

Looking back, Looking through, Looking beneath

The Promises and Pitfalls of Reflection as a Research Tool

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This essay is based on a lecture given at the mdw – Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien within its series entitled *Knowing in Performing*. Those attending the lectures had the opportunity to reflect in a variety of ways on what might constitute the nature of that knowing. For my contribution, I was interested in asking whether we might stretch out the ‘knowing in performing’ of the series title to include ‘knowing *through* performing’ and ‘knowing *as* performing’ – by analogy with Christopher Frayling’s modelling of research in-and-through musical practice in his 1993 essay *Research in Art and Design* (Frayling 1993).¹ Within the sphere of music, I have considered these questions from many angles over many years; from the perspectives of my own performing, musicological work and artistic research supervision to the contributions I would like to think I have been able to make to the formation of the discipline of artistic research in music. In the present essay, I would like to focus on how my experiences relate to the practices of ‘reflection’, ‘self-reflexivity’ and ‘autoethnography’ within artistic research. I shall do this by considering three issues: the reasons for regarding these practices as important to the field; the nature and limitations of their criticality; and some of the difficulties that can arise when we try to reflect on our own processes within artistic research contexts.

¹ Frayling’s categories of arts research work are: “research into art and design, research through art and design and research for art and design” (Frayling 1993, 5). This model remains highly influential for those involved in curriculum development associated with artistic research, perhaps because Frayling’s classifications open up the possibility for a variety of discourses without displacing art-making from its primary role.

Let us open our musings on this topic through the use of a simple metaphor. Imagine a plain, white scarf made of a fine, silk material. If I raise it to my field of vision, it is partially transparent, but what I see is not fully clear. I can detect outlines, but many specificities disappear. Moreover, the vision of someone looking at me changes as well. The point of the metaphor is that, in a sense, we operate constantly with this screening of our experiences. We believe the world to be – to look, to sound – as we perceive it, but our understanding is constantly shrouded by ‘the white screen’, the opacity of being in our own individuated human orientation.

This may seem, at first, to be a simple point, but in considering self-reflexive work, it is anything but that. This white shroud is, in many ways, constituted of our own processing of experiences, our preferences, prejudices, aspirations and limitations. It is an expression of ourselves in the world – but it has far-reaching implications for what we perceive. Music also operates in this way; the sounding of a chord evokes any number of associations, visions and perceptions, none of which is entirely transparent or translatable from one person to the other. Consider these words of Judith Butler:

“To know the limits of acknowledgement is a self-limiting act and, as a result, to experience the limits of knowing itself. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility, and of generosity, since I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot fully know, what I could not have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves.” (Butler 2001, 28)

Looking through a white scarf reminds us of this partial opacity: of the need to remember it when carrying out research practices, but also of the importance of respecting its importance as an element of creative processes. As I considered this metaphor, I also contemplated the aspirations that the mdw had for its *Knowing in Performing* lecture series as a whole. As part of coming to terms with the discussed white screening, it is interesting to reiterate some of the objectives for the lectures stated on the project website, including the wish to:

- Explore “interest in epistemological questions.” *So, we might ask: what are some of the implications of critical reflection for knowledge-formation in music-making and the arts more generally?*

- Interrogate “how artistic practices constitutively support and instigate processes of knowledge creation.” *Here, we might refine the first point to be more specific about what critical reflection can be as a practice, and in support of understanding musical performance (for example).*
- Investigate “the integration of different forms of – non-verbal – knowledge (tacit, procedural, embodied, sensual and auditory knowledge) [to open] new bridges between theory and practice and [contribute] to the development of methodologies both in art and in research.” *In this case, critical reflection has the potential to be a conduit, a way of interrogating more deeply the nature of tacit knowledge.*
- “Critically analyse international institutional policies and facilitate an open debate on how to integrate current practices and discourses into future teaching and research structures.” *In this sense, we understand and reflect upon the potential of our artistic research work to be not about the reflective self but about the transpersonal – the shared domain where apparently private reflection becomes part of a more universal concern.*²

Given the strong implications of the institutional agenda for the mdw concerning artistic research, and bearing in mind the current interest in self-reflection and autoethnography as related but non-identical topics as manifested in recent conferences, we may benefit from striving for a better understanding of some of these implications. On reflection, the emphasis on the objectives is significant, and echoes developments in artistic research internationally – but what is its nature when characterised as a ‘research skill’, and how can it serve as a mediator between research and the arts? The aim in seeking answers to this relates to the *Conference Report* of the International Symposium *Knowing in Performing* on 4 April 2018, in which the panel concluded that artistic research “makes it possible for students to develop ‘reflective research skills’ opening up a very broad and flexible field between research and the arts with potential gains on both sides.” (Noda 2018) The issues that emerge from this are manifold, but may be summarised in the following, all-embracing question: How may we come closer to a context for reflective work and a deeper sense of what it might mean for artistic research?

2 The website for *Knowing in Performing* is: https://www.mdw.ac.at/knowinginperforming_rvo/

This essay first revisits specific European political developments to show where the discussion on reflective practice has its roots (*Looking back*). It then examines developments that have become consolidated into what has been described as the ‘Norwegian model’ of artistic research (*Looking through*); finally, it considers more broadly and critically the role of reflection in the work of the international artistic research community (*Looking beneath*).

Looking back

The catalyst for many of the questions surrounding reflective practice may be found in work carried out over fourteen years ago at the Bologna Seminar on Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society, in Salzburg in 2005.³ For researchers in Austria and beyond, it feels apposite to be revisiting this work as a part of developing stronger ideas concerning reflection in artistic research and what it means for artistic research, now and in the future. From the ten *Salzburg Principles* that were generated from that seminar meeting and its follow-ups, three particular points arise, of which research leaders should remain cognisant in relation to artistic research work:

- a. The first point is that doctoral training, while meeting the highest academic standards, must increasingly support its students in developing skills and understanding beyond academia. At first, this can seem like a blatant call toward educational instrumentalisation, but we can also regard it as an opportunity to question the nature of research itself, particularly in a field such as music where so much of the epistemological potential emerges within performing environments.

This means that reflective practices within such research work must be transformed, as appropriate, to facilitate reception.

- b. The second is that research thrives on intellectual mobility; that our ideas and research development work should not be confined by national boundaries. At this point in history, this is a precept we should consider

³ The conclusions and ten points from the *Salzburg Principles on Doctoral Education* (EUA publication, 2005) can be found here: http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/Salzburg_Report_final.1129817011146.pdf

in a new light given the dangers posed to intellectual mobility by developments in global politics. In many ways, the idealism of the EU, and of the Bologna Process, has been severely challenged in this aspect.

Reflective practice suffers in hermetically-sealed silos; the participants become too convinced about the absolute nature of realities that hold good for them and for those in their own 'echo chamber'; this is a point for attention and concern.

- c. The third aspect that is of particular pertinence to our questions today is the emphasis upon interdisciplinary work. In the arts, this has been seized with considerable energy, and with many surprising and novel results. However, there is no absolute clarity about the core standards of the practices, and there is a real danger in some work that interdisciplinarity itself has been incorporated as a point of merit rather than as potentially generative of such.

*The instrumentalised use of interdisciplinary practice has, at times, led to its devaluation and to research practices that are suspect. This links with some of the more critical points I shall make about 'reflection' later in this essay.*⁴

Arts organisations have followed up on the Salzburg Principles in various ways; in particular, we can recall the EUA's *Taking Salzburg Forward* (2016)⁵ and ELIA's *Florence Principles* (2016),⁶ which bring the discussion right into the arts fields and define such work, in terms of doctoral programmes, as:

“[using] artistic methods and techniques, resulting in an original contribution to new insights and knowledge within the artistic field. The project consists of original work(s) of art and contains a discursive component that *critically reflects* upon the project and documents the research process. Internationalism, interdisciplinarity and interculturality are implicit in many artistic practices [...]” (ELIA 2016; emphasis added)

4 The points are extracted from the website of the European University Association (EUA): <https://www.eua.eu/downloads/publications/salzburg%20recommendations%202005.pdf>

5 Position Papers: *Doctoral Education – Taking Salzburg Forward: Implementation and New Challenges*, accessible on: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/354:doctoral-education-taking-salzburg-forward-implementation-and-new-challenges.html>

6 The *Florence Principles* by the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA 2016) can be found here: <https://www.elia-artschools.org/documents/the-florence-principles>

It is this element of critical reflection that I wish to interrogate further. In the discussion of this point within the policy writings, there is still a sense that that to which reflection relates is the verbal and written communication concerning research, its outcomes and significance – as in the phrase used above: ‘a discursive component’. However, even if the recording and communication of the critical reflection must generally be framed verbally, the critical reflection itself arguably resides inside the artistic practice – it is the ‘knowing in performing’. The consequences of this have generated a range of responses. Developments over the past ten years show that not only are our artistic research programmes demonstrating a high degree of diversification generally, but our views upon reflective work as reflected in our programmes are especially heterogeneous; in fact, the institutional and ethical stances behind how reflection is to be generated, recognised and validated are highly significant indicators of a given institution’s more general attitude to artistic research.

Looking through

To illustrate this, I would like to address the artistic research training in my current place of work, the Norwegian Academy of Music, and its related National Artistic Research Programme (NARP), speculating about its potential and qualities and raising some red flags about its weaknesses. These include the dangers of a certain kind of intellectual narcissism masquerading as research; to look through is not to be confused with gazing at one’s own reflection – that would be a quite different kind of ‘looking back’ (or ‘being looked back at’) from the one I have just discussed.

The following is an extract from a report entitled *Research and Development in the Arts 1995-2015: Twenty years of artistic research*, authored by the working group appointed by the National Council for Artistic Research, Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions:

“The Artistic Research Fellowship Programme was established in Norway in 2003 in order to fund the research of individuals within arts training schools. Its activity has since been consolidated and overseen by the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme (NARP). In the work on developing the programme in 1999-2000, the following statements from Central Saint Martin’s College of

Art and Design in London had considerable influence because they so clearly describe art as a subject area that communicates in a peer context:

- Art and design practices are intellectual pursuits in their own right not requiring translation to other terms in order to have sense and coherence
- Art and design works embody 'meaning' through their interior symbolic languages and syntax (formal organisation)
- Art and design works embody 'meaning' through their discursive relationship to other works in their field and their corresponding cultural positions
- Art and design works can be read by those trained in the subject in the same way that, for example, mathematicians read mathematics or philosophers read philosophy.

Artistic research in Norway takes the artist's special experience and reflection as its point of departure, and, as such, is in line with the category research in the arts. A high artistic standard is a key requirement for artistic research in Norway. This is part of the platform of the Artistic Research Programme and the institutions' research activities. Artists develop work methods that prove to lead to an artistic result. The methods employed can be individual or specific to each artistic field, such as composition, design or dance. The field of art is experimental in nature, and critically testing, challenging and overturning methods are integral parts of its culture. Questions about and reflection on method are fundamentally interwoven with the artistic work itself. The reflection that is part of artistic practice, on content, process and methods, has a central place in artistic research." (Malterud, N., Lai, T., Nyrnes, A. & Thorsen, F. 2015)

In January 2018, an Artistic Research PhD based on the NARP structures was ratified in Norway. The new PhD programme retains its predecessor's strong emphasis upon personal 'reflection'; there is no written thesis, instead there is a requirement for the artist to reflect critically on their project work in ways that may – or may not – involve words. In many ways, the element of reflection has been the most fraught aspect of Norwegian artistic research programmes – whether pre- or post- the move to PhDs. It has often proved more challenging than the art-making at their core. Tensions between art and its explication, and the credentials of the artist-researcher as a reliable

arbiter of these are often problematic. Long-standing questions about the viability of personal experience and self-scrutiny within the supposedly objectified world of advanced research remain unanswered.

A report commissioned by NARP, authored by Eirik Vassenden in 2013, revealed that the reflective work of the PhD research fellows generally emerges in the form of practical consideration of three areas, with the relative emphasis upon these areas varying according to the work of those writing them:

1. Relating one's own artistic practice to the surrounding field;
2. Relating one's own artistic practice to the problem of articulation;
3. Tracing the relationship between one's own artistic practice and the personal experience of theoretical work and reflective work. (Cf. Vassenden 2013, 31)

Vassenden articulates the challenges; many involved with artistic research would find this kind of discussion familiar. He writes:

“How [do we] put into words the experience of developing an artistic project or doing artistic work? All such attempts at articulation involve the writer [...] finding a good and expedient language with which to describe his or her experience, a language that will also make it possible to share this experience theoretically and cognitively. A language that enables not only the sharing of experience, but also the discussion and problematization of the experience, so that the creative practice, filtered through a different medium, also becomes visible to the creative subject. In this perspective, the attempts at articulation are based on an underlying literal interpretation of ‘reflection’ which can function as a mirror, but also as a contrasting element [...]” (Vassenden 2013, 4-5)

So, we can see that the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme has moved to develop a critique of what reflection might be, understanding that this, in itself, is important research work. But this does not mean that its research candidates find negotiating their studies to be straightforward. For example, a very well-known improviser in Norway, Ivar Grydeland, carried out a third-cycle level practice-based research project from 2012 to 2015. His programme followed the so-called Norwegian Model emphasising the artistic

development of the research fellow (more on this later). Upon completion of his work, Grydeland wrote the following as part of his mandatory self-reflection for the project:

“I recall a peculiar experience of time while recording this. It was an interesting blend of correspondence with an unreliable echo of myself while looking into the immediate future, planning my next echo. Confused whether what I played happened in the moment or moments ago.” (Grydeland 2011-15)

In more recent artistic research development work, attention has increasingly turned to ways in which auto-ethnography and self-reflexivity can continue to be developed as viable approaches to conducting musical research. Grydeland’s work is significant because of the extent to which he places the self-reflexive problem right at the heart of the improvisational practice, hence the title of his project: ‘Ensemble and Ensemble of Me.’ The very fact that the promoters of artistic research are studying this kind of work demonstrates an attitudinal shift that has taken place over a number of years, for a variety of reasons and across a wider spectrum of activity than that of artistic research alone. What does this mean?

To illustrate, I return to the scarf metaphor with which I opened this essay. The metaphor illustrates the simple point that the world is not our own idea and that we are screened off from many of its realities by virtue of being human. One of the interesting things about being an artist is that this fabric screen can become part of the materiality of our work, coloured both ‘on purpose’, as part of a creative process, or by accident, as part of the processes of daily life, like dye splashed across its material. Sometimes these processes have a fluency and are easy, and sometimes they are unpleasant, painstaking and difficult; sometimes a great deal of mess is made, and we must not flinch at this if we wish to look through this new, entirely altered screen.

At this point, it is crucial to point out differences between critical reflection and autoethnography. Heewon Chang’s definition is a helpful starting point:

“First, like ethnographers, autoethnographers follow a similar ethnographic research process by systematically collecting data [...] analysing and interpreting them, and producing scholarly reports, also called autoethnography. In this sense, the term ‘autoethnography’ refers to the process and the

product, just as 'ethnography' does. Second, like ethnographers, autoethnographers attempt to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation. In other words, autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self [...]. The last aspect of autoethnography sets it apart from other ethnographic enquiries. Auto-ethnographers use their personal experiences as primary data." (Chang 2008, 48-49)

Could it be that through a definition such as this, one might go as far as to state the paradoxical: 'autoethnography is nothing personal' or, 'autoethnography is none of my business'? Whether or not that is the case, even this stricter practice opens up possibilities for artistic research work. As Jessica Azodi writes:

"Utilising autoethnography within the practice of artistic research strengthens the bond between the embodied aspects of the research and the ethnographies we create to convey our experiences [...]. Creating autoethnography from practice-based research is a self-nourishing cycle. I write about and document my experiences throughout the artistic process. Preparing for performance involves many hours of 'in the moment' embodied learning, but that kind of learning is hard to track and difficult to explain. When I write about my experiences, I force myself to articulate sensations and discourse while they are in progress or shortly after. When the performative moment is over, the accumulation of these materials provides a ground upon which I can build an analysis that facilitates better decision-making going forward." (Azodi 2018, 201)

The key here for disciplined autoethnographical practice is the 'analysis-building' cited by Azodi. The evidence of the disciplinary nature becomes the analysis; done well, and with regard to tested practices, it stands up to what we might call 'scientific' scrutiny. This differentiates it from 'reflection' in artistic research work, particularly in those countries in which that reflection can be manifested in art-making itself, as is the case in the Norwegian model.

Looking beneath, or implications

In such a case, though, critical reflection has consequences, especially in relation to 'sites' – places of work, but also personal situations and 'styles', the way we are ourselves but not ourselves. Critical reflection shows potential courage; it requires disciplined questions and the inevitable need to 'give an account of oneself' as Judith Butler (2001) puts it, in relation to the core themes, and referring to the citation from Butler with which I opened the essay.

Artistic research has become concomitant with innovations around musical language and notions concerning its 'truth content', and has also been a driving force behind various innovations in art-making. Western art music is particularly challenged by the standard locations of its developmental, pedagogical and professional practices: the music conservatories and music departments affiliated with colleges and universities, the orchestral halls and opera houses. These institutions, and many others, are woven into entrenched cultural and social spaces and, as such, have varying influences and impacts on the socio-political structures of which they are a part. Yet, what could be interpreted as a vulnerable position actually affords opportunities for researchers related to such institutions and their practices to take responsibility for developing exemplary work in microcosm, addressing precisely the most contentious areas in the service of challenging essentialism. Artistic research can critique institutions, going deeper and potentially interrogating the very aspects of artistic materiality which form the basis for the core structures in culture.

Our reflexivity, our need to 'hear' things on our own terms, has come to represent aspects of our being in the world. We confront an all-too contemporary predicament of finding difficulty in hearing any voice that is unlike our own; non-identical languages point out a high degree of inward turning in self-reflexivity. Projects developed in this way can have a high degree of regional specificity, which can be a very positive gesture so long as there is a movement beyond a narrowly-owned, merely reflexive language. In a broader sense, such a move potentially remakes the interrelationships of artistic researcher, scholar, character and performer in the light of sound itself, something related to the focus of the research in a given project, but with implications beyond it. But it also generates a responsibility – to articulate the work and its aspirations far beyond localised reception. The twist

is that in artistic research, we look at ways in which personal reflection, auto-ethnography and self-reflexivity can continue to be developed as viable approaches to conducting artistic research. We strive to hear things not 'on our own terms' but 'in our own selves'; the terms on which we hear things must be more inclusive and communicable or the reflection becomes too myopic to function as research. Ends and means are reversed.

The idea of the twist brings me back once more to the metaphor of the scarf and the idea of how the personal metamorphoses into the transpersonal at the pressure of the twist point. We can imagine that on one side of this scarf is the transcription of an artistic – or other – working life. Experience becomes its threads and patterns, its faults and beauties. Self-scrutiny in artistic work can sometimes bring this field to a point of pressure when it is twisted and reversed, when the private realms of the art-making are reversed to the other side and seen by those ready to witness, or with ears to hear. We may think of this twist point as the necessary locus of resistance in artistic research work, when the difficulty feels most intense and personal, yet the reversal in the aftermath has an impersonal, objective quality. It is not that we leave that point of pressure with a totally clear vision; no, we will return to different kinds of illusions. But sometimes the constriction also offers a view to a clearer, more distant field.

Conclusions

The paradox of this, in the conservatory setting, is that the fundamental material for the kind of artistic research work being envisaged emerges from very specific, often self-reflexive work, but finds not only echoes, but perhaps its very *raison d'être* in more universal arguments. The 'secret garden' of the teaching studio may finally need to fling open its doors – conceptually, if not physically. Within arts training institutions the development of artistic research therefore brings with it a set of concrete educational questions that are not susceptible to quick or easy resolution. On the contrary, they must remain open as an evolving approach to how curriculum development is to take place within a 'no longer so young', but still rather volatile disciplinary background. If artistic research is to substantiate its propositions for reconceptualising claims to authorship, for example, then this ethical aspect must come to the fore.

I would argue that issues such as those I have presented here also prompt a contemporary consideration of how the work of artistic researchers engenders a call for better, ever-evolving understanding of the reflexive work that often accompanies their artmaking, but equally often embodies it. Some kind of rapprochement between ‘hearing’, ‘listening’ and ‘aural reflection’ would seem to be apposite, not least because of the embeddedness of each in identity formation. If, indeed, “identity is the trace of affect”, as Anahid Kassabian (2013, xxvii) writes, then an inquiry into these, both in relation to the artistic research project and its associated practices of reflection (and even into auto-ethnography), may assist us in understanding developments in the field. Perhaps more importantly, such an inquiry may be an important adjuvant to a call for a more trenchant criticality as the field of artistic research matures, so that artistic research might articulate excellence without disregarding the marginal – a notion worth reflecting upon.

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