

Notes on Artistic Research and Research on the Arts: Distinctions and Interfaces

17th of September at 17:00-19:00, Think Corner (Tiedekulma)

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I sit waiting for the panel discussion to start and I think back to the immersion I have had on the topic of artistic research recently. Last week, Iceland University of the Arts held its Annual Hugarflug Conference, which in 2021 described itself as a “platform for an open, informed and critical dialogue on the arts, architecture and design; on knowledge production in the expanded field of the arts as well as their intersections with other fields.” This year, the Hugarflug conference was themed Artistic Research: The Tacit Knowledge. Its questions of focus were: Are the research methods of artists too different from the traditional ways of performing research to be taken seriously? Is there a need for a common language? I now think of the University of Helsinki’s event *Artistic Research and Research on The Arts: Distinctions and Interfaces*, and I see that the questions posed to the panel are very similar to last week’s conference in Iceland.

This event hosted by the University of Helsinki is introduced by moderator Dr. **Kalle Puolakka** (University of Helsinki), with panellists from different institutional and artistic backgrounds, including Dr. **Hanna Korsberg** (Helsinki University), Dr. **Mika Elo** (Uniarts Helsinki) and **Tom Cardwell** (Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies). In the introduction, the listeners are introduced to the key distinction between artistic research (which only started its evolution 30 years ago) and academic research on the arts (whose knowledge evolution traces back to ancient Greece).

The questions of focus for the panel discus-

sion are not light matters in this moment of Finland’s cultural history. At multiple points in the panel discussion, the issues of funding, institutional renewal, doctoral education, and both artistic and academic careers are all at stake whilst they adapt to cultural politics, rural migration to urban centers, and the general disruption felt within academic institutions. However, the fundamental question from the event is, “*do we need both academic research on the arts and artistic research?*” YES, we do – and the panel discussion successfully opened why this is the case. For the uninitiated reader, academic research in the arts has well-established methods, institutions, and academic practices. It objectively looks reflectively at art and applies methods such as historical research and aesthetic discourse. Artistic Research, on the other hand, is more subjective and develops when artists use their practice as a form of research, which we typically refer to as “practice-based research” or “practice-led research”. So, what are the main distinctions and interfaces between artistic research and research on the arts?

Disambiguating the discussion further, the panellists acknowledge that artistic research is still early in its evolution and that delineation continues because traditional boundaries are still under negotiation – including how the field might define a specialist. Moderator Puolakka prodded the hornet’s nest with the question, “Does artistic research need some fixed core methodologies?” Professor Elo responded that artistic research can also use scientific methods as well as methods

Distinctions	Interfaces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Terminologies — Related topics — Individualistic art research practice vs. collective artistic practice — The application of interdisciplinarity — Artistic research can capture embodied, experiential, sensorial aspects of an artistic experience that research on art cannot capture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Institutional alignments with funding modalities — Both types of research aim to broaden socio-cultural and educational perspectives in the arts — Art is becoming more academic

coming from artistic practices. Additionally, it is not as interesting to ask what artistic research is as what does artistic research do? What does it achieve? And how is it changing institutions?

Although art education is individualistic, artistic research challenges this with collaboration and critical dialogue. Dr. Cardwell made the point that collective approaches are gaining momentum in the art world and points out that the “market-driven solo genius, which has persisted since the Renaissance to the present, is currently being replaced by collective groups being awarded exhibitions. We also see this in education when students choose to submit assessments made by collaboration. This creates a challenge for academics – how do you grade collectively?” I reflect on this point and think of Blast Theory (I personally loved Cat Royale) and the Team Lab opening exhibition at Amos Rex that had hundreds of people lining up in below-freezing weather to view their interactive installations. It’s obvious that these collectives are alive and thriving (and interdisciplinary). I wonder about the business model...

The issue of interdisciplinarity needs more critical discourse both in terms of research on art and artistic research, with not only strong distinctions emerging from the discussion but also diverse viewpoints concerning defining interdisciplinarity in practice. Dr. Korsberg made a point that one “cannot get a Master’s degree in interdisciplinary practice.” Dr. Cardwell made the point that interdisciplinarity can be part of creative freedom. My mind wanders to the interdisciplinary contributions of **Hildegard von Bingen** and **Leonardo Da Vinci**...

One area in which artistic research has been particularly successful has been in its community

development model. The improved scale of temporality that artistic research offers practitioners and researchers cannot be overlooked. It provides a critical relation to the traditional artistic practice and its renewal. This need for renewal and challenging tradition requires ways of finding and sustaining critical dialogue and then research.

Looking to the future, the panel generally agreed that we will lose a lot as a society – and in the research community – if we favour one field over another, and that a multiplicity of arts is always beneficial. Quoting Dr. Elo, “The arts live from multiplicity. It is important that we have different art forms in dialogue with each other. Multiple ways of translation. Between different expressions, temporalities, and spatial articulations. If we do not have the multiplicities, we would lose out.” The panel agreed and reiterated that we need to support as many types of research and approaches regardless of distinctions and interfaces as possible.

“The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” – Will Durant after Aristotle’s Poetics