

## **How Do We Do It? An Introduction**

Lecture given at KASK on February 20th 2018

### **Introduction**

With this lecture, I would like to demarcate conceptually the platform for arts and design research practices we name How Do We Do It? In doing so, I am marking the field we will inhabit over the next three days. Therefore, this lecture will not be a general introduction to artistic research, but only to those aspects that are relevant for the proposal we will publicly inaugurate today.

In this short introduction, I am not adopting a neutral position: I will expose my ideas—ideas I share with many colleagues but that diverge from other perspectives and approaches on how to understand the unavoidable tensions that emerge out of bringing together the terms “art”, “artistic”— or as I will propose “aesthetic”—, and “research”. I am adopting a decidedly first-person perspective—although not always explicitly—the same perspective we invited the researchers that are going to share their practices with us in the coming three days to take: we ask them to share with us how do they do “it”, how each of them does research. Research is something we do, something each of us does, and it is the intertwinement of all these practices—of all these specific, organized, and systematized varieties of doing—that defines what research is.

With this introductory lecture, I would like to provide a framework that allows us to initiate the collective process of reflection we want How Do We Do It? to be. This lecture is going to be a short one in order to have time to initiate the dialogue today.

### **On artistic research**

There are different strategies to delimit the field of artistic research. An interesting one consists of using the term “research in the arts”. The use of this term aims at opening a wide field that can include all research disciplines dealing with art: from art history, philosophical aesthetics or art sociology to artistic research in a specific sense of this term. I think this is an interesting departing point because it can facilitate a fluid exchange between different forms of research on an ostensibly common general topic (art). At the same time, it makes it even more necessary to specify the particularities of artistic research—that is, what makes artistic research different from other forms of “research in the arts”, not for the sake of defining differences, but rather to identify the particular contribution of this form of research to this field. This specification can be marked by a change of preposition, substituting “in” with “through”—“research through the arts”. This substitution expresses the idea that the specificity of this kind of research bears on

understanding performing art as research practice and not—or not necessarily—as object of research. Consequently, art is resituated inside the framework of research and located in the sphere of methodology—in the field of the how, of the procedures of inquiry. I think that only in this case, that is, only understanding artistic research as a form of research by means of art practices—by means of the performance and the performativity of art practices and artistic artifacts—it is worth differentiating a form of artistic research. Therefore, I understand artistic research as research through the arts, research by means of art, as a variety of research basically defined by a methodology—by ways of proceeding, by ways of doing research—configured by, or at least based on, art practices.

Before I continue reflecting on the function of practices in this context, I would like to make a short excursion referring to a question that I consider to be relevant. I think that the term “aesthetic research” is more adequate than “artistic research” to denominate this form of inquiry. Two main reasons support this idea. The first refers to the etymological origin of the word “aesthetics”: the greek term “aisthesis”. This term designates a way of understanding based on certain uses of our senses. In short, aisthesis means understanding through the senses. This form of understanding can provide the foundation for a possible “sensuous knowledge” and/or a “sensuous thought” or “sensuous thinking”, in which “thinking” is understood as an intervention in the process of the emergence of significance—that is, of what things and states of affairs are, or better, what/how they signify for us. Using the term “aesthetics” in this original sense—and not referring to a philosophical discipline dealing mainly, at least after Hegel, with the theory of art—we are situated, undoubtedly, in the epistemic or cognitive field, which means that we are in a good position to address successfully the question of research. Defining aesthetics basically as understanding through the senses or, more precisely, through practices that actualize and mobilize the epistemic power of the sensuous, the field of aesthetics is wider than the field of art. Aesthetic practices include all kind of practices able to actualize and mobilize the possibilities of understanding through the senses, and not only those practices restricted by the normativity that both defines and derives from the concept and the system of art. There are aesthetic practices that are not considered to be artistic, but that nevertheless can fundamentally contribute to developing a mode of understanding different than the one enabled by the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. Aesthetic research (this is my proposal) can be understood as a variety of modes of inquiry methodologically based on practices of understanding through the senses in and beyond the limits of art. I think some of the practices we will share and discuss over the next three days will confirm this thesis.

Let’s come back to the question of the relationship between practices and artistic or aesthetic research. Although I would say that all research is based on practices—that is, on organized and systematized forms of action—practices have a special significance in the field of artistic research (I will continue using the standard term). This relevance derives from the kind of “thought” or “thinking” that grounds and enables this form of inquiry. This “other thought” or this “other than thought”—“aesthetic thinking”—is characterized by Dieter Mersch in his book “Epistemologies of Aesthetics” as follows (I quote): “‘Thought’ is understood as a practice, as

acting *with* materials, *in* materials, or *through* materials or *with* media, *in* media or *through* media.”

“Thought” or “thinking” is practice, which means that practicing—performing a practice—is thinking. Aesthetic practices are in themselves processes of thinking, and not forms of action that have a functional or instrumental relationship with thought, that are performed after or before thinking. Even the formulations “thinking through practice” or “thinking by doing” do not suffice. They do not capture the radicality of the identification of thought with practice, the equalization of practice and thought. Aesthetic practices are not subordinated to thought; they do not produce or lead to thought. They are the very process of thinking. These specific forms of action, of doing, are in themselves epistemic performances. That is, they enable conditions for significance to emerge.

Obviously, to establish this relationship between thought and aesthetic practice does not only reinterpret the second term, but also the first. To qualify thinking as aesthetic is not to add an aesthetic component to a predetermined concept of thinking, but to modify radically—from its roots—the concept of thought. Aesthetic thought is a way of understanding, a network of procedures that allows for a significant re-constitution of our world—of our reality—or of some of its particular aspects or components on a different basis, according to a different logic than the one based on language. Although aesthetic thinking can develop in a linguistic medium—let’s think, for example, of poetry—it subverts the logic of language, its constitutive infrastructure, its basic organization: its syntax, its grammar, its morphologies, through other kinds of logics, through other ways of establishing and organizing relationships—with ourselves, with our environments—rooted in the sensorimotor and emotional engagement of our bodies with their surroundings. Aesthetic thinking is not discursive, not apodictic, not explicative, not predicative and consequently does not lead to conclusions (or at least it does not require definitive conclusions and if it does reach it do not do so directly). Aesthetic thinking—this is my thesis—enables alternative understandings through an actualization and mobilization of the intrinsic epistemic potentialities of the most fundamental forms of relationship between our bodies and their surroundings. Aesthetic thinking is sensuous thinking and develops according to the logic of the sensuous.

Aesthetic practices perform this logic. I mean two different, but intimately interconnected, things when I say that “aesthetic practices perform the logic of the sensuous”. The first is that through practicing, that is, carrying out organized and systematized forms of action, we realize this particular logic: we actualized it, we bring it into action, we specify in and through action the possibilities that this logic originates, we bring about actions that are enabled and constrained by this logic. While this first meaning of the formulation “aesthetic practices perform the logic of the sensuous” is based on the meaning of performing as doing, the second refers to performativity, that is, to the agency of aesthetic practices. By actualizing the logic of the sensuous, aesthetic practices produce artifacts—so apparently virtual as a score, so apparently impermanent as an improvised choreography or a process of dialog or so apparently enduring

as an image—and these artifacts are endowed with agency. They are active agents, performative peers in our process of aesthetic thinking, of making sense through the senses. Practicing aesthetically we think with materials, media and with the artifacts we produce. We enable, thus, the circulation of, and mutual conditioning between, different agencies: material agencies, media agencies, and the agencies of aesthetic artifacts. We articulate a network of agencies to which we and the so-called audience/public/beholders become exposed. And this ex-position—this placing ourselves forth, this getting in touch with these other agencies—is what enables the fulfillment of these agencies, the possibility of seeing differently, of feeling differently, of understanding differently. Aesthetic practices—the ways we do it—are procedures that realize the epistemic potentialities of the sensuous, the possibilities of aesthetic thought, by organizing material, media, and artifacts agencies. Practices are, therefore, the keystone of artistic research processes. That is the reason we decided to build a platform for arts and design research practices and to dedicate the next three days to reflecting collectively on how do we do it.

### **On How Do We Do It**

While we decided to call How Do We Do It? a “platform”, meaning an open space, a wide and minimally structured framework to address from multiple perspectives the issue of arts and design research practices, I have to admit that I don’t have a good term to designate what is going to happen in the coming three days. It is not a conference, a colloquium, a symposium, or a workshop... I do not have an appropriate name and I take this as a positive symptom. I think we are trying something “new”. Maybe nothing completely (or, for sure) spectacularly new but new enough in order to not find a proper name, to feel that it does not really fit in with any established format. This newness does not arise out of the intention to make something new but merely of the attempt to find adequate and efficient ways to reflect collectively on research practices. Practices, as media, tend to withdraw, to recede to the background, to be opaque. We are not used to show how do we research but rather what do we research, or even why do we research, what are the institutional or disciplinary frameworks or the motivations of our research and specially what are the results of our research. Although everyone would accept the idea that our research results depend fundamentally on the specific ways we research—on how do we do it—for any reasons this does not seem to be worth to be shared. Consequently, when we are asked to present, to show, to make accessible the ways we research, the practices we perform, the concrete difficulties we meet in our everyday life as arts and design researchers, we don’t know how to do it. The reflection on our research practices, therefore, implies a reflection on the suitable media, strategies to efficiently and coherently share our practices. Efficiency and coherence in this case are linked to each other. In the process of preparation of this... let’s call it “project”... we realized that, at least to a certain extent, the best way to share practices is, somehow, by practicing. And this conclusion can be expressed in terms of coherency between the means of sharing practices and the epistemic roots of these practices: aesthetic thinking. Quoting again Dieter Mersch I would say, referring to the lecture I’m giving right now, that “we therefore begin with an aporia, because the incompatibility, difference, and ‘otherness’ of

thought [of aesthetic thought] is discussed using concepts. It is approached by, and can be only missed by, discourse. Hence everything that can be said about 'aesthetic thought' as its own independent form of thought is said in a misleading medium." If we believe, as I do, in a radical artistic or aesthetic research, that is, in a form of inquiry through artistic aesthetic practices, we have to make it artistically or aesthetically in each step, in each phase of the research process. That means, unavoidably, to be consistently and even stubbornly critical of the hegemonic media of research: language.

In the next three days, we will experience how the nine researchers that are going to share their practices with us have found ways to make this possible. In the weeks that followed the selection of participants—luckily we received more applications than we could admit—I have been talking with them about their efforts to find formats of presentation that accomplish the goal of this endeavor: to make our research practices as accessible as possible in order to be able to reflect collectively on, or better with (since practices have agency) them. I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to our participants for their efforts to make this possible.

In the next three days, then, we will have nine "presentations", also this term is not necessarily the right one, distributed in nine time slots of 90 minutes each with at least 30 minutes pause in between. These "presentations" will take place here—that is, they will turn this place into a place for shared reflection on/with research practices. On Friday afternoon, we will have time for final (provisory final) reflections, and on Thursday evening we will have a presentation of books made by arts and design researchers.

As you have probably noticed, the term "disciplines" has not be relevant in the conception and realization of How Do We Do It? This is not a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary environment, but rather a non-disciplinary one. Recognizing the relevance of disciplines—also disciplines have agency—to focus on practices allows us to create and work within a framework in which the differences between disciplines, without disappearing, become irrelevant. Although disciplines are, as we all know, in a constant crisis, they still are the basic structural unit of arts institutions. The possibility of destabilizing this order in favor of alternative, more fluid, flexible, and integrative structures by situating artistic research practices—that is practices aiming at new forms of understanding through aesthetic thinking—shows the social and political transformative potential of this other form of inquiry. I am convinced that practicing, legitimizing, and sharing forms of understanding based on bodily, sensuous, emotional, processual and collective practices can contribute fundamentally to breaking the conceptual and operative basis of social, political and even economical systems based on the production, control, and distribution of objectified knowledge and information. This is not only an academic affair. Beyond the borders of the academy and of the so-called art world, it is relevant to understand and show how do we do it.

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