

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: THE CASE FOR ARTISTIC RESEARCH

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POSITIVE REVIEW WITH FIVE IMAGINARY CRITICAL INLAYS¹

Vytautas Michelkevičius. 2016. *Meninio tyrimo suvesti. Žinojimo kontūrais* [*Converged by Artistic Research: Along the Contours of Knowing*] (Monograph). Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla. 160 p. Illustrated (32 diagrams and 29 pictures). 450 copies. ISBN 978-609-447-229-9.

Vytautas Michelkevičius wrote a book. A rather illuminating and provocative book, which is destined to be received ambivalently. The book is filled with evolving meanings and information – he is continuously erasing and reshaping the boundaries between art and science, practice and theory as well as between artists and scientists. On the one hand, the author introduces and tries to establish a new inter/trans/disciplinary field of research and studies, i.e. artistic research. On the other, the range of possible reactions to the book might vary from very sympathetic and friendly to critical or even hostile. A reader can be pretty sure of the book's capability to provoke heated debates and discussions. And this fact alone supports the value of the book. What is so special about the book? In order to answer this question, the review is structured in a way that captures both aforementioned aspects.

Having in mind that Michelkevičius mostly cares about the arguments for artistic research, it is, thus, tempting to single out at least some counterarguments against artistic research. In the spirit of Plato, let's imagine what art or/and research-related persons with



different backgrounds would say about the endeavour of artistic research. I would like to give the floor to five imaginary personas (IP) who could vocalize possible or applicable objections to the conjunction of art and research. These imaginary objectors are ideal types rather than real people. Therefore, any resemblances to real persons are purely accidental.

¹ This review discusses the Lithuanian edition of the book (2016). The revised English edition is to be published in autumn 2017.

COVER AND BACK COVER. Compliments to the author for a clever design of the book! The format, the colours, the texture, the play with the serifs draw attention to this publication. Due to its large format, there is enough space for the content on the cover which is rather unusual. The title of the book itself is neither self-explanatory, nor very clear. It is highly likely that the author consciously chose an enigmatic title – this part of the book immediately raises a bunch of questions that cannot yet be answered, at least not before reading the book:

1. What is artistic research?
2. Who are those that are brought together by this artistic research?
3. Can we achieve new objective knowledge with the help of artistic practices?
4. Finally, what is the use and the purpose of the aforementioned artistic research?

The back cover should terrify the scientists because their theory, or even their financing, is being threatened here. The author and his supporting team restrain science in order to free some space for artistic research. “Artistic research changes the attitude not only towards the art practice but also towards scientific research by questioning its status as the only legitimate way of producing knowledge”. Imagine some suppressed members of the social sciences and humanities, suffering from constant nagging coming from politicians, administrators, natural scientists etc. And here comes Michelkevičius saying, “Come on, make some space, let’s share the territory...”

(IP 1) DEPRESSED HUMANITARIAN: Artistic research? Let a thousand flowers bloom... Wait. No. No way. Financial resources in the field of science are scarce. Humanities are the obvious target to decrease finance... Artists practicing artistic research are the major competitors to humanitarians. There is

no way for artists to compete with natural sciences, biosciences etc. Thus, they are trying to enter the territory, which is already underfunded. God, save us from researching artists...

So that the scientists would not notice anything, they are being sedated, like “the research function is being returned to art (it had this function back in Renaissance)”, or: this monograph looks at “how art can expand the nature, methods and understanding of scientific research”. Their request to let them in is wrapped in the promise that they will expand your horizons, and they will really do that... Finally, the most respected authority from the back cover, Julijonas Urbonas (an artist, designer, researcher, vice rector of the Vilnius Academy of Arts, etc.), states: “Artistic research is the means to free science”. However, he does not tell what science has to be freed from...

PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION. The author admits that “this monograph is simultaneously a scientific and partly artistic research into the issues of contemporary knowledge and borders of the disciplines.”

(IP 2) STRICT SCIENCE ADMINISTRATOR: There is no need for new disciplines and methods. All the emerging fields can be easily incorporated into the existing ones. The map of the sciences is already established. No new demarcation lines are needed. On the contrary, if every time a new (inter) discipline appears we were forced to remap, it would cause a great havoc and regress *ad infinitum*. Proliferation of new fields and disciplines causes loads of problems: (1) even the existing classifications are too complicated – there are way too many disciplines, which is a real obstacle for more efficient administration of research; (2) blurring the boundaries between art and science results in institutional uncertainties: ministries of culture and councils of culture/arts are responsible for the art field, ministries

of science and education together with research councils are responsible for the scientific field etc. In case of artistic research, this division ceases to function properly. It means a systematic error, which is by no means desirable. If artists are discontent, why should we worry about changing the functioning system? If it works, don't fix or don't transform it. In science it's always easier without artists. Theology is troublesome enough... Do not proliferate!

It is very much probable that the author, by attempting to ensure himself, employed a very scientific and bureaucratic language in the introduction (objective, tasks, problem, prior examination, timeliness, relevance, methodology, methods etc.). For the pleasure of science administrators. Probably to erase any doubt about this book not being a *scientific* monograph. He is indeed successful at the expense of non-scientists. The most interesting thing is that those people who came up with ways to write sophisticated introductions are not the people this book is meant for. Why? Because they would only accept Chapter 1. Chapter 2 would annoy them, and in Chapter 3, old-fashioned science fades and gallops away irreversibly...

By the way, the preface appears to unexpectedly answer the second question. Who are those brought together by artistic research? "Artistic research converges art and science, visual, performance, and other forms of art (literature, theatre, dance, cinema, music etc.), as well as artists, scientists, researchers, writers, and curators. In addition, artistic research brings together lines, concepts, forms, and ideas in diagrams, and their creators and researchers in collaborative platforms."

[CHAPTER 1. THE CONCEPTIONS
OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH]

The central (and the most referential) part of the book which allows a closer examination of three different meanings of the research – educational (Chapter 2), art

practice (Chapter 3) and (scientific) research (Chapter 4). By the way, the author finds out that the term "artistic research" can be used in eleven different ways (and that is automatically an answer to the question number one), from research through creative practice to research as art (pp. 40–41). It is complicated and also dry. Those willing to wander may do so together with the author. Those who come to trust him can be guaranteed a safe passage to the other chapters where this information is applied in a clearer and more easily apprehensible contexts. The reviewer acclaims, with great responsibility, that Michelkevičius is a good guide who can be trusted. It will take time but he will get you out of the maze.

Obviously, the scientific part of the reviewer's identity was pleased – there are many theories, surnames, classifications, divisions, etc. As well as that, Plato's ghost clears up at least one of the aspects belonging to this artistic research. The philosophical education that the reviewer possesses dictates that one cannot do without Plato... In situations where you do not have anything to say, you will find at least something in Plato's writings. And not totally off topic! Especially if Alfred N. Whitehead is to be believed – he proclaimed that (sic!) "*The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato*". Following Whitehead, one could assume that Plato, due to his "leaping logic", is the first representative of artistic research. When Plato does not have enough arguments, he changes the strategy – instead of logical and rational argumentation he employs stories, myths, poetry and other means of narration, starting with an innocent proposal "Try to imagine...". Together with Plato you attempt to imagine and, without noticing, you already believe in the otherworld, running androgens, means of transportation named soul etc.

Michelkevičius himself quotes George Smith who "defining the artist as a philosopher <...> argues that all prominent artists were philosophers, and

vice versa, as they aestheticised ideas from the times of Plato.” (p. 102). If Plato is indeed close to artistic research, humanities are no longer under the threat. However, Michelkevičius asserts that this unity of art and science was disrupted by the Enlightenment and Kant; therefore, now it is the right time to restore historical and disciplinary justice – the author is indeed successful at doing that.

[CHAPTER 2. ARTISTIC RESEARCH
IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES]

In this chapter, the author criticizes (not only) Lithuanian education politicians and administrators. It's not that they do not deserve that. This chapter clearly demonstrates that Michelkevičius's monograph is not a solution to artificial problems. The book is based on the examples drawn from five countries, and those examples help solve some important issues – PhD in Arts, its status and connections to artistic research. Unfortunately, the reviewer does not have any experience in the field; however, for the reasons unknown, he trusts the judgement of the author.

[CHAPTER 3. ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN
LITHUANIAN CONTEMPORARY ART]

In this chapter, the author seriously, attentively and scientifically looks into artistic research. This proves to be probably the most interesting part of the book which not only connects the artistic, practical and theoretical pieces of this monograph but also helps understand what this artistic research actually is and what shape it may take. If prior to this the definition of artistic research was sort of abstract or even desolate, Chapter 3 puts everything in place. Not only that – this chapter manages to expand the horizons of non-artists. It is indeed interesting to get acquainted with art projects made by Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas, Dainius Liškevičius, Julijonas Urbonas and Indrė

Klimaitė followed by their interpretation through the lens of artistic research.

“The leaping logic” proves to be very convenient in this context – it serves as a concept helping to discern the specifics of artistic research. Michelkevičius claims that this unorthodox logic “distinguishes artistic from scientific research: knowledge presented in such form not only has the capacity to propagate faster and more efficiently (due to the rhetoric used), but can generally be made public and possibly even legitimised in both the artistic and the scientific discourses. In contrast, emergence of the same or similar knowledge in the scientific discourse through a scientist's utterance would be hardly imaginable due to lack of authoritative evidence and non-scientific or illogical argumentation.” (pp. 117–118) In other words, we are again confronted by Plato's reverberations.

(IP 3) CLASSICALLY TRAINED ARTIST: Why the hell do we need artistic research? It's a sign of artists' inferiority to scientists. Why should we switch the way we work and express ourselves? I don't feel this way. Scientific analysis of art has never given any sufficient outcomes. Art is perennial, while all scientific theories are doomed to be replaced by novel knowledge. Honestly, I don't care about truth, I don't care about better knowledge, I do not perform so-called research. Art precedes all of it. My major concern is aesthetical value. Spare my efforts and time...

Obviously, this chapter is meant for those participating in artistic discourse (as the introduction is dedicated to the fans of the scientific genre). Passers-by who only occasionally visit art stops will be unsatisfied due to a lack of details and depth in the presentation of the aforementioned projects. For example, when the author talks about Liškevičius's art research, he does not fill in all the explanatory loopholes and leaves some questions unanswered. Paper books are not known for their interactive qualities, therefore, the search of technological

support is inevitable. Anyway, this chapter gives answers to question number 3 and lets us forget the phobias potentially caused by looking at the back cover.

[CHAPTER 4. A PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH ON ARTISTIC RESEARCH]

In this chapter, the author independently conducts artistic research. There is no need to retell what sort of artistic research the author has carried out by using the methods of mapping and visualization – the author has done it far better in the book than any grumbling reviewer ever could. It is not worth ruining the pleasure of discovery for the readers, however, it should be mentioned that this chapter partially manages to answer question number 4.

It must be admitted that two and a half years back the reviewer did not have the slightest clue what artistic research is, and now he is at least slightly more knowledgeable on the topic, thanks to Michelkevičius. By being treacherously lured (“we need you and it might be interesting to you...”) into this project of artistic research, the reviewer must conclude that this interdisciplinary experience together with art critics, artists, architects, curators, designers, linguists etc. unexpectedly improved his knowledge about science and related fields along with expanding the understanding of “research”. Being on the other side of one’s professional community equals being taken out of one’s comfort zone because the arguments and the statements are no longer evident in themselves. All this means being in a “great between”, which is called artistic research.

(IP 4) INCREDULOUS PHYSICIST. It is irresponsible to blur the lines between art and science. And artistic research seems to do exactly that. One of the major problems with such an idea is evaluation of scientific knowledge. There are lots of cases of misconduct in science. Even in natural sciences... Are

we ready to admit that whatever is called research is equal in its epistemological status to research in the hard sciences? Having in mind free-reigning fantasy of artists, artistic research might be a death sentence to objective and value-free research. If something is novel and artistically sweet, it does not necessarily represent the real state of nature. Who’s gonna be the arbiter of truthfulness? Artists? Scientists? Philosophers? Sorry, but I am not ready for this...

[CHAPTER 5. THREE AND A HALF SHAKY QUESTIONS ABOUT ARTISTIC RESEARCH]

The author explained quite a lot. However, not all of the questions raised are answered – on many occasions the primary questions transformed into some other questions. And that is a good thing because the new questions are even more interesting than the original ones. Therefore, it is desirable that the monograph would end with an acronym “tbc” and illuminating wanders in the maze of artistic research would be continued.

Nearly one hundred years ago sociologist Max Weber said that people choose to do science due to the leaping logic, sorry, due to reasons incompatible with scientific arguments. Science gains its social or some other value due to *para-scientific or meta-scientific reasons*. Therefore, artistic “supplements” play a significant role in science, for example, when one is deciding on the career of a scientist. A famous science journalist, whose surname was unforgivably forgotten during the process of writing this review, did not become a scientist because of... Spock. If a fictitious *Star Trek* character could affect a choice of career in such a way, then the opportunities of artistic research are even bigger. That is what Michelkevičius’s book manages to prove, argumentatively and rationally, without any leaping...

(IP 5) OLD SCHOOL POSITIVIST. You must be kidding – artists have decided to become

researchers?! Artistic research is *contradictio in ad-jecto*. We cannot expect artists to carry on research without special training and education. That sounds ridiculous. Research is scientific activity looking for truth and well-founded knowledge. Artistic research is a form of metaphysics, which cannot pretend to be true knowledge, because it uses meaningless words and senseless sentences. Artists with their so-called “methods” are obviously outside this search. Aesthetics cannot be assessed by the means of science and vice versa. Does it mean artistic research is the newest version of *anything goes*? Seems like artistic research is another attempt to undermine science. Artistic research is a pseudo-research on a par with the humanities (both of them even lack “science” in their titles) – they both provide knowledge, which cannot be verified neither empirically, nor mathematically... End of story!

When science examines art and vice versa, there is no safe theoretical or practical shelter left. It is impossible to define the reality of researchers once and for all times. The body of science is a live organism, which constantly evolves, changes and challenges, and thus, any finite classification would limit the creativity of research. Therefore, do not conserve! Same with methodological or epistemological perspective which would help discuss Michelkevičius’s monograph. That is why this review does not aim for objectivity, precision, aesthetics and other socially acceptable values. Subjectively, this is a great book, deserving a wide audience interested in scientific research, artistic practices and the junction of those two. A must-read for artists, humanitarians, philosophers, social scientists, natural scientists and anyone “to whom it may concern”...