistic manifestation. Magritte here splits himself – or should we say the character – into the I and the other, superposing what the character can see in the mirror with what the painter sees behind the person.

From the inside, the artist appears as both observer and observed, both subject and object. A questioning of the methodology of the artist's practices appears here. A move from being a participant observer to being an observing participant reveals both the blurring of the subjective and objective position of the artist. Participant observation is an ethnological method used in the social sciences. It implies that a researcher becomes part of the society and culture of study as closely as possible by learning the language, habits and practices of the community he or she is studying and participating in as

a full member. Being a quasi-member of that society offers the possibility to study and understand that society more fully while still being a researcher.

In the method of observing participation in artistic research, the resemblance of the ethnologist to the artist is reversed, in that the artist is not initially an observer, but a participant – the actor. By observing, reflecting and researching their own participation and activity, he or she becomes an observing participant. The roles are similar, but inversed, the artist coming from the inside, the ethnologist coming from the outside. As such the artist as an observing participant will have more difficulty in escaping idiosyncrasy and the research will always involve parts of personal knowledge, artistic development, identity and sensibility. At the same time, however, this subjective research attitude will be accompanied by multiple interactions with and from the outside. Each process of observing and researching artistic practices from the inside will necessarily link with knowledge and context from the outside. It will open new insights in creative processes; it will reveal interdisciplinary relations and lead to creative interactions between humans and materials as well as sharing personal and cultural knowledge.

Inside and outside elements will participate in relations, interactions and transformations of processes that are mutually conditioned by the author, context and practice. The possible tension between different perspectives and inputs will imply a constant adjustment of intended and presented actions and interactions, opening up a dynamic of approaches of which neither exists outside this mutual relationship and which needs to be repeatedly reassessed.



## Conclusion: META HODOS

The five metaphors situated artistic research inside the environing artistic practice itself, inside a cultural environment, and offered a view from both the inside and the outside. We now come back to the *meta hodos*, to searching for the path, going halfway along the path, going beyond the path. A path is never a path in isolation. A path exists because there was initially an intention and a goal, a need to create a path. The path is realised by way of a practice, a dynamic practice, a repetitive and systematic practice, never exactly the same, but often similar. The path can become broader or can slightly move its orientation, borders and curves, like a river when rain and erosion become intense. But while the flow of the river will push one in a direction, depending upon natural causes, the path is mainly defined by human interaction and intention. To remain a path, it has to invite other walkers. No walkers, no paths. The walker has the possibility to stop, go back, redraw the borders and the curves, look behind, interact with other walkers, explore the environment of the path: going *meta hodos* by way of walking.

## Literature

- Borgdorff, H. (2012). *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- Brown, A. (2005, November). René Magritte and Paul Éluard: An International and Interartistic Dialogue. *Image & Narrative. Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative*, 13. Retrieved from <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/surrealism/brown.htm>
- Coessens K. (2003). Experiencing Knowledge: Some Philosophical Insights for Educational Research. In P. Smeyers & M. Depaepe (Eds.), *Beyond Empiricism. On criteria for Educational Research, Studia Paedagogica*, 34, 181-194. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Coessens, K. (2018). To Submit or not to Submit: Negotiating Artistic Research in the Academic World. In B. van Kerckhoven & W. Ysebaert (Eds.), *Evaluating Art and Design Research: Reflections, Evaluation Practices and Research Presentations* (41-52). Brussels: ASP.
- De Certeau, M. (1980). *L'invention du quotidien, Vol. 1: Arts de faire*. Paris: 10/18.

- De Certeau, M. (1990). *L'invention du quotidien, Vol. 2: Habiter, cuisiner*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Finlay, L. & Gough, B. (2003). *Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Sciences*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Frayling C. (1993). Research in Art and Design. *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1(1), 1-5. London: Royal College of Art.
- Heidegger, M. (1998/1927). *Zijn en Tijd* [Being and Time]. Nijmegen: Sun.
- Ryle, G. (1984/1949). *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sandywell, B. (1996). *Reflexivity and the Crisis of Western Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.