

# SENSUOUS KNOWLEDGE

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<http://sensuousknowledge.org/category/sk1/>

## **Why Sensuous Knowledge makes sense** **Why artists should not leave research to researchers alone**

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Dear friends and colleagues,

From the very title I have announced a position – I will state the importance of bringing with us the very special competence and insight of artists and designers into the notion of research and development in art and design. My talk today will deal with the following four issues:

- 1. What are the very special capacities of art and design education?**
- 2. Why are the higher educations of art and design now so concerned about R&D?**
- 3. What is the Norwegian Programme for Research Fellowships in the Arts?**
- 4. Now what?**

First a small comment on language. In Norway, we use the phrase artistic development work rather than research, mainly because the academia has a strong ownership to the word research. In English, however, I think these words are more mixed as R&D. In this talk, I will make it specifically clear when I mean scientific research.

One more problem: I talk about Art as if that is one specific issue, the same with Design. We all know that these names include a wide and varied range of practices.

### **1. What are the very special capacities in art and design education?**

We are looking at a ceramic plate, very small, I made it. The main reason I was appointed as a professor in our institution, ten years ago, was my capacity to make this – a capacity which includes

- Technical skills and experience;
- Concentration;
- Patience and staying power;
- Curiosity;
- Systematic and methodical experiments;
- Attention;
- Knowledge and orientation in the contemporary field of ceramics;

- Knowledge and orientation in the contemporary field of arts;
- Experienced independent standards of quality;
- Etc etc.....

These aspects, in various combinations, are necessary parts of most artists' and designers' competence. You could also add something about how to manage, practically and economically, how to approach the public, how to survive and develop as a person as well as an artist.

Presuming that the artistic outcome holds a standard of excellence, the capacity beyond is very complex, very exclusive and very personal, and should not be underestimated. You should not expect anybody to reproduce this act just after a certain training. It takes its effort and its time – and also some talent, if we may dare to say that word.

The competence of our professors of art and design are usually based on long and specific education and experience. The exclusive skills I have just presented, constitute the foundations of our disciplinary nature as professions as well as educations. These capacities are needed to do our research and development work. Today, my specific question is HOW such exclusive competences can be included and elaborated.

Now I was appointed not ONLY because of my technical skills and experience, Concentration, Patience and staying power, Curiosity, Systematic experiments, Attention, Knowledge and Orientation in the contemporary field of ceramics, Knowledge and Orientation in the contemporary field of arts, Experienced independent standards of quality.

I was appointed also because somebody thought I had abilities for communication, organization and development, with students, with staff, with a broad network national and international. Somebody assumed that I held the capacity to explain discourses to the students, addressing relevant issues, convening discussions, developing ideas together with colleagues, organizing programs, arranging events, presenting issues and activities, filtering information.....

Such capacities have not always been demanded when new persons have been appointed. During the last 20 years there has been a dramatic shift in the view on what sort of art teachers we need. The old professor role - the guy who drops in once a week to declare good or bad – is OUT. The whole process of teaching and learning is now recognized to require structure, organization, attention and time.

It was interesting to see that in the later Norwegian reform in higher education, the Quality Reform, the suggestions for better quality in the universities and large institutions, was about ways of teaching that most art institutions already are familiar with: group work, close communication between student and tutor, etc.

Our staff's abilities of organization, communication and networking will turn out to be very useful when we come closer to the issue of research and development.

## 2. Why are the higher educations of art and design now so concerned about Research and Development work?

The simple answer is: Research and development work are included in our main tasks, referring to the law. But WHY is this so? I have three main explanations:

- requirements from the government;
- shifts in research paradigms;
- restricted conditions for research in the world of art and design.

About requirements from the government:

Until the early 90s the art educations in Norway were allowed to exist as rather exclusive, isolated, nontransparent organizations, with very local solutions for their tasks. However, our institutions' quest for being really included in the higher education financed by the state, resulted in being exposed to the same tasks and the same requirements as all the other institutions of different sizes and different subject areas.

The main requirements, from the ministry, could be summed up as these:

- That we demonstrate results within the fields of responsibilities formulated in the law and the budget;
- That we relate to international standards and networks;
- That we develop administrations of professional and reliable standards;
- Transparency on how the funding is being used, and on all formal processes, like appointments;
- That we have systems for and understanding of quality assurance.

This is a very short version of a complex story – leading up to the institutional demands for R&D activity. I am not saying that these institutions all over before had bad standards of quality, and now high standards because of these demands. I am just describing some major changes in the conditions for getting funded.

Within art education, there has been a tradition for very generous amounts of time for staff to carry out their personal art or design activity (or career). Keeping up with artistic work has been considered a precondition for teaching – and more or less a challenge and privilege of one's own –and has very seldom been clearly credited also to the education institution that in fact provides the finances.

The professors' personal art and design work have been communicated across a diversity of professional worlds, art and design domains - but NOT so much with the institutions' internal and external development. There has in some way been a suggestion that if you just add the individual achievements, you get the institutional results. Such a viewpoint is no longer valid. Keeping up with artistic work is still considered a precondition for teaching. And the institutions, as such, are expected to contribute to extended interpretations and understanding in their field.

Then about shifts in research paradigms: The old division of tasks means that artists develop art - while proper art historians develop the research and theory about art – in the later years also including sociologists, anthropologists etc . **This division of tasks is old-fashioned.**

From all professions of practice (health is an example) the practitioner's voice has been strengthened and listened to in a new way – because it contains specific information from just their point of view. The old-fashioned theorist position, claiming to see reality with an objective gaze, is no longer available. The old hierarchies between theory and practice, “brain and hand”, are challenged in most fields, for good reasons:

The whole notion of so-called facts and fact-based research has since long broken up in most disciplines. Strategies for including broader and more dynamic approaches to understand the world appear to be necessary. The conditions for research, going in-depth with a project, may in the professional world of art and design often be restricted: The last year I have heard voiced, from practicing artists and designers from various field, this reason for promoting research and development work within the institutions. In performing arts as well as object design, highly qualified practitioners feel destructively pressed by deadlines, limited funding and conventional customers. Far too little research time are allowed in developing specific projects. This is remarkable because these fields have a reputation for being “free”. However, the educating institutions have the responsibility as well as finances, and quite substantial, to question and enrich practices from other angles than the art market and the customers are willing to support.

The resources for R&D within the institutions are the staff, in part time, and research fellows – full time, and students – but this last group I will not concentrate on here.

Now art and design educations do not only have artists and designers in the staff. They also include a lot of theory teachers, very important collaborative and necessary contributors in the creative education. In relation to research, they do not represent a principal problem, as they would do research in their field from their university background.

### **3. What is the Norwegian Programme for Research Fellowships in the Arts?**

*(I am now approaching the issue of Ph Ds in art and design, which I suppose most persons here are involved in discussing.)*

After a long preparation process, the Norwegian ministry for education and research in 2002 decided to launch the Programme for Research Fellowships in the Arts. It is an equivalent to academic PhD programmes, but does not (so far) give the PhD title. This was a conscious attitude to begin with from our institutions – in order not to get delayed by an academic discussion about real and not real research. It does, however, after 3 years give the competence qualification of an Associate Professor/Senior Lecturer. The programme is going to be evaluated after 5 years, and the question of degree will then certainly come up.

The programme is open to applicants from all subject areas in education in the creative and performing arts (visual art, film, music, theatre, dance etc). To be admitted in the programme, a proposal presenting an art or design project, on quite a high level, is required. A board of representatives from different institutions is responsible for the admission process. The fellowship will be attached to one of the institutions, which provides space, supervisors, colleagues etc. The fellows meet twice a year for interdisciplinary sessions, together with their supervisors. The main supervisor needs professor competence within art or design (not theory). There are of course regulations

about the aims of the programme, expectations, the role of the supervisors, reports and assessments etc.

Some important matters are different compared to traditional academic life. The word “scientific” is not mentioned once in the regulation – neither is “dissemination”. It is stated with big letters that the artistic project is the main thing. The regulations also say:

*In addition to the artistic result of the work, the research fellow must submit documentation/ a presentation of his/her work process and comment on the process and result seen in relation to the artistic project, the problems described in the project description and relevant academic discourse. This part of the documentation shall **normally** be in writing and shall be publicly available.*

In the programme now, 6 fellows are starting their 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 4 start their 1<sup>st</sup> year – and 4 of these are here with us. I hope they have made a good impression. The depressing fact is that only 1 new fellowship is suggested in the national budget for next year. This we will try to change.

So far, we can summarize the following experiences:

- The fellowship proposals and subsequent projects seem to be interesting as well as relevant from art and design professional standards – a relevance which we consider necessary. We do not intend this program to be regarded as a second class domain for combinations of medium art/medium theory. A fresh and exciting discussion on how documentation can be developed, has started.
- The interdisciplinary meeting point for the fellows was an experiment, partly planned because the situation for a lonely fellow just relating to an institution, would be unwise. The number was just too small. These meetings, with presentations and discussions, have demonstrated a great potential for professional outcome between disciplines as far from each other as performing music and conceptual fine art.
- The board itself has also become a functional arena for interdisciplinary discussions on standards and goals. Apart from this, we do not have an abundance of such opportunities.

I will mention one of the fundamental questions that appeared when we constructed a programme like this: The programme shall serve the development of art and design. But the situation that is set up for the fellowship and the fellow is not a typical setting for an artist and designer. The programme includes a strict frame of supervising, reporting, researching and resulting in which not every artist would feel at home. The context of the programme belongs – and should so - in many ways to an institutional life. One of the fears was that this would favor the polite and mediocre projects. However, such a fear has not been confirmed so far.

The programme has a website: [www.kunststipendiat.no](http://www.kunststipendiat.no)

#### 4. Now what?

So far in this talk, I have been discussing the resources and qualifications within our staffs. From my point of view, many of our prevailing problems related to research and development projects, are due to organization and culture, not to a lack of competence. I will describe this more in detail.

We DO design and art – and staff in the institutions should definitely do this. But: we should ALSO contribute to the critical reflection about the field – for the reasons I mentioned above:

Our voices represent specific experiences and insights that are needed.

The word reflection is really overused. It can make you feel very tired. Still, there is no other sufficient word, for what is the main pursuit here. According to the dictionary, reflection means:

*thought or afterthought, considering*

*– or mirroring of a wave movement,*

- the last expression produce a rather poetic vision.

I would definitely not advice art expressions always to be followed by words. But practices where reflection, verbalization, or critical action are weak, run the risk of practising standards according to a limited and exclusive community, whether it be professional or public: it could be Conceptual or Material, Religious, Emotional, Activist – the whole point of the community is that it knows what this is about.

Within the unspoken traditions of the actual community, standards and rules are handled informally, but yet very powerful, all the time.

The critical reflection, to be done by ourselves, has several purposes. One of the important ones is to take the risk of exposing the internal values of the field.

Consequent and continuing gathering, exchange and development, of professional knowledge, within and around the institutions, are actions that can shed light into the protected areas of the guild. Such strategies must become more stable and more visible. Research and development work can become tools for such a purpose.

The organization must stimulate

- Meeting-places for discussions – and a positive atmosphere for work-in-progress presentations;
- Collaboration projects between professionals in the same field, between different fields, between practitioners AND theorists, local or international or both;
- Receiving and discussing of results, where disagreements are welcomed;
- An open culture – there may be something to to learn from some good-practice research communities.

A potential obstruction is the shyness of some artists concerning their work. We lack the traditions to facilitate discussions of work in progress, especially when it comes to rather personal interests. Yet, to create a tradition, one just has to start.

I know that many fears the art and design development area to become a space ruled by dilettantes. They fear that if not standards from science are to be applied, the area will be lacking relevant criteria for critique.

The fields of art and design actually do have criteria for quality – even if they are challenged and changed probably in a higher speed than those in science. We also have established quality standards for our bachelor and master level educations. All our professional experience concerning quality must be tried out and applied also for research and development work. Projects might be different from “pure” art – but may be not THAT different. The projects must communicate with a discourse. If a project deals with painting, you cannot escape from painting critique by naming it research. Does it have historical implications, you cannot avoid that just by calling it art - etc. We do not want to build a house for homeless projects that are homeless because they don’t want to relate to critical discourses.

When we discuss issues of quality, we need to include

- Questions of relevance;
- Questions on the relation between the main theme and the forms of documentation;
- Questions of whether specific professional qualities have been used and exposed enough.

The argument “do what you are good at” (practice) and leave the other (research) to us – should evoke suspiciousness, especially if such arguments are launched by actors who build their own territories. We should do what we are good at – but expand our understanding of what it means to be good. Yet, why does it sometimes seem difficult for our staff to formulate development projects relevant to their field, from their point of view? A simple explanation might be that this is because they have not done just this exercise enough and trusted themselves in it. Or maybe the culture around them is not sufficiently supportive or imaginative regarding such activities?

I am afraid the growth of research and development can give some of our professors the feeling that their artistic competences are not good enough any more. I think we have to work very seriously to get rid of this feeling of alienation, in order to establish creative alliances between different positions.

When you ask artists about how they made up their work, you always face the limitations of what can be presented within a logical discourse. Somewhere, a very unexpected decision may be taken, for reasons that cannot be articulated. The nature of art provides a great position for formulating the more irrational parts of life. If we do not manage to bring with us the freedom and values related to these distinguished powers of art into the research and development work, we are doomed to a rather self-righteous, not-surprising and dull activity.

I will let the Swiss artists Fischli and Weiss assist me in finishing this lecture. First some questions from their book *Will happiness find me* - a book with some hundreds of questions:

- *What does my dog think?*
- *Would it help me if I dug a hole?*
- *Who is going to pay for my beer?*
- *Whose fatigue do I feel?*
- *Why doesn't she call?*
- *Why won't they let us talk about things we don't understand?*
- *Is my brain a poorly furnished apartment?*
- *Can everything be thought?*

Then at last, *How to work better* from 1991:

1. *Do one thing at a time*
2. *Know the problem*
3. *Learn to listen*
4. *Learn to ask questions*
5. *Distinguish sense from nonsense*
6. *Accept change as inevitable*
7. *Admit mistakes*
8. *Say it simple*
9. *Be calm*
10. *Smile*