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Artistic research as a challenge to the humanities. A meditation on the ruins of binary oppositional thinking.

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Abstract

Artistic research is not only a challenge *to* but also *for* the humanities, and a challenge it must meet. The alternative is intolerable. By using the ‘method’ of meditation, the author of the article seeks to distance himself from entering the conceptual maze and the binary oppositional thinking that have hitherto characterized the debate on (or against) artistic research. The article discusses three cases that illustrate the infructuous use of binary oppositional thinking, beginning with the so-called ‘War on Early Music’. Then follows a discussion of the ‘old’ PhD programme at IRCAM, Paris, and a short discussion on Agamben’s critique of ‘conceptual art’.

The conclusion is that we need to develop our ability to comprehend art as *activity*, i.e., seeing art as constituted by acts through and in practice. The change from *facts* to *acts* as the molecular entity in research can provide a common theoretical and methodical ground for both academic research, artistic practices and artistic research.

Il vient au poète des idées profondes dont il ignore le principe et les suites.
Fruits d'une longue méditation dans le philosophe, il en est étonné, il s'écrie:
"Qui est-ce qui a inspiré tant de sagesse à cette espèce de fou-là ?"¹

Prelude

The present meditation was sparked by my reading and review of the *Manifesto of Artistic Research: A Defense Against Its Advocates*.² With no holds barred, the authors of the *Manifesto* assault the field of artistic research. Their first line of attack is to state that artistic research is entirely politically driven and institutionalized by the EU's Bologna Reform, rather than arising from any authentic research commitment. Their next is to question the competence of artist-researchers, claiming they lack necessary skills both as artists and researchers, which explains the incompetent use of theory and the inability to communicate in text. In sum, wrong people, wrong theory, wrong language.

The tone of the *Manifesto* is brash and authoritarian, and the reader may well ask how this belligerent attack on artistic research may be called a *defence*? The main value – and yes, there are valuable insights in this book – is that it airs opinions that are widely shared more privately among colleagues in the corridors and canteens on different campuses. With the *Manifesto*, the cat is out of the academic 'black box'. The arguments can be studied and evaluated. A seeming clarity emerges: the different positions in this modern 'Guerre des Coins' are now more easily discernible.³ And maybe that was the intention of the *Manifesto* all along?

Yet, the reading of the *Manifesto* reveals how easily we get caught up in infructuous binary oppositional thinking. In order to reflect on the construction of the antagonism surrounding artistic research, I will begin by presenting three arguments that are regularly encountered in this modern 'Guerre des Coins' – arguments that are also present in the *Manifesto*. But first I need to address the issue of the odd generic appellation of the present text, 'meditation'. Why

¹ 'The poet gets ideas of which he ignores the principles and consequences. After a long meditation, the philosopher is surprised and cries out: "Who has inspired that fool with so much wisdom?"' (My translation). Denis Diderot, 'Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé "L'Homme"', in *Œuvres complètes* (City: Publisher, 1994), 11:534.

² Silvia Henke, Dieter Mersch, Nicolaj van der Meulen, Thomas Strässle and Jörg Wiesel: *Manifesto of Artistic Research: A Defense Against Its Advocates* (Zürich, Diaphanes, 2020). See Erlend Hovland, Death in Bologna: An Essay on a Manifesto against Artistic Research, Music & Practice 9, www.musicandpractice.org/death-in-bologna-an-essay-on-a-manifesto-against-artistic-research/.

³ Cf. the controversy in Paris between French and Italian opera in the eighteenth century. I prefer this name to the more frequently used 'querelle des Bouffons' partly because 'Guerre des Coins' reveals the purely 'topographic' character of the dispute. The opposition was located to opposing corners, to different 'institutions' as is in general the case with the present debate on artistic research.

this term? And has the term any relevance for the matter at hand, the reflection on the role of artistic research in relation to academic research?

Alluding to a 'New' Method.

Conventional wisdom dictates that to comprehend a complex issue, you need to take a closer look. Yet there are issues that resist this approach, issues that can benefit from zooming out, rather than in. The debate on artistic research is one of these. The closer we look, the more we get entangled in conflicting interests, tendentious arguments, tacit and vocal prejudices, and ideological and idiosyncratic points of view. When the conflict is as divisive, ideological and, frequently, personal as that of artistic research, it is nearly impossible to engage in the discourse in any other role than as a partisan. This is why reflections on artistic research might benefit from a different approach, taking a step back from the ongoing debate that so frequently descends into something resembling the polemical invective engaged in by opposing political parties.

The genre of philosophical mediation, although more in the version of René Descartes than of Marcus Aurelius, seems to present itself as an interesting point of departure. The meditation as method allows us to take a step back, to create a distance, and not instantly try to attenuate inherent inconsistencies or conflicts of interests inscribed in the topic in question. The meditation uses writing actively as a means of reflection, and moreover, as a means to elaborate an independent voice that can supplant the noise of preconceived ideas and interests. The main goal, on which it must be judged as a method of research, is its ability to provide new perspectives or hypotheses, or better models for comprehension.

The role of the meditation is philosophical in the broad meaning of the term. Its purpose is to develop what is hidden in the multitude or chaos of conflicting apperceptions, definitions, interests and narratives. As a method, the meditation is generative (sometimes even creative), indicative as well as inventive (or even improvisatory). It is generative in the sense that it consciously seeks differing perspectives in order to comprehend a topic. It is indicative as it proposes new ways to comprehend an issue, as it may create a new model or hypothesis. And it is inventive, partly by necessity, as it cannot simply follow established argumentative lines or strict academic procedures as these frequently are part of the challenge the meditation seeks to overcome (cf. Descartes).⁴

⁴ Let us not forget that the conventional academic paper produces a perspective largely pre-defined by its internal generic order and style of argumentation. Thus, there is a further argument underlying my search for a relevant genre of writing and method of research, since traditional genres of academic writing do not seem to afford a solution for how to deal with the topic 'artistic research'.

Meditation as genre and method is sometimes tentatively defined, with reference to Marcus Aurelius, as a ‘retreat into oneself through writing’.⁵ (And its similarities to the phenomenological reduction are not lost on me, although the ‘bracketing’ in meditation is provided through the use of writing as a means of observance and suspension, focus and reflection). Yet, as a method, the purpose of the meditation is not to dwell in one’s own perspective. The retreat is tactical, a way to disentangle from the argumentative knots and inconsistencies present in the topic under study. There is no naivety involved. What we know and how we think about the world are largely dependent on language, on our discursive practices. But acknowledging this is not an argument for assuming that we should not try to examine how we may approach the world differently, and possibly by this approach, creating or finding other aspects that are ignored or misconstrued by our use of language.

To some extent the meditation as genre acknowledges the limits of conventional academic writing in the assumption that any ‘objective’ or ‘factual’ treatment of the issue at stake is not possible; and in the present case, the modern ‘Guerre des Coins’, this is due not only due to the many inconsistencies and incompatibilities in the argumentation, but also to the fact that much of the activity of the artist-researcher is primarily articulated through art. The communication is effectively hindered. A common denominator is absent. And yet, the purpose of this text is not to argue that art and research are mutually exclusive entities, which of course they are not, but that artistic research may be framed as a constructive challenge to the humanities. The question is then that of how art can mediate research, and *vice versa*.

Returning to arguments

The Manifesto presents three substantial claims that might spark our meditation, claims that are also frequently found in other corners of the debate on artistic research:

1. Artistic research is nothing new. Artists have always sought new material, new techniques or new formats. The only new thing is the institutional framework politically instigated by the Bologna Reform.
2. Being under (institutional) obligation to do research, the artist-researcher falsely tries to implement academic methods and theories that are irrelevant to artistic research.
3. The artist-researcher must adopt the practices inherent in art and not those of academic research. The artist-researcher must primarily be artist.

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of the History of Sexuality* (Random House, New York, 1988), 51.

The first argument is fashioned as an objection to the institutionalization of (and the hype around) ‘artistic research’. But the objection is nonetheless an acceptance that there has always been (re)search for and development of new techniques, material and formats in the arts. The question then, is how this objection can be turned into an argument against artistic research. If research in the arts is nothing new, why shouldn’t the present political and financial support be a cause to celebrate? But this question is not addressed by the critics. On the contrary, what is flagged is the fear of institutionalization and academization of the arts.⁶ But doesn’t this fear reveal of an idealized concept of art? Is art not an institution?

The second argument consists of a critique of the inappropriate and incompetent use of academic categories, methods and philosophical texts in artistic research.⁷ The result is either a vain attempt to academize artistic research or a ‘mess’ created by a cacophonous plurality of provisional methods, theories and systems, incompletely comprehended by the artist-researcher. (Both lines of criticism are present in the *Manifesto*). But if we accept that artistic research cannot simply adopt academic methods and theories, the present ‘mess’ may be considered as a challenge for us all to partake in the development of relevant methods and theories for artistic research. If not, as it stands today, there are only two options: Either to persist inadequate academic methods and theories – and using them in inadequate ways – or to ignore the issue altogether, in which case there is hardly any difference between art and artistic research.

It is the latter of these two options that is prolonged into the third argument, in which the fear of academization is again resonant. This argument can be represented by the following citation from the *Manifesto* where the authors give a description of what may exemplify artistic research and research practices:

⁶ As could be demonstrated in the following paragraph from the *Manifesto*: ‘Art has undeniably taken on the character of a “system”. Labels like “artistic research”, “practice-based research”, and the like reproduce this system in the mode of its immanent professionalization. Meanwhile, it seems unpopular to speak of a historical break according to which art has given up its role as “governor” (Adorno) of another, “better” world, to instead function as a “research machine” which has stripped away everything utopian, now defaming it only as “romantic”’. Henke et al., *Manifesto*, 59.

⁷ This occurs when the artist-researchers try to implement conventional criteria of academic research or search for models where they, most likely, cannot be found, as in the natural sciences, or when they exploit philosophical texts for ‘vogueish’ citations. As formulated in the *Manifesto*: “Historical epistemologies”, “actor-network theory”, “object-oriented ontology”, or “new materialism”, as well as privileged thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Karen Barad, or Donna Haraway are not so much read and criticized as used and exploited as citation sources. Theoretical building blocks are manufactured which do not even attempt to understand aesthetic thought.’ Henke, et al., *Manifesto*, 12.

As examples of such research practices, we could take dichotomies or incompatibilities or tensions that become manifest between things, actions, textures, materials, or images and sound and their respective composition (com-positio) in the sensual sphere. Beyond their measurement through quantifying methods, or their conceptual definition, they break forth from the respective contradictions and dissonances, are, as leaps, already thoughts, without needing to articulate themselves as such or requiring a *de-finition*, [sic] an exhaustive explanation. This is why we speak so often of ‘showing’: it signifies that form of displaying or presenting which does not require certification through language’.⁸

Although we may loosely grasp the gist of the paragraph, the writing is both semantically and grammatically ‘challenging’. Nonetheless, this extract reveals a view of artistic research that has no resemblance to any known definition of research (and can hardly be said to bring forth new knowledge, which is normally the first criteria used when ‘research’ is defined). But it further reflects a general view among the *Manifesto*-authors, claiming that artistic research must be like art, and further, be reflecting of the (great) artist’s inspirational, incomprehensible, system-free way of creating. But the citation is also typical for a language and argumentation used in the discourse of some of the advocates of artistic research. It is a language or at least a style of argumentation that may bring to mind Nietzsche’s portrayal of the Dionysian art as presented in *The Dionysian Vision of the World*. Nietzsche writes:

Conversely, Dionysian art is centered on the play with intoxication, with the state of ecstasy. [...] Singing and dancing, the human manifests himself as member of a high, more ideal commonality; he has unlearned walking and speech. But more: he feels himself enchanted and he has actually become something other. ... He feels himself a god; what else lives only in his power of imagination, he senses now within himself [...]. The human is no longer artist, but has become artwork; he is as ecstatically and exaltedly transformed as before he saw the gods transformed in dreams.⁹

What these two extracts have in common is not only an evocative prose but also the description of an inspirational, internalized and transforming process beyond rationality and language. Making art (or pursuing artistic research) is first and foremost something embodied, something that must break with the ordinary, something that favours transcendence, something that is rooted in the ‘power of imagination’ or ‘ecstasy’. Where the citations differ is in the reference to the divine, but this difference is, as I argue below, more about form than substance.

⁸ Henke, et al., *Manifesto*, 48.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dionysian Vision of the World* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 31.

What the Dionysian concept of artistic research brings forth is an opportunity to define *academic* research as fundamentally different and fully dissociated from artistic research. This serves the authors of the *Manifesto*, and indeed many scholars in the field of art research and aesthetics, well. What they want to defend as theirs, is the privileged access to a superior insight developed by aesthetic knowledge. Interestingly, in this regard, Nietzsche's description of the Apollonian seems rather relevant:

Beauty [Schönheit] is his [Apollo's] element, eternal youth his companion. But the beautiful seeming [schöner Schein] of the dream-world is his domain, too; higher truth, the perfection of these conditions in contrast to day-to-day actuality's tattered intelligibility, elevates him to a prophesying god, but just as surely to an artificing god. The god of beautiful seeming must be at the same time the god of true cognition [der wahren Erkenntnis].¹⁰

As is amply exemplified in the *Manifesto*, scholars (and not least philosophers in the Kantian tradition) may share an Apollonian ideal of 'beauty', 'higher truth' and 'perfection', and an idea of how the 'beautiful seeming' is 'true cognition'. What we further find in the *Manifesto* is a cultivation of a concept of aesthetic ideality as well as of the 'utopian art', to which its authors confess themselves. And interestingly, the concepts of aesthetic ideality and utopian art maintain all the necessary distance to the 'day-to-day actuality's tattered intelligibility' (see the Nietzsche extract above), which, rather interestingly, could count as a definition of *practice*. Tellingly, what is always lost from sight when binary oppositional thinking rules, is practice. In fact, when torn between the camps of Apollo and Dionysius, the issue of *artistic practice* will always disappear.

The rules of clarity

Art and academia are institutions consumed by authoritarianism inured by personal career interests, which propagate power structures that fixate positions and muffle dissonant voices.¹¹

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Dionysian Vision*, 30. This citation can further explain a central contradiction in the *Manifesto*. First, the authors try to define artistic research in pure Dionysian terms, in other words, the research that real artists do. But in other parts of the book, they argue that their own (Apollonian) reflections are artistic research. This contradiction is insolvable.

¹¹ Reflecting this point is the following citation from Bourdieu: 'But the most formidable barrier to the construction of an adequate science of practice no doubt lies in the fact that the solidarity that binds scientists to their science (and to the social privilege which makes it possible and which it justifies or procures) predisposes them to profess the superiority of their knowledge, often won through enormous efforts, against common sense, and even to find in that superiority a justification for their privilege, rather than to produce a scientific knowledge of the practical mode of knowledge and of the limits that scientific knowledge owes to the fact that it is based on a privilege.' Pierre Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 25.

Should someone pursue Georgina Born's call for a genealogical study of artistic research, I suspect that the quest for power and position, emanating from both sides in this modern 'Guerre des Coins', would be an important theme.¹² In fact, if we are honest about our initial position on the issue of artistic research, our personal career interests and academic/artistic backgrounds are hardly irrelevant. A cynic may say: 'Follow the money and you'll find the quarters of the *Coins*.' But then again, in which part of the world of art and academia would that not be true, at least to some degree?

But there is an issue that seems even more fundamental. Prior to our engagement in art and academia, and certainly to the coining of the term 'artistic research', there is a foul play already set up: the lure of *binary oppositional thinking*. This play is part of our psyche, culture and academic order. Whether we ascribe it to something we have inherited from Greek mythology and philosophy, or from a Hegelian dialectical thinking, it crops up in nearly any form of societal or political thinking. As mentioned above and amply demonstrated by the *Manifesto*, academic research attributes to itself willingly an Apollonian insight and clarity ('We who know'), whereas artist-researchers, on the contrary, are frequently attracted by a concept of art and research that reverberates Dionysian overtones and the cult of genius. Interestingly, on both sides of the *Guerre*, the art religion inherited from the nineteenth century with its hagiographic cult of the Great Artist, seems to offer a solution to different challenges. It installs a large area of *inexplicability* that serves as an excuse for not dealing with all that surpasses the scope of interest and competence of conventional academic research. Unsurprisingly, issues related to artistic practices are systematically put in the box labelled 'unknowable'. But the idea of inexplicability also suits the artist-researcher who may prefer to immerse his or her work and research into the fluid folds of mystery and inspiration. The rhetoric of the *Manifesto* is revealing. It consists of infantilizing the artist-researcher, and, at the same time, singing the praises of the unknowable and unconscious nature of true artistic creation. The question – and this is not a rhetorical one – is whether artistic researchers should find themselves content with playing the infant-role assigned to them by the worshippers of Apollo. The advantage is that it frees the artist-researcher from the burden of consciousness and the obligation to *articulate* knowledge in practice, performance or creation. This brings us to the paradoxical situation where both sides of this *Guerre* can find a comforting quietude in preserving the rigidity and non-communication inscribed in binary oppositional thinking. In fact, both sides may find a shared interest in deprecating any attempt to make a 'cross-over', something that is again amply presented in the *Manifesto*.

¹² See Georgina Born, 'Artistic Research and Music Research: Epistemological Status, Interdisciplinary Forms, and Institutional Conditions', in *Knowing in Performing: Artistic Research in Music and the Performing Arts*, ed. Annegret Huber, Doris Ingrisch, Therese Kaufmann, Johannes Kretz, Gesine Schröder and Tasos Zembylas (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 35–50.

I do think that binary oppositions are ruinous not only to the development of practical and artistic knowledge, but also to a more nuanced knowledge of human culture. They install a kind of mechanics, nay, a machinery, that we too easily accept as relevant – and thus regulative – for our intellectual, cultural and artistic activities. Indeed, when clarity rules, it tends to rule by the application of simple binary oppositions. Apollo versus Dionysus, Science versus Art, Objectivity versus Subjectivity. It is the acceptance of these binary oppositions that may explain why the mere idea of artistic research is considered by many to be a contradiction in terms (cf. Science versus Art). And undoubtedly, as long as we let them rule unchallenged, binary oppositions are and will be constituting forces in our culture and society, as in our use of language. Time and again we have been willing to re-enter this (divine and mythic) play of simple oppositions. And yet, as we today see the ravaging consequences of binary oppositional thinking, unpleasantly present everywhere in politics, society and culture, why should we believe that a similar thinking will bring the development and understanding of artistic research any further?

Interlude I

In preparing the survey ‘Artistic research. Where are we today?’ for the journal *Music & Practice*, we noticed that many of the potential participants who had earlier been outspoken advocates for artistic research, now politely declined and expressed a profound lassitude with the whole debate. Now is the time to *do* artistic research, they said, not to re-enter the conceptual maze of this modern ‘Guerre des Coins’. Their replies have an uncanny resemblance to something else. But to what exactly?

From the end of the 1970s and into the 1990s there was a fierce debate in the Early Music Movement, a debate that has never since been toppled in intensity and animosity in the musical world. The critics, vocally led by ever-strident Richard Taruskin, had the direct or indirect support from leading (conservative) thinkers and academics, such as Hans Georg Gadamer, Carl Dahlhaus, Richard Scruton. Academically well-armed, they torpedoed the arguments coming from the Early Music Movement, a movement rooted in a belief in *authenticity* obtained by playing on historical original instruments, and therefore respecting the composer’s *intention*. Initially, the defenders, mainly practitioners, tried to engage the debate, but confronted with the rhetoric skills and intellectual mindset of the Taruskin camp, the argument was lost, time and time again. Understandably, the practitioners got fed up, and retreated to the musicians’ self-imposed ethos: Shut up and play! And, eventually, this they did rather well. The Early Music Movement became a major player on the musical scene, both in commercial terms and in terms of adding centuries of forgotten repertory to the concert programme. So, if the defenders of Early Music Movement lost the battle, did they not in the end win the war?

The ‘War on Early Music’ was not only a clash between the academics and mainstream musicians on the one side, and the Early Music practitioners and some dedicated musicologists on the other; it also reflected an ideological clash between a (continental) hermeneutic tradition and a British empirical positivism.¹³ There was initially a rigid and scientific flair to the Early Music Movement, basing their performances on the ‘correct’ execution of ornaments, an ‘obsessional’ non-use of vibrato, and an adoption of an equidistant and geometrical time (i.e., slavishly respecting the metronome). This created a style of performing that is easily recognizable in the recordings of the Beethoven symphonies by Christopher Hogwood and Roger Norrington.¹⁴ This was not lost on Taruskin who insisted on a reversal of the terms. ‘What is usually called “modern performance” is in fact an ancient style, and what is usually called “historically authentic performance” is in fact a modern style.’¹⁵

There are similarities between the ‘War on Early Music’ and the ongoing ‘Guerre’ on artistic research. The criticism of mediocrity is recognizable in both. In the 1970s, many historically informed musicians struggled with performing well on the (‘newly found’) original instruments. New skills had to be learned. The occasional awkwardness added a flair of amateurism for the listeners who preferred the polished sound of a Karajan recording. The establishment noticed further the lack of respect for ‘tradition’, ‘canon’, and ‘authority’, which constitute the bedrock of hermeneutic thinking in academia (cf. Gadamer) as well as in the world of classical music. Interestingly, this criticism bears similarity to the reproach against the artist-researcher for not mastering established academic method and theory, and for being mediocre artists. In addition to the criticism of artistic mediocrity and ‘academic/cultural naivety’, the critics accused the authentic performance of lacking *aesthetic relevance*. The question posed was why one should try to reconstruct a performance that was aesthetically relevant for an audience 300 years ago. Again, the last argument can be compared to a frequent accusation against artistic research: its lack of relevance to both art and research.

Yet, in the context of our ‘Guerre’ there is one fundamental outcome of the ‘War on the Early Music’ that seems particularly relevant or even alarming. Instead of boosting artistic freedom and a new creative common ground, the antagonistic atmosphere pushed the opponents into their respective dikes. Of course, discussions are tools for reflection, and must not as such be

¹³ Of course, this claim is reductive, and does not reflect the more nuanced positions found for example among continental performers. Yet they were less involved in this ‘War’.

¹⁴ The inflexible take on musical interpretation and the quest for ‘doing it according to the sources’, created a culture of control, or what became colloquially called the ‘Early Music Police’.

¹⁵ Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 173.

shunned. But when they become intransigent and belligerent, and held within each tribe's idiosyncratic 'idiolect', the outcome is a given. The 'War on Early Music' produced mutually stifling opposites that to a large degree have since structured the musical world. Still today, after some 50 years since this conflict was ignited, musical institutions (not least in higher education) and practitioners are largely fixed to either side of the divide. So, how are we going to avoid making the same or similar mistakes in our dealing with artistic research?

Homo ludens

In his writings, Henk Borgdorff has adapted Christopher Frayling's trichotomy of 'research into art', 'research for art' and 'research through art'. Borgdorff's terms are 'research on the arts', 'research for the arts' and 'research in the arts'.¹⁶ The most revealing – or merciless – of these is the change of preposition from 'research into art' to 'research on the arts.' Implicitly, this change of preposition can be considered as harsh description of a research that does not engage *with* what it takes as its topic. The research *on* may well describe the 'nounification' of art, the tendency of conceiving art as a thing (a noun) on which one (im-)poses scientific methods, theories and terminology. The order of the research is directed *upon* art. The fact that conventional academic research on art has been overly fixated on the autonomous or immanent work of art, reveals a scientific culture that gains its superiority through control and fixity of its research object, at the cost of a broader understanding of artistic practices and the performative qualities of and in art. In that regard, the notion of the autonomous or immanent work of art, which has influenced more than 200 years of aesthetic reflection, from Karl Philipp Moritz (the 'pre-romantic' author) to Theodor W. Adorno and up to the present, has proven itself particularly effective.

The very fact that artistic research rarely adopts the autonomous work of art as its main topic of research might explain its 'innate' dissonance with conventional academic art research. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that the concept of the autonomous work of art has effectively been combined with the hagiographic approach to the Great Artist, as well as with the dominance of hermeneutical thinking in the academic art research. At least, this 'package' can explain why the attention in academic research has consistently emphasized *product* instead of *process*, and *poesis* instead of *praxis*. What is fixed is fixated. But the nature of playing and acting of man cannot be (be-)held as an object. *Homo ludens* performs acts not facts.

Irrespective of how we judge the political manoeuvrings behind the Bologna Reform, this changes nothing in the fact that conventional academic research does not communicate well with art as practice and performance. If Bologna challenges, or rather, provokes the academy,

¹⁶ Henk Borgdorff: *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012).

that is a good thing. It should be a necessary wake-up call for stagnant research fields not prepared to interact with research *in* the arts.

According to the *Manifesto*, the trap in which artistic research is easily caught is made of the urge to validate itself according to academia's standards of research. This urge is fully understandable, but also problematic if we consider the general inaptitude of academic research to deal with the arts as practice and performance. Accepting the claim that conventional academic research tends to misconstrue art, both ontologically and epistemologically – a claim that in many ways is the conceptual *raison d'être* for artistic research – will not the attempt to meet academic standards be a dead-end or at least put artistic research in a subsidiary position that undermines its potentiality? Moreover, to outsource the exploration for relevant method and theory to *other* scientific disciplines can hardly provide anything but a temporary relief. If method is about how we *do* research and theory about how we *conceive* (the matter of) research, we may of course seek inspiration and new ideas from other fields, but relevant methods and theory must be intrinsically related to the art in question, and to art as practice and performance, if artistic research is going to defend its *raison d'être*.¹⁷

Interlude II

Pierre Boulez was heralded already in the mid-1950s as the future of contemporary music by Adorno who hailed the Frenchman as the link between the aging serialism of Schoenberg to a music freed from all subjectivity, a music that was 'ultimately to replace composition altogether with an objective-calculated ordering of intervals, pitches, long and short durations, degrees of loudness; an integral rationalization such as has never before be envisaged in music'.¹⁸ Later, in his lectures at College de France, Boulez himself (sometimes with help from his assistant Andrew Gerszo), presented the future of music, the computer-assisted composition and the new real-time technology (such as the 4X). What these lectures actually conferred to the audience at 11 Place Marcelin Berthelot is questionable; but what Boulez did achieve was to change the historical narrative. If the dominant historiographical narrative in music, considered as 'emancipation from generic norms and compositional rules' (Dahlhaus), had been crowned with Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître*, a new narrative centred on the compositional use and development of new computational technology was now put forward, exemplified by works such as Boulez's *explosante-fixe* and *Répons*.¹⁹ The narrative of progress

¹⁷ So far, most of the arguments in this paragraph resonate with the *Manifesto*. But the *Manifesto* offers no solution but to push the artist-researcher into the Dionysian fold. And conveniently enough, this will immolate any provocation caused by the Bologna Reform.

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 199.

¹⁹ See Carl Dahlhaus, "Was ist und wozu studiert man Musikgeschichte?" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1 (Laaber: Laaber, 2000), 203.

through compositional technique had been supplanted by a narrative of progress through technology. And if Boulez was the final redeemer in the first narrative (according to Adorno), he was now the master of the second.²⁰

Due to his political dexterity, Boulez was able to inaugurate his own Bayreuth – IRCAM – at Beaubourg, Paris, in 1974. It soon became a world-leading centre for development and use of computational technology for musical composition. Still today, composers go on pilgrimages to this Monsalvat of computer-assisted composition. But the ambitions were broader than simply to procure new technology for composers. In 1989 the pedagogical branch of IRCAM launched master's and PhD-programmes and admitted around 20 applicants each of the following years. Composers, conductors, musicians and musicologists from the whole world came to Paris and began their third cycle at this prestigious new study, created in collaboration with the French elite institutions, ENS (École Normale Supérieure) and EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales).

The educational programme was divided in two equal parts, the first consisted of classes in musical composition techniques and technology (given by world-leading composers, such as Boulez himself, Tristan Murail, György Kurtág, Marco Stroppa and Brian Ferneyhough as well as by the staff at IRCAM), and the second part consisted of classes in physics and mathematics given by scientists at ENS. And yet, after some five years the PhD-programme was terminated. One of the most prestigious institutions in music, under the direction of the most celebrated contemporary composers and conductors during the last decades of the twentieth century, which had created a PhD programme of dreams with the participation of world-leading scientists and artists, was terminated with only a handful dissertations completed.

Why did IRCAM fail? Retrospectively, what is obvious was the lack of other academic perspectives than those embraced by technology and natural sciences. The study of music was reduced to what was contained by the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in addition to the presentation of various compositional techniques and analyses. In fact, no critical perspectives were included and no involvement with the humanities were offered. What was offered were the 'coins', the valuta of IRCAM, the same STEM-based subjects by which both this institution and Boulez sought to govern the musical world. But writing a thesis in music is generically speaking something done in the humanities, in other

²⁰ As Boulez declared himself in 1976: 'Technology and the composer: collaboration between scientists and musicians ... is, therefore, a necessity.... Our grand design today ... is to prepare the way for their integration and, through an increasingly pertinent dialogue, to reach a common language'. Cited from Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

words, in a field that was completely lacking in the curriculum offered at IRCAM as well as in its corridors.

The crisis in arts appears to be an important subtext to most discussions on contemporary art and artistic research (cf. Gernot Böhme). But is not this crisis primarily one of relevance and communicability – in other words, a crisis that a further focus on technology and sciences can hardly solve? Founding a leading institution in the arts based on the STEM-disciplines marks a step that can hardly be seen as anything but an attempt to ‘apollinate’ art and research. But when the lights of the technology and sciences are turned off, how do we know that the artist has gained a way to better practise art as a cultural and communicative activity? The problem is not the technology as such, but to misconstrue a relation by making the tool the master.

Interestingly, Boulez himself raised this issue implicitly, nearly in a filicide manner, when he criticized the IRCAM-engendered ‘spectral music’ for lacking the ability to create musical forms.²¹ The computer-assisted technology gave the composers a tool to analyse sound and build beautiful spectral chords, thus creating a new focus on timbre as a dominating entity in musical composition. But what it did not give was any means with which to reflect on musical development, on how to create musical form, on how to accomplish a *mise-en-scène* of the music.

Interlude III

In his book, *Création et anarchie*, Giorgio Agamben delivers a harsh criticism of the art of Marcel Duchamp, and implicitly, of all conceptual art, which for him is a movement that disregards what he calls the ‘artistic machine’, that is, the relation ‘work – artist – operation’.

In the context of this meditation, you may think that there are good reasons to celebrate Agamben’s harsh debunking of the conceptual art.²² Undoubtedly, and irrespective of one’s personal preferences, conceptual art can be held as a collapse of binary oppositional thinking. If anything, this is an art of paradoxical nature, closely connected to the (‘duping’) artist’s ideation, which may appear as a Dionysian genuflection in front of the auspices of an Apollonian cult. But rather than following Agamben in his grumbling on the absence of an

²¹ See Jean-Baptiste Barrière, ed., *Le Timbre, métaphore pour la composition* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991), 546.

²² ‘Ce qui s’est produit ensuite, c’est qu’une bande ‘malheureusement encore active, d’habiles spéculateurs et de dupes a transformé le ready-made en œuvre d’art. Non qu’ils aient réussi à remettre réellement en mouvement la machine artistique – qui tourne désormais à vide -, mais un semblant de mouvement arrive à alimenter, plus pour très longtemps je crois, ces temples de l’absurde que sont les musées d’art contemporain.’ Giorgio Agamben, *Création et anarchie: L’œuvre à l’âge de la religion capitaliste* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivage, 2019), 25.

artwork (*ergon*) and the lack of operation (*energeia*), what fascinates me is another issue. Even when we accept that ‘the idea becomes a machine that makes the art’ (as Sol LeWitt articulated it), we need to ask *what* the materiality from/on/in which this machine makes art is.²³

Nearly as a rule, whatever the physical materiality of conceptual artwork is, it will in the end be transformed into relic. For a philosopher (cf. Agamben) fascinated by *ergon* and *energeia*, this quasi-irrevocable transformation is revelatory of an art lacking in substance (both in the metaphorical and physical sense). However, it is towards another perspective I would like to point: the ‘what’ on which conceptual art depends. This ‘what’ is ‘us’, our interactions and systems of communications, our social and aesthetic practices, our emotional and intellectual life, developed in time and space; all this we may put together and study under the epithet ‘the humanities’ in the broad sense of the term. Without an anchor in this life-world, no conceptual art is possible, nor is any art for that matter. So, rather than simply being an endorsement of ideas or concepts as such, conceptual art (and conceptualizations in arts), direct us towards the contemporaneity or even the con-spatiality of the relation ‘art and us’, but also towards how works of art can descend into relics when our cultural references change and ‘concomitance’ evaporates.²⁴

Now, this is less an attempt to make a plea for conceptual art than a reminder of what we tend to ignore when we overinvest in the physical materiality and process of the work of art, both in the sense of *ergon* and *poesis*. And this reminder is by no means only relevant to conceptual art, it is also relevant in reminding us of the matter that actually constitutes art, not the physical item as such, but the culture and its practices in which we act, and through which we comprehend and comprise the world.

Eluding time, change and act.

The three Interlude cases show how binary opposites organize our thinking, yet in a manner that is easily challenged. Even if Taruskin’s reversal of the terms ‘modern’ and ‘ancient’ challenged the initial binary oppositional organization, it did not change the thinking as such. It simply renamed the binary regime. Likewise, the rationalization of art and research at

²³ It is easy to comprehend why this return exercise an attraction for the artist-researcher. To develop a concept or to present conceptualizations in place of (or as a supplement to) the material work as object, has all the character of something resembling a philosopher’s work. This can thus answer the question of what kind of work the artist-researcher actually does. The answer is that he or she develops, studies or exposes concepts and conceptualizations of art. The artist-researcher becomes an artist philosopher. Art regains utopia – or at least the world of ideas.

²⁴ The performative impact of Duchamp’s *pissoir* was dependent on a pre-existing concept of art, on a given historical situation. The performative impact was temporal, today it has become a representation of a breach, confirming a modernist narrative. As an artwork, its position today is anecdotal, it lacks actuality.

IRCAM played into a binary opposition between ‘future-technology-science’ and ‘past-interpretation-emotionality’ and, implicitly, echoed a variant of the Apollonian and Dionysian divide. Agamben’s criticism of conceptual art played into a similar opposition, but now divided between ‘artworks’ and ‘concepts/ready-mades’, between real art and absurdity, *ergon* and ideas. And in all three cases, the argumentation is based on an attempt to seek control, on something we could call a fixation of position. This is done by ‘building on’ entities that are considered as solid, or rather, as self-evidently relevant, whether it is ‘the authentic instrument’, ‘tradition’, ‘technology’ or ‘ergon’.²⁵

The premise hidden in the binary opposition between artistic and academic research (and, I fear, in all binary oppositional thinking) is based on the suspension of *time* (and thus of change) as a vector in human comprehension. Seeking clarity through oppositional thinking is not only an oversimplification, it also involves a *de-temporalization* of culture and society. The mythical nature of much de-temporalized oppositional thinking is hardly a surprise. The point of myths is to suspend time.

The suspension of time and the attempt to fix positions are present in all three Interlude cases. Through the concepts of the ‘autonomous or immanent work of art’ and ‘aesthetic relevance’, the critics (cf. Taruskin) of the Early Music Movement attacked the idea of an authentic performance. The critics – somewhat paradoxically – used the argument of tradition in order to de-temporalize the work of art and to advocate for its present-day interpretative values, all assembled under the epithets of ‘aesthetic actuality’ and the ‘timelessness of art’. On the other hand, the Early Music Movement tried to suspend temporal distance by the appeal to ‘authenticity’ and ‘intentionality’, failing to see how they, as a movement, represented a present-day taste and practice. What both parties shared was a similar search for facticity and fixed positions, either these were identified in the (transcendental, yet material) presence of the autonomous work of art, or in the (use of) historically authentic instruments.

The turn to science and technology, as seen in the IRCAM case, is also in essence a suspension of temporality. The attraction and ‘logic’ of science is its timelessness. The scientific method does not ‘understand’ time in its pursuit of objectivity and facts.²⁶ The facticity of art is thus

²⁵ Not only are these entities considered well-founded, so is also the vocabulary through which they are judged. The general use of terms like ‘art’, ‘artist’, ‘composition’, ‘history’ or even ‘music’, reflects a belief that terms are (more or less) given, that they can be objectively used to construct our mental diagrams representing the world. What is forgotten is that terms are unstable, changing, and at times – and over time – contradictory used. Yet, when binary oppositions organize our thinking, musings on time, change and ambivalence are not applauded.

²⁶ In other words, it privileges spatial thinking, a thinking that in scientific terms holds the laboratory with its (seeking) total control of the elements as its ideal. The topic of making the laboratory the ideal type or site of all research, also in the humanities, with its attempt to manage in a controlled and spatially fixed manner is developed in Michel de Certeau’s writing.

confirmed and solidified through the use of technology and science, which provide the identity, means and explication to the research as well as to the art.

The issue I raised with the Agamben case was the oversimplicity involved in his critique of conceptual art, based on a construal in which art is primarily considered as an object related to *ergon* and *energeia/poiesis*. Yet art cannot be considered as independent of concepts or ideas unless we ontologically reduce it to fixed and material entities, to entities that are restricted to a spatial thinking.²⁷

And yet, even if the oversimplification implied by the use of binary oppositions can be balanced by a graduation from one ‘pole’ to the other, we are still offered a spatial representation of the matter, or in this case, simply a two-dimensional representation. When clarity rules, it is not only because we organize in binary oppositions our mental representation of the world, but also because we ignore time as a constituting dimension. When time is factored in, fixed positions evaporate.²⁸

In historical terms, the porousness of the demarcation between the arts and research in the humanities has always been generative, and at times, a locus for renewal of both. It is this reciprocal fecundity that must be regained by artistic research. The distinction between what is art and what is research evaporates in the work of Denis Diderot, Søren Kierkegaard, Walter Benjamin or Gaston Bachelard. In fact, the rich plurality of perspectives in the humanities and its research is nearly unfathomable. Let us not forget that the history of the humanities has been deeply invested in the issues of craft and arts (‘Ars’) for centuries before the end of eighteenth century (and the following hagiographic cultivation of the Genius and the immanent work of art). This tradition could point back to Aristotle, to his attenuating of the certainty of *epistêmê* and strengthening epistemological qualities of the *technê*. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the ‘cross-fertilization’ between sciences and arts transformed both categories, not least due to the possibility created by the printing press, as could be exemplified by the manual written by the artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) on geometry ‘for the use of painters, goldsmiths, sculptors, stonemasons carpenters’.²⁹ The humanist tradition of developing knowledge from crafts and arts, thus to weaken the rigidity of the binary opposition between

²⁷ Of course, I do not say that Agamben is suspending concepts or ideas in his aesthetic thinking, but that does not change the fact that his critique of conceptual art is based on a binary oppositional thinking and the priority exclusively given to the work of art as an entity.

²⁸ In other words, clarity is won at a price we should not want to pay: the price of ignoring time and thus, change, and of ignoring the truth that acts are the basis of all human life, and thus, practice.

²⁹ See Lorraine Daston, *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 48.

sciences and arts, was a tradition that peaked with the *Encyclopédie* of d'Alembert and Diderot. All of this offers an argument as to why humanist art research could collaborate with and sustain the development of artistic research. It simply needs to acknowledge its past plurality.

But there is one further issue we need to include in our quest for attenuating oppositional thinking. We need to move away from regarding human culture and art primarily and exclusively from the (dominant) perspective of the 'textual paradigm' (which nonetheless has the methodologically convenience of reducing art to text/textuality and research to text on text/textuality). The 'logocentrism' of which both Ludwig Klage and Jacques Derrida warn us about – the over-investment in the epistemological potential of the word or the text – must be challenged.

What we need to develop is our ability to comprehend art as *activity*, and by this, sustaining the development of a 'practice paradigm' in research, that is, seeing art as (performatively) constituted by acts through and in practice. The change from *facts* to *acts* as the molecular entity in research can provide a common theoretical and methodical ground for both academic research, artistic practices and artistic research. But is this not simply to reengage a new binary oppositional thinking, acts versus facts? It is not. Acts are not opposed to facts. Research may well establish facts, but preferably on the basis of the acts on/in which art 'articulates' itself. This is why the study of practices may suspend the binary oppositional thinking that is established between academic and artistic research. Research based on facts (and fact-finding), will always prioritize the prospect of achieving control through fixation of positions, but only of what it has (epistemologically and ontologically) already defined as relevant for its topic. The question we need to ask is whether this fact-based research has not from the outset declined to engage with art as human activity. In other words, are not the ruins of binary oppositional thinking a result of an error of judgement, of us ignoring that the common denominator, or rather, the privileged point of departure, is acts, not facts?³⁰

Artistic research exists. It is institutionalized. Artistic research is not only a challenge *to* but also *for* the humanities, and a challenge it must and can meet. The alternative is intolerable. The art research in the humanities must be directed towards finding new ways to *comprehend* and *contribute*, and not only explain (to) art. It must further let the art and artistic research inform and influence the fields of interest. If we could persuade the humanities to humility, to adopt the research ethos of a Diderot or Goethe and to begin with a 'Zarte Empirie', that is, with the fragility of the empirical details and acts, and not from the ready-made categories and

³⁰ Yet, a research or science basing itself on facts has the opportunity to achieve control, that is, the fixation of positions. On the other hand, research that begins with acts will have to seek other ways to establish order, by finding a logic, tendencies, rules or laws articulated in and through acts.

perspectives, then this battle is one we can fight together.

The hypothesis developed through this meditation is that culture and practices provide the *material continuum* to all performance and creation in the arts, and any research ignoring this will fall short of being aesthetically and phenomenologically revealing. The urge to isolate a topic or a position in order to gain control and clarity will always have consequences. It will cause an ontological and epistemological reduction affecting both art and research, and moreover, a retreat into irrelevance or splendid isolation. In fact, and please forgive me for the following metaphor, even if islands may look like attractive and well-defined locations, they are always connected, not only by water and air, but also by the earth, on which they are nothing but towering masses of stones and bedrock. But as long as both art and research forget the presence of water, air and earth, how can they light the fire of our engagement?

What I fear is that conventional academic art research will fail (yet again) to seize the opportunity, fail to see that it now has the opportunity to access new material, to be connected and invested in art as a living phenomenon, to deal with art as practice and performance. But this must imply getting our hands dirty – to embrace the performative paradigm in which art is articulated. The pull towards the superior heights and purity of Mount Parnassus will always be strong. On the other hand, I also fear that the cult of Dionysus will continue to enchant the artist-researcher. The attraction of presenting pretentious and self-promoting art projects as research is strong. And all this may lead to a paradoxical situation where peace reigns between the cults of Apollo and Dionysus, by maintaining a shared agreement of ‘non-interference’.