# Q and A

## Towards a Practice of Artistic Research

Janneke Wesseling and Kitty Zijlmans
Leiden University

# Posing the Question within the Framework of Artistic Research

Janneke Wesseling

### Questioning and being questioned

One of the biggest challenges for PhD students is finding a research question. Without it, no serious research is possible. In fact, research is a way of asking questions, guided by a central research question. Often, the central question is only revealed at the completion of the research project: "Aha, now *this* is the question that has haunted me over all these years—this is what I wanted to find an answer to!" The question evolved over time and was adapted during the different phases of the research process. The difficulty, then, is in first finding the initial question, a well-formulated and viable question that will be productive enough to set off the research process.

This initial question is a challenge for PhD researchers in every field, but I believe it is especially difficult for researchers in the field of artistic research. This is so, first, because artistic research is rooted in and deals with sensory perception. There is a gap to be bridged between sensory perception and experiential, non-linguistic content on the one hand and linguistic modes of argument on the other (Biggs 2004). In artistic research, or "research in and through art," artistic practice is the source of and the condition for the research and its outcomes. Artistic research may be defined as the critical and theoretically positioned reflection by the artist on her or his practice and on the world, in artworks and in written texts. This is to say that the research relates theoretical discursivity, which is expressed in writing, with artistic practice and sensory perception. The research question must do justice to this interconnection of

sensory, non-linguistic practice and discursive writing. In finding the question, then, artist-researchers to a certain extent have to jump over their own shadow and distance themselves from practice.

Second, the idiosyncratic nature of each individual art practice (and of artworks) does not necessarily predispose artists to communicate questions arising from their practice with others and to share their dilemmas and insights with peers. There is often a certain lack of experience and exercise in this respect. This may explain why PhD students in artistic research sometimes have trouble making the distinction between information and argument, as well as between a subjective view of things and argument (the argument being the objectivisation of a personal perspective). But the capacity to make this distinction is a prerequisite for PhD research.

Thinking in terms of "argument" in relation to art practice signifies a paradigmatic shift in our appreciation of art. The traditional model of art practice, which was deeply Romantic, was described some thirty-five years ago by Pierre Bourdieu as follows: "The pure intention of the artist is that of a producer who aims to be autonomous, that is, entirely the master of his product, who tends to reject not only the 'programmes' imposed a priori by scholars and scribes, but also . . . the interpretations superimposed a posteriori on his work" (Bourdieu 1984, 3). Very few artists and theorists would subscribe to this model today. However, old habits die hard, and art education is still in the process of adapting itself to the demands of more recent, collaborative and research-oriented, models of art practice. Artists doing research still are pioneers in this relatively young field.

## The primacy of the question

The role of the research question is threefold: limitation, clarification, and deeper understanding. The subject needs to be narrowed down and the field of research needs to be limited and restricted. The general tendency among new PhD research students is to zoom out and open up the scope on their topic as widely as possible: they want the research to contain everything that comes into sight. However, precisely the opposite is necessary. The researcher must zoom in on a specific topic. Some particular "how" is necessary, and the more particular this "how" is formulated, the better.

In a column in the Dutch daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad,* scientist Robbert Dijkgraaf advised young researchers to "travel lightly" (Dijkgraaf 2015, my translation). Students need a compass, enabling them to intuit the direction that interesting developments are leading toward. The second instrument they need is a tuning fork, to "feel" which subjects or directions they are in tune with, to feel what it is that inspires them. Then they need a loupe, enabling them to focus on the subjects that spark their imaginations, to forget about the bigger picture and to loose themselves in details. And finally, they need a dice: researchers need a bit of luck and should remain open to the element of play.

Often, artists are proficient in using compasses, tuning forks, loupes, and dice in their practice. But when it comes to doing research in an academic con-

text, they often tend to think that "objectivity" is a defining characteristic of academic discourse and that they have to focus on the bigger picture. As said, the contrary is true. The research question, which finds its origin in personal considerations and suppositions, will serve as the loupe.

Doing research requires complete surrender to the research question. In *Thinking with Whitehead*, Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2011, 58) states that we "must limit ourselves to the problem that has been raised, and trust our problem." She then goes on to explain that "there are two modes of 'trusting': the implicit one presupposed by our certainties and habits, and the riskier one, which exposes the thinker to adventure." It is, of course, the riskier one that counts here.

What is meant by "adventure" is illustrated by a metaphor used by Whitehead, namely the "foothold of the mind." I freely adapt this metaphor here to research in the humanities, of which artistic research is part. (Stengers and Whitehead primarily refer to scientific research.) It means that we must have confidence in and take advantage of our attributions and definitions, just "as mountain climbers take advantage of what offers them a foothold" (Stengers 2011, 91). Like a mountain climber, the researcher gropes her or his way forward, searching for a position to enable the next step, "for everything that acts as a landmark must offer a foothold for memory and judgment" (ibid., 75).

The experimental foothold is not "invented" or "created" by the mountain climber. It is "offered," as a gift yielded by the experiment that is part of the research process. The foothold exists out there, as part of "nature" and our experience. In other words, the experimental adventure sees traffic from both directions: "What is at stake is the survival of the 'mind's new 'foothold,' and of what is supposed to be that foothold's respondent in nature, that is, the twofold passage to existence of the experimental apparatus *qua* reliable, and of the object to which it refers *qua* belonging to nature, or to what we have to do with in awareness" (Stengers 2011, 100–101). This, then, is where trust comes in: that there will be two-way traffic, that there will be reverberation, and that when we dig deeper (or climb higher) we will always find more. Only through restricting a specific problem or question will we be able to find the next foothold.

What follows from this is that the question has primacy over the proposition. As the Dutch philosopher Gerard Visser writes in his essay *Oorsprong & vrijheid* (Origin and freedom): "The existential primacy of possibility over reality manifests itself in philosophy and science in the logical primacy of the question over the proposition. What is at stake? When the question returns, than there is the opportunity for the issue to present itself again" (Visser 2015, 85, my translation). This is what philosophy and science have in common with art. The artwork is not so much an object, let alone an unambiguous proposition; rather, it is the presentation of a question.

Clarification and deeper understanding will follow from the operation of limitation and restriction engendered by the research question. A well-formulated and specific question will aid understanding of the meaningfulness and urgency of the topic. This to say that there is an intrinsic link between value on the one hand and restriction or limitation on the other.

## How to find it?

The struggle to find a research question may have different causes; but, generally, it comes from the artist-researcher's lack of conscious awareness of his or her own position in the discursive field, as well as a lack of conscious awareness of a specific perspective on the topic. Also, as most artistic research-projects are interdisciplinary, PhD researchers tend to get lost in the new field of study they are addressing.

A typical response to a PhD supervisor might read like this: "The background research to my investigation is probably what gives you the impression that I am writing as a visual studies student or as a historian rather than as an artist, but I think I got carried away in explaining Western colonialism only because I am so immersed in it and this immersion was actually very fruitful because it allowed me to define my direction clearly. . . ." But this is not how any direction will be defined clearly. Immersion is inspiring and necessary during a certain phase of the research, but it will be much more fruitful after a question has been formulated, not before.

How to find the question then? Stengers (2011, 22) suggests considering the following: "What are the questions that make you think, around which the demands that define what matters for you are organized?" This implies that the question is complex and consists of sub-questions (the organisation of "the demands that define what matters for you") and that the question is highly personal. What matters to you, what makes you think? A research question is intimately connected with a general sense of importance, an importance that in the incipient phase may not yet be fully understood. It is mainly felt; it is the conviction that "this is important." The general sense of importance will be made specific in the course of the research, by way of detailed investigation and concentrated attention ("dig deeper").

In *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead ([1938] 1968, 11) suggests that "one characterization of importance is that it is that aspect of feeling whereby a perspective is imposed upon the universe of things felt. . . . The two notions of importance and of perspective are closely intertwined." There is, he says, "no importance in a vacuum." Importance means selection—it is "this rather than that" (ibid., 7). A perspective is posed on the universe, on what is out there, because to deal with the universe, to deal with "matter-of-fact" (factuality, that which is given), we need to select. Selection "requires the notion of relative importance in order to give it meaning" (ibid.). We know there is always more, we may even have a vague sense of this "more" and of its potential. But to move forward in our inquiry, we select, and through this selection process we may be able to access more of the wider range of potential. The selection (restriction, limitation) actually creates more space, which Whitehead calls "elbow room"; it is freedom to move (Stengers 2011, 191, 229). "Thus importance, selection, and intellectual freedom are bound up together, and they all involve some reference to matter-of-fact" (Whitehead [1938] 1968, 7). This last sentence is a beautiful and concise description of research and of the role of the question in the research.

The research question, which originates in a subjective perspective on things, will be objectivised in a systematic approach, leading to a coherent argument.

Research is the communication of one's insights to peers; it is making one's presuppositions explicit, in a process of questioning and being questioned. This presupposes a sense of whom and where these peers are. Therefore, in finding the research question, the researcher must consider who her or his colleagues are. "What definition of what matters do I share with them? To what tests shall my proposition be subjected?" (Stengers 2011, 22). There will be no research without communication and debate with colleagues. Once more, Whitehead ([1938] 1968, 8): "The notion of importance. . . . can be inadequately defined as 'Interest, involving that intensity of individual feeling which leads to publicity of expression.'"

The question and the act of questioning thus have primacy in the research process. However, this does not mean that the question does not need to be answered. It is the "response-ability" of the researcher to come up with an answer (or multiple answers). In fact, if a question is not answerable, it is not a research question. The desire to find an answer is the precondition for a well-formulated question.

# Giving an Answer

Kitty Zijlmans

What is needed to formulate an adequate answer to an individual research question, as elaborated above? Except for personal drive and motivation, also required are a clear sense of how to position oneself, a proper research environment, and writing skills as well as praxis.

Starting with the first aspect, taking up the responsibility of answering the question means literally to open oneself to the ability to respond; thus, desire and urgency need to be felt for this endeavour. The obvious follow-up concerns formulating a research question and how one can best answer it. There never is only one best way: a relevant and convincing answer largely depends on the extent to which the answer—that is, the argumentation, the narrative—expresses the urgency and desire to understand one's own drives and directions. Janneke Wesseling and I take the standpoint that answering a research question in the context of a PhD project basically means elaborating the narrative, giving an exposition of what the artist would like to convey in clear—but equally poetic—language (if one has the gift of writing). Artistic research-based questions cannot be answered in one-liners; instead, they need a substantial

corpus of writing, discourse if you like, to be able to respond deeply and genuinely to the issues preoccupying the investigator and to complement, in its particular and unique way, the (visual) artwork, musical piece, composition, and so on of the PhD project.

The answer also needs a clear positioning—that is, a contextualisation of the investigation, of the issue(s) in question in the field to which it refers. It depends on the investigator what field or fields that may be. This may sound random, but it isn't; artistic endeavour and inquiry explores a particular subject that has been of interest to the artist for a long period, because it emerged out of her or his artistic practice and may address particular scholarship from fields relevant to the artist's study, be it philosophy, anthropology, archaeology, psychology, or another. These disciplines are not a smorgasbord from which to pick arbitrarily; there is a need for theoretical consistency, but the artist may have a good reason to read certain scholarship idiosyncratically. As James Elkins (2009, 130) remarks in *Artists with PhDs*, if a peculiar reading is the case, it is "absolutely essential to build in a commentary on the writer's purposes: a commentary that would ideally also demonstrate that the author knows the discourses and chooses to ignore or distort them." I would like to add that writing such commentary is always essential because it clarifies the position the artist takes.

All this sounds as though there is a clear path demarcated for one to follow, but every research project also has its contingency and serendipity. The material or information one is looking for might come from a completely unexpected side, at an unanticipated moment or place; one can never fully organise one's research. Just as most artists have not been trained to formulate a research question, they also have been challenged too little to articulate in writing how they position themselves in the field of art and/or in relationship to an academic field relevant to their research. Different from any other kind of academic research, the start of an artist's research is his or her own practice, as Janneke Wesseling has elaborated above, and the main problem an artist faces is how to articulate the unique coherence between her or his artistic praxis and the research question—or between practice and theory if you like. From here, the answer—or rather, the argumentation—will follow, but this never *just* follows from it, especially because writing and art making are inextricably entwined in the process. Building up an argument is not a linear process; in contrast, the road is full of bifurcations, and looking back, the path taken resembles the game dominos rather than the arrow from a bow.

In arriving at an answer to the posed research question, a clear comprehension is needed of the fields the artists are working in and, following from that, of relevant and related artists (and theorists) with whom they associate or to whom they juxtapose themselves. This is the horizon against which artist-researchers position themselves to articulate their singularity, which is needed for a clear focus in the research and to create a relevant frame of reference. The frame of reference is not just "out there waiting for you" but also needs to be formed. This is a subjective enterprise but at the same time there are also limits to what can be brought together. There needs to be a *rationale* to it—and it is

precisely the exchange and balance between singular and general, individual art praxis and theoretical discourse, that makes artistic research unique and urgent. The next section contemplates what might be needed to get there.

## Research environment

All research presupposes an environment that allows research to be executed and that stimulates it. No research of any kind is possible in a vacuum. It is reminiscent of the audacious question boldly posed by art historian Linda Nochlin in 1971 in the early days of feminist art history, Why have there been no great women artists? The answer is not because women lack talent or are incapable of greatness, but because the right questions about the conditions for producing art need to be asked. There have not been great women artists, so Nochlin argues, because they lacked the institutional (not the individual or private) preconditions and access to proper art education to achieve such levels in the arts. One needs the proper context to flourish, male artists not excluded; but women artists were more often than not deprived of such frameworks. Therefore, Nochlin ([1971] 1988, 176) made an appeal to women artists to "take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought—and true greatness—are challenges open to anyone, man or woman."

Linda Nochlin's call for a new type of institute may very well apply to the budding field of artistic research today: to create the conditions for a framework to critically assess art creation and reflection, and to reach a level of scholarship equal to the academic field. Artistic and academic research are mutually beneficial in being communicating vessels that introduce to one another the other's mode of operation. Elkins (2009, 130) draws a further conclusion: "Universities have not been set up to think about the confluence of making and studying, understanding and knowledge, practice-led research and research-led practice, writing and seeing. Studio art practice could be the place to carry those discussions forward."

Clearly, the necessary conditions for elaborating a research question include an inviting and stimulating institutional bedding of artistic research. Such an environment—the Orpheus Institute being a case in point—brings with it the enriching opportunity to get feedback on the research process from supervisors as well as one's peers in a laboratory-like setting. Being engaged with different angles and perspectives—from advanced researchers to beginners and from various artistic disciplines and theories—engenders a research environment that stimulates the artistic outcome by means of artistic experimentation. Ideas bloom in a culture of invention, creation, experimentation, and testing. An inspiring research environment is needed to produce innovative, pioneering research. Also, it builds up a research memory, an archive, and best practices (and failures, for sure)—in short, a context to relate to. Without such an environment, answering a research question will always fail.

## Importance of writing

Writing is a means of articulating one's thoughts, hunches, and ideas. No research question, nor its answer(s), comes out of the blue. People already have a lot of knowledge or rather carry with them a sense of knowing (like in the Dutch *weten* or the German *Wissen*), indicating a deeper level of knowing, of inherent or tacit knowledge. Such implicit knowing is also fuelled by making, by making things that emerge in the interaction with the material as a fellow player, by learning and getting "the feel of it." The body remembers this (tacit skills). Ways of knowing and ways of making are nested, they are deeply ingrained in body and mind, as John Pickstone argues in his book *Ways of Knowing* (2000); this is because, following Michael Polanyi who coined the term "tacit knowledge," all ways of knowing involve both craft and skills. So the proper research question may also stimulate tacit knowledge to come to the surface, and writing may help in that process.

On the one hand, writing is self-centred: artistic research simply asks for a written discursive-reflective text—it is about the artist's motives, her or his "key-drivers." On the other hand, it needs to connect to the world outside by contributing to what we can call cultural work. Cultural work in this context can be described as generating a critical public discourse on art within the field of art, for higher education, academia, and society at large. Thinking about art that results in "art writing"—to choose a somewhat neutral term—needs to come from both artists and academic scholars/critics; in contrast to academic theorists, artists' theory springs from or is strongly related to their art practice. "Art writing" in the sense of a written dissertation as part of the doctoral degree in art thus contributes largely to a new discourse and stimulates the debate about the nature of artistic research, about understanding art and the way it is made; important societal value also lies in this role. In German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's theory of society as composed of various emerging dynamic functional social systems, each of which is run by its own type of communication, art is one such system. Artistic research contributes to the self-description of the art system. By "self-description," Luhmann means the mode of operation by which systems generate their internal identity; in the case of art, it "reacts to internal problems of meaning and is not just concerned with illustrating general philosophical theories. . . . In self-description, the system becomes its own theme; it claims an identity of its own" (Luhmann 2000, 248). This self-description occurs both in artworks (called "compact communication" by Luhmann) and in writing.

More than any other type of utterance (scientific, political, religious, economic, etc.), art and art writing demonstrate the power of imagination and creativity, driven by artistic motivation. They have a language of their own because of the interconnection of sensory, non-linguistic practice and discursive writing, as Janneke Wesseling argued above. But how can one arrive at writing such a text? A text prompted by a research question rooted in art practice, which, to paraphrase Isabelle Stengers, makes you think, and around which the demands that define what matters for you are organised. Again, there isn't a simple answer to this question, but it gives a direction: the narrative that the artistic

researcher builds up springs from her or his interest, artistic and intellectual curiosity, and art practice. In *Artists with PhDs*, Henk Slager (2009, 52) calls artistic research a form of experience-based knowledge, which, so he adds, "does not preclude the fact that artistic research as a form of idiosyncratic research still should be able to answer well-defined questions." This brings us full circle by returning us to the mutual dependency of question and answer.

To round off this reflection on Q and A, a few words on the notion of experience as mentioned by Slager. Experience can be understood in the sense of either an experienced artist or embodied, sensual understanding. In 2016, during her inaugural lecture on the occasion of accepting the new Chair of Practice and Theory of Research in Visual Art at Leiden University's Academy of Creative and Performing Arts, Janneke Wesseling expounded the latter notion of experience as in-depth understanding, alluding to the development of a conceptual apparatus specific to the interrelation of making and thinking; this, she contends, is fundamental to artistic research. In giving an answer to the posed research question, a methodical itinerary needs to be followed that relies on thought processes as well as experience. This is where the response to the question may reside.

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