

# The Debate on Research in the Arts

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## Research definitions

The Research Assessment Exercise and the Arts and Humanities Research Council both employ research definitions (albeit different ones) that enable them to judge research projects in terms of eligibility criteria. I am intentionally drawing here again on the UK situation, because the official bodies charged with funding research there are explicit about their assessment standards. The definition of the RAE is briefly: ‘original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding.’

If we also take this broad definition of research as a benchmark for research in the arts – and I see no reason not to do so as of yet – then we can use it to derive the following criteria:

- (1) The investigation should be *intended* as research. Inadvertent (fortuitous) contributions to knowledge and understanding cannot be regarded as research results.
- (2) Research involves *original* contributions – that is, the work should not previously have been carried out by other people, and it should add new insights or knowledge to the existing corpus.
- (3) The aim is to enhance *knowledge and understanding*. Works of art contribute as a rule to the artistic universe. That universe encompasses not only the traditional aesthetic sectors; today it also includes areas in which our social, psychological and moral life is set in motion in other ways – other performative, evocative and non-discursive ways. Hence we can speak of research in the arts only when the practice of art delivers an intended, original contribution to what we know and understand.

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There are three ways to ask what makes art research distinctive in relation to current academic and scientific research: by posing an ontological, an epistemological and a methodological question.

The ontological question is (a): What is the nature of the object, of the subject matter, in research in the arts? To what does the research address itself? And in what respect does it thereby differ from other scholarly or scientific research?

The epistemological question is (b): What kinds of knowledge and understanding are embodied in art practice? And how does that knowledge relate to more conventional types of academic knowledge?

The methodological question is (c): What research methods and techniques are appropriate to research in the arts? And in what respect do these differ from the methods and techniques in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities?

Obviously one should not expect all these questions to be answered within the confines of this article. What I shall do below is to define the space within which the answers can be given. These parameters could be an aid in the struggle for legitimacy and autonomy for the research domain of the arts.

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### **The Methodological Question**

Before I turn to the question of which methods and techniques of investigation are appropriate to research in the arts, and in what respects they may differ from those in other scholarly domains, it seems wise to draw a distinction between the terms 'method' and 'methodology'. In the debate on research in the arts, the term 'methodology' is frequently used at times when one simply means 'method' in the singular or plural. Although 'methodology' may sound more weighty, the procedures it refers to can usually be less mystifyingly called 'methods'. I am following here the suggestion made by Ken Friedman in an exchange of views about research training in the arts, when he proposed using 'methodology' exclusively to refer to the comparative study of methods. A 'method' is then simply a well-considered, systematic way of reaching a particular objective.

The central question here is: Is there a characteristic, privileged way of obtaining access to the research domain of art practice and the knowledge embodied in it, a route that could be denoted by the term ‘artistic research’? Under what premises can such research be done, and, in conjunction with this, should such research orient itself to or conform to approved academic (or scientific) standards and conventions? Here, too, opinions in the debate differ widely, and it is not always clear whether a person’s stance is informed by considerations pertinent to the issue or by motives that are essentially extraneous to art research. Individuals and institutions that have an interest in using partly institutional means to protect their activities, for example against the bureaucratic world of the universities, may be more inclined to adopt an ‘independent’ course than those who are less afraid of selling their body and soul.

One distinction from more mainstream scholarly research is that research in the arts is generally performed by artists. In fact, one could argue that *only* artists are capable of conducting such practice-based research. But if that is the case, objectivity then becomes an urgent concern, as one criterion for sound academic research is a fundamental *indifference* as to who performs the research. Any other investigator ought to be able to obtain the same results under identical conditions. Do artists have privileged access to the research domain, then? The answer is yes. Because artistic creative processes are inextricably bound up with the creative personality and with the individual, sometimes idiosyncratic gaze of the artist, research like this can best be performed ‘from within’. Moreover, the activity at issue here is research in art practice, which implies that creating and performing are themselves part of the research process – so who else besides creators and performers would be qualified to carry them out? Now this blurring of the distinction between subjects and objects of study becomes further complicated by the fact that the research is often of partial, or even primary, benefit to the artist-researcher’s own artistic development. Obviously there must be limits. In cases where the impact of research remains confined to the artist’s own oeuvre and has no significance for the wider research context, then one can justifiably ask whether this qualifies as research in the true sense of the word.

Just as with the ontology and epistemology of research in the arts, the issue of methodology may also be further clarified by a comparison with mainstream scholarship. Taking the broad classification into three academic

domains as a reference, we can make the following rough generalizations about the different methods associated with them. As a rule, the natural sciences have an empirical-deductive orientation; that is, their methods are experimental and are designed to explain phenomena. Experiments and laboratory settings are characteristic of natural science research. The social sciences are likewise empirically oriented as a rule; their methods are usually not experimental, however, but are primarily designed to describe and analyze data. Quantitative and qualitative analysis exemplify social science research. One method developed in the social science disciplines of ethnography and social anthropology is participant observation. This approach acknowledges the mutual interpenetration of the subject and object of field research, and might serve to an extent as a model for some types of research in the arts. The humanities are as a rule more analytically than empirically oriented, and they focus more on interpretation than on description or explanation. Characteristic forms of research in the humanities are historiography, philosophical reflection and cultural criticism.

If we compare various fields of scholarship with one another and ask (1) whether they are exact or interpretive in nature, (2) whether they seek to identify universal laws or to understand particular and specific instances, and (3) whether experimentation plays a part in their research, then we arrive at the following schematic structure. Pure mathematics is generally an exact, universally valid and non-experimental science. The natural sciences likewise seek to generate exact knowledge that corresponds to universal laws or patterns, but which, contrary to mathematical knowledge, is often obtained by experimental means. These can be contrasted with art history (to cite just one example from the humanities), which is not primarily interested in formulating precise, universal laws, but more in gaining access to the particular and the singular through interpretation. Experimentation plays virtually no role there at all.

The distinctive position that arts research occupies in this respect now comes into view. Research in the arts likewise generally aims at interpreting the particular and the unique, but in this type of research practical experimentation is an essential element. Hence, the answer to the question of art research methodology is briefly that the research design incorporates both experimentation and participation in practice and the interpretation of that practice.

In summary, research in the arts is performed by artists as a rule, but their research envisages a broader-ranging impact than the development of their own artistry. Unlike other domains of knowledge, art research employs both experimental and hermeneutic methods in addressing itself to particular and singular products and processes. If we now take together these explorations of the ontological, epistemological and methodological facets of research in the arts and condense them into one brief formula, we arrive at the following characterization:

*Art practice – both the art object and the creative process – embodies situated, tacit knowledge that can be revealed and articulated by means of experimentation and interpretation.*