

Imagined Meetings

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What are the origins of the concept of 'expositionality'?

We at the Journal for Artistic Research (*JAR*) have actually coined this concept, although I have seen it popping up in different contexts, not always in the sense that we intend. 'Expositionality' is *JAR*'s most basic critical concept, providing that one keeps in mind that 'exposing practice as research' could be replaced by 'staging practice as research', if this is more suitable, or 'curating practice as research', or 'performing practice as research', etc. It does not really matter what specific term is used as long as a practice is seen to redouble itself. Practice is not only done, but is also put into its own epistemic perspective.

Therefore, we are dealing with a multiplicity of local knowledges and local practices which we cannot compare against a given framework. We can engage with each of those, but this engagement is – in a positive sense – problematic. We do not act on a stable ground, which is an interesting and necessary place to be.

In most presentations I have witnessed, when I enter a space where practice is exposed as research, a negotiation starts; where do I find myself in relation to it, what do I get out of it, and, actually, what is the 'what' that I am getting? Is it an experience? Is it a propositional piece of knowledge? Those things are quite unclear before their space is entered. For good reasons, one normally doesn't know what is going to happen.

The emphasis on a material practice exposing itself has, as a consequence, a locality of almost autonomous status. In the introduction to *The Exposition of Artistic Research: Publishing Art in Academia*, Henk Borgdorff and I stress two values: (1) self-determination – practice can self-determine its own exposition as research; and (2) indetermination – a practice can be anything, that is, there are no criteria to include or exclude something. What we thus find are objects or agencies, which are part of those performative situations that change what we think, what we know, and who we are in those situations.

This is a very different model of knowledge when compared with 'written outputs' and an idea of academic writing that needs to be fulfilled.

What are the implications of expositonality when the context is art and not academia?

Academia is an institution, which is part of such a negotiation. Art is also an institution, and it, likewise, affects what is possible and also desirable. In both cases, if the institutions that are implied are interested in different things, I see people having problems getting their real concerns into spaces of negotiation. Thus, audiences that require particular modes of engagement have to be produced and cannot be assumed. A space for 'artistic research' is not a given that I could simply utilise – something has to happen at that point.

But aren't 'the art world' and 'the academic world' incredible generalisations?

Good point – the idea of locality should be applied to those concepts as well. At the same time, one needs to acknowledge that there are pressures to homogenise what may be local situations. What we might know as 'diversity' is actually under threat, within conditions that operate with very narrow economic support structures and quite particular modes of behaviour, and where some things are gratified and others aren't, etc. This is the case for 'academia' as much as for 'contemporary art'.

Given those forces, it is unclear whether a radical position of locality is tenable. At the same time, following a certain trajectory of art, having to try to realise this impossible situation is an almost natural continuation.

Thus, we should assume that the knowledges that might be produced, must be difficult to assimilate in discourses that are assumed to happen *precisely in those knowledge economies that are enacted through and in these institutions*. This means, however, that 'failure' (e.g., to communicate) needs to be integrated as merit into particular expository situations and not simply experienced, for example, as personal failure when confronted with certain academic expectations. This would allow one to see another kind of 'failure', namely the failure of academia to actually understand the difficulties of artistic researchers, who have to make knowledge work on its *own* grounds. Thus, there is this political edge to 'artistic research' that almost forces researchers to discuss the conditions under which they write their PhDs while writing it, or hang their exhibition while hanging it, etc.

However, I have the sense that today this kind of fragmentation also applies to other fields of research, e.g., in the sciences. A wider acceptance of such complications may now be developing. For example, notions of 'transdisciplinarity' or 'mode 2 knowledge pro-

duction', which are slowly gaining hold in the sciences, may actually come more naturally to contemporary artists who have already been working in post-media conditions for a long time.

Do notions of radical locality pose ethical dilemmas, since people – being differently localised – may also be excluded?

At *JAR*, we are faced with this problem very concretely, for example, when we receive submissions from non-Western contexts. On the one hand, being an open-access, online publication, we claim global reach; on the other hand, the assumption that such a research publication sits nicely in all those other, local contexts is an illusion.

Such ethical considerations are not only relevant on a global scale with massive geographic distances, but also on a local scale where two practices may be radically different. Thus, we always have to think about an 'other', with whom I might not share ground but whom I still want to encounter. Yet, at the same time, I don't want to assume a ground based on my tradition, history, or discipline that would facilitate this encounter. In fact, research concerns in contemporary art often deal implicitly or explicitly precisely with those questions. Following Peter Osborne, one may even suggest that in dealing with those questions art might become contemporary.

How do you engage with a material that is first of all alien? How do you encounter a material in such a way that you don't cancel it out by imposing an idea onto it, so it becomes what you want it to be rather than what you were interested in in the first place?

Does this not highlight a problem with peer review also in other fields of research?

Yes and no. Seeing your peers as your locals strengthens processes of peer review. At the same time, this locality implies difference so that 'agreement' as a starting point becomes less interesting when compared with the beginning of a critical discussion.

One doesn't expect peers to validate a piece of research for an abstract, generalised audience. But, if it is a discourse amongst a very small group of people, the question is: how would you in a publication or exhibition space negotiate the difference in opinion (and not just treat peer review as a seal of approval)? The question of agreement becomes particularly problematic when peer review is used to distribute funding...

If knowledge is negotiated in localised, transformative situations, does one not need to be concerned about a possible instrumentalisation of practice?

While I wanted to highlight the space in which such negotiation can happen, I also wanted to suggest that its epistemic and ethical aspects allow us to precisely critique the instrumentalisation of knowledge. One would need to argue that instrumental processes cannot be truly transformational, since they remain fixed on a predicted goal, like a production process, rather than on a more radical transformational potential for all partners who enter the negotiation. By ‘transformation’, I don’t mean simply the transformation of somebody else, but the transformation of a situation and of all parties, which makes it impossible to imagine a non-affected operator of such an instrument.

Processes of transformation may be open or closed (i.e., instrumentalised). One may say that the level of criticality – that is, the degree to which we allow ourselves to be challenged by a transformative situation – defines the ethical status of the situation, since through it all participants, human or otherwise, are given space (or not). This does not mean that the situation homogenises the participants, but rather that it highlights their particularity and difference, since the same situation is necessarily experienced differently – a difference that cannot be breached.

Of course, part of the pressure on artist-researchers stems from the increasing grip techno-science has on notions of research, as expressed, for example, in debates around ‘impact’. This is why there is a necessary political dimension to the project of artistic research, which would lose its art if it complied.

Are you not looking for mutations rather than transformations?

‘Mutation’ sounds perhaps too random... I don’t really know what happens outside a handful of very specific projects, so perhaps my choice of expression may be biased. There may not be a general answer to the required degrees of openness.

The question also highlights my current mode of speaking about ‘artistic research’, which uses some generalisations and abstractions. However, what is the ground on which I can actually characterise what we conveniently call ‘a field’? This may also be the reason why there is so little useful literature around. People may be hesitant about making statements with any generality in order to avoid qualifying other things not known to them. This may also be the reason why people hedge statements by relating them continuously to themselves.

At the same time, because the debates about politics and ethics tend to be general, this may result in a lack of perceived contribution, where highly personal statements don’t add up to a chain,

giving them much less weight and potential for change, in particular when institutions are concerned.

Isn't there a danger of ending up nowhere, since it becomes so relative?

We are dealing here with the fallout of what one may call 'the post-structural situation', which for many has led into relativism and 'anything goes'. So the question for us is; how do we relate to notions of the quality of a work, of a situation, etc., if you say that you cannot have a general descriptor of what it is that has a quality?

We can still relate to something concrete though, but following the criticism mounted by post-structuralism we have learned not to universalise this relationship. What is still missing are convincing approaches that parallel the critical dimension of deconstructive philosophy, which took away presumed objectivity but did not account for what has and may still be called 'creativity'. Why do some things still prevail despite our best efforts to deconstruct them?

From within 'artistic research' – whatever this is – few voices have discussed this problem. More work has been done in philosophy, but here we are faced with the problem that philosophers tend to speak about something (e.g., art) without problematising their mode of speech; that is, without having an expositional relationship to their own practice. This is why notions of 'immanence' are so important and, following this, people such as Laruelle, who challenge philosophy's tendency to transcend localities of the kind we have been talking about. Hence his quest for non-philosophy, which may best be described as 'thinking'.

The kinds of expositions that *JAR* is looking for could perhaps be characterised as immanent philosophy; that is, a philosophy not associated with the discipline of philosophy as we know it, but which remains interested in the transcendental. How would you recognise this and as what? Philosophy? Artistic research? It would be interesting to take certain artists and certain situations and claim philosophy for them, not in an orthodox manner, but as the kind of philosophy that we seek.

An edited transcript of parts of a seminar, 'Imagined Meetings', held at the Royal College of Art, London, on 14 January 2015.