

Border tactics of artistic research

Between the academia and the art world

Dave Loder

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¹ Borgdorff, Henk. "Artistic Research as Boundary Work". In: Art and Artistic Research: Zurich Yearbook of the Arts, vol. 6 (2009): 72-79

Boundaries are interesting, productive places. Through their definition as a point or relation between two or more territories, zones or conditions, they demarcate what is from what is not, what is here from what is there. Boundaries are never static, but fluid and dynamic places, sites of attack and breach, barricade and reinforcement.

It is with these considerations that the term "boundary work" is applied to practices of artistic research by Henk Borgdorff.¹ Artistic research is sited not simply at the boundary of disciplines – a declaration of multi-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary – but at the border of academia and the art world. As such, artistic research has to acknowledge its dual context, and the ways of doing and relevancies of both these contexts. Within the academic sphere, artistic research is asked to participate in certain regimes of knowledge production. In a traditional art context, while such epistemological concerns might be present in the work, the priority is one of aesthetics. It is a matter on how, if at all, these demands resolve that makes artistic research a slippery and contested activity, not only to undertake but also to both locate and be presented to its audience. However, artist and champion of artistic research Michael Schwab likes to point out that a traditional aesthetic judgement is not valid for artistic research, as "the art market is no recipient for artistic research" [img. B] and the production of successful art objects is not its primary aim.

Whereas artistic research should not be reduced to being concerned with the transformation of

[img. B]
See: page 2.



Michael Schwab,
Elastic Tree,
2007. String,
elastic, nails,
photocopy, 350
x 300 x 250 cm.
Photo: www.
seriate.net.

[img. B]

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Michael Schwab,
Elastic Tree,
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elastic, nails,
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x 300 x 250 cm.
Photo: [www.
seriate.net](http://www.seriate.net).

ART AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH ARE NOT IDENTICAL. THEY SHARE THE SAME MEANS BUT NOT THE SAME GOALS. – THE VALIDITY OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH DOES NOT DEPEND ON THE PRODUCTION OF SUCCESSFUL ART OBJECTS. IT MIGHT PRODUCE SUCCESSFUL ART OBJECTS, BUT THEN AGAIN, IT MIGHT NOT. – THE ART MARKET IS NO RECIPIENT FOR ARTISTIC RESEARCH. – ART IS CENTERED ON THE BEAUTIFUL OBJECT, EVEN IF THE OBJECT HAS VANISHED INTO CONCEPTS, PERFORMANCE, OR DISTRIBUTIONS. – IN THE PAST, ARTISTIC RESEARCH HAD TO DISGUISE ITSELF AS ART, BECAUSE THERE WAS NO OTHER REGISTER IN SOCIETY. – ART IS A WEAK SOLUTION TO THE QUESTION OF RESEARCH. – A NEGATIVE OUTCOME IS ACCEPTABLE. – IF THERE IS FAILURE, IT LIES IN THE WRONG COMMITMENT TO THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH. – AN ARTISTIC RESEARCHER HAS TO TRUST HIS PROCESS MORE THAN HIS RESULT. – A TRULY PROCEDURAL ART DOES NOT EXIST. – ARTISTIC RESEARCH SHOULD NOT BE JUDGED BY ARTISTS AND THEIR LIKE. – ARTISTIC RESEARCH OFFERS THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM THAT IS ART. – ARTISTIC RESEARCH IS ALL THAT ART IS MINUS ART'S DEPENDANCY ON PRODUCTION. – ARTWORKS AND EXHIBITIONS HAVE TO BE JUDGED BY THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH AND NOT BY THEIR ABILITY TO PLEASE OR BE SOLD. – THE ARTIST IS TOO SMALL A PERSON TO BE OF USE, VALUE, OR INTEREST.

knowledge instead of art, it is the potential registration of knowledge – and the activity of such registers – that is cultivated as part of an aesthetic experience. Knowledge is not naively registered in or through aesthetic experience, but is rather a condition of the aesthetic modus of artistic research; that is the production or transformation of knowledge as an aesthetic in and of itself. Artistic research should not be confused with the aestheticization of knowledge – where existing and even new knowledge might be presented as an aesthetic object or experience – but instead the very emergence of knowledge is complicit with an aesthetic experience itself. This type of agency is a ‘kind of border violation’, a bleeding of academia and art world, but also the violent dismantling or rupturing of notions of ‘discipline’, by which traditional academic subjects identify and regulate themselves.² In the Post-Occupy milieu, the un-organisation and un-disciplining of artistic research provides a platform for artists to develop ‘border tactics’, ways of working in and through academic and non-academic institutions that can penetrate and intervene in knowledge systems and other regimes of reproduction. Artistic research can

*[...] raise essential questions about the very nature of research itself, at once highlighting its limitations and forging tools that could feed back into new modes of activism in tandem with the development of new infrastructures of distribution operating parasitically at the margins of the university and the art world.*³

² Borgdorff, Henk. “Boundary Work: Henk Borgdorff interviewed by Michael Schwab”. In: *Intellectual Birdhouse: Artistic Practice as Research*. Cologne: Walther König, 2012: 117.

³ Sholette, Gregory. “After OWS: Social Practice Art, Abstraction, and the Limits of the Social”. *E-Flux Journal*, No. 31 (January 2012). Web. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/after-ows-social-practice-art-abstraction-and-the-limits-of-the-social/>>; and McKee, Yates. “Occupy and the End of Socially Engaged Art”. *E-Flux Journal*, No. 72 (April 2016). Web. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/occupy-and-the-end-of-socially-engaged-art-an-historical-snapshot/>>.

In occupying this border, artists that practice artistic research can manifest procedures and apparatus to disrupt existing knowledge structures that are present in academia, transforming systems of reproduction which test and antagonise the premise of their own production and distribution. These practices can only be undertaken at this threshold, at the boundary of academia and art world, and present a rich and fertile arena for artists who operate beyond the limits of socially and politically engaged art. While socially or politically engaged art practices are arguably distinct from artistic research, they share an impetus of agency and activism. However, Yates McKee’s claim of a Post-Occupy condition asserts a re-territorialisation of spaces beyond those traditionally engaged by such practices, in which artistic research deploys expanded modes of (re)organisation and the claiming of its own distinct cultural terrain.⁴

The moments of interruption, conflict and antagonism that the experimental status of artistic research stimulates do not produce new knowledge in and of themselves, but rather provoke the actual conditions on which new knowledge can be located and cultivated and from which new knowledge can emerge. The territorialising of the academic apparatus enables a transformation and reconfiguration of a technical capacity, a reformatting into yet-to-be-determined forms and states. Where traditional research employs and duplicates already existing and stable models of the technical, artistic research seeks to dismantle the very premise and presumption of using such forms,

⁴ McKee, Yates. *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*. London: Verso, 2016: 71.

and instead promotes the development of new experimental models and prototypes that evolve and follow from the epistemic trajectory upon which they are propelled. Individual and specific research methods and processes are developed that are self-reflexive and adaptive, responding to particular and unfolding situations, and subsequently become reconfigured to further pursue their goal. Rather than bringing pre-existing tools and measurement devices that are tainted with an already determined outcome – a ruler will only ever measure distance – artistic research pursues the measure of measurement itself, developing subject or event specific (anti)methodologies from which their own qualities of measurement and determination may emerge.

The uncertainty and ambiguity of such (anti) methodological approaches is essential to the practice of artistic research, where these elusive, intensive states give rise to the very conditions from which epistemic objects or paradigms may emerge. Border tactics rupture not only disciplines and organisations, but propagate intensive states that are unstable and in- or under-determinate, an un-making and dis-assembling of “epistemic things [that] create questions and a future of possible knowledge.”⁵ Artistic research arranges the surfacing of a type of primordial epistemic plane, a pool of potentialities from which new knowledge may emerge. Hybrid practices, spawned by border tactics and conceived at the porous thresholds of academic disciplines and heterogeneous art practices, colonise existing structures of production

while simultaneously allowing colonisation by new epistemic paradigms.

The activity of boundary work intervenes to rupture regimes of knowledge in the academy, and inevitably artistic research must occupy the regimes of reproduction in the art world. Certainly there is a number of contemporary artists that engage in research-based approaches and methods for their art practice, such as the Otolith Group, Walid Raad’s Atlas Group and Sarah Browne, however any parallel in the art world of the extent to which artistic research can and does erode existing ideologies in academia demands further analysis and consideration. Finally, artistic research is an activity that expands both ways at the same time, involuting a condition, making a space and occupying a gap between the thresholds of the academy and the art world. These paradigms are exemplary for proposing new and alternative platforms of knowledge making, advancing new models for academia that are not constrained by existing regimes of ideological and institutional reproduction. The practices can offer pedagogic models that are agile and adaptive against the current assault endured by the humanities from neoliberalism. Artistic research offers critical, pedagogical and knowledge-generating (anti) methodologies that deliver not simply new ways of thinking and doing, but actual conditions that can be occupied which exceed the limitations of current ideologies of reproduction - in knowledge and beyond. [S]

⁵ Schwab, Michael (2012) “Between a Rock and a Hard Place”. In: *Intellectual Birdhouse: Artistic Practice as Research*. Cologne, Walther König (2012); 240

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