

PERSPECTIVES ON ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN MUSIC

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Chapter Two

Six Propositions on Artistic Research

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The term *artistic research* is a neologism aimed to fit an emergent practice: a practice that is extremely diverse, complex, full of exciting potential, and closely related to artistic production.¹ It is indeed so closely related to artistic production that the makers of art might be thought to have *always* been engaged in artistic research, at least in *some* cases. My aim in this chapter is to put forward a number of propositions about key characteristics of artistic research that help identify these cases. I shall consider Christopher Redgate's innovatory work on the oboe, and show it to be an example of artistic research in music that is located at the entry point of a wide-ranging epistemic potential which is not generally captured in the term artistic research, at least not in the way it is theorized by one of the key figures of the debate, Henk Borgdorff. I then briefly discuss the distinct epistemic orientation of artistic research, and how it can, as a side effect, lead to questioning and changing the conditions of art. The six propositions on artistic research with which I conclude all underline that—and in which way—artistic research is a *specific* artistic practice.

ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH: AN OBSCURE DIFFERENCE

The relation between artistic production, artistic practice, and artistic research is by no means easy to conceive clearly. Henk Borgdorff's short but labyrinthine discussion of these and related concepts gives an initial impression of the difficulty (Borgdorff 2011). Borgdorff declares from the onset that the question of the difference is "present in the background" (45) of his discussion, which is why I trace his awareness of the question by comparing his various explicit statements on art and artistic research. Art, in Borgdorff's words, has the abil-

ity “to impart and evoke fundamental ideas and perspectives that disclose the world for us and, at the same time, render that world into what it is or can be” (60–61). Borgdorff describes art’s world-disclosing, and thereby epistemic, character further as “offer[ing] the . . . reflection on who we are, on where we stand” (50). Artistic research, in turn, in his view, is the “articulation of the unreflective, non-conceptual content enclosed in aesthetic experiences, enacted in creative practices and embodied in artistic products” (59).

The sense in which Borgdorff uses the term *articulation* is opaque: articulation, synonymous with expression, is supposed to occur *without* “making explicit the knowledge that art is said to produce” (44). In a slight elaboration on this statement later in the text, Borgdorff rather sloppily uses the term *explication* to mean the same as *make explicit*: “primary importance [of artistic research] lies not [*sic*] in explicating the implicit or non-implicit knowledge enclosed in art” (61). This stands in curious tension to Borgdorff’s statement that “artistic research seeks to convey and communicate [*sic*] content that is enclosed in aesthetic experiences, enacted in creative practices and embodied in artistic products” (45). For this not to be an outright contradiction I presume that with “articulation” Borgdorff arguably refers to *nonverbal* “conveying” and “communicating,” and that, in turn, with “making explicit” he means *verbally* explicit. By way of such (presumably nonverbal) articulation, artistic research has, according to Borgdorff, two effects: “In a material sense . . . the research impacts on the development of art practice, and in a cognitive sense on our understanding of what that art practice is” (54). The impression at this point, then, is that artistic research inquires into art, elucidating it, and leading to innovative art. Notice that the articulation requirement introduces a sense of *aboutness*: artistic research, to Borgdorff, articulates a knowledge enclosed in art by means of art. In other words, artistic research—proceeding through artistic practice—is thought to be *for* art, and to result in *new* art *about* the knowledge *in* art.

At the same time, Borgdorff claims that it is artistic research *itself* which “concerns and affects the foundations of our perception, our understanding, our relationship to the world and to other people, as well as our perspective on what is or should be” (61). This bears striking similarity to the “world-disclosing” and “world-rendering” functions Borgdorff attributes to art: while on the same page he merely states that “artistic research addresses [*sic*] this world-constituting and world-revealing power of art,” to “concern” and “affect” go beyond “addressing,” into constituting (i.e., world-rendering); and, by concerning and affecting “our understanding,” into revealing (i.e., world-disclosing). And Borgdorff attenuates the epistemic function of art when stating that “the production of images, installations, compositions and performances as such is not [*sic*] intended primarily for enhancing our knowledge (although forms of reflection are always entwined with art)” (54).

Hence, in Borgdorff’s account, the epistemic capabilities of artistic production and artistic research largely overlap, with the distinction remaining nebulous; and the notion that artistic research articulates a supposedly ineffable content (thereby developing our understanding of art and leading to new practice) is obscure. The dilemma is perhaps most apparent in Borgdorff’s sentence that “artistic research seeks in and through the production of art to contribute not just to the artistic universe, but to what we ‘know’ and ‘understand’” (54)—as if the “artistic universe” did not already do precisely this through its epistemic capability. Does Borgdorff mean that artistic research goes *beyond* art in epistemic terms? If yes, how so? By considering and discussing the following case study, I seek to shed some light on the relation between artistic practice and artistic research, arguing that artistic research is a *specific* artistic practice.

IS CHRISTOPHER REDGATE’S TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY OBOE PROJECT A CASE OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH?

London-based oboist Christopher Redgate, in collaboration with the woodwind manufacturer Howarth of London, has recently redesigned the oboe and spectacularly enriched its playing and repertoire. Redgate’s design and playing improvements range from alterations to the key-work, over enhancements of the instrument’s microtonal capability (including eighth-tone scales), through to extensions in the altissimo range (from A₆ up to Eb₇) and an addition of more than 1500 multiphonics to the existing 833 (Redgate 2015). Composers such as Brian Ferneyhough (2013) and Michael Finnissy (2012) have written works that explore Redgate’s outstanding virtuosity and musicianship on the enhanced instrument in close collaboration with him. Redgate’s work (including his collaborations) seems a ready example of artistic research. Only an artist of Redgate’s order would have been capable of redesigning a traditional instrument with this kind of result, systematically joining design alterations and advancements in instrumental technique, to extend former aesthetic limits in direct exchange with compositional activity—through Barrett’s engagement with “beat multiphonics” and “aleatoric-style multiphonics,” and Finnissy’s transformation of a microtonal vocal improvisation to the oboe (Redgate 2015, 210–12).

Would Redgate’s work classify as artistic research in Borgdorff’s terms? His taxonomy of the various relations between arts and research distinguishes between research *on* the arts, research *for* the arts, and research *in* the arts (Borgdorff 2011, 46). To Borgdorff, research *on* the arts is research that is essentially *about* the arts in the sense that they are the object of research, as is the case in musicology for example. Research *for* the arts Borgdorff defines as “applied, technical research done in the service of art practice.” And in re-

search *in* the arts (to Borgdorff this is artistic research proper) artistic practice is the “methodological vehicle [of the research], when the research unfolds in and through the acts of creating and performing” (46).

Redgate’s twenty-first century oboe fits Borgdorff’s second category: the redesigning clearly involved research *for* the arts. It also fits the third category in that Redgate informed the process in a continuous and exploratory manner, researching artistically by way of his playing skills and his sonic and performative imagination. But, recalling Borgdorff’s *articulation* requirement, is this true for Redgate’s work? A superficial look might lead one to think that all Redgate did was to improve the mechanics of the oboe; a service to art practice of the kind that is research *for* the arts, not artistic research *proper*, even though it was conducted through artistic practice. “But,” one might retort, “would Redgate’s collaborations with composers not count as artistic research?” To answer this question convincingly in Borgdorff’s terms, one would have to show that the articulation requirement is met. Obviously, new work, including new pitch material and timbral material, has become possible through Redgate’s extended instrument and practice. But, again in Borgdorff’s terms, that could be merely a contribution to “the artistic universe.” In what way does Redgate’s work create new knowledge beyond this? In wanting to put a finger on an obscure, yet crucial quality in work such as Redgate’s, one needs to return to the question of the epistemic nature of art and artistic research.

UNDERSTANDING: A KIND OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCED BY BOTH ART AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH

What kind or kinds of knowledge does work such as Christopher Redgate’s produce? Borgdorff distinguishes three forms of knowledge: propositional knowledge, skill, and knowledge by acquaintance (Borgdorff 2011, 55). Borgdorff focuses on skill as a major form of knowledge produced by artistic research, and it is easy to see why. Skill is practical knowledge. Making art requires skill. As artists extend their craft, they acquire new skills, and thus new knowledge. Skills—particularly bodily skills—cannot easily be conveyed in language, which is why Borgdorff views them as *tacit* or *implicit* knowledge: “The implicit, pre-reflective knowledge and understanding embodied and enacted in art practice” (59). Yet, skills can be shown. They can be taught to others, or they can be an integrated element of collaborative work. Redgate’s work is a clear example of this: working toward and with the redesigned oboe, he clearly extended his craft; other oboists might similarly advance their skills, and Redgate’s skills were put to use and extended in his collaborations with the composers. In this way, as Redgate himself observes, “composers have reimagined the sound world of the [oboe] by exploring technical extremes” (Redgate 2015, 203).

Surely, however, increased dexterity and widened sonic resources by themselves do not amount to the kind of revelatory knowledge Borgdorff refers to. Bodily and material skills only make a small part of the artistic skills that, together with other kinds of knowledge, **make up the sought artistic knowledge**. By requiring that the research should be **done by an artist**, Borgdorff aims to ensure that artistic skills are included in the picture; yet Borgdorff does not suggest *what* the specific distinguishing features are that make a skill *artistic*. To begin with, artistic skills are not just skills of playing an instrument, or of writing a score. Artistic skills are bodily skills put to artistic use. Yet intrinsic to bodily skills are abilities that are not *only* of the body (including cognitive skills, such as *listening* skills) and abilities that are not *necessarily* tacit, such as compositional abilities and aesthetic judgements.

While a consideration of the role of tacit knowledge in artistic research such as Borgdorff’s certainly helps to spell out some distinctive features for those seeking to identify a new form of research, then, this does not suffice. Borgdorff recognizes this (“[artistic] content encompasses more than just the tacit knowledge embodied in the skillfulness of artistic work”, (60) and points in roughly the right direction by stating that “art’s epistemic character resides in . . . the very reflection on who we are, on where we stand . . . obscured by scientific rationality.” But he does not unpack this broad suggestion. Roger Scruton, in a recent book called *The Soul of the World*, characterizes this other notion of knowledge:

To describe the ‘order of nature’ in terms of some complete and unified science is to give a systematic answer to the question ‘what exists?’ But the world can be known in another way, through the practice of *Verstehen*. The world known in this other way will be an ‘emergent’ world, represented in the cognitive apparatus of the perceiver, but emerging *from* the physical reality, as the face emerges from the pigments of the canvas, or the melody from the sequence of sounds” (Scruton 2014, 36).

Scruton goes on to call the “world known in this other way” the *Lebenswelt* or lifeworld, a Husserlian term, and argues that it is irreducible, and that it represents a space of reasons that is beyond the horizon of nature, answering the “why” question asked of the world as a whole which science cannot formulate. *This* kind of awareness of the epistemic practice of understanding is not restricted to preconceptual, bodily knowledge; but the latter is, of course, included in it.

Hans Georg Gadamer (1975) further clarifies the idea of the epistemic capability of art by viewing it as a process of interpersonal understanding: of cognition that proceeds on the level of society and culture, has an ethical dimension, and is fundamentally open-ended. When making art, the artist’s liberty is bound by the shared truth that life is communal. To Gadamer, the

humanistic awareness of the presence of this kind of knowledge can be traced via the idea of *sensus communis*: an idea dismissed by Kant and excluded from his moral philosophy (39). In engaging with the artwork—and this may involve interpersonal engagement with other artists, as in Redgate's collaborations with various composers—its makers (and appreciators) immerse in it as in a game, losing distance to the artwork, and gaining access to its world. To participate in the process of understanding can lead to a transformative experience (95).

This epistemic capability, I claim, is shared by art and artistic research (although certainly not all artists are interested in realizing this capability). Artistic research is an artistic practice with the general epistemic capability of artmaking in Gadamer's sense. It is however distinctive. Part of the difference is revealed when considering that large parts of artistic production have conditions that are not as binding for artistic research: First, artistic research has an emphasis on process, in the sense that it does not *require* a work. Its artistic exploration can be performative, and a particular performance might or might not lead to an artifact, or a philosophical insight. Christopher Redgate's oboe is not a musical work, but a work of craftsmanship, an instrument. His playing, on which the design improvements are based, included much systematic improvisation (Redgate 2015, 213). Second, artistic research can but does not *need* to care for the interests of the conventional art market. Its community and audience are different—think of art therapy, of laboratory work, and of improvisatory encounters, of workshops. Artistic research therefore extends and shifts the domain of traditional artistic production. Third, artistic research not only brings up conceptual insight through the hermeneutic process, it also engages with other forms of knowledge, such as scientific, philosophical, and manufacturing knowledges; and *crucially* so. As a result, two forms of thought—thought in the artistic medium, and thought underlying philosophical or scientific reasoning—are put in constant dialogue. The engagement is an ongoing, omnipresent part of the hermeneutic process within artistic research and intertwined with it. This is a significant difference in practice and enlarges the complexity, depth, and rigor of reflective practice. Fourth, and finally, the self-critical approach that marks *some* artistic practice marks *all* artistic research.

NAMING THE DIFFERENCE: ARTISTIC RESEARCH AS A SPECIFIC ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Concluding, here are six propositions arising from my discussion above.² These represent sufficient rather than necessary conditions on what artistic

research is and can be, supporting a pluralist view, and awaiting further clarification:

- (1) Artistic Research engages in thought that proceeds via a medium, for instance sound. The thought is not abstract, but concrete and felt, though not necessarily verbal. It has a bodily component, that is, somatic practice contributes to its shaping. Thought in artistic research thus proceeds via doing and perceiving.
- (2) The thought is part of a process whereby one improves one's *understanding* of the world, of the environment, of society, of others, of oneself, of an aspect of life. The process is driven not only by an *epistemological* inquiry, but also by an *ethical* one: Artistic practice, and musicking in particular, offer means to engage in and enhance interpersonal understanding. The innovatory potential of artistic research, then, is not only technical (in the widest sense of the word), but also hermeneutic.
- (3) In being felt, the thought has a subjective quality. This is why the first-person perspective, and (as is often overlooked) the second-person perspective, grounds artistic research, next to a reflective component that further involves the third-person perspective.
- (4) Artistic research engages with other forms of inquiry (including philosophical thought) on an intimate level, bringing various modes of thought into mutual dialogue. Proceeding epistemically rather than being driven by market interests, artistic research can challenge and innovate the *social* and *aesthetic* conditions of art.
- (5) Artistic research cannot and should not be limited to an extension of craft or dexterity. While it brings with it a gain of skill, of "knowing how," the relevance of such skill for art and for hermeneutic understanding may vary.
- (6) A remarkable implication arising from the transdisciplinary domain of hermeneutic activity is that questions orienting artistic research do not need to concern art or its practice alone; they can be philosophical, sociological, or psychological in nature. Likewise, results can concern realms outside art. Some examples for research areas that extend the purely musical domain are: music and solidarity, music and conflict transformation, music and dance, music and empathy.

With these propositions in mind, Christopher Redgate's work toward and on the twenty-first century oboe—if understood as involving the interpersonal

experimentation with an extended listening into new aesthetic realms by way of collaborative improvisation and composition—is already a genuine case of artistic research. But beyond this, Redgate's work could be part of a larger cultural inquiry into virtuosity, beauty, and their respective others, in case he *chose* to engage with these concepts systematically. That is to say: the domain of artistic research includes all artistically driven inquiries into means with which we enhance our *understanding* of the lifeworld, transforming ourselves on the way toward a better life. And that can mean to work outside the realm of the artwork, and outside the art market, in a process marked by sophisticated critical engagement within collaborative artwork and with scholarly discourses and by self-criticism. Much of the potential for artistic research in music lies in its exploration of the interpersonal realm, including interartistic, intermedial, and interdisciplinary work, with which we—musicians and listeners—can jointly address existential questions.

NOTES

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2. A more detailed and refined consideration of theses on artistic research was given in a keynote paper held at the *DoktorandInnenforum* in Graz in October 2015 and is in preparation for publication.

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