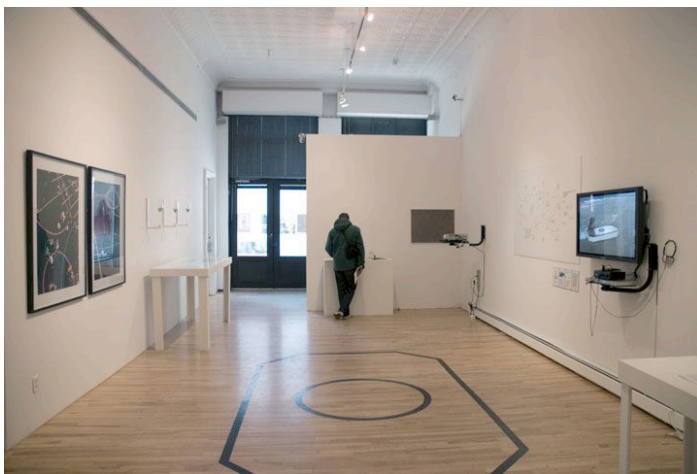


NAMELESS SCIENCE

Introduction

Henk Slager



Nameless Science, Apexart, installation shot. Image credit: Hugh Watt.

The debate on artistic research, emerging worldwide in the field of visual art for some five years now, tends to focus on what artistic research could be or should be. As a consequence of that debate, artistic research, an as-yet undefined sanctuary for creative experiment and knowledge production, is prone to the danger of being absorbed by an intellectually crippling academic discourse on how the specificity of research-based art as a novel *modus operandi* could be defined and framed. That tendency is comparable to what happened in the 1990s, with the initially so radically formulated anti-disciplinary cultural studies. Such academic debate that ultimately seems to be focused particularly on institutional and managerial results – and is, moreover, associated in Europe time and again with the so-called Bologna rules, i.e. the introduction of a bachelor, master, and PhD structure in art education, provides very little insight into the specific qualities of the artistic research process as such. Therefore, it is highly pressing for us to approach research practices from the perspective of the artistic profession, implying entirely different, and also more intrinsic, views.

In that context, the project *Nameless Science*¹ aims at expanding the artistic research debate while showing the concrete outcome of seven artistic research “best practices” in PhD projects. These actual projects will demonstrate that the form of research taking place through the practice of visual art is, in fact, much more dynamic than usually observed within the traditional academic bastions still characterized by distinct and clear fields and disciplines.

Visual art embraces a different form of research strikingly described during one of the first European conferences on artistic research by Sarat Maharaj as “spasmodic, interdisciplinary probes, haphazard cognitive investigations, dissipating interaction, and imaginary archiving.”² A mode of research not focused purposefully on generating “expert knowledge”, but specifically on expressing experiential knowledge. Such knowledge cannot be channeled through rigid academic-scientific guidelines of generalization, repetition and quantification, but requires full attention for the unique, the qualitative, the particular, and the local. In short, a form of nominal knowledge production unable to serve a retinal, one-dimensional worldview characterized by transparent singularity, but rather creating – and if necessary demanding – room for the undefined, the heterogeneous, the plural, the contingent, and the relative. Such knowledge production can only be the sole outcome of a research practice defined at all times by an absolutely open, non-disciplinary attitude and an insertion of multiple models of interpretation. That mode of research was strikingly described in the 1970s by the philosopher of science Feyerabend, in a then-utopian fashion, as “anarchist methodology” and “Dadaist epistemology.”³



Nameless Science, Apexart, installation shot. Image credit: Hugh Watt.

In spite of much academic skepticism, there is indeed today a visual practice satisfying the essential components of widely accepted research. Research conducted by artists - similar to research in the traditional sciences such as humanities, social sciences and natural sciences - is as well-guided by the most important maxim of any scientific activity since time immemorial: the awareness of the necessity of transparent communication. The artist as researcher needs to explain clearly why the domain of visual art necessitates the research questions and, conversely, why those questions should necessarily be articulated in the visual domain. In addition, the researcher should be able to justify both the process and the chosen operational methodology and trajectory. In that context, one characteristic turns out to be particularly remarkable. A striking methodology in the topical practice of artistic research appears to be the formulation of a certain problem from a specific situational artistic process and, furthermore, to interconnect that problem in an open constellation with various knowledge systems and disciplines. Such artistic research projects seem to thwart the well-defined disciplines, since they know the hermeneutic questions of the humanities (the alpha-sciences); they are engaged in empirically scientific methods (the beta-sciences); and they are aware of commitment (the gamma-sciences). Because of that capacity and willingness to continuously engage in novel, unexpected epistemological relations in a methodological process of interconnectivity, artistic research could best be described as a delta-discipline: a way of

research not a priori determined by any established scientific paradigm or model of representation; an undefined discipline as "nameless science"⁴, directed towards generating novel connections, flexible constructions, multiplicities, and new reflexive zones.

That undefined non-paradigmatic discipline as nameless science is indeed the curatorial basis underlying the exhibition *Nameless Science*. [Figs. 1 and 2] All seven artistic research projects presented deal with an artistic reinterpretation of representation(al) models, existing disciplines, comprehension strategies, and academic classification systems. Consequently, these research projects do not solely produce fluent forms of interconnectivity and methodology accompanied by different forms of knowledge production. They also lead to novel artistic strategies and intensity of perception.

In his project *Photographing the Barents Region* (2008), Morten Torgersrud (Bergen National Academy of the Arts) deconstructs a homogenizing geography from the paradigm of the nation-state and a territorializing form of atlas-thought by focusing on the complexity of a political, cultural, and economic interstitial domain: the Barents Region determined by the spheres of influence of both Norway and Russia. Torgersrud's "essay installation" consists of a creative atlas, mapping a series of significant locations - not from a centric perspective or a coherent narrative, but from a passion for both the material history of the landscape and the politics of space. The installation is accompanied by a series of slide projections and textual reflections dealing with how the medium of photography contributes ideologically to the historical rise of the homogenizing concept of landscape.

Researchers Matts Leiderstam (Malmö School of Art) and Jan Kaila (Finnish Academy of Fine Arts) engage in related research questions. In his project *See and Seen* (2006), Matts Leiderstam investigates the conventions for the ideal landscape developed as techniques of perception in 18th-century painting (e.g. Claude Lorrain). A research trajectory consisting of investigation into historical reports and contexts, and production of various artistic strategies (copying, tourism), leads to the issue and implications of current spectatorship and how to address that subject in artistic work.

The project *Photographicality* (2008) by Jan Kaila focuses on the dominance of the photographic paradigm in current visual communication. Such photographic perception seems to manifest itself in an almost intermediated way as an artistic tenet and attitude. The use of different media aiming at creating pictures awakens perceptions, associations, and other meanings similar to the working of photographic images. In an installation consisting of photographic images mediated by video and text, Kaila explores whether the photographic process of communication might be related to a polar intertwining of a presentational, aesthetic dimension ("the here and now"), and the photographic, representative, and informational dimension ("the there and then").

Ronan McCrea (University of Ulster) also examines the photographic process of communication. In his *School Play Series* (2008) project, he creates a series of markings in a schoolyard suggesting an undefined game. Photographs appear to demonstrate that the game is spontaneously played. However, the photographs also force us to pose the ontological question whether playing a game – as an anthropologically ambiguous and in fact undefined phenomenon – could indeed be captured in a decisive moment. For example, a moment where the child finds out that the rules governing the game are similar to the rules of daily life; a life lived outside the safe environment of the school.

In Ricardo Basbaum's (Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) project NBP (New Bases for Personality), a hermeneutic link is created between game and artistic experience. The installation is a multifunctional metal structure, a set of instructions for the participants, video registrations of a series of games played, and a diagram with several layers depicting both the original project and the transformations submitted throughout history. That creates a series of rhythmic propositions, an awareness of potential forms of social relations, and ultimately a topology of a dynamic concept of identity surpassing the interpretative framework of social science.

Do natural sciences allow an artistic intervention and re-verification of visual representation? That question is the starting point for Irene Kopelman's (MaHKU, Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design) research project *Ubx expression* (2008). Kopelman investigates how various natural science collections used to base their display systems on 19th-century forms of categorization, and logics of identity, a classifying logos excluding differences and singularities. In the form of a concentrated series of artistic interventions and deconstructions of device systems, Kopelman develops alternative forms for archiving and display for a number of natural science collections.

Examining the logic of display and exhibition occupies Sarah Pierce (Goldsmiths College, London) as well. Pierce's project *Test Pieces, Ambivalence and Authority* (2006-2008) focuses on the paradox of the curatorial characterized by a point of order but also by a point of pause. In *Eyes of the University*, Derrida related the concept of points of pause to the college campus as a tentative, transitional site of speculation and deferral. Departing from that deconstructivist insight, Pierce draws attention to the anticipatory status of student work. In her Apexart presentation, she links the status of artistic research to the implications of a research attitude for the development of an art education curriculum. Therefore, a video registration of (and a critical, epilogical reflection on) the *Nameless Science* symposium and contributions from students at various New York art academies are included in Pierce's installation.

¹ *Nameless Science*. Exhibition: Apexart, New York. December 10 - January 31, 2009. Curated by Henk Slager. Symposium: The Cooper Union, New York, December 12, 2008. The symposium involves a presentation of the *Nameless Science* research projects by the artists, followed by a discussion with critical referents from EARN (European Artistic Research Network) members Mick Wilson (Gradcam, Dublin), Gertrud Sandqvist (Malmö Art Academy), Felicitas Thun (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna), Tamar Zinguer (The Cooper Union), and John Rajchman (Columbia University). Also keynote statements by Sarat Maharaj (Malmö Art Academy), Grant Kester (University of California, San Diego), and George Smith (Idsva, Portland).

² Sarat Maharaj, 'Unfinishable Sketch of "An Object in 4D": Scenes of Artistic Research', in: Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds), *Artistic Research, L&B, Volume 18* (Amsterdam/New York: Lier en Boog, 2004), p. 50.

³ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method. Outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge* (London: Verso, 1975).

⁴ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited and translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000). Here Aby Warburg's research is sketched as "unnamed discipline": a mode of being freed from a formalizing, academic disciplining process.