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# The Non-Researchable

'Art as research' is not research.  
And 'research on art' does not exist.

In the first part of my text, a parallel development is observed in the expansion of artistic research on the one hand and a simultaneous decline in music and art forms that either lack narrativity or partially or even constitutively elude discursivity. Artistic research is thus called upon not only to promote and illuminate academic-artistic debate and, in its wake, the public perception of the arts, but also to restrict it in striking and incisive ways, or even - albeit unintentionally - to obscure and obstruct it.

The second part takes this negative finding a step further by questioning the label 'research'. However, the primary aim here is to outline a way of thinking and formulating that has an alternative to the concept of research in mind.<sup>1</sup>

## Part 1

### Research Erases the Non-Researchable

The university art discourse in the more recent disciplines of artistic research finds its counterpart in the current rapid withdrawal of abstract art or art of emptiness and refusal of expression. I have observed both in the last 20 years, i.e. since around 2005. Art such as "8 Grau" by Gerhard Richter, alongside other monochrome tendencies or other manifestations of a successor to the 'black square', has since disappeared from the 'market'. What has remained is a talkative art, a rhetorical art, an art that always has good (political, socio-critical) reasons - the art of good reason. Only such an art is accessible to research, only such an art can be used to make a statement. Research is therefore carried out where researchable things can be found. And what is no longer "researched" today, what is not accessible to research, no longer has a chance of being heard - how could it? How could silence make itself heard?

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<sup>1</sup> Part 1, "Research Erases the Unresearchable", was written in early 2024 at the request of an Austrian institute for artistic research for a planned book publication. However, after receiving the manuscript, the inquirers never got back to me. Apparently, its content was all too shocking and incompatible with the institute's standards. The expanded text presented here was delivered as a keynote lecture for the ARTikulationen symposium in Graz in October of the same year. And although I expected that Part 2 might be even more shocking, this time the clients were highly stimulated and interested in further discussions.

Musicology has always suffered from the fact that it has necessarily had to limit itself to what is discursively accessible - and has accordingly always been despised by the "real" musicians, who instinctively knew that discourse only scratches the surface of what truly constitutes music. What is new is that today it is the "real" musicians who are leading the discourse, the composers and performers who are striving for a PhD, and who seem to forget what else is lurking beneath the discursive surface - even worse: the forgetting is joined by a musical practice, a composing that tends to be limited to surface phenomena. Only what is accessible to the discourse is composed, while the unsaid or unspeakable, which actually - or once? - made up the music, is suppressed and disappears from the stage.

In composing, which is subject to the compulsion of having to be research at the same time, one and the same mechanism is at work in the approach/strategy/attitude, despite all its outward diversity. And this synchronized approach is that of a certain kind of discursivity. Everything that constitutes the respective work is held in such a way that it could just as easily be narrated, that one could make a written text of artistic research or a thesis out of it at any time. In principle, everything that happens is 'said', nothing is 'shown'. Everything has a theme - like a sonata. There is nothing more than thematic and motivic, nothing more than rhetoric. Everything knows what it is doing and why. Everything can be justified, everything is argued out and follows an argumentative economy. Everything is revealed - nothing remains to be discovered. No more questions. Only answers. And answers murmur 'meaning'. But whoever says meaning means interpretation. It is about establishing the sovereignty of meaning and placing it above what is interpreted - art. It is about the exercise of power, discipline and the monetary value of art.

For art itself, on the other hand, meaning has no meaning. This goes so far that it does not even shy away from the attribute of "senselessness", it can even emphatically affirm it. Because 'senseless art' can just as well mean art that cannot be perceived by the senses. Duchamp's non-retinal is the precursor to this. It was once there to deprive art of its tradition of craftsmanship and intelligibility. Today, however, it once again serves as a justification for a great deal of craftsmanship and intelligibility in all the art-research art with its references, documentations, rhetorics, statistics, etc.

But senselessness can do more than just the magic trick of art that cannot be perceived by the senses. The most subtle of all places of art, and at the same time its greatest challenge, is

to a certain extent its negativity, is precisely where meaning and significance elude us - even if this escape from meaning is only temporary, and even if it is almost certain that the trap of meaning will inexorably snap shut afterwards. The targeted place has both a temporal dimension, as the interval of deferral, of deferral from sense, from meaning, from signification; but it also has a spatial dimension: as distance, as timeless space, as emptiness. This emptiness is articulated by art, celebrated by music, while this space is surrounded by marble columns whose capitals glow with gold leaf.

But all of this seems incompatible with the usual attributions of meaning, elevations of significance and justification strategies of artistic research, and will remain incompatible with it as long as it proves incapable of reflecting precisely this 'negativity'. However, artistic research can only be 'positive': it cannot withdraw anything, it only wants to add and calls this "knowledge production". Yet knowledge production only guarantees that art - which touches on not-knowing and tirelessly spells out to us the inability to know - is missed once again.

## **Part 2**

### **Research and Fraudulent Labeling**

Artistic research, as far as I have encountered it, can be sorted into two principal categories: 'art as research' or 'research about art'.

The former, 'art as research', is not. It is either not art or not research. In the following paragraph, I refer to music as a representative example, as I have done several times in this text.

Music is a place (- after all, it invites us to linger) that tends to override the mechanisms of representation, at least playfully dealing with them without ever completely dancing to their code (their nose). The signifier of music is always unstable, and the scandalous thing about it is that it, music, does not even care that there is a signifier at all. Even a work of program music, even 'Peter and the Wolf', only plays with the reference game of representation, but derives its peculiar charm precisely from the difference to it, from a non-functioning and only conditional fulfilment of its codes. It is like a child who plays seriousness, but remains charming and incomparable precisely because it will never achieve this seriousness and instead has something that adults have (almost or long since) lost: play, not being in the code, not

fulfilling it, or to put it more positively, independence from the code and from functioning: Music doesn't function!

However, music or art that does not function, that even partially eludes the code, cannot be research to the same extent. Research without code does not exist. Art does. Even if only temporarily, or rather outside of time.

What can be said about the other category, research about art: it does not exist. There is either poetics or secondary literature. Both can undoubtedly be of great value, but that does not constitute research about art. I call 'poetics' here what calls itself 'aesthetics' and traditionally represents a branch of philosophy. None of the common aesthetics can manage without imposing non-artistic norms and categories on art, which typically originate from discourses on morality and truth. Art is not true. It may be ambivalent and ambiguous, but it cannot be forced into binary codes such as true/false. Such aesthetics therefore appear to be out of place, or to put it more kindly, if we read them metaphorically, as poetics.

The situation is much better with secondary literature. This refers to the wide-ranging disciplines traditionally covered by musicology in the field of music. What sounds like degradation in the term secondary literature can, on the contrary, be a true nobility. For this alone deserves the label 'research'. Only here does research exist in an unambiguous way in the sense of auditability, consensus, verifiability. However, the study of the manifold circumstances surrounding music and art may say a great deal, but it still does not fulfill the finding 'research "about" art'.

The fact that traditional musicology and its successors present themselves as 'secondary' or 'accompanying' is not an attribution from outside. It is they themselves who make the 'secondary things' their main field and refrain from placing them at the center and giving them the status of the actual work of art. Under certain circumstances, this would mean seeing the gold leaf of the capitals or the upholstery of the rows of seats as an integral part of the artwork. However, such an act would then no longer be research, and certainly not research "about", but itself an act of art.

The finding 'research "about" art' would perhaps have been fulfilled if there had been any significant feedback of such research on art production. On the terrain of historical performance practice of musical works, such feedback has indeed borne significant fruit. However, the interpretation of older music, which basically represents the continuation of a historicist practice, cannot be equated with the actual creative act, whether this is reflected as art production, as the equally creative act of perception, or as the creation of

production conditions. The creative act remains unexplored, and research 'about' art stays unfulfilled.

Whoever says 'research' submits to the scientific codes of 'wrong' and 'right'. But what if the object of research negates precisely these codes and constitutionally resists verbalization? The decisive feature of music, and at the same time its greatest potential, is its fundamental resistance to meaning, the fact that it can never be completely dissolved in language, that it does not aim for certainty, for gaining knowledge, but for gaining uncertainty. I owe my teacher Gösta Neuwirth the concept of creative not-knowing, which expresses the fact that not-knowing is, to a certain degree, one of the conditions of creativity. In this respect, research and knowledge production appear more as barriers, as protective walls against the creative not-knowing of art, and do not prove to be the necessary tools for circumnavigating it.

Let us put aside the concept of research for a moment and set out in search of a way of thinking about art that is neither linguistically subordinate, semiotically restrictive nor reducing to communication. The first thing we find when we comb through this essay alone in search of such thinking is a veritable list of artistic negativity.

I enumerate:

- Not-knowing
- Non-sense
- Non-narrative art
- Non-representational art
- Non-functional art
- Anti-rhetoric
- Refusal of expression
- Rejection of communication
- Inaccessibility
- Resistance to discourse
- A-thematic art
- Denial of meaning
- Art without reason
- Art of emptiness
- Silence
- The unspeakable
- The non-researchable

We are touching a border. At the same time, we create a list. The list can be continued. By no means finished. So there is also an opening. Something unfinished. A project.

A patient and encircling mapping of the border is certainly capable of showing something of what lies behind it. The

boundary line of our knowledge is at the same time the boundary line of ignorance, its negative form, its complement. It is not even true that only silence prevails behind what can be said: What cannot be spoken about can still be composed about.

But even silence can still be spoken about. Even classical rhetoric had a whole list of different figures of silence in its repertoire. A way of thinking about art that does not submit to the imperatives of research could be suitable for confronting the negative aspects of art in 'knowing ignorance'. Admittedly, it is doubt that this 'knowing ignorance' can ever have the character of evidence. And that is why it cannot be replaced by research. However, this unprovability goes much further and also applies to one of the most fundamental differences between art and research: experience. What art offers us is not insight, not knowledge, but experience. This can be as concrete, as immediate, as painful as a toothache. But experience, even if it were the greatest event in our lives, something that changes us permanently, would remain just as little empirically verifiable, just as little communicable as toothache.

### **Addendum: The Abyss**

There is an abyss between art (production) and the discourse (about it). Every explanation is merely an attempt to ignore, deny or fill in the abyss. No explanation explains anything (from beyond the abyss). All explanations, interpretations, attributions of meaning have only one purpose: not to have to look into the abyss, not to have to acknowledge it at any price, to be able to pretend that it is not there, and that there is a continuity, convertibility or translatability between art and its description.

An art discourse worthy of the name would practise the discipline of avoiding a hasty closure, would be a virtuoso at keeping the gap open, would have the ability to fend off words with words - those words that, like a sticky mass, like paste, strive to fill every gap as quickly as possible, to fill up all trenches with debris of meaning. What is needed instead are words of opening, not of closing, words of unlocking, not of locking.

Crossing or leaping over the abyss is handled or omitted in different ways by art or discourse. Art before the age of artistic research rarely forgot that there were two sides and a divide separating them. The attitude or manner of a certain hostility towards theory was part of the habitus of a previous generation of artists (often more pronounced in the visual arts than in music). This could mean that the other side of art, its

theorization, was allergically avoided, but was always present as the other side precisely through avoidance and defence.

Conversely, theory does not focus on this two-sidedness at all. It does not even see it - not to mention the abyss in between. Art theory only exceptionally reflects on its own theoretical tools, does not make them the object of theory, which could thus enter into a conscious opposition to the object of art. Theory is fundamentally encroaching. It does not reflect itself, but always already reflects the other, which consistently conceals itself as the other in the encroachment.

This specific kind of unreflectedness is the characteristic of secondary literature. Secondary literature is always about something that lies outside itself and that was already there before it was written about. Primary research, on the other hand, can be recognized by the fact that this is not so clear-cut. At least Bruno Latour might have suspected it of having invented its subject and its field of research in the first place. We are familiar with primary research from the most diverse fields of knowledge, but for art it is not yet clear whether such research exists at all. (A rare almost-exception to this is Lyotard's book with/about Karel Appel in his rather singular admission, for a philosopher, of the untranslatability of the work of art into philosophical concepts).

Researching the abyss would be such an 'invention', i.e. primary research, if only because it is not at the center of observation for art and is not seen at all by the classical art sciences. The list of artistic negativity (see above) could be a possible approach for primary research. It is not itself the abyss, but leads to it. The abyss only becomes visible when it is observed. And it does not belong to an order that was already clearly 'there' before the observation. The abyss is neither art nor the discourse about it, but affects both - separating and connecting at the same time.