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Against Practice: An Artistic Theory of Knowledge

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Abstract

As artistic research grows into an established mode of academic inquiry, it has become possible to distinguish a ruling metaparadigm which we denote as the practice paradigm. This paradigm is to a large extent based on the argument that artistic research is not equipped to produce standalone theories, but instead offers ways to develop and disseminate knowledge through sensory media and embodiment. The foundations for this argument are not grounded in actual expressions of artistic reasoning and reflection in a wider perspective. The enforcement of this paradigm furthermore concerns the challenges that maturing artistic research faces in co-existing with scientific research in institutional settings. We argue that the fixation on personal practice imposes unnecessary restrictions on artistic researchers and that the reduction of exploratory artmaking to applied practices is superficial, as it ignores the way artistic theorizing has tended to be done earlier in non-institutional settings. In this position paper, we review epistemological and methodological claims made by influential promoters of the metaparadigm and critique the justification of the approach. Moreover, we propose a way to move beyond the practice paradigm by reconnecting exploratory artmaking to a kind of artistic theorization that generates creative frameworks for conceptual ideas, styles, and formats rather than a catalogue of implemented works by individual practitioners. We also speculate that the articulation of the philosophical underpinnings of artistic research in its first phase might be a premature response to a theoretical crisis in the arts in general—a crisis that indeed calls for creative solutions, but has so far been met primarily with a defense of practice.

Keywords Artistic research · Paradigm · Practice · Epistemology · Methodology

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

1 Introduction

The central feature of artistic research is often held to be the permeation of artistic practice into all planes of research activities (e.g. Wilson 2018) and the concept of reflection in action (Schön 1991) is often invoked in situations in which artistic research is equated with professional knowledge in the arts. Artistic researchers themselves have often advocated for epistemological and methodological plurality in relation to the established sciences (e.g. Kjørup 2011). Yet, on closer inspection, this variation seems to be limited by a narrow spectrum of a few core ideas, with diversity primarily manifested through the artistic researchers' individual and subjective expressions as practitioners rather than through distinctly different philosophical and/or theoretical positions. Although considerable attention has been devoted to situating artistic research in relation to scientific research, on closer examination there has been limited engagement with the potential for more radical paradigmatic (r)evolution, heterodoxy, and internal critique within artistic research itself. But as the community of artistic researchers expands and the volume of research output increases, this lack of conceptual nuance and debate—and arguably, imaginative scope—has become increasingly apparent. We seek to address this gap by opening the discourse to alternative perspectives and identifying actionable pathways for broadening the epistemological and methodological horizons of artistic research.

1.1 About Artistic Paradigms

Kuhn's (2012) conceptualization of scientific paradigms describes a continuous sequence in which game-changing revolutionary ideas disrupt sustained periods of so-called "normal science," characterized by puzzle-solving within an open-ended range of problems shaped by evolving practices, theories, techniques, and more. Kuhn gives examples of how crises in research communities are connected to theory change, occurring when anomalies do not fit the norm. He underscores that in order not to abandon research as such, a paradigm cannot be rejected without another one being substituted (*ibid.*). After first applying the term somewhat inconsistently, Kuhn (1977b) made a distinction between paradigmatic examples of successful application and disciplinary matrices that gives communities of researchers their common ground through tradition, education, instruments, and other institutionalising elements. Comparing art and science, Kuhn (1977a) came to two notable conclusions: First, that style in the arts is not equivalent to theory in science. Second, that particular artworks pave the way for stylistic paradigms among communities of artists. Martindale (1990) further notes that the arts and the sciences follow similar cycles of disruption and adherence. He states that when the arousal potential (or "poetic power") of a style-forming artistic idea fades and the proponents are no longer able to recruit new adherents, the paradigm dies with the artists who are the promoters. Such changes in the arts have furthermore been associated with technological advancement and the social and psychical consequences thereof in terms of media ecology (McLuhan and Parker 1968; McLuhan and McLuhan 1988; McLuhan 1967, 2003). Hence, it follows that an intensified paradigmatic awareness becomes a part of artistic projects.

Kuhn once remarked that “[o]nly when they must choose between competing theories do scientists behave like philosophers” (1970, p. 7). If we extend this observation to artists, it becomes compelling to consider the possibility of theoretical conflict within artistic research, even though both Kuhn’s and Martindale’s claims predate the formal emergence of artistic research as an academic mode of inquiry. Crucially, for our line of reasoning, paradigmatic examples of stylistic change do not emerge in a philosophical and theoretical vacuum but are shaped by specific theoretical coordinates, sometimes in direct connection to scientific progress. Theory is relevant to both scientists and artists, as paradigms tend to crystallize through revolutionary applications that follow periods of crisis from theoretical destabilization.

Accordingly, we do not claim to introduce a new paradigm, but rather to engage in a form of pre-paradigmatic theorization. However, most importantly, we stress that this theoretical exploration is of immediate concern for artistic research more than for artistic production of more informal kinds, and that any paradigmatic series of change in artistic research reconnecting to historical examples involves proto-variants of research in the arts. That is, our focus here is the paradigmatic evolution of artistic thoughts and ideas expressed as such and not their implementation and effect upon artistic *acts*.

1.2 About Artistic Research

Although artistic training has long been embedded within higher education, the formalisation of artistic research—characterized by the introduction of doctoral programs and peer-reviewed publications—remains a relatively recent development within academies and universities. Today, a new generation of artistic researchers is emerging. Unlike their predecessors, these researchers have to a higher degree been supervised by formally trained artistic researchers from the earlier generation and increasingly engage with both scientific communities as well as broader societal contexts. As a result, intra-disciplinary formations and tensions can become more prominent and structurally significant. Furthermore, this development enables us to identify a dominant metaparadigm within artistic research, thereby creating the conditions for articulating viable alternatives. Viewed through the lens of communal knowledge production, this moment may be interpreted as a sign of disciplinary maturation.

Three key factors contributing to the emergence of artistic research within higher education institutions around the turn of the millennium have been highlighted: the influence of the Bologna Process on art schools in Europe, the imperative to legitimize theoretical approaches in arts education in general, and the availability of attractive funding opportunities (von Borries 2014). Setting these contextual drivers aside, our primary concern lies in examining how artistic researchers substantiate their claims to knowledge.

At present, two distinct strands of attitudes can be discerned, each offering a partially divergent perspective on how artistic thinking constitutes valid knowledge in relation to science. We elaborate on them below. Despite their differences, these strands converge on a shared foundational premise: the centrality of artistic practice as the principal way of knowing. We refer to this prevailing discursive orientation as

the *practice paradigm*. Within this meta-paradigm, the centrality of practice remains unquestioned. Written reports and reflective commentaries may accompany the manifestation of practice in this kind of research—but the notion that artistic researchers might contribute original abstract theorization independently of, or beyond, their specific or current practice is largely held as inconceivable.

1.3 About Artistic Practice

Artistic *practice* is not exactly the same as either technique or genre, although these concepts might overlap in some cases. We posit that practices could, if placed on a continuum, be described as formal, communal, or personal. The more formal they are, the more they are governed by rules, making them more explicitly communicated and preserved across generations and institutions. The more personal they are, the more they are governed by habits, thereby making them more implicit. A practice does not start when the finger hits the piano key or the brush meets the canvas; it is the sedimentary experience leading up to that very moment that constitutes it, as Shottenkirk and Chatterjee (2010) point out. From a neuroscientific perspective, they stress how personal art practices rely on nondeclarative (procedural) memory, not declarative (semantic and episodic) memory. Compare with Polanyi's (1962) "tacit" and "focal" knowledge as well as Martindale's (1990) "primary-process cognition"/"primordial thought" versus "secondary-process cognition"/"conceptual thought." Shottenkirk and Chatterjee give the following description of what is meant by "practice":

Art is an activity, in part a mental one and in part a physical activity, one that is repeated over and over, until the artist develops a practice. In fact, that word "practice" is often used by artists in referring to their own art. "My practice" embeds within it one's habitual use of not only images and materials, but one's basic intent: the meaning behind one's work. "This is what I do; this is my practice." This notion includes the meaning behind the art—the content of the art—of which one is almost peripherally aware, a tangential force that though motivates the production of art. Like the "gist" of an emotion known only by the amygdala, an artist's practice is that intentional and dispositional force that is not amenable to detailed description, at least by the artist. It is a "gist"; a deeply felt perspective of the world, a profoundly remembered attitude of what it means to be this distinct, physically embedded individual. (ibid., p. 17)

Artists may possess implicit—not explicit—knowledge in relation to their practice, but that does not mean that they have implicit knowledge about other things as well. (That is, having an artistic practice does not mean that you are psychic.) Moreover, the implicit and sensitive nature of personal practice is not a problem as long as the practice is not the object of research or confused with the technique, genre, medium, or event used to channel information from the practitioner. It is understandable that anxieties arise if artistic research is expected to produce explanations of the researching artist's own practice in anti-artistic ways. Shottenkirk and Chatterjee again:

Artists know but don't always know that they know and furthermore know that if they know they will no longer be able to have that fluid access to knowing without knowing. That can be parsed as follows. Artists often implicitly know things without explicitly knowing them, and furthermore implicitly know that if they explicitly know they will no longer be able to have access to that fluid part of the brain that implicitly knows. The medial temporal lobe will crush the basal ganglia in triumphant evolutionary zeal. The creative role of the basal ganglia—the role of procedural memory—would be undermined if it were fully translated into the declarative part of the brain. In other words, to gain explicit knowledge of something is, to some extent and in some situations, to lose [sic] it. (*ibid.*, pp. 17–18)

It is taken for granted that the function of artistic practice is to be more or less the same in artistic research as it is in popular views of artistic creation. To date, scholarly debate in artistic research has largely focused on conceptual distinctions and overlaps among frameworks such as “practice-as-research,” which is rooted in standpoint epistemology and typically yields non-textual research outputs (Nelson 2022), and “practice-based” or “practice-led” research in art and design. The former employs artistic practice as an exploratory method for engaging with experiential and phenomenal dimensions, while the latter initiates and directs inquiry through questions that emerge directly from practice (Candy 2006; Candy et al. 2006; Candy and Edmonds 2018).

There have admittedly been other attempts to outline paradigms within artistic research, for example “the atomistic paradigm” of artistic practice as a new and separate way of knowing in itself versus “the holistic paradigm” of artistic practice integrated with established academic research (Djahwasi and Saidon 2020). However, the rivalry between these two is merely an internal dispute within what we propose to examine as the practice paradigm. Another example of a proposed paradigm adhering to artistic research is “the performative paradigm” (Bolt 2016). This paradigm is, however, claimed to be applicable not only in artistic research, but stresses the epistemic effects of all performative practices which in a transdisciplinary way can also be found in the social and natural sciences. Once more, practice is framed as the central vehicle for knowledge production, only in this case both within and beyond artistic research.

1.4 Questions

How is the practice paradigm justified? And what motives could drive this justification? To address these questions, we review prevailing arguments in the literature by highlighting influential schools of thought, and identify who might benefit (or not) from the paradigm, both directly and indirectly. As we argue that the foundational arguments supporting the practice paradigm are weak, we propose an alternative approach grounded in non-institutional and historical examples of artistic theorization. We further speculate on how this alternative framework might contribute to the advancement of artistic research as a legitimate and dynamic mode of academic inquiry.

1.5 Limitations

Our study and discussion is confined to the domain of artistic research—defined as formalized research conducted by artists within academic institutions, driven by artistically relevant questions, for artistic purposes, and by artistic means. We do not engage with arts-based research, wherein artistic practices are employed to support inquiries particularly in the social sciences to enable perception of phenomena in different ways (Barone et al. 2008). Nor do we address research in aesthetics or art history within the humanities, or research in art education. We will also leave out the discussion about whether artists should have any place in academia at all or instead be keeping to their own non-academic artistic institutions (cf. Lesage 2006; Hovland 2021).

Given that artistic research is shaped by various protocols across geographical and disciplinary contexts, it is important to acknowledge that much of the relevant literature originates from artist-scholars situated within the European sphere. This contextual specificity informs both the scope and the interpretive framework of our analysis. However, a crucial aspect is that we focus our review on epistemological and methodological claims made by artistic researchers themselves, and not philosophers in general. The paradigm is hence articulated from within the field.

2 Attitudes Within the Practice Paradigm

Within the domain of artistic research, two predominant strands of attitudes can be identified. While they share certain foundational assumptions, they diverge significantly in their relationship to science. The first, which is similar to what Böderer (2023) calls “specific AR knowledge” and may be termed the *protective strand*, positions artistic research in competitive opposition to scientific inquiry. It asserts that artistic research is fundamentally distinct from science and maintains that artistic researchers should refrain from engaging in scientific procedures, as processes of academisation and scientification are viewed as antithetical—and potentially detrimental—to the essence of art. Promoters that might be associated with this attitude often take the position that artistic research instills instances of multiple ways of knowing (e.g. Bippus 2013) which can be non-scientific as well as anti-scientific.

The second, which bears similarities to what Böderer (2023) calls “extended AR knowledge” and is referred to here as the *promotive strand*, situates artistic research alongside science, viewing it as a complementary, collaborative and expansive partner that enables “felt knowledge” (Klein 2010) rather than a contrasting or antagonistic counterpart. This strand emphasises the kinship between artistic and scientific research (Borgdorff 2009) and promotes a shared space despite disciplinary differences (Schwab 2023) in which “hybrid heuristics” (Rheinbergen 2018) can be employed. Despite their differing attitudes, both strands tend to marginalize the role of theorizing textual output produced by artistic researchers—though this tendency is more pronounced within the protective strand than in the promotive strand. In both cases, artistic practice and material experimentation are upheld as the primary and distinguishing vehicle for knowledge production.

2.1 The Negative Definition

A notable issue is the recurrent reliance on a negative definition of artistic research—characterizing it by what it is not (science), or by what it is liberated from (theorizing text following academic standards)—rather than articulating a robust, affirmative conceptualization. This framing leads to a problematic demarcation: when standalone theorizing output in default formats is treated as the defining line between artistic and scientific research, as if they are mutually exclusive modes of inquiry, artists who nonetheless produce such theory-driven work risk being reclassified as scientific rather than artistic researchers no matter their artistic groundings and objectives. This dilemma is often illuminated from the reverse perspective:

Once an artist becomes a researcher, he or she is no longer permitted to be solely an artist. Can he or she be a “true” artist at the same time as doing intensive research? And, on the other hand, if the artist is really an artist, can he or she be a “good” researcher? (Coessens et al. 2009, p. 18)

One might ask whether any other sorts of professionals and practitioners except artists are subjected to such doubts. The underlying anxieties and complexities keeping artistic researchers strictly practice-bound—instead of engaging in artistic thought or argumentation outside and apart from the confines of practice—deserve closer attention. Moreover, the characterization of artistic knowledge production and development as being, by definition, practical is inconsistent with numerous historical precedents that predate the formalization of artistic research, which we will come back to. Additionally, defining science solely by the functional, structural, and stylistic features of its textual outputs is reductive and fails to capture the complexity of scientific inquiry.

2.2 The Regressive Tendency

Gatekeeping attitudes toward scientifically engaged and informed artists are not limited to the artistic sphere; they are also evident within scientific communities, where skepticism and even hostility may be expressed. In the words of ecologist Wilson (1998, 234), who elsewhere strongly advocated for consilience: “The key to the exchange between [science and art] is not hybridization, not some unpleasantly self-conscious form of scientific art or artistic science, but reinvigoration of interpretation with the knowledge of science and its proprietary sense of the future.” However, framing the epistemic potential of art in this way—as merely an ancillary, interpretative, or communicative instrument in service of science—risks relegating artistic exploration and systematization to an unfairly minor role in the modern age, rather than fostering its development and growth in parallel and in dialogue with scientific progress.

This underscores the urgency of reimagining the relationship between art and science, at least from the perspective of art. Because such a perspective perpetuates a reductive view of artists, casting them as scientifically naïve figures aligned with the Romantic trope of the “noble savage.” Havelock (1986b) traces the privileging of

artistic poetry over prose—as a medium perceived to be more direct, authentic, and pure—and the dichotomy between subjective/active and objective/passive authorship to Rousseau and later Derrida. It can also be demonstrated that while art predates science and philosophy as an epistemic activity for the coordination of the collective mind and memory, it has certainly continued to evolve.

Havelock (*ibid.*) contends that textual abstraction is crucial for cognitive operations such as advanced linear reasoning, structural analysis, durable points of reference, and conceptual synthesis. Eisenstein (1980) further maintains that the dissemination of fixed and depersonalized prose—delivered as printed media products—has fostered readers' capacity to question and creatively diverge from established authority, cultivating a form of intellectual independence vital to critical discourse and creative deviance. As she observes in relation to the introduction of the printing press:

Previous relations between masters and disciples were altered. Students who took full advantage of technical texts which served as silent instructors were less likely to defer to traditional authority and more receptive to innovating trends. (*ibid.*, 689)

The critical mindset can hence be directly connected to how self-studies of literary sources came with the possibility of subverted and destabilized social roles. This was revolutionary and in science, it became a norm.

Science, Havelock (1986a, b) argues, was historically first enabled by the emergence of abstract syntax and thereby likewise abstracted reasoning facilitated by alphabetic literacy. In its earliest forms, art functioned as a mnemonic system for cultural and communal knowledge and thought patterns with agentive perspective and narrative as core features. The transition to a phonetic-alphabetic writing system, and the subsequent technological developments in script, print, and digital media, allowed for a separation not only between sign and signified but also between knower and knowledge. As abstraction and critical referencing to theoretical statements paved the way for both science and philosophy, these shifts fundamentally altered the conditions for art. Art was no longer required to preserve and direct folk knowledge, yet it retained cultural prestige as an exclusive and costly practice—consistent with the handicap principle (Zahavi and Zahavi 1999; Miller 2001; Simler and Hanson 2018). Moreover, writing and reading in a synaesthetic manner with coding across sense modalities (Gombrich 1977) also likely fueled artistic notation and abstraction in general.

Importantly, artists do not constitute an isolated or illiterate class. Intellectual and scholarly art forms have historically emerged in close dialogue with philosophy and science without sharp boundaries. A prominent example is the invention of opera, which did not emerge organically, but served as a conscious scientific-artistic conceptualization of Renaissance discoveries and ideas or even a laboratory for aesthetic-cognitive exploration (Katz 1994); “[O]pera sprang from theory; it was literally invented.” (Adorno 1986, p. 463) According to Havelock (1963), the cognitive shift toward abstract conceptualization enabled a world-model with not only “doing” entities but also “being” properties. For art, this marked a reconfiguration from (subjective) practices to (objective) processes and products. While earlier modes of thought

were not entirely abandoned, the transition from the remembering to the reflecting mind allowed art to become a vehicle for both projection and provocation. Nevertheless, we can imagine a complementary function of art in relation to science in its capacity to be a break for non-reflective action—what Ellul (1965) calls “orthopraxy”—and present “antienvironments” that brings attention to current cultures and practices (McLuhan and Parker 1968).

Rejecting the reduction of art’s value to its reception by non-artistic audiences, critics, and markets, we emphasize that the fine arts also encompass an intellectual conversation from artist to artist—one that stretches across generations and institutions. We furthermore reject the notion that art has never needed philosophy “to tell it what to do” (cf. Shottenkirk 2018, p. 93). On the contrary, history abounds with examples of artists deeply influenced by philosophical thought, as well as artists who have theorized more independently to construct their own “epistemic icons” (e.g. Grice and Jones 2024) or “symbolic generalisations” (Kuhn 1977b) as foundational elements for channeling artistic production. Such vehicles of artistic conceptualization and testing do not reach the public as *pragmata* (acts and events), but serve artistic theorizing as *schemata* (plans and patterns). Both *pragmata* and *schemata* are artistic outcomes, but while the first includes communication with non-artists, the second can serve intra-artistic knowledge production more precisely. Guiding and framing concepts in art have often been exposed in treatises, charts, and systems, and have most effectively shaped artistic creation when devised by artists themselves as distinct artistic models that serve to integrate both original thinking and scholarly knowledge—scientific as well as philosophical—before or between practical applications. The fact that artists selectively engage in theoretical integration outside practical application in this way aligns with Shottenkirk’s observation that “[p]hilosophy tries to own, as it were, other disciplines while art seeks to plunder for purpose” (2018, p. 92). Some of the most successful artistic theoreticians seem to do exactly that, reframing scholarly ideas in abstract form for artistic purposes.

Many influential artists—not least Richard Wagner, Wassily Kandinsky, Arnold Schönberg, Bertolt Brecht, Rudolph Laban, Glenn Gould, Joseph Beuys and many more—were also engaged in abstracting and systemizing writings, and produced and published theorizing text as well as diagrammatic figures for the purpose of preliminary modeling and ideational prototyping, which was not necessarily connected to individual artworks. Through their creation of original artistic concepts and systems, such artist-theorists have functioned as artistic variants of what can be thought of as “initiators of discursivity” and have offered “primary coordinates” for the “discursive practices” that have followed them (Foucault 1998). Their theoretical insights, ranging from mathematics and physics to anthropology and ethnology, informed their systematic creation of artistic ideas, styles, and formats, grounded in abstract conceptual frameworks and functioning as structuring principles for future practitioners. This distinguishes them from many artistic researchers in contemporary academia, whose individual artworks are often presented as isolated instances of practice manifesting beliefs or convictions with sometimes unclear epistemic value. And such tendencies, we argue, reflect a dimension within artistic research that warrants critical examination. It is here that we most clearly diverge from the mainstream in artistic research, which tends to assert the dichotomy that thinking is either primarily artistic

or primarily linguistic (e.g. Johnson 2011). In contrast, we maintain that linguistic reasoning and rationality have shaped and enriched artistic thought for centuries, and that this cognitive mode has not been beyond the reach of artists since pre-modern times—even though it has been in the interest of artists to uphold an aura of pre-literate intuition, mystery, and innocence.

3 Arguments for the Practice Paradigm

There are two main arguments supporting the practice paradigm in artistic research: *the epistemological argument* and *the methodological argument*. In its strongest form, the epistemological argument asserts that artistic practice enables a distinctive mode of thinking and knowing, and grants access to a richer experience of world-constituting elements. The methodological argument, by contrast, emphasizes how the process of making directs the researcher's attention toward new insights and hence new knowledge. These can be understood as representing two versions of the practice paradigm: a *hard* version, grounded in cognitive claims about artistic practice as a transformative, directly mind-altering activity, and a *soft* version, which focuses instead on the ways artistic practice shapes behavior, focus, and choices as grounds for reflection.

3.1 The Epistemological Argument

The epistemological argument is explicitly grounded in constructivist conceptions of knowledge production. Borgdorff (2012) advocates for a position termed “constructivist realism” following Latour (1999), who uses the metaphor of “staging” to describe processes of aestheticization that direct attention to two planes of reference at the same time—not only in art, but also in science. Borgdorff delineates four distinct perspectives on the relationship between artistic practice and theory. “The instrumental perspective” treats theory as a repository of technical knowledge applied within artistic craftsmanship. “The interpretive perspective” employs theory to contextualize and reflect upon artistic practice. “The performative perspective” posits that theory itself constitutes a form of practice, actively shaping the object of inquiry. Lastly, “the immanent perspective” emphasizes that artistic practice represents a unique mode of thinking, wherein knowledge is embodied and experienced sensorily rather than articulated discursively.

Borgdorff asserts that “[a]rtistic processes or products are essential components of and in artistic research,” and that “[artistic] [r]esearch results consist partly of one or more artistic productions or presentations,” while also acknowledging that “critical reflection on the research process, and documentation of it in discursive form, is also part of the research results” (ibid., pp. 24–25). His epistemological stance further contends that artistic research creates new realities by generating “fundamental ideas and understandings which, although non-discursive as a rule, make the world into what it is or could be” (ibid., p. 100). This conviction is encapsulated in his claim: “Only in and through art do we see what landscapes, soundworlds, histories, emotions, relations, interests, or movements really are or could be” (ibid., p. 172).

Arguments derived from this framework suggest that artistic practices convey and disseminate knowledge beyond the constraints of textual discourse and abstraction. However, the extent to which such knowledge is novel, valid, or transformative remains insufficiently examined. While textual theorization is not excluded, it is typically positioned as ancillary to the demonstration of practice, rather than as a central component of the research output. Artistic practice is regarded as essential, and the notion of artistic theory independent of direct or simultaneous practical application is largely considered untenable. Consequently, the textual reporting, argumentation, and speculative engagement undertaken by artistic researchers is not viewed as the primary locus of original knowledge production. It is often deemed more appropriate for artistic researchers to cite philosophical authorities than to engage in theoretical construction or critique themselves: “Artistic research [...] does not really involve theory building or knowledge production in the usual sense of those terms” (ibid., p. 173).

Borgdorff advocates for methodological pluralism, allowing artistic researchers to employ methods from other disciplines, including the sciences, provided that the research is conducted in and through artistic practice. The following section will examine the proposition that artistic practice constitutes a methodologically justified means of producing knowledge.

3.2 The Methodological Argument

Nelson (2022) proposes practice-as-research as a methodology grounded in experiential concepts such as tacit knowledge, embodied cognition, and performativity. He outlines a research process in which the artist-practitioner derives knowledge through “inner commentary in the processes of being-thinking-doing and these might be recorded in a (sonic or written) diary in everyday language” (ibid., 44). He further explains: “The attempt to know-what, to make the tacit more explicit, involves also the dynamic intra-relation between know-how and know-that to generate informed critical reflection” (ibid.).

From this perspective, the methodological argument asserts that knowledge emerges entangled as practice guides the artistic researcher’s attention toward new insights—not discoveries—in the course of action. Nelson proposes replacing the term “research question” altogether with “research inquiry” in the context of practice-as-research, arguing that the former implies definitive answers, whereas the latter invites open-ended exploration. The experiential and improvisatory dimension of art-making is thus positioned as the primary justification for a practice-centered methodology in artistic research.

A variant of the methodological argument comes from Hannula et al. (2014), who proposes a research procedure in which the artistic researcher shifts between the insider perspective as practitioner and the outsider perspective as distanced commentator. While Hannula et al. underscore that artistic research should not be equated with art and artmaking, they hold that practice is a fundamental part of artistic research, since this kind of inquiry “starts inside a historical and contextual artistic practice, has an eye on the good as defined in that practice, happens as public acts that are considered parts of the practice and returns to it, to inform its continuation” (ibid., xii).

3.3 Possible Motives

The depiction of artists as world-constituting agents, as articulated in Borgdorff's constructivist realism, presents an undeniably empowering narrative. The practice paradigm may appeal to artists who seek to reclaim a pre-literate ideal in which artistic practice held a mystified status, insulated from expectations of discursive articulation and rational accountability. It may also resonate with those committed to critiquing and deconstructing the epistemic authority of science. However, by positioning practice as the central epistemic mechanism—and at times conflating practice with theory—this paradigm risks subjecting artistic research to the industrial and societal norms of the non-academic artworld, thereby constraining its conceptual autonomy in that respect.

Simultaneously, the practice paradigm may find support among scientists who continue to uphold the 19th-century bifurcation between science and art, reinforcing the institutional and hierarchical dominance of scientific disciplines. This dynamic reflects not only epistemological tensions, but also broader concerns related to social stratification and the distribution of economic power within academic institutions.

4 Counterarguments and an Alternative Approach

The reduction of artistic research to activity-driven processes of aestheticization, as aligned with constructivist realism, overlooks the broader epistemic functions and potentialities of both art and artistic research. The epistemological argument, as defined above with reference to Borgdorff and Latour, unless interpreted through an extreme solipsistic lens, is vulnerable to critique in light of extensive philosophical challenges to constructivism and its inherent limitations (e.g. Phillips 1995; Hacking 2000; Boghossian 2006). By failing to make a distinction between practice and theory, this argument conflates a priori training with a posteriori reflection. It also disregards Havelock's observation that abstract conceptualization beyond immediate acts and events is fundamentally dependent on written discourse rather than practice—a dynamic that has been central to artistic processes since Antiquity. Although experimentation, exploration and subjective discovery are certainly integral for example to many improvisational and artisanal practices, their embodied and person-centered modes of transmission arguably tend to slow down innovation and obscure abstract conceptualization. This would be due to their lack of what Havelock (1963) describes as the ability to separate the knower from the known—an epistemic shift made possible precisely by the technology of writing and later print, which enabled the distance between author and audience necessary to foster effective critical discourse (Eisenstein 1980).

The methodological argument, in which Nelson for instance argues that the practitioner-researcher paradoxically derives insight from an inner commentary while engaged in tacit knowledge, is problematic from a neuroscientific view. Compared with the limitations of declarative knowledge in relation to artistic practice as described by Shottenkirk and Chatterjee (2010), it is more likely that the commentary is a creative byproduct producing a narrative that fits the artist's self-image as

researcher in a self-serving and even self-deceptive way, rather than actual or novel knowledge (Trivers 2011; Simler and Hanson 2018). The methodology suggested by Hannula et al. is in this aspect more realistic and plausible. However, following their line of reasoning, the only thing separating an artistic researcher from an artist is how theory informs research and not art, which historically has not been the case.

The alternative approach proposed here seeks to re-establish the systematic scaffolding of art-making through theoretical means, encouraging artistic researchers to operate as artistic theoreticians. This model draws on historical precedents wherein artists developed intermediate conceptual frameworks to guide future practice. Rather than privileging demonstrations of practice or the production of singular artworks—often aligned with commercial or cultural functions—this approach shifts the focus of artistic research toward investigating the conditions for the emergence, or construction, of new art forms. Historical exemplars such as Wagner’s *music drama* and Beuys’s *social sculptures* serve as illustrative precedents.

Taking Wagner as an example of a paradigm shift in a proto-stage of artistic research, we observe how he built upon Mundt’s conceptual idea and expanded it theoretically until a defined framework for creation could be articulated through texts and diagrams (Wagner 1852). Practice and production followed, and the transition from Wagner’s early romantic operas to his later music dramas became evident through the examples that shaped his lasting influence on future generations of artists. Notably, subsequent artistic theorization and composition has tended to engage with Wagner’s conceptual framework rather than only the individual works themselves. The broader relevance of this kind of theoretical output, where artists identify key concepts, map principal relations, and devise generative systems or orientation tools, is hence that it stands not only as a basis for implementation and production, but as a research result in its own right. The impact of such frameworks, reaching beyond their original areas of application, is evident in, for example, Schönberg’s serialism, which has influenced developments across literature, architecture, and film music, and Laban’s movement notation system, which has found applications even in robotics.

These artistic researchers *avant la lettre* were, of course, also practitioners—either alongside their theoretical work or during specific periods—just as many scientific researchers also engage in practical professional activity from time to time. What distinguishes the historical examples we discuss here from much artistic research today is that these artists formulated original theories and creative concepts as artistic scaffolding devices, rather than merely offering scientific justifications for their existing practice, artistic applications of philosophical schools of thought and “artspeak” that contextualizes the art within traditional art myths (Unbehaun 2021).

What further sets them apart from philosophers within aesthetic theory or other non-artistic theoreticians is that their intellectual contributions have not only reached a general readership but have been taught to successive generations of artists, thereby shaping the practices of others rather than only their own careers. Their ideas and concepts are taken up transgenerationally explicitly within the arts; they are applied and further developed by artists who may not refer back to paradigmatic artworks, but instead engage with the abstract conceptual frameworks these figures introduced. By contrast, the relation between theory and practice in much contemporary artistic

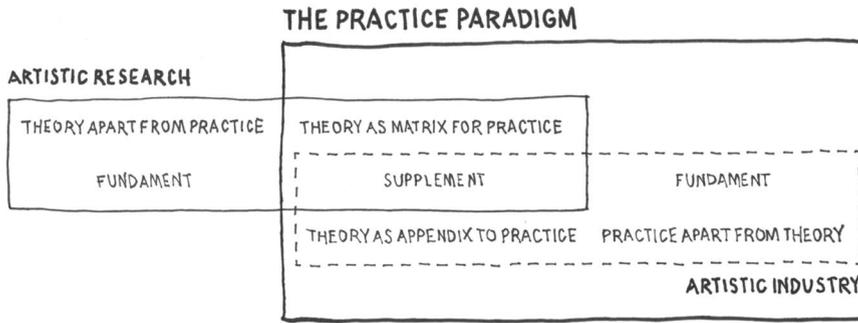


Fig. 1 Diagram visualizing the potential for artistic research beyond the limits of the industrially driven practice paradigm and as conceptually differentiated from art-making

research tends to remain rather circular and confined within the artist's own production, making it difficult to extract theoretical outcomes with broader applicability, as well as ground for theoretical critique. The historical examples we highlight demonstrate that there has been a strong tradition of artistic theorizing that does not preclude broader, generative forms of artistic work—a genre of output that allows for understanding and questioning without the reader having access to any particular artwork.

This form of modelling as a research outcome would be grounded in philosophical or scientific theories selected for their relevance to the artistic inquiry, including original theoretical contributions developed by the artistic researchers themselves. Its validity would be assessed not only through conventional academic metrics but also through its impact on artistic variation and development beyond the scope of the individual work or the researcher's lifetime. By extending the notion of artistic research beyond the practice paradigm (see Fig. 1), this approach—abandoning artistic practice as the central mode of inquiry in favor of artistic theory—resonates with Feyerabend's (1993) anarchistic philosophy of science. It repositions the artistic researcher as a conceptual designer rather than a cultural laborer embedded within the artworld industry or societal service structures, thereby opening up space for a more speculative, generative, critically engaged, and intellectually rigorous mode of artistic research.

5 Discussion

Given the purported functionality and complementarity of the practice paradigm in relation to science—as articulated in both its hard and soft variants—it is necessary to consider its potential adverse implications. If, as Havelock (1986b) contends, abstract theorization through autonomous textual output is foundational to cognitive capacities such as complex linear reasoning, advanced structural mapping, systematic referencing, and conceptual abstraction, then the marginalization of such output within artistic research may entail significant consequences for knowledge production in the arts. This observation directly relates to our first research question: How

is the practice paradigm justified? The privileging of practice as a way of knowing is often framed as a corrective to perceived limitations of discursive reasoning, yet this justification may obscure vaster cognitive and epistemic affordances of textual theorization.

In this case, we presume that the primary reader or reviewer of the research output is another artistic researcher or possibly an artist. Eisenstein (1980) identifies a connection between the widespread dissemination of autonomous texts—separated from the author’s presence as a living agent—and the reader’s capacity to critically engage with and creatively diverge from authoritative voices. This capacity for critical distance is foundational to theoretical discourse. In contrast, a paradigm of artistic research that presents itself as *avant-garde* yet deliberately eschews textual output may inadvertently foster artistic conservatism, reinforce traditional hierarchies of prestige within the field, and inhibit intra-disciplinary critique. By failing to disentangle discourse from practice in substantively emancipatory ways, such a paradigm risks obstructing the conditions necessary for reflexive and critical engagement on a deeper level. This tension underscores the need to interrogate whether the privileging of practice inadvertently reproduces the very hegemonies it claims to resist, particularly when textual engagement is dismissed as secondary or derivative. This raises important questions about the motives driving the justification of the practice paradigm: Is its dominance sustained by epistemic conviction, or by institutional and cultural incentives that benefit certain actors and their preferred activities within the artworld and academia?

The recondite master-disciple system in the fine arts—wherein disciples follow established masters who ensure the continuity of practices and established models of thought through selective succession—relies heavily on proximity, admiration, and personal allegiance. Critical gestures from within the arts are typically directed outward, toward non-artistic authority figures and their representations, rather than inward, toward the discipline itself and its prevailing idolatry. Moreover, artistic outputs that resist theorization might evade rational critique, privileging affective communication over depersonalized argumentation. This orientation aligns more closely with the mechanisms of ideological reinforcement than with the norms of scholarly inquiry. Such dynamics suggest that the practice paradigm may serve to consolidate existing power structures, benefiting established practitioners and institutions while limiting opportunities for critical renewal and theoretical innovation. This kind of analysis might help to identify which stakeholders might benefit from the paradigm, both directly and indirectly.

The reluctance to allow artistic researchers the freedom to theorize independently of practice risks assuming a dogmatic character. If the practice paradigm is sustained by what Popper (2002) described as “pet theories,” its adherents are likely to seek confirmation rather than refutation, thereby limiting future development. Furthermore, strong identification with the professional status of the artist—an identity imbued with cultural prestige—may inhibit the evolution of artistic researchers into roles that engage more substantively with scientific or philosophical domains outside the current scope of the artworld. Such protective posturing may be symptomatic of deeper structural dynamics, including in-group loyalty and disciplinary insularity.

It is not unreasonable to posit that artistic research currently faces a theoretical crisis—one that situates the field in a state of epistemic limbo, caught between its allegiance to the contemporary artworld, which valorizes practice above all, and its dependence on philosophical frameworks imported from the other academic fields as “ready-mades.” A proactive engagement with theory production, oriented toward artistic invention, could offer a pathway to reclaim epistemic and institutional relevance on art’s own terms. However, such a shift requires acknowledgement of the existence of this crisis and recognizing its role in impeding conceptual progress: the artworld and artistic academia must be highlighted as normative environments onto which disruptive anti-environments can be projected by artistic means. The dominance of practice in the early decades of academized artistic research may thus be interpreted as a premature and symptomatic response to unresolved epistemological tensions. In response to our second research question, we argue that the motives behind the practice paradigm’s justification are probably not solely epistemological, but also institutional and cultural, shaped by disciplinary traditions and professional incentives.

The alternative approach proposed here expands the scope of artistic knowledge to include purely theoretical contributions—an inclusion that is historically grounded yet potentially contentious within the current institutional and societal climate. We can observe essentialist and conservative tendencies both in the fervent defense of practice within the arts and in the persistent binary division between art and science. The viability of our proposed reconfiguration hinges on both individual and collective willingness to embrace artistic theorization without positioning practice or artistic activity of any kind as the central epistemological or methodological component of artistic research. This entails cultivating institutional structures that support theoretical innovation in the arts, including publication venues, funding mechanisms, and pedagogical models that recognize theory as a legitimate and generative form of artistic output. Our alternative framework, grounded in historical and non-institutional examples of artistic theorization, offers a way to advance artistic research as a legitimate and dynamic mode of academic inquiry—one capable of generating conceptual tools, models, and systems that extend beyond the production of singular artworks as end-products. Ultimately, the question is whether relinquishing the presumed epistemological and methodological primacy of practice constitutes a conceptual shift too radical and emancipatory for the field to accommodate.

6 Conclusions

In conclusion, our study presents a coherent account of the pervasive emphasis on practice within the field of artistic research. We have articulated the foundational ideas behind what we term the practice paradigm—an orientation marked by some internal variation, yet broadly encompassing all diverse forms of artistic research as it has emerged in the 21st century. We have identified two core arguments supporting this paradigm: a hard epistemological argument and a soft methodological one. Concurrently, we have subjected this paradigm to critical scrutiny, highlighting its constrained capacity to conceptualize artistic research beyond the confines of produc-

tive, commercial, or socially instrumental art-making. In response, we have articulated counterarguments that challenge both its epistemological and methodological premises. As an alternative, we propose a reconceptualization of artistic research as a program that includes artistic theorization beyond application in practice—a creative ideation oriented toward the deliberate invention of novel styles and formats, informed not only by philosophy and art but also, to a significant extent, by scientific inquiry. Crucially, this model does not presuppose artistic practice as a necessary epistemological or methodological vehicle. In doing so, we invoke the spirit of Paul Feyerabend in a novel context and domain, and acknowledge the broader possibilities of practice as a subsequent, but not compulsory, phase of application in theory-driven artistic research.

It is not possible to either revert to a pre-literate or pre-scientific epoch, or to restore the epistemic primacy of artistic practice in its traditional form. Likewise, the historical entanglement of art and science through different ages—predating the institutionalization of artistic research—cannot be undone. Our contention is not that theoretical reasoning is unwelcome in artistic research, but rather that the disclosure of personal practice has become a *de facto* requirement in activity-driven projects designated as artistic research. To broaden the scope of artistic research to include not only practice-based inquiry but also artistic theorization—aimed at modeling abstract ideas, styles, and formats connecting concepts and realizations but without necessitating direct practical engagement by the researcher—the following conditions must be met:

- First, at the personal level, the distinction between being an artist and being an artistic researcher must be clearly acknowledged, accepted, and emphasized.
- Second, the artistic research community must actively welcome and promote philosophical pluralism and genuine viewpoint diversity.
- Third, formal frameworks and protocols governing artistic research and research education must be inclusively revised to recognize purely theoretical investigations and outputs by artists as legitimate scholarly contributions.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to consider whether researchers in other disciplines engage in practices analogous to those of artists. If the notion of practice is extended beyond technical or disciplinary routines to include aesthetic and potentially metaphysical dimensions—those that inform the norms, preferences, biases, and self-conceptions of researchers—then such a parallel becomes plausible. In this expanded sense, practice is shaped by referential frameworks, subjective inclinations, and epistemic dispositions. If this is the case, then the role of practice in research warrants a broader discussion that reaches way beyond the confines of the arts.

While the outcomes of artistic research conducted within the practice paradigm may appear abstract or opaque, claims to knowledge in the sciences are typically more straightforward. The interwoven outputs of theory and practice in artistic research often remain difficult to disentangle, which can hinder critical engagement with specific arguments and methods. We maintain that theory and practice must operate in concert in both art and science; however, asserting their equivalence and

collapsing the distinction ultimately obscures—rather than strengthens—the epistemic contributions of artistic research.

Though we acknowledge that both the arts and the sciences face significant pressures within bureaucratic and competitive university environments, a broader problematization of norms and bureaucratic constraints within academic institutions lies beyond the scope of this paper. Artists who navigate between research and practical production may experience a dual burden and loyalty ties, shaped simultaneously by academic demands and implicit expectations from the industry and the artist community at large. Practice-centered epistemologies and methodologies do not guarantee that artistic research is free from institutional constraints comparable to those found in the sciences. Nor does a shift toward a more theory-inclusive mode of artistic knowledge production resolve these issues. What may, however, be gained by relaxing the requirement for practice-exposing outcomes is a loosening of certain constraints on artistic research sustained by the dynamics of the institutional artworld, understood as the multi-national societal and communal structures among stakeholders and artists who all contribute to determining of what qualifies as art (Dickie 1974).

Following our articulation of the practice paradigm and the problematic conditions it entails, we highlight that the *raison d'être* of artistic research might neither be to join philosophers in debates on aesthetic theory, nor to engage with the concerns of societal or industrial art practitioners. Rather, a primary task would be to continue the tradition of artistic theorization that these other fields of investigation do not explicitly address and tend to neglect as an area of development: the production of theoretical contributions that articulate rationales for artistic practice beyond what is already known or currently possible to realize in practice. Such research could separate the theoretical output—though not theory itself—from its immediate practical context, thereby extending both intra-artistic innovation and intra-artistic critique beyond individual artmaking. Our concern is not with practice as such, but with the crude assumption that artistic practice alone can constitute research per se and embed theory, while artistic theory in an ahistorical manner is not granted the same capacity in return.

Ultimately, we find no compelling justification for the presumption that artistic research must foreground practice in order to count as such. While it is frequently asserted that artistic practice enhances knowledge production by transcending the limitations of textual abstraction, we propose a reversal of this view. The true scholarly potential of artistic research may reside in its capacity for artistic theorization—an intellectual modality of speculation and imaginative reasoning that surpasses both sensory engagement and scientific creativity. The contribution of this paper lies in the identification of risks and opportunities associated with the practice paradigm as understood through our artistic-theoretical lens. Future research, moving beyond the reflective argumentation of this philosophical inquiry from an artistic perspective, could for instance include organizational studies and empirical research in the social sciences to clear out any direct causal links between practice-centered epistemologies and institutional effects in the arts.

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Declarations

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