

How Artistic Research Becomes Public

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Clichés of Arts and Academia

One of the most interesting conundrums raised by the establishment of artistic research in academia is that of presentation formats. The name of the most widely-known example—performance/lecture—reflects the struggle to create definitions in which practitioners of both academia and the arts find themselves. The performing arts employ performances and academia uses lectures; therefore, the interface of the two must be a performance lecture. The juxtaposition of the two terms might allow us to enter a space in between definitions, where one must dwell in the unknown and not jump to conclusions. Although such a space is an amazingly interesting place, it is not necessarily comfortable. It is a place where art usually thrives, and it may serve as a tool to disarm a more traditional positivistic understanding of knowledge that rules the understanding of what academia is and what it represents. Notably, when working within academia, one realizes that academia does not necessarily recognize itself in that manner. When using the terms of ‘arts’ and ‘academia’, I am referring neither to my own understanding nor that of other academics with which I collaborate. Rather, I am referring to what I perceive as the ruling and generalized understanding of the two institutions and how such understandings resist the establishment of artistic research. As always, when borders are questioned, there is resistance. Some fear that a supposedly more subjective relation to knowledge, which is represented by the deliberately loose relation between evidence and conclusions in the arts, would collapse the forms of empirical and objective knowledge that might represent academia. By contrast, defenders of the arts fear the loss of its supposed essence through ‘academisation’, where method, theory, critical reflection and text pose threats to creative intuition. The two camps seem to identify

themselves through their mutual opposition, and both fear that the hybrid will dissolve their mutual identities. Instead of worrying about what one field might do to the other, we could view artistic research as a field of its own that need dissolve neither academia nor art, which may create a place for practitioners who are not satisfied within the existing frameworks.

Although there are reasons for the separate terms of ‘scientific research’ and ‘artistic research’, in the Scandinavian languages, the term for research—‘forskning’—rings of science yet has its own translation as ‘vetenskap’. The English term ‘research’ has a broader meaning, which might best translate into Swedish as ‘efterforskning’. However, that term is a bit too broad because one can research (efterforska or utforska) anything, such as where in Helsinki one can find the best tapas. This is evident in how many artists outside academia claim that their work qualifies as research, even though they have no affiliation with a research institution, no peer-to-peer comparisons and no critical mass or assessment. At the institution where I work (Den Danske Scenekunstskole) in Denmark, the term ‘forskning’ is avoided in favour of Kunstnerisk Udviklingsvirksomhed (KUV): artistic development work. While I understand this as a strategy to fend off the fear of academisation, this also means losing mandated parts of the political field and risking being considered irrelevant. Whether this will prove to be a smart strategic move or not remains to be seen.

Ways to Become Public

What results should a researching artist produce? There should be an outcome that is different from what the artist could have achieved in the arts field alone. Yet, it should ideally not conform to existing academic formats, such as the written thesis. Hence, there is an expectation towards the artist to be innovative and to

change the field (of course, not too much). Therefore, instead of presenting an exposé of possible formats, I will offer examples, followed by how to approach the problem of finding a relevant format for any particular project. The first possible format is digital publication, which creates many possibilities. Notably, the *Journal of Artistic Research* (JAR) provides an online tool in the form of a digital spreadsheet. However, digital publication may be too easy a solution. When publishing online, work is potentially made available to millions of people. Thus, this contributes to the production of Big Data and its ceaseless production of new texts, which create more authors than readers and the sense of despair that accompanies such over abundance. Ultimately, the act of publishing my thesis online may not guarantee more knowledge production than inviting ten people to a presentation.

The second format I want to address is that of the performance. Regarding my PhD research, the outcome expectations were two-fold due to the collaboration of two institutions: KTH (Royal Institute of Technology) and DOCH/Uniarts, both in Stockholm. Because KTH had the exam rights, I had to conform to their guidelines and produce a thesis. However, DOCH/Uniarts had hoped for the presentation of other formats, which would need to be in addition to the thesis. As such, these formats remained additional and could not question the system of assessment or its criteria. The only small gap I found within the system was that there is traditionally a timeslot during the defence that is dedicated to the PhD candidate to allow him/her to make corrections to the text. I used this to present a short performance. The PhD candidates had started at DOCH after me earned their degrees through Lund University with other requirements, in which the written thesis was not obligatory. One of the candidates, Malin Arnell, used this possibility to engage in radical questioning of what a final outcome of a PhD research could look like. Instead of writing a centre piece, she invited the opponent and the jury to a 72-hour

performance. The duration was based on the standard workload of a jury member when assessing a thesis. The work was called 'Avhandling/ Av_handling' and was translated into English as 'Dissertation/Through_action'. The durational performance was followed by an event that was intended to equal the defence, where Malin conducted a shorter performance, with interventions by the opponent and the jury members. I was only able to attend part of the defence and can only offer testimony about that part; however, it was my clear impression that the lack of recognizable formats created confusion, which seemed to undermine the project's quality. The supposition that the questioning of a format already has value may also include the possibility of falling into the void of the undefined—a space that the arts persist in but that may be completely obsolete within academia.

In addition, there is the problem of presentation format. In the spring of 2015, I organized the symposium 'How does research become public?'. The symposium addressed the question of distribution of knowledge and its forms and took place at DOCH/Uniarts in Stockholm. In one of the moderated discussions, PhD candidate Jon-Paul Zaccarini met professor Chrysa Parkinson to talk about materialization/crystallization. Zaccarini had previously made a presentation on this topic, where he used the process of crystallization as a metaphor for how his research took form. In Zaccarini's case, it was not only a metaphor—he conducted actual experiments of crystallization. However, I would like to propose it as a metaphor for how something material can reveal itself through process and time, although the goal of the process is not the production of that same material. In that sense, it is not a question of engaging in the production of materials but rather noticing when something is taking form and then engaging in a sort of sensitive leading/following to see how it can materialize. Any process will produce materials; however, by deciding on a format beforehand, one

will limit the possibilities and one's own capacity to notice such materialisations. This is easier said than done. It is time consuming and demands a significant amount of trust in the intra-action of form and content that are at work in any research process. The researcher and the institution will both need to openly engage in dialogue. The material outcome needs to be assessed for its capacity to meet scrutiny and to determine what sort of presentation format can allow for such scrutiny. I understand these materialisations as bi-products rather than end products. They are themselves not definitions of the process; rather, they are material examples of possible outcomes. As such, they present themselves as elements through which the process can be scrutinized. The scrutiny may include known formats, such as peer-reviews or seminars, but should not be limited to these. I realise that it is a vague proposal because no tangible criteria for this method are presented. The proposal goes against the construction of the sort of standardized models that scrutiny usually demands; however, I do believe that there is a way to create a reflective framework around each specific work that will allow for assessment.