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One of the many challenges that artistic research faces, and one that I am particularly interested in, is whether artistic research has, or should have, its own methodology. What does it entail to actually ‘do’ artistic research and how can, or should, it be done? This is an important question, not only because it may help artistic researchers to do their research, but also and perhaps even more importantly, because a clear methodology ensures transparency: a project that clearly outlines the methodology that is used and the manner in which the methodology has contributed to the results, is paramount for the academic validity of that project.

Even though Anke Haarmann’s book Artistic Research: Eine epistemologische Ästhetik, does not have the words ‘method’ or ‘methodology’ in its title, the notion of epistemological aesthetics sounds promising as far as addressing the issue of academic validity and investigative productivity is concerned. The beginning of the book seems to promise exactly that: on page 11 she asks whether the visual arts investigates our contemporary visual surroundings and on page 13 she poses the question of what we mean when we speak of art as research. Can art be regarded as a reflective practice that generates new insights, that are formulated through artistic articulations? Moreover, she points out that art needs its own methodology that focuses on the history, heuristics and practice of specific artistic knowledge production and argumentation (15). As a result, Haarmann concludes, the main challenge of epistemological aesthetics is to understand artistic practices as a form of research and knowledge generation (16).

Haarmann seems to restrict her study to the visual arts, with the first chapters focus on visual arts in particular. These chapters address the manners in which visual art can be interpreted as an examination of culture and society. Haarmann does this by examining works, by artists such as Cindy Sherman, and analysing them as critical commentaries on contemporary culture and society. Haarmann stresses that knowledge and insights that are generated in this manner
are not explicitly given by the work. Instead, they are the result of the activities of someone who engages with the work: interpretation is a praxis (39).

Up to this point, the book explores the potentialities of (visual) art to generate knowledge. In the following chapters she continues in a similar manner devoting sections to what she calls the ‘practical turn’ in humanities research and to the value of visiting art studios for gaining new insights. However, she does not address the praxis of artistic research itself, i.e. doing research and generating knowledge through artistic practices. Instead, Haarmann compares art to science and asserts that researchers in the latter field could learn, from art, how to incorporate intuition in a productive manner. By referring to Bruno Latour she asserts that science does not discover truths, but rather create the truths that it wants to see (80). In this sense, Haarmann concludes, science is literally as creative as art is.

She then continues to outline a history of art as research and points out that it has one of its roots in political art. Political artists, Haarmann argues, no longer merely create objects but assume intellectual positions through artistic practices (91). Conversely, it is because of political decisions that the notion of artistic research became institutionalised (112). As a consequence, Haarmann asserts, one of the aims of artistic research is to forge art into a discipline, to institutionalise it in order to be able to control it (29).

Next, Haarmann discusses how art has developed from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards and how this development was a move away from creating aesthetically pleasing objects, to works that question the notion of art itself. Art is about the ideas it expresses, not about the sensory pleasures it may evoke (142). This move, she points out, comes with its own challenges. How can visual art be meaningful? In which ways can it express ideas? In order to address these questions Haarmann resorts to semiotics, concluding that reading aesthetic signs resembles an exploration of the ephemeral nuances of aesthetic meanings, a skill that can be developed through practice and experience. What is needed is a “reading competence” that transcends the memorisation of meanings and the application of specific rules for translating aesthetic expression into specific meanings. Instead, an aesthetic sensibility is needed, informed by a thorough knowledge of culture (223).

For those who are familiar with cultural studies these observations may not come as a surprise. On the contrary: what Haarmann understands by epistemological aesthetics is very similar, if not identical to, cultural analysis. In my view therefore, it is surprising that there is no mention of cultural theorists nor reference to cultural studies or cultural analysis in the book. Furthermore, when Haarmann presents her interpretations of artworks in the book, providing cultural analyses of these works, I do not find her interpretations particularly strong, especially when you compare them to analyses done by ‘proper’ cultural analysts such as Mieke Bal. Moreover, cultural analysis is not the same as doing artistic research and since “artistic research” is the main title of the book, I was a bit disappointed to discover that artistic research is not really what the book is about.

This shortcoming aside, the book does address an interesting link between research and artistic practices. Haarmann suggests that research in general, ultimately is a practice of creating signs and values. This means that research operates on the same terrain as art does. After all, art is a practice that produces signs and values as well. As a result, Haarmann concludes, it is possible to reconstruct artistic practices as artistic research and research as artistic practice (279). In this way artistic practices can be interpreted as critical interventions, or a critical epistemology as Haarmann calls it, that questions research as a value-free and
objective practice. Instead, art as artistic research shows how research is creative and subjective as well. This opens up interesting possibilities for artistic research as a critical investigative practice.

The final chapter further explores artistic research. Here, Haarmann asks whether it is possible for artistic research to come up with its own methods. She observes that artistic researchers are forced to adopt methods and practices from other disciplines, in particular the humanities, and to write scholarly texts in order to properly fit into established academic traditions. This, Haarmann asserts, is a clear indication that artistic research still is far from a ‘normal,’ generally accepted academic discipline (285). Artistic research is only really useful, she proposes, if artistic practices and aesthetic methods alone are sufficient for generating new knowledge and insights. In this way artistic research is able to distinguish itself from the humanities and the exact sciences (285).

Unfortunately, Haarmann does not specify how this can be achieved. Moreover, she herself needs verbal language and disciplines such as cultural studies, art history and philosophy to show how art can generate knowledge. As a result, her book could be regarded as proof of the impossibility of artistic research as she would like to see it, at least for now.

Biography

Vincent Meelberg is senior lecturer and researcher at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, and at the Academy for Creative and Performing Arts in Leiden and The Hague. He is founding editor of the online Journal of Sonic Studies. His current research focuses on the relation between sound, interaction, and storytelling. Beside his academic activities he is active as a double bassist in several jazz groups, as well as a sound designer.