The unavoidable openness of artistic research

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Abstract. This contribution investigates the possibilities of communicating artistic research without minimizing the multi-interpretability of the artwork and without having to adopt a philosophical vision – to be applied to the art and the research - as a starting point. The archival model, the rhizome model, and the contingency model are highlighted as viable possibilities. The models and the search for these models are applied to the music and other artistic domains.

Keywords. Artistic research, artistic research versus philosophy, openness in the communication of research results.

Resumen. Esta contribución investiga las posibilidades de informar sobre la investigación artística sin minimizar la multi-interpretabilidad de la obra y sin tener que adoptar una visión filosófica -que se aplicará al arte y a la investigación- como punto de partida. El modelo de archivo, el modelo de rizoma, y el modelo de contingencia se destacan como las posibilidades viables. Los modelos y la búsqueda de estos modelos se aplican a la música y otros campos artísticos.

Palabras clave. La investigación artística, la investigación artística frente a la filosofía, la apertura en la comunicación de resultados de la investigación.

In the recent past, a great number of publications have paid attention to the body of knowledge generated through research in the arts. A variety of authors[1] have elaborated on different kinds of knowledge, discerning between on the one hand explicitable knowledge and on the other hand 'tacit' and 'embodied' knowledge, two kinds of knowledge that are hard or quite impossible to put into language. Other authors elaborated on the possibilities for communication these

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[1] Specifically:
BIGGS, Michael (ed.): "The concept of knowledge in art & design", in *Working Papers in Art & Design*, 2002.
BIGGS, Michael: "Learning from Experience: approaches of the experiential component of practice-based research", im *Forskning, Reflektion, Utveckling*, 2004.
CAZEAUX, Clive: "Inherently interdisciplinary: four perspectives on practice-based research", in *Journal of Visual Arts Practice 2*, 2008.
COBUSSEN, Marcel en Sligter, Jurrien: in the special issue dedicated to artistic research of the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory, vol 12, 1*, 2007.
SULLIVAN, Graeme: *Art Practice as Research. Inquiry in the Visual Art*, Sage Publications, London, in particular the chapter 'Visual Knowing', 2005.

types of knowledge have to offer. In this way, language as a means of communication of knowledge gained through artistic research was examined. At the same time, the question was raised whether other forms of communication (other than language) would not be better suited to help spread this kind of knowledge. Other studies sought to determine what the ratio is between artistic knowledge and the truth. All these attempts do indicate rather similar outcomes: the fact that the general norms for research are only partly applicable to artistic research. The lack of existing norms leaves matters either completely in the dark, the question pertaining the description, explicitation, and communication of knowledge unanswered, or makes that answers are being sought within the field of subjectivity, making connections –as much as possible- with the field of intersubjectivity.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that the excellent studies that are being referred to have almost all, without any exception, been written by theoreticians, and not by the artists themselves. These theoreticians position their opinions within the frame of, in the first place, philosophy and sociology, and psychology and anthropology in the second. It is not unimaginable, in this case, that the results of the artistic research run the risk of being moved even farther away from art and the research itself. If we agree that research in the arts or artistic research can be understood as being 'practise-based', then the subsequent question becomes fully justified: is it at all possible to approach the output of the artistic research, the knowledge that results from the artistic research and its subsequent communication thereof, through the practise of art itself? Is it possible, in that case, to remain as close to the domain of the artistic practise itself, leaving the field only for approaches from within directly related 'meta'-domains such as art history and aesthetics, or, in an absolute ultimate stage, general referential frames of a philosophical or sociological nature? It may seem slightly contradictory to the reader, that this attempt as well would be undertaken by a theoretician, but it is based on a decade of intense contacts held with artist-researchers in all disciplines, including architecture, which can be included into the domain of the arts on the basis of its underlying design fundament[2].

In an attempt to find an answer to the questions raised above we will consider the artwork itself as our starting point. The work of art is indeed the source of all 'knowledge' in the arts. The starting point will be historically framed through the well-known proposition that the high-quality art of the past has always been rooted in research, without there being any necessity for the explicitation of the research results other than through the realisation of the artwork itself. The work of art contained and still contains the whole outcome of the artistic process, which can be described as research and production combined. The realisation that, historically speaking, communication has always occurred

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[2] The author has developed, from 2002 onward, the research policy of the art departments of the K.U.Leuven Association. From 2006 to 2010, he was acting director of the Instituut voor Onderzoek in de Kunsten (Institute for Practice-based Research in the Arts), which was integrated into the Geassocieerde Faculteit Architectuur en Kunsten (Associated Faculty of Architecture and the Arts) early 2010.

through the artwork itself speaks in favour of those who hold the opinion that the outcome, the results of the artistic research or artistic knowledge, need not be explicitated at all. I do not, in this way, wish to take sides with those who seek an overly simplified solution by assuming that 'all art is research and every artist a researcher'. I do wish to emphasise that it is of course obvious that art would express, explicitate, and communicate its knowledge through its product. In line with the historical situation, we may add that in the past numerous, if not most, artists seldom have felt compelled to provide ample 'text and explanation' to their art. Their strongest argument was that they chose to communicate through a specific artistic discipline of choice, in which the work of art was left to speak for itself, without even the slightest word of explanation, without even a single textual sentence.

This historical phase has not yet ended; many artists still operate in its spirit. However, in the artistic field, the 'research' aspect has demanded, and received, increasingly more attention. Artistic research is not a phenomenon exclusive to the young 21st century; it has been very much present throughout a number of 20th century artistic movements. I do not mean to specifically refer to conceptual art, where the expression of ideas became increasingly more important, up to the point where the concept (or the research) would replace or coincide with the artwork itself. I would rather want to point to the aura of 'modernism' which has defined much of the 20th century and, in the same breath, the quest for 'originality' which has typified the individual artist 'genius' of the 19th century. The artist has to undertake research in order to become truly 'original' or 'modern'. He has to be aware of the scope of existing possibilities to work in a new and original fashion, oppose existing attitudes, be critical, and so on. Many 'modern' composers have written texts about their own music or their own aesthetic: not only Strawinsky, Cage, Boulez, Stockhausen, and Bernd Aloïs Zimmermann for instance, but Ives, Varèse, Lachenmann, and Rihm as well. These texts can definitely be understood as a self-justification of their modernist attitude but even more so as an expression of their unspoken desire to be better understood by their listeners, and hence appeal to a wider and more appreciative audience. The texts are in no way an excuse for the 'degree of difficulty' of the music, but they seek to explain how, and mainly why, the composer chose to work in a particular fashion. I believe that this kind of texts has little or nothing to do with the present situation of artistic research. The communication of research results and processes should formulate answers to specific research questions and is not a means to justify someone's personal artistic expression.

Even if the advent of the 21st century was characterised by many a 'post'-phenomenon in the myriad of disciplines that make up the entire artistic field, the concepts of originality and the quest for the new have not necessarily disappeared from the artistic 'credo'. Originality is now, however, to be found in areas that are very different from those in the past: the realisation that newness is a very relative concept, shifted importance to a form of originality that is to be found in novel combinations of existing elements, in humble additions to what already exists, in archive-oriented approaches to art, in new visions on art in the

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public space and the role of the artist in society, which is mainly the case for audiovisual, visual and new media-based art.

If research is presently given increasingly more attention, then a readjustment of the concept of communication is in order, and the artwork itself can no longer be seen as the one and only starting point. This attention for research promotes the belief that a clear research question must invariably yield a clear research answer. The starting point for the communication must in this sense include both the artwork itself and the research performed. This brings us to the more nuanced question: how can research results be conveyed through the communication of the artwork-research combination that underlies the creation of the artwork itself? Can we maintain that a maximum level of communication can be reached through the artwork itself, a maximum that requires only 'local' additional communication of research process-related input? Or is this combined communication impossible; should the existence of a rift, in which the communication of the research results is entirely different from the communication of the artwork itself, be recognised? Or are there many more combination possibilities between these two extremes? I would want to exclude the second extreme right away: if the communication of the research results has indeed nothing in common with the communication that originates in the artwork itself, then it would seem that the research is fully disconnected from the artwork that is its subject, more even: the artwork is not the result of the research or contradicts it. But it is also possible that the research yields a rich variety of results, to the point where the artist will only use a select number of them at a given point, reserving others for a possible future art production. This would also exclude the first extreme: the research results are entirely embedded within the artwork itself and can only be communicated through it. Artists for whom research is a significant part of their artistic process must be aware of the consequence of having to disclose their research findings to the public. This means that there is a need to investigate the degree to which the artwork differs from the research results, and similarly to what extent the artwork itself falls short in communicating the research results.

This immediately brings us to the core of a subsequent problem: a generally accepted characteristic of high-quality art is its multi-interpretability. A good work of art cannot be understood through one single approach or interpretation, it always remains partly concealed, impenetrable, and unknowable, and it provides new insights and approaches with every consecutive contemplation. On the opposite side, there is research with a preference for clear and unambiguous answers to precise questions, yielding research results that are either comprehensible, practical, and applicable elsewhere, or of a generic nature altogether. In a classical sense, this is known as the 'reproducibility', the 'controllability', and 'verifiability' of the research. It is not unimaginable that the research results, in all their unambiguousness, will affect the multi-interpretability of the artwork. It is inadmissible that research results would create a possibly narrowing effect in the process-product relation, a simplification leading towards an 'only true' significance of a particular work of

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art. Research, quite contrarily, should have an opening and widening effect on the artistic creation and the layered meanings an artist can infuse his work with.

A specific example can clarify what is meant by 'narrowing' and 'widening'. When someone asks whether the ideal interpretation of a piece of music exists, the answer will invariably be negative. But what if someone asked whether the ideal interpretation of a piece of music could be arrived at through artistic research? It is a fact that the study of the performer's interpretation takes central place in the research conducted in the music field. Through the research, the interpretation seeks to be authentic, 'true' to the intention of the composer, the context of the work, its origin, the spirit of the time. This research approach leans towards the assumption that one true and 'correct' interpretation must somehow exist. Once this true interpretation is found, described, and realised, all that is left for other performers to do, is to imitate it. Taking the idea of this 'ideal' even further: once the 'true' version is recorded on a carrier, will that then be the ultimate version to be copied forever? Is this an insane fantasy? Hopefully so, yet composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen had already explored ideas in this direction. For he presented recordings of his own compositions conducted by himself as models to other performers and suggested they follow these recordings as closely as possible. Research could in this sense have a narrowing effect, instead of striving for openness in the interpretation as an ideal. Still, performers find it rightfully important to have exchanges with living composers. As long as these are exchanges where the intentions of the composer and the insights of the performer are brought together, as long as that dialogue leaves the interpreter free in his creative approach without forcing him into one particular type of interpretation, then this can only enrich the open interpretation[3]. The necessity of these conversations is caused by the fact that the notation in the score, or the 'assignment' for the performer in any given notation system, is never entirely absolute. It is precisely the interpretative license of the performer that gives the medium of music its freedom and richness and guarantees non-repetition, which in turn allows every new performance to add new dimensions to the notated work. What is notated has to do with the conventional music notation of a particular era; the interpretation, however, should always be contemporary and innovative. The actual context in which a new interpretation comes into being is not the context of the origin of the composition, but the context in which the interpreter presently lives. This reasoning implies that the research into the interpretative potential of music may not be dictated by existing assumptions or the narrow vision of a composer, nor by imitation or restriction, but, quite contrarily, that it needs to continuously strive to safeguard the multi-interpretativity of what is noted, and consequently exploit it. Certain composers are very aware of this and have consciously stimulated the openness of the artwork through their research into alternative compositional methods. In this

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[3] In his doctoral thesis, Stefan Östersjö elaborates on this issue in quite a nuanced way. He analyses the changes in the relation between performer and composer through a number of conversations with composers whose works he studies and performs. ÖSTERSJÖ, Stefan (2008) Shut up 'n' play. Negotiating the Musical Work. *Doctoral Studies and Research in Fine and Performing Arts* 5. Malmö Academies of Performing Arts, Lund University, Malmö.

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way, the entire output of aleatoric music, from Boulez to Lutoslawski, can be explained in the fact that composers have given utmost importance to the non-(identical) repetition of their music, and have simultaneously stimulated interpreters into creative research by inviting them to continuously and actively seek out new and alternative performances. Another conscious choice that leans towards multi-interpretativity is the explicit non-finishing of a composition. In the case of Pierre Boulez, it is presently as good as certain that he will never finish a number of compositions, and that other works will exist in a variety of versions, without there ever being a single definitive one. The writing of various versions of a work, from identical musical material that appears to be self-generating (which can only be made possible through research), was characteristic for composer Luciano Berio[4]. In the aesthetics of Wolfgang Rihm, the notated composition is considered as a possible palimpsest: he interjects new passages in a subsequent version of a composition, others are expanded, and certain passages are erased entirely or replaced by something completely new, and so on. This leads to an endless scope of possibilities which originates, initially, in exploratory composing, and is then carried even further in a 'multiplication' of interpretative possibilities in the performance itself.

This approach to music and research in music has definite parallels with the concept of the archive in the way it is presently explored by numerous visual artists. This approach to music and research also has parallels with known attempts to bring the audience as close to the art, and the process of art production, as possible. In the case of art in the public sphere, the audience can as it were take over the role of the performer of a piece of music: every individual in the audience will help determine what the artwork will ultimately look like. The artist becomes the facilitator for the realisation of the artwork which he himself has initiated. This method of producing art is considerably more complex than the simple situation of the artist in his studio. In the case of 'art in the public sphere', research imposes itself as an obvious necessity. The artist cannot restrict himself to the mere realisation of his own insights, whether or not acquired through research, but is obliged to investigate a wide domain of possibilities and potentialities so that, at any given time, the cooperation of the public individual may be correctly assessed, valued, facilitated, and given a place within the larger concept.

The ensuing contradiction lies in the fact that the less tangible, comprehensible, and unambiguous the explicitation of the artistic research becomes, the greater the chance that the practice-based research in the arts will yield an important, interesting, grand, and high-quality work of art. Suppose that the research results were to consist of the systematic description of the various interpretations, contents, and meanings that can be derived from a given work of art, so as to comply with the requirements for clarity and controllability, where would that lead us? It would be the unmasking of non-multi-

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[4] "It is not for nothing that Berio's friend Umberto Eco referred to, amongst others, work by Berio in his discourse on the necessity of the open interpretation of the artwork": ECO, Umberto (1962, rev. 1976): *Opera aperta*. English translation: *The Open Work,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1989.

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interpretable art; as a result, certain artworks would possibly be labelled as being of lower quality, or even 'bad'. But staying with 'good' and high-quality art: to explicitate the many intentions, layers of meaning, and possible interpretations to such an extent, is that at all positive or even desirable? Is it not deadening for the free and personal interpretation? The way in which research results are communicated and formulated, the way insight is provided into the research process, and the manner in which it is described, would have to occur in a similar way, using the same media, so that its openness may remain intact. Without wanting – or being able - to be exhaustive, I would subsequently like to attempt an outline of a few of these possibilities. It has been pointed out before that the choice of medium has to be made in function of the communication and that language is in this respect definitely not the only available medium. The description of the possibilities would have to be applicable to various artistic mediums, without having to specify how the actual realisation within each medium needs to be carried out.

The first way in which an open presentation of research results can be carried out consists of simply placing the found possibilities side by side. The results are presented in as neutral a way possible, without making any assessment or evaluation. This may certainly be considered a valid working method, particularly in view of the critical attitude which the artwork can (still) provoke in the evaluator. The critical attitude, conjured up by reviewing the research results, can in this way be carried into a broader societal vision or context. The presentation of an archive, as described earlier, can in this way consist of the presentation of works of art in combination with the results of the research, or works of art which incorporate research results, whereby the spectator is left to develop his or her own critical interpretation in complete freedom. In the case of music this would mean that a (research) concert would present a choice of different interpretations/performances of the same musical piece, each performance based on different research results, giving the critical listener a chance to work out his or her own evaluation.

A rhizome structure is a possible second way through which an open presentation of research results could be worked out. Research results are in this case elaborated along ever farther reaching branches and forks that originate in a central question or a first answer. These various branches grow ever farther and branch out from previously chosen possibilities. A telling example in this sense is the family tree, where branches are 'accidentally' formed when family members marry non-family members for generations, creating new offshoots through reproduction. This results, finally, in a large series of branches and elements, in a way grown 'as by chance' yet still interconnected and derived from the same 'stem'. As a result, the rhizome structure connects coincidental or contingent elements with demonstrably logical associations, presents an 'impenetrable' structure through which it acquires a certain validity as a means of presenting open and freely interpretable research results. As a medium, installations in the visual arts are invariably set up as rhizome structures; the elements presented side by side are all interconnected, even if only because they can be contemplated

simultaneously. Both the 'rhizome' and the 'archive' have the labyrinthine element in common, even if, in the case of the first, the structural element is more explicitly present. Likewise, the computer seems a perfect medium for the elaboration of a rhizome structure: by making certain choices, links are established with consecutive 'screens' in an open-information framework, which could very well come to resemble that of a 'gaming'-concept. The concept of contingency that underlies the rhizome could very well lead to research results being presented in an actual 'gaming'-environment. This concept is also directly aligned with the idea of the 'network': a network is a rhizome structure of an entirely different order; it makes even more connections and flows in more directions than a structure with a single central stem.

Whoever mentions the concept of 'rhizome', particularly in an artistic context, becomes immediately identified with the philosophy of Deleuze[5]. At the beginning of this text, we questioned the philosophical leanings of researching artists and the application of philosophy to works of art: usually the artist's research originates in the ideas of a philosopher or research is connected with these ideas in an attempt to invest the artist's own findings with authority. The answers presented here show quite the opposite: the rhizome structure becomes a viable possibility that originates precisely in the reflection on the possibilities of the communication of research results within the artistic field, and through the artistic research itself. From this artistic research result we may gather that a philosopher such as Deleuze has come to similar findings within his own professional field. This in turn can possibly become an interesting base from which the rhizome method in the arts can be compared to the philosophical rhizome methods of Deleuze and others. Deleuze in this way represents the endpoint of an independent reflection that originates in artistic research and not its origin, otherwise his philosophy would dictate the reflection, or would be blindly assimilated and applied within the area of artistic research in question. The application of any kind of philosophy on artistic research would always have to fall under the condition that the application originates from within the essence of the research itself, within what is art-related or artistic. Again: the opposite is quite often the case.

A third possibility through which artistic research results can be communicated, while safeguarding the openness of interpretation, consists in bringing the aspect of 'coincidence' or contingency, which was present in the former two possibilities, to the foreground. The inclusion of the element of chance guarantees openness, doubt, and the non-admission of narrowing or dictating truisms. A chance-based presentation method could originate in the continuous negation of what was previously stated or presented, although this could lead to a far reaching level of irony or self-denial, instead of providing answers in the quest for open communication and open answers. The concept of letting-go, of the ephemeral is however inherent to music (more so than to the so-called spatial arts): the vision that music only exists through the performance and at

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[5] *Mille Plateaux* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari from 1987 was based on *Rhizome,* which dates from 1976.

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the precise moment of its rendition or performance, is inherent to all 'time-based arts'. Here also, adequate communication of research results can be looked into. The idea of letting-go can be directly connected to the concept of transitoriness, the non-fixed and non-fixable 'truth' of the research results. In spatial art can be found various media and possibilities that emphasise the intangible, such as for instance the usage of darkness so that objects become only partly visible, or only visible during brief moments of illumination; the showing and not-showing by means of monitors, the creation of 'mist' that surrounds the presented objects, and so on. Through the possibilities that come with new media, the visual artist gets to manipulate the dimension of time as well.

Here also, the philosophical base of contingency, as explained by Rorty[6] for instance, could possibly serve as a point of reference (however not as a source or reason for its application onto art). But even more convincing and current is the following fact, which directly connects with the subject of this very essay: what happens if the philosopher or sociologist with all his insights, which the artist in turn can discover through research, decides to set up an art exhibition – as the result of an artistic research - himself? This time, the answer comes from an anthropologist, Bruno Latour, who in 2005, together with Peter Weibel, curated the exhibition *Iconoclash. Beyond the image wars in science, religion and art.* In the catalogue[7], Latour entitled his introduction: *From* Realpolitik *to* Dingpolitik – *or How to Make Things Public.* The fact that openness is a necessity to the outcome of the artistic research and the communication thereof, and that within this openness all elements still reveal interconnectedness, is put forward and affirmed by Latour in even broader terms: "It's clear that each object — each issue — generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. There might be no continuity, no coherence in our opinions, but there is a hidden continuity and a hidden coherence in what we are attached to. Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. Each object may also offer new ways of achieving closure without having to agree on much else. In other words, matters in dispute — taken as so many issues — bound all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of 'the political'. (...)

The problem is that transparent, unmediated, undisputable facts have recently become rarer and rarer. To provide complete undisputable proof has become a rather messy, pesky, risky business. And to offer a *public* proof, big enough and certain enough to convince the whole world of the presence of a phenomenon or of a looming danger, seems now almost beyond reach —and always was. Latour continues to explain how our hold on facts and our sense of objectivity are becoming increasingly less objective and fixed. He believes that objects and these can be works of art, including artistic research results, can yield much

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[6] RORTY, Richard: *Contingency, irony, and solidarity,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.
[7] LATOUR, Bruno & WEIBER, Peter: *Making Things Public – Atmospheres of Democracy*, MIT Press, 2005.

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more than any philosophical vision. Put another way: the 'knowledge' that objects bring can be richer than what has happened up to now: the application of a philosopher's vision on artistic research and artistic realizations. Latour puts it as follows: "They *(the objects)* are much more interesting, variegated, uncertain, complicated, far reaching, heterogeneous, risky, historical, local, material, and networky than the pathetic version offered for too long by philosophers. Rocks are not simply there to be kicked at, desks to be thumped at. 'Facts are facts are facts'? Yes, but they are also a lot of other things *in addition"*. And this 'in addition' is entirely in the hands of the artist-researchers.