

**Beyond “Reflective Practice”:
Breaking Glass in your Room Again**

Rolf Hughes

I gave up talking long ago to anyone about money or art. When these two things meet, something is always wrong: art is either under- or overpaid.

Heinrich Böll, *The Clown*

Besides, you can't teach old fleas new dogs.

Federico Fellini

Henk Borgdorff titled a recent article “Where are we today? The state of the art in artistic research.”ⁱ For this occasion I prefer to consider where we might be tomorrow – i.e. where artistic research might lead. Having attended many earnest discussions emphasising “reflective practice” as the passport for practitioners in the artistic disciplines to enter the realm of research, I today feel that a number of orthodoxies spawned by this debate may be causing a form of mental cramps. While it is generally agreed that a) a heightened understanding and contextualisation of creative process will lead to an overdue modification of existing research paradigms b) that a concept such as artistic research is valuable as a corrective to existing research epistemologies and methodologies and c) artistic research also gives a name to an individual type within the extended ‘family’ of research (siblings such as “design-led research”, “practice-based research”, and their many variants, may also be symptomatic of a transitional phase), yet I am concerned that a cult of creative disciplines might emerge, one in which initiates assume the default bunker mentality of cults, namely that those outside its erected fortifications are hostile and bent on contaminating the essential purity of their established mindset with their own alien concepts. Paradigm change is invariably a protracted process. If the claims for artistic research at times sounds like special pleading, or even a form of affirmative action, as Ronald Jones has provocatively argued, we may be justified in looking ahead to try to discern what productive strategies might best lead us out of the varieties of status anxiety that has dominated so much of the debate thus far.ⁱⁱ I will propose that we may find more compelling lines of development in examining the *intersections* of our shared and evolving professional knowledge by occupying discursive positions both *beyond* and *within* our adopted professional identities. This is to propose forms of research inquiry that communicate (and inspire action) beyond the relatively narrow concerns of an audience limited to fellow practitioners of a given

discipline or family of disciplines. The questions that interest me are less connected to continuing speculation about the *identity* of artistic research (*what is it? what can it be?*), than to contesting questions of research relevance, impact and change (*what can it do?*). This in the belief that the research society will prioritise this century will likely relate less to identity (understanding) than to action (judgement, relevance, impact).

Borgdorff writes, "The controversies surrounding artistic research often turn on the problem of demarcation. What exactly distinguishes artistic research from artistic practice? And what distinguishes it from scientific or academic research? Underlying such demarcation problems is a question of legitimacy."ⁱⁱⁱ The question of legitimacy is indeed the chasm that separates the two treacherously-paired terms *artistic research*. What criteria might we establish for accepting "artistic research" as a) artistic and b) research? Should we even seek to establish "standards"? In an informal discussion, George Petelin proposes the following that might be applied to specific practices as criteria:

1. Evidence of innovation in the content, form, or technique of the work in relation to a respected genre of practice.
2. Relevance of the work to its social context and/or to discourses within its genre of practice.
3. Thoroughness of research, analysis, and experiment evident in its accomplishment or of work leading to its accomplishment.
4. A potential effectiveness (as judged by expert peer reviewers) to intellectually engage or to aesthetically affect an intended audience.

"The work and its contextualisation together (Petelin writes) would help the reviewers to rank submissions and to decide whether they are indeed 'artistic research' and not just art *or* research. And, of course, all criteria can have exceptions for which a special case may need to be made."^{iv}

This sounds reasonable enough, but the notion of 'ranking' artistic research projects or proposals introduces a complimentary problem – that of assessment and evaluation. Does artistic research begin with an explicit "purpose"? With stated "goals"? With an intended "outcome" that can be communicated in advance (and evaluated subsequently)? If not, the forms, conventions, genres of research may be out of date because they demand these sorts of statements, thereby initiating an inappropriate 'language game', one in which one confidently states a future that is actually

uncertain (otherwise no discovery and therefore no research). Most stress that established models of assessment from the sciences and humanities are simply not applicable to artistic research, at least without major modifications, but what then is appropriate as a measure of assessment? How might we establish a satisfactory basis for judgment? Is a community's sense of *quality* transferable or peer-specific? Can the established conventions of peer review serve the double demands of artistic research? Clearly, we need to work these questions through specific examples or case studies to understand them further – and our possible answers. The completion of the research project *Beyond and Within* is a welcome event in this respect.

Furthermore, the project expands our conception of what artistic research might be concerned with, and this too is a welcome contribution. Since Donald Schön's persuasive articulation of the reflective practitioner (1983), reflective practice has been valued for its capacity to yield rich empirical material concerning how things are made, and thereby insight into professional practice. For the practitioner, reflection on practice brings greater awareness, helps to identify, redefine or reframe recurring problems, to contextualise and thus develop the work. It can make creative processes more transparent, and open up the work for wider criticism, understanding, and appreciation. Individual reflection thus becomes part of an extended community of reflective practitioners (Refsum 2007). Borgdorff remarks, "A naive conception of art — of artworks, art production and art reception — is a thing of the past. (...) Artistic research is inseparably tied to the artistic development of individual artists, as well as to the development of the discipline or disciplines in which they work."v This is to embed artistic practice in a historically and theoretically informed reflexive practice. Without this historical and theoretical contextualisation, we are left with the notion that underpinning reflective practice is simply faith in the individual practitioner's capacity to unearth – and communicate – the significant aspects of their own process or practice via the somewhat fuzzy concept of "reflection". The twin risk of earnestness and solipsism is ever present. Is reflection always undertaken in good faith? Is there not a risk of self-dramatization, or even deliberate falsification of results? How does artistic research contribute to breakthrough knowledge within such a paradigm? As there are insufficient cases, as yet, to inform the development of a discussion around quality, we are often expected to accept this contribution on trust – hence the perceived need for 'translating' this type of knowledge from one audience to another. Enter the philosophers, academics, and displaced critics.

An alternative approach is to view artistic research as autonomous; as a bringing together of experiential, historical, theoretical and contextual forms of knowledge, revealing insight into professional expertise and skill alike. Artistic research in this view is a reflexive epistemology that yields insights into research practice (including various creative processes across the disciplines) in a broader sense. It produces new arenas in which “essentially contested concepts” can engage in gladiatorial combat (or, if you prefer, tango dancing on broken glass). It inspires material-focused curiosity coupled with entrepreneurial thinking unconstrained by the rigid logic of mono-disciplines or the conventions of existing artistic genres. It is speculative in the sense that Herbert Simon means when in *The Sciences of the Artificial* he distinguishes design from the natural sciences – “The natural sciences are concerned with how things are... design on the other hand is concerned with how things ought to be.”^{vi}

Combining an exploration of collaboration and organisational entrepreneurship (led by Åsa Johannisson) with an investigation of material properties (in this case, glass) and material knowledge (led by Nina Westman), the aptly-named multi-disciplinary research project “Beyond and Within” would appear to be one such case. Methodologies of performance-led organisational change co-exist with explorations of exhibition space as scenography, and these in turn frame investigations into glass as a choreographic tool, as an object, a vessel of communication inspired (literally) by the human spirit. This is artistic practitioner as simultaneously researcher and curator (or entrepreneur), bringing together disparate practices to create a system that is greater than the sum of its parts. The project therefore represents an excellent example of the symbiotic benefits of *strengthening* (practice) and *extending* (a disciplinary field) in research.

What, ultimately, is the project’s significance? Is it to strengthen the glass industry in Småland by bringing out the performative aspects of glass-blowing and thereby link craft to entertainment, experience design or tourism? To extend the field of circus arts by linking juggling, rope and pole, physical theatre and the like to the production of physical artefacts, the creation of which also involves skill, physical prowess, heat, danger? To elaborate craftsmanship through film-making, acting, mime, clown, glass blowing, dancing, music, set design and curating? To devise new means of co-operation? It is noticeable in the project that everyone involved – from Smålands Museum, Sveriges Glasmuseum and Regionteatern Blekinge Kronoberg, to Orrefors Kosta Boda – emphasises the value and pleasure of collaboration, raising the question as to whether the cultural artefact (the performance, film, exhibition etc.) is simply a tool towards this end of successful collaboration,

rather than (as we tend to assume) 'the thing itself'. One significant research outcome of such an approach might accordingly be described as the creation of *speculative, practice-based interdisciplinary methods*.

To what might such methods be applied? The question leads us into a different research landscape, the emerging features of which are only starting to be mapped. Perhaps *Lightness, Speed, Mobility, Locality, Situation, Conviviality, Learning, Literacy, Smartness, Flow*, as John Thackara (2005) proposes. Perhaps *Mind, Body, Law, Information, Networks, Language, Space, Time, Media, Money, Life and Water*, as Mark Turner (2009) suggests. Or what about adapting some of the reflexive values of artistic practice, such as those the late Italo Calvino (1988) advocates in relation to literary composition – *Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, Multiplicity, and Consistency*? And so begins a discussion of the core themes and values (others, naturally, are possible) that may steer artistic research away from the lure of the mirror towards new, satisfying forms of relevance and understanding. For interdisciplinary design thinkers, such forms will likely involve change (the aim to change a person or an organisation, for example, or to resolve a hitherto “wicked” problem), with each initiative pitching its tent according to evolving needs – on shifting sites of engagement.

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i

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See, for example, Ronald Jones "Omphaloskepsis", published in *Frieze* 14 May 2009. Available online: <http://www.frieze.com/comment/article/omphaloskepsis/>

iii

Borgdorff, 2010.

iv

George Petelin, Journal of Artistic Research Discussion Forum. Online: <http://jar-online.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9&hilit=Evidence+of+innovation+in+the+content+%2C+form> (Accessed 30 April 2010)

v

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