

# INTELLECTUAL BIRDHOUSE

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*Artistic Practice as Research*

*Edited by*

**Florian Dombois, Ute Meta Bauer, Claudia Mareis, Michael Schwab**

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## BOUNDARY WORK

*Henk Borgdorff interviewed by Michael Schwab*

*In a recent text in the Zurich Yearbook of the Arts (Borgdorff 2010) you mention the concept of 'boundary work' in relation to artistic research. Could I ask you to expand on your ideas?*

I borrowed the concept from Thomas F. Gieryn (1983). I did not study his work in detail and just stumbled across the concept of 'boundary object', which actually is the term he uses—I use 'boundary work' in the article to highlight the negotiations that are required along the boundaries, but I think the more challenging concept is 'boundary object', which is an object that changes its ontological and epistemological nature depending on the context in which it is used. This is especially interesting along the borderlines between different disciplines, within academia, for instance.

'Boundary object' means that an object has some meaning in a certain research environment and another meaning in another research environment. Moreover, in the sociology of science, where the concept is used, it also has a role to play between academic disciplines *per se* and fields outside academia. This is interesting for artistic research, because artistic research places itself on the border between academia and the art world. As a consequence, artistic research as boundary work has two contexts: one context is academia, which means that artistic research has to acknowledge that it is part of academia and its ways of doing; the other context is the art world, where artistic research has to be relevant for things which happen within the 'real world' outside.

*Taking this into account, what impact does a concept such as 'boundary work' have on artistic research as a discipline? Is artistic research a discipline; or rather, can it be a discipline if it operates with 'boundary objects'?*

The notion of 'discipline' has become contested not only in the case of artistic research but also in the case of other areas of contemporary research. When you ask a question about 'disciplines', you really enquire about traditional disciplinary academic research, while a lot of advanced academic research nowadays challenges the notion of 'discipline'—it is post-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary. Artistic research is more something that represents this kind of border violation than being a new discipline alongside other art-related disciplines.

*Part of the notion of ‘discipline’ is the way in which it safeguards its borders through, for example, reviewing processes or the adherence to certain modes of writing. Is such safeguarding also challenged through the advanced concept of ‘boundary work’?*

There is a misunderstanding here. When I say that artistic research is not a discipline in the usual sense of the word, I am referring to the old concept of scientific research as organized in specific scientific disciplines, which is not the case with artistic research. This does not mean that it is not disciplined—that there is no quality assurance or refereeing process, although no one at the moment knows how to do that in the best possible way. I am just referring negatively to the old concept of what is called ‘mode-1 science’, which is disciplined and organized in a homogenous way—chemistry laboratories in Helsinki or Barcelona, for example, all look the same, the quality of their research is exclusively assessed by disciplinary peers, i.e. academics. This is not at all the case in artistic research: it is more heterogeneously organized, more diversified, with a form of extended peer-review, which in our case means that both academics and artists judge the quality and the direction of the research and even the research agenda at large. This character makes it an example of ‘mode-2 knowledge production’, although I will not say that artistic research always is mode-2 knowledge production (I have written extensively about this elsewhere [2009])—there are all kinds of problems attached to that. To answer your question briefly: yes, it is not a discipline in the usual sense of traditional, disciplinary academic research; but academic customs, like quality assurance through a refereeing process, are still in place.

*Can boundary works be reviewed in the same way as other types of objects? Normally, when you are reviewing something, doesn’t it have to have some form of identity? In other words, is there not a potential methodological problem when reviewing processes refer to a shifting object, so that the way you would talk about it has to adapt in some form or other?*

I don’t think so. The fact that the object is floating, or not a real object at all if looked at on closer inspection, is not a problem within academia. Not even the different perspective: for instance from the artist’s side, towards the same phenomenon—compared to an academic looking at the same object—creates a problem. Once an object is approached in order to review its research quality, academic discourse is already prescribed, making no difference whether the reviewer is an artist or not. The whole point rather is that the borderline between artists and researchers is being blurred. The moment you are refereeing

or judging the quality of an artwork as research, you brand it within academic discourse. However, there are two other things I want to stress that relate to the concept of ‘artistic research’ as boundary work: artistic research is a good example of a form of academic research in which the context is not just the disciplinary environment of university-based research—the outside world, in this case the art world, plays a central role in formulating the research agenda, formulating the direction the research has to take, evaluating the outcomes of the research, and assessing the quality of the research. Thus, artistic research has two contexts that make artistic research a very good example of modern contemporary academic research, where more and more people realize that the quality of academic research is not assessed only within the boundaries of university institutions. The second aspect has to do with the blurring of art and other life domains. The text I published in Zurich has to do with the boundaries of what art is and what the realm of knowledge and research is, and also what art is in comparison to our moral stance or to issues of daily life. I think that artistic research is an opportunity to address specifically the interrelationship between what is at stake within art and other domains of life. In artistic research projects, things are articulated that bear on who we are, where we stand, what our relation is to other people and the environment. In that sense, artistic research is also transdisciplinary research, because it reaches out to the wider community, making it relevant to the discussion around ‘mode-2 knowledge production’.

*When you say that the ‘boundary work’ is not a real but a floating object, what are the implications in relation to the work’s materiality? Are there particular modes that bring out the ‘boundary work’? How can a ‘boundary work’ appear, and how might it be threatened?*

The starting point is: there is no work—at least not in a strict ontological sense. Artworks become concrete only in specific settings, contexts. Artworks and artistic actions acquire their status and meaning in interchange with relevant environments. The art world is one such environment; academia is another. It all depends on what you are looking for. The research context might invite us to identify a work as ‘work’, either material or immaterial. Again, it all depends on the issues addressed, the questions raised and the methods used. There are no particular modes that bring out the ‘boundary work’, but the ‘research mode’ will bring out the work on this side of the boundary; the ‘market mode’, for instance, on the other.

*There are two aspects I am interested in when it comes to artistic research and the question of boundary work: one aspect is the discipline—it sounds very*

*much like artistic research is a transdisciplinary exercise that transgresses all possible disciplines; the other aspect is that the boundary work as you describe it might equally lack identity, and that only by pragmatically accepting provisional identities such as 'artworks' can we even talk about it. Does a 'boundary work'—in spite of its floating or shifting character—have a stable identity that functions as a point of reference within different contexts; or are there more complex ontological consequences to be drawn from the concept of 'boundary works'?*

The distinction I make in the essay *The Debate on Research in the Arts* (Borgdorff 2006) between an ontological, an epistemological, and a methodological question served a mere heuristic aim: to differentiate between different aspects of research in the arts, which one might encounter in this emerging research field. In fact, there is no such a thing as an 'ontology of artistic research' independent of its epistemology and methodology. Identifying a research object is always at the same time an epistemic act, i.e. knowing at least roughly the kind of knowledge the object might convey or embody; and a methodological act, i.e. knowing how to get access to the knowledge the object is said to convey or embody.

In your question you refer to 'a boundary work', thereby already more or less objectifying the 'object' of research. In my essay *Artistic Research as Boundary Work*, I emphasize the more active use of the term: the work to be done, both on the border of art and academia and on the border of art research and other life domains. Precisely because no sharp boundaries can be drawn between art on one side and academia and other spheres of life on the other, research in art has to acknowledge that its 'objects' are fuzzy, preliminary, contingent on the project at hand. One might say that the epistemological core of the artistic research program is empty, or at least crowded and heterogeneous—terms used by Helga Nowotny et al. (2001: 179) to describe the new production of knowledge—and dependent on the specific perspective or the 'implication' of the research project. This fuzzy epistemology of artistic research is in line with recent investigations into the history and epistemology of science. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's notion of an 'epistemic thing' tries to capture something of the contingency inherent to research in science:

As long as epistemic objects and their concepts remain blurred, they generate a productive tension: they reach out into the unknown and as a result they become research tools. I call this tension "contained excess". François Jacob speaks of a "play of possibilities". (Rheinberger 2010: 156)

The artistic research program is a case in point where from the start we acknowledge that the research 'object' or 'issue' does not have a fixed identity—which invites, in principle, unfinished thinking. Especially due to the non-conceptual content of artistic research—the fact that what is at stake here can only partially be 'captured' discursively—it evades any definitive epistemological 'grip' while at the same time opening up a possible perspective on what we do not yet know. 'Artistic things' are epistemic things *par excellence*; they create room for that which is un-thought. In *The Debate*. . . I made a distinction between scientific facts, social facts, historical facts, and artistic facts in order to highlight the *sui generis* nature of the object of research in the arts. As with the distinction between ontology, epistemology, and methodology I would like to play down that distinction. There are no such things as basic artistic facts on which the edifice of the artistic is built. The realm of the artistic is historically and systematically contingent on where and how it is constituted. Here, we can learn something from Science & Technology Studies, e.g. the Actor-Network-Theory, where the artistic realm is a network and something which is performed through the active involvement of its acteurs, both human and non-human. To paraphrase Bruno Latour: the artistic research program is a program to 'reassemble the artistic', which in itself is an unfinished project.

*If the 'artistic' is a project-to-come, what are the characteristics of 'artistic research' that make it different from other forms of research?*

When it comes to discriminating or demarcating artistic research from other advanced mode-2 forms for knowledge production, I would simply say that there are two features, which are characteristic of artistic research when compared to other approaches. Firstly, there are methodological prescriptions; and you could say that artistic research takes place in and through the making of art, making it distinct from, for instance, humanities research into the same issues. Secondly, there is the outcome of artistic research, which, partly at least, is art. I say 'partly', because people differ in opinion about the amounts to which discursive aspects might be added to the artistic outcome. For sure, if there is no concrete practice or artwork as a part of the outcome of an artistic research project, then in my opinion it could not count as artistic research. Here we have two criteria, which discriminate artistic research from other advanced forms of knowledge production that might address the same issues: one is that it is in and through creating or performing that the research is done; and the other is that the outcomes of artistic research are partly also concrete artistic products—artefacts, installations, compositions, and so on.

*In this case, would you not worry about the potential impact of art market structures on artistic research, i.e. what is counted as art or artwork in the market? Does artistic research then not have to buy into limited forms of art making, whilst the more advanced or more ephemeral practices (which might not necessarily produce a work or anything identifiable as such) would actually be disadvantaged? Would we not rather expect the opposite; namely, that artistic research if anything would mount a challenge against any traditional definition of art and its objects?*

Yes, I see the danger, but then again, I think that with the introduction of artistic research we have created—and we are still creating—a free space also in opposition to the demands of the market, to the creative industries, to the daily strains of production—a free space for ‘material thinking’, to use the term of Paul Carter. As a consequence, I am not that afraid that the whole endeavour of artistic research will be in one way or another corrupted by the demands of the market. I think on the contrary that it might be the case that in performing artistic research we can have some influence over what counts as art, and as an interesting prospect not only within academia but also within the art world. That is rather optimistic, I think; but it might be the case that in the future not only our understanding of what academia is might change, but also that of art.

*So, you see artistic research as having a strategic role in these transformations?*

Well, this is a part of the side agenda. It is not the first thing I think about, but it might add some extra benefits. Whether to call it ‘strategic’ or not, I am not that sure.

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*Fig. 1:* Klotz, Heinrich (ed.) 1991. *Matjuschin und die Leningrader Avantgarde* (Catalogue of the correspondent exhibition. ZKM Karlsruhe). Stuttgart and Munich: Oktogon, 124.

*Fig. 2:* Barck, Karlheinz. 2002. 'Die Russische Akademie der künstlerischen Wissenschaften als europäischer Inkubationsort' in *Trajekte. Zeitschrift des Zentrums für Literaturforschung* 4: 4.

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