Hanging on

With this symposium my position as lector comes to an end.. Just a couple of things remain that I would like to say to you. First of all I would like to thank some people. I know that extensive gratitude has become a part of public life, and I am sorry, but I will not go as far as that. There are however a number of people that I certainly want to thank because the lectoraat would not have been possible without them. First of all the teams that have made LAPS into what it has become: Henk de Vroom, Esther Deen, Alexandra Landré, after that Merel Driessen and Sietske Roorda, followed by Michelle Schulkens, Rosanne Jonkhout, Christie Bakker up to the team today that has made this event possible: Joyce Drosterij, Liza Prins with the help from Birna Bjornsdottir. And of course many thanks to my successor, Patricia de Vries, who has so graciously taken over the position. Thank you all: you’ve made LAPS .

And I am of course very grateful to the board members that have made this position possible and that have supported all our vague ambitions, intentions and experiments over the years. Thank you Tijmen van Grootheest, Annelies van Eenennaam, Jurgen Bey and Ben Zegers. And thank you so much Jaap Vinken and Jet Langman for your unrelenting support in making research at Rietveld into what it is today.

I cannot mention all the colleagues, members of the research groups, people contributing to projects in and for the field: there are simply too many. Today they have been represented by Anke Coumans, Paula Albuquerque, Hans van Houwelingen, Curdin Tones, Esther Polak en Renee Boer, who have shared their ideas with us. I thank them from the bottom of my heart for their contribution, but also for what they stand for: a mixed group of highly motivated people wanting to explore with me what research at an art school can mean. Colleague lectors swimming with me in the same unknown waters, all of us supporting each other, which, in the quite competitive environment of the art schools in the Netherlands, has been a relief. And I want to especially mention Sher Doruff, who can not be here today, but who has from the beginning been an immense theoretical and practical support in thinking about artistic research. And of course, once more, Paula, partner in the crime called artistic research. Thank you.

But my main gratitude goes out to all the members of the research group, the kenniskring, throughout these 19 years. Artists and theory teachers taking the risk of sharing their projects and plans, shifting from art to research, or to artistic research without knowing what it was or is or what its consequences can be. Thank you all so very much.

Ok, enough gratitude.

What is it that we have accomplished in all these years? What is the main character of this lectoraat, and for that matter, of many other lectorates, professorships, in the arts? To me the in-between of this position has always, from the very beginning, felt as ideal. A position between the academic disciplines and the arts, taking the best from both worlds, avoiding their more tedious aspects (well, at least trying to avoid them). An in-between that is not just a metaphor because in this school we are literally in between teaching and staff. We are in between the students, but have no students, we are part of the staff but have no staff function.

From the start it was decided that the lectoraat would not be a separate department, not at BA level but neither at MA level. Lectors work with teachers/researchers, not with students, but that was not the only reason. The school was not interested in setting up a separate training course for artists working in public space, a new Amsterdam School with a specific way of thinking and making. From the beginning it was clear that the lectoraat was not so much about realizing artworks in and for the public domain, but more about questioning the role of art in relation to the public domain. And from the beginning the focus was not on training artists but on training researchers.

A Rietveld School of artistic research is what we have been establishing, without calling it as such. And the Creator Doctus experiment with Yael Davids and Femke Herregraven is the perfect and successful example of what this Rietveld school of artistic research stands for.

Over the years we have created a research *culture* in this school. A clear research *structure* however is still missing, but I am sure that jaap, joyce, paula, patricia, liza and eva will ‘wash this piglet’ in no time.

There is one more point that I want to dwell upon. The question no longer is: what is artistic research, that is behind us, we’ve been there, done that. The answer to that question is in the practices that assemble under this name here and at other schools and other venues.

No, the issue I want to discuss shortly with you is: where is artistic research and what does it do?

To elaborate we go back to the picture for this conference: hanging on. The picture of the three hooded figures loitering on a bench is not intended as a portrait of the lectorate within the academy, but more as an image that can illustrate the position of artworks in public space. Artworks in the pubic domain can be seen as these young adults, senselessly hanging about: without a clear function, undefined and undefinable, slightly menacing, until you get to know them better, and they are really nice, filled with vague ambitions and unfulfilled plan. They are the mirror of a society that pretends to have things under control but that has no clue where it is going.

Now this overoptimistic and at the same time dystopic picture of the role of artworks in public space is no longer a realistic depiction of the state of affairs, if it ever was. These days artworks have obligations, a task to fulfill, work to do. Like the youngsters hanging about they are forced into a normal life, a nice job in ict, a concrete plan and certain steps towards a foreseeable future. They have to grow up. Cohesion, inclusion, participation, sustainability, energy crisis, precarity, you name it and it seems to be on the artworks plate.

In reaction we resist the burden of these obligations. Like a mantra we keep repeating: the artwork offers no answers, but we feel cornered by this rising pressure and we have a hard time explaining ,what it does do, instead of giving answers.

At first sight artistic research seems to be just one more task in the neo liberal book of obligations for art. Artists behaving like academics, artworks mumbling references to incomprehensible sources: there does not seem to be much to gain in this research-turn the art world is taking. Academic research itself today has been completely absorbed into systems of demand that will only fund research if it can predict the direct impact on society it will have.

I am convinced however that there are advantages in research, but I think that it very much depends on the way we strategically position art as research.

Again: I will not go into the discussion about the question what artistic research is, but I want to put a couple of points up front, to further the discussion;

First: works of art can be seen and discussed as proposals or propositions about unknown possibilities, alternative trajectories, and unfeasible systems. They can be analyzed as results of research. The proposition can be small, almost insignificant, like the way the color red works in relation to other colors, or the way a tree can be painted. But it can also contain a much larger view of the world, the future, the system or the way humans treat each other. This fact is often obscured by the statement that because of this content every artist is a priori a researcher. An argument used to close the discussion about artistic research before it has even started.

But secondly we have to conclude that works of art are hardly ever analyzed or discussed as proposals or propositions. Of course the humanities specialize in reflections on this aspect, but the results of these reflections never seem to have any effect on politics, policies and public debates. The motto seems to be that what happens in the art world stays in the art world. The discussion about works of art in the public domain is usually about the support the work is getting, or not getting, about the costs – of course- about its pleasing or absolutely non pleasing qualities, but never, never about its content.

Third: this does not mean that works of art in public space – and elsewhere – suddenly have to start behaving like research results, in the sense that they explicitly reveal their process or elaborately refer their sources and reflections. Too often I see works appear that believe a process is an outcome – it only is when the process itself has been the object of the research- or that hide behind an impenetrable layer of words. The results of academic research can function perfectly in and for society without having to be explained in detail, they function on the level of their outcomes. And the same is true for art: works of art offering proposals and propositions, covering a vast terrain of research, can still be great works of art.

The question remains however: what does this recognition of works of art as carriers of proposals and propositions bring us, what is the value for us, and more important, what is the value for the art world? Is re-naming art as research not just another sticker, an unimportant footnote? These days we are very much aware how important names, indications and categories are for the way people and things are seen, or not seen, treated or respected. This is not different for works of art. The way you frame them is a crucial factor in the way people and things are able to function. The re-framing means that works of art are allowed to shift from being revelations into beings of research. Revelations, as they have been since romanticism, are discussed on the level of their truthfulness, their quality, but never on the level of their relevance. Discussed as outcomes of research works of art get relevance, a voice in the debate about the future.

But again: is this not another form of making art useful, a way of giving the hang youth a steady job? It sounds lame: but art it is a specific kind of research, it does not give answers. Artistic research is speculative, non-discursive, thinking about impossible futures, inverse perspectives, offering long term thinking instead of short term solutions. Calling something research is not only a way to change expectations, but also an instrument to gain time, to postpone the solution, to have an excuse for lingering, searching, not finding, speculating, postponing. Calling art research makes it possible to shield it from other expectations.

If youngsters hanging about would call themselves researchers, I am sure they would be left to themselves.

But why now, what is at stake?

If we look back in history we discover moments in which major shifts have taken place. Shifts in world view, in understanding society, in defining mankind, and in defining art. I would like to call them tectonic moments. Around 1800, around 1900, in the 60-70s of last century. Moments in which the existing view of the world fell apart, gaps opened up, things became uncertain, undefined. Moments of immense anxiety but also of fantastic possibilities. Tectonic moments have always been great for art, because works of art like to balance on the edge of chaos, works of art thrive by the projection of unforeseeable futures. These tectonic shifts have always produced not only new forms of art but also new institutions, new media, new academic disciplines. Institutions, media and disciplines that from their start were instrumental in closing the gaps again, covering the hole, re-establishing a seamless picture in which everything comes together again.

The powerful impulse of art during the tectonic moments is almost immediately reduced by locking the works into white cubes and making their content irrelevant in relation to market positions.

I think we are living in such a tectonic moment now. Things are shifting, names are renamed, gaps are wide open, holes cannot be covered, futures seem more unforeseen than ever before.

Artistic research is a child of this tectonic moment. Born as a result of new questions for art, new possibilities for artists. But also in danger of becoming an instrument of regression and regulation. Artistic research can only have a positive function for art when it manages to fight its own disciplinary tendencies.

With this warning that is not an answer to any question I leave you.

Jeroen Boomgaard

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