

Fake Organum: The Uneasy Institutionalisation of Art as Research

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Abstract

Artistic research is still in its infancy and continues to pander to dominant institutional discourses of what research is. In particular artists too often ‘borrow’ methodologies from the sciences to justify their practice as research. There is a need for a *Novum Organum Artium* that will form the foundation of an artistic method, just as Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum Scientiarum* did for the scientific method.

Keywords

Artistic Research, Research Methods, University-Based Art, Methodologies, Scientism, Francis Bacon.

Introduction

In *Novum Organum* (1620), Francis Bacon introduced his inductive method of experimentation that was foundational for the development of the modern scientific method. *Novum Organum*, translated as ‘new instrument’, argued for an alternative system of logic to the syllogism described in Aristotle’s *Organum*. Bacon’s method advocated that only after careful cataloguing and classification of all instances in which a characteristic under observation is present (or absent), could a theory on the observed characteristic be formulated inductively. Despite the problem of induction outlined by both Hume and Popper, inductivism continues to feature in scientific practice and has historically demonstrated considerable success. Most contemporary research utilising *Big Data* could certainly be described with Bacon’s method of induction. A method in which “the scientist would question nature without biases or hypotheses and move to generalities in an algorithmic fashion, as if (in Bacon’s words) by machinery” (Conrad & Serlin, 2011). Indeed, the relentless and exhaustive collection of data required by Bacon before any general theory can be posited is perhaps only possible if undertaken by a machine.

This new machinic tool of science that Bacon designed to “restrain discursive reason and make good the defects of the senses” (Rees & Wakely, 2004) may

have since been subject to centuries of critique, but the basic principles it introduced of experimentation and observation importantly continue to be representative of the public understanding of what scientists *do* and what research *is*.

Art as Research

After the amalgamation and mutation of art schools into universities and the emergence of the PhD in artistic practice, art students and art academics are increasingly asking themselves how to do research (Buckley & Conomos, 2009). Approaches to research are vastly influenced by the structure of the system that they are generated in (Newman, Tarasiewicz & Wagner, 2015) and artists are now increasingly finding themselves within a university system. In this system, artistic practice can only be made sense of “as a kind of research that creates new knowledge—art as science, art as humanities, never within its own terms, but in the ever-present standardised language of scientism, bureaucratic and economic rationalism” (Conomos, 2009).

The reframing of art as a “kind-of research” may be necessitated by its institutionalisation but it continues to be debated if it indeed the case. Adam Geczy (2009) argues that art is not research, that art is art, and this is an important distinction “for it recognises the discourses about what art means, which are a whole lot more venerable, productive and accurate than the definition that art is research. Glen Lowry (2015) criticises university-based art as producing both bad art and bad research. This is further amplified by the emergence of “the (art) academic as a conformist intellectual” whose institutionalisation has located them in a “box-ticking culture of pedagogy and research where academics are snug in their tenure-track career” (Conomos, 2009).

An institutional environment that demands the accumulation of research “points” is hardly encouraging for what Lowry calls “good research-creation” that pulls

professional academic “outside zones of comfort and away from monitored disciplinary divisions or divisions of labour” (Lowry, 2015). It was in this environment that artists started redefining their practices as research, and although many now make the distinction between “art” and “artistic-research” (Lowry & Freitas, 2013), art as research will remain a dominant feature of the practises of university-based artists, both students and academics.

Fake Instruments of Artistic Research

Conomos (2009) has described the institutional environment that led to the repositioning of university-based art as research, as in fact hostile to creative arts research. With its “cultic fetishisation of patently unsuitably narrow criteria of evaluation as to what represents academic research” (Conomos, 2009), artists have started to distort their own arguments to accommodate this criteria (Elkins, 2006) and ingratiate themselves with the overriding institutional narrative. In doing this artistic researchers begin to consider and conjure methods and methodologies to describe what was previously known as a practice.

As artistic research is still in its infancy and lacking a comprehensive research agenda (Jones, 2006), there is no comprehensive overview of artistic research methods (a fruitless task in itself). Artist researchers therefore seek-out methodologies from other disciplines and ‘borrow’ them, often simultaneously critiquing the appropriateness of these adopted methods (Macleod & Holdridge, 2006). The implementation of these “fake methods” is rarely because it is suitable for the art/research the artist intends to undertake, but rather to justify the art/research within its institutional context by using the dominant language of that context. As Butt writes, “...a stereotype of scientific language is adopted to bring a veneer of academic respectability to a creative project whose material transferability cannot be guaranteed” (Butt, 2011). This is evidently the wrong approach, as while art is research, it is a different type of research that produces a different type of knowledge than that of the sciences (Newman & Tarasiewicz, 2013). In-stead of developing another *Novum Organum* (new instrument), artistic research is too often pandering to science, the dominant language of research embedded within the university, and instead offering up a fake *Organum*.

Novum Organum Artium

More than two hundred years after Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, William Whewell offered an alternative approach with his *Novum Organum Renovatum*. Described as “philosophically perverse” (Butts, 1965) and irresponsible (Herschel, 1841), Whewell’s schema could assist with the development of a *Novum Organum Artium* (new instrument of the arts). Whewell argued for the importance of the guess. According to Wettersten (1993), Whewell’s approach demonstrates that “even if we start with poor guesses and treat them critically, we can come to the truth; there are many paths to the truth, but only one goal”. As described by Macleod and Holdridge (2004), “findings presented through art are always *a posteriori* and thus, ill suited to the institution’s pursuit of truth and prescribed outcomes.” In this case, a guess is possibly the best place to start, it’s definitely a vast improvement on pretending to know what you’re doing and where you’re going.

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Andrew Newman is an artist and researcher based between Sydney and Vienna. His research focuses on epistemic cultures in arts and technology, while his performative art practice stabs in the dark. Newman currently leads the Open Publishing Lab at the Research Institute for Arts and Technology and he is co-editor of the Journal for Research Cultures.