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If artistic research is the answer – what is the question? Some notes on a new trend in art education

by Marijke Hoogenboom

The Netherlands have always been easy in adapting to recent developments or even trends - in cultural politics as much as in education. We seem to be willing to change, or not even establish traditions, if the sign of the time is asking for something else: for new features, new structures, new funds.

Specifically in art education the classical academy (and with it the old master-student relationship) has already been abandoned in the late seventies and be replaced by an objectified school system, transferable curricula and shared assessment criteria.

However, by giving up the dominant idea of art education as an incomparable *Meisterschule*, we have opened up the academy and created the possibility for multiple differences between study courses that co-exist within a well-defined frame of reference. In the performing arts for example, significant experimental movements have been able to enter the educational system and have been the driving force behind unique pedagogical adventures like the *School for New Dance Developments* or the *Mime School* (both meanwhile functioning as official BA programmes at the Amsterdam School of the Arts). The innovative and independent performing arts scene in the Netherlands still owes its quality and vitality to these schools and to the opportunity they provide to radically link education and contemporary art practice.

Of course there are not only artistic, but also strong political and economic forces that are regularly calling for renewal, or at least for evaluation and repositioning of existing modes. In the mid nineties, just before the Bologna process left its marks in higher education, the Netherlands witnessed a short period, where the demand to tie up educational paths was not yet institutionalized. Probably in order to prepare for Bologna, or simply out of hesitation, the Dutch government was willing to support a few postgraduate institutes that would develop an autonomous educational practice over a longer period of time, beyond new rules and regulations and beyond fashionable (European) policies.

I was lucky enough to co-found one of these institutes, the international training programme

for performing arts, DasArts.¹ For me, DasArts is an example for the productive use of a political situation and the resistance to operate in reaction or anticipation of a trend. But how? DasArts has for more than fourteen years functioned as an independent and truly pioneering art school, dedicated to the development of young professional talents. In the process of creating an institution from scratch, DasArts has moved on forward on a journey characterized by a refusal to repeat what is commonly accepted educational practice. Without a fixed curriculum, teaching staff or classes, it forced it self to discover again and again what 'postgraduate theatre training' could be. A discovery made by doing, based on risk, uncertainty and surprise. Adherence to a plan was never part of the institute's strategy. DasArts continuously has insisted upon the urgent importance of going beyond the academy, of working as a pedagogical laboratory which is not only about teaching art, but also about the art of teaching.

Without telling the story of DasArts (which is not the subject of this essay), there is much in the original mentality of the enterprise that I would like to remember today - today that we, academics, educators and policy makers, are finding ourselves in another world wide growth industry, the growth industry of artistic research.²

Undoubtedly, with the higher education reforms occurring now all over continental Europe, there is a hype about artistic research. Consistent with the Bologna process and the establishment of three-cycle structure (bachelors, masters, doctorate), 'research' has been introduced into areas of higher education that used to focus mainly on professional training. It has become a central task in former polytechnics, Fachhochschulen and universities of applied sciences, including institutes of higher arts education. Looking at the many new opportunities for artistic research that have come into existence recently, it is no secret that none of them have been initiated or even been called for by artists themselves. Key programmes like the *Norwegian Research Fellowships in the Arts*, the *Austrian Program for Artistic Research*, the Swedish studies degrees at doctoral level, the *Belgian Associations*, or the Dutch *lectorate* scheme are pure state interventions. The issue is whether Bologna, and the introduction of research, is a dictate and threat coming from outside art and arts

¹ De Amsterdamse School Advanced Research in Theatre and Dance Studies, founded by Ritsaert ten Cate in 1994. Since 2009 DasArts is acknowledged as an international Master of Theatre (MTh). www.dasarts.nl

² One of the most comprehensive examples is the Norwegian Programme for Research Fellowships in the Arts. www.kunststipendiat.no But recently also the Austrian Science Fund has created a new Program for Artistic Research. www.fwf.ac.at The most prominent institutions for artistic research in Flanders are the IvOK (Institute for Practice Based Research in the Arts) at the K.U. Leuven and the Arts Platform at the Universitaire Associatie Brussel (University Association of Brussels). <http://associatie.kuleuven.be/eng/ivok/index.htm>, www.vub.ac.be/english/infoabout/associatie/platform.html The Swedish Ministry of Education and Research has introduced fine and applied arts studies degrees at doctoral level to enable doctoral arts studies to develop on their own terms. www.sweden.gov.se/education In the Netherlands the first opportunity to obtain a PhD in visual arts is provided by the Faculty for the Arts at the University of Leiden, in collaboration with the Royal Academy for the Arts, The Hague. www.phdarts.eu

education (copying the existing Anglo-Saxon model), or whether it is a chance and a challenge: to create even more diversity within higher education in Europe and to facilitate talented artists by government, to do state-funded research at the highest level like their colleagues in academia. So let's take a step back from a general tendency to a more local point of view: the specific approach of the Netherlands, and even more local, the approach of the Amsterdam School of the Arts.

The last six years we have witnessed interesting and controversial developments in the educational field in the Netherlands. Alongside traditional teaching practice, a series of research groups (or *lectorate* as they are known in Dutch) are being funded. The express purpose of these groups is to expand and refresh current educational practice at art schools with current artistic research projects. The resulting initiatives – and particularly the work undertaken by my own group *Art Practice and Development* – do not in any way aim to imitate traditional academic models. Rather, a great variety of artists are invited to further develop their practical proposals and test out their individual methods.³

Beyond Bologna, these research groups have been a response to a worrying development at art schools and universities of applied sciences, which are increasingly defining themselves according to the current labour market and dedicating too much of their application-oriented teaching to concrete vocational training. In theatre for example, this means that courses in stage direction, acting, dance or dramaturgy become stuck in traditional occupational images, barely contributing to contemporary developments, let alone provoking innovative art forms. Teaching is based on that which has already proved its value and therefore belongs to the canon of knowledge generally accepted as necessary to practising a certain profession or discipline within familiar contexts. In the worst-case scenario, students' abilities are only judged according to vocational rather than artistic practice, a minor distinction that in my opinion is of fundamental significance in the reinterpretation of higher education in the performing arts.⁴

This trend was of particular concern to the Dutch Ministry of Education and Science because: -it has led to an alarming move away from academic discourse within Holland's dual education system (i.e. the strict separation of universities on the one hand, and art schools and universities of applied sciences, on the other);

³ The research group *Art Practice and Development* was founded at the end of 2003. It operates on an inter-faculty basis, and with no fixed boundary between the school and its professional environment. Besides individual research projects, it has an artist-in-residence programme and a great many joint projects with venues, festivals and faculties. www.lectoraten.ahk.nl

⁴ Ute Meta Bauer's collection of essays on new artistic approaches to higher artistic education is still very topical: Ute Meta Bauer (ed.), *Current Approaches on Higher Artistic Education*, Vienna 2001.

- art schools and universities of applied sciences may not be able to stand up to the qualitative comparison within Europe required by the Bologna Agreement;
- publicly funded teaching is being restricted to the predominant professional operating systems and making a negligible contribution to social innovation.

The fear was of a downright paralysis of educational practice, insufficient ties to the contemporary art scene, widespread isolation from international developments as well as alienation from a social, economic and cultural reality undergoing dramatic change. Accordingly, the aim of the later research offensive was formulated very firmly and established as an *engine of innovation*, a dynamic mix of teaching, research and practice. (Although I restrict myself to the arts here, this measure naturally applied to the entire spectrum of universities of applied sciences and the most varied faculties from the fields of technology, economics, education science, health, the media etc.).⁵ Ideally, art schools would be forced to undergo comprehensive upgrading (despite not having the right to award doctorates, a privilege reserved for the universities) and develop a very specific alternative which is slowly presenting a challenge to academic activity: for in the lively debate regarding applied, practice based or artistic research, in the Netherlands we have deliberately refrained from following the Anglo-Saxon model and made a conscious effort to maintain the differences between the education systems, preferring a productive coexistence of differing approaches.

When we started to create research groups at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, we were asking ourselves three main questions: How can we relate to the (institutional and theoretical) debate without getting corrupted by claims that are rather motivated by the political than by artistic developments? How can we learn from the artists' needs and ambitions and put their own sense of research centre stage? How can we create support structures for artistic research that are complementary to the existing structures in education and the professional field?

I am afraid that my personal answer to this complex challenge is rather simple and again and again originating from the absence of authority, or the absence of a curatorial approach. It is an approach 'without', without programme, without preconceived content, without telling artists what it is, without knowing why, how and for whom. And then: providing the opportunity.

For the debate, I wonder, why we have to battle so hard to theoretically legitimise artistic

⁵ For a complete overview of research groups at art schools and universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands see www.lectoren.nl

research - research in which art practice is central to the research process, and in which art practice is also partly the outcome of the research. On the one hand, the focus is on the type of research (and its relationship to art) as well as its knowledge content (and distinctiveness) in the light of existing and generally accepted research methods. The question is raised can artistic practice be considered research? And what is the subject of this research – the result or the process? Does not all art – or do not all creative processes – inherently have a research aspect? Must this process, for instance, have the scientific qualities of being systematic, integrated within a context, methodologically comprehensible and verifiable? And must (written) publication make it accessible to the general public? Or is this objectification replaced by a certain subjectification, shaped by the experience of the artist whose work it is?

The argument is repeated when it comes to the issue of knowledge. Again, the distinction is made between theoretical and practical knowledge, with synonyms for practical knowledge such as embodied, tacit or implicit knowledge. Knowledge, therefore, which presupposes a fundamentally different way of understanding. What kinds of knowledge and understanding are embodied in artworks and creative processes, and how can these be explored and articulated in artistic research? Does that mean that these types of cognition cannot be compared with other disciplines or supplemented with other approaches? And last but not least: Should artistic research even get involved in a debate on exclusivity (of differences)?⁶

The research group *Art Practice and Artistic Development* is specifically concerned with the questions, methods and themes that artists approach us with if they wish to combine them with research opportunities. We work, so to say 'bottom up' and assume that artists have long had their own, equivalent means of knowledge production, that they have appropriated research practices and that they should not necessarily be subjected to the conditions of the academic establishment's knowledge system. From the first *Bureau de Recherche* set up by the Surrealists, to Peter Brook's *Centre International de Recherche Theatrale* (CIRT), from Brecht's *Versuchen* to James Lee Byars' *World Question Center*⁷ there is a long tradition of lively artistic research which continues to this day, a testament to the need of artists to learn more about their own profession and to make their findings available to others. Artistic research has its own history, present and future. Correspondingly, as cultural critic Sarat

⁶ My colleague Henk Borgdorff, who leads the research group *Art Theory and Research* at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, has provided a very comprehensive account of the international debate on artistic research and the meta-theoretical discourse. www.ahk.nl/lectoraten/onderzoek/debate.pdf

⁷ As part of a ritual performance James Lee Byars incessantly asks fellow artists what question they ask themselves: "What question contributes to your own evolving sense of knowledge?" www.edge.org/questioncenter.html

Maharaj concluded in a detailed essay on *Artistic Research*: “Most of us must feel we have been doing it for years, without quite calling it like that...”⁸

Obviously artistic research here is based on an understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts. After all, there are no art practices that are not saturated with experiences, histories and beliefs; and conversely there is no theoretical access to, or interpretation of, art practice that does not partially shape that practice into what it is. Concepts and theories, experiences and understandings are interwoven with art practices and, partly for that reason, art is always discursive. Research in the arts might, if we want to continue to create that specificity at all, seek to articulate some of this embodied knowledge throughout the creative process and in the art object. But has not the American dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton articulated this constant tension between conscious thought and sensory movement already? “When we use body/mind we are just trying to deal with the fact that there seems not to be a word which contains both consciousness and all of sensation and the ability to move and create sensation or to move yourself and create sensations by the way you are dancing ... [Then] the mind can be seen as being partly consciousness and partly physical.”⁹

Within the works of my own research group, the story of the dance theatre ensemble Emio Greco|PC is an interesting example, as over the last few years it has consciously expanded its focus beyond the production or reworking of old plays. The ensemble has, on the one hand, already significantly contributed to public debates about contemporary dance in its so-called *Dance & Discourse Salons*. It has done so for a long time and on an international basis. But on the other hand, EG|PC has already been around for more than ten years: veteran protagonist Bertha Bermudez has left the stage (but not the ensemble), and the choreographer and dancer Emio Greco is no longer able to perform in all the plays. The group now has to decide whether and in what way it can communicate to a younger generation and how it can maintain its repertoire. This is a problem the group shares with many contemporary choreographers and dancers.¹⁰

As artists-in-residence at the Amsterdam School of the Arts in 2004-05, EG|PC finally got the long sought after opportunity to examine the topic of *Transfer* in an educational environment. This involved teaching their own methods of training and parts of their choreographies as

⁸ Sarat Maharaj, Unfinishable Sketch of 'An Unknown Object in 4D': scenes of artistic research. In: Annette W. Balkema, Henk Slager (ed.), *Artistic Research*, Amsterdam/New York 2004, page 39.

⁹ Sophie Lycouris, *Destabilising dancing: tensions between the theory and practice of improvisational performance*, PhD thesis, University of Surrey, September 1996, page 91.

¹⁰ The acronym PC stands for the director/choreographer Pieter C. Scholten, also a founding member and, along with Greco, artistic director of the ensemble right from the start. The work of Emio Greco|PC, their salons and the Accademia Mobile are fully documented on: www.emiogreco.nl, www.ickamsterdam.nl

well as discussing all the issues bound up with the subject in three consecutive salons with national and international theorists, dramaturges, critics and students. Direct results of this collective undertaking include the collaborative research project *Inside Movement Knowledge*, and the *Accademia Mobile* – the company’s mobile training centre – which has been on tour since 2006.

For EG|PC, the question of imparting and the need to gain an explicit view of one’s own art is indissolubly bound up with the dilemma of dance as an ephemeral art, the material nature of human existence and its continual disappearance. As dance theorist André Lepecki asked in the very first salon: “Where does dance come to rest after it has been done? Where does dance move to and how is it revived in the memory during writing?”¹¹

If the memory of and the search for the traces left by experienced dance are to go beyond the written word, other media become necessary and the search will go beyond the actual performance to include the artistic process involved in its creation, which is even less visible than the final product. Does this mark the territory for artistic research? And even the territory for artists affiliated with academy-bound research groups? “Once the performance is over, all that is at stake in the process of making, all investment in the process as well as the post-production life of the work, tends to fall into oblivion. Neither festivals nor theatre venues make the effort of presenting the work besides the performance as its actualized product. The knowledge acquired, the tools developed in the working process and in collaboration, artists carry on with themselves. Rare are the opportunities where the knowledge of the artists themselves, rational and methodological as well as subjective and experiential, can be shared with a wider public.”¹²

Inside Movement Knowledge is an attempt to create a particular system of recording and transmitting the choreographic work of EG|PC, to safeguard its memory and understand and learn from its specific vocabulary and way of working. In the first phase, still during the residency, a documentary film was made about the systematically developed *Double Skin/Double Mind* workshop, which already contained significant elements of the later idea to create a complex digital resource in the form of an interactive installation, such as filmed dance movements, discursive descriptions of basic methodology (of dancers, choreographers and students, which are gathered in a glossary), as well as the edited and compiled presentation of years of teaching.¹³ The interdisciplinary project team departed from the assumption that the complex nature of dance cannot be adequately represented

¹¹ Ingrid van Schijndel, *Dance and Discourse, Reflections from the Practice: the Salon series of Emio Greco | PC*. In: *Company in School, Between experiment and heritage*, Amsterdam 2007, page 8.

¹² Igor Dobricic and Bojana Cvejic, *Before and After the Show: unfolding the working process: part of the cultural programme *Almost Real* of the Alcantara Festival*, Lisbon, June 2006. www.almostreal.org

¹³ *DoubleSkin/Double Mind*, a documentary film by Maite Bermudez, premiered at the Cinedans Festival in Amsterdam, July 2006.

with a single technology. On the contrary: all participants are acutely aware that no single means of recording and transmitting can do justice to what *their* dance actually is.

The installation therefore uses a variety of media and processes: Bertha Bermudez and Emio Greco have internalised the dance of the company and are the driving forces behind the project; Scott deLahunta, author and dance theorist is comparing four current experiments with the aim of producing distinctive *choreographic objects*;¹⁴ Frederic Bevilacqua is developing the *Gesture Analysis Program* at the Paris IRCAM Institute. Marion Bastien and Elian Mirzabekiantz are studying the well-known dance notation systems of Laban and Benesh; and finally Chris Ziegler, who was already involved in the production of Forsythe's CD-Rom *Improvisation Technologies* ten years ago, is responsible for bringing together all these different approaches in an iterative media design process.

Despite this wealth of subjects-specific research that has nurtured the development of the interactive installation of EG|PC, it is still worth questioning the extent to which *that what one does*, the physical sensations of the dancer, the mental notes or even the intention can actually be conveyed. William Forsythe has for his own research to represent the choreography of his piece *One Flat Thing Reproduced* limited the possibilities: "We are *not* trying to recreate the experience of the piece, or the genesis of the piece, it's not etymological, it's not archaeological, it's not historical, it's not any of that. It's simply about saying: watch space become occupied with complexity."¹⁵

Particularly in dance we might assume there to be some contradiction in attempting to express artistic processes and the immediacy of performance through mechanical means of documentation. On this point, the theorist Susan Melrose puts forward an interesting proposal for a performance archive. An attempt to reconcile the inside with the outside, the material with the discursive and the situational with the trace.

The kind of archive Melrose is proposing is not an archive that conserves something that would otherwise be lost. It is not an archive that comes *after* the artwork itself has been completed. Melrose claims that all works, simply because they are compositions, choreographies or plays, already contain their own archives. "Because it is a spatio-temporal-organization, blocked in some sense, to permit repetition and transmission."¹⁶ The time of the archive is present at all stages of the artistic process, and, in the opinion of Melrose, is also the medium that completes the circle and generates new artworks and new

¹⁴ Alongside EG|PC deLahunta is also working on comparable projects with Wayne McGregor, Siobhan Davies and William Forsythe, see: Scott deLahunta and Norah Zuniga Shaw, *Constructing Memories: Creation of the choreographic resource*. In: Ric Allsopp and Scott deLahunta (ed.), *Performance Research: Digital Resources*, Vol. 11, No 4. 2007.

¹⁵ Ibid. The research project is called Synchronous Objects, <http://synchronousobjects.osu.edu/>

¹⁶ Susan Melrose, Transcription of a paper for the conference *Performance as Knowledge*, ResCen, Middlesex University, May 2006. www.mdx.ac.uk/rescen/archive/PaK_may06/PaK06_transcripts4_1.html

creative processes. “There is the time before making the work (when it is thought about, in some manner or another); the times of making itself; the time of finishing, and the time of the *finished work*, when it has emerged, and been identified as such, and – so to speak – put *out there*. And then comes the time of the archive, which tends, explicitly or implicitly, formally to thematise and allow reflection on time past and allow that effect of breaking and picking up again.”¹⁷

The second phase of *Inside Movement Knowledge* is completed with the making of the documentary film, a publication and the prototype of the interactive installation.¹⁸ In the third phase, which has already begun with new additions to the team and new institutional partners, the project is devoted to offer the installation as an experimental tool to trigger new research issues (around corporal literacy, memory and technology) and to explore how means of recording and transmitting not only serve to analyse and document works of art, but can also function as a type of “real-time feedback” (Scott deLahunta) and flow directly into the creative process again.¹⁹

All this is a big step to take and will undoubtedly present a great challenge to the ensemble and the event-structure of our investigation. Artistic research is not a one-way street. If we want to take the potential of such ventures seriously, we have to continue expanding interdisciplinary and cross-institutional cooperation between teaching, research and artistic practice. Here at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, that at least is the belief we have come to.

To conclude, I would like to make a heartfelt plea to embrace the growing opportunities for artist-driven research initiatives in order to allow professional artists to keep nurturing their practice, to challenge the academy to expand its structures and to finally create more diversity (in modes of thinking and doing) that will prevent art schools from adapting to the uniformity of ‘knowledge production’, the Bologna process is promising.

But the question we might need to ask ourselves is to what extent are we willing to be modest and to resist requirements that prescribe formats and aims. Requirements that suggest *how* one needs to know. A more open approach to research in the arts could reverse the way in which application and assessment has started to function. Not the artist should be in the position to legitimise his work according to a standardized procedure or to

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Capturing Intention*. Essays, documentary, DVD-ROM, interactive Installation, Amsterdam 2007.

¹⁹ For the next two years *Inside Movement Knowledge* (IMK) has received the special RAAK funding by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. It is coordinated by the research group Art Practice & Development in collaboration with EGJPC, Netherlands Media Art Institute, Department of Media and Culture Studies University of Utrecht, and the Dance Departments of the Amsterdam School of the Arts. www.insidemovementknowledge.net

articulate him self primarily in words (verbalising field, subject, objectives, method, process, outcomes and contribution to a research community). If artists - as doctoral students or fellows - would deliberately be invited to speak in the medium of their choice and to show us what artistic research could be, we would obviously create a new situation for the panels and juries to invent other ways of reading, interpretation, and discussion than those required by an academic text. To impose a format or a medium on the artist is to fail to recognize the potentiality of his work and to neglect the chance for more imagination in art education. If our efforts are focussed on knowledge and understanding (or on *Entwicklung und Erschliessung* as the Austrian initiative claims) we might be trapped: There is no art practice without blind spots. Total insight and transparency of creative processes is impossible and probably not even desirable. What if artistic research is not situated within the world of knowledge and understanding, but within good old avantgarde-traditions, where the singular artist seeks for insecurity and for an ongoing questioning of his findings and his aesthetic and social position? What if we don't want to know? If artistic research would happily include the right not to know.

Marijke Hoogenboom became Professor of the suprafaculty research group Art Practice and Artistic Development at the Amsterdam School of the Arts in 2003. She has been one of the architects of DasArts since its foundation as the first and, up to now, only international MA theatre training programme in the Netherlands. Hoogenboom is a member of the Grants Committee of the Prince Bernard Cultural Fund, and shares responsibility for international policy at the Dutch Council for Culture. She is an in-demand speaker, moderator and consultant in the fields of the arts and art education, in the Netherlands and abroad. In September 2008 she received the Marie-Kleine Gartman Pen for artists and theatre commentators from the Dutch Stage Association.