



Essays

Inventions and institutions

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Inventions and institutions

Artistic research as a medium of change

By Esa Kirkkopelto

During the first decade of the new millennium, artistic research has secured its position as an acknowledged mode of academic research. Both among its practitioners and administrators, it has been understood rather as an independent research *field* than as a particular research *method*. Artistic research may proceed according to many methods as well as create methods of its own. Cultivation of this field, keeping it open and growing, poses several problems. This paper¹ will focus on one of them, the *criteria of evaluation*. What means do we have to *criticize* artistic research: discuss, agree or disagree, on the quality and signification of the research done?

As it seems to me at the present, it would not be that difficult to agree on common criteria, to write down a list of principles. For sure, several lists of this kind already exist and they are also used for different purposes. Yet, even if we agreed on them, the question concerning their application would remain. As the problem removes from criteria to the logic of their use, the whole issue reveals philosophical and political implications and defies the needs of practical decision making. Yet, the decisions always have to be done, and we have to find good reasons for them.

In Finland, we have so far abstained from agreeing on criteria of evaluation, from hurrying with the affair – not only because of the fear of disagreement, but also because of the early stage of the development of the research field. On one hand, strict criteria can turn into obstacles or into instruments of power; on the other hand, there has also been a hope that the branch of research we are dealing with, namely the artistic research practice, would somehow reveal its criteria and their applicability by itself, through its own modes of operating. The same hope motivates also my following remarks. Instead of looking for a list of criteria, we should ask the conditions for artistic research to establish itself as a *self-critical practice*.

My discussion builds on an earlier argument on the definition of artistic research that I suggested a few years ago and that I have defended ever since on several occasions (see: “New start: Artistic Research in Finnish Theatre Academy”, *Nordic Theatre Studies*, 20 / 2008). According to this definition, artistic research is research conducted at an art institution, for instance at an art university. Despite its appearance, this definition is not merely pragmatic or opportunistic, even if at the moment I presented it there were clear pragmatic reasons for it; neither is it (or not only) “institutional”, that is to say: it does not solely conform to the “institutional theory” of art. Rather, it has more substantial contents that I try to explain here.

Establishing artistic research as a self-critical practice presumes a certain change in our way

1) Esa Kirkkopelto gav denne forelæsning i Aarhus d. 8. april 2013, efterfulgt af en workshop ved kollektivet Other Spaces, som han er initiativtager til. Arrangementet var del af Other Spaces' gæstespil i Danmark, arrangeret af Secret Hotel, hvor vandringsforestillingen ”Reindeer Safari” blev opført på Mols og i Aarhus.

of discussing and arguing. When it comes to the evaluation of research outcomes in particular, it is important first of all that we are able to make a difference between two things: in the following, one is called “innovation”, another “invention”. The “innovation”, one of the key-terms of “creative economy”, is the concept introduced in the modern economic sense by Gabriel Tarde and further developed by Joseph Schumpeter. By innovation, I understand here new kinds of production, development and introduction of new kinds of products and applications, where the degree of novelty is dependent on the expectations of a certain group of users or consumers. (“The action of innovating; the introduction of novelties; the alteration of what is established by the introduction of new elements or forms” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*; *innovare* = make new; “The process by which an idea or invention is translated into a good or service for which people will pay, or something that results from this process”, *Business Dictionary*.) An innovation is a new kind of device, an instrument. Now, if an innovation is considered as *one* possible outcome of an artistic research project (as it is widely considered) its alternative cannot be anymore an ordinary work of art. Instead, the whole argumentative milieu has changed. As the gates for the instrumentalization of art are opened through innovation, an art university can no longer base its values on the opposition between “pure” and “applied” arts since, according to the given logic, the domain of purity is constantly shrinking. Against the interest of the creative economy, there has to be found another kind of interest which would be as powerful as the first one. Therefore, if we want to name the end product, the outcome, the object of evaluation of artistic research projects, I argue that we should use another term, almost synonymous, but crucially more ambivalent, namely “invention” (“the action of coming upon or finding”, according to the

Oxford English Dictionary; *invenire*: *in+venire* “come into”, “discover”).

Inventions are not necessarily recognized at first as something “new” but they can also seem strange and surprising. Their novelty can evoke opposition or it can be barely recognized at all. Their usefulness, not to mention profitability, is secondary to the hidden, invisible or silent surprise, the event, to which they give place in our ways of perceiving, act, think and discuss. Inventions can be due to a sudden flash of inspiration. They may be overreaching or just amazing. Finally, inventions can return art making to a more Faustian landscape with corresponding ethical concerns. What counts is that after their arrival within the given field, nothing is the same as before. A part of our common world, namely the one touched upon by that particular artistic research practice, is widened or reconstructed. The challenge an evaluator faces now is to recognize this inventive potential, recognize something as inventive without compromising, appropriating or killing it.

On the other hand, the real inventions are rare and they are hard to make. How to assess the inventive potential of an artistic research project? And what distinguishes the latter from an “ordinary” masterpiece, a work of art? Is it possible to set a horizon for invention? Therefore, maybe the most justified perspective for evaluating invention is precisely the one where it is juxtaposed and confronted with innovation.

It is clear that the terms “innovation” and “invention” can be used synonymously. The terminological change I suggest is based on an effort to create and recognize a critical difference at the level of artistic research practice itself, to reveal it as a self-critical practice which would be capable of recognizing and articulating the different kinds of tensions

that sustain it. I am not claiming that from now on we should demand “inventions” instead of “innovations”. We should rather understand that whatever we do under the heading of artistic research, no matter if we do research or criticize it, our activity is *suspended between by these two extremes and contaminated by them*. As researchers and critiques, we should take responsibility of this situation and keep it also open. In this way we also make possible that the changes the accomplished research projects are anticipating will really take place one day.

The following argument I would now develop further is based on my five-year experience as supervisor of artistic doctoral studies done at the Theatre Academy Helsinki. The argument follows two axes that will coincide at the end.

1) Thinking along the first axis: what takes place in these projects is a certain change, a transformation. *An artist changes her artistic medium into a medium of research*. The outcome of the research, no matter what is its final mode of composition, constitutes a medium of research, which can be publicly discussed and reasonably assessed. As a result, we get not only a research outcome, some kind of artistic invention, but also a new kind of artistic agent, an inventor, an artist-researcher, the primary expert of the medium that she herself has created. This kind of process-oriented idea of the research derives from the way the artistic doctoral students organize and carry out their studies. According to the degree regulations of the Theatre Academy, our students usually accomplish several “practical parts” (nowadays three in maximum) within their research project framework. Each of these parts is evaluated separately. According to our experience, the first ones are almost without exception quite ambiguous and too complex, close to the initial artistic practice of the researcher, like individual art works. For

the same reason, they are difficult to criticize. As such, they constitute a basis for an auto-critique and self-reflection on the part of the student, which later leads to the precision and restriction necessary for the research, and quite often also to the redefinition of the practical and theoretical goals of the research. The transformation that takes place concerns both the practice and the practitioner. Supervision and collegial feed-back have a crucial role both in provoking the change and in supporting it. During the process, the works, the practical parts, tend to become more reflective, transparent, communicative, focused, accessible and also enjoyable in a new way. An artist changes into an artist-researcher, their practice articulates itself as research. Art and artist change their function into something not given from outside but suggested by the artist-researcher and their research project. An artistic outcome no longer manifests itself in its sheer originality, as pure invention; rather, it also shows and establishes its routes to discovery, its “method”. In other words, the art work becomes a *medium of invention*. One practical consequence of this is that even though several practical parts tend to lengthen the studies, these stages are necessary in order to *go through* and *display* a certain process of change. What becomes articulated through the series of these practical steps is precisely the *medial* nature of the research, i.e. the *change* it carries out and the *exposition* of that change.

As you can notice, the term ‘medium’ remains the same as we move from one domain to another, from art to research. In order to do so, it has to mean something more than what we usually call a medium, namely a mere instrument of communication. Here, we are in fact coming closer to the original philosophical use of the term, simultaneously “as *interval* and as *transmission*” (Aristotle: *to metaxou*). A medium is not only a path,

a “method”, a transition from one place to another, but also the material and technical ground on which that path is traced, a place for placing and a happening, which does not only enable a change but makes it happen in a certain way, according to the conditions set by the mediating material or technique. The medium inscribes itself into the change by the singular way the change takes place.

An *artistic* medium in particular *enables* a certain change, a transition from one state to another, and *displays* it, performs it. This performance in turn can take place by either tending to hide the mediating function of the medium, for instance the materiality or technology, or by tending to lay it bare. As an artistic medium changes into a medium of research, as I suggest, then the mediating transmission takes place between the known and established levels of perception and discourse and the unknown ones, whose mode of existence is hard to define. Therefore, the change remains conditional: insofar as the medium sustains and carries out movement towards points unknown, it cannot ever accomplish the transition it communicates; it remains suspended between two stages; it can only suggest the transition by repeating it endlessly, but always anew, it sets a scene for a change.

This kind of research medium is always ‘techno-logical’ in a broad sense, a knowledge of technique, whether or not it consists of some new technical device, an instrument, or of a mere conceptual rearrangement concerning the ways we perceive, produce or act. In the latter case, the technique concerns the level of our psychophysical constitution, our body-minds, reorganizing our modes of moving, feeling, emitting voices, communicating and encountering other beings like or unlike us.

So far, the model I have explained has made the change the major criterion of any artistic

research project. A project accomplishes and displays a certain change in relation to a practice and its practitioner. What ways does it have, do we have, for considering the nature of that change itself, and to criticize this change? What actually changes?

2) Let’s start anew, following another axis of argumentation. This argument goes as follows: As an artist presents her artistic practice as research, one of the requirements she faces is consequently that she tends to reveal the medial nature of her practice and does not hide it (anymore). She is not only reflecting on her medium, since that is what artists always do, but she is also articulating it as a procedure that can be publicly discussed and criticized. The mediality of her practice is connected to its capacity to call forth certain kind of changes and display the path to those changes. Therefore, *as a process of artistic research carries out and displays a certain change, it articulates itself as a medium of invention*. The artistic research medium compares itself with our given modes of perception and behavior that, insofar as they are *given*, are governed by and consist of as many perceptual and behavioral *institutions*. The medium opens a *space of institution* and makes it possible for us to carry out changes within its limits.

If we agree that an artistic research outcome is an invention, this entails that something radically new and strange “comes in”, enters our world changing its constitution: a change in our way of sensing, perceiving, thinking, acting and teaching, a new medium of perception. The inventiveness of an invention is in itself a matter of evaluation: is it something really new and different in relation to previous devices and modes of practice; does it have an impact on these? But mere originality, or even ingenuity, does not suffice to make an invention research in any institutional or academic sense, to distinguish

it from art making and experimental art. I would return to my earlier argument: *artistic research does not only take place in institutions but it should also make research on them*, take institutions as its object. By this, I mean not only the particular institution where the research happens to take place but also institutions in a broader sense: from the aesthetic institutions of perception and affect to current political institutions, through showing how the latter are connected to the former or even based on them. Hence, the inventiveness of an invention is to be assessed in relation to institutions that surround and sustain it: we should ask to which extent an invention has the potential to change these institutions and, finally, why they should be changed.

We see that we have now also reached a broader idea of artistic research as institutional research. Artistic research done by an artist *outside* institutions is worth its name only if it has *institutional consequences* and if it can articulate itself in relation to institutions, was it only in order to *resist* them. That is why art universities should not close their gates to initiatives and influences stemming directly from arts fields but they should show a constant interest towards these initiatives and provide for artists a forum where different kinds of artists and practitioners can bring their ideas under critical reflection. Also the status and the modes of the post-doctoral artistic research should be considered in a broader than merely academic perspective.

Insofar as every institution is established and sustained by human beings, each is a human invention. There are no natural institutions. "Nature" is a name for the state outside institutions. Even though this is a simple fact to notice, it is always difficult to prove and indicate its validity in the specific cases of singular and existing historical institutions.

This is always a matter of research. Any discourse about art or science as means for developing and reforming society implicates that invention can turn into institution in the active and affirmative sense of the term, as *instituting* (Cornelius Castoriadis). The founding of a new institution implies inventing and inventions are always potential institutions. An invention as soon as it appears, i.e. as it is *recognized* as an invention, paradoxically loses its originality, it's *droit d'auteur* and opens up as a disposable means to everybody (Derrida, "L'invention de l'autre", *Psyché*). Since the inventions tend to become institutional, since they have an *institutional potentiality*, they are more fundamental than innovations. The innovations, by contrast, do not need to have this kind of institutionally creative power. Their way of coming forth is embedded in the given institutional landscape and its expectations, which of course do not exclude surprise either. The innovations are replaced by other innovations: they are part of the acknowledged modes of production, whereas those modes are basically different kinds of historical institutions. *The innovations are always institutional, the inventions never.*

Artistic research makes up inventions which, insofar as they are of public interest, are also (at least potentially) *new* institutions, and thus carry out critical changes in the institutional *status quo*. The inventiveness of an invention is therefore linked to the institutions, as their future. As a consequence, the criteria for evaluation would consist of considering *to what extent an artist-researcher is able to present her invention as a potential institution*. If they manage to do that, their research has significance to everyone, it produces *knowledge*. And even if a researcher would not present their research in these terms, it should be possible for their results to be considered and criticized from this perspective: to what extent can the outcome take into account

and reclaim its own instituting aspects and responsibility of them? If it *cannot*, this may mean that it consists of mere institutional or academic art, which we presumably do not desire. From the very beginning of each new project, we have to be alert in order to avoid this kind of ‘academisation’, or ‘institutionalisation’ of artistic research. Yet the only way to avoid it, is to put the institutions into question from the very start.

Obviously, one benefit of this kind of reasoning is that it liberates the evaluation of artistic research from epistemic speculations and validity claims. An artistic research outcome can consist of a fiction, of a thought experiment, if only its institutional consequences, its transformative potential in relation to prevailing institutions, are somehow important and fruitful. An artistic research outcome can be a relatively independent art work, if it simultaneously suggests a change in the position of art works in relation to the given social field and to our understanding of both. These consequences can be ethical, political or pedagogical. Artistic research can reclaim its status as academic research equal to *scientific research*, art universities alongside science universities according to the same logic: if we think that the artistic research of institutions does not limit itself to mere *artistic* institutions but that it can observe all kinds of institutions, including scientific ones. Just as art can be studied scientifically, scientific practice can be subjected to an artistic analysis concerning the *medial* aspects of that practice.

Whereas neo-liberal market economy destroys institutions, or rather, maintains them only in order to exploit them, we should defend institutions by deconstructing them, for instance in the way suggested above. In order to make this struggle more active and to put an end to the constant withdrawing, to the disputes over the diminishing resources, we

should adopt a wider, more affirmative and active idea of what institution and instituting may mean. Particularly in the case of artistic research we should take into account its simultaneously inventive and institutional nature of artistic research practice, consider it as a medium of invention.

To conclude, I will quote a Swedish art philosopher Sven-Olof Wallenstein who, in his article on Art Institutions, returns to Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s way of analyzing and criticizing social power structures: “A society or an institution is held together only by that which flees, just as the line of flight is only the point of deterritorialisation of a given structure” (*Art and Its Institutions*, p. 122). An institution is built on what flees it, as a way to slow that something down enough for us so that we can reflect upon it, to study it, to dwell in it, to use it, to exploit it, to enjoy it, to desire it, to appropriate it or to share it. Artistic research consists of a critique of its concrete conditions and its modes of effectuation that are, neither at the outset nor in the end, truly its own; that are defined by institutions at the outset and that in the end flee our reach altogether.

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