

artistic [PhD] research at a crossroads

[between an academic-institutional and an artist-run societal practice?]

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“The debate about Artistic Research lost me a couple of years ago, when it became clear that that debate tended to be much more about creating an academic/ bureaucratic discipline, then [sic] attempting to figure out something for an artistic discipline.” Hito Steyerl, response to Peter Osborne, in: Henk Slager (ed.) *The Postresearch Condition*, Utrecht, 2021, p. 13

I find it rather disturbing, perhaps even alarming, when an artist who had a vital role in shaping and embodying today’s concepts of artistic research, gives up on it. (To use an analogy: this may be comparable to a composer like Pauline Oliveros giving up experimental electronic music composition with the argument that it has become “an academic/bureaucratic” rather than an “artistic discipline”.)

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Hito Steyerl’s work is a still-new example of an art practice that developed into its current form, and received its full public recognition, only after the artist obtained a PhD title, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (in 2003). Steyerl’s art has even been called “research art” by critics. This could be cited as a textbook example of how artistic research and a PhD degree can help an artist becoming the world’s “most influential person in contemporary art” (a title given to Steyerl, as the first female artist ever, in 2017 as part of the “Power 100” ranking list of the periodical *ArtReview*).

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Steyerl has actively contributed to developing the concept of artistic research, not only with her audiovisual art works, but also as a theorist and writer. This is an essay she wrote in 2010. Her new essay - also published by our colleague Henk Slager in Utrecht - thus describes her ultimate disappointment with the discourse.

But how correct is Steyerl’s diagnosis that the “debate around artistic research” ended up creating “an academic/bureaucratic” instead of artistic discipline?

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Here we see a Creator Doctus project that took place, for the most part, outside academia, and inside a contemporary art museum where it was validated by its curators and the participants in its “daily practice” of physical exercises. In other words, the project first of all got recognition within the art discipline. Only its final review and defense were in an academic institution. (This is similar in structure to the concept of the “practice-based PhD” as it exists in the UK, and with a bit of luck also the “professional doctorate” in the arts that is about to be introduced at Dutch art schools and design polytechnics.) Of course, I’m not telling you - the people here in this room - anything new. So is Steyerl’s perception mistaken?

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But the reality of higher education artistic research programs can be quite different from Jaël Davids’ “Daily Practice”. This is a funding call of the Dutch Research Council. I need to stress here that it was created by truly open-minded, caring and well-meaning people working at the Research Council. This program also financed the symposium and publication in which Hito Steyerl voiced her critique of artistic research. But even the most engaged people at research councils have, in the end, to fit their programs into governmental research and development agendas, which in this case was the creative industries sector development agenda of the Dutch Ministry of Economy.

This agenda clearly ends up framing and determining the kind of artistic research that can be done - which by the way includes one project that I am conducting myself in collaboration with Janneke Wesseling from Leiden University, and which involves one PhD candidate, Anja Groten from the Hackers & Designers collective here in the neighborhood of Amsterdam-Noord. Although I do not regret this project and hope that Anja feels at home in it, too, the reality is that its original theme - Critical Making - was derived from the given “Smart Culture” framework. Anja in turn had to make her research interest - a critical reflections on her experience with collective work forms and alternative technologies - fit our given theme. So, in the end, even this individual research could only exist in relation to a government agenda.

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Here is another example from the late 1990s: “Theory and Practice of Artistic Creation Processes”, a joint PhD research cluster by Freie Universität Berlin and UdK Berlin. One half of the PhD candidates in this cluster were practicing artists, the other half university humanities graduates.

While this program, and its title, had been tweaked to be maximally open to diverse practices and research perspectives, it yielded a strange effect: the PhD candidates in

the cluster eventually stressed themselves out thinking that they needed to elaborate the “artistic creation process” into a cultural theory, and ended up referring to it as “ACP” - completely against the intentions of the professors who had initiated the project.

Please forgive me for further indulging in his autobiographical flashback (because back then, I was a PhD candidate and staff lecturer at the university department that had co-initiated this project, and I contributed to its publications).

In 1998, this cluster had already achieved a lot of what we are still struggling for today, particularly here in the Netherlands, and at least if I speak for my own school Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam. Back then in Berlin, however, I had mixed feelings about the project. Funded research clusters had just been introduced into the humanities. While they greatly increased opportunities for PhD candidates to obtain paid positions, they also ended up creating a two-class system. PhD candidates who were in the clusters and projects had to fit their research into the overarching cluster themes and were highly dependent on everyone else in the project; people whom they hadn’t initially chosen to collaborate with. People like me, on the other hand, who wrote their PhDs outside those clusters, as regular university department tutors, still could write their PhD thesis on self-chosen subjects, had less pressure to conform to academic fashions, and in most cases ended up having the better careers.

[For practicing artists, the value of defining one’s own PhD research project rather than conforming it to a predefined theme, may even be greater than for people in the humanities.]

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The “Vienna Declaration” as the example of institutionalizing artistic research in the EU, 2020

After the Vienna Declaration, with the creation of doctoral studies in continental European art schools, there is a concrete risk of creating one’s own genre of academic research art, in an art system run by art schools. I know that this is a typical and frequent critique by art conservatives, but I would like to rethink it from a pro-, not anti-artistic research perspective. There’s the risk of a self-contained, self-referential, self-gratifying system. (Which, admittedly, wouldn’t be the first self-referential and self-gratifying system in the arts or in academia.)

And, to be very outspoken, I am worried by the recent development of ELIA - as an umbrella organization of European art schools - now creating its own artistic research events, publications and co-authoring a position paper on artistic research: because it violates a principle that is firm if not sacred at universities, namely the strict separation of research practice and university management. For example, the Modern Language Association as the roof organization of American humanities is, for good reasons, strictly separate from the Association of American Colleges & Universities, the roof organization

of university management. ELIA now acts as both, probably out of a weakness of artistic researchers to self-organize.

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In the Vienna Declaration, we also see how a policy document frames the epistemology and thus - ultimately - the possibilities of artistic research, including future PhD projects. It reads quite similar to how the Dutch governmental economic development agenda has trickled down to the Dutch Research Council project call.

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Attached to the “Vienna Declaration” were job openings for PhD candidates. These opening not only required artists to fit their projects into existing thematic clusters, but even the titles of those PhD projects were predefined by the institutions. Which, of course and on the other hand, meant new opportunities for artists to get paid for artistic research, and hence a good thing?

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Nevertheless, this begs the question: which of the above - partly historical and canonical, partly contemporary - artistic research projects would fit today’s frameworks, clusters and research agendas? Surely, this is not an issue (as far as I can tell) of the Creator Doctus program. But isn’t it an issue, and isn’t Hito Steyerl’s critique proven right, elsewhere?

[Footnote: similar issues have proliferated in, and changed, the humanities and social sciences, where in the course of the later 20th and early 21th century many speculative approaches - psychoanalysis in psychology, critical theory in sociology, continental [non-analytical] philosophy in philosophy, hermeneutic interpretation in literary studies - became marginalized and/or replaced by empirical, quantitative and logical-positivist approaches. This has made transdisciplinarity between artistic and university research rather more difficult than easier. But it conversely means that traditionally educated university academics who struggle with these developments have high hopes in artistic research; see Rogoff and others.]

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This boils down to the (perhaps old, but still urgent) question: who validates artistic research? In the past, these were only art communities and larger society. They could even include - as in the above example - Internet memers who confirm that, for example, Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening research had lasting impact.

Will institutional artistic research PhD programs still consider Internet memes as validation? Or will, as is the standard for sciences and humanities, artistic research retract to the comfort zone of only academic peer-review?

The strength of the Creator Doctus is, IMO, that it addresses exactly this issue by structurally involving art world partners in every CrD project.

[Footnote: typical forms of external validation for university academia include a non-university press publisher publishing a PhD thesis as a book; a non-academic periodical reviewing a research book. But all these only amount to validation *after* the fact, respectively after the completion of a PhD project.]

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Which academic institution would have validated the above work [Adrian Piper's *Funk Lessons*] in 1984? (It was created, by the way, by an artist who had a university PhD degree in philosophy.) Which research agenda and which call would it have fit? Since Jaël Davids' PhD project has some commonalities with it, the Creator Doctus might have given it a space. But still the question remains: would the "Funk Lessons" have been accepted as an artistic PhD project if such programs had existed in 1984? And conversely: how can we make sure that we accept projects into our doctoral programs that are as uncommon for contemporary art discourse today as the "Funk Lessons" were four decades ago?

Or to put it differently: will institutional artistic research programs still allow artists to set their own research agenda?

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But the opposite is also true: when granting artists the autonomy to set their own research agenda, do we meet the high academic standards that Piper herself demands from artistic research? [See her above, too-little-known lecture on YouTube.]

And just as important: how can PhD programs allow, be inviting and nurturing to the research work of existing artist collectives? That means, inviting artistic research projects developed, proposed and done by already existing, self-organized artists collectives (such

as Black Quantum Futurism), rather than tearing these collectives apart by requiring their members to pursue individual PhD research paths and collaborating with fellow candidates that were chosen by the institution, not by the artists? (It should be noted that this model, which stems from hard science lab research, is already problematic in the humanities!)

In other words: there is, I'd argue, value in artistic research as autonomous research, despite the fact that the concept of autonomy is now being seen more critically in the arts. Such autonomy is also desired for other, established fields of academic research, and makes artistic research attractive for scholars in among others the humanities, social and technological sciences. Transdisciplinary research - where artists collaborate with such researchers - then would not mean to give up autonomy and conform to established formats of research lab work, but rethink the forms and epistemologies of research for everyone.

To sum up, I indeed think that 'we', as the ones who make up a part of the discourse and institutions of artistic research, are at a crossroads, at this very moment. The paradox we need to solve, or rather: keep alive, is the following:

How can artistic research (including doctoral research) remain an experimental structure when, after its institutionalization, it no longer is an experimental structure? How can it be made an artist-run practice?