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Creative Data Lab

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A field of possibility: Artistic research data in context

By Karin Johansson

My starting point for this text is that artistic research management (ARDM), as in making artistic research data accessible and assessable, involves more than accounting for the research process and adhering to formal demands; it's an important part of a pro-active development of the field of artistic research.

Artistic research: A shared field?

I have followed and taken part in the discussions around artistic research as a discipline for some decades now and will start out by briefly revisiting the National Artistic Research School (Nationella Konstnärliga Forskarskolan – NKF). The research school was in operation in Sweden 2010–2015 with around 20 PhD candidates and a continuous seminar for all active supervisors. I was one of the participants in this seminar and one of the editors of the resulting anthology *Acts of Creation*.¹ Åsa Lindberg-Sand and Anders Sonesson, with many years' experience of educating supervisors in all LU faculties, headed the development of the NKF supervisors' seminar during five years. In the concluding chapter of the anthology they stated that their impression of what was being created was not a common, shared field of artistic research. Rather, they saw the development of many different fields and referred to the image of an archipelago where “the research projects could be perceived as small, well-defined islands in a vast sea of artistic practice”, and where “each PhD candidate inhabits their own island”.² In my experience, this archipelago-like nature of the artistic research field was demonstrated

1 H. Frisk, K. Johansson & Å. Lindberg-Sand., *Acts of Creation: Thoughts on Artistic Research Supervision*. (Ågerup: Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2015)

2 Frisk, Johansson & Lindberg-Sand 2015, p. 196.

many times during the NKE, where discussions often illustrated, and even seemed to widen, disagreements between the art forms concerning method, theory development, and other research-related issues. In my view, these differences are not necessarily a problem – they might be seen as illustrating the complexity and richness of a new kind of interaction in artistic knowledge production. A perhaps more difficult feature concerns the issue of how individual projects often do not interact outside of their own contexts. Lindberg-Sand and Sonesson also observed a one-to-one relationship between the artistic practice and the artistic research outcome, which they therefore described as “singular”, in the following sense:

For the artist as a researcher, exploring and crowning their professional practice with conducting research, the outcomes do not have to pass a judgment neither of the quality of research nor of how they could be transformed into and benefit the collective development of professional practice in the next stage. Instead the outcomes may be immediately applied in the local context of the artist and, as works of art or of research, judged primarily by the influential participants in the social practice of this kind of art.³

This singularity has been a topic for debate from the start of artistic research. One of its effects is that individual artistic research projects contribute only very moderately to the building of a common research culture – that is, if there is one. While the emergence of journals such as *JAR (Journal of Artistic Research)* and *VIS (Nordic Journal of Artistic Research)* have created fora for the sharing of knowledge, the notion of a unified field of artistic research might still only be a construction. As such, it served the beneficial but slightly top-down purpose of creating a formal doctoral degree in the arts (2010), but perhaps this “field” is developing more towards the archipelago observed by Lindberg-Sand and Sonesson than towards becoming one entity. The remark made by Frisk in 2018 does not yet seem out of date:

Due to the novelty of the field of artistic research there is no solid agreement as to what artistic research data actually consists of, let alone how it should be documented, and it remains a very important but largely unresolved question.⁴

3 Frisk, Johansson & Lindberg-Sand 2015, p. 202.

4 H. Frisk, “The archive that writes itself: Tracing the roots of solipsistic sound culture in the digital age”, *Svensk Tidskrift för Musikforskning Swedish Journal of Music Research*. 99 (2018), p. 37.
<https://doi.org/10.58698/stm-sjm.v99.33625>

Considering the singular character of individual artistic research projects described above and the novelty of the field as stated by Frisk, a relevant question concerns how a common, shared field of knowledge may be developed. If we stick to the archipelago metaphor, I suggest that the inhabitants of different islands do not need to agree on everything, but they need to relate to each other, that is, to communicate between islands and to highlight each other's existence. This means referencing others who are active in the same discipline in one's research outputs.

My impression is that this practice of referencing is underdeveloped in artistic research. Traditional research disciplines are probably built more on referencing each other's research than by agreements on definitions. Here, ARDM presents an opportunity both to highlight the unique and singular character of artistic research projects and to open up for common knowledge development.

ARDM: an asset in field development?

Since a discussion of what research data "is" must be anchored in and exemplified by actual research projects, and since common or established guidelines are lacking, situated decisions concerning data have to be made in every specific project. This necessary situatedness of ARDM may be seen as reflecting a complexity and a richness rather than a deficiency, and the collected knowledge will grow and expand when researchers engage with each other's results. That is, if, and when, artistic researchers apply a proactive mindset and take the initiative concerning research data, outputs and products.

In their study of how the academic discipline of social work was established and developed in Sweden from the 1970s onwards, Peter Dellgran and Staffan Höjer⁵ describe how the discipline was initially largely characterised by knowledge import, theoretical pluralism and paradigmatic openness. They also picture how, from a meta perspective, research products may be theorised as simultaneously mirrors of and tools for individual and discipline development: *coronation works*, *socialisation instruments* and *paradigmatic reflectors*. This may be transferred to a discussion of the role research data management plays in the development of artistic research as a discipline. In the same way as when it concerns research products, the discussion and handling of research data mirrors past and present states of knowledge bases, power

5 P. Dellgran & S. Höjer. *Kunskapsbildning, akademisering och professionalisering i socialt arbete*. (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 2000)

structures and aesthetics, and provides tools for personal, educational and institutional development.

Here, a dialogue between librarians' and archivists' extensive experience of data terminology and the practices of individual researchers related to the conceptualisation, treatment and sharing of data may interrelate individual and collective levels. This kind of dialogue has been an important part of the Creative Data Lab and continues both locally and nationally, with, for example, the Art Files platform at the Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts, Lund University, and the network meetings of the Swedish National Data Service. The importance of common contexts and infrastructure cannot be enough emphasised, when the aim is to support and encourage collective knowledge formation processes where artistic researchers have the opportunity both to gain from and contribute to field development.

I will give a brief example from my own research practice of what was not such a case: Ten years ago, I conducted the project *Musical rhetoric in contemporary rituals: discourses in and on new music for the organ*⁶ where I commissioned compositions for the organ (I'm an organist) from four composers. Organists' performance practice still contains two distinct relationships to notated works of which the first one is historically the youngest:

- the score as the composer's individual piece of artwork, to be interpreted and realised, and
- the score as a starting point for copying and further development by the performer, and as a tool for promoting improvisatory skills.

The task given to the composers in this project was intentionally somewhat vague; I wanted to see how they interpreted the request to deliver a piece with (i) a relationship to historical repertoire, and (ii) any degree of collaboration with the performer (me). The four compositions as well as the rehearsal processes turned out to differ in interesting ways, and to display a spectrum of views on composition, performance, notation and interpretation. All parts of the project (my individual work and the performer-composer interaction) were documented and the compositions were finally performed at a live concert.

6 K. Johansson, "Musical rhetoric in contemporary rituals: Discourses in and on new music for the organ". *Proceedings of Det tredje örat*. (Lund: Inter Arts Center, Lund University, 2017)

In total, the project generated the following types of documented outputs, listed in the approximate order of when they appeared in time:

- Sketches of artworks
- Recordings of individual rehearsal sessions
- Recordings of interactive sessions
- Annotations, general notes and logbooks
- Final versions of artworks
- Concert performance
- Concert recording
- Analytical outcomes

All documentation was stored and analysed in relation to the research questions, but in this project I did not reflect in a structured way on questions like:

How can the integrity of the research data be preserved in an artistic research project that may contain a number of different kinds of data, as well as raw material from the artistic process?⁷

I did also not discuss the issue of research outcomes as data, while several interesting questions concerning data duality, definitions and treatment would have been on my agenda today. This data was stored on my computer, on my private hard drives and in desk drawers where no one else had access to them. While the articulation and conclusions of the project were presented and discussed, I missed the opportunity of categorising and sharing them as data – and of inviting others to participate in them as such. Today, I would more easily have had access to tools and support for taking such actions and for conducting discussions on meta levels.

Even though the attitude towards the term “data” continues to be ambivalent in the field of artistic research (see for example the Konstex report⁸), the general topic of ARDM is more on the table nowadays. So, if “data” might still be a difficult concept, and if overall agreement on definitions of concepts such as method, theory and data is still a utopia, my strong impression is that discussions are always productive and beneficial to the field.

⁷ Frisk 2018, p. 38.

⁸ Konstex Arbetsgrupp. “Om öppen vetenskap och forskningsdata: Rapport”. (Lund: Lund University, 2022)

ARDM: an open field

In conclusion, my main reflections from the work done in the Creative Data Lab concern the importance of (i) referencing inside the field and connecting to relevant artistic research projects that discuss ARDM, (ii) cooperating with librarians, archivists and data stewards by presenting cases of ARDM, and (iii) applying a proactive attitude towards ARDM.

Building practices around ARDM for purposes of co-operation, evaluation and creative inspiration also means continuing to build the discipline of artistic research as an open and interactive field – an archipelago with a well-developed transportation system.

With reference to Umberto Eco⁹, the image of the open work as a field of possibilities has been used both by Frisk and Östersjö¹⁰ and by Nilsson¹¹ in connection with musical performance and data treatment. On the topic of the relationship between a particular piece of work and its individual performances, Nilsson writes:

A performance of an open work is compatible with playing a game, and one single performance actualizes the game, but is only one singular outcome of all possible outcomes of that particular game.¹²

I would like to conclude by comparing this to the relationship between general ARDM and individual artistic research projects. In the field, or archipelago, of artistic research where common definitions are hard to establish, each individual project constitutes one example, or one implementation, of ARDM as an open work – but not its totality. Questions and problems concerning data are treated in different ways in different projects, and, over time, the collective knowledge concerning artistic research data and its management will become increasingly rich, in an open field of possibility.

9 U. Eco, *La struttura assente* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968)

10 H. Frisk & S. Östersjö, "Negotiating the musical work: An empirical study", *ICMA, Proceedings of the International computer music conference 2006* (San Francisco CA: Computer Music Association, 2006), p. 242–249.

11 P.-A. Nilsson, *A Field of Possibilities: Designing and Playing Digital Musical Instruments*, doctoral dissertation (Gothenburg University, 2011) <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/items/5d5af699-dbc7-48c0-bd4e-5c9bc87e9240>

12 Nilsson 2011, p. 108.

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