Introduction

Why do we need to think about artistic research supervision when doctoral supervision in general is such a well established field? What particular skills are needed for a supervisor to get under the skin of an artistic research project? How can PhD candidates be guided in order for the artistic projects to develop fruitfully? What are the ethical implications of supervising an artistic research project? What is the meaning of method and theory in this kind of research? And in what ways will the supervisors contribute to the development of the field of artistic research?

These and similar questions have been at the fore in the discussions between a group of supervisors in Konstnärliga Forskarskolan (KFS) – the Swedish artistic research school – during a couple of years. When KFS was established in 2010 as a nationwide structure for postgraduate education in the arts in Sweden, artistic research had been expanding during a decade, but as a discipline was still more evocative of an archipelago of small, non-connected islands than a unified field. This had certain implications for PhD candidates and supervisors, as well as for the institutions, since there were no given structures to lean against. Many of the standards in form and principles in the humanities and natural sciences do not relate to the art field at all. Procedures for peer review, publications, conferences, examination and theory-practice relations commonly differ from, or have no counterpart in artistic research. These principles had to be rethought.

Research supervision, which is at the heart of any doctoral programme, in the area of artistic research often lacked established research environments, institutional support and understanding of the role of the supervisor. Thus, there was a need to consolidate and coordinate resources and support some of the smaller university colleges in their establishment of artistic research more systematically. Through the formation of KFS, research environments, research education and supervisor's training were supposed to be launched and supported simultaneously and in collaboration. With the plurality of artistic genres included it soon became a relevant transdisciplinary meeting point for artists in Sweden. An important element in this process was the introduction of the doctoral degree in fine, applied and performing arts, also officially established in 2010. The funding for KFS came from the Swedish Research Council, and a total of nine universities and university colleges formed part of the collaborative research school, hosted by the *Malmö Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts at Lund University,* in collaboration with the *Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts at the University of Gothenburg*.

KFS offered PhD candidates from these university colleges, research courses, administrative support and, perhaps most importantly, a buffer zone between the sometimes quite rigid structures of education administration at the involved institutions, the rules and regulations framing doctoral education in the academy, and the artists' need for latitude and dynamic organization of their projects. However, the PhD candidates are not the only inhabitants in this buffer zone; the zone also includes the supervisors and, thus, to a large extent also constitutes the context for the supervision of artistic research.

The need for and the nature of this buffer zone played a central role in the development of the supervisors’ network in KFS – Acts of Creation (AoC). Despite 15 years of artistic doctoral education there was still a lack of artistic researchers trained to undertake the role of supervisor. As a consequence, PhD candidates in artistic research initially had a tendency to turn to established academic researchers with research experience, a degree and the training to supervise. These were commonly found in the fields of philosophy, sociology, musicology and the likes, which, like many other disciplines, are of great interest to artistic research but have methodological and theoretical traditions that are often not directly applicable in such projects. At the time of the establishment of KFS this lending of competence was the norm in Sweden, and meant that a common body of knowledge of how to develop discipline specific theories and methods was never initiated or established. One of the aims of organizing AoC was therefore to create a forum for sharing the gathered and collective experience of supervisors in the field, and hereby to build competence from within the subject rather than to continue borrowing academic credibility from other disciplines. A second aim was to contribute to a community of practice where supervisors could exchange experiences and support each other and the development of KFS. Thirdly, the network was arranged as a continuous programme in artistic doctoral supervision, which included discussion seminars, assignments and a platform for interaction and collaboration. All supervisors within KFS were invited to participate in the AoC network's two meetings per year. As a programme, it was built up around three flexible course-modules out of which the first included short assignments on the essence of the responsibilities and regulations surrounding research education. The second module focused on the relation between the specific artistic practice and the research activities, including ethical dimensions and practical concerns. The final module involved a written reflection on the context of supervision, and the discussions during the text seminars eventually developed into this anthology.

As we shall see from the texts in this book, the position of the artistic research supervisor is not easily defined. It is clear that the traditional doctoral supervisor and the artistic supervisor have much in common, but it is equally clear that the latter do require some special competences. The wider cultural environment of artistic research is characterised by ambiguity towards the development, simultaneously both attracted and repelled by the prospect of a closer relationship with the academy. Obviously, the supervisors of artistic research should support the PhD candidates in their work, but navigating in this context takes great skill and sensibility.

The participating authors represent several different art fields. From visual arts we find Bryndis Snebjörnsdottir, an Icelandic artist with a PhD from Valand in Gothenburg where she now teaches and supervises, Hinrich Sachs, a Swiss artist and professor at the Royal Art Academy in Stockholm and Andreas Gedin, a Swedish artist and curator. Sverker Jullander, professor at the Music Academy in Piteå, Karin Johansson, organist and associate professor at Malmö Academy of Music, and Henrik Frisk, artistic researcher and associate professor at Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm come from the field of Music. Ylva Gislén, director of KFS, theatre critic and artist, and Tove Torbjörnsson, commissioner of documentary film at the Swedish Film Institute come from performing arts and film, respectively. Finally, Åsa Lindberg Sand, associate professor in educational sciences and Anders Sonesson with a PhD in biology, both from the Centre for Educational Development at Lund University and tutors in AoC, contribute with one chapter about their experience of encountering the field of artistic research through the context of the supervisor's network in KFS.

The contributions deliberately represent a wide range of approaches to artistic research supervision. Our goal has been to reflect the variety of current perspectives on supervision in artistic research rather than aiming at presenting a homogenous collection of texts or creating a uniform theory of supervision.

The reasoning in the chapters depart from each author’s particular discipline but we believe that all artistic disciplines, and perhaps also other practice-based research disciplines, may find the discussed topics interesting. They bring out issues that one may imagine are quite general for research supervision and these are approached from different angles by the authors: Several of the texts tend towards a discussion of the structures of research, which is natural at a point in time where much is still left undefined. Others are more personal and subjective reflections upon the challenges in supervision presented in open and reflective forms.

The risk of this approach is that the result becomes too broad for the material to convey a unified message. On the other hand, imposing strong limitations on the style, topic and scope of the chapters would have resulted in a less appropriate publication in our opinion. now they reflect the fact that the field of artistic research is not a unified one, and this diversity is one of its strengths. However, it is also our hope that this volume will be followed by others so that a dialogue can be initiated concerning these important issues in artistic research supervision.

Thematic overview

The varying approaches to enacting and conceptualizing supervision in artistic research presented in this book share one basic starting point, namely, the key precondition that the researcher is also the artist, and the artist is also the researcher. The artist makes a difference (Coessens, Crispin & Douglas, 2009). This is true also for the supervision of artistic research. Even though a project can lend competences from related disciplines, artistic skill has to play a part. The implications of this are highlighted in the texts and they illustrate the complexity of the supervisor’s task and role.

Vulnerability, doubt and insecurity

The context for supervision in artistic research may well be compared to a construction site, and several chapters focus upon the insecure, doubtful and even vulnerable situation of both candidates and supervisors. For example, when speaking of supervision, Ylva Gislén (Chapter X) notes that the supervisor might often experience confusion rather in the attempt to guide the PhD candidate. Tove Torbiörnsson (Chapter X) focuses on the troublesome position of artists who are set to supervise other artists without having any formal experience of research. In a personal and poetic reflection on her work with a PhD candidate, she demonstrates the delicacy of the supervisory situation. This may be compared to the previous discussion of the inclination of PhD candidates to choose supervisors without artistic competence or experience.

Based on their own experiences as PhD candidates, Andreas Gedin and Bryndis Snebjörnsdottir touch upon ethical issues that have become valuable assets in their subsequent work as supervisors. Artists have always explored new territories and appropriated new domains and Gedin discusses the shift between positions on the public arena of fine arts, and how this is related to and dependent on the creation of new loyalties. Snebjörnsdottir’s background is her position at Gothenburg University, and she describes a ’landscape of uncertainty’ within the contexts both of contemporary art and of the academy, in which the supervisor and the PhD candidate have to navigate together. One of the gains of the KFS experience, according to Snebjörnsdottir, is that it created a space for listening, which opened up for a ‘constructive vulnerability within the larger establishment’ (p. xx). Anyone that have acquired a PhD or even just been involved in a continuous and intense learning period can surely understand what vulnerability means in this process. When the surrounding context is a large administrative apparatus, such as a university, this vulnerability can be daunting, but Snebjörnsdottir calls us to embrace it and mobilise empathy through it. As a method for supervision, she argues, it reduces the insecurity of the agents in the field.

Feelings of vulnerability, doubt and insecurity may be experienced as troublesome but often form a necessary and valuable part of working creatively, regardless if this work is defined as artistic processes, research or supervision. In this way they are productive, albeit unpleasant. However, they may also be unproductive, if they are reactions to actual deficiencies in the institutional context or responses to paradoxical expectations in the development of artistic research. As seen in in several of the contributions, an important part of knowledge building is to disentangle the productive aspects from the unproductive ones. A key question in the continuous development of artistic research is how to build strategies that can allow for the dynamics of artistic practice within the frame of the educational institution and still adhere to the needs and requirements of the regulations surrounding artistic research education.

Knowledge development in artistic research supervision

Some contributions highlight the need for developing discipline-specific concepts that are idiomatic to the practice of artistic research. Henrik Frisk stresses the importance of discussing and clarifying the relationship between theory, method and practice in artistic research supervision. He points to the necessity of deconstructing the hierarchical order between them, which does not mean dispensing with theory or method altogether. That would be just another way of maintaining an unproductive division. If the ambition of artistic research is to ‘defend the artistic work process from the intimidation of the academic attitude and the theory-practice dichotomy, […] that has reinforced the binary relationship between artistic practice and theoretical constructs’, it is now time to explore how this relationship can be dialectic. Frisk recommends a ‘non-hierarchical distribution of research resources’ in order to create and support methodological and theoretical agency on the part of PhD candidates, and the use of knowledge laboratories grounded in practice. This means, for example, to look at theory also as something inherent to the artistic practice in favour of the view of theory as something that is merely applied.

Gislén suggests a series of intuitively and randomly chosen concepts that nevertheless describe crucial aspects of the situation and process of being a PhD candidate in artistic research. With this format, she imitates Roland Barthes’ A lover’s discourse (1990) and adds a critical, questioning dimension by inviting the reader to re-interpret terms such as Method, Archive and Understand. Apart from capturing some of the intricacies of supervision, this text points to an important topic of discussion in artistic research: how the form for presentation in itself carries a meaning and a message, and how to relate to given, traditional modes when presenting new types of knowledge. Hinrich Sachs gives another example of this in his chapter, which is written as a correspondence between him and a friend who is a heart surgeon. It portrays the difficulties in communicating aspects of quality of professional practice without having a vocabulary and central concepts in common.

The complexity of the supervisor’s role

As suggested by Sverker Jullander, the ideal supervisor in artistic research combines many roles in one person. Based on an overview of the legal requirements for supervisors in artistic research, he proposes that such a person needs to be ’a professional artist with a specialisation relatively close to that of the doctoral student, with a PhD in the relevant artistic discipline, and an academic teaching position, or at least experience of teaching at an academic level’.

Åsa Lindberg-Sand and Anders Sonesson point to yet another level of complexity in the supervisory situation: the fact that those who are admitted to the doctoral programme usually are established artists, and that they are expected to further develop their artistic practice and the research-project simultaneously as a joint or internally related enterprise. In other fields of research, supervisors achieve their authority mainly through their research qualifications, which provide a taken-for-granted hierarchy between the supervisor and the PhD candidate. The supervisors in artistic research have to gain their authority not only from research but also from their standing in artistic practice. Supervisors with substantial qualifications in both areas are rare and hard to find. This means that there is often no taken-for-granted hierarchy or authority to fall back on for the supervisors. They seem to rely more on the building of a productive and rewarding personal relationship with the PhD candidates than supervisors in other domains do. New forms for interaction have to be built for artistic research supervision, which may also contribute to the general culture of supervision in other disciplines.

The dynamics of evaluation

A point of much debate in the network of Acts of Creation has been the question of ‘what is to be evaluated and how?’. Hinrich Sachs focuses on the dynamics of evaluation and quality in the dialogue on the value of art. Is it possible to compare the quality of heart surgery to the quality of a piece of art? And is it even worthwhile discussing quality in two so different disciplines? He suggests that what is needed are modes of evaluation that are equal to the artistic practice that is assessed and warns us of reducing the artistic practice into merely information.

Andreas Gedin emphasises the need for input from agents outside of academia and for feed-back on the artistic production during the time as a PhD candidate. Discussing criteria for measuring quality in artistic research, he looks at examples of actions that can be taken when projects fail to meet standards. Where lies the supervisors’ loyalty in these situations? Are their loyalties primarily geared towards the institutions or the PhD candidate?

The supervisor in context

In the development of ‘institutions of education’ into ‘institutions of education and research’ (Lundström, 2013), the process of artistic research finding its position in the system is not always straightforward. Gislén gives a concrete example of this when she points to how individual candidates may experience a lack of understanding concerning their needs for spaces suitable for artistic practice. In turn, this demonstrates that the institutional definition of ‘research’ is sometimes not compatible with the view of artistic research as a natural continuation and expansion of the Bachelor and Master’s degree. In a related passage Snebjörnsdottir describes artistic research as the aforementioned context of uncertainty within which the artist/researcher can bring in her own skill set and define, or redefine, what artistic research may actually constitute. This condition of flux may seem to present a problem, but might in fact be an asset in the process of defining the field. In her chapter, Karin Johansson departs from the question of how supervision of artistic research can influence and promote agency for PhD candidates. Based on a focus group interview with supervisors and PhD candidates she describes the supervisory situation as acts of collaborative knowledge creation and discusses how it can be developed into what might be called a creative dialogue.

In artistic university colleges or departments in Sweden, the positions of senior lecturer and professor are furnished with holders of artistic qualifications. Åsa Lindberg-Sand and Anders Sonesson point out how the increasing number of artists with a PhD challenges the traditional educational and administrative structures that frame the academic career as a teacher and researcher in the artistic field. When experienced artistic researchers continue their development by supervising PhD candidates, they also develop specific qualifications that are important for the further development of the field of artistic research and of the doctoral programmes. However, there is an obvious lack of post-doc positions and rewards that could nurture these professionals in the institutional context and allow for a senior artistic research environment to flourish.

Hopes and visions for the future

Research depends on the creation and maintenance of a common, collectively shared body of knowledge and experience. The growth and development of any research field thus also rely on environments where results and processes can be shared and communicated. If artistic research projects are conducted in individual contexts only, without building on and relating to previous research in the area, collective learning and development will be limited. Of course, artistic research projects most often emanate from individually oriented perspectives, similar to how artistic projects are made, but at some point the research has to reach out and contextualize itself in the larger field of research. Even though the traditional modes of communicating art (e.g. concerts, exhibitions and performances) are important, artistic research still only has a limited set of output channels in the academic field. Therefore, the institutions hosting research and research education need to develop specific environments for this purpose, an ambition that cannot be limited to traditional academic text referencing but should include works of art not commonly framed as research. Artistic research thus needs to refactor the academic referencing system for its own purposes, and one of the roles of the artistic research supervisor is to assist the PhD candidates in finding appropriate contexts for communication that are not limited to textual representation.

An interesting question for the future concerns the specificity of artistic research and its relationship to other research disciplines. What is required in order to achieve a sustainable interdisciplinary development of this field? From an over-arching perspective, Åsa Lindberg-Sand and Anders Sonesson describe their view of the developments in KFS. Against the background of their involvement in doctoral supervision and research in other disciplines and long-term, extensive experience of training programmes in supervision, they give a vivid description of how much the discipline of artistic research turned out to differ from what they were used to. They suggest two scenarios, which also could be perceived as two versions of the future of artistic research. In the first scenario artistic research and doctoral education is viewed as integrated aspects of artistic practice, contributing primarily with a safe haven and resources for the further advancement of art, primarily conducted by elite artists as PhD candidates. In this future, both the artistic school/department and the academy as a whole may gain prestige and visibility by putting forward the artistic productions as crowning the academy. However, the fact that artistic practice and artistic research are equated create institutional conditions in which artistic research is viewed as fundamentally different from other kinds of research, and should be kept apart from general requirements on the practice of research in the academy. In this scenario, the modes of supervision will probably be framed primarily by the needs in the development of artistic practice, and the contribution of the supervisors to the development of this larger field is probably of less importance.

In the second scenario the interdependencies between artistic practice, research and the institutions are more complex. Artistic research is regarded as an activity separate from artistic practice though they depend on each other to a high degree. When artistic research develops as a practice that is not identical to artistic practice, the collective aspects of the knowledge formation in research may step forward and add new social contexts related to, and gaining importance for, the development of art. As a consequence, supervisors also need to be experts in both areas and their role in PhD candidates’ projects as well as in the development of the field of artistic research will be of great importance. Regardless of which of these two scenarios are implemented in the academies, the question that Lindberg-Sand and Sonesson go on to ask is “how the supervisors will be institutionally, professionally or artistically rewarded for their complicated task”. They suggest that the institutions harbouring artistic research have to take an active standpoint concerning how the research environment should be developed and how the challenging role of the artistic doctoral supervisor can be institutionally supported. This will be even more important if, in the future, some artistic institutions/departments will evolve and profile artistic research towards scenario one and other towards scenario two. This is so, because one of the gaps between the scenarios consists of a different framing of the responsibilities for and contributions of the doctoral supervisor both to the work of the PhD candidate and to the field of artistic research.

We are certain that this book can contribute to the dialogue around the advancement of artistic research and research environments by highlighting the crucial and complex role of the supervisors in this development. Artistic research in Sweden is in a strong phase of progression, and senior researchers and supervisors need to stand at the forefront and be among those who lead the way forward in this process. However, the development of environments where results and experiences can be shared and communicated is not a task for individual researchers. Challenges have to be handled as an inspiration also at the institutional level. As pointed out by Johansson, “this is a long-term, collective process that both requires and results in individual growth, group development and a continuous rethinking of the institutional self-image. Consequently, it depends not only on personal capacities and initiatives of individual supervisors and PhD candidates, but on strategic efforts and investments at a university level”.

References

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