

Artistic Research:
Is There Some
Method?

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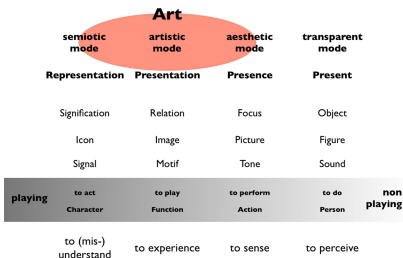
JULIAN KLEIN¹

The Mode is the Method Or How Research Can Become Artistic

In the various fields of research, we encounter many different methods: statistical testing of hypotheses; hermeneutical interpretation; language analysis of terms and concepts; thought experiments and empirical experiments; surveys and interviews; juridical negotiations about norms or thresholds; series of trials and errors; defining axiomatic systems; logical proofs; product development; programming algorithms and calculating simulations. This list can be continued. Some of them can be combined, or applied in parallel in interdisciplinary ways, in order to investigate a complex subject. The artistic way of researching is also part of this spectrum of methods applied in current research. This is the proposition of this text: there is no method *within* artistic research because to research artistically *is* in itself a method, or, better, a strategy of undertaking research.

Every kind of research needs a theoretical foundation, and reflection should always be a crucial component. The same is true for

professional arts: although we can conceive of some art production being conducted without both theoretical concepts and self-reflection, in most cases (at least some) theory and self-reflection are constituent parts of professional artistic projects. In other words, art production and reflection are normally inextricably linked. The formula “art plus thinking about art” equals research obviously falls too short. The same counts for “art plus writing about art”; it is not thinking and writing that transform the arts into research. Thinking and writing about art can be done well without researching, and artistic research can be done without thinking and writing about art, such as in thinking or writing artistically about another topic beyond the investigation of the arts. While art and artistic production can certainly be subject to any kind of research, whether it is artistic or non-artistic, there obviously exist more possible, interesting, relevant, important and promising topics that can be addressed in an artistic way during research. Rather,



1. This text is a brief summary of what has been published by the author before in different articles. It is not meant as original research or analysis. Therefore, it does not refer to any external sources. For detailed explanations and references, please consult the cited original publications.

it is the other way round: it is the specific artistic perceptive mode that qualifies research as artistic (see also Klein, 2011).

MULTIPLE MODES OF PERCEPTION

Our perception enables us to encounter the world in different modes. While these modes are overlapping and not strictly separated, we are able to describe them like the colours of a spectrum of perception.

The first mode can be called the *transparent mode*. In this mode we perceive reality without being aware that what we encounter is actually provided by our perception. We have the conviction that something is the case, we have a “perception-that”. We are just considering the mere *present*. By the next moment we might have forgotten that we even had a perception. For example, walking through the woods we see a branch lying on the path. As a result, we probably step on it, hearing the cracking noise without taking further notice.

The second mode is the *aesthetic mode*. It comes into play when we start to realise how a certain perception feels, or, in other words, when the transparent perception becomes an *aesthetic sensation*. We are aware of the quality of our perception, the perception itself becomes part of the content of itself, it is opaque and gets a *presence*, and so we have a “perception-how”. We recognise the shape of the branch in its geometric details, we feel its physical resistance while stepping on it, and we listen to its specific sound when it cracks underfoot.

The third mode can be called the *artistic mode*. It defines art as

being a perceptive mode. Here we experience the world as consisting of two or more layers of reality. Their borders divide our awareness and perception, like frames or the limits of a canvas. The world unfolds in a *presentation*. We take the things as something. We are having an *artistic experience*. We are standing with our two feet in two different realities, and are sensing the threshold between them (“mental decoupling”). We are aware of the liminality and the framing of the different realities. We are able to watch ourselves as if looking from the outside. This process is mostly highly dynamic and fluctuating. We can follow the direction of the branch as a hint for where to go. We can also look at it as if it was an unknown species. It can be a toy sword, or we can squash a dangerous animal with our foot. We can even take the branch as a magic wand, thinking of a wish when treading on it.

When these framed realities become stable and predefined, we enter the *semiotic mode* of perception. In this mode we read the content of our perception as signs, we have the impression that we can understand their meaning. Here our perceptive processes become objects, they gain properties, and are able to act as representations. This mode often appears within communicative refuges that are marked with established thresholds. Without knowing the assumptions, conventions, definitions, habits and codes of a certain refuge, we are not able to enter it. At the least, we have to know some vocabulary, if not actually speak the local language. When we know that another person has put the branch down for us to mark the fork to take,

we can read the message. Or, perhaps, the branch is in the shape of a cross, making us wonder whether someone has died here recently. Then we might hesitate to step on it in order not to destroy the memorial.

As these modes also overlap, the realm of art as a communicative system begins within the aesthetic mode, and reaches quite far into the semiotic mode. But as significations and meanings become more and more stable and unquestioned, we take them for granted and cease to notice the contingent framing. At a certain point, we stop playing with meanings and start simply to understand them. At this point we trespass over the threshold of the frame without also looking from the outside: we have entered the refuge with our whole perception. In this moment, we have quit the artistic mode.

MULTIPLE MODES OF RESEARCH

Research is usually defined as a systematic quest for new knowledge. Here, *systematic* means that the investigation is undertaken intentionally and contextually, especially knowing on which existing knowledge the endeavour is based. *New* is a knowledge that is original in the sense that it cannot be achieved by just consulting other sources (this kind of inquiry is sometimes described by the French term *recherche*). A knowledge already known elsewhere should not be qualified as new, except in the case that the possible source of the knowledge itself is unknown. This illustrates that the "newness" of a knowledge is of course a relative quality; it can always only be qualified as new relative to a basic

population of individuals or groups. For example, a specific knowledge could have been completely forgotten for a long period before being rediscovered by a later generation, again being considered as new. And the term *knowledge*, of course, can comprise all kinds of knowledge, not only declarative, explicit, verbal knowledge or measurable results, but also, for example, sensual, emotional and experiential knowledge.

To undertake research is a practice of various academic and non-academic professions. Notably, *researching is a practice*. It can be a scientific practice, a scholarly practice, an industrial practice, a journalistic practice, a cultural practice, a social practice and, indeed, also an artistic practice. This practice of researching can be qualified as artistic when it is conducted in or with the artistic perceptive mode.

With this definition there is no need to distinguish between different "researches", because the practice of systematically trying to gain new knowledge is the same. What varies is the amount of the many possible attributes, of which more than one can be employed simultaneously. Particularly, the scientific, scholarly and artistic predicates can be valid for a certain research practice at the same time. Being qualifying adjectives, they only modulate the common substantive "research" and are therefore able to superpose and interfere. In other words, if a research practice is called "scientific", there is very little said about the occurrence of an artistic mode within it. And if a practice is rightly called "artistic", there is equally nothing said about its scientificity. In other words, if anything is scientific, the fact of it being scientific is not

a reason to conclude that it is necessarily unartistic. And if anything is artistic, the fact of it being artistic does not automatically conclude that it is unscientific. Both qualities can meet, although, of course, they don't always have to. Science and art are two independent dimensions in a common cultural space.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ARTISTIC MODE

The artistic mode can be described as the perceptive mode of felt or sensed framing of multiple layers of reality. It is accompanied by mental decoupling and meta-awareness (for a more detailed analysis of this perceptive and mental state, see Klein, 2010). How can this perceptive mode be fruitful in the context of research? In order to benefit from its application in research, we have to consider some of its peculiarities.

First of all, the artistic mode shares with the aesthetic mode a very obvious property: it is based on sensual experience. They are both experiential and grounded in subjectivity, which means that they cannot be imparted or passed on directly, but only shared or facilitated. A sensual experience is undergone within ourselves; it cannot be delegated (also known as the *qualia phenomenon*). Any analysis or description of the aesthetic mode has to regard what could be called the "phenomenological principle": our senses provide us with access to the environment and therefore determine what we are able to perceive.

On the other hand, we normally deal with the content of our perception by supposing that there are objects with properties. In the framing

of the artistic mode these objects get an additional appearance in their additional realities – we recognize them simultaneously from inside and outside the frame. In the semiotic mode objects become a meaning, dividing their appearance into signifier and signified, while we only address the signification and forget about the signifiers (when we recognize both at once we are already on the way into the artistic mode). The semiotic mode is the region of what could be called the "hermeneutical principle": within a given context (or framing) we are mostly able to say "what the things tell us", independently from our perception, which means that any analysis or interpretation of a semiotic meaning has to be based on the sign system (or refuge) that it is embedded in, i.e. that is used in the respective communication.

In the artistic mode, the constructive nature of perception and the emergence of context come together. This might sound like a contradiction, because we are so used to thinking in oppositions, such as subjectivity and objectivity, properties and sensations, reality and fiction, facts and imaginations.

The question seems to arise: what is to be applied, the phenomenological or the hermeneutical principle? But this contradiction turns out to be only superficial. Nevertheless, we find this paradox in many discussions about artistic topics. Many authors thinking about aesthetics have proposed different approaches to explain this observation (for references, see Klein, 2010, and Klein, 2011). To gain knowledge out of the artistic mode, the best solution is to merge the two principles in a framework of artistic relativity:

When we “phenomenologise” the hermeneutical principle, or “semiotize” the phenomenological principle, we are not only able to describe the transition from individual, independent perceptions to interdependent, intersubjective communication, but also to provide a tool for analysing the relationships between different regions of semiotic systems (refuges). Then the assumed contradiction between (alleged “scientific”) objectivity and (“artistic”) subjectivity disappears. Since the Enlightenment, we have become used to conducting a comprehensive critique of objectivity. Hence, the *qualia phenomenon* is also called the *qualia problem*. But the *qualia problem* only appears as a problem when we believe in a reality consisting purely of objectivity. If we also add subjective knowledge we are able to dissolve many of those alleged contradictions. This is the core advantage and the strength of artistic knowledge. Therefore, what is needed for undertaking fruitful research in an artistic mode is a comparable comprehensive critique of its subjectivity.

The artistic mode is not at all a new invention. It has been applied throughout the centuries in different contexts and under different names. But it proves to be surpassingly powerful in being able to bridge the realms of aesthetics and semiotics, because it adds relativity to otherwise non-relativistic concepts that are still too often recognised as incommensurable. In particular, this relativity helps to avoid the necessary circularity when thinking of meaning as stable properties of objects.

WHEN IS RESEARCH ARTISTIC?

I have argued that *artistic research* is not an artistic practice that claims to be understood *as if being* research (like the term “practice as research” appears to sound). Instead, research itself is the practice, which sometimes during its process may or may not be called artistic. This diagnosis allows us to overcome artificially constructed oppositions by asking the more fruitful question: *when* does a certain research practice become artistic?

The artistic mode can be employed in different phases and for different aims during the research process. For example, it can play a role in the initial motivation of a research topic, problem or question. It also can occur during the development and design of a project, or in phases of investigation, discussion, experimentation, data collection or interaction with people. It may shape some of the products of the project, or the dissemination of the knowledge gained. The artistic mode may also appear in the resulting discourse. There exist research projects where the artistic mode is only employed in a comparably limited, defined phase (which may not even necessarily be connected to a published product). And there are examples where the artistic mode permeates the whole process. As a consequence, the actual differences between artistic and non-artistic ways of researching mean that they exist as much more of a continuum than two categorical and incompatible spheres.

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