

Some Thoughts about Artistic Research

Lonnie van Brummelen
& Siebren de Haan



They are involved with their discipline, their colleagues, their students, their sponsors, their subjects, their own and host governments, the particular individuals and groups with whom they do their fieldwork, other populations and interest groups in the nations within which they work. (..) In a field of such complex involvements, misunderstandings, conflicts and the necessity to make choices among conflicting values are bound to arise and to generate ethical dilemmas.

As artists we often work in situ, in an unfamiliar context that we discover as we go along. The outline above is not, however, a description of the artistic fieldwork of contemporary artists, but a quote from the American Anthropological Association's Principles of Professional Responsibility which dates from some forty years ago.¹ And we are not the first to make the link between art and anthropology. In Hal Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer', an essay published in *The Return of the Real* in 1996, he observed that artists and critics were increasingly identifying themselves

with anthropologists.² According to Foster this identification was a reaction to developments in art (and society) of the preceding decades. Given that the shifts which stemmed from this continue to be relevant, we will summarise them here. The work of art changed from an autonomous object, into an entity that is partly determined by the spatial and physical conditions of perception. The art institution was transformed from a physical location into a discursive network. It became apparent that the public was not a homogeneous, passive group but a heterogeneous multiplicity of participating subjects. And art expanded breadthwise into culture. Post-colonial anthropology had developed into the science of 'alterity'. It was contextual, interdisciplinary and self-critical – and it were these characteristics that artists and critics, with their jointly redefined practice of artistic research, thought they needed in the broadened domain of art.

1 Adopted by the Council in May 1971. Cited in Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 118.

2 Hal Foster's analogy alluded to a lecture entitled 'The Author as Producer', which Walter Benjamin delivered at the Institut pour l'Étude du Fascisme in Paris in 1934, calling on artists to intervene – as the revolutionary workers were doing – in the means of production in order to transform the apparatus of bourgeois culture.

For us, as for many of our colleagues, speculations, experiments, fieldwork, production, reception and provisional conclusions, in short the process of artistic production which generates dilemmas both ethical and aesthetic, is integral to the work of art.

We were both trained in an era when the debate about 'invisible power structures', as laid bare by thinkers such as Bourdieu, Foucault and Gramsci, dominated the cultural climate, without the body of thought of these intellectuals ever being taught explicitly. Nevertheless, we learned to see Impressionist paintings as status commodities, art museums as machines of discipline and prescribers of taste, and Ancient Greek culture as a symbol of Eurocentrism, as the ultimate representation of values that were imposed upon subject classes by a dominant elite. Because we have internalised the sceptic, we are constantly making sure that we are not being exploited for any agenda whatsoever.

The sceptic would say that by labelling the expanding work of art as 'artistic research' art is commodified as 'knowledge' and thus instrumentalized for the

knowledge-based economy, which is meant to strengthen national competitive positions in the multipolar world of the 'global economy'. While we have no desire to disregard the sceptic he appears to have a blind spot: what role can the aesthetic play in a world where positions fix themselves? Artistic research suggests an ethos that appeals to us, namely the open-ended quest for the aesthetic. In an age when 'beyonds' are being created anew – now with the aim of our fending them off – artistic research is stimulating the exploration or eluding of boundaries and prompts us to shuttle between domains that we thought had nothing to do with each other. This means that artistic research is not a discipline but a mentality, not the dominion of artists and critics alone but of the beholder as well.