

RESEARCH INTO THE PERFORMING ARTS. INTRODUCTION

José Antonio Sánchez

Universidad de Castilla La Mancha, Cuenca

Victoria Pérez Royo

Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder)

Research is an inherent part of artistic practice. This is the conviction shared by almost all artists who have questioned what should be understood by art research. It is inherent because any genuine artistic process implies a journey towards the unknown or the new, i.e., generates knowledge or something that provokes questions about reality, giving way to new forms of investigation. Therefore, given the difficulty of defining art, we would have serious problems pursuing this line of thought as we would arrive at the conclusion that art research is, as is all art, everything that artists call research or that which the institution accepts as being.

It would be paradoxical to accept the institution's criteria when the problem of defining research into the arts arises precisely from the difficulty of building a system for teaching and specialisation based on voluntarism or the ups and downs of the market and the institutional contextⁱ. Along with the institution (which includes the market) and the artists, there is a third element in the form of the higher education system, generally based at universities. This, to some extent, may behave like the general public, incapable of understanding less conventional proposals, and in need of explanations and justifications which, for artists, managers and critics, are superfluous. However, critique can be generated and the necessary foundations can be provided to evaluate the presence of suitable methodologies and elements for discussion to create a productive dialogue with tradition.

Therefore, the concepts of art and research into the artsⁱⁱ held by each of the players involved in the field of artistic production and exhibition do not necessarily have to coincide: artists, teachers, critics, managers, politicians, buyers and the general public will respond very differently to the question of what art is and what research is, or, better still, to the question about the artistic nature of a specific work or proposal, and the research that this work generates.

Independently of specific viewpoints, perspectives will be conditioned by the social function each one plays. Disagreements can be absolute, with condemned artists achieving public notoriety, through the unexpected discovery of unappreciated talent, in the major operatic and theatrical scandals or through the protests against acclaimed artistic proposals by large institutions which the media label as banal.

The art institution is not compact and therefore its criteria are as varied as the interests which it encompasses. As well as being non-compact, many of its regular *workers* come from other fields including journalism, finance, education, cultural management, politics, etc. It could be argued that these intersections of employment and interests have been gradually forged over time in a more or less logical way while the intersection with the university has come about more as a political imposition. This is in fact the case. However, it is also true that the evolution of artistic practice

throughout history has been largely conditioned in a direct way by a wide range of political and economic impositions. Is it indeed possible to think of any practice being outside the influence of politics? On the other hand, we can also consider that the presence of an artistic education in a ghetto, clearly differentiated from education within other disciplines of knowledge, constituted an anachronism which demanded shock treatment. Once universities stopped being the ground for speculation and pure science and opened their doors to eminently practical disciplines such as engineering, teaching, business management, nursing and sport, why continue marginalising some of the practices which, in their origin, were in fact part of the essence of universities? In the same way that practical thought has gradually won ground in the social and employment field, erasing the boundaries between theory and practice, the university has also adapted to this new situation, having accepted the uselessness of speculation with no practical basis, together with the risk associated with practice without reflection.

In view of how other disciplines have entered the higher education system, it is not far-fetched to imagine how alliances, affinities and intersections of interest may arise between each of the stratum involved in the art institution, among them the artists themselves. These alliances may derive from a meeting of social and economic interests. However, they may also derive from a shared understanding of artistic practice as research, perhaps linked to the social sciences, which would result in a field of endeavour (as found in other areas) less exposed to the market and linked to an objective search for knowledge.

On this basis artistic research has no reason to adapt to the formats and criteria assumed by the academic research system or the academy without questioning the radical subjectivity of creative work. It is a case of breaching the gap between academy and art in which each of these is called to rethink the inherited conceptions of the self and other. For art the first condition is to abandon the paradigm of genius, contested throughout the 20th century, although still present in the conception of the artistic world and in the self-understanding of artists as being beyond rules. The use of intuition, analogy, impact or the absurd in many cases situates the artist, as observed by Schopenhauer, “outside the principle of causality”, although it is not this that liberates them from all rules or makes them immune to a critical reaction to their work or an intuitive recreation of their proposals. It is undeniable that artistic “geniuses” exist, i.e. those who are “brilliant”, capable of discoveries or courageousness that is unimaginable for the majority of their counterparts. Such brilliance (always relative, never substantial) does not give them a different status; it does not place them outside of the system but rather gives them a relevant and very visible standing in the system. Not even they escape from the structure in which artistic production takes place and circulates. The *insubstantiality* of genius is also the *insubstantiality* of art. “Art” is an abstraction derived from the observation of artistic qualities in different works, actions or even attitudes. “Artistic”, as John Dewey observed in 1934, is an adjective meaning to affect human practices and experiences to very varying degrees. No school or research centre will teach students how to become an artistic genius such as Tadeusz Kantor or Merce Cunningham. However, schools can

teach methodologies which relate to artistic practice that go beyond the learning of technique alone. Teaching artistic practice methodologies can only be achieved through research into the processes of creation. Artistic research should therefore serve to increase the level of transmission of creative methodologies beyond that of the transmission of technique (while still maintaining this practice).

The extreme opposite of unique and one-off genius is the scientific presumption of the repeatability of an experiment which, in many cases, has been used as an obstacle to the understanding of artistic creation as valid and scientific research. The generation of an artistic practice (whether a work, image, process, situation or moment) escapes systemisation and generalisation and therefore repeatability is an invalid criteria in defining the scientific in the arts. The experimental environment in natural sciences is controlled, quantified and manipulated to precisely measure the invariability of conditions, thereby ensuring the repeatability of the experience. The phenomenon of culture, and even more so that of creation, cannot be simplified and stripped of its other inherent qualities as it is precisely these nuances of reality, the particular characteristics of the local and individual, which largely contribute to giving meaning to a work of art. However, this does not mean that all levels of objectivity must be renounced. It instead indicates the need to find appropriate parameters. Therefore, far from mimicking the fields of experimental and human sciences, what is more appropriate is to propose parameters and criteria which correspond to the specific nature of artistic procedures, assuming a critical position with respect to the institution itself and the self conception of the artist.

Scientific objectivity can be accepted as an apt criteria provided that it is understood in the sense stipulated by Niels Bohr (Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, 2005: 9-19), i.e. that it is not based on an impossible search for universality or arbitrary repeatability which abstracts and simplifies its objective or the conditions in which it exists, but instead is focused primarily on the communicability of research. The emphasis falls therefore not on the objectivity understood as universal but on the intersubjectivity that enables dialogue. In the case of phenomena that do not permit a clear distinction between subject and object, the possibility of taking research to the arena of public scientific discussion cannot be founded on a simplification of its essential characteristics to achieve objectivity, but on opening its language to critique and discussion in the heart of a community. This would be a second aspect of the conception of art inherited from romanticism which would have to be renounced to admit the scientific dimension of artistic research: a practice that escapes discussion. Dance in particular has been traditionally considered as a practice which is contrary to language, associated with the indescribable, ephemeral and intangible; this prejudice, which is particularly evident in German expressionist dance, has led to the understanding of this discipline as knowledge which is exclusively physical, related more with emotional and irrational experience than with the cognitive (Klein, 2007: 25-36). Dance, on the other hand, as with any artistic practice (and unlike the actual act of creation) enables placement, analysis and focus. When we speak of teaching arts or research into arts, we speak of the practice

and not of the creative act itself (whether this exists or always exists with the same relevance in any artistic work). Theatre or dance, as with any artistic practice, undoubtedly represents forms of knowledge which create a dialogue both with tradition and contemporariness, with the sciences and the rest of the arts, with everyday knowledge and with technique; in addition, artistic practices can be situated and broken down into tools, methods, formulas and work habits. This generates a context which enables discussion in the heart of the community and which legitimises the validity of research. The artist, in fact, is rarely alone. The artist in solitude does not produce art but produces a formal advance of an aesthetic experience which, in order to take place, requires multiple productive-receptive collaborations. Artistic practices, even those of the “solitary” artist occur firstly within an institution, determined by a tradition and marked by a circuit, both of which are disputable, confrontable and permeable, but in no case invisible or insignificant. Secondly, they form part of a network (cultural, intellectual, artistic and scientific) which offers a wide range of exchanges and collaborations as well as debates, controversy and antagonism: the positive and negative relationship are two equally valid and inevitable forms of placement in this network. Finally, artistic practice is situated in a particular historical, social and political context or moves between one context and another, exploring and feeding on contradictions, problems and interventions which are in constant supplyⁱⁱⁱ.

Artistic research, as a dimension of the creative process, is necessarily unique and subjective, although this does not make it undiscerning or unquestionable. It is therefore fundamental to offer access to its processes so that they can be questioned and submitted to criticism to be evaluated and weighed. The process is thereby not understood as an unquestionable and strictly unique experience which impedes debate, but above all as a space for negotiation, a space in which discussion and controversy are fundamental work instruments and in which openings and indetermination are not seen as failings in the system but instead as advantages. The question radiates therefore in finding the appropriate mediums to open, expose and transmit the stages of development of research to enable them to be commonly negotiated within the framework of the artistic research community. In addition, another relevant method to guarantee the communicability of the artistic process consists of exploring the environment in which research is carried out, localising its historical context and determining the position assumed by the creator. It is precisely through a collective effort that a critical environment is achieved, a context in which a fruitful and dynamic situation can arise between different research projects, individuals and work groups. In this sense, situating artistic research in an appropriate environment is fundamental: the task of research centres and higher education centres consists of presenting themselves as archives where tradition and access to productive and collaborative networks and work contexts can be tracked to enable critique of the wider social and political contexts in which they exist, as well as provoking reflection on a daily basis.

On the other hand, should they also be places of production or simply spaces for the circulation and occurrence of processes? In the same way that the uniqueness of the artist is no

longer interpreted within the sphere of genius, the uniqueness of the work, whether an object, score or duration should not be interpreted within the sphere of the exceptionality of the master and the absolute work. The artistic experience is temporal. It is not static but dynamic. It is not simultaneous but processual. Research, to be coherent with experience and practice, is therefore thought of as research into the process and never into a closed object. In other terms, the field of artistic research is the process of creation. Research becomes more interesting with a higher level of previous specification of the process. Therefore, when research is associated with a process which leads to, for example, an installation or a production, it is hoped that this action or production satisfy the research needs at that moment and that research into this process thereby remains a paraphrasing of the installation or production. When, on the other hand, research is associated with the process of creation that surpasses the production of an artistic piece in a specific format, it can then offer something which each of the artistic productions do not achieve individually.

The following proposals arise from this reflection: 1. Research is seen as a process which transcends specific results. 2. Research does not conclude with the presentation of a product but with the acquisition of knowledge based on practice. 3. Disciplinary formats are not the only elements in which research into the arts can take place: an exhibition is not the only format for a visual artist and a production is not the only format valid for a performing artist. An action, book, conference or durational piece are valid formats if, within them, knowledge can arise from the practice.

Does this mean that production, the product or the work are excluded from artistic research? In no case is this true; it is simply about seeing them as moments, privileged moments of the codified or potential experience, moments which are in fact necessary. Therefore, with the same conviction that we defend the process as a space for privileged reflection for artistic research, we condemn the conversion of processes into objects, i.e. the consideration of the process as an end in itself, separating it from the moments of formulation and therefore of transmission of knowledge which is essential to research, of the spaces for dialogue but also indispensable to enable the creation of an aesthetic experience. Research into the arts is a dimension of artistic practice, rather than being separate from it. A distinction is made with regard to production but this is not considered as two different types of practice, but rather two dimensions of the same practice. Obviously we are not differentiating object and process in aesthetic terms as there are numerous works that are presented as duration or process (from the Fluxus practices to the relational), but instead making a distinction in discursive terms: by process here we understand the mobilisation of the three factors with which the uniqueness of the artist, the work and the receiver is related: tradition, network and context.

It is true that there is a parallel between the logic that leads to the condemnation of an artistic object or a stage representation as a means of resisting the commoditisation of the aesthetic experience and the emphasis on the processual to conceive artistic research within the context of the university. This emphasis would not only respond to greater facility to reflect on methodologies

but also defend the model based on the search for and the circulation of knowledge and the maintenance of a critical attitude. Unlike a higher education system which is dependent on the logic of capital, i.e. on the training of professionals who are quickly incorporated into the productive system, we refer to higher education which integrates experimentation into the exploration of the unknown, questioning the real and the design of holistic models of understanding society and our environment which do not necessarily coincide with those derived from pragmatism or functional interest. Faced with the application of work methodologies and research instruments which present and communicate previously determined results in accordance with logic leading to a known and expected result which is efficiency achieved, the optimum scenario would be to have the freedom to choose between a diversity of methods and tools, or even invent them based on a commitment to the specific needs inherent in each particular research case. In this sense, the methodologies offered to artists by universities or academies should not be restrictive or inhibitive but instead promote a creative response and encourage the production of new methods which are appropriate to the specific field of research^{iv}.

This point defines the fundamental challenge presented by the complexity of artistic research within the academic or university context: there currently coexist different research models whose ontological, epistemological and practical bases are at times immeasurable or even contradictory and which reflect the difficulty of justifying an education in the arts; the ambiguity of the current situation with respect to defining and implementing artistic research in higher education centres is undeniable. However, such disparity between criteria should not be considered as being problematic as this open and indeterminate nature is precisely what creates a privileged environment capable of promoting a critical dialogue (Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, 2005: 24). Such a variety of approximations in the framework of a public and open debate are in fact the mechanism which create an optimum situation to enable articulation of the foundations, methods and objectives of artistic research and justify the complexity of the objective under analysis. Artistic research calls into question the scientific methods currently considered valid in such a way that it assumes a role of a generating a mechanism for the renewal of academic and scientific disciplines.

Without this implying that artistic practices should be treated as being exceptional with respect to other practices^v, there is no doubt that they can significantly contribute to the transformation of knowledge and to the permanent transfer of information and experiences between the academic field and other social spheres. Juan Luis Moraza observed how, despite its epistemological, anaxiomatic, abductive, performative and interdisciplinary nature, artistic practice is able to exercise an intermediary function between awareness and intellectual knowledge^{vi}.

This function which Moraza reserves for artistic practices can be especially applied to the practice of performing arts where the differentiation between theory and practice becomes increasingly less necessary and, as observed by Virno, human discussion is primarily conceived as *praxis* (action) rather than *poiesis* (production) or *episteme* (knowledge), with *praxis* essentially requiring both innovation (in the words of Hannah Arendt, “beginning anything again without

requiring a causal chain”) and performativity (“show oneself to oneself and to others”) (Virno, 2005).

Practice is in itself a discourse. It is not necessary to invent alternatives to propose its integration into the university sphere. It is not necessary to invent translations to foreign tongues or focus on analysable products. Research into the arts is not something that works outside of or in parallel to practice but is a dimension of the same practice. Therefore the function of academies and universities which are responsible for officially opening spaces for research is to create the conditions that ensure the development and continuity of the work of good artists.

Translated by Lara Duke

ⁱ See the text by Marijke Hoogenboom, “If artistic research is the answer – what is the question? Some notes on a new trend in art education” in this volume.

ⁱⁱ On the subject of different types of research, see the text by Henk Borgdoff, “The debate about research into the arts” (in the same volume) which also establishes a state of the question on the theme as well as offering some definitive proposals to establish a specific nature for artistic research within the university context.

ⁱⁱⁱ In *Art as Experience* (1934), John Dewey insists on situating art within its social context, not with the intention of depriving it of its autonomy, but in an attempt to avoid the risk of exact definition and incommunication aimed at a correct understanding of art from the past (especially that from pre-modern periods) as well as of artistic practice. That art is foremost experience and not language brings about firstly the question of the relationship that artistic practice facilitates, a relationship that is not primarily univocal (in terms of the issuer-receiver) but rather multilateral: a work of art is only a moment in a complex system of relationships which are established between the individual, the artistic institution and the social context, as well as between the relative (past), the effective situation (present) and later readings (future). Modernist art arose from the creation of this isolated context of day-to-day experience called museum. Theatre, based on its performative nature, maintained a closer relationship to social experience and hence has been more conditioned by it. However, paradoxically, in recent decades, at the same time as the theatres moved to break down their walls, theatre tended towards solidification of these walls. Art, however, cannot be isolated from communal spaces and negotiation of coexistence.

^{iv} In this sense we defend the figure of the researcher-creator assimilated by Paul Feyerabend’s *epistemological anarchist*; a creator who uses different research areas and instruments without concern for the consistency or the observation of a pre-established method, an opportunist who uses different areas of traditionally incompatible knowledge, disregarding disciplinary boundaries and focusing on the essential *abundance of the real*. See Feyerabend (2009), *¿Por qué no Platón?*, Tecnos: Madrid, pp. 9-16 y Feyerabend (2001), *Conquest of Abundance*, Paidós: Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Mexico.

^v “Whatever the specialisation of the economic circuits they enter, artistic practices do not constitute an “exception” with regard to other practices. They represent and reconfigure the divisions of these activities.” See Jacques Rancière, *La división de lo sensible, Estética y política*. Consorcio Salamanca, 2002, p. 78.

^{vi} Juan Luis Moraza, presentation on “Research content”, on 8 November 2007 at the conference entitled *A research degree in fine arts: strategies and models (2007-2015)*, organised by the University of Vigo. <http://tv.uvigo.es/video/1831>. Moraza indicates other possible contributions from artistic practices to the university project: the tradition of radicalness and iconoclasm, the ability to integrate complex intersubjective matters, communicative efficiency, awareness in the registering of problems, emotion and dialogue.

Bibliographic references

Feyerabend, Paul (2009), *¿Por qué no Platón?*, Tecnos: Madrid

Feyerabend (2001), *La conquista de la abundancia*, Paidós: Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Mexico.

Hannula, Mika / Suoranta, Juha / Vadén, Tere (2005), *Artistic research – theories, methods and practices*, ArtMonitor: Gothenburg.

Dewey, John (2008), *Arte como experiencia*, Paidós: Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Mexico.

Klein, Gabriele (2007), "Dance in a knowledge society", en Sabine Gehm / Pirkko Husemann, Katharina von Wilcke (eds.), *Knowledge in Motion. Perspectives of Artistic and Scientific Research in Dance*, Transcript: Bielefeld.

Jacques Rancière (2002), *La división de lo sensible, Estética y política*. Consorcio Salamanca: Salamanca.

Virno, Paolo (2005), *Cuando el verbo se hace carne. Lenguaje y naturaleza humana*, Traficantes de sueños: Madrid.

Published in *Cairon. Revista de estudios de danza*, nº 13, Madrid, 2010, p. 5-15.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).