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Article abstract

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A REVIEW OF *ARTISTIC RESEARCH AND LITERATURE*, EDITED BY CORINA CADUFF AND TAN WÄLCHLI

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Abstract: The intersection between artistic research and literature has so far found little attention in the literature of arts research (Caduff & Wälchli, 2019). This is surprising as artistic research regularly encompasses creative forms of language, but also because creative writing has established itself as an academic discipline for quite some time. The anthology I review here, *Artistic Research and Literature*, edited by Corina Caduff and Tan Wälchli offers a heterogeneous and hybrid collection of contributions engaged with the performative quality of the research, the definition of the subject, institutional affiliations and self-positionings as well as a diverse range of case studies.

Keywords: creative writing; performative research; hybridization; poetic arts; artist/writer

As the editors of *Artistic Research and Literature* (Caduff & Wälchli, 2019) underline, the intersection between artistic research and literature has, so far, found little attention in the very rich and stimulating literature on various forms of arts research. This is surprising for two reasons. For one, artistic research regularly encompasses written text (among other means), and often researchers employ particularly creative and analytical forms of language. Secondly, creative writing has established itself as an academic discipline for quite some time, potentially offering a solid field of reference for research into language and writing. If this potential has remained hidden so far, Caduff and Wälchli observe, this may be due to the disciplinary boundaries upheld by respective academic institutions. It is only recently that creative writing has become understood as a decidedly artistic practice, and that potential connections to art schools and arts research have become feasible (Caduff & Wälchli, 2019, p. 2). Although long-standing institutional boundaries are certainly unfortunate, it appears that the current discussion might actually profit from the anachronism. On the one hand, the elaborate thinking and knowledge, as well as the many references that artistic research has brought along, are accessible, and basic questions such as those concerning possible subjects of artistic research and its self-legitimation have been thoroughly discussed. On the other hand, the various approaches and points of view articulated in this volume regularly evoke the spirit of pioneering work in the making, in an area that has yet to be explored and make reading it a stimulating voyage of discovery.

It is not obvious how to structure such a heterogeneous and hybrid collection of contributions from authors with diverse biographies and academic backgrounds. Subsuming the chapters under a number of overarching themes, as suggested by the editors, is an understandable strategy, but it is not entirely compelling in this case. In the following, I will therefore not proceed along these thematic axes, but will discuss the individual texts according to four points-of-view. These are points-of-view which focus on particular qualities and the potential of these qualities with regard to the “tradition” of artistic research. First, I consider the questions of form and presentation of a written text to be fundamental, since these highlight the *performative* quality often characteristic of artistic research. Secondly, the *definition of the subject* is often of high importance in moments of establishing a new field of research, and this is also the case here, as more than half of the contributions are in some sense or other devoted to that problem. Thirdly, a side track to this discussion leads to *questions of self-positioning, institutional affiliations, and legitimacy*, which are foregrounded in a few contributions. Finally, I consider how the editors have grouped together those contributions which present *case studies*, since these are often instructive for understanding historical dimensions and particular strategies as well as the diversity, originality and autonomy of research activities.

In another volume on artistic research, editor Lucy Cotter (2019) starts her introduction lamenting over the subjugating and restrictive effects of printed language (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Quote from Cotter (2019, p. 9) with original formatting.

By ordering words into a straight line, writing tends to push thought along one direction, holding thinking back from branching out in multiple paths. I find that some thoughts prefer to move backwards and circle around themselves, allowing for a slow reconfiguration of meaning. While writing this text, I miss the freedom of drawing, where one can spatially mark out different kinds of relationships. Distances between thoughts. Gaps that open space to think across

Seemingly unrelated

Ideas.

Or consider what one might put into a hole.

Typing this, I anticipate the difficulties I will create for proofreading if I make spontaneous decisions to experiment, like gluing words together to see whether they become illegible or if their sudden obscurity would invite a nice slowness, a different kind of legibility. (p. 9)

Such self-reflexivity and playful attempts at breaking-up the established patterns of linear narratives are well-known in artistic research. And the resulting experience for the reader, characterized by stumbling, skipping and re-ordering the linearity of the text, is not solely focused on analyzing content, but is one of activating additional modes of perception to generate new kinds of knowledge. This experience is manifest in several contributions in this volume. Authors present their thematic excursions in specifically designed textual formats, which allow for a free play of analytical arguments and offer multiple points-of-view. A prime example of this is Maya Rasker's essay, "A letter to Foucault" (2019). In addressing an eminent thinker, long deceased but still highly influential, Rasker is not interested in quoting his theses as indisputable references, but rather in exploring his status and questioning the ensuing hierarchies as well as the dominance of "theoretical" doctrines in general. The particular achievement of this text lies in describing the hierarchies not as one-dimensional, but as highly ambivalent – as when Rasker admits the appeal of "hid[ing] in the shadow of a giant" (p. 35), or when she elaborates on the difficulties of maintaining integrity when engaging with a person or a way of thinking that one admires. Rasker touches on a

reverent relation to theoretical references, which, despite being very wide-spread, is hardly ever addressed in scientific debates. And she counters this with a particular mode of “working through” a relationship, in order to emphasize that knowledge is hardly ever produced outside multi-layered controversies including moments of affection.

A similar attitude, but in a very different disguise, manifests in Redell Olsen’s “Writing Scripto-Visual Costumes and Columns of Air” (2019). She employs parallel columns of texts, variations in typography as well as textual inserts and words overprinted on others. This presentation is used to articulate ways of reasoning which are not to be summed-up in a linear narrative. Instead, they make transparent that their claims are indebted to (and made meaningful by) a range of diverse logics. According to Australian artist and researcher Brad Haseman (2007), such performative strategies have come to constitute a new paradigm which distinguishes praxis-based research in the arts. The conception of specific (textual) formats is now an integral part of such research, which is not only interested in presenting results, but also reflects on the modes of presentation as well as the context in which knowledge was produced. In my view, this performative character of practice-based research purported by Haseman is comparable, in the current volume, to Ferdinand Schmatz’s (2019) plea for acknowledging the directness and presence imminent to poetry. Both Haseman and Schmatz highlight the ever-new and productive moment of reception — depending on the individual receiver — in which knowledge is not just transferred, but constantly being created. Or, in the words used by Alexander Damianisch (2019) in this volume: explorations at the intersection of research and artistic practice are distinguished by a “permanent unrest of meaning” (p. 142).

As is often the case in publications on artistic research, a significant number of articles in this volume, too, are dedicated to the definition and characterization of a research subject which is still only in the making. With the special focus here being on literature, a crucial question concerns the boundaries between the established academic discipline of creative writing and a not yet fully developed practice-based research in and through poetic writing. Jan Baetens, in “Writing Cannot Tell Everything” (2019), interprets the often-stipulated distinction between creative writing and critical analysis as a “tension between ‘writing’ and ‘text’” (p. 20). However, he finds this dichotomy too simple and outdated, and instead opts for an approach called “Mixt,” in which both modes are employed, commenting on each other dialectically and thereby creating additional layers of meaning. In a similar vein, Vincent Broqua (2019) observes various practices of “hybridization” (p.122), which he considers a necessary complement to those more established modes of writing that are often confined to individual academic disciplines. Broqua aims to expand the rules of speaking and writing, since he considers this the only way to activate language.

Similarly, Tine Melzer (2019) is looking to activate the sometimes hidden potential intrinsic to language in new practices of writing. She does so in her artistic practice, but also in her contribution to this volume, entitled “Aspect Change and Poetic Charge as Tools for Artistic Research in Literature.” Presenting a number of research “instruments” (p. 145) borrowed from disciplines such as philosophy and psychology, she sets out to unravel the many layers of meaning usually carried along by language. For instance, the tool of “aspect seeing” (pp. 150–152) encourages us to see things in multiple ways and shows how slight shifts in perspective can reveal not only new images but also new verbal imagery. In fact, such acts of “aspect seeing” occur quite frequently and often “naturally” in everyday language, without, however, always activating their potential for changing established meanings and interpretations.

Next to exploring potential subjects for new practice-based research in the poetic arts, the interaction with existing institutional settings is also addressed in this volume. Institutions are obviously key for establishing the new field, but the individual biographical positions of researchers and practitioners are also up for discussion. Daniela Cascella (2019), for her part, explains right at the outset that her contribution is coming from a “writer – not a theorist, not an academic” (p. 85). If she seems to take these distinctions for granted, then her ensuing explorations indicate that she assigns a “writer” a particular autonomy with regard to his/her attitude and voice, which she does not consider given in the role of a theorist and even less in the role of an academic. In order to exemplify the various inter-dependencies of a new “type of research-into-writing/writing-into-research” (p. 85), she delivers an intriguing composition of textual fragments, occasionally referring to each other and employing a broad range of styles. Some of them reflect on her institutional allocation (“writing tutor in art school”, p. 85), others on her self-understanding as a writer (pp. 85–86), and yet others refer to writers such as Alejandra Pzarnik, Clarice Lispector, Bhanu Kapil or Ingeborg Bachmann. Diary-like descriptions of her moods are interspersed into ruminations about teaching writing practices at the intersection of creative practice and scholarly analysis. The fractured structure of the text, saturated with inter-connections, represents a kind of thinking that is aiming at precision and inclusion, inviting the reader to follow its path.

Other contributions address the transfer of creative writing tools into art school, less with regard to restrictive structures than to strategies and tactics for institutional agency. Looking back at her task of setting up an MFA in Art Writing at Goldsmiths, at the University of London, Maria Fusco (2019) relates how a lack of models, first perceived as unsettling, leads to an openness for constant negotiations with the students as active participants. Her short description, focussed on this one example, is also worth reading for the way she uses anecdotal observations to comment on institutional mechanisms as well as on her autonomous ways of interacting with them. At some point, she was stunned to notice how

frequently she was using the word negotiate (p. 81), and she came to learn how important generosity (p. 83) is when working in trans-disciplinary constellations. Christa Maria Lerm Hayes (2019), in her article, provides some wider context for the various individual points-of-view articulated in this volume and recounts some currents in education and science policy from past decades. This includes notes on outstanding art historian Aby Warburg and on artists/writers such as James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp, and which remind us that practice-based research in and through the arts is not primarily or even exclusively the outcome of recent policy initiatives, as is sometimes upheld.¹

Case studies can significantly contribute to knowledge about artistic research, and this can also be observed in this volume. Singular cases are always more complex than what theoretical analyses can tell, as they testify to the productivity of artistic research. They activate the potential of such research in particular constellations, and they showcase the autonomy of individual approaches as well as their resistance to norms and standards. The artistic works explored in this volume offer rich and manifold examples for this, and they are often quite entertaining — another quality which is essential for knowledge in this field. Among the case studies is Tan Wälchli's (2019) discussion and political labelling of Konrad Bayers's plays with language. In the piece at hand, the poet substituted all nouns with the word "karl," creating a narrative which is not only absurd but also historically charged and meaningful given the significance of the name "karl." Bayers's unconventional way of employing forms of language invites reflections about the content and interpretation of his texts, but also about the possibilities of language in general. Another virtuoso player with language, translator and lyric Oskar Pastior, is presented here by Thomas Strässle (2019). Pastior works with translations, for which he does not exclusively set-out from the words and sentences of a text, but also from the sounds created by certain words or phrases, as well as from anagrams. According to Strässle, this implicitly raises the basic question of what to translate in a translation, so that he speaks of "applied translation research" (p. 183). Such examples underline a specific promise which Haseman (2007) sees in the "performative research paradigm," namely that research is not only conducted to create content, but also to expand the methods and instruments of artistic practices in each single case.

To conclude, I share the view of the editors that examining the intersection of practice-based research in the arts with practices of writing opens a promising path for expanding debates about artistic research, which have predominantly been focussed more narrowly. In my opinion as reader and reviewer though, it would have been feasible to underline a bit more pointedly and more confidently the autonomy of the diverse contributions in this volume, both through a more apt grouping and through a more extensive introduction. This is a very rich and readable collection of short essays, and readers will encounter a range of concise and assertive arguments.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A recent example for this questionable view occurs in the otherwise intriguing publication *Manifest der künstlerischen Forschung. Eine Verteidigung gegen ihre Verfechter* (Henke et al., 2020, p. 5). By insisting on older approaches to practice-based research in the arts, as provided by Lerm Hayes (2019), I do not mean to deny that such research has gained enormous momentum following the Bologna reforms, particularly with regard to funding and infrastructure. See for example, my contribution “Undisziplinierte Disziplin. Ein Plädoyer mit Beispielen” (Mader, 2021).