

A desire for something else: transdisciplinary approaches in artistic research

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Transdisciplinarity as a possible conceptual approach in the arts might carry a blurriness at its core. In recent years, artistic practices seem to operate increasingly in-between different disciplinary fields, not merely adding plural disciplines, but concretising a dialogical interaction within them, and opening a particular research field for the production of differences. In artistic research, both the desire and need to experiment with a transdisciplinary constellation might be associated with the possibility to explore *practices of doing otherwise*.

Back in 1992 Hugh G. Petrie wrote that “*The notion of transdisciplinarity exemplifies one of the historically important driving forces in the area of interdisciplinarity, namely, the idea of the desirability of the integration of knowledge into some meaningful whole (...)*” (Petrie 1992: 304). According to Petrie, transdisciplinarity is therefore a particular mode of interdisciplinarity with at its core a desire to think beyond the addition of disciplinary perspectives. Further, Petrie situates transdisciplinary within specific discursive traditions: “*The best example, perhaps, of the drive to transdisciplinarity might be the early discussions of general systems theory (...) when it was being held forward as a grand synthesis of knowledge. Marxism, structuralism, and feminist theory are sometimes cited as examples of a transdisciplinary approach (...). Essentially, this kind of interdisciplinarity represents the impetus to integrate knowledge, and, hence, is often characterized by a denigration and repudiation of the disciplines and disciplinary work as essentially fragmented and incomplete*” (Ibid: 304-305). The ambivalence that results from the desire to conceptualize a relevant whole while acknowledging the fragmented and incomplete dimensions of certain fields of knowledge create an unstable terrain of inquiries and explorations that might characterise transdisciplinary research.

However, other positions have defined the possibility of transdisciplinarity without a repudiation of disciplinary boundaries per se, but rather as the *need* to critically identify the problems of situated disciplinary practices in order to produce other forms of knowledge through a transdisciplinary shift. For Antje Lann Hornscheidt and Susanne Baer, the transdisciplinary position preliminary implies to identify and analyse the conditions linked to situated and specific disciplinary fields which might then permit to unfold alternative ways of learning. Here they argue from the perspective of transdisciplinary gender studies: “*By elucidating approaches chosen within disciplines and articulating their limitations, a sharp awareness of the disciplines’ varying ways to produce knowledge can be developed, including a critical assessment of the questions posed, the theories applied and the methods used, as well as the disciplinary genre conventions governing how research is re/presented. Such knowledge is fundamental in learning how to learn in alternative ways*” (Baer/Hornscheidt 2012: 170). The potentiality of a transdisciplinary perspective might here be understood as the integration of different *forms of knowledge* after having identified the *regimes of knowledge* associated to a given disciplinary field. These dimensions make the transdisciplinary approach a decidedly epistemologic one. Furthermore, a transdisciplinary position raises the question of the implementation of alternative positions when engaging with established discursive norms.

In approaching Visual Culture Studies as a transdisciplinary field of research, Sigrid Schade and Silke Wenk remind us, following Michel Foucault, that (scientific) disciplines are “discursive formations” which are operating within complex relational systems involving institutions, economical and societal processes, situated behaviours, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification and modes of characterization (Schade/Wenk 2011: 53).

Moreover, scientific disciplines are identified as practices controlling and generating specific positions according to either already established rules or newly settled ones (ibid: 54). Scientific disciplines are therefore not static but concretize a sort of plasticity by existing in a complex and changing matrix of relations between communication, discourses, as well as social and political practices. These relations often result in normative mechanisms of exclusion as to what is considered valid knowledge or not (ibid: 55). Navigating within these ambivalences, the transdisciplinary perspective might therefore imply a conceptual position which reflects its own immanent becoming, that is to say, where self-reflexive research practices are constantly attempting to critically position themselves within their own situatedness. Without eluding the specificities of singular disciplines, but rather by operating a possible dialogical shift in-between them, transdisciplinarity might open a fragile and unstable field of inquiries for testing and experimenting the formation and production of knowledge possibly resulting in heterogeneous practices of *doing otherwise*.

In the arts, a desire for alternative positions towards existing institutional and socio-political realities seems to be a recurrent occurrence within so-called critical contemporary practices. Recent years have seen transformations in this field as artists often operate in “unclassifiable” categories using research methods and/or unconventional approaches to engage with plural artistic forms. The possible formats of materialization and artefacts resulting from these practices incorporate different mediums in multiple constellations and combinations. Nowadays, a classic separation of disciplinary fields in the arts (visual arts, theatre, performance, music/sound, dance) seems to become increasingly inadequate to reflect fragmented forms and complex articulations of hybrid artistic practices.

Following this observation, artistic research as a relatively recent academic field might offer a paradigmatic terrain to exemplify different forms of transdisciplinary approaches in the arts. Like any (relatively) young fields of studies, both transdisciplinarity and artistic research are not fixed concepts but can be understood and defined from multiple perspectives. A particular position within both these fields of study will here imply the focus on the reciprocal interactions between aesthetical and discursive productions by understanding artistic practices as *cultural inquiries*¹. This specific transdisciplinary perspective defines a field of study for scientific-artistic research that analyses the agentive and transformative potentialities of aesthetical practices and their subsequent dialogical constellations.

Artistic research doesn't necessarily imply the mere collection and analysis of data, but might rather propose to concretize reflexive-sensual epistemic perspectives. By doing so, artistic research analyses the complex articulation of both discursive dimensions and aesthetic practices and the multi-fragmented relations produced by their mutual interaction. This specific interaction happening in artistic research might argue against an all too disciplinary perspective, and opens an unstable, albeit productive field for conceptual positions. For cultural theorist Sigrid Adorf, and here echoing Bertold Brecht, artistic research can be exemplified by the necessity for the artist to be informed by perspectives from different disciplines in order to relevantly engage with the complexity of the relations created by capitalism: “*Brechts alte Absage an den Mythos vom schöpferischen Künstler klingt, trotz dem die Kritik an der creatio ex nihilo als Demystifizierung des klassischen Künstlerbildes wahrlich nicht neu ist, für mich noch immer brisant. Ökonomie, Psychologie, Soziologie und Geschichte nennt er gleichsam als Hilfswissenschaften seines ästhetischen Experimentierens, als notwendiges Wissen anderer Felder, das er studieren muss, um die Komplexität*

¹ For further resources, see the digital publication platform initiated by Sigrid Adorf, Noémie Stähli and Julia Wolf: INSERT.ART– Artistic Practices as Cultural Inquiries. <http://www.insert.art>

gegenwärtiger Verhältnisse denken zu können, denn diese ließen sich im fortgeschrittenen Kapitalismus nicht mehr einfach abbilden» (Adorf 2021: 8-9). This necessity for the artist to be informed about a set of practices and knowledge forms going beyond purely aesthetic questions might resonate with the possibility for artistic research to closely interact with a double articulation: the methodologies offered by cultural analysis and critical studies on the one hand, but also a concrete understanding of the art as opposed to its problematic autotelic and presumably neutral function on the other. Indeed, a culture analytical position underlines a perception of art as a fundamentally social practice and operates in dialectical opposition to the positivist perspectives of *art for itself* or *“l’art pour l’art”*. Contemporary artistic practices are hereby understood in resonance to socio-political tensions and power relations, and exist often in a transversal entanglement with the multiple forms of violence produced by contemporary capitalism. Such a transdisciplinary perspective materialized in artistic research might hereby help to reveal these complex relations and interactions in identifying artistic practices not as neutral activities but rather as affective and embodied politics calling for cultural inquiries.

Furthermore, this particular transdisciplinary understanding of artistic research might help analysing the performative potential of art to transform reality, that is to say, to concretely change a given situation into something else. Sigrid Adorf formulates the necessity for an art form to be politicized in order to become transformative, here arguing in relation to the work of artist VALIE EXPORT: *«Die ästhetische Form soll dahingehend politisiert werden, dass ihr erkennendes Darstellen von gegebenen Zuständen zu einer Form der Kritik wird, in der oder durch die das Potential zur Änderbarkeit von dem, was wir „Wirklichkeit benennen“ (EXPORT, s.o.) aufscheint» (Adorf 2021: 18).* The need for an *aesthetical form* to become a *concrete form of critique* raises the question of how artistic practices can potentially produce a shift in the production of reality. In that sense, the artistic practice is explored, analysed and tested in its potentiality to produce alterability within a complex constellation of affective forces. According to Barbara Bolt, this moment of transformation could be understood as a *performative paradigm for artistic research* (Bolt 2016). In resonance to theoretical positions by Judith Butler and JL Austin, Barbara Bolt shifts performativity specifically in the context of artistic practices, not relating this concept to performance per se, but rather to the concrete effects of art in the world: *“In their capacity to be both actions and generate consequences, performative utterances enact real effects in the world” (Bolt 2016: 133).* This understanding of artistic practices having real effects in the world underlines the transformative potentiality of the artistic gestus and, hence, its social and political possibility. Following Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and resituating it in the artistic context, Barbara Bolt argues that the *“performative paradigm operates according to repetition with difference” (ibid: 132).* This performative re-iteration for artistic practices produces differences through repetition and triggers concrete effects in the world like discursive, material and/or affective consequences (Bolt 2016). Performativity reveals subjectivity through the *performative moment* as a repeated act enabling transformation (and not happening beforehand): *“Butler’s theory of performativity relates to the formation of the subject. In Butler’s thesis, there is no subject who precedes the repetition» (ibid: 135).* Within the art, the artistic subject doesn’t exist *a priori* but is revealed through performativity while the re-iteration of the artistic practice through time implies the immanent possibility of social and political transformation. To systematically and qualitatively assess these effects might set a task for a transdisciplinary understanding of artistic research as cultural inquiries: a reflective and situated positionality attentively analysing the conditions for critical artistic practices to challenge institutional and social norms and eventually make a difference.

Such an understanding of transdisciplinarity as an interactive and dialogical form of artistic research opens a terrain for operating in-between different disciplinary fields. However, these interactions happen neither only on the theoretical, nor on the solely practical levels, but within their reciprocal articulations. Mutual interactions connect discursive perspectives with practices (and the other way around) and might be a possible further characteristic of a transdisciplinary perspective within artistic research. Theory and practice become inseparable, producing a permanently transforming field of interrelations.

Highlighting her need of theory as a possibility for healing the pain and wounds occurring in her life (and more specifically her father's violent behaviours during her childhood), bell hooks describes this dialogical moment between theory and practice like an attempt to grasp "*what was happening within and around*" her (hooks 2011: 59). This desire to understand is strongly anchored in the reciprocal, dialogical and situated perspectives brought by the articulation of theory and practice: "*When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two — that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other*" (ibid: 60). This "theory">"practice" reciprocal interaction described by bell hooks could form the core of a possible understanding of transdisciplinarity in artistic research and thus create a tool for cultural critique in the arts.

A specific transdisciplinary perspective, as outlined in this text, could help articulate artistic practices as decidedly socio-political forces that critically reflect reality while emphasising the need to make a difference. Hence, the exploration of the complex relations resulting from artistic practices might reveal the conditions for their performative possibilities in the ambivalent context of current institutions under global capitalism. The field opened by transdisciplinary artistic research and further informed by cultural analysis could therefore contribute to materialise both a need and a desire for something else.

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