

ARTISTIC RESEARCH: WHAT FOR?

The day before yesterday I got a call from Olöf, head of the research department at the Iceland Academy of the Arts: "Georg, one of our speakers cancelled. Could you jump in?"

I accepted with pleasure and have taken this 'side door invitation' conceptually: I do hope that my presentation will allow us a discerning look at 'artistic research'.

First, I'll give you a short presentation of how DasArts, Advanced Studies in the Performing Arts in Amsterdam, operates. Second, I'll formulate some 'footnotes' on artistic research, based on the on-the-job experience I have gained as a dramaturge for DasArts artists.

A. HOW DASARTS FUNCTIONS

If I had to distil the essence of the DasArts philosophy into one little thought, I would say that DasArts is a place for artistic development of the performing arts, continually re-defined by the artist's needs: as flexible as artistic investigations are various, as solid as concrete experience and knowledge.

Many other descriptions have been formulated in the past, for instance: "DasArts is an artistic laboratory disguised as a school", or: "A first-aid kit for talented narcissism and neuroses, in order to deal with the absolute fear and vulnerability of what it means to perform, to be a creative entity in its own right."

The good thing about those descriptions is that they are all correct.

My description today expresses the following: DasArts is a place for 'making art' rather than 'contemplating art'. Our focus is on invention, originality, and individuality: the unique artistic idiom we are curious to discover in its individual and contemporary form.

My favourite quote from Ritsaert ten Cate, the founder of our house, describes this in a most enlightening way: "We cannot know what theatre must or will be tomorrow. Participants in our program have the responsibility to show us what the future will be; and DasArts exists to support and inspire them in this process by helping them to develop themselves and their craftsmanship. But, more

importantly, DasArts is also here to assist them as they discover their own vision of the future.”

DasArts describes its quest as follows: Is it possible to define the circumstances under which artistic creation is stimulated, uplifted, supported? And if so, can we create those circumstances? As long as we succeed in that, participants have the responsibility to “show”, not “tell us”, what their theatre of the future looks like. DasArts is always about the ongoing articulation of individual artistic forms.

That position has led us to determine some of the key structural elements with which we work: Participants come from all different backgrounds - including non-performing backgrounds, as long as they are willing to conquer the stage. A committee selects the participants from the applications submitted; scouting remains an alternative. Participants generally have a BA diploma in art – or an equivalent practical experience as an artist. Participants are generally in their late twenties when they apply. The ‘official age range’ is between a minimum of twenty and a maximum of forty years old. At the moment, our youngest participant is 23 and the oldest just turned 43.

The number of participants is around 25, but will go down to roughly 15 within the new Master’s programme. DasArts was founded in 1993 as an independent structure affiliated with the Amsterdam School of the Arts. If everything goes as planned, as of 2009 we will become the ‘Master of Theatre’ for that same Amsterdam School of Arts.

At DasArts, we do not have lessons and fixed timetables in the traditional sense, nor are there teachers or classes in the normal sense. Staff and participants are considered ‘colleagues’ who have different tasks. We have a well-defined set of guidelines that forces us to conduct ongoing internal reassessment and renewal.

Two of the four semesters in the DasArts programme are mainly composed of extensive artistic adventures that we call Blocks: an appointed mentor(s) confronts the participants with his or her own methods and perspectives, based on a specific theme (with guest teachers and visiting artists). Very short-term assignments (sometimes a couple of hours), internal performances and feedback sessions are basic components of this.

No Block is ever repeated twice, and for a long time they were called ‘artistic

pressure cookers'. These Blocks constitute one of the most important complementarities to what we can observe at present in the cultural field. Looking at the trajectories of emerging artists, we discover many "nomadic biographies": a project here, a residency there – even virtual ones – and a research project in between, in various places and with new constellations of people each time. Rare or even absent are 'continuity' in terms of insight into someone's development (longterm observation), 'mentoring' or critical artist friends who express precise and grounded criticism. The presence of the artists in our house and the exchange between them, the need to articulate again and again in a non-competitive environment, is a key element for successful stimulation and challenge at DasArts.

The collective Block experience stands beside the two other semesters, which focus on the individual trajectory. In the present Master process we call these 'Contextuals'. The participants return to their individual research and the aims they discussed with the artistic team at the beginning of their studies. Participants work during their last semester on a final project (master's exam). The artistic staff and external advisors are at their disposal for exchange and critique at all times during the 'individual semesters', as are their fellow students. During these individual semesters, we additionally organize two common activities based on all individual investigations. Participants present their projects and conclusions. Next, we propose a complementary programme directly linked to some of the individual projects. This aims at a more sophisticated articulation of someone's individual trajectory or touches on issues fundamental to the performing arts or art practice.

The four DasArts-semester do not have to be taken consecutively: we appreciate and encourage participants to spend some time outside DasArts in order to maintain existing contacts or to prepare their final exam more consistently. Being in 'a school' for four consecutive semesters might become counterproductive.

The responsibility for what someone is doing, or not doing, remains in the participant's hands: DasArts only can, and does, commit itself to guaranteeing a major development during those four semesters.

B. FOUR FOOTNOTES ON 'ARTISTIC RESEARCH'

So, yes, I did use that magic term, 'research'!

Some comments:

First:

As a DasArts dramaturge, I'm convinced of the importance of cognitive (intellectual) support within the process of art creation. And as that same dramaturge of creative processes, I also ask: To what extent does knowledge and awareness uplift the creative process? Or: At what stage in that process does it help – or not help? When does 'knowledge' empower art and when might it break down or even stop it? In what situations is it more important to keep a secret than to solve an enigma? How does ambivalence support exchange with a future audience?

I guarantee you: I'm not a romantic who exclusively believes in intuition and spontaneous creation that comes from born talent. But I have experienced that in many processes, an early focus on understanding can put a brutal end to a creative process. In other words: A good dramaturge *also knows* when he has to shut up.

Second:

Let's assume that 'research' is a temporary term that 'legitimizes art' in today's society by placing it in an academic context. 'Research within the arts' is often used as a normative argument: "Be aware, dear audience, that what you just saw is a result of research. So please, take it seriously!"

As if the very fact of artistic research is a guarantee of higher quality; as if quantifiable and presumably scientific criteria were needed to point out and appreciate artistic value. Do we need research in order to legitimise artwork? And, as intellectuals dominate the discussion on art, the term is being multiplied again and again.

Third:

One of the main elements that makes DasArts a unique spot is the absence – except for the conclusion of the participant's study – of the obligation of production. Participants are not requested to "produce pieces" and tour with them. Audiences are invited in order to create the fundamental situation of theatre, to test how art forms communicate and to avoid navel-gazing or an elitist attitude. Of course, participants are therefore required to try out artistic forms in front of live audiences. But they do not have to produce here.

If I may compare artistic research to research in other fields of human activities,

I can see more reason to use that term for the DasArts experience. It is the absence of the production requirement that makes it research: the freedom of experimentation, the luxury of time, mistakes and foolishness. Columbus was a very decided and ambitious man, full of talent, courage and willpower. Thanks to that, he discovered America. But the day he left the Spanish coast with his armada, he was heading for India!

Fourth:

Let's keep in mind what we are ultimately busy with. Are we aiming for the creation of a *discourse* about art or are we aiming for *art forms*? Let's not use it as an excuse to take artists seriously in an academic context. Let's not be a pool for artists who flee into academia because the 'real world' does not allow them to carry out their intentions. We do not need excuses.

I do consider the distinction between 'theory' and 'practice' in art to be a schism we need to leave behind us. But let's not confuse the mechanisms of creative processes with those of critical evaluation. Different circumstances also necessitate different modes and requirements. Creating art is highly individual, possibly spontaneous and to some extent intuitive – sometimes even contradictory.

Research in Art Practice is a useful tool. It may enlarge contexts and influence artwork. It declares seriousness in unserious times.

The value of artistic research depends on how inventive it is, not how solid or provable it is.

The creation of art is the creation of a form – a form that can be seen, heard, read and ultimately understood. Let's not define the form first.

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