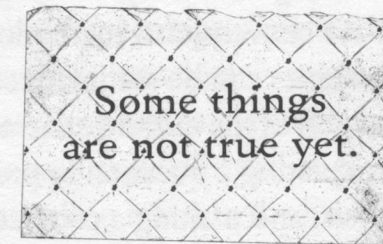


# A Methodology of Artistic Research: The Notion of 'Experience'

Methodology is one of the three most misused and trivialized terms in the emerging field of artistic research. The other two are 'ontology' and 'knowledge', that is, 'knowledge' in conjunction with 'production', as in 'knowledge production'. The popularity of these concepts stems from a misplaced effort to lend academic weight to artistic research. The term 'ontological', that one very frequently comes across during conferences on artistic research, usually simply denotes 'important'. As for 'knowledge': I will return to the issue of 'knowledge' in relation to art practice in the latter part of this lecture. Concerning 'methodology': generally, for example in presentations of research projects, 'methodology' does not refer so much to a 'knowledge of methods' (which is what the term literally implies), but merely to a specific 'method' or 'approach' that is used to tackle

a particular problem, for example an art project commissioned in public space.

Of course that is not to say that the development of a methodology of artistic research is not of great importance. Such a methodology presupposes an acquaintance with a diversity of research methods (including the assessment of their origins and histories) and the reasoned choice and consistent application of a particular approach. I regard it as one of the vital tasks of ACPA to take responsibility for a precise use of concepts and for the development of a solid and coherent methodology of artistic research.



<Performative insert 2>  
'Some things are not true yet.'

Performer goes to the front (where the candidates usually stand when they defend their thesis) and speaks the sentence in a loud, clear voice into a floor-standing microphone. She speaks very loudly as if the room were much larger and as if she wants to reach an audience beyond this room.

Methodology as the reasoned and systematic implication of a set of concepts as well as methodological debate are essential to the advancement of any research field. In the case of artistic research, this means that concepts such as creativity, performance, political engagement, expression, sensory perception, visibility (to name just a few) will have to be problematized and thought through in a consistent manner. What is needed is the development of a conceptual apparatus specific to the interrelation of making and thinking, which are the fundament of artistic research.

Over the past fifteen years or so, a lot of work has been done in this respect. It is not surprising that during these years the theoretical framework of artistic research, as a young field establishing itself as a scholarly discipline and therefore seeking academic legitimization, has been largely informed by existing academic methodologies, mainly deriving from the humanities. These conventional methodological criteria in the humanities can be summarized as offering an interpretation of the current state of affairs in a certain field, articulating a question or problem, presenting an analysis, and making a coherent argument that proposes an answer to the posed question and thereby offering a new contribution to the field of knowledge. Even though these criteria have their relevance for artistic research in a very general sense,

artistic research now has to develop on the basis of its own merits and its own particular sets of questions.

The next logical step in the development of artistic research as a field of study is the critical reflection on its specific and inherent characteristics, the in-depth consideration of its particular profile, and of the aims of artistic research as a type of research that is grounded in artistic practice. A lot of work is to be done to gain insight into the nature of the interrelation of art practice and theoretic discourse.

As a step in this direction, I will expand on the concept of 'experience', as a notion that emphasizes the experiential nature of both art practice and artistic research. Experience is etymologically related to 'experiment', from the Latin *experientia* (from the verb *perior*, which means to try, to attempt), which in its turn derives from the Greek verb *peirao* (to try, attempt, test, get experience). Experience therefore has (at least) two meanings. One is related to the past, as a competence which is required in the course of time. This competence may equally be practical or technical, as well as intellectual or psychological. The other meaning refers to the lived presence in 'real time'. In this sense, 'experience' is synonymous to 'event'. These two meanings of experience, although different, are closely related. An experience in the here and now may relate to a similar

experience in the past, which enables the recognition of a particular experience as such in the present.

Any methodology of artistic research should, I believe, take sensory perception and 'bodily thinking' into account as a defining characteristic. Artistic practice, no matter how conceptualized or politicized it may be, is rooted in a sensory understanding of or perspective on reality, or takes sensory perception as point of departure. The term 'experience' implicates this interlacing of intellectual discourse with the sensory world.

A genealogy of the notion of experience can be traced in the thinking of William James (1842–1910), John Dewey (1859–1952), Whitehead (1861–1947) and Brian Massumi (1956), consecutively, all philosophers belonging to the empiricist tradition. Massumi proposes to group these philosophers (and others, among whom Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze) together under the denominator of 'process philosophy', a term Massumi borrows from Whitehead. What these thinkers have in common, says Massumi, is an understanding

'of the world as an ongoing process in continual transformation. It is not concerned with things – certainly not "in themselves" – so much as with things-in-the-making, in James's famous phrase' (Massumi 2015, VIII).

James, Dewey, Whitehead and Massumi have deployed the term experience to overcome the Cartesian subject/object divide, the separation of a 'knower' and a 'known'. The fundamental idea of their philosophy is mutual interaction and involvement, and the possibility for subject and object to constantly switch roles. No one thing or being at any moment is merely subject or only object.

According to James, who may be called the father of process philosophy, for an empiricist philosophy the *relations* between entities are of equal importance and equal reality as the entities themselves:

'For an empiricist philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system*' (James 2003, 22, italics James).

Any kind of relation experienced, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, is as real as anything else: this accounts for the radicality of James's empiricism. The radical empiricist will not privilege the experience of 'conjunctive relations' over 'disjunctive relations' and will not reject any of them, but accepts them as they come. Contrary to rationalism, which privileges the whole over its parts and emphasizes universals, empiricism, according to James,

'lays the explanatory stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction. My [i.e. James's] description of things, accordingly, starts with the parts and makes of the whole a being of the second order' (ibid.).

This is why Isabelle Stengers, in *Thinking with Whitehead*, says about empiricism that its goal is to 'never go "beyond" usual experience but rather to transform it, to make what usually "goes without saying" matter' (Stengers 2011, 46). Through being reflected upon, ordinary experiences are transformed, the reflection resulting in 'what usually goes without saying matters'. This is precisely what art practice is often about and what art works can do.

As I said, the concept of experience also implies the idea of mutual interaction and involvement, looking and being looked at, it implies the possibility of subject and object to constantly switch roles. It means movement and changeability of perspectives. The 'interweaving of change and permanence', says Whitehead, is 'the primary fact of experience'; and this interweaving 'is at the base of our concepts of personal identity, of social identity, and of all sociological functionings' (Whitehead 1968, 53).

The story of a recent scientific discovery may illustrate this idea of relationship and connectedness,

of mutual interaction and involvement. In the month of May of 2016, divers off the coast of Hawaiï tumbled upon the largest sponge in the world.<sup>4</sup> It is 3.5 metres long, 2 metres high and 15 metres wide. This sponge-animal lives on a coral reef at a depth of 2,100 metres near the north western islands of Hawaiï and is possibly several thousands of years old, according to American researchers in the scientific journal *Marine Biodiversity*. The divers filmed and photographed the object from all angles and realized only afterwards, while studying the images, that they had filmed a sponge. The sponge was able to reach its size and age owing to the fact that nature on these islands has not so far been disturbed by human activity.

It is hard to imagine the implications of a life with a time-span of several thousand years for a living being. It is even harder to grasp how the sponge may have experienced the presence of the human divers and the impact on it of this event. This particular sponge will certainly be changed for ever, even if we do not know how, and so will the divers who had the experience of meeting it.

The connectedness of things, which according to Whitehead is 'the essence of all things of all types' (1968, 9) has always been a source of inspiration for artists. The well-known poem *Tijd* (Time) by the Dutch poet Vasalis (1940) speaks about the

interweaving of change and permanence, and of the switch of perspectives, by referring to the time of the stone:

*Ik droomde dat ik langzaam leefde...  
langzamer dan de oudste steen.  
Het was verschrikkelijk: om mij heen  
schoot alles op, schokte en beefde,  
wat stil lijkt.*<sup>5</sup>

The poet, dreaming that she was living slowly, slower than the oldest stone, experiences the passage of time from the perspective of the stone. It is terrifying to watch everything that normally had appeared silent, push up around her from the earth, jerking and trembling, the trees wrenching themselves from the soil and the swelling and shrinking of the tidal waves as a mere tremor. The poet concludes by asking how she could ever not have known this and how she will ever be able to forget.

In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey describes aesthetic experience as a specific and integral event, with a beginning and an end. Dewey emphasizes the dynamic character of this event, because it takes time to complete; there is a chronological order of reception, development and fulfilment. Not only does a person *undergo* that experience, the actual undergoing is also *perceived*. The undergoing stage is

receptive, implying surrender; but adequate surrender is only possible through an intense and controlled activity, through effective action. This merging of surrender and controlled action creates the experience (Dewey 2005, 55, 56).

Dewey's description of aesthetic experience as a specific and dynamic event, in which undergoing and perceiving, or surrender and effective action, are merged, is not only an apt description of what happens in the interaction between art work and spectator, but may also help to understand what is at stake in artistic research. In fact it reveals the challenge the researcher is facing.

While experiencing an art work, the spectator engages in an interaction with an object or event that purposefully addresses the spectator (or audience) and plays an active role in this interaction.<sup>6</sup> Art work and spectator switch roles in observing and being observed, in a process that involves both skill and knowledge. The time of the art work is the duration of this specific reciprocal engagement between art work and spectator. Each art work, whether age-old or contemporary, is actualized or brought to life in the time spent in this interaction. It is a 'merging of surrender and controlled action which creates the aesthetic experience' (Dewey), a going back and forth between spectator and work in a free and unpredictable movement, after which the art work

will remain in the memory of the spectator and shape her perspective on the world.

This is not any different for the maker of the work, the artist, who experiences the work as the very first spectator. In artistic research, the researcher is expected to elucidate and to reflect critically on this aesthetic experience and on her/his own work, and to contextualize it artistically and theoretically. In doing so, the researcher must take up the position of both insider (the making) and outsider (critical reflection). The researcher has to develop the skills to change gear between these two modes and a way to reflect on this switching between modes.

Perhaps this is much to ask, perhaps it is asking artists to jump over their own shadows. But then, this critical reflection, this switching between the experience of the maker and the experience of the spectator is inherent to art practice. Artists are constantly faced not only by the task of producing the work, but also by the challenge of positioning it in the world, giving it a place, conceptualizing the relationship between it and its environment. To repeat Riley's words: the artist has 'to establish the terms upon which a creative dialogue can be sustained'. Doing art is questioning how to do it. I want to stress the fact that this goes equally for an artist who sets herself the goal of bringing about political

or social change as an artist who states that her work addresses eye and ear in a tactile way and simply 'is'. The considerations on how to position one's work are as much political as aesthetic in nature, no matter whether we are dealing with a conventional painting or sculpture, performance, conceptual art or a political/activist art practice.

The work of the American conceptual artist Ian Wilson (1940) may serve as an example. Wilson's practice consists of staging discussions on questions of epistemology. For example, since 1999 Wilson has been organizing an ongoing series of discussions on the topic of the Pure Awareness of the Absolute.

How does Wilson succeed in distinguishing *his* discussion on the Absolute, as art work, from any other discussion on the Absolute? For the public to be able to perceive the discussion as art, Wilson has to frame that discussion as such. He does this in the first place by the choice of location, which is usually a museum or art institution. Then he carefully attends to all physical circumstances under which the discussion will take place, from designing the printed invitations to the discussion, to arranging wooden chairs in an oval and presenting the room as a stage. There may be a description on the wall outside the room of Wilson's practice. Participants are aware of the artistic nature of the event and will, upon entering the room, perceive the discussion in

this double way: as an engaged discussion on the Absolute *and* as an art work.

A note on terminology is needed here. The concept of 'experience' comes very close to Massumi's 'affect'. Affect means 'being right where you are, more intensely' (Massumi 2015, 3). Like experience, affect goes two ways: it is affecting and being affected. Intensified affect comes with 'a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places' (ibid., 6). At this point Massumi refers to James's 'connectedness of intensities of experience'. Affect is thinking bodily, accompanied by 'a sense of vitality or vivacity, a sense of being more alive' (ibid.). Also, affect has to do with the sense of potential, the sense that there are always more potential ways of affecting or being affected (as in Whitehead's famous dictum: 'There is always more...').

In all of these respects, Massumi's affect is inspired by James's 'connectedness' and Dewey's 'experience' and is akin to my use of experience in relation to art practice and artistic research. But there is a slight difference in meaning between affect and experience as it is meant here. 'Affect' connotes, in a general sense, a certain way of being in the world, being 'open to the world, to be active in it and to be patient for its return activity' (ibid., x). Affect is

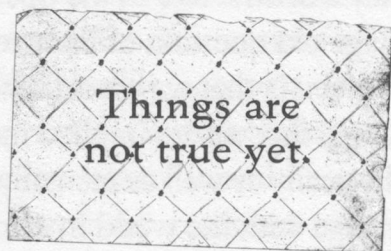
unrelated to intentional activity. In this sense, it is too wide a concept for my argument. 'Experience' refers to *a* specific and reflected experience. In the words of James: 'The peculiarity of our experiences [is] that they not only are, but are known, which their "conscious" quality is invoked to explain' (James 2013, 13). I therefore prefer the term experience in relation to the issue of artistic research.

I want to emphasize that the terms connectedness, experience, event and affect constitute an aesthetics, an aesthetics that implies morality because these terms play a central role in the quest for an answer to the age old question of 'how to live'. The answer that is given is that we are an inherent part of our surroundings, that we are implied in our surroundings, physically as well as mentally, and that we need to engage with the world in a continuous process of affecting and being affected. In short, that it is not possible to find any enjoyment in life without being connected and involved with the things around us. This is to say that the aesthetics proposed here has a strong political and ethical meaning. Today, at a time when much attention is paid to the political and societal value, or impact, of art practices, the issue of aesthetics is far too easily brushed aside by both artists and theorists, as an outdated and no longer relevant view of art. I believe this is a mistake. In talking about art we necessarily address

<Performative insert 3>  
'Things are not true yet.'

Performer goes to the organ and plays on some random keys. Afterwards she sings the sentence in a high pitched and touching melody as she were alone in this space with her thoughts and at the same time somewhere else.

the issue of aesthetics. It is my conviction that a coherent perspective on aesthetics always implies political and moral consequences. In art, it is precisely the aesthetics that can make the difference.



## Artistic Research: Fundamental Research

Much has been written on artistic research and the kind of knowledge it (supposedly) produces and that is often referred to as 'tacit knowledge'. Since artistic research is carried out by artists, artistic research yields knowledge, experiences, insights and understanding that cannot be brought about in other ways: this knowledge (knowing) is embodied in the art works and art practices themselves. Art works do not describe, explain or analyze, but they enact or embody points of view and values. Artistic research, then, is the research into the nature of this enactment and into this embodiment of views and values in specific art works or practices.

Artistic research is a radically speculative discipline, just as art is a radically speculative mode of practice. Speculative thinking does not approach the world as 'a grab-bag of things', but as a dynamic