

Evaluating Artistic Research at AVU

A working proposal from LARGE AVU (Laboratory for Art, Research and Graduate Education)

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Within the field of artistic research, the question of evaluation is one of the most complex and contested ones, with no straightforward unifying solutions. Depending on their respective structures for the PhD in art, different university programs follow different models of evaluation. From the “elaborate structures for the specification, assessment and quantification of learning outcomes”¹ in the so called UK artistic research model, closer to a scientific type of research, to the emphasis on artistic value in the assessment criteria of the Nordic model, various structures of evaluation are currently in use across the spectrum of the art PhD programs in Europe. The solutions in place cover a wide range, from an almost exclusive focus on the written thesis in programs orienting themselves on the sciences to proposals of the artistic work itself as a submitted dissertation, with various combinations of the two in between.

In the introduction to the chapter “Judgments: The Questions of Quality and Evaluation,” the editors of the *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education* remark upon the difficulties inherent in the attempt to assess artistic research:

This anxiety of assessment – this worry that what begins as judgment will turn into the imposition of restrictive norms and homogenizing standards, that it might fail to recognise new artistic values in their moment of emergence – is an important factor in the elaboration of a research education in the arts.²

Acknowledging the importance of this “anxiety of assessment” is an important factor in devising evaluation criteria that retain the requirements of third level doctoral study without

¹ James Elkins, “Six Cultures of the PhD,” in Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten, eds., *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education* (online, 2013). Available at www.sharenetwork.eu/resources/share-handbook, accessed January 6th, 2024, 11. See also Henk Borgdorff, “A Brief Survey of Current Debates on the Concepts and Practices of Research in the Arts,” in Wilson and van Ruiten, eds., *SHARE: Handbook*, 146-152.

² Wilson and van Ruiten, eds., *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, 229.

compromising the needs of artistic practice as artistic practice, as opposed to a complement to academic research. However, as “a merger of the requirements of professional art practice and the traditional requirements of the academy”³ and in the attempt to comply with the requirements of both, the artistic research PhD is faced with the threat of imposing the need for what Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson describe as a “double doctorate:” the artist researcher needs not only to develop a high-standard artistic practice, but at the same time he or she must be able to provide a written reflection at the academic standard of another theoretical discipline (often art history or art theory, but also, depending on the thematics of each project, other disciplines).

One of the aims of this document is to explore ways in which it is possible to evaluate a PhD level standard in artistic research while taking into account the specificity of artistic practice. Three directions will be followed: firstly, what is being evaluated; secondly, how it is evaluated, and lastly, who evaluates. These three levels of inquiry, and their corresponding implications, will at the end form the basis of a list of principles for evaluating artistic research at AVU.

1. WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED

The first aspect that needs to be clarified is the nature of the work that is expected in the artistic PhD programme, both in terms of official submissions and in terms of the activities assumed to be carried out throughout the process. The formal requirements of what needs to be realised play an important part in defining a means for an artistic research practice to function within an academic context while retaining its relevance to the wider field of contemporary art production.

³ Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, “Evaluating Quality in artistic Research,” in Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2011), 407.

The 2023/2024 *Doctoral Study Guide AVU* defines the range of an artistic research project as follows:

An artistic research project represents a thematically determined continuous artistic or architectural creation corresponding to the volume of four years of study, in which independent artistic research is pursued, which contributes to the development and appreciation of art. This activity focuses on artistic creation, which is considered the basis of knowledge creation. Questioning and reflecting on specific methods and production procedures while developing one's own artistic project represent a significant part to be included in the research work. Research in the sense of complex knowledge production is fundamentally defined as open to any outcome.⁴

The first four points in the Principles of Evaluating Artistic Research at AVU Annex follow up on the directions traced here: the doctoral study in artistic research involves the development of a systematic research project driven by artistic practice over a period of four years, which takes the form of an inquiry in the field of contemporary art practice, responds to a gap within a wider context and results in an open form dissertation. All these requirements point towards what Henk Borgdorff and Johan A Haarberg call the model of an “integrated” submission in artistic PhD programs: one which, rather than treating the artistic and the theoretical sides of a research project separately, regards them as a unique contribution to knowledge:

The dual identity of third-cycle research in the arts is, for some, mirrored in the requirement that the practice of the art form in question is coupled with a clearly articulated reflection on that practice, while, for others, the requirement is for an integrated submission that constitutes a singular contribution to knowledge which demonstrates competence in both the art form and the forms of academic practice without assuming a split between the two.⁵

⁴ *Průvodkyně doktorským studiem AVU 2023/2024* (online). Available online at: https://be.avu.cz/app/uploads/2022/02/pruvodkyne-doktor-st_avu-2023-24.pdf, last accessed on January 28th, 2024, 19.

⁵ Henk Borgdorff and Johan A Haarberg, “Research Assessment and Qualification Frameworks,” in Wilson and van Ruiten, eds., *SHARE: Handbook*, 230.

This understanding of an integrated model for an artistic research project, one in which the artistic and academic contributions are not separated is not in contradiction with more general definitions of research, which aim to define it beyond the borders of individual disciplines. Such broader definitions of research describe it as “creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge.”⁶

However, if definitions of research in a wider sense allow for integrating artistic practice into academic research and the other way around, possible specific formats for this integrated model are less defined. The *2020 Report on Research at AVU* Ondřej Buddeus and Magdalena Stanová provides several suggestions for such integrated, open formats:

One of the challenges for art doctorates is finding alternative forms or directly new formats for sharing knowledge. Express the theory in a form other than (pure) text; find such combinations of text and images (or other material) where the images are not illustrations, but are equivalent to the text; draw a work in which the pictures express the theory and the texts are their illustrations.”⁷

The question of how to avoid illustration when integrating artistic practice and theory is essential to the second question in the assessment criteria proposed, that of how to evaluate. This will be the subject of the next section.

⁶ OECD (2015), *Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development, The Measurement of Scientific, Technological and Innovation Activities*, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264239012-en>.

⁷ Buddeus, Ondřej and Magdalena Stanová, *Zpráva o uměleckém výzkumu pro AVU* (online, 2020). Available at https://be.avu.cz/app/uploads/2021/11/zprava_o_umeleckem_vyzkumu_avu_20204.pdf, accessed January 25th, 2024, 18-19.

2. HOW IT IS EVALUATED

One important aspect for integrating artistic research projects in the academy, and as a result also for the question of how they can be evaluated, is that of artistic practice's relationship to other disciplines. Due to the centrality of the written thesis in many artistic PhD programs, the assumption is often that these programs are particularly suitable for artists with an interest in theory, be it art theory or the theoretical discourses developed by other disciplines. However, another approach is possible. Following the broadness of the definitions of research discussed previously, it can be argued that to what extent a practicing artist is interested in theory should not be the most important component affecting whether he or she can embark on a PhD project, or how this project would be evaluated. A much more relevant question is to what extent a practitioner sees their work as something which could develop over a longer period of time, with an internal coherence, and with a clear relationship to a wider context. Someone might, for example, consider their own artistic practice in the wider context of the medium they are using, which, depending on the case, might expand outside the scope of contemporary art, as is the case for example with an artist using performance who might be interested in the wider dialogue of a particular performance practice to performative traditions such as those of theatre, dance or music. Therefore, rather than placing the relationship between artistic practice and theoretical text at the center of an artistic research project, what could be emphasized much more is the critical relationship between an artist's individual practice and a wider context. Ondřej Buddeus and Magdalena Stanová outline this communal dimension of an artistic research project when they write that "with a doctoral project, it is assumed that the research/creative energy is directed towards the articulation of a new understanding and of new knowledge for the benefit of the community, not for the benefit of the individual."⁸

Juliane Rebentisch's discussion of the relation between installation art and the social and political context that it emerges in (and that it sometimes explicitly thematises) could provide a useful model for the way in which contemporary art - and by extension, artistic research - can relate to the wider theoretical context that it operates in. In her book

⁸ Buddeus and Stanová, *Zpráva o uměleckém výzkumu pro AVU*, 22.

Aesthetics of Installation Art, Rebentisch discusses site-specificity, as a core trait of installation, in the following terms:

The intervention of an installation semantically charges the particular space in which it is presented in such a way that the latter resonates in the aesthetic reflection with the knowledge of political, cultural, and social contexts that lie beyond the sociotope of the art world.⁹

Although Rebentisch's argument focuses on the social and political relevance of artworks, and as such on their relationship to knowledge from disciplines such as political theory, feminist theory, cultural studies etc, her conclusions apply to contemporary art's relationship to any other discipline. What Rebentisch emphasizes about the installation works that she discusses is that they are not "in and of themselves criticism or politics in a narrow sense."¹⁰ Equally, works of art produced as part of artistic research project that are informed by theories coming from other disciplines, be it science, philosophy, or critical theory, are not in themselves science, philosophy, or critical theory. Such "interested art," despite being intrinsically connected to its social and political context and, as such, to other disciplines which share similar concerns, is not exhausted by the transmission of knowledge from these disciplines. This is an essential aspect that needs to be considered in the evaluation.

The relationship between artistic research and research in the fields of art history and art theory warrants particular attention, in addition to the more general discussion of the relationship between artistic research and research carried out in other disciplines. As disciplines whose range of activity relies on the existing artistic production, art history and art theory would appear to be closest to artistic research. An important difference, however, is that in the case of artistic research the practitioners themselves are responsible for both theory and practice. Moreover, very often in the case of artistic research, the artistic work has not yet been produced, which means that the theoretical and the practical work advance in parallel and in dialogue with each other, as opposed to one being responsive to the other. As emphasized by Ondřej Buddeus and Magdalena Stanová in the 2020 Report

⁹ See Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 261.

¹⁰ Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, 262-63.

on the Research at AVU, the already existing art historical classifications often do not prove to be satisfactory in the support of producing new artistic work, for which other, new categories might be necessary. What might be necessary instead, they argue, is to consider what art theory might be “from the point of view of those who make art.”¹¹ Hugo Schreiber makes a similar remark in the 1994 AVU research report: “Most of the teachers indicated that they do not find satisfactory answers in the classical art theories, often too focused on their own, academic questions.”¹²

3. WHO EVALUATES IT

One last aspect needs to be taken into account in the evaluation: the composition of the evaluating board. It is important that the structure of the assessing commission is planned in accordance with the specific nature of the artistic research project.

¹¹ Buddeus and Stanová, *Zpráva o uměleckém výzkumu pro AVU*, 12.

¹² 1994 AVU Report, quoted in Buddeus and Stanová, *Zpráva o uměleckém výzkumu pro AVU*, 12.

PRINCIPLES OF EVALUATING ARTISTIC RESEARCH AT AVU

1. WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED

1.1 A systematic research project that is driven by artistic practice and develops over four years

The doctoral study consists in the formulation and development of a systematic research project driven by artistic practice over four years. As such, central to the research process is the production of a series of artworks that is coherent thematically and formally and is developed in a systematic manner.

1.2. An inquiry in the field of contemporary art practice

The artistic research project takes the form of an inquiry. In order for a project to be an artistic research project, it needs to formulate an interrogation in the field of art and develop specific methodologies to pursue this interrogation through artistic practice. As such, the artistic research project needs to have an ongoing driving vector, a sense of a complex yet focused direction, motivation and interest that can sustain its development over a period of four years. By contrast to the centrality of a language-based research-question in the theoretical disciplines of the humanities, the inquiry or interrogation at the center of an artistic research project need not be formulated exclusively through language.

1.3. An inquiry that responds to a gap within a wider context

The inquiry at the basis of an artistic research project does not merely concern the artist himself/herself. In addition to contributing to the development of an individual practitioner's work, the artistic research investigation opens up a dialogue with the wider field of artistic

production, both in its current state and historically. In the case of an interdisciplinary project, the research opens up a dialogue with knowledge from other disciplines.

1.4 An open form dissertation

At the end of the four-year period, the candidates submit a open form dissertation which documents the artistic project. The relationship between the artistic work and the textual reflection is not set and needs to reflect the specificity of each project.

2. HOW IT IS EVALUATED

2.1 Original contribution to contemporary art practice and knowledge

The evaluation is not done according to the principles of another discipline of knowledge, but according to the specificity of the field of contemporary art. The artistic research doctoral project should not be evaluated by the standards of another discipline. Equally, the artistic research doctoral project should not be evaluated by the standards of art theory and art history.

2.2 Shareability and relevance to a wider context

The work is not restricted to the interpretation of the individual artist but can be transmitted further, and can provide a basis for further knowledge.

3. WHO EVALUATES IT

3.1 Assesment by professional practitioners

The evaluation must be carried out by professional practitioners in the field of contemporary art.

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This document was created with the support of a grant no. 0215000148 from the National Recovery Plan, awarded to AVU by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic in 2023.

