

# **Explicating the intuitive: interconnecting sensory, non-linguistic practice and discursive writing in artistic research**

Presentation at Multiplier seminar 'Feed-back, feed-forward: Approaches to artistic feedback in doctoral supervision'

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## **Explicating the intuitive**

How to assist the doctorate student in the arts in explicating the intuitive? That was the question I was invited to present my thoughts on for the Multiplier seminar 'Feed-back, feed-forward', organized by the Orpheus Institute in Gent. A challenging question indeed, and also one that cuts right to the heart of the matter: artistic research. 'Explicating the intuitive' aptly describes the paradoxical situation we find ourselves in, faced with the apparently impossible task of explicating the inexplicable.

According to Merriam Webster's dictionary, 'intuition' is the power or faculty that enables 'direct knowledge' without 'evident rational thought and inference'; it is 'immediate apprehension or cognition'; it is 'quick and ready insight'.<sup>1</sup> So here we are, trying everything we can to interfere with this direct, quick and ready knowledge through rational thinking. According to another source, the glossary of the University of Chicago: "Intuition in the broadest of terms means immediate apprehension." (...) 'Immediate' may also be used to signify the absence of interference, the absence of cause, the absence of justification, the absence of symbol, or the absence of thought."<sup>2</sup>

Is this not precisely what we ask our PhD students to do, to interfere with the direct and immediate flow of insight, to look for causes of intuited insights, perhaps even to justify them; and to create symbols or to develop rational thinking to explicate intuition? Small wonder, then, that our field of research is sometimes criticized for challenging artists to jump over their own shadow.

## **Intuition and artistic research**

Intuition plays a major role in any art practice - although of course not all art practices are equally intuitive; some may be of a more cerebral nature, such as conceptual art. It is precisely the quick knowing as described above that enables the practitioner to act on the spot and to improve working methods and level of performance. This quick knowing is usually the result of long years of training: training hand, body and ear in playing the violin, training visual perception and the hand and body (and their interaction) in visual art.

The intuitive nature of art practice has led to vehement discussions on 'the production of knowledge' in relation to artistic research; what does knowledge mean in this case? Is it transferable? And what kind of knowledge is this, tacit or implicit knowledge?

Scientific and scholarly research is usually driven by an intuitive and sometimes quite personal conviction,

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1 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intuition>, accessed 17 February 2021

2 <https://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/intuition.htm>, accessed 17 February 2021

even though superficially the opposite might seem the case. This is equally true for artistic research as it is for scientific research. The origin of a research project often lies with a clue or a hunch or a personal conviction of something, which is brought to the table with the aim of involving the attention of others (colleagues, peers, PhD supervisors). Through discursive activity - i.e. through the dialogue and interaction with peers, through writing and through the publication of the research - the progress of the research process and possible findings and insights are discussed and put to the test. The public dimension of doing research, i.e. the involvement of peers and colleagues, is at its core.

Therefore, when we talk about doing research in the field of art, what we are really talking about is making the artistic process public (insofar as it relates to a particular research project). Other than that there is no valid reason for talking about art practice, or the production of art, in terms of research.

So how does a research-art practice distinguish itself from a non-research art practice? In an institutional context, such as the context of PhD programmes for artistic research, it means that the artist<sup>3</sup> takes it upon herself to make statements about the thinking process and the production of the work. The researcher allows others (colleagues, peers, supervisors) to participate in this research process, entering into a discussion with them and opening herself up to critique. The researcher seeks the discussion in the public domain. Without public discussion and exchange with peers the research, as research, lacks its reason for existence.

In the art school, artists they may have been taught exactly the opposite, that is to make statements about their work or practice. They are trained to assert or to state what their art work or practice is about. Of course, writing a dissertation is quite the opposite of making statements. It is rather about problematizing and complicating one's ideas, convictions and insights. A dissertation is not a manifesto, and writing it takes immersion in a certain topic over an extensive period of time. Doubts and questions, complexity (in the sense of layerdness) of argument, rather than solutions or answers, is what matters here. In writing a dissertation one does not remain in the domain of assertion.

The PhD student enters a challenging field of tension at this point, having to do with the nature of writing a PhD dissertation. A dissertation is a specific genre that differs from other types of text. It calls for a coherent argument and it is demonstrative by nature: the thinking process, and the consecutive steps taken in building in the argument, will have to be articulated and explained. Therefore, besides the personal conviction or intuition, there is the need for logical reasoning: showing where one is in the thinking process and in the construction of the argument, and clarifying next steps. The dissertation embodies the logic of an encounter, of becoming acquainted, of acquainting oneself. The point here is not to let go of or even destroy the intuitive insight by rationalizing it, but rather to return to it time and again, to trust it as a measure, yardstick or guide all the way through the research process.

As Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi reminds us: "Thinking art is not about imposing a general overlay on its practice. The last thing it should be about is forcing art to fit into another discipline's categories and holding it to them. It is about putting art and philosophy, or theory and practice, on the same creative plane, in the same ripple pool. Art and philosophy, theory and practice, can themselves resonate and effectively fuse. Thinking-feeling art philosophically can intensify art's speculative edge. It's totally unnecessary to put theory and practice at odds with each other."<sup>4</sup>

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3 Unless otherwise specified, in this text the term 'artist' is used in a general sense, referring to varying artistic disciplines.

4 In an interview conducted with Arjen Mulder at V2 in Rotterdam: 'The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens', published in 2008, [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org), accessed Marc 2 2021, p. 37.

## A re-evaluation of practice

In artistic research, the art practice is at the heart of the research and the research question will originate from it. In other words, PhD students depart from their practice, from the domain with which they are intimately familiar and where they have expert knowledge. From here, interdisciplinary connections will be made to other fields of knowledge.

Over the past decades, in the field of the sciences a certain re-evaluation or rehabilitation of practice can be witnessed in relation to theory. New Materialist modes of thinking are largely accountable for this change in perspective on the role of practice in scientific research. In the sciences, 'practice' has long been, and often still is, regarded as subordinate and subservient to theory. Many scholars look down on practice as being merely the handwork in the laboratory that is needed to support or offer proof of theory. The truly important work is of a theoretical nature, that is, the work of the mind. The struggle of art academies in Europe to gain recognition for artistic research by universities, can largely be explained by this hegemony of theory.

From an historical point of view, the hierarchy of theory over practice in Western culture has originated in the age-old tradition of valuing *vita contemplativa* over *vita activa*. The predominance of mind over body can be traced back to Plato and to Saint Augustine's embracing of platonic thinking, as argued by Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* (1978). Like Plato, Aristotle held deductive thinking in high esteem and downplayed experiment.

According to the American philosopher Ian Hacking (*Representing and Intervening*, 1983), the disbalance of theory and experiment was reversed with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, in particular with the thinking of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). During the scientific revolution, practical experiment "was officially declared to be the royal road to knowledge, and the schoolmen were scorned because they argued from books instead of observing the world around them."<sup>5</sup> But times have changed, Hacking tells us, and today the history of the sciences is almost always written as a history of theory rather than of experiment: philosophers of science "constantly discuss theories and representations of reality, but say almost nothing about experiment, technology, or the use of knowledge to alter the world." Hacking notes that the theory/experiment status difference is "modelled on social rank". His *Representing and Intervening* contests the theory-dominated history of science. It is Hacking's conviction that "a question posed in terms of theory and experiment is misleading because it treats theory as one rather uniform kind of thing and experiment as another".<sup>6</sup>

Earlier in the 20th century, the Spanish philosopher and social theorist José Ortega y Gasset addressed the state of affairs in a series of lectures at the university of Santander, published as *Méditation sur la Technique* (1935). Without technique, Ortega y Gasset argues, man could not exist and would never have existed. Yet it is the policy, even the foundation, of the University (written by him with capital U) to ignore technique by completely excluding it from its own sphere and by delegating it to specialized schools. Therefore scholars educated by the University find themselves "paralyzed in the face of the most pressing problems of their time", while on their side the engineers, lacking the "synthetic and panoramic education that only the University has to offer", are incapable of dealing with problems that technique poses for mankind.<sup>7</sup> According to Ortega y Gasset, human life is 'fundamentally' production and fabrication.

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5 Hacking 1983, 149.

6 Ibid. 162

7 Ortega y Gasset 2017, 10.

Production therefore is primary, and thought, theory and science follow from it.

For Hacking, practice is characterized by experiment and by the intervention in reality (instead of the representation of reality). Hacking calls himself an 'ontological realist' who believes the entities, states and processes described by correct theories are real, and not mere "constructs of the human mind for organizing our experiments".<sup>8</sup> In certain respect, Hacking's *Representing and Intervening* anticipates New Materialist modes of thinking.<sup>9</sup> Under the heading of New Materialism, a diverse group of thinkers is brought together who agree in one fundamental respect: the existence of a reality, or a world, of objects *out there*, independent of our gaze and of our knowledge of them, independent also of our access to these objects. These thinkers aim "to preserve the autonomy and irreducibility of substance".<sup>10</sup> New Materialism embodies the attempt to leave Kant and Hume behind and to sidestep the subject-object divide. Contempt for practice signifies the subject-object distinction, or the Cartesian habit of mind that the New Materialists aim to overcome.

A leading proponent of this strain of thinking is the American philosopher and physicist Karen Barad, even though she does not like use the term New Materialism, preferring 'agential realism'. Barad's ambition is "to contribute to the founding of a new ontology, epistemology and ethics, including a new understanding of the nature of scientific practices". Agential realism is to be understood "as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the roles of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices", in an attempt "to rethink fundamental concepts that support binary thinking including the notions of matter, discourse, causality, agency, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, space, and time."<sup>11</sup>

Barad emphasizes that "agential realism does not merely offer a unified theory of cultural and natural forces, but inquires into the very *practices* through which they are differentiated."<sup>12</sup> Agential realism wants to provide an understanding of 'materialization', recognizing 'matter's dynamism'. It is not the scope of this text to offer an interpretation of Barad's rich and complex thinking. I want to focus here on the central role of matter and materialization, and of practice, in her philosophy. Barad does not refer to matter as a fixed substance, but rather as a process of 'iterative intra-activity'. 'Matter', in her view, "refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization".<sup>13</sup>

Barad shares Hacking's critique of representationalism and his 'nonrepresentationalist realist account' of scientific practices. She elaborates his critique by proposing that both experimenting and theorizing are "dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects, and matter and meaning".<sup>14</sup> Theorizing and experimentation, according to Barad, are not about intervening, because 'intervening' implies an intervention into a given situation or into reality from the outside. Theorizing and experimentation are rather about what she calls 'intra-acting from within', that is, as part of the phenomena produced, in a reciprocal entanglement.

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8 Hacking 1983, 2

9 The New Materialist strain of thinking goes by a number of different names, among which New Materialism, Object Oriented Ontology, and Speculative Realism.

10 Bryant 2011, 26

11 Barad, 25,26.

12 Ibid., 66

13 Ibid., 151

14 Ibid., 56.

Barad brings theory and experiment closer together and, rather than reversing hierarchies between theory and practice, aims to break down the barriers between the two. She is undoing the 'fracture' between them, as Bruno Latour calls it: "The difference between theory and practice is no more a given than the difference between content and context, nature and society. It is a divide that has been made. More exactly, it is a unity that has been fractured by the blow of a powerful hammer."<sup>15</sup>

'Objective' knowing, the knowing from a distance, does not exist, Barad asserts: "Knowing is direct material engagement, a cutting together-apart, where cuts do violence but also open and rework the agential conditions of possibility. There is not this knowing from a distance. Instead of there being a separation of subject and object, there is an entanglement of subject and object. [...] Objectivity, instead of being about offering an undistorted mirror image of the world, is about accountability to marks on bodies, and responsibility to the entanglements of which we are a part."<sup>16</sup>

## **The Research Question**

The research question serves as a key instrument in explicating the intuitive and will keep the researcher focused during the whole research trajectory. In fact, doing research is essentially a way of asking questions, guided by a central research question. Often, this central question is only revealed at the completion of the research project: "Aha, now this is the question that has haunted me over all these years – this is what I wanted to find an answer to!" The question evolved over time and was adapted during the different phases of the research process. The difficulty, then, is to find the initial question, which should be well formulated and viable, being productive enough to set off the research process. It is important to note here that the research question does not call for an easy answer or solution, but rather points in the opposite direction, of complicating and questioning assumptions and ideas.

Finding and articulating the initial question is a challenge to PhD-researchers in every field, but especially so for researchers in the field of artistic research. This is, firstly, because artistic research is rooted in and deals with sensory perception. There is a gap to be bridged between sensory perception and experiential, non-linguistic content on the one hand and linguistic modes of argument on the other (Biggs, 2004). In artistic research, the research relates theoretical discursivity, which is expressed in writing, to artistic practice and sensory perception. The research question has to do justice to this interconnection of sensory, non-linguistic practice and discursive writing. In finding the question, then, the artist-researcher to a certain extent has to jump over her own shadow and distance herself from the practice.

Secondly, the idiosyncratic nature of each individual art practice (and of artworks) does not necessarily predispose artists to communicate questions arising from their practice with others and to share their dilemmas and insights with peers. There is a certain lack of experience and exercise in this respect, which may explain why PhD-students in artistic research sometimes have trouble making the distinction between information and argument, as well as between a subjective view on things and argument (the argument being the objectivization of a personal perspective).

The research question functions in a number of different ways. It will help the researcher to clarify the topic and to limit or restrict herself to the issue at hand. In her book *Thinking with Whitehead*, Belgian philosopher Isabel Stengers observes that "we must limit ourselves to the problem that has been raised,

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15 Latour, 267

16 In an interview with Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, in R. Dolphijn and I. van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, Ann Arbor (Michigana, US): Open Humanities Press, 2012, 52.

and trust our problem"<sup>17</sup> and "the limit of a problem is neither a weakness nor a defect. What is a weakness or a defect is to forget that limit; to forget that a problem has a price, to forget that the concepts created respond to a question, not to a vision"<sup>18</sup>.

Doing research, then, requires complete surrender to the research question. There is a strong connection between restriction or limitation on the one hand, and the creation of value or meaning on the other. Surrender to the research question involves taking the problem that is raised seriously, "trusting it", in the words of Stengers. She explains that "there are two modes of 'trusting': the implicit one presupposed by our certainties and habits, and the riskier one, which exposes the thinker to adventure." It is, of course, the riskier one that interests us here.

What is meant by 'adventure' is illustrated by a metaphor used by Whitehead: the 'foothold of the mind'. It means that we must have confidence in our attributions and definitions, "at their risks and perils, uniqueness and continuity as facts of nature (...) as mountain climbers take advantage of what offers them a foothold".<sup>19</sup> Like a mountain climber, the researcher gropes her way upward, searching for a position to enable the next step, "for everything that acts as a landmark must offer a foothold for memory and judgment"<sup>20</sup>. According to Whitehead, "The feeling of trust makes experience a field of experimentation. It is therefore the condition for every form of creation."<sup>21</sup> In other words, a particular experience (or observation, insight or intuition) becomes a research subject that enables the experimentation with this particular experience by trusting it, by surrendering to it.

Here it should be noted that the experimental foothold is not 'invented' or 'created' by the researcher. It is 'offered', as a gift yielded by the experiment, the foothold exists out there, as part of 'nature'. In other words, the experimental adventure is a two-way traffic. This, then, is where trust comes in: that there will be a two-way traffic, that there will be reverberation and response, and that win climber higher or digging deeper) more will always be found. And only through the restriction to a specific problem or question a next foothold be found.

The struggle in finding the research question may have different causes. Often it results from a lack of awareness on the part of the artist-researcher of her position in the discursive field, as well as a lack of awareness of a specific perspective on the topic that is addressed. Also, as most artistic research-projects are interdisciplinary, researchers initially tend to get lost in a new field of study.

Again, Stengers can be of help here. She asks: "What are the questions that make you think, around which the demands that define what matters for you are organized?"<sup>22</sup> This implies that the question is complex or layered, consisting of sub-questions ("the organization of the demands that define what matters for you") and that the question is highly personal: what matters to you, what makes you think? It is intimately connected with a general sense of importance, an importance that in the incipient phase of the research may not yet be fully understood. It is mainly felt, it is the conviction that "this is important". The general sense of importance will be made specific in the course of the research, through detailed investigation and concentrated attention.

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17 Stengers 2011, 58

18 Ibid. 93

19 Ibid. 91

20 Ibid. 75

21 As quoted by Stengers 2011, 59

22 Ibid. 22

In *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead reflects on the concept of 'importance' as follows: "One characterization of importance is that it is that aspect of feeling whereby a perspective is imposed upon the universe of things felt.... The two notions of importance and perspective are closely intertwined".<sup>23</sup> There is, he says, "no importance in a vacuum". Importance means selection, it is "this rather than that". A perspective is posed on the universe, on what is out there, because in order to deal with the universe, in order to deal with "matter-of-fact" (factuality, that which is given), we need to select. Selection "requires the notion of relative importance in order to give it meaning". We know there is always more, we may even have a vague sense of this "more" and of its potential. But in order to move forward in the inquiry, the researcher selects, and through this selection process she may be able to access more of the wider range of potential. The selection (restriction, limitation) actually creates more space, which Whitehead calls "elbow room". It is freedom to move.

The research question is found and developed with the help of peers. Research is the communication of one's insights with peers, it is making one's presuppositions explicit, in a process of questioning and being questioned. Therefore the researcher should decide on her peers and on the field of knowledge she wants to engage with: "Who are my colleagues? What definition of what matters do I share with them? To what tests shall my proposition be subjected? What is the field of knowledge I want to engage myself with?" asks Stengers<sup>24</sup>. The research question, which originates in a subjective perspective on things, will be objectivized in a systematic approach, leading up to a coherent argument.

Articulating the research question and finding a way to explicate the intuitive is a matter of paying due attention. This is to say there is a debt to be paid; and the kind of debt to be paid is a carefully and attentively phrased question. To arrive there, conditions must be created that will allow the researcher to sort branches of knowledge, to determine which of them are illusory, which of them are 'subjective', and which are worthy of defining an 'object' - all the while trusting that in digging deeper one will always find more.

I conclude by presenting in précis form the evolution of the research questions of a particular PhD student, questions that constitute the framework for meaningful feedback on the artwork itself.

### **An example: development of a research question by Joost Grootens**

In the following, I present different stages of in the development of the research question of one of my former PhD students, graphic designer Joost Grootens (who graduated in 2020).

**2015:** The first version of the research question was overly complex and windy, addressing many different topics all at once. In fact, it is hard to deduce from this question what the actual focus of the research was going to be:

*Today's complex streams of information call for condensed representations of data, causing renewed interest in maps. How can we understand this supposedly 'neutral' design typology as an instrument of politics, culture and technology, and further develop its potential to combine representation of data with the creation of edited visual content?*

The subsequent version was, by contrast, overly simple. In fact it was more a statement or assumption than a question to which the words "what is" were added. However, it became clear that the focus of the

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23 Whitehead 1968, 11.

24 Ibid. 22

research would be on the design of maps. From now on, the focus would be on map design, and no longer on the field of graphic design in general:

*What is the influence of digital technology on the visual rhetoric of the map?*

**2016:** Then followed a more concrete question that incorporated specific concepts, such as 'rhetorical devices', 'map designer', and 'manipulation'.

*What are the rhetorical devices of the map designer in the information age?*

*How does the graphic language of a map manipulate its user?*

**2017:** Next, the concept of 'tactics' was introduced, and the perspective of the user was temporarily (as it would turn out) out of sight:

*How did the tactics of map design respond to technological changes in graphic tools?*

**2018:** This was then rephrased in a more precise way:

*How did the tactics of map design respond to technological changes in tools to create, record, edit, produce and distribute visual information?*

An important new step in the research project was marked by the introduction of the notion of post-representationalism, which at first led to a proliferation of the research question into several questions:

*Can a post-representational reading of new map making practices reveal something about the continuous transformation of graphic design?*

*How can graphic design as a field be reshaped into a broad set of practices beyond the narrow confines of design as specialised activity?*

*Can this research be a model for one of these practices?*

**2019:** Leading to:

*Can a post-representational reading of current map making practices reveal something about the continuous transformation of graphic design? And if so, how?*

*Can graphic design as a field be reshaped into a broad set of practices beyond the narrow confines of design as specialized activity? And if so, how?*

And then to the final question:

*What can a post-representational reading of contemporary mapmaking practices reveal about the blurring of the producer-user divide in graphic design?*

The final research question is well formulated and productive, incorporating the main points of focus of the research project; addressing subjective concerns (the position of the graphic designer) and the practice of the researcher (map design), as well as general issues that are relevant to contemporary design practices (post-representationalism, producer-user divide).

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