The Structure of an Artistic Research Question

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Once upon a time, somewhere in the Universe, a group of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings wanted to learn the Ultimate Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything. To still their yearning for knowledge they designed the supercomputer Deep Thought. 7 ½ million years later the computer arrives at the answer 42. However, at this stage nobody could remember what the Ultimate *Question* to Life, The Universe, and Everything was. The computer had presented the Ultimate *Answer* to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything, but what good is an answer unless we know the question?

Question and answer are the hen and the egg; they are the Heideggerian artwork, artist and art. One is defined by the other, and one cannot make sense without knowledge about its counterpart. An answer is always related to a question, and as we ask a question, we not only can, but we must, always anticipate something of the answer. When we ask a question, we have already given a preliminary answer, and likewise, our answer is only full when we relate it to a question. Or: if you don’t mind the excursion into Zen and the world of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki: “the very asking is more than half the answering.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Or: we could stay with Heidegger who, as he is formulating his ultimate question, namely the one about ‘Being’ discusses how questions and answers in general are related: “Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought. [...] As questioning about ... questioning has *what it asks.* [...] As a seeking, questioning needs previous guidance from what it seeks. The meaning of [42 – oh, excuse me, I mean:] Being must therefore already be available to us in a certain way.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

As Artistic Researchers we should not be content with an answer like 42. When *Deep Thought* proposed that the meaning of life was a figure, the people did not get to know something they did not know from before. Or, they were indeed presented with a piece of knowledge that was new to them, but a figure is nothing less than a worthless fact. Why? Because millions of years have passed since the question was put, and when they were presented with the answer they could not relate it to the question. Perhaps even more important is that even if they had remembered the question, there was no salient relationship between question and answer. Figures can indeed be meaningful, but 42 did not enlighten our understanding of the initial question because we do not know the question. If a question is to tell us more than we knew, then we must get to know something *about* something, or in Heidegger’s words:

What is questioned is to be defined and conceptualized in the investigative or specifically theoretical question. As what is really intended, what is to be *ascertained* lies in what is questioned; here questioning arrives at its goal.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In other words, Q&A must be related. They must be two sides of the same coin. They must be different aspects of one and the same theme. That is why also the second project of the pan-dimensional beings was doomed to fail. They devised a new programme to discover the Ultimate Question, and this time it was a ten-million-year programme, but their question would never allow for the meaning of life to be expounded because the chosen method aimed at seeing how mice worked in a computational matrix.

It is difficult to ask good questions. Deep Thought and its sequel were terrible at asking questions, or rather: they were devised to answer poorly formulated questions. Let us hope that we as artistic researchers have more intelligent questions to ask. So, can we ask meaningful questions about the meaning of life, or, is it at all possible to ask questions about art that are productive? One may easily be deluded to believe that questions should seek clear-cut answers, but the first we need to learn is that clarity is not in itself a criteria for truth or relevance. Einstein said that “everything should be made as simple as possible, though not simpler.”[[4]](#footnote-4)Art is seldom simple. Anyone who avoids asking questions about art with the ostensible argument that the nature of art does not allow for asking questions assumes a naive understanding of research – one where answers are simpler than what is possible. What is often said, that there is beauty in simplicity, is not always necessarily true. Measuring the amount of saliva or the hormones that are produced during a kiss may result in exact measures but the graphs will be very poor explanations of a kiss. Too many researchers have come to love their answers, their *42 answers*, without remembering what their questions were. Others merely ask questions that they can answer, and thus they avoid the questions that really matter.

So, I ask again, is it possible to ask questions about the meaning of life or pose artistic research question? Indeed it is, but as you ask you must answer; and the meaning of life could hardly be contained within figures or any simple statement.

The point I have tried to make is utterly simple. Question and answer are reciprocally related. A question always implies something of the answer. From the other point of view: an answer without a question is an expression, not an answer.

This sounds pretty simple to the extent that it is obvious. Even so, it must be said. Too much practice is done in the name of research that is not at all research. Why? Because there is no *about* to the research. It may be artistic work at a very high level, but it is very seldom that the artistic expression per se presents us with an understanding of what the expression is *about*. Let me give an example of someone who tried to take the bull by the horns and relate to this problem.

Kim Vincs’ article “A Case Study in Studio-Based Dance Research” initially mesmerized me as she both pinpoints how much artistic research is conducted and she also presents us with a beautiful theory to elaborate her practice. She wrote:

When I began my PhD in dance through practice and exegesis, I will freely confess that I did not have a methodology in place to situate my dance practice in relation to the written exegesis I was to produce.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Is this not how we very often begin? Our question is a mere hunch rather than a full-fledged question. Vincs even admits that she did not have a question but rather she wanted to let her practice bring out questions and issues in her dancing. What she arrived at was an elaborate discussion of her practice in the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the *rhizome*. The word ‘rhizome’ comes from Ancient Greek and means “mass of roots”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Gingers are rhizomic. They grow as roots in a seemingly un-orderly fashion. No part of the root is hierarchically superior to the others as with a tree where the stem and the crown are put on top of the root system. To Deleuze and Guattari this meant that the rhizome is a

web of interconnecting elements in which ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:7)[[7]](#footnote-7)

To Vincs this meant:

To research dance in this context, one must go beyond isolating dance practices as texts to be read, to the idea of dance practice as a field in which rhizomic structures of knowledge are produced and integrally laced through with the subjectivity of the artist.[[8]](#footnote-8)

By reading her practice through Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*,[[9]](#footnote-9) she can get a language to describe how and why her subjectivity must be part of the rhizomic web. She can lay out a theory of art practice where there are no master signifiers, but where art is a play of signification that avoids to be frozen into finite structures. She very beautifully lays out Nietzsche’s idea that:

vi er ikke *subtile* nok til å merke det *vordendes* [tillblivandes] sannsynligvis *absolutte strøm*; det *varige* kan vi takke våre grovinnstilte organer for, de som sammenfatter alt og bringer tingene ned på felles plan, mens jo ingenting eksisterer *i denne form*. Treet er hvert øyeblikk en ny ting, vi hengir oss til *formen* fordi vi ikke fatter subtiliteten i en absolutt bevegelse.

Yes, what Vincs has written is a beautiful account of an artistic process. Or is it? Although I was initially fascinated, the more I read the more I felt that something was lacking. What is her research really *about*? I would say that her answer is somewhat more interesting than *42*, but it is of the same structure. What is most remarkable is that she simply did not have a research question other than “to situate [her] dance practice in relation to the written exegesis that [she] was to produce.”[[10]](#footnote-10) As she begins to write she comes to argue that the research is conducted with the researcher’s part-taking subjectivity as part of the empirical material, but we are not informed about whichsubjective actions in her research process actually led to the theory. She fails to use the method she so thoroughly describes, and thus there is a leap between her exegesis and practice rather than the two being part of one and the same rhizome.

How then, could a successful artistic research question be formulated? Although John Cage probably never heard of the term ‘Artistic Researcher’, he could be seen as one. Arnold Schoenberg called him “an inventor of genius”,[[11]](#footnote-11) and every ounce of Cage’s practice bears the attitude of artistic research. In 1976, for the bicentennial celebrations of the constitution, he wrote *Apartment House 1776*, based on “forty-four pieces of four-part choral music by William Billings and other American composers”. What Cage wanted to accomplish with the music he wrote, in *Apartment House 1776* and with his music in general, was to make “each sound vibrate […] from itself, not from a theory.”[[12]](#footnote-12) He also wanted to write music so difficult to understand that not even he could understand it. In this context, understanding means that one should not be able to follow the music, and that the music should avoid conventional means of signification. With such aims he began re-composing the old choral music with the help of chance operations. His first result was, in his own word: “superficial”.[[13]](#footnote-13) It resembled the original too much and it did not allow him to get away from “what was so obnoxious to me: its harmonic tonality.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The answer, the music that is, is understood and can only be understood through the research question. The answer was not to his likings. In order to find the answer he was looking for he had to make adjustments. He did not change the question. He still wanted to avoid the obnoxious harmonic tonality, but in order to arrive at an answer that was to his likings, he changed the method; and that is an entity I have thus far not discussed.

So, with a new method he re-composed the work again twice until he arrived at a version which he found “brilliant” and “marvelous”.[[15]](#footnote-15) That meant that he could not follow it, that he had managed to write a piece of music where his role as author was questionable, and which avoided traditional signification.

The simple theory I have argued in favour of is that *question and answer are reciprocally related*. With Cage’s *Apartment House 1776* it ought to be clear that question and answer are related. What is also clear is *how* they are related, and that is through the method. As the answer is inherent to the question, so must the art of the relation between question and method be elaborated through the method. If this paper survives the transition to an article, the role of method in relation to questions and answers will be elaborated further. Although I have argued that question and answer must be in somewhat the same type/format/entity, there must also be a difference. Method will be what bridges this difference. Similarity between question and answer is as little an aim as clarity is an ideal for the answer. If there is identity between question and answer, then we merely get to know what we already knew, but a productive artistic answer must give us more knowledge than we already had. ‘Method’ is what gives the legend to how we can understand the premises for how question and answer are related. Method may even be our primary entity that we ask through so that our research question as a matter of fact asks for the development of a method.

Before I round off I wish to mention four consequences of the above discussed model and I want to make some additions to further clarify the theory.

1) Although I claimed that Cage’s *Apartment House 1776* was a successful example of artistic research, could or should it be considered as artistic research? In the state that Cage left his work, we must answer a simple *no*. We can discuss how clear the research question must be, and although I argue that it can be far from clear-cut, and although I also argue that an answer could be sung or grunted, it must always be clear what the research is *about*. Cage’s process did indeed very much resemble a research process, but it is not until a researcher, in this case yours truly, points out what is at stake in the process that the artistic process turns into research. On the other hand, the researcher that turned the artistic expression into artistic research could have been Cage himself.

2) The model of defining artistic research through question-method-answer cannot be compromised with even when we are dealing with artistic expressions of utterly high merits. Putting an expression outside of the concept ‘research’ is not in any way to devalue a piece of music or an interpretation. On the contrary, an expression or interpretation may far surpass excellent research without making it research. Artistic merits are *not* sufficient criteria for an expression to be considered as research. Although the expression may be high-end it still lacks clarity concerning what it is *about* and an elaboration of how that *about* is reached and understood. On the other hand, if the artistic merits are extraordinary, the expression most likely inspires researchers to place the expression within the question-method-answer context and thus make the expression relevant in an artistic research context.

3) Any question and answer will not provide us with research. Artistic Research is still a very new field of research. The methodology is poorly developed, and likewise are we often times lacking both concepts and experience to assess research. I propose that we value research from the relevance it has for others. This does not in any sense exclude research where the researcher takes place in the research as an artist, but it asks from the researcher that she must never be private. It must always be possible for others to follow the research process. Scientific experiments can be reiterated, but artistic practices are of a somewhat different nature. Even so, unless there are aspects of the research that can be repeated again – be that through playing, practicing or thinking – we are dealing with personal development rather than research.

4) In artistic research, an answer can be a question. Last weekend I taught a tango seminar. For the first three hours we tried to figure out how to differentiate between the lead of SHOW (bent knee) and SHOW (straight leg). Assuming that we were conducting a class in artistic research, did we have a research question? Or did we commence the research process with the answer and from there worked to find appropriate questions for our answer? What may look like an answer may indeed be a question, and the contrary may also be true. We could perhaps say that our tango seminar presented an answer with the function of a question. From there we worked out a set of methodologies to connect the answer/question to the answer/question. This leads us to understand that question and answer to a certain extent are interchangeable under the condition that we possess a thorough methodology that is relevant to other dancers/researchers. The methodology may also provide us with our research question and any three elements may provide us with the entry point into the research process.

That was my conclusion. This paper is on a negative note written as a polemic against the naive belief from some ostensible researchers that any practice is a research. On a positive not, the paper tries to pin down a few aspects of what an artistic research question is, and it suggests how research-like aspects of any practice can be put in a proper research context. The brevity of the paper makes it impossible for the discussion to be extensive, but it is the author’s hope that the paper will provide fertile grounds for further fruitful discussions about what we are looking for in artistic research.

1. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism. Second Series* (New Delhi: Munishram Manoharlal Publishers, 2004), 74. A little discourse on Cage and questions is found in: Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, "Introduction," in *John Cage Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1994), 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted from: Alfred Brendel, *Alfred Brendel on Music. Collected Essays.* (London: Robson Books, 2001), xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kim Vincs, "Rhizome/Myzone: A Case Study in Studio-Based Dance Research," in *Practice as Research. Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. REF WIKIPEDIA [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophreniz* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Vincs, "Rhizome/Myzone: A Case Study in Studio-Based Dance Research," 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alastair Williams, "Cage and Postmodernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. David Cope, *New Directions in Music* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 2001), 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cage quoted in Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)