

Chapter 3

The Art University — a space for negotiating and sharing

By Nina Malterud

This text is an extended version of my keynote speech at Vetenskapsrådet's symposium in Malmö in November 2015, in which I was arguing for broader professional environments and potential interdisciplinarity in art education as preferable alternatives to the smaller and more specialised institutions from the previous century. During the discussion at the symposium, I realized how much my message and my attitudes are grounded in the Norwegian situation, where art educations have been able to promote their interests quite well for the last 20 years. The following text should be read with this understanding of the context.

Educational structures as part of political processes

The theme from Vetenskapsrådet seems to address two different models: the art university as an institution including diverse artistic fields, and art education(s) being part of a university with a portfolio of several subject areas. University in this context is understood as an institution hosting more than one discipline and having research and education as equal missions.

Higher education in Norway is funded by the state, with few exceptions. Higher art educations in Norway are – and want to be – part of this system in different ways: as independent institutions or as part of universities or university colleges. Structural changes in education are certainly political processes, involving the government, parliament and the ministry. Art educations do have a voice in hearings and communication with the Ministry of Education and Research concerning the subject area art. In the law of higher education, artistic is positioned as a recognized parallel to scientific. This is consequently followed up in other regulations and public documents, and is a guarantee for a position of the subject area art. Art education has its defined space and reasonable economy within the state funded institutions.

The various art fields do not run the education. There have been examples of the opposite, where the field itself – or the union – has defined the content and the learning outcomes and reduced the education to a vocational school delivering students fit for the trade. Universities have a strong tradition of and obligation for “academic freedom”, a mission to transgress existing practices, which is also necessary for the arts.

Still, relevance and close contact with the art scene is crucial. Artists do have an influence on the artistic content, context, methods and measures as professors, supervisors, assessors and other roles, and as institutional leaders.

Last year, the Norwegian government initiated a comprehensive structural reform of higher education. Their aim is to reduce the number of institutions and ensure that these fulfil all academic demands, and have complete three-cycle environments and sufficiently strong research activities. The reform questions the independent status of smaller institutions, including the Bergen Academy of Art and Design, Oslo National Academy of the Arts, the Norwegian Academy of Music and the Oslo School of Architecture and Design. The pressure from the government is strong. Responding to the reform demands, Bergen Academy of Art and Design, being the next to smallest state-funded higher education institution in Norway, will from 2017 probably form a new art faculty at the University of Bergen together with the Grieg Academy. Design, fine art and music will be the fields for research and education in the faculty. Through this process, a conscious focus on establishing the

relevant framework and resources for the subject area will be necessary.

Different artistic expressions – shared identity?

The Norwegian Artistic Research Programme (2003-) is funding artistic research projects in dance, design, fine art, music, opera and theatre through individual research fellow projects (PhD) as well as institutional projects. The programme is established as a logical result of the claim that artistic is an identifiable and special property, and is not part of the Research Council of Norway (as in Vetenskapsrådet in Sweden), but established as a parallel. Research fellows from all artistic fields are enrolled in the programme and employed at different home institutions. They meet in seminars a few times a year, focusing on general themes such as research methods, reflection and dissemination. Many of the fellows have complained about the obligation to relate to other fields and the lack of a common language. This is not surprising considering the long traditions of the field-specific institutional environments. However, from my position on the Steering Committee over the years I have observed

people joining for common interests, becoming colleagues and friends, influencing each other, even building projects together. In my work as professor, rector, steering committee member, conference organizer, moderator and evaluator, I have experienced many occasions in which several art fields have come together with great effect.

The various fields challenge each other, irritate each other, confuse each other and act as THE OTHER. Prejudices are confronted through personal meetings. Each field seems to have both strong and weak qualities from their tradition, culture and discourse, and these attributes become visible when meeting the other. The specialised language of the discipline cannot be used in multidisciplinary presentations and discussions, but the gain is response and resistance from other artistic positions. The gain is also that the very notion of something being artistic is being discussed and challenged.

The reasons for promoting a shared artistic identity overarching the specific discourses of the various fields are both political and academic. To define art as one subject area with common interests has been cru-

cial to gain a strategic position within the educational system. Theatre, dance or design are too small on their own to have a voice in the political system. Also, the boundaries between the fields are much more osmotic and hybrid than before. Students and staff are on the move and wish to have access to and try out more arenas. Fine art is not strictly divided into painting or sculpture. Performers of medieval music cooperate with contemporary composers. Whether or not these movements result in new artistic expressions, is an open question.

What does art education possibly lose when it more and more becomes research-based?

The gains and losses depend on how research is defined. Artistic research in Norway is grounded in the artists' special experiences and reflections. The framework for the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme and the research in the art educations is built upon this principle. A quotation from Henk Borgdorff¹ emphasizes this:

We can justifiably speak of artistic research ('research in the arts') when that artistic practice is not only the result of the research, but also its methodological vehicle, when the research unfolds in and through the acts of creating and performing. This is a distinguishing feature of this research type within the whole of academic research.

Artistic research is supposed to

- generate knowledge on artistic grounds
- articulate and focus on professional issues through artistic practice and reflection
- develop and challenge a broad spectrum of means of expression and documentation
- establish arenas for sharing processes and results
- qualify reflection in the institutions through contextualization and critical discussion
- contribute to and challenge artistic practice and the discourses of the arts
- strengthen artistic competence in society²

This platform for artistic research includes open and organised dialogues and critical investigations of

notions of quality. The emphasis on artistic research undermines the tradition of the academy as a more privatised atelier/studio, where the focus has been on educating students, where the professor has been the main authority in their individual preserve, as was practiced in Norway far into the 1990s. The students, however, will now gain from a much broader research environment.

Research demands a certain rigour. Artistic research implies frameworks including project descriptions, long-term planning, applications, reports and evaluations. These features are supposed to support transparency, discussion and accountability. However, the same framework may turn into mere routines with little professional substance. Watch out!

The fear of “academisation” – when other established research traditions are given priority before the artistic features – is certainly relevant. I have seen research projects presented as artistic, also in Sweden, where the response has been urgent: Is this artistic research? Does this project strengthen the art field by its goals and methods? Is the framework’s potential for the arts really being explored?

Is the art university a political dream, or is there a broadened future for art?

Art education in larger institutions will probably meet some of the same frustrating conditions as other subject areas: bureaucracy, incompetence, impotence, possible financial cuts and crisis. There are risks being inside, and there are other risks being outside. However, such a thing as a “free” institution hardly exists – the freedom has to be worked for and achieved within any framework. There is a future for art as long as we continue to discuss and promote artistic needs and values. This theme can be elaborated in much more detail. Many more questions should be posed. But I will end here in favour of the art university, as a professional space for:

confrontation

negotiation

generosity

communication

commitment

investigation

invitation

¹ Henk Borgdorff: The production of knowledge in artistic research, The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts, 2010, p. 46
<https://www.routledge.com/products/9780415581691>

² These points are translated from the recent report Forskning og utviklingsarbeid innen fagområdet kunst, 1995–2015: 20 år med kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid, Nasjonalt råd for kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid, The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions, November 2015. www.khib.no