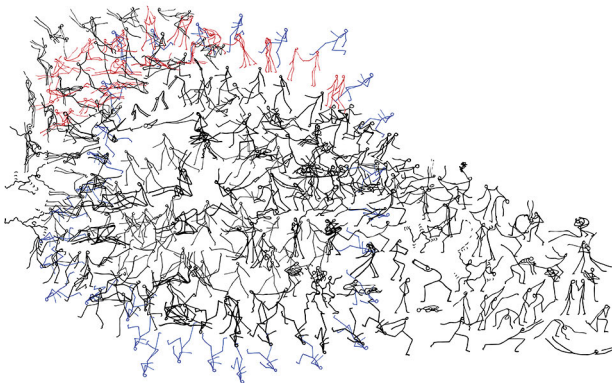


The Pot Calling the Kettle Black

An Essay on the State of Artistic Research

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The object of artistic research is art. As artists we engage in research to become better at what we are doing, for the development of knowledge and methods. We introduce new ideas in order to rethink art, become leaders, increase audience engagement, investigate new presentation formats, tackle political and societal issues, or to develop sustainable practices. We do it for the relevance of art in an ever more complex and diverse society.

The threat to artistic research is political ignorance and lack of insight as well as a conservative view of knowledge which tries to mould art into the established structures of academia. Art runs the risk of being held hostage by those universities where artistic quality is subjugated by pedagogical or scientific standards. In many countries there is still resistance and opposition to artistic research on artistic bases and art is forced into areas that demand methods, theories and training developed for science. How will this affect art? And to what extent are we, the artists, to blame if this happens?

We all live and work in a context, in a reality we can influence through what we do and say, how we live and act, how we deal with practice. Given the current situation for culture and art in Europe, the markets for performing art are experiencing rapid change towards increased commercialisation. This is a factor that affects the need for research activities and the expectations they must meet.

With the digital explosion and the requirements from a globalised world comes a sharp increase in the demand for interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary research methods, and the transfer of results into concrete implementation. We must challenge the status quo. This takes a measure of individual and institutional disobedience. To do this, one must stay in shape and be on the move, physically and intellectually. That is how we can stimulate ourselves to insights that make us capable of dealing with the inescapable uncertainty and fuzziness of the future.

To keep in shape and be creative, we need opportunities for in-depth work processes, risk-taking, experiments and research that does not necessarily lead to a performance as a final product. We need time for the kind of processes that are no longer attainable in an increasingly commercialised market. We are dependent on meeting others in order to catch sight of ourselves, of our ideas, thoughts, opinions, tastes and political positioning. We need time for collegial dialogue and international exchange. Through in-depth work processes and research we can assume the right of interpretation and responsibility of and for issues for which art may hold the answer.

Not all artists are potential researchers, but all innovative art demands a certain amount of research. Some artists do this in an academic context, some outside of academia. Anyone can call themselves a researcher or claim a research practice, but to gain formal recognition as a researcher one must fulfill the required sharing and documentation that makes one's research available to peers/colleagues for an exchange of views, project reviews and critical dialogue.

I have been involved in the development of artistic research since the 1990s. For 25 years I have witnessed in Sweden a development from a situation in which the academic world actively worked against artistic research to a climate of openness and co-operation, in which the artistic researcher is given real opportunities to work on an artistic basis, supported by a legal framework and sufficient infrastructure. The latter refers to the application of artistic methods, the formation of artistic theory, and the financing of senior artistic research on par with the requirements for scientific research. Art is afforded the same opportunities to influence society as science. This has not always been a given. As artists, we have been actively engaged to make this happen through lobbyism, activism and as experts in our field. What do we then do with these opportunities? How does all this contribute to the development of the arts? How does it affect our ability to produce, engage and facilitate dialogue? Does it really affect us?

I am focused on contemporary choreographic performative art – an area that is seriously disadvantaged in many countries, and in which there is no higher education on an artistic basis, or no education at all above BA level in some countries. Many European countries accept an artistic basis for research at BA level, but demand traditional academic approaches for an MA or PhD. This also applies to a so-called 'practice-based' PhD. Judging from academic institutions I have visited, this means a weaker artistic result.

The reasons for this are either that (1) candidates are accepted on the wrong criteria; or (2) those who select candidates are not merited or are poorly updated on contemporary art and/or its role in society; or (3) the market compels less competent artists to choose an academic career for lack of professional opportunities; (4) or universities design their programmes in a way that runs counter to innovative art; or (5) senior artistic research is not considered a priority.

1. Many universities accept doctoral candidates with the goal of preparing teachers for academic positions. The result is that there is a stronger emphasis on pedagogical and academic merit than on artistry. This in turn weakens the artistic competence among those who are charged with teaching new young professionals. Candidates should be accepted on artistic merit with artistic research projects. Otherwise, their training and research run the risk of being irrelevant.
2. Only if those who select candidates have relevant experience and competence in the respective fields of art can research education add to deepened artistic competence, critical thinking, artistic development and an increased relevance for art in society. If candidates accepted lack artistic experience and competence, their projects will be mediocre and without any chance of bringing progress to their field of art.
3. Today's market within the arts can be roughly divided into two categories: those who work commercially and/or institutionally with quantitative criteria for success, and those who operate on an idealistic basis, often with platforms run by artists and with intra-collegial criteria for success. The first category tries to reach large audience groups, the second aims to create art that is appreciated as innovative, important and therefore valued among their peers. In between there are a number of interesting constellations and radical institutions and producers who succeed in pushing and crossing borders.
Universities have established themselves lately as a complementary market, particularly in countries where cultural policies have collapsed and support for innovative art has been put on hold. These are countries in which artists find it increasingly difficult to finance their work, with many of them forced to seek alternatives, such as positions as teachers, doctoral or postdoc researchers.
4. When universities design doctoral programmes within the arts on a scientific basis, the artist is deprived of the chance to conduct specific in-depth artistic research to further the arts; if these programmes are supervised by professors with only theoretical knowledge the whole idea is lost. Artistic education must be conducted on an artistic basis, supported by theories aimed at the development of artistic competence, artistic method and artistic practice – not the other way around. Artistic research must be supervised by artistic professors/artists, happily in collaboration with professors from other fields of knowledge.

5. All higher education within the arts should be supported at the senior level by artists who are professors within their field of art. The title of professor should be bestowed on artists with documented experience of art at a high professional level. This should be judged by a group of peers with knowledge and experience in the specific field.

All higher education should be affiliated with research. The idea is that all artistic researchers must have the same opportunities as researchers within other fields of knowledge to attain academic degrees and gain access to funding and infrastructure for research. Only then can art be properly represented within the academic world.

It is always interesting to discuss criteria for the assessment of artistic quality or a “high professional level”. In my book *Art, Research, Empowerment – on the artist as researcher* (Lilja 2015) I write about quality criteria developed by peers and used to value a choreographic work, as an example:

- Is there something original, a personal approach/expression in the work?
- Can I distinguish a purpose and direction behind the work?
- Is there a contextual discussion or positioning?
- How is the work related to other choreographic practice?
- Is the work relevant in a current discourse?
- Is there a development of established codes or other contextual spheres (social, political, cultural)?
- Is there a development of time, space and form in the presentation?
- How are intra-medial effects used, such as music, light or imagery?

To be able to answer questions such as these, one requires knowledge in and of choreography, artistic process and production, both from experience and commitment to the field. Good art is not equal to good artistic research. Good artistic research is not the same as good art.

“Artistic research is research conducted with artistic practice as its base and artistic practice as its object.” Lars-Göran Karlsson, as quoted in *Art, Research, Empowerment* (Lilja 2015, 14).

Artistic research is conducted by artists who research within and through the arts. Artistic methodologies are applied, and the end result is presented in the way that is best suited to the content and theme of the project. The research can take place within groups with cross-disciplinary and/or scientific

competences, or as a solitary effort. The process and the results are documented and made available to peers/colleagues with relevant competences from the same field (art form/discipline) who meet in the research environment for an exchange of views, project reviews and critical dialogue.

When one experiments, researches or produces innovative projects for the market, there are no demands for documentation, publication or collegial sharing. Nor is there much time for in-depth processes, reflection or living non-productively. A filter of political correctness is often added to the work. To be frank, many artists adapt their ideas and themes to those of public debate or current trends. Art institutions often prioritise works that lie within trends and are expected to draw a large audience. Artistic processes, however, cannot be streamlined and adapted without losing their relevance. Who dares to go against these trends?

The artistic researcher, just like the artist “on the market”, must have time to think – to practice thinking. One must have time to critically reflect about the art one would like to see/do/experience – one needs time to fantasise. One must face the consequences of such questions and find solutions; or as choreographers Paula Kramer and Stephanie Misa ask in their article *Artistic Research as a Tool of Critique*: “How then can we develop and position our research projects, doctoral and otherwise, so they don’t fall prey to stabilising structures that threaten the existence of multiplicity in all kinds of possible ways, attending instead to the complexities of situated, historically embedded, critical research?” (Kramer & Misa 2019)

Whatever you do must be done fully for it to attain relevance, to make a difference. To do something “just right” is not enough for a person who wants to see progress. Art becomes important only when it touches you, shakes you and/or offers an alternative to the given. This demands courage and a knowledge of art, culture, society and politics. It also implies an element of risk. This responsibility always lies primarily with the artist and secondly with her or his counterpart – the audience. The links are the producer, the curator and the media. When it comes to research, the responsibility lies first and foremost with the artist and secondly with their counterpart – the academy.

How can we, then, avoid becoming stuck in comfort and adaptation to systems that promise more than what we ourselves expect to accomplish? How can we act to find alternatives that support the needs of those who are investigating, experimenting and innovating? If the system and/or infrastructure do not fit the purpose, they must be changed.

To move on we must practise thinking, questioning and rephrasing the commonplace with integrity and individuality. We must work to bring spatial as well as conceptual sites into dialogue with the contemporary, to seek enhanced living in movement. That is how our attention is sharpened. That is how alternative expressions are created. That is how systems are changed. The act of living embodied in and through movement.

Research (at its best) stimulates collegial interaction and makes collective effort possible. We do have needs in common and are certainly capable of suggesting alternatives for change. Research can contribute to new market platforms with the aim of making contemporary art available to broad and diverse audiences; it can focus on empowerment, capacity building and social cohesion; it can initiate, develop and implement social innovation processes based on cultural and artistic formats; it can promote interdisciplinary formats, methods and instruments for cultural production and innovation processes. We can do it.

We see, hear and feel movements that are space and time at the same time. Objects are moved around their translations, transposed into transgressing boundaries. Academia must offer conditions to make it possible for the artist, fed by a hunger for knowledge and new insights, to take the risks needed to work with research and innovation, including (good conditions for) work for endangered practices. This is a question of infrastructure and politics. Politics shape the conditions.

As attentive, creative and empathic individuals, we are all needed with our individual insights and visions – with our practices, with our research. We are all active in the creation of our futures, of futurities to be approached as consequences of practice. We must strengthen the opportunities to engage in knowledge production, enhance our chances for a career and put the public in direct contact with qualitative and challenging artistic endeavours. The academic context can be most fruitful and rewarding for artistic research, but it can just as well be in contradiction with what art needs, a hindrance for progress.

It is up to us as artists to focus on how we can make academic infrastructures embrace artistic research, and which aspects we think can enhance the relevance of art and its presence in our lives. This, I would say, takes a measure of individual and institutional disobedience. Boundaries must be expanded and extended, and conventions based on tradition exploded ... One simply can't let the pot call the kettle black.

Literature

- Kramer, P. & Misa, S. (2019). Artistic Research as a Tool of Critique. Retrieved from <https://nivel.teak.fi/adie/artistic-research-as-a-tool-of-critique/>
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