The reflective methodology of artistic spatial research

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In the arts, we can observe aesthetic confrontations with social, ecological, urban, acoustic, geographic, political, and many other spaces by means of corporal, performative, graphic, interventionist, or participatory methods. But can spatial research methods be applied to the arts? The performance group LIGNA explores the architectures of economy and power at central train stations in order to reveal mechanisms of exclusion in public space.[1] The artist group Ala Plástica performs aesthetic fieldwork as ecological action at Rio de la Plata by involving the local population in identifying different insights into the ecology of the space.[2] These two examples serve to stimulate the imagination for potential aesthetic spatial research with concrete artistic projects. By using conventional scientific terms, such as those of cartography and field research, it is possible to describe spatial research methods in the field of the arts or to translate aesthetic approaches into aesthetic conceptions of space: This was the case for LIGNA, where urban space was understood performatively and illustrated choreographically, or for Ala Plástica, where ecological space was perceived rhizomatically and recognized as transformative based on indigenous knowledge and landscape art. Before I take a closer look at the aesthetic approaches to artistic spatial research specifically, it is first necessary to address the systematic challenges associated with this type of spatial research. This means exploring the epistemological realm of possibilities offered by artistic research methods.

The epistemological aspects raise the question of what qualifies certain practices related to space as aesthetic research methods? How can we summarize the methods used in artistic spatial research? How do traceability and thus negotiability manifest in the arts? Which *paths to knowledge* can be identified as aesthetic research methods? Artistic spatial research requires contemplation of its methods: a methodology. As a doctrine based on the structure, conception, or prevalence of the methods, a methodology can be understood as the fundamental tenets of concrete scientific methods or as the contemplation of the case-specific requirements for singular epistemic approaches. A regulatory methodology acts as a guide for the scientific field of work. A reflective methodology explains the specific methods used after the research endeavor as a retrospective

1 See https://ligna.blogspot.com/2009/12/radioballett.html

2 See https://alaplastica.wixsite.com

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plausible path to knowledge. I aim to show that we cannot refrain from using a methodology in artistic research and that it is possible to develop a reflective methodology, especially to avoid the danger of disciplining the arts with a regulatory methodology. At the same time, I hope to entice the other sciences to join us on our path toward a reflective methodology capable of validating both the singularity and plausibility of the approach in the field of the arts. I would like to focus on a contemplative theory of routes to knowledge and learn to understand the aesthetic methods of the specific practices in the arts in order to determine what methodological research means in relation to the arts and how it can be assessed.

1 Comparative methodology

As of the beginning of the 21st century, artistic research is still at an early stage of development on its way to becoming a *normal science*. A "normal science," as denoted by philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1976), describes the status of an established discipline that does not have to legitimize its methodological standards because it is no longer called into question as a science. However, the debate about the arts and their methods[3] illustrates that artistic research—and thus artistic spatial research as well—is still far away from achieving the status of an uncontested normal science. Artistic research does not yet have any methodological standards—and many think this is a good thing for the sake of supposed freedom in the arts. But at the same time, it is necessary to validate the plausibility of and accept originally artistic practices and aesthetic methods as research techniques for practical applications in the arts. Therefore, it must be possible to distinguish arts-based practices from the methods used in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. It only makes sense to use the term artistic research instead of arts that simply juggle with scientific practices if we can identify originally arts-based research techniques and differentiate aesthetic field research, cartography, or surveying from ethnological or geographic research. This differentiation with regard to the different methodological approaches can in fact be achieved by a methodology devoted to the manifold plausibility criteria of different methods in the various disciplines with the goal of identifying the specific characteristics and demonstrating the plurality of methods as a basis for the epistemic distinctness of artistic research methods.

Such a comparative methodology is nothing new in and of itself. It will merely have to be adapted to the arts and their unique character as artistic research. A comparative methodology is a long-standing approach used since the advent of the natural sciences and their separation from philosophy. During the transition from the 15th to the 16th century, Francis Bacon differentiated between the experimental method used in the new "empirical philosophy" on the one hand and the deductive method used in traditional, argumentative philosophy on the other, although he insisted that people "must for a while renounce their notions, and begin to form an acquaintance with things" (Bacon 1990 [orig. 1620]: Aphorismus 36). Not only does Bacon endeavor to understand and discuss

3 For an example with a wealth of other references to the debate on artistic research, its methods, and its practices, see: Badura et al. (2015).

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the methods in the differentiation, he also assumes that a new perspective on research is required for this differentiation in order to truly recognize the epistemic substance of the different roads to knowledge. This call to renounce our notions and familiarize ourselves with "things" can also be applied to the methodology in artistic research. In the 19th century, Wilhelm Dilthey established the category of the social sciences, differentiating them from the natural sciences based on the concepts of *understanding* in the natural sciences and *explaining* in the social sciences (see Dilthey 1974). In the 20th century, Hans Georg Gadamer took up this differentiation and proposed defining the understanding and interpreting texts in the historically philosophical disciplines as "experience of the world" in contrast to the modern natural sciences (Gadamer 1986). Gadamer explicitly calls the type of understanding used in the natural sciences "methods" as opposed to the type of understanding inherent in the social sciences, which appears through the experience of "hermeneutic understanding" and does not produce knowledge but rather "truth" (ibid.). It is not necessary to follow Gadamer's recommendations for a differentiated terminology, but they clearly illustrate the considerable focus on an interpretative endeavor to distinguish methods from types of understanding, which has characterized the history of comparative methodology for a long time.

This attention to an epistemological differentiation must be rediscovered and used for the benefit of artistic research. It places *aesthetic philosophy* (as one could also call artistic research based on Bacon's concept of "empirical philosophy" for the emerging natural sciences) on an equal footing. Closer inspection of the existing scientific disciplines, which are no longer only divided into the two main groups of *argumentative or empirical philosophy*, opens up a multi-faceted cabinet of curiosities for the comparative methodology with diverse, coexisting approaches to searching for knowledge: approaches that operate with different media such as numbers, words, or images and that each vary within the sciences. In the historical-philosophical disciplines, another analytical tool was established with Michel Foucault's discourse analysis, different than Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's speculative dialectics, Plato's narrative dialogues, or Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. In the natural sciences, digital simulations differ from empirical laboratory work, exploratory fieldwork, or theoretical mathematics. Qualitative or quantitative interview techniques deal with the social world differently than participatory observation perspectives. Time and again, new methods have had to be established or assert themselves over the suspicion of pseudoscience.

Against the backdrop of this plurality of methods, aesthetic practices can principally also be added to the list of recognized methodological approaches. But which ones? Despite the broad variety of methodological approaches, there is wide consensus that negotiable and explicable methods are intrinsic to the concept of research, which means research must take place within the framework of comprehensible practices. The methodology underlying the methods—in their wealth of variations—is determined by this traceability. The numerous research approaches are based on this shared expectation for traceability as this serves as a negotiable instrument for each method in the research. This raises the epistemological question of what exactly this traceability means in the field of arts-based methods and how it works.

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2 Retrospective traceability

A comparison of the approaches used in different sciences to ensure traceability reveals that some function differently in argumentative semantic webs than in deliberate lines of reasoning or quantifiable experiments. The respective traceability of sentences, calculations, or effects operate with distinct media or obligations. From an epistemic perspective, deliberate reasoning (from the natural sciences) first had to prove itself historically vis-à-vis speculative explanations (from philosophy) in order to be recognized as a comprehensible method for acquiring knowledge. Not only does the initial concern regarding a lack of traceability clearly apply to modern art as a field of research, it also appears to be part of the epistemological debate. The sciences are a long historical process of negotiations about what should be accepted or rejected, which involves not only the right to make assertions and speak but also the plausibility and persuasive power of the methods and how they are experienced or co-experienced. Therefore, a methodology for the arts as a knowledge producer would seem indispensable for artistic research in order to validate the plausibility of the aesthetic strategies. Nevertheless, such a methodology is often rejected out of fear for the autonomy of the arts. However, the widespread rejection of an aesthetic methodology is related to the steadfast understanding of a regulatory methodological approach that lays down a canon methods instead of aspiring for a reflective methodological approach.

After all, traceability does not mean regulation. The demand for comprehensible methods in the field of artistic research does not have to imply anything more than the *post-hoc* description of the actual path to knowledge, including the expedient system and outcome in detail. Jean-François Lyotard (1993: 33 et seqq.) uses the term "post-modo" to describe this anticipation of a not yet achieved but sensed knowledge about the path of cognition that will make sense and lead to understanding in retrospect. Doing *post-modo* research means preconceiving an evolving consistency and recognizing its implementation as consistent after the fact. We are familiar with such unanticipated work on methodological consistency in the cognition process from other disciplines. Therefore, no established sets of authoritative research methods and no canon of fixed reflexion techniques can be defined before the deliberation process. Philosophies continue to develop new, systematic-methodical answers to various questions and problems. The self-reflexive and adaptive process of practical research is decisive in this regard. Reflexive and adaptive practice means that the methods and their respective consistency develop as the exploratory and investigative process unfolds logically together with its situative genesis.

Accordingly, for artistic research, it can be advisable to define a basic requirement for a precise, reflexive, consistent, and transparent method as an after-effect or consequence of arts-based research practice, but not as a preceding set of rules. On the horizon of a reflective methodology looms the fact that research in the arts follows a methodically consolidating practice and it is possible to discuss—reflectively—the traceability of the applied methods in retrospect. This means relying on comprehensible, negotiable, falsifiable aesthetic methods that are first developed and validated within the field of artistic research; and this means integrating reflectivity and retroactivity into the epistemic theory. This means striving for a doctrine of routes to artistic knowledge that does not

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prescribe but rather reconstructs. Thus, the fear of the arts being turned into a discipline, induced by the search for standard methods, appears to be methodologically unfounded. A methodology for artistic research aspires to be a justification for the retroactivity of the methodical and thus ultimately a collection of individual cases of artistic research. For this collection, it is necessary to highlight the compelling nature of the individual arts-based techniques *post-modo*, with the aim of establishing a tradition of research cases and not identifying standard methods. It would be helpful to refer to individual research practices and to recognize their effects in terms of generating insights from this perspective—not based on universal methods. It is necessary to consider individual artistic practices and determine their research potential, which brings me back to the cases of artistic spatial research I mentioned at the beginning. What are the epistemic practices underlying the artistic studies of urban space in the case of LIGNA or of ecological space in the case of Ala Plástica?

3 A study of the exclusion mechanisms in public space

The *Radio Ballet* organized by the LIGNA performance group investigates the rules and exclusion mechanisms of public space by making deviant behavior visible. It is regarded as a "practice of inappropriate loitering."[4] The *Radio Ballet* follows the assumption that public space is part of visual culture and can be understood as a *mise-en-scène* of the urban. Accordingly, the *Radio Ballet* can be found at the iconic level of the performative, methodically developing a corresponding relationship between aesthetic research practice and the conception of the study object. The *Radio Ballet* is a performance that takes place in partially public spaces, such as train stations. As a performance, it can demonstrate something in and on public space because the public is performative. In order to understand what can be illustrated in and with the performance, it is necessary to become part of it. The understanding that is unlocked with this performance about open space takes place as a "co-experience" (Badura 2015), by participating in and experiencing the performative experience. For the *Radio Ballet*, the LIGNA group invites voluntary participants to meet at a certain time at a certain location, for example at Hamburg Central Station. Everyone in the performance then has headphones on or listens to a transistor radio. The participants find themselves spread out across the space and hear over a certain frequency on their radios what is inaudible for normal passers-by: instructions, music, and reflections. "The Radio Ballet," whispers the voice on the radio into the ears of the participants attending the performance, "promotes the gray zone between permitted, twilight, and forbidden gestures. It allows the gestures that are driven out of the privatized public space to return."[5] The performance is based on a pre-produced radio program that is broadcast via an open city radio station or a mobile transmitter. In a mix of prompts, explanations, and atmospheric musical sounds, the participants in the

4 See the video documentation of the performance at: https://ligna.blogspot.com/2009/12/radioball ett.html

5 See here and listen to the following acoustic quotes: https://ligna.blogspot.com/2009/12/radioball ett.html

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performance are turned into collective and scattered experimenters in using permitted and forbidden gestures in the privatized public space. Dispersed across the train station with its platforms and lounges, stores and snack stations, the performance participants follow the instructions from the radio and can be identified based on the simultaneous movements of their bodies as a scattered choreography: As if by magic, all participants of the performance bend their right arm suddenly and stretch out their hand to beg. All participants lie down on the ground at the same time scattered across the train station. "The businesses in the consumption area," announces the voice on the radio, "display vestiges of a dream world: the dream world is the commodity. The privatization of the consumption area guards wealth—other distributions of this wealth are conceivable in inappropriate loitering!" After these theories on the commoditization of the public and its narcotic effects on the individuals, another voice now prompts the listeners to become active: "Stand in front of the shop window and brush the goods against the grain!" As if the brushing of the many fingers over the store windows were not enough as a gray zone gesture to sense the forbidden first hand, the voice on the radio urges: "Contact: Knock on the store windows—knock on the window again but harder." This produces a frightening clatter against store windows in the train station. What seems like a provoking signal from outside, knocking against the principles of public order, is backed by the inner logic of the choreography as an argument: "Another distribution of wealth becomes conceivable," says the radio and then calls: "Run away!" The performance participants fly away from the store windows, where they were standing just moments before, across the space again in all directions—as if they were fleeing. The performance participants create a choreography that provokes the space in terms of its socio-economic boundaries, thus making those boundaries visible. By means of "inappropriate" loitering in public space, participants of the performance step onto the stage of the public and become representative and visible actors. The interventionist performance of the *Radio Ballet* is a demonstration of regulations and prohibitions in the literal sense of a *demonstrare*, performative, and at the same time disconcerting display: a display that becomes accessible to the participants of the performance as a co-productive experience. Furthermore, by means of a retrospective, cinematic display, this performance makes it possible to communicate and thus replicate the knowledge unfurled in it. The cinematic documentation of the *Radio Ballet* is an audiovisual montage consisting of acoustic inside views of the performance using radio recordings and visual exterior views of the performative actions in the public space of the train station. When watching the video, viewers are sucked into the atmosphere of listening to and following instructions and subjected to the fixating gazes of the passers-by when reaching out the hand to beg or sounding out the room fleetingly. The aesthetic experience, which produces knowledge in the context of the performative setting (like under controlled and structured laboratory conditions), is translated into a communicable medium by means of the cinematic documentation, into an audiovisual co-experience.

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4 Aesthetic field research in ecological space

Ala Plástica takes a different approach: methodologically, spatially, and in terms of communication. The group deals with Rio de la Plata in Argentina and sees itself as an artistic-political environmental organization. Rio de la Plata, the river of silver, is an estuary the size of a sea and as such a complex socio-natural space. Several million people in the densely populated metropolises of Buenos Aires and Montevideo are supplied with water from the drainage basin. The estuary is polluted by trash and discharge. This ecological and social starting point forms the basis for the research and transformational work of Ala Plástica in the natural space. Its long-term project *Junco/Especies Emergentes*, which started in 1995, resembles a field research project as a campaign in which the local population, as well as scientific and technical experts, are invited to participate. The social, political, aesthetic, and scientific research question centers around a local type of reed, the junco, based on the traditional knowledge of the local rural population about its occurrence, texture, effects, and pliability. Junco is used to weave baskets in the daily practices of the rural community. Thanks to its extensive root system, however, junco is also able to clean water and reinforce river banks. It creates landscapes, purifies bodies of water, and clarifies facts. Its occurrence is economically and ecologically useful. Within the scope of its artistic-political project, Ala Plástica makes use of photography, performative gatherings, collections of objects and statements, and choreographies of people and expertise. The local, site-specific, and traditional knowledge has been mapped out and successfully applied to the specific environmental problems of Rio de la Plata as an ecological, epistemic, and aesthetic tool. As an alternative to scientific, biochemical knowledge types that respond to environmental pollution with laboratory analyses and artificial substances, Ala Plástica unlocks experience-based knowledge and uses it as a minimally invasive instrument to shape the landscape: The junco reed belt on the banks of Rio de la Plata was restocked as part of the *Junco/Especies Emergentes* project in order to improve the water quality in the basin.[6] This aesthetic-horticultural campaign implied a collaborative analysis, land art, and political action, while also having a socio-epistemic impact. Just as the reed spreads rhizomatically via its root system, the communication networks of the group grew and are becoming more and more refined. The junco knowledge type flows through these communication channels and settles in the ramified network, like the river bottom covering the reed rhizome on the banks of Rio de la Plata. Ala Plástica does not simply share the knowledge developed in its projects centrally via the Western European cultural system. The oral knowledge transfer of the indigenous population is activated as well, similar to scientific networks in which papers are written and presentations are held. The group restages methodologically comparable, participatory interventions in the ecological space at other locations with other plant and human collaborators and organizes exhibitions showcasing the reed as a representative exhibit. The exhibitions are regarded as a platform for reflective artistic practice since, as established by artist and theorist Julie Ault, they constitute "sites where art and artifact are made public, where social processes and contexts that art and other kinds of production come from can be described or represented to viewers" (Ault 2003: 361). Exhibitions

6 See https://alaplastica.wixsite.com/alaplastica

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can be understood as arrangements that are constitutive for the orders of knowledge. Both the selection of projects as well as their spatial arrangements create meaning for observers in the scenographic collaboration (see Haarmann 2019: 67 et seqq.).

5 Imagination of the future anterior

The path to knowledge in artistic practice can be interpreted as a singular and site-specific method following the completed research and artistic process. Nothing about these spatial research practices proves to be paradigmatic and necessarily transferable. Every arts-based spatial research project unfolds and develops its originally appropriate methodological practice based on the inquisitive activity with which both questions are formulated and performances are executed in the arts. Artistic spatial research is always productive. It produces aesthetic findings and artifacts. It is a future anterior questioning in the reconstructive performance of artistic actions and objects. It is precisely within the context of this figure of positing a question in the aesthetic process that the question arises of the impulses within which a future anterior of retrospective prior knowledge, and thus an inkling of the methods of cognition, can unfold. In other words, how does the method of aesthetic research unfold at the interface between questioning and positing?

The imagination can be regarded as a key term that inspires artistic practice in the context of research as an indication of the right route to knowledge. In this case, imagination does not refer to arbitrary fantasies. From the personal experience of a Spanish performance collective, the imagination that inspires artistic research can be divided into two subtypes: The deconstructive "imagination breaks down real connections and reassembles the parts," while the projective imagination "enables us to imagine an alternate reality in the sense of a perspective. […] This type of imagination produces knowledge by attempting to transform reality" (Peréz Royo et al. 2013: 38). While the deconstructive understanding of imagination is closely related to what the founder of philosophical aesthetics, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, calls the "power of imagination"—the faculty of acumen (see Baumgarten 2007 [orig. 1750/58], own translation)—protective imagination expresses an aspect of speculative artistic practice that reflects what art theorist Konrad Fiedler (1991 [orig. 1913/14], own translation) referred to as the "expressive movement." In the context of deconstructive imagination, the artistic research subject uses the power of imagination to anticipate the possibilities inherent in the objects and juggles them. The deconstructive and connecting power of acumen can be explained based on the work of chemists in a laboratory who have to possess knowledge about the ratios of molecules and their ability to be recombined in order to break down or bind substances and thus to identify them. Essentially, this imagination can be thought of as an essential component of science as a whole. Every research hypothesis arises from the anticipatory power of imagination of the researchers. This anticipatory power of imagination is not characterized by the spawning of arbitrary ideas, but rather it results from the field of the known and fans those possibilities. In general, research requires that sense of the possible, which can be called imagination, in order to anticipate the unknown on the horizon of the known, which could be fabricated and understood by reassembling the pieces. This imagination is made methodical and systematic by the

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fact that the aesthetic and research activities associated with it are guided by a focus on the conjectured and thus systematized. The deconstructive imagination is targeted. It resembles a concentrated forecast that anticipates a specific something in order to follow it directly, albeit by means of searching and juggling. Moreover, the projective imagination is inventive. It is the creative faculty that enables us to imagine alternate realities and to gain insights by attempting to transform reality. This second type of exploratory imagination claims to recognize the creative process and develop knowledge by forming and formulating (art)work. It leads to an artistic movement of expression, which is accompanied by a process of creative understanding in working through and shaping the matter. This diagnosis of the projective type of aesthetic imagination and research reminds us of Konrad Fiedler's claim that it is possible to recognize the world by creating aesthetic products (see Fiedler 1991 [orig. 1913/14]). The process of creative design unearths revelations. In doing so, the speculative power of the imagination not only inspires the epistemic creation process but also structures it. As in the case of deconstructive imagination, projective imagination does not refer to phantasms but rather to emblematic premonitions of what could and will be. With this speculative anticipation of an alternate reality, artistic practice is not regulated or predetermined, although it is organized. And this organization of aesthetic activities can be replicated *post hoc* in terms of the steps required to complete the work. Aesthetic deduction—as an artistic multi-step approach—appears to be developing in the direction of inquiry, which the imagination proposes to the act of doing and based on which it is possible to scrutinize and negotiate the plausibility of the assumption and the stringency of the path to creation in retrospect.

6 Research cases

Both the LIGNA performance group and Ala Plástica make use of projective imagination with their transformative interventions in public or ecological space. The speculative imagination of the Ala Plástica group anticipates a natural space that restricts indigenous knowledge and plant growth and acknowledges another ecology with the means of its realization. Here the *Junco/Especies Emergentes* campaign installs an alternative subject of knowledge—the rural population on the banks of Rio de la Plata—and obeys exclusive structures in the production of knowledge. The will not only to portray the world repeatedly but also to change it against the backdrop of its potential, recognized differentness inspires this spatial art to question the knowledge of the world, to rethink the subjects of candid speech, and to expand the epistemic methods. The artistic group LIGNA endeavors to explore and thus change public places of consumption and their structures by means of a performance. The aesthetic work of the group is based on the assumption that there could be a better world. A world in which public space is not organized around consumption. The artists produce insights in their attempt to transform reality. LIGNA imagines a world in which the public manages without exclusion mechanisms. The group anticipates this alternate reality and scrutinizes the truth of the existing reality by means of aesthetic interventions. The speculative intervention in the case of the LIGNA group is a creative, aesthetic discovery technique that challenges reality with change in order

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to reveal it and to make it possible to change what has been revealed. The group acts proactively, not with verbal challenges but with a gesticulative performance by projectively changing the choreography of public behavior.

Case by case, artistic projects can be analyzed using a reflective methodology, suspiciously resembling an epistemic practice, motivated by the theoretical imagination that practices that produce insights exist in the arts and can be applied as evidence in individual cases in parallel to the justification for an epistemological aesthetic in artistic research. Case by case, artistic (spatial) research can be reconstructed as an epistemic truth and understood as a practice for knowledge production, ultimately asserting itself as a relevant research tradition.

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