

Theories and Practices of Contemporary Artistic Research

A Transdisciplinary Approach

Edited by
Domenico Quaranta

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Finanziato dall'Unione europea - Next Generation EU, Missione 4
Componente 1, CUP D43C24000580001

Progetto PNRR: Iartnet - An International Platform For Artistic
Practice/Research And Cultural Heritage at Italian Higher Arts
Education Institutions

Codice Identificativo INTAFAM_00066

Edited by Domenico Quaranta

*Theories and Practices of Contemporary Artistic Research
A Transdisciplinary Approach*

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Layout by Elisa Pozzoli

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Published by BIBLION edizioni

May 2026

ISBN 978-88-3383-557-0

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INTRODUCTION

Nicoletta Leonardi, Domenico Quaranta

This volume brings together a selection of texts first presented at the international seminar *Theories and Practices of Contemporary Artistic Research: A Transdisciplinary Approach*, held at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in March 2025. Conceived as the public launch of the IartNET project – *An International Platform for Artistic Research and Cultural Heritage at Italian Higher Arts Education Institutions*, funded by NextGenerationEU and coordinated by Nicoletta Leonardi – the seminar marked a decisive moment in the ongoing redefinition of artistic research within Italian higher arts education, particularly in the wake of the introduction of doctoral programmes in 2024. That institutional shift has brought into sharper focus a set of questions that had long remained implicit: how to define artistic research as a field of knowledge production; how to articulate its methodologies across heterogeneous practices; and how to construct the epistemic, institutional, and technical infrastructures required to sustain it.

The seminar was framed by contributions from Giovanna Cassese, President of Italy's National Council for Arts Education (CNAM), and Johan A. Haarberg, Executive Officer of the Society for Artistic Research (SAR). Their interventions were instrumental in situating the discussion at the intersection of national policy frameworks and international debates on artistic research. Cassese addressed the structural transformations currently reshaping Italian higher arts education institutions, foregrounding the implications of doctoral-level education and the need to consolidate shared regulatory frameworks. Within this context, she also pointed to the importance of considering artistic research not as an exceptional or separate domain, but in continuity with broader research practices, suggesting the need for shared

criteria and a common epistemic ground across different forms of knowledge production. Haarberg, in turn, positioned these developments within a transnational perspective, emphasising the role of international networks, evaluation protocols, and research infrastructures in the consolidation of artistic research as a recognised field of inquiry. Together, these contributions framed the seminar – and, by extension, the present volume – within a dual horizon: that of institutional reconfiguration and that of international exchange.

While grounded in that specific occasion, this publication is not conceived as a set of proceedings. The contributions have been substantially reworked within a broader editorial framework that seeks to extend, reframe, and in some cases re-articulate the arguments first presented at the seminar. The texts gathered here are thus neither transcripts nor simple revisions, but expanded and repositioned interventions that reflect the evolving nature of artistic research itself. The volume may therefore be read as a space of elaboration, in which the temporal immediacy of the seminar gives way to a more sustained form of reflection shaped by an ongoing and shared inquiry.

The book is organised into three sections – Defining Contemporaneity, Contemporary Artistic Research Practices, and Key Issues in Contemporary Artistic Research. These are not intended as fixed categories, but as conceptual thresholds through which different themes and topics can be articulated and brought into relation. Rather than delimiting discrete domains, the sections operate as permeable zones, enabling transversal readings and facilitating the emergence of resonances across contributions that, while grounded in distinct disciplinary or methodological frameworks, address intersecting concerns. The tripartite structure thus provides a flexible architecture within which the multiplicity of voices assembled in the volume can be both situated and set into dialogue.

The first section, introduced by Domenico Quaranta, interrogates contemporaneity not as a self-evident temporal marker, but as a historically situated and critically constructed condition. Shaped

by states of crisis and by the pervasive influence of global information technologies on the experience of time, contemporaneity emerges as a field of tension in which different temporal regimes – acceleration, suspension, recurrence – coexist and interact. The contributions by Leevi Haapala, Jacob Lund, and Santiago Zabala approach this condition from distinct philosophical and theoretical perspectives, tracing its implications for artistic production and for the ways in which the present is conceptualised, experienced, and contested.

The second section, opened by an essay by Eva Frapiccini, turns to the practices of artistic research themselves, examining their forms, methods, and institutional embeddedness. Artistic research is approached here not as a unified methodology, but as a constellation of situated practices unfolding within specific ecological, technological, and organisational contexts. The contributions by Samuel Bianchini, Elena Cologni, Rosita Mariani, and Akram Zaatar explore different modalities of practice-based research, addressing questions of participation, performativity, archival work, and the politics of display. Particular attention is given to the ways in which such practices negotiate their position within and against institutional frameworks, and to the forms of knowledge they produce – often processual, relational, and resistant to conventional modes of validation.

The third section, introduced by Lorella Scacco, addresses a set of issues that define the current horizon of artistic research, foregrounding its engagement with broader social, technological, and environmental transformations. The contributions gathered here examine, from different perspectives, the implications of ecological crisis (Kristin Bergaust), the impact of automation and artificial intelligence on cultural production (Antonio Somaini), and the challenges of sustainability in design and architecture (Fosbury Architecture). Taken together, these essays delineate a field in which artistic research is called upon to engage not only with internal disciplinary questions, but also with the urgencies of the present.

Within this overall structure, the introductory essays assume a strategic function. Rather than offering neutral overviews, they

establish historical, theoretical, and methodological coordinates that orient the reader while opening lines of inquiry that traverse the volume as a whole. The internal sequencing of contributions has likewise been carefully considered. Rather than following a strictly thematic or disciplinary logic, the arrangement of texts within each section seeks to produce a cumulative and dialogic effect, in which different perspectives – philosophical, artistic, institutional, technological – are brought into productive proximity. This editorial strategy encourages a mode of reading attentive not only to individual arguments, but also to the relations that can be established between them.

A further defining feature of the volume is the coexistence of heterogeneous writing forms. Alongside essays that adhere more closely to established academic conventions, the book includes contributions that remain in proximity to artistic practice, adopting narrative, speculative, or process-oriented modes of articulation. This plurality is not incidental but reflects a constitutive aspect of artistic research itself: its capacity to operate across different registers of knowledge production and to mobilise forms of writing that exceed or displace traditional scholarly formats. Preserving this diversity responds to the need to recognise artistic research not only as an object of discourse, but as a mode of thinking and making that challenges the boundaries between theory and practice.

The question of mediation is central to the conception of the volume. If the seminar functioned as a live space of exchange – structured through presentations, discussions, and informal interactions – the book translates that experience into a different medium, with its own temporalities and modes of engagement. This translation involves not only the revision of individual texts, but the construction of a discursive environment capable of sustaining dialogue across distance and time. Through cross-references, thematic continuities, and implicit echoes, the volume invites the reader to navigate its contents as a constellation of interconnected positions rather than as a linear sequence of discrete contributions.

At the same time, the publication must be understood within the broader ecosystem of dissemination developed through IartNET. Alongside the project's digital platform – an interoperable, open-access infrastructure designed to aggregate, connect, and render accessible a wide range of materials – the project has also initiated the development of an International Hub for Artistic Research. Conceived as a space for exchange among researchers, supervisors, and practitioners, the Hub is intended to support the articulation of shared descriptive and evaluative protocols, as well as the development of research trajectories at the doctoral level. Within this expanded framework, the present volume offers a complementary form of stabilization. Where the platform and the Hub privilege connectivity, dialogue, and the ongoing negotiation of research practices, the book introduces a different temporality, characterised by sedimentation, critical distance, and editorial coherence. The relationship between these modalities reflects a broader tension within contemporary artistic research between process and form, openness and structure – a tension that is not resolved but productively sustained.

More specifically, the volume engages with a series of questions that have acquired particular urgency in the context of the recent institutionalisation of doctoral studies in artistic research in Europe and beyond. Among these are the need to articulate shared vocabularies capable of accommodating diverse practices; to define evaluative criteria that can account for non-discursive and processual dimensions of research; and to develop forms of documentation adequate to the specificities of practice-based inquiry. The contributions assembled here do not resolve these issues; rather, they render their complexity visible, offering a set of situated approaches that open further lines of investigation.

Finally, while firmly anchored in the Italian context, the volume consistently opens onto an international horizon. This is evident both in the profiles of its contributors and in the issues it addresses, which resonate with debates taking place across

different national and institutional settings. In this respect, the book reflects one of the central ambitions of IartNET: to situate Italian higher arts education institutions within a broader network of exchange, while contributing to the ongoing formation of artistic research as a field that is at once locally grounded and globally articulated.

If artistic research resists definitive stabilisation – remaining a field in formation, shaped by ongoing negotiation between practices, institutions, and discourses – this volume does not seek to fix its contours. Rather, it proposes a provisional configuration: a set of positions, trajectories, and points of tension that together outline a landscape in transformation. As such, it is less a conclusion than a moment of passage – one that both documents and actively participates in the processes through which artistic research continues to define itself.

THE PARADOX OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Giovanna Cassese

President of the National Council of Higher Arts and Music Education,
Ministry of University and Research

*Ideas are not rejected; they germinate in society,
and then thinkers and artists express them*
Lucio Fontana (1946)¹

The current historical phase is of particular significance for the entire AFAM system (Higher Education in Art, Music and Dance), which includes Academies of Fine Arts, Conservatories, Design Institutes, and Academies of Dance and Theatre. Ongoing reforms are progressively reshaping the institutional structures, functions, and future development trajectories of these institutions.

Nevertheless, a central paradox continues to characterize the Italian context: although the country is universally recognised for its excellence in the arts and design, the full valorisation and institutional recognition of research outcomes at the national level remain limited. This gap highlights the urgency of initiatives capable of strengthening the AFAM system and more effectively promoting the scientific and cultural value of research within artistic institutions.

Article 9 of the Italian Constitution² affirms the role of the Republic in promoting culture, scientific and technical research, and in

¹ Fontana L., 1946, *Manifiesto Blanco*, Buenos Aires.

² "The Republic shall promote the development of culture and of scientific and technical research. It shall safeguard the natural beauties and the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation. It shall safeguard the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems, also in the interest of future generations." Constitutional Court of the Italian Republic (1947, December 27th). *Constitution of the Italian Republic*.

safeguarding the landscape and the nation's historical and artistic heritage. Within this framework, as reflected in the activities of institutions such as the Accademia di Belle Arti, research, artistic heritage, and cultural development are closely interconnected. In his address of 3rd February 2022, at the beginning of his second presidential term, President Sergio Mattarella emphasised that Italy is, by definition, a country of beauty, arts, and culture, recognised and appreciated at the international level. He further stressed that culture constitutes a fundamental component of national identity, whose preservation is essential for fostering knowledge, moral growth, and economic development. This perspective is particularly significant for students, as it highlights the alignment between higher education and professional pathways in the creative disciplines, underscoring the critical role of the younger generation in sustaining and advancing the nation's cultural and artistic heritage³.

Research is Research

Although it often entails long timeframes and uncertain immediate outcomes, the intrinsic value of research lies in sustained inquiry, study, and experimentation. In the field of the arts, this dynamic is particularly evident: AR is never a mere aesthetic exercise, but rather a true leap into the unknown, a process that brings together vision, intentionality, intuition, and methodological rigour. Within complex contemporary contexts, it constitutes an exceptional critical lens through which to interpret the present. Today, in an age of complexity characterised by the proliferation of languages and by a fluid, constantly evolving society, it becomes essential to deepen the speculative dimension of artistic practice in relation to research – moving beyond the

³ Mattarella S., 2022, *Message from the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella to the Parliament on the day of his swearing*, February 3rd in. <https://www.quirinale.it/it/discorso/message-from-president-republic-sergio-mattarella-to-parliament-day-his-swearing-in>.

paradigms of traditional scientific methodologies and fully recognising the potential of imagination and creativity. From this perspective, art becomes a privileged space of intellectual and critical freedom: a conceptual and operational laboratory capable of generating new ideas, worldviews, and reflections on the social, ethical, and aesthetic dynamics of contemporaneity, while also fostering learning and the development of interpretative tools for the future.

Research is research. AR should be understood from a broad and open perspective – not as a rigidly delimited or definitively defined field, which would in itself constitute a paradox, but rather as a dynamic process of inquiry through which the artist interprets and reworks the complexities of the contemporary context, translating them into innovative forms of expression and new configurations of meaning. AR thus emerges as a legitimate, flexible, and experimental discipline, capable of integrating divergent and syncretic thinking through interdisciplinary interaction, dialogue with other fields, and the experimental application of both traditional and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI). It opens up new expressive possibilities, enabling the exploration of uncharted territories and the development of critical perspectives with ethical and social relevance, particularly within a digital and interconnected environment.

AR differs from conventional scientific inquiry: it is not limited to empirical verification, standardised methodologies, or conventional peer-review criteria, but generates innovation through creative and subjective approaches. The interaction between art and science fosters advanced forms of creativity, while artistic methodologies and aesthetic practices also contribute to psychological well-being. A historical perspective highlights the multifaceted role of research in shaping artistic practice, showing how development, innovation, and experimentation have always been inseparable within the arts, as exemplified by figures ranging from Phidias to Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Borromini, Goya, Claude Monet, and, more recently, Anselm Kiefer and William Kentridge.

Research activity should also be considered within the interpretative framework of the Faro Convention⁴, assuming a central epistemological role in the construction of cultural identity. Within this perspective, AFAM institutions can be understood as disciplinary research communities, playing a critical role in social and cultural development, as well as in the valorisation and safeguarding of cultural heritage, and conceiving research as both a right and a duty for students and faculty alike.

The Lack of Recognition of AR: A Political and Cultural Issue

Founded to carry out research-creation, production, conservation, and mediation of cultural heritage, these institutions perform complex institutional functions that cannot be equated with those of universities or general education systems. Despite their paradigmatic role in artistic education at a global level, they have historically operated within contexts marked by structural limitations and have at times been marginalised vis-à-vis conventional educational institutions.

Persistent issues also remain regarding the recognition, evaluation, communication, and dissemination of the outcomes produced within the AFAM system. For many years, what I refer to as “clandestine research” in Italy has been the subject of debate and numerous publications. The main challenge continues to be ensuring visibility, appropriate evaluation processes, and full institutional recognition. This is crucial, as research in itself transcends the prestige of individual institutions: for these

⁴ The Faro Convention (or the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society) is an international treaty adopted in 2005 and ratified by Italy in 2020 (Law 133/2020), which places citizens at the centre of cultural heritage governance. Cf. Council of Europe (2005, October 27th). Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. *Council of Europe Treaty Series*, 199. <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>.

communities, it constitutes an autonomous domain whose investigative potential – rooted in artistic practice – remains vast and still largely unexplored.

Within the AFAM system, research emerges as a structurally integrated domain in which theoretical and practical dimensions jointly contribute to the definition of a specific educational model. The study of art history, criticism, and theory represents an essential component, in dialogue with the university context but oriented towards a distinct methodology grounded in the interaction between inquiry and production. From this perspective, the notion of “practice-based” research appears reductive, as artistic practice itself rests upon both implicit and explicit theoretical frameworks and can be understood as a form of knowledge.

The 1999 reform⁵ reaffirmed this principle: according to Article 2⁶, within AFAM institutions theoretical research and artistic production are closely integrated, constituting a single process of inquiry and creation. The separation between research and creation thus appears artificial. As demonstrated by the great masters of the past, artistic innovation arises from the continuous interplay between technical experimentation, conceptual elaboration, and historical awareness, confirming that every significant work is the result of an ongoing dialogue between research and production.

Research retains a strategic function, both in historical and archival studies and in the promotion of innovation among faculty and students, while also integrating students into processes of conservation and the valorisation of artistic heritage. By way of example, restoration schools represent innovative models of education in which research, conservation, and teaching are fully integrated. Contemporary experimentation increasingly adopts

⁵ Law 21st dicembre 1999, n. 508. Cf. <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1999-12-21;508>.

⁶ Article 2 of Law 508/1999 defines the AFAM system as a framework for higher education, specialisation, and research in the artistic and musical fields, recognised under Article 33 of the Italian Constitution, and establishes that the institutions within it serve as primary sites for research and production.

interdisciplinary methodologies and advanced technological tools, ranging from diagnostics to chemistry, physics, and mathematics, as well as the use of AI, thereby reinforcing the central role of AFAM institutions in the production and transmission of artistic knowledge. Despite progress in methodologies and technologies applied to the arts, AR in Italy continues to face institutional and cultural obstacles that have long limited its development and full recognition. The reform aimed at fully integrating academies into the university system has not yet been completed, despite more than twenty-five years having passed since its introduction. Historical divisions between art and craft – what Walter Gropius described in 1919⁷ as the «arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist» – persist and the integration of university research with AR continues to encounter structural difficulties. Academies still face obstacles in achieving full recognition of their autonomy, which highlights the need for a more in-depth reflection on the nature of AR, as well as on the recognition of its methodological autonomy and epistemic value.

The Multiplicity and Variety of Research in AFAM Institutions

In recent years, AR has gained increasing political and cultural relevance, driving significant initiatives promoted by the National Council for Higher Education in Art and Music (CNAM) and fostering new developments in the fields of art and design. The intrinsic relationship between research and artistic production, which in the past has at times slowed the implementation of reforms, is now recognised as a central element of the system, and recent provisions aim to further consolidate this integration. The interaction between research and practice, already established by Law 508/1999, constitutes a defining feature of AR:

⁷ Gropius W., 1919, *Bauhaus Manifesto*, Weimar, Germany.

an applied dimension that, while presenting specific structural complexities, enables the renewal and transmission of knowledge consolidated over time. At the national level, 145 institutions – 105 of which belong to the AFAM system – form a widespread network of knowledge across the country. Within this context, the so-called “third mission”⁸, understood as the valorisation and dissemination of knowledge, has long represented a fundamental component of institutional practice, fostering stable relationships with local communities, regional authorities, and urban contexts, and contributing to the construction and safeguarding of cultural heritage, landscapes, architecture, and monuments.

Research within AFAM institutions encompasses a broad methodological spectrum, including historical, archival, bibliographic, aesthetic, anthropological, pedagogical, musical, and philological studies. It integrates artistic practice with the study and valorisation of institutional heritage, which constitutes an active resource for both teaching and research. Within this framework, accredited restoration schools and professional conservators operating under the Ministry of Culture play a central role in the preservation and enhancement of paintings, casts, prints, drawings, photographs, books, and works of art, both historical and contemporary.

Recent research projects, particularly in the field of design, increasingly focus on the development of innovative and sustainable materials, often in collaboration with universities, industries, and research centres such as the National Research Council (CNR) and the National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development (ENEA). These initiatives demonstrate a close integration between scientific research, teaching, and artistic practice, offering students immersive learning experiences and contributing to the development of new areas of knowledge at the intersection of art, science, and technology.

⁸ The “Third Mission” is the institutional activity through which universities and research institutions engage directly with society and the business sector, complementing teaching (the first mission) and scientific research (the second mission).

The 2024 Turning Point for Research Recognition

The current period represents a decisive phase for the recognition of research within AFAM, a process led by the CNAM that identifies 2024 as a historic turning point – the year in which these institutions achieve full recognition and full integration into the university system, in line with the provisions of Law 508/1999. This milestone builds upon earlier developments, notably the admission of AFAM institutions, for the first time, to participate in Projects of Significant National Interest (PRIN) in 2020, following a directive decree issued by the Ministry of Universities and Research, thereby overcoming years of exclusion from the main funding instruments for basic research⁹.

Between 2022 and 2024, this trajectory was consolidated through the work of the CNAM and through ministerial and presidential measures that updated educational frameworks and clarified the role of researchers within AFAM. Traditionally regarded primarily as teachers, AFAM faculty members now see their status aligned with university standards, with full recognition of their role in both teaching and research.

Despite these significant achievements, critical issues persist. Evaluation committees rarely include members drawn from the AFAM system, and, paradoxically, many external evaluators – often officials from the Ministry of Culture or members of the university sector – lack the specific expertise required to fully recognise the nature, specificity, and relevance of AR. Evaluation processes now consider both teaching and research careers, according to criteria increasingly aligned with university standards.

⁹ Decreto Direttoriale n. 1628 del 16 ottobre 2020. <https://www.mim.gov.it/-/decreto-direttoriale-n-1628-del-16-10-2020-bando-prin-2020>.

Third-Cycle Degrees

For the new generation of AFAM faculty, it is essential not only to possess advanced teaching competences but also to consolidate substantial research experience. A central element in this process of recognition and integration is the establishment of doctoral programmes, regulated by Ministerial Decree 470/2024, which constitute a strategic node within the AFAM system. These programmes introduce a third cycle of higher education comparable to the university model, while preserving the specificities of AR.

In particular Article 9 of Ministerial Decree 470/2024¹⁰ plays a crucial role, introducing an innovative doctoral model that goes beyond traditional industry collaboration. It enables the development of research pathways in close synergy with major cultural institutions – such as museums, theatres, and foundations – with the aim not only of preserving and enhancing artistic heritage, but also of promoting creative production and cultural transmission. This framework establishes a clear methodological and educational reference for doctoral candidates, providing interdisciplinary tools and competences for operating within the artistic and cultural sector.

This development represents a crucial step in defining the identity of AFAM institutions, establishing a structured framework in which future faculty members are expected to integrate teaching and research activities. The availability of adequate funding for doctoral cycles remains a priority, particularly in light of the conclusion of previous research support programmes. In this context, the Ministry of Culture has provided significant support, recognising the value of these initiatives and the importance of AFAM. The ongoing reform also led, in 2024, to the activation of 62 new doctoral programmes, reflecting the complexity and transdisciplinary nature of AR and the commitment to ensuring continuity and quality in the training of future professionals and scholars. Their implementation required extensive institutional effort, including the

¹⁰ MinisterialDecreem.470del21febbraio2024. <https://www.mur.gov.it/atti-e-normativa/decreto-ministeriale-n-470-del-21-02-2024>.

development – between August and December – of a dedicated digital platform supporting all 62 doctoral projects, through complex initiatives carried out in synergy among multiple institutions.

The New Disciplinary Sectors

Further structural changes were introduced by Ministerial Decree 128 of 12 February 2025¹¹, which established new disciplinary sectors and redefined faculty profiles, enabling cross-institutional recruitment between academies and conservatories and marking a significant transformation of the AFAM system. This outcome was made possible by the extensive work of the CNAM in revising and reorganising the Artistic-Disciplinary Sectors (SAD), a strategic step for implementing new recruitment processes and ensuring real equivalence between AFAM and universities, while affirming the institutional dignity of the system and the value of its faculty.

The CNAM acted with precision and timeliness to ensure that the revision of the SAD fully met the objectives set by the Ministry, enabling the complete implementation of the reform within the established timeframe. This intervention not only strengthens the overall quality of the AFAM system but also consolidates its institutional recognition in alignment with international standards. At the same time, the valorisation of faculty expertise and the optimisation of selection processes remain key priorities for the future of artistic and musical education.

The current situation, however, remains complex. While faculty mobility across disciplinary sectors represents a significant opportunity, it requires careful and coordinated management. At the same time, the ongoing evolution of fields such as Art and Design calls for further reforms in the coming years, including the revision of first- and second-cycle curricula, many of which are now outdated and require updated and coherent organisational frameworks.

¹¹ Ministerial Decree n. 128 del 12-2-2025. <https://www.mur.gov.it/atti-e-normativa/decreto-ministeriale-n-128-del-12-02-2025>.

Ministerial Decree 128/2025 also introduced an initial correspondence table between new and previous sectors, supporting existing curricula. At the same time, the CNAM has expressed its full willingness to collaborate closely and promptly with the Ministry in defining new academic frameworks, ensuring that they respond coherently to current needs in education, research, and production across artistic, musical, theatrical, choreutic, design, and restoration fields.

What Remains to be Done

At the beginning of the second quarter of the twenty-first century, AFAM institutions are undergoing a profound transformation, culminating in the launch, in 2025, of new doctoral programmes. These programmes have accredited highly innovative transdisciplinary projects characterised by integration between arts and sciences, between new technologies and traditional knowledge, and between the know-how of *Made in Italy* and the potential of AI. Through these legislative measures, the AFAM system is set to strengthen its contribution to research and artistic production at both national and international levels.

The activation of doctoral programmes and the progressive recognition of AR represent key elements in strengthening the research system in Italy. However, the continuity and effectiveness of these developments depend on the availability of stable financial and human resources. With the conclusion of PNRR funding, it is essential to ensure sustained support, in order to guarantee the continuation of doctoral cycles within the AFAM framework, including the expansion of human resources and the creation of dedicated researcher positions. Although the role of researcher is formally established, institutions currently lack the necessary funding for recruitment; therefore, the development of research requires not only the completion of full professorship structures, but also the establishment of adequate and sustainable structural conditions.

A further critical issue concerns research evaluation. The CNAM emphasises the need for clearer governance regulations, particularly with regard to planning and the assessment of scientific quality. Evaluation is essential, especially for doctoral programmes, which involve continuous monitoring and assessment throughout their duration. In recent years, the CNAM has promoted an expansion of the role of evaluation units, recognising their central importance in the internal assessment of AR. However, these units are not always adequately prepared; therefore, regulations must be updated to include experts from the AFAM system, ensuring fair peer review and a proper understanding of the specificities of AR. In this context, on 10th July 2023, by decree of the Secretary General, the CNAM established – together with the Directorate-General for Institutions and the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research (ANVUR) – a working group tasked with developing the initial proposal for the AFAM VQR (Research Quality Evaluation). The CNAM played a central role in defining an initial list of research outputs in the arts, including not only publications but also artistic, performative, theatrical, choreographic, and design outputs. While in theoretical disciplines – such as Art History, Aesthetics, and Art Theory – the identification of outputs is relatively straightforward, AR in practice-based and contemporary fields presents greater complexity. After more than a year of work, the CNAM developed an extensive list of research outputs across multiple domains – including music, theatre, design, visual arts, restoration, and dance – defining criteria for what constitutes research in fields such as painting, sculpture, music, theatre, and choreography. The official presentation of this framework is expected in June 2026. The introduction of doctoral programmes raises fundamental questions concerning the definition of a PhD in the arts. According to Ministerial Decree 470 of 21st February 2024¹², the

¹² Ministerial Decree n. 470 del 21-2-2024. <https://www.mur.gov.it/atti-e-normativa/decreto-ministeriale-n-470-del-21-02-2024>.

final outcome is not limited to a traditional written dissertation but consists primarily of an artistic work accompanied by a written component. This approach highlights the originality and specificity of AR in comparison with conventional academic pathways. Parallel efforts have also been undertaken to include all AFAM faculty members in the Ministry's login database, a prerequisite for participation in national research projects; however, the process remains incomplete, as Academies and Conservatories are not yet fully integrated, making continued institutional advocacy necessary.

Another significant initiative concerns the memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Universities and Research (MUR) and the Ministry of Culture (MIC)¹³, active since 2023, aimed at safeguarding and enhancing both the tangible and intangible heritage of AFAM institutions, particularly that associated with younger generations. Tangible heritage includes artworks, sculptures, libraries, cast collections, and photographic archives, while intangible heritage encompasses knowledge, practices, and artistic traditions transmitted within institutions. This initiative aligns with the principles of the Faro Convention, emphasising the transmission of cultural heritage to future generations.

The working group, coordinated by the CNAM and composed of fifteen members, aims to strengthen creativity, knowledge production, and research capacity, while ensuring the transmission of this heritage. In this perspective, heritage is not only preserved but becomes a laboratory – both physical and conceptual – for interdisciplinary learning, research, and experimentation. Collections such as casts, photographic archives, libraries, and historical archives become active educational environments, enabling new generations to engage with historical references and archetypes as tools for artistic training. In this way, artistic

¹³ Cf. https://dgeric.cultura.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/M4C1_Inv-4.1_Protocollo_-MUR_MIC_draft-29.3.2022-1-signed-signed_Prot.pdf.

memory is preserved while creativity is stimulated, fostering interaction between arts and sciences, and between contemporary technologies and traditional knowledge.

Artistic education institutions also play a strategic role in relation to museums and other cultural institutions under the Ministry of Culture. Within a dynamic conception of cultural heritage, the presence of young artists and researchers introduces new interpretative perspectives and strengthens awareness of the importance of transmitting heritage as a core component of cultural identity. In this context, academies become large research communities and production laboratories, capable of further developing doctoral programmes and transdisciplinary projects, thereby consolidating the role of AFAM within the national and international cultural landscape.

Finally, a central challenge concerns communication and valorisation. It often remains difficult to fully convey the impact and significance of the initiatives undertaken, highlighting the need for more structured communication strategies, increased visibility, and systematic participation in exhibitions, fairs, and major cultural events. Despite operating within established networks, these institutions may at times appear self-referential and insufficiently understood externally. Strengthening communication – alongside enhanced networking – is therefore essential to ensuring full participation in the cultural ecosystem.

In this perspective, AFAM institutions continue to promote policies aimed at achieving full recognition within the university system, ensuring the valorisation of research, production, and institutional identity. They operate as knowledge communities in line with the principles of Article 9 of the Italian Constitution and the Faro Convention. Museums, archives, collections, and libraries take on an active role as interdisciplinary laboratories and learning environments, offering new generations opportunities to engage with historical memory while fostering creativity, innovation, and methodological experimentation.

Within this framework, new generations are called upon to reinforce and transmit Italian cultural identity, deeply rooted in

AR and creative practice. Through the valorisation of research, know-how, and artistic identity, AFAM institutions position themselves on an equal footing with the university system, open to dialogue and capable of contributing to the national and international cultural landscape, entrusting younger generations with the mission of preserving and innovating Italy's artistic, cultural, and creative heritage.

ARTISTIC RESEARCH'S COMING OF AGE?

Johan A. Haarberg

Society for Artistic Research (SAR) Executive Officer

In the following, I will address five key issues and present a series of fundamental statements concerning artistic research (AR) and higher arts education institutions. I will begin by discussing the creation of the *Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research (2020)*¹ and the proposed revisions to the *Frascati Manual (2022)*², outlining their relevance. I will then introduce the question of referencing within AR, offering a brief overview, and provide a short introduction to the Research Catalogue, which serves as the primary platform for AR outputs. I agree with the fundamental statements made by Giovanna Cassese regarding what research should entail and what the arts can contribute. However, with regard to her statement that “research is research,” I would argue that, while this is correct in principle, it does not fully hold when it comes to AR. I will return to this point later.

It is important to emphasize that the foundation of all research, across disciplines, lies in the advancement of knowledge and in pushing disciplinary boundaries towards the cutting edge. This applies to medicine, chemistry, archaeology, and all other fields, and it equally applies to the arts and to AR.

¹ AEC *et al.*, 2020, *Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research*, ELIA Publication, Bruxelles, Belgium, <https://cdn.ymaws.com/elia-artschools.org/resource/resmgr/files/vienna-declaration-on-ar24-j.pdf>.

² Birkeland E. *et al.*, 2022, *Proposed Changes to the Frascati Manual*, May, ELIA publication, Bruxelles, Belgium, https://aec-music.eu/media/2022/06/Cover-Letter-to-OECD_NEST1.pdf.

This principle is not always fully acknowledged, and in some cases interdisciplinary activities tend to take precedence. However, AR is still a relatively young field and must remain aware that the primary objective of research activity is the advancement of the discipline itself.

AR is a form of research that originates in artistic practice and generates knowledge and insights that can only be obtained through that practice. For those familiar with German, the term *Erkenntnis* provides a useful reference for what is at stake in AR, although it does not fully translate into English; “insight” comes closest to capturing its meaning. While knowledge has long been produced within the arts, AR has a comparatively short history and, as it emerges from practice, it departs from the long-standing tradition of research on the arts. This distinction is not yet fully recognized across higher arts education institutions.

No university or higher education institution (HEI) can sustain itself without teaching and learning environments grounded in active research, and this applies equally to higher arts education institutions (HAEIs). Since AR stems from practice, it is essential that its outputs are relevant to peers in the field and communicated in appropriate forms. There is a risk that the methods, formats, and outputs of AR may be defined by scholars in the humanities rather than by artists themselves; this is an important consideration in the development of AR programmes.

It is equally essential that what is shared is articulated in a systematic way and made relevant to peers. In my experience, this requires a cultural shift, moving away from the degree of privatization that has traditionally characterized artistic practice.

Such a willingness to share is fundamental to the transition from a master–apprentice model to a culture grounded in research. AR should be a central component of higher arts education, and students must be enabled to understand how to conduct it. Exposure to AR processes is what ultimately allows this understanding to develop.

The Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research

The consortium behind the *Vienna Declaration*³ first convened in Vienna in 2019. Over the past five years, the Society for Artistic Research (SAR) has collaborated with the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA), the Association Européenne des Conservatoires (AEC), and other international umbrella organizations in higher arts education and the cultural sector to promote and secure recognition for AR in Europe and beyond. The most recent development in this process is the establishment of the Artistic Research Alliance, founded by these partners in September 2024.

The initial milestone of this work is the *Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research*, which opens as follows:

«Artistic Research (AR) is practice-based, practice-led research in the arts which has developed rapidly in the last twenty years globally and is a key knowledge base for art education in Higher Arts Education Institutions (HAEIs). The *Vienna Declaration* is intended as a policy document addressing political decision makers, funding bodies, higher education and research institutions as well as other organisations and individuals catering for and undertaking AR».

AR is defined as research conducted through high-level artistic practice and reflection. It constitutes an epistemic inquiry aimed at expanding knowledge, insight, understanding, and skills. Within this framework, AR aligns with the five main

³ The consortium that expressed the Vienna Declaration includes all the major European umbrella organisations connected to higher arts education and artistic research: Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC); Centre International de Liaison des Ecoles de Cinéma et de Télévision (CILECT / GEECT); Culture Action Europe (CAE); Enhancing Quality in the Arts (EQ-Arts); European Association for Architectural Education (EAEE); European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA); Music Quality Enhancement (MusiQuE); Society for Artistic Research (SAR); The Global Association of Art and Design Education and Research (cumulus).

criteria defining research and development as outlined in the *Frascati Manual*⁴.

AR is conducted across all artistic disciplines, including architecture, design, film, photography, fine art, media and digital arts, music, and the performing arts. Its outcomes emerge both within individual disciplines and, in many cases, in transdisciplinary contexts that combine AR methods with approaches drawn from other research traditions.

The *Vienna Declaration* provides a foundational definition of the requirements of AR, but it does not prescribe criteria for evaluating what constitutes “good” or “bad” AR. Rather, it clarifies what distinguishes AR from other forms of research. It does not claim that AR is exclusive to higher arts education, nor that it can only be conducted at a high level within such institutions. However, it acknowledges that higher arts education institutions face specific challenges in engaging with AR, particularly with regard to academic recognition. As such, the document is conceived as a policy instrument to support dialogue and negotiation with political decision-makers.

Proposed Changes to the *Frascati Manual*

The *Frascati Manual* is primarily intended to support the collection of statistical data on research activities, but it is also used for a range of other purposes. In many countries, it serves as the basis for determining which activities qualify for research funding. This is the case in several Eastern European countries, as well as in Italy. A potential risk arises when existing funding schemes come to an end: if AR is not recognized within the framework of the *Frascati Manual*, this could lead to significant

⁴ Produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the *Frascati manual* is an internationally recognised methodology for collecting and using R&D statistics, offering an essential tool for statisticians and science and innovation policy makers worldwide.

challenges. The 2015 edition of the manual⁵ included the arts for the first time, but it distinguishes between three approaches to arts-related research: research for the arts, research on the arts, and artistic expression.

Research activities are required to be novel, creative, uncertain, systematic, and transferable or reproducible. From the perspective of AR, these criteria should not pose major difficulties. While reproducibility may present certain challenges, transferability does not. Despite the fact that AR can satisfy these five criteria, it is still frequently not recognized as such.

The terminology introduced in the 2015 *Frascati Manual* distinguishes between three ways of engaging with the arts: research for the arts, research on the arts, and artistic expression. Research for the arts can be understood as supporting other fields – for example, chemistry – while research on the arts belongs to the humanities and the scholarly tradition.

However, further distinctions introduce a contrast between artistic expression and research, alongside the notion of artistic performance. Artistic performance is generally excluded from research and development, as it is considered not to meet the criterion of novelty in R&D, being oriented towards new forms of expression rather than the production of new knowledge. Furthermore, the criteria of transferability and reproducibility are seen as not being fulfilled. In this way, the framework effectively excludes the notion of AR and, consequently, the knowledge domain of the arts.

Through the *Vienna Declaration*, the consortium undertook a detailed review of the *Frascati Manual* and proposed several concrete reformulations. Among the main proposals are the following: redefining the sixth category⁶ – currently “Humanities and the Arts” – as “Humanities”; renaming subcategory 6.4, from

⁵ OECD, 2015, *Frascati Manual 2015. Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264239012-en>.

⁶ Cfr., 2015, «Table 2.2. Fields of R&D classification», in *OECD, cit.*, p. 59.

“Arts” (which includes arts, history of arts, performing arts, and music), to “Studies on the Arts”; and introducing a new seventh category specifically dedicated to the arts, with a corresponding set of subcategories. This would establish a distinct seventh knowledge domain for the arts.

This proposal was submitted to the OECD committee responsible for the *Frascati Manual*. The response from the then chair, representing the United States, was that AR is already addressed within the manual, which, in practice, is not the case. At present, there remains a problematic prioritization between artistic expression, artistic performance, knowledge in the arts, and AR, while the knowledge domain of the arts itself remains unrecognized. In the near future, it will be crucial to formally acknowledge AR within the broader definition of research outlined in the *Frascati Manual*.

The five criteria for research are not inherently difficult to meet; however, it is essential that they are applied consistently across all contexts, including teaching and the evaluation of AR. Wherever AR is addressed, it is important to demonstrate the relevance of these criteria and to communicate this clearly to stakeholders, decision-makers, ministries, statistical agencies, and representatives of the OECD committee.

A further concern is the lack of references to other AR outputs. In many AR projects, references are frequently made to French philosophers or to commentators on climate change, but only rarely to other artistic researchers or projects. This situation needs to change, and research culture must evolve accordingly.

There is also an excessive reliance on written text as the primary mode of reflection and documentation, with insufficient integration of the demonstration and documentation of artistic practice, which constitute the foundation of knowledge production.

The Research Catalogue (RC)

The Research Catalogue (RC)⁷ is an advanced rich media platform serving the AR community. It was established in 2010 with initial funding of €400,000 from a Dutch research agency and has since been maintained by the SAR, which has invested approximately €700,000 over the following years. The platform currently hosts around 30,000 registered users. Six peer-reviewed journals use it as a publication platform, and it includes nearly 40 institutional and research project portals, among them two Italian consortia (IartNET and EAR)⁸. With approximately 5,000 publicly accessible AR outputs, it represents the largest global platform for the presentation of AR.

The platform enables images and sound to be placed on an equal footing with text, allowing users to move beyond linear narrative structures. It also provides each user with a personal media repository to document, organise, and contextualise their work across all stages of development. As such, it functions as more than a media archive, supporting the contextualisation of artistic practice in ways that few university repositories can.

Three examples illustrate its use. The first is a project by the Swedish dance researcher Andreas Berchtold, titled *In circles leading on – folkdance, a choreographic intersection*⁹. This research departs from a study of the relationship between one's embodied cultural formation and the understanding of practice, addressing the question of which approaches are needed

⁷ Cfr. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/>.

⁸ Coordinated by the Academy of Fine Arts of Rome and funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU, Enacting Artistic Research (EAR) is a partnership of seven institutions (including art academies, conservatoires and universities) aiming to leverage artistic research as a strategic tool for the internationalization of Higher Education for Art, Music and Dance (AFAM). Cf. <https://abaroma.it/en-enacting-artistic-research/>.

⁹ Berchtold A., 2022, «In circles leading on – folkdance, a choreographic intersection», *VIS – Nordic Journal for Artistic Research*, n. 8, <https://doi.org/10.22501/vis.1571956>.

to allow different perceptions of dance to contribute to the development of the field.

A second example is *Reclamation: Exposing Coal Seams and Appalachian Fatalism with Digital Apparatuses* by Ernie Roby-Tomic¹⁰. In this exposition, the artist examines how the mountainous geography of Appalachia has been shaped by the coal industry, reclaiming 3D geospatial data of mining disaster sites extracted from Google Earth. The project demonstrates the potential of the RC: by accessing the map view of the page, one can visualise its structure. The RC effectively provides a design environment functioning as a canvas, where video, sound, and text can be freely arranged, with links connecting different pages and incorporating references, methods, and the evolution of the project over time.

A third example is *Luxurious Migrant // Performing Whiteness* by Stacey Sacks¹¹. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "critical intimacy," this performance-essay reflects on whiteness, privilege, and their performative dimensions. Technically, it is structured as a single-page project that offers minimal navigational guidance while enabling open exploration. Through the RC, users can layer media, combine soundtracks with video or slideshows, and structure the presentation according to the specific needs of the project.

In conclusion, what is required for AR to "come of age" can be summarised as follows. First, the *Frascati Manual* must be reformulated to include the knowledge domain of the arts and to acknowledge the role of AR. Second, higher arts education institutions must embrace AR as a form of research that originates in artistic practice and ensure its integration at both

¹⁰ Roby-Tomic E., 2020, «Reclamation: Exposing Coal Seams and Appalachian Fatalism with Digital Apparatuses», in *VIS – Nordic Journal for Artistic Research*, n. 4, <https://doi.org/10.22501/vis.748182>.

¹¹ Sacks S., 2020, «Luxurious Migrant // Performing Whiteness», in *VIS – Nordic Journal for Artistic Research*, n. 0, <https://doi.org/10.22501/vis.394964>.

Bachelor's and Master's levels. Third, AR must shift its primary references towards other artistic researchers and AR outputs. Finally, the demonstration of artistic practice must be more fully integrated into the documentation, presentation, and dissemination of AR outputs. In short: less words, more art.

PART 1 | DEFINING CONTEMPORANEITY

FIRMLY HOLDING YOUR GAZE ON YOUR OWN TIME¹

Domenico Quaranta

Brera Academy of Fine Arts

«To take in what is happening, an inter-disciplinary vision is necessary in order to connect the 'fields' which are institutionally kept separate... The precondition for thinking politically on a global scale is to see the *unity* of the unnecessary suffering taking place»².

According to major English dictionaries, the adjective “contemporary” can have at least two slightly different meanings. Most commonly used to describe the simultaneity of two or more events occurring at the same time, over the course of the twentieth century – in cultural criticism as well as in everyday usage – it came to signify anything modern, new, or marked by the characteristics of the present. Contemporaneity, therefore, denotes the quality or state of being contemporary.

What dictionary definitions do not account for, however, is that the meaning of the term is quite evidently shaped by our situated perception of the present and of the flow of time – perceptions that are always embedded in a specific moment that is at once historical and personal. When I first encountered *This Is So Contemporary!* by Tino Sehgal at the German Pavilion of the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, I was in my twenties, enthusiastically

¹ «The poet – the contemporary – must firmly hold his gaze on his own time», in Agamben G., 2009, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, Stanford University Press. Ed. by W. Hamacher, trans. D. Kishik, S. Pedatella, p. 44.

² Berger J., 2002, «Where Are We?», in *Id.*, 2016, *Hold Everything Dear. Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*, Verso, New York, p. 38.

and perhaps somewhat naively entering an art world that seemed to have embraced contemporaneity as a value rather than merely a condition. Art, it appeared, had to be young, new, and capable of speaking to the present about the present.

At a broader historical level, the world was entering a period marked by the collapse of grand narratives, terrorism, economic crisis, precariousness, and global warming; yet it was also still celebrating the transformative power of emerging communication technologies, their democratic promise, and their potential for empowerment. In my then-naive view, art had to be able to comment on, critique, and even shape this world through its own specific languages and tools.

In Sehgal's performance – where interpreters dressed as gallery attendants suddenly began dancing through the space while singing the title phrase – I perceived both an erosive irony directed at a world anxiously striving to appear up to date, and the contagious joy of being part of it. For all those involved, at different levels, “contemporary” seemed to mean, quite simply, modern and new.

Twenty years later, I find myself more inclined to understand the contemporary in its original sense of simultaneity, and less inclined to experience it in positive terms. On a personal level, I am now a middle-aged man who alternately strives – and fails – to make sense of the world he inhabits. The present appears as an unstructured series of unrelated events, occurring simultaneously across different scales, presented to my attention all at once, and among which it is difficult to establish any hierarchy, let alone derive meaning.

Interrupting this text, I begin to doomscroll through my phone. Within seconds, it presents me with a young woman inviting me to use her face as a target, a humorous video of cats being bathed, and a recent statement by the current American president, saying: “A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again.” A sudden burst of notifications returns me to my immediate reality: a student asking me to supervise her thesis, my sister informing me that our father still has a fever, and Duolingo reminding me to maintain my 254-day streak.

The experience of contemporaneity as simultaneity has always been frustrating, if not outright disquieting. Modern communication media have significantly exacerbated this condition. As early as the 1970s, John Berger reflected on the sense of disconnection produced by the juxtaposition of unrelated images within the same magazine spread, or by the act of zapping on television between news, fiction, entertainment, and advertising - famously concluding that «one can only say that this culture is mad»³. The present, in this sense, is invariably confusing, incoherent, and resistant to comprehension; only the past – and, to a certain extent, the future – can be organized into narratives structured by causal relations, by the logic of before and after. And yet, the disjointed experience of contemporaneity outlined above is neither purely subjective nor universally shared. It is not simply generational, as it can be recognized by individuals both older and younger than myself. Nor has it always taken this particular form; rather, it appears as a condition specific to the present. Over the past two decades, profound transformations in our perception of time and space have compelled us to reconsider the very notion of contemporaneity⁴. The digital temporality of computers, smartphones, and platforms – continuously synchronized with a global computational infrastructure of submarine cables, server farms, and satellites – has accelerated communication across all scales, effectively collapsing the interval between action and effect, between sending and receiving. As media theorist Douglas Rushkoff has observed, everything today unfolds in an extended present: events occur instantaneously and recede into the past just as quickly⁵. At the same time, however, the past no longer recedes into distance; instead, it persists as an ever-accessible and continuously

³ Berger J., 1972, *Ways of Seeing*, episode 4, BBC.

⁴ Cox G., Lund, J., 2016, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity & Contemporary Art*, Sternberg Press, London.

⁵ Rushkoff D., 2013, *Present Shock. When Everything Happens Now*, Current, United States.

present archive of events and content. Conversely, the future has largely disappeared as a horizon of projection and possibility⁶. This ongoing process has been further intensified by the recent proliferation of generative AI, whose relentless production of the “new” transforms the past into a resource to be mined and recombined, while rendering the future a landscape populated by synthetic hallucinations – outputs generated from existing data and presented as speculative visions.

Concurrently, contemporary capitalism has completed a far-reaching process of temporal expropriation: first by eroding the distinction between labour time and leisure, then by colonizing the latter through the proliferation of micro-tasks that are scarcely perceived as work, and finally by monetizing virtually all forms of data we produce - through posting, app usage, and the self-monitoring of everyday life under the promise of optimization and self-improvement⁷. Within this context, immersed in a continuous flow of notifications, tweets, misinformation, conspiracy theories, spam, and algorithmically generated slop, attention becomes fragmented and unstable. As a consequence, our capacity to focus, to think, and to remember appears increasingly diminished⁸.

All of this renders a discussion of contemporaneity all the more urgent. The contributions collected in this section respond directly to this urgency. In his essay, Jacob Lund addresses the very definition of contemporaneity, considering it both as a historical period and as «a particular experience and relationship to time and history». He outlines how recent social, political, economic, and technological transformations have shaped its current form, understood as «a global interconnection of different presents,

⁶ Berardi F., 2011, *After the Future*, ed. by Gary Genosko & Nicholas Thoburn, AK Press, Chico (CA).

⁷ Cray J., 2013, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso, New York.

⁸ Bishop C., 2024, *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance Today*, Verso, New York.

different ‘sites of life,’ with different pre-histories, and different experiences of time».

Leevi Haapala, in turn, guides us through a re-reading of Giorgio Agamben’s seminal essay *What Is the Contemporary?*, focusing on his well-known definition of the contemporary as “he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.” Haapala argues that art – understood as a mode of seeing and producing difference, as well as a practice capable of generating narratives and counter-narratives – enacts this notion of the contemporary in a particularly effective manner.

Finally, Santiago Zabala, interviewed about his book *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, elaborates on the specular concepts of emergency and the absence of emergency. The latter provides a compelling account of a form of contemporaneity in which the state of exception has become normalized, thereby emptying emergencies of their status as events. Within this framework, art can “save” us through emergencies – by producing events and moments of rupture or shock.

While reading these essays, three recurring concepts emerge that, in my view, help delineate the specific identity and – if the term may be provisionally adopted – the “function” of artistic research within the contemporary condition. The first is the notion of focus, or deep attention, capable of generating understanding and, potentially, revelation. The second is interdisciplinarity, which mobilizes different fields of knowledge “against the specialization that frames these disciplines” (Zabala), and which – echoing John Berger – seeks to grasp the unity of reality beyond the institutional divisions that separate domains of inquiry. In a contemporary context characterized by fragmented attention, the collapse of unifying narratives, and the increasing difficulty of translating growing volumes of data and ever more complex, interconnected systems into meaningful forms of understanding, these concepts constitute powerful tools – tools that artistic practice, perhaps more than other, more institutionalized forms of labour and research, is uniquely positioned to preserve and cultivate.

The third concept is storytelling. As Federico Campagna has incisively observed,

«Even the most sophisticated theory remains sterile if it lacks the immersive quality of literature... Since the infinite *chaos* of reality will always exceed the limits of any conceptual system, we should recognize that all our attempts at reducing it to a meaningful cosmos are merely 'likely stories'... Every conceptual world that we might devise is ultimately a story for us to live by»⁹.

Campagna is not alone in recognizing how the “soft substance of narrative” can assist in developing an understanding of an otherwise chaotic, fragmented, and ultimately absurd reality¹⁰. Through its capacity to combine sustained attention to its subject matter, an interdisciplinary approach to research, and the ability to weave these elements into narrative forms across different media, artistic research – as discussed in this volume – emerges as a crucial tool for engaging with, and potentially defining, our current experience of contemporaneity.

⁹ Campagna F., 2024, *Otherworlds: Mediterranean Lessons on Escaping History*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

¹⁰ Most notably, Donna J. Haraway has always recognized the importance of what she calls “speculative fabulation.” See Haraway D.J., 1991, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, London; and Haraway D.J., 2016, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC).

ART IN CONTEMPORARY CONDITIONS

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By now, it seems uncontroversial to remark that “contemporary art” has substituted “modern art” as a descriptor of the art of our times. In current art discourses, it is, however, still unclear what this substitution of adjectives to qualify the art of the present implies¹. Why is “modern” no longer adequate to describe the art of our historical present? What does the notion of “the contemporary” mean? What does it grasp that “modern” does not? How do the two differ in their understanding of history and futurity?

In everyday use, the word “contemporary” has almost the same meaning as “modern”: namely, “now”, “of the present moment”, or “up to date”. If one consults *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the listed meanings of the adjectival form of the word are all relational to time: «Belonging to the same era or period as another person, thing, or event; living, existing,

¹ The substitution is relatively recent but has been underway for a while. The first institution that included the word “contemporary” in its name was the ICA, Institute for Contemporary Arts, in London, which was established in 1947. For foundational theorizations and discussions about the term “contemporary art”, see Smith T., Enwezor O. & Condee N., 2008, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Duke University Press, Durham (NC); Smith T., 2009, *What is Contemporary Art*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (IL); Belting H., Buddensieg A. & Weibel. P., 2013, eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA); Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’. *October*, 130, Fall 2009, 3-124, and Aranda J., Vidokle A. & Kuan Wood B., 2010, eds., *e-flux journal: What is Contemporary Art?* Sternberg Press, London.

or occurring together in a particular period; coexisting»². «Happening or taking place simultaneously; occurring together at the same time; simultaneous»³. «Having existed or lived from the same date; equal in age, coeval»⁴.

The last definition of the word, dating from the middle of the nineteenth century, repeats the meaning of its everyday use and makes it a synonym of the word “modern”: «Of or characteristic of the present time; modern; (esp. of furniture, clothing, etc.) having modern, as distinct from traditional, features or styling; (sometimes) *spec.* designating music, architecture, etc., which makes use of new, often experimental, ideas and techniques»⁵.

Today, this definition – somewhat ironically, as our subject is the contemporary – appears a bit outdated. In a sense, the meanings offered by *The Oxford English Dictionary* are ahistorical and can be applied to relationships, matters, and circumstances at any point in history. Contemporary belonging, existing, living, occurring, or occupying has always taken place; the formulation “X and Y are/were contemporary/contemporaries” can be applied in any historical period, at any time. Thus, the statement “All art has been contemporary” – as reads the neon sign by Maurizio Nannucci installed on the entrance facade of the Altes Museum in Berlin in 2005 – is true according to the dictionary definition of contemporary, in the sense that all art has come into being at the same time as

² Interestingly, the entry on “contemporary” in the OED Second Edition from 1989 was revised in June 2019 and last modified in September 2023: Oxford English Dictionary (2023rd, September). s.v. “contemporary (adj.), sense 1”. Accessed May 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6753920402>.

³ Oxford English Dictionary (2023, September). s.v. “contemporary (adj.), sense 2”. Accessed May 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7785458854>.

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary (2023, September). s.v. “contemporary (adj.), sense 3”. Accessed May 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1112298133>.

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023, September). s.v. “contemporary (adj.), sense 4”. Accessed May 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2893183230>.

someone's life, has been coeval with a community for which it was the art of *their* time, etc. However, in light of the replacement of "modern art" with "contemporary art", we need to historicize the very notion of the contemporary. In line with the last dictionary definition and everyday use, "contemporary" can be regarded as a deictic term whose reference – "now", "of the present moment", etc. – is dependent on the situation in which it is being put into use, meaning "at the same time" as when one is speaking, but, as I will return to below, this time itself – the time to which all the meanings of the word are relational – is changing⁶.

Boris Groys makes a distinction between modern, postmodern, and contemporary art based on their relation to the temporal categories of past, present and future, remarking that

«today's contemporary art demonstrates the way in which the contemporary as such shows itself – the act of presenting the present. In this respect contemporary art is different from Modern art, which was directed toward the future and it is different also from Postmodern art, which was a historical reflection on the Modern project. Contemporary "contemporary art" privileges the present with respect to the future and to the past»⁷.

Leaving aside for the moment Groys's implicitly developmental understanding of the history of art – where contemporary art follows modern and postmodern art in a progressionist art-historical narrative – I would like to stress the endeavour to present the present as a defining characteristic of contemporary art, which is also remarked by Juliane Rebentisch: «The full normative sense of the term

⁶ Cf. Rajchman J., 2011, «The Contemporary: A New Idea?», in Avanesian A. & Skrebowski L. (eds.), *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, Sternberg, London, pp.125-144.

⁷ Groys B., 2008, «The Topology of Contemporary Art», in Smith T., Enwezor O. & Condee N. (eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC), pp. 71-80: 71.

contemporary art consists in the fact that it is meant to make our historical present present to us»⁸.

On this background, my point is that when we say that contemporary art is an art of the present, an art that is directed toward and somehow gives expression to the present, we also need to question the category of the present itself, since the way in which the present is constituted is changing⁹. The notion of the contemporary, understood critically, refers to a change in our relation to and experience of time itself, a change in the temporal quality of the present.

How, then, is the *present* present – or the *contemporary* contemporary – constituted? Who – and what – takes part in the present? When and where did it begin?

Due to developments in communication technology, the emergence of planetary-scale computation¹⁰, growing awareness of the climate crisis and eco-systemic change, processes of

⁸ Rebentisch J., 2015, «The Contemporaneity of Contemporary Art», in *New German Critique*, n. 124, pp. 42:1, 223-237: 229.

⁹ Here and in the following I reiterate main points from my book Lund J., 2022, *The Changing Constitution of the Present: Essays on the Work of Art in Times of Contemporaneity*, Sternberg, London.

¹⁰ Cf. the notion of “the Stack” developed by sociologist and architectural theorist Benjamin Bratton to describe how smart grids, cloud computing, mobile software and smart cities, universal addressing systems, ubiquitous computing, and robotics are not unrelated genres of computation but constitute a larger aligned and coherent whole, an accidental megastucture in the form of a planetary scale computing system. Bratton B.H., 2015, *The Stack – On Software and Sovereignty*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA). On the website of *antikythera*, a think tank on planetary computation directed by Bratton, planetary computation is described in this way: «Computation is not only more than calculation; it is a planetary-scale cognitive infrastructure that impacts structures of knowledge, geopolitics and ecologies. Its scale extends from the global to the intimate, from the nanoscale to the edge of the atmosphere and back again. As you stare at the glass slab in your hand, you are, as a user, connected to a planetary technology that both evolved and was planned in irregular steps over time, each component making use of others: an accidental, discontinuous megastructure. Instead of a single megamachine, planetary computation can be understood as being composed of modular, interdependent, functionally-defined layers», Bratton B.H., 2025, «Planetary Computation», *Antikythera*, October 5th, <https://antikythera.org/planetary-computation>.

decolonization, among other factors, the very constitution of the present is fundamentally changing. The present to which *contemporary* contemporary art refers is one characterized by contemporaneity in the sense that it is constituted by the bringing together of a multitude of different temporalities at different scales, including deep geological time and different grand narratives and imagined communities developed during modernity. The contemporary present is formed by an intensified global or planetary interconnectedness of different times and experiences of time, and it is this intensified and felt *interconnection* of times at a planetary scale that is historically new, that makes our present different from previous (especially Western) presents¹¹.

Compared to the transitory and anthropocentric modern present we are therefore occupying and living in an expanded present in which several times, historical narratives, and temporalities – human as well as non-human, biological, geological as well as technological – take part in what we perceive as present and as presence – and in making presence and the present come into being¹².

Contemporary art, therefore, is not merely “art produced at the present point in time”, but an art that relates to contemporaneity as a defining condition of our historical present. Contemporary art – worthy of its name – in various ways articulates the condition of contemporaneity – this globally or

¹¹ Cf. Chakrabarty D., 2018, «Anthropocene Time», *History and Theory*, vol. 57, n. 1, pp. 5-32, 6. I mainly use the term “global” to refer to human, worldly, cultural, political, and historical issues, and the term “planetary” to refer to entanglements with more-than-human matters, scales, and temporalities. On the planet as a new category within the humanities, cf. Chakrabarty D., 2019, «The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category», in *Critical Inquiry*, n. 46, pp. 1-31. On planetary consciousness, cf. philosopher and political theorist Mbembe A., 2022, «How to Develop a Planetary Consciousness. Interview with Nils Gilman and Jonathan Blake», in *Noema*, www.noemamag.com/how-to-develop-a-planetary-consciousness/.

¹² Cf. Lund, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

planetarily shared, or at least interconnected, present – and makes it experienceable.

This means that contemporaneity, the present that the term “contemporary” now refers to, is at once a period – understood as a description of our era and the times in which we live – and a particular experience and relationship to time and history. The intensified global interconnection of different cultures, times, and historical narratives that are brought to bear on the *same* present forms a sort of planetary present, and – at least in principle – a global sharing of time, although one not shared equally. This makes it impossible to maintain the conventional modern Western developmental configuration and understanding of history, including the art-historical narrative we have been building since the Enlightenment, when the modern notion of art also came into being.

The art-historical move from modern to contemporary art is not just a move from one period or era to the next in a linear and teleological narrative where each era builds upon and develops from the previous era. Such an understanding would try to assimilate contemporary art to the logic of the modern configuration of art history, but it is this very configuration that has been rendered inoperable by the contemporaneity of contemporary art. Arthur C. Danto, among others, was early to remark the death of this particular history of art, which had been dominant to such a degree that its end was confused with the end of art itself. In Danto’s view, there would still be art, but «whatever art there was to be would be made without benefit of a reassuring sort of narrative in which it was seen as the appropriate next stage in the story. What had come to an end was that narrative but not the subject of the narrative»¹³.

¹³ Danto A.C., 1998, *After the End of Art*, Princeton University Press, Oxford, pp. 4-5. Cf. also Lund J., 2019, *Anachrony, Contemporaneity, and Historical Imagination*, Sternberg, London.

Danto finds support for his analysis of how contemporary art escapes or detaches itself from the established art-historical narrative in Hans Belting's incisive remark: «Contemporary art manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward»¹⁴. Thus, for Danto, the notion of the contemporary does not designate an art-historical period, but rather a posthistorical era with no more periods and no more progression to the grand art-historical narrative: Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, etc. Posthistorical art – that is, contemporary art – is art that is created with «no historically mandated directions for art to go in»¹⁵.

A significant part of the art being made or being actualised today can no longer be placed in specific genres and categories belonging to particular art forms; often, it is no longer expressed in a delimited work, and it is hard to distinguish from its surroundings and what is not art. Contemporary art deserts the art-historical narrative that has been established as the interpretive framework of the practice in which it takes part, rendering this narrative inoperative, or at least deficient. The art-historical narrative of unified progression is dismantled by its own subject.

In other words, linear art-historical progress has now been suspended, as coexisting contemporary art practices do not necessarily take part in the development of the same or a shared narrative.

The history of art that Danto and others are talking about is, however, almost exclusively the Western one, and they primarily see the end of that history of art from a Western perspective. The historical disorder, mentioned by Danto, is a

¹⁴ Danto quotes Belting from: Belting H., 1987, *The End of the History of Art*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (Ill.), trans. Christopher S. Wood (Original work: *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*, published 1983).

¹⁵ Danto A.C., 1993, «Art after the End of Art», in *Artforum*, vol. 31, n. 8, April, p. 67.

disordering of *the* history of art as defined from a Western and, in many instances, implicitly colonial or imperial point of view. The modern discourse of progress and teleology is a practice of historical totalization that excludes those who do not comply with its parameters and places colonized nations and subaltern subjects in another time. The latter are removed from the present, othered, placed outside history, and thereby denied coevalness¹⁶.

So, to recapitulate my points so far: Following many years of globalisation – of which such progressionist and exclusionary discourse was an integral part – globality is now a historical condition in which we live. Our historical present is characterised by the intensification of mutual global interconnections and exchanges between all the cultures and regions in the world, an accelerated speed of cultural, economic, and migratory circulation, generating a global or even planetary sense of contemporaneity. «The world's inhabitants have at last become truly contemporaneous», as Marc Augé stated in 1994¹⁷. This historically new condition of contemporaneity has, for a large part, come into being as a consequence of developments in communication and so-called real-time technologies. And recently, the sense of contemporaneity and a generalized sharing of time have been strengthened further by the idea of our entering the so-called Anthropocene era and by the widespread realization of the effects of climate change on our existence as a species, as we now share a potential planetary extinction.

Awareness of the globalised conditions of the present situation has helped to divide the modern attitude to art history in the singular into several related art *histories*, and to expand

¹⁶ Cf. Fabian J., 1983, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York.

¹⁷ Augé M., 1999, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City (CA), trans. Amy Jacobs p. 89 (original work published 1994).

our understanding of the practices which can be said to participate in what we call art. The ruangrupa collective's curatorial strategy for documenta fifteen (2022) is a salient example of this in the way it – in the words of Abhijan Toto and Pujita Guha of the Forest Curriculum – “call[ed] into question what ecosystems of artistic production Documenta as an institution has heretofore participated in”¹⁸. Contemporary works of art no longer participate in a single progressive form of history, with each art-historical period replacing, developing or challenging the previous period. The history of art as we knew it is no longer the horizon within which a large part of contemporary practices operates and create meaning. Contemporary art has abandoned, or is at least trying to challenge, the kind of Euro-American centrism which characterised modern art. It is far more transnational, global, and cosmopolitan, or even cosmological, in its outlook, often with a distinctly local point of departure, and to a large extent, contemporary art seeks to go beyond the idea that the human being is a privileged, self-sufficient actor who is the centre of the world.

Where does this leave us with regard to futurity? Several thinkers and cultural critics are, rightly, concerned that we have lost the future as a political object, that our experience of time has transformed into an experience of an ever-expanding present with no temporal horizon other than the present, and hence that we are losing the capacity to imagine the world otherwise. Thus, historian François Hartog remarks that the category of the present has developed into “presentism,” meaning that the present has become the privileged temporal category according to which the past and the future are conceived, but also a category that absorbs the past and the future. Presentism is the sense that only the present exists, whereby historical

¹⁸ Toto A., (2022, «Documenta 15», in *Artforum*, September, vol. 61, n. 1, www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202207/abhijan-toto-and-pujita-guha-for-the-forest-curriculum-on-documenta-15-88918.

time and any ideas about a qualitatively different future seem to be suspended¹⁹. It should be noted, however, that most of the discussion of presentism and post history deals almost exclusively with time experiences within a Euro-American framework²⁰.

Against this background, we are in need of at least *imagining* a qualitatively different world, of projecting a futural moment that transcends the all-encompassing temporal horizon of presentism without falling back into the synchronizing and universalizing discourse of progress, which characterizes Western modernity.

We need to take into consideration Achille Mbembe's description of how the African decolonizations during the twentieth century "inaugurated a time of branching off toward innumerable futures". The wave of decolonization, he argues,

«... was animated by the quest for a future that would not be written in advance, [...]. The Western claim to epitomize the language and forms in which any human event could arise, and even to have monopoly on the very idea of the future, was only a fiction. The new postcolonial world was not condemned to imitate and reproduce what had been accomplished elsewhere. Because history was being produced in a unique way each time, the politics of the future [...] required

¹⁹ Hartog F., 2015, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, Columbia University Press, New York, trans. Saskia Brown (Original work published 2003).

²⁰ Including Hartog's recent proposal to think about a new anthropocenic regime of historicity, tellingly titled *Chronos: The West Confronts Time*. Hartog F., 2022, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time*. Columbia University Press, New York, trans. S. R. Gilbert (Original work published 2020). Proposing to employ an Anthropocene regime of historicity to link the temporal gaps between the time of the Anthropocene and the times of the world, between a digital presentism and the world's other temporalities, and between that presentism and the Anthropocene, Hartog remarks, «It is no longer, as it was in the good old days, a matter of simply articulating past, present, and future, but of taking into account pasts, presents, and futures, whose impacts may differ, diverge, even contradict each other, but which nonetheless form a nexus or a web of temporalities in which, to one or another degree, we act and are acted upon». Cfr. Hartog, *op.cit.*, p. 233.

the invention of new images of thought. This was only possible if one committed oneself to a long apprenticeship in signs and their modes of encounter with experience – an apprenticeship in the time specific to the sites of life»²¹.

What distinguishes our present from previous presents is that it is conditioned by *con*-temporaneity, understood as a *global* interconnection of *different* presents, different “sites of life”, with different pre-histories, and of different time-experiences. It is an idea of contemporaneity as, at least in principle, a shared present across divisive cultural and historical differences; of a temporary unity of the present across the planet²². This means that it is necessary to try to establish a global, or rather, planetary perspective on the present. Analyses of the global art world should therefore, as stipulated by Okwui Enwezor, take into account that “contemporary Western artists see themselves as being in a post-historical situation, whereas non-Western artists wish to be in a post-ethnic one. To be no longer identified by race, ethnicity, or tribe [...]»²³. We have, in other words, arrived at contemporaneity via different paths, but the post-historical situation and the struggle to become what Enwezor calls post-ethnic are now inevitably interconnected, which in no way diminishes the importance

²¹ Mbembe A., 2021, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 3.

²² Philosopher Peter Osborne states: «what seems distinctive and important about the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through the distinctive conceptual grammar of *con*-temporaneity, a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but of times: we do not just live or exist together ‘in time’ with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterised by a coming together of different but equally ‘present’ temporalities or ‘times’, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times», Osborne P., 2013, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, Milan, p. 17.

²³ Enwezor O., 2015, «World Platforms, Exhibiting Adjacency, and the Surplus Value of Art», in Smith T. (ed.), *Talking Contemporary Curating*, Independent Curators International, pp. 91-92.

of being attentive to these differences and to decisive inequalities; on the contrary. Any image of the future now has to come to terms with this planetary interconnection and our inescapable entanglement with the dynamic being of the earth. We are forced to let go of the idea of a one-dimensional time, from which it would be possible to imagine and project a different future. Futurity is no longer something that lies ahead on a one-dimensional, progressive continuum. The coming into being of contemporaneity, the interconnection of different histories and temporalities, worldly and planetary, implies a spatialization of time, and we now have to begin to imagine futurity and global politics liberated from the modern Western obsession with the time of succession and the imagination it allows for, including persisting colonization, social, racial, and regional inequality²⁴.

This research has been supported by Novo Nordisk Foundation Investigator Grant in Art History Research 0068539.

²⁴ Cf. Latour B., 2005, «From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public», in Latour B. & Weibel P. (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), pp. 29-30.

CONTEMPORANEITY, STORYTELLING, AND THE POWER OF ART IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

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Whose story is being told, and whose voice is telling it? And further: whose story can we trust, and whose story do we want to believe? These questions assume shifting positions in relation to fact and feeling, both of which are necessary building blocks in storytelling. In politics and policymaking, we want debate on value systems to remain anchored in fact, but in the post-truth era, fact has been eclipsed by emotive arguments that polarize and stir zealotry. The ends appear to justify the means.

Grand narratives and invincible universal truths were debunked with the demise of the modern era. Today, we are familiar with local and international conflict, irreconcilable clashes, and stagnant disputes; political heroes and traitors periodically switching places as their supporters cheer on, oblivious to whether they speak the truth. Unstable times and the rise of populism in many parts of the world have reawakened a hunger for narratives that provide easy solutions and survival stories exalting the individual-as-hero. Free movement and global commitment to democratic decision-making are being supplanted by narrow-mindedness and national navel-gazing. Social media has transformed everyone into a storyteller, whether we like it or not. Personal stories and feelings are leaking into the public domain, where they are exploited as tools of influence in the name of customer service and user experience. Through user tracking, shared likes and sentiments have become the currency of the platform economy, and targeted social media advertising has become an instrument of populist politics. What stories are we ultimately willing to share about ourselves, knowing that our personal data and

social media tracking details are assets that can be bought and sold in blatant disregard of our privacy? Even contemporary art is complicit in the storytelling economy. Museums and other art institutions are pitted against rival service providers in an ongoing battle for customer attention.

After receiving the invitation to join this seminar, I felt compelled to revisit Giorgio Agamben's essay *What is the Contemporary?*. At the beginning of his essay, Agamben presents the key questions for today's topic, namely contemporariness. He asks: «Of whom and of what are we contemporaries?». And first and foremost, «What does it mean to be contemporary?»¹.

These are the questions I've been thinking about over the years in many roles and positions: as a curator, a researcher, a museum director, and an academic leader. Our educational background, age and position, cultural-political situation in society, the ebb and flow of economic activities in the finance sector, and not to mention pandemics and wars, affect us all and shape how we see ourselves as contemporaries.

Agamben answers based on Roland Barthes's reading of Nietzsche and asserts: «The contemporary is the untimely». This is something that exceeds the fever of history and historical culture. As a second criterion for contemporary, he identifies "relevance," which, with respect to the present, is understood as «a disconnection and out-of-jointness», often felt as a sense of anachronism².

I would like to give an example of Agamben's sense of relevance through one image from last autumn. This was an activist attack on the House of Parliament in Helsinki on the 25th of September 2024, by two eco-activist groups: Swedish Restore Wetlands and Extinction Rebellion Finland (Elokapina in Finnish). Their key message was that the party is over! We cannot continue the

¹ Agamben G., 2009, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, Stanford University Press. Redwood City (CA) Edited by W. Hamacher, trans. D. Kishik, S. Pedatella. Originally published in Italian: Agamben G., 2008, *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?*, Nottetempo Edizioni, Milano.

² Agamben, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

overconsumption of natural resources, and, in this case, peat, in the time of the climate crisis.

What happened on that day in September? In a few minutes, activists spread pigmented liquid with old-fashioned fire extinguishers on the pillars of the House of Parliament in Helsinki. They called it «an impactful political work of art». Their motivation was to make the Finnish state-owned company Neova stop its large-scale digging or excavating of peat in Sweden, which, as Extinction Rebellion Finland reported, causes more emissions than all domestic flights in Sweden, and thus destroys life-maintaining wetlands.

The images from the demonstration went viral immediately. In its easiest and perhaps most populist reading, the demonstration was seen as an attack against the ultimate representative of the democratic institution itself.

Can this be read as untimely? Maybe not – it was very timely, even punctual. Does it have relevance? I really hope so; at least it was very easy to see the impact of out-of-jointness. The attention it created was immediate. Iconic stone pillars of the House of Parliament, and the intensity of the blood-like paint on top of the pillars, brought anachronistic elements together by combining stability and immediacy, permanence and momentariness. Unfortunately, the discussion about the activist attack focused on the institutional value of Finland's key legislation body, the architectural and cultural-historical value of the building, and only long after that on the environmental values, which the state-owned company violates. As a contemporary eyewitness, I can respect our cultural-historical building, but at the same time, I still cannot escape from the urgency of the sixth extinction, and the responsibility it requires on an activist level and on the level of legislation. Agamben makes another suggestion to identify contemporariness by saying: «The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness»³.

³ Ibid., p. 44.

This can be taken literally, but also metaphorically. Belgian artist Ann Veronica Janssens in-situ scalable photographic print *Phosphènes (Phosphenes)*, 1995, is a micro-organic exploration about phosphenes, the visual phenomenon that gives the impression of seeing light without an actual light source. Phosphenes can, for example, be induced by mechanical, electrical, or magnetic stimulation of the retina or visual cortex. Phosphenes have also been reported by meditators (called “nimitta”), people who endure long periods without visual stimulation (the prisoner’s cinema), or those who ingest psychedelic drugs. If you close your eyes and put pressure on your closed eyelids with your fingers, colored, sparkling geometric patterns appear – you begin to see in the darkness. For the artist, it is a nomadic and visual proposal. Agamben continues with his description of darkness: «The contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him»⁴.

At this point, we contemporaries can see the concerns of our time. *The Global Risks Report 2025* reveals an increasingly fractured global landscape, where escalating geopolitical, environmental, societal, and technological challenges threaten stability and progress. The rise of extreme right-wing populism around the world seeks to provide easy catch-phrase solutions to complex problems. At the same time, a strong nationalistic emphasis overshadows global challenges and their solutions. How and in what manner the Ukrainian war ends will showcase the new world order. And, as we have seen after the US elections, the old rule-based world order and respect for the sovereignty of national states is over. Multicentered diplomacy might no longer shape our future. In her 2013 essay, *This Way, Polis, Ethos, Esthesi*, Chantal Pontbriand asks: «Where can politics form links with art and its practice?» and she replies: «Art can introduce difference. [...] Art is a process that cannot be satisfied with the same: it is essentially

⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

research and proposition of a difference»⁵. Pontbriand believes that politicians are only connected to culture as a tool to promote a political entity or use culture as a tool of control. Instead of addressing the question of culture, politics mainly relates to entertainment, industry, and economy. In our formatted culture, in which we are immersed, we are consumers, not actors, as she concludes. From Pontbriand's perspective, we should be looking for difference and should be able to propose it in our roles as cultural workers, scholars, and museum and theater directors, and allow it to appear.

As Agamben concludes: «To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot-this is what it means to be contemporary»⁶. And he continues in a very poetic way, saying:

«... As such, contemporaries are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to firmly fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. In other words, it is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss».

I would like to conclude, based on Agamben and Pontbriand's readings, that to see and to cherish difference is a way to see in the darkness. With two small examples, I would like to remind us how contemporary art can produce differences.

The first is Sámi artist Outi Pieski with her installation *Our Land, Our Running Colours* (2016). The Sámi are the only recognized indigenous people in Europe, inhabiting the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. There are an estimated 60,000-100,000 Sámi people, of whom about 10,000 live in the

⁵ Pontbriand C., 2013, «This Way, Polis, Ethos, Esthesis», in Id., *The Contemporary, The Common: Art in a Globalizing World*, Sternberg Press, London, p. 120.

⁶ Agamben, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

area of the Finnish state. The Sámi land (Sápmi) is located in the northern parts of Scandinavia and Kola Peninsula.

In her installation, Pieski has coloured the fells formed by branches with shawl fringes – in her words, with ‘our colours’, referring to the shawl of the Sámi dress and its diverse colorings. The landscape depicted by Pieski is part of the Sámi homeland that has been evoked using the colors of the past, present, and future generations living there. In the work, human presence is both symbolically and materially part of the landscape in which one lives. Even though *Our Land, Our Running Colours* is timeless in its landscape likeness, it is also extremely topical and addresses the current moment by using subtle symbols of being and belonging. Although Sámi are often referred to as a united people, they are divided into smaller sub-communities based on language, cultural practices, and lifestyles. Pieski’s installation and its title produce a difference in the way we visualize Northern landscapes and in our understanding of them, not via touristic Lapland exotism, but from a perspective and proposal of a Sámi artist, linked to the land and histories of the people who lived there before the national state existed⁷.

Agamben would not like to make understanding what it means to live as a contemporary too easy. He likes to challenge us to see beyond the obvious topics of our times. The quote starts:

«... It is important to realize that the appointment that is in question in contemporariness does not simply take place in chronological time: it is something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it. And this urgency is the untimeliness, the anachronism that permits us to grasp our time in the form of a “too soon” that is also a “too late”»⁸.

⁷ Cf. Lilja E., 2019, «Hand-Knotted Landscape – Reflections on Outi Pieski’s *Our Land, Our Running Colours*», in *FNG Research*, n. 4. https://research.fng.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/fngr_2019-4_lilja_emma_article1_1.pdf.

⁸ Agamben, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

This elegant formulation reveals the difficulty of catching the moment that bears witness to our sense of contemporariness. To be present in the moment, and at the same time to reflect on it from a distance, either from a historical perspective or by anticipating its future implications, is not easy. Agamben admits the difficulty: «The present is nothing other than this un-lived element in everything that is lived. [...] The attention to this ‘un-lived’ is the life of the contemporary. And to be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been»⁹.

This un-lived moment as a concept recalls the pandemic times. For my second brief case study, I would like to highlight a specific work by Indian artist Sheila Gowda. You might recall her major solo show entitled *Remains* at Hangar Bicocca during the first spring of COVID-19. I was happy to visit the show, and what impressed me most about it was a very archaic installation titled *Collateral* (2007). I was convinced that we should show the installation at Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, and after complicated arrangements and remote supervision from Bangalore, it was made possible. We exhibited it in 2022, right after the pandemic, in our major international survey show, *ARS22. Living Encounters*.

Collateral, as you might remember it, is a very serene installation that requires audience patience and attention. The installation is a constellation of incense cakes that have been burned slowly to ashes. It consists of a “landscape of shapes”, as the artist herself described them, laid out on low mesh-screen tables of varied sizes, each one the size of a man, woman, and child. The installation invites contemplation of themes of closeness, continuity, and separateness. The shapes are the fragrant, ashen remains of burnt incense, and offer a place for quiet reflection and solace, thereby conveying yet another key narrative of our time. The burning of incense took place before the visitors were allowed to enter. In that sense, the event under the fire hoods

⁹ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

occurred beforehand and was thus un-lived for the visitors; what we see is what remains, ashes. And these remains are ephemeral, existing only during the period of the exhibition. In these patterns, there is something very archaic. One can also reflect on the un-lived life, or even the lives lost during the pandemic times. The quality of the 'un-lived moment' is something which Agamben describes: «That which impedes access to the present is precisely the mass of what for some reason (its traumatic character, its excessive nearness) we have not managed to live». And that is why it is possible to interpret Gowda's installation as both a pandemic narrative and a timeless (or should I say "archaic") meditation on encounters with death. Agamben recognizes the essence of contemporariness in its Messianic tone, which he describes as "the time of the now" (Kairos time)¹⁰.

A key task of contemporary art is to present alternative ways of seeing and narrating, and, as previously stated, to produce difference. Visual artists tell stories in ways that no other mode of narration can. They may be personal stories of failure or empowerment, or rereading's of history. By virtue of the very word "contemporary", there is an implicit remit for contemporary art to share counternarratives and imagine alternative futures, but this entails more than just dreaming up wild dystopian visions or simply registering the status quo. The current ethos of contemporary art flies the flag of plurality, urging artists to seek out a multiplicity of counternarratives. And this request is more urgent than ever. «This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation to other times»¹¹.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 52.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 53.

WHY ART CAN SAVE US THROUGH EMERGENCIES

Santiago Zabala

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Art often works better than scientific announcements and philosophical treatises as a way to reveal emergencies. This is not because of artists' ability to create beauty but rather because of the intensity and depth of their works. Today, artists are closer to the greatest emergencies than many scientists and philosophers because art has been more resistant to the global return to order that defines our socio-political condition, as the emergence of far-right populist movements demonstrates. While these seek to "rescue us from emergencies" by improving and preserving our order, art, at its best, attempts to "rescue us into emergencies," creating events and shock. This rescue not only reveals absent emergencies, but it also becomes an emergency, that is, an experience of danger. If we agree with the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin when he states that "where the danger is, also grows the saving power," we must find ways to experience or at least acknowledge this danger. Art's role in stirring our existence is vital to opposing the absence of emergency sought by advocates of the return to order.

In the following conversation¹, philosopher Santiago Zabala discusses his book *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (2017) with Leonardo Franceschini, a professor of philosophy at East China University of Political Science and Law.

¹ Original publication: Franceschini L., 2018, «Why Only Art Can Save Us: An Interview with Santiago Zabala», in *Arcade. A Digital Salon*. April 19th, <https://shc.stanford.edu/arcade/interventions/why-only-art-can-save-us-interview-santiago-zabala>.

Q: Recently, Donald and Melania Trump requested a Vincent van Gogh painting from the Guggenheim, but the museum responded with a counteroffer², Maurizio Cattelan's *America*, a gold toilet. I wonder if your book, which also features a work by the Italian artist on the cover, should also be interpreted as a move similar to Nancy Spector's (the museum's chief curator), a provocation and intervention in the public sphere. After all, you call for "existential interventions" through art.

SZ: I'm not certain whether Cattelan and Spector wanted to provoke or educate the Trump family. Either way, Cattelan's *America* is a serious work of art that, as we can see, has managed to intervene in the public sphere. The sculpture on the cover of my book is called *The Ninth Hour* (1999) and depicts Pope John Paul II lying on the ground after being struck by a meteorite. Recently, film director Paolo Sorrentino used it in the opening credits of his TV series *The Young Pope*. The sculpture's title alludes to the ninth hour of darkness that fell upon all the land when Christ cried out, «Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?» – «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?» – but the book's title paraphrases Martin Heidegger's famous response when he was asked whether we could still have any influence now that we are so overpowered by technology: «Only a God can still save us»³. My intention is to point out that, now that God is dead and we are even more overpowered, perhaps it's art's time to save us. The intervention you refer to has to do with demands of art in the twenty-first century, which are linked to our continued existence, that is, our salvation.

² Almino E.W., 2018, «Trumps Wanted a van Gogh for the White House But Were Offered a Gold Toilet», in *Hyperallergic*, January 25th, <https://hyperallergic.com/trump-van-gogh-white-house-guggenheim-maurizio-cattelan/>.

³ Heidegger M., 1966, «Only a God Can Save Us», in Stassen M., 2003 (ed.), *Philosophical and Political Writings*, Continuum, France, p. 38.

Q: So, after the death of God, only art can save us? What is the relation between the absence of emergency and the possibility of art saving us?

SZ: One must distinguish between emergencies and the absence of emergencies. The former has become the axiomatic term through which sovereigns legitimize any imposed order through the framing concept of a “state of exception,” as Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben have all explained. The *absence* of emergencies is the result: a world where politics, finance, and privacy have been forced into previously established technological frames. This is why Heidegger (who was the first to point out in the 1940s that the «only emergency is the absence of emergency»⁴) believed that emergencies do not arise when something doesn’t function correctly, but rather when «everything functions [...] and propels everything more and more toward further functioning»⁵. In a world where we are constantly under surveillance, and even the future is becoming predictable⁶ through online data mining, the problem is not those constructed-for-consumption emergencies that we make a loud show of confronting in the glare of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, but rather the ones that we ignore. In this condition, the election of Trump, for example, rather than constituting an emergency, seems to be the incarnation of the absence of emergencies – a state of broadcast emergency signals that are meant to drown out the real but absent emergencies, from climate change to civil and human rights. In this condition, the goal of art is not to rescue us “from emergencies” but rather “into emergencies.” Rescuing from necessarily means concealing the essential emergencies that shape the modern world, but rescuing into means thrusting us into these emergencies, that is, saving us by revealing what has been hidden in plain sight. As

⁴ Heidegger M., 2012, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, p. 99. Trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (original book published 1989).

⁵ Heidegger, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

⁶ Zabala S., 2012, «Predicting the Future through Online Data Mining, in *Aljazeera*, October 5th, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/10/5/predicting-the-future-through-online-data-mining/>.

Friedrich Hölderlin said: «Where the danger is, also grows the saving power»⁷. The works of art I explore thrust us into these emergencies.

Q: The twelve artists you discuss are all very different from one another, and the absent emergencies you confront through their works also vary widely. Can we consider your book an attempt to create an interdisciplinary conversation?

SZ: Yes, sure, as long as by “interdisciplinary” you refer to the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the human sciences, as they are represented in *Arcade*, for example. While I still have faith in the conversation (as Richard Rorty understood the term)⁸ among philosophy, literature, and history, I’m concerned that *Naturwissenschaften*, the natural sciences, are too integrated into Adorno’s «die total Verwaltung», the total administrative/organizational system, to contribute freely to the conversation. This does not mean I have ignored scientific research. Quite the contrary. I refer to the work of the marine biologist Judith S. Weis and the glaciologist Eric Rignot to understand the absent emergencies of marine pollution and Antarctica’s glaciers. But I use their research in order to interpret their findings broadly, that is, against the specialization that frames these disciplines. This is why hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, is so important in the book.

Q: Are you referring to hermeneutics “anarchic” vein?

SZ: Yes. Hermeneutics, as I conceive it against Hans-Georg Gadamer’s account, is an adversarial, antagonistic, and dangerous affair. After all, Hermes, as Gerard Bruns explains, was the «many-sided, uncontainable, nocturnal transgressor»⁹. In order to understand works of art that thrust or rescue us *into*

⁷ As quoted by Heidegger M., 1955, *The Question Concerning Technology*. Heidegger M., 1977, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Garland Publishing, p. 28.

⁸ Zabala S., 2017, «Richard Rorty: Life, Pragmatism, and Conversational Philosophy», in *Los Angeles Review of Books* July 22nd, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/richard-rorty-life-pragmatism-and-conversational-philosophy/>.

⁹ Bruns G.L., 1992, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT), p. 215.

absent emergencies, it's necessary to practice interpretation as an existential intervention; our lives are at stake. This is why the danger each interpretation implies is meant to save us.

Q: Recently, both Silvia Mazzini¹⁰ and Martin Woessner¹¹ said your book “is not aesthetic, but rather, exquisitely political,” that is, “continues the political struggle” you began in *Hermeneutic Communism* (coauthored with Gianni Vattimo). Do you agree?

SZ: If by “political struggle” we refer to an existential resistance, I agree. But just as I don't see *Hermeneutic Communism* as a political book, neither is *Why Only Art Can Save Us* a contribution to aesthetics or to art theory. Instead, they are both attempts to disclose what remains of Being, that is, existence. This does not mean that communism and visual art are not central themes in the books, but they are functional to the emergence of Being, which has always been philosophy's main concern.

Q: Contrary to Mazzini and Woessner, who wrote favourable reviews, Paul A. Kottman¹² in *Public Seminar*, believes there is a “crisis of authenticity” in academic philosophy and in contemporary art that you share with Cattelan's work. You are both part of the problem.

SZ: I wish! It would be wonderful if my philosophy could do what Cattelan is doing to contemporary art. As far as authenticity is concerned, I would be much more worried if there wasn't a crisis. This would imply a return to metaphysics, modernity, or, even worse, logocentrism. The truth is that art can rescue us into this crisis, and philosophy can interpret its meaning. Let's keep doing both.

¹⁰ Mazzini S., 2018, «Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency», in *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*, March 2nd, https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/15506_why-only-art-can-save-us-aesthetics-and-the-absence-of-emergency-reviewed-by-%E2%80%A2silvia-mazzini/.

¹¹ Woessner M., 2017, «The Art of Survival: On Santiago Zabala's “Why Only Art Can Save Us»», in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 1st, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-art-of-survival-on-santiago-zabalas-why-only-art-can-save-us/>.

¹² Kottman P.A., 2018, «Fake Art and Inauthenticity in Philosophy», in *Public Seminar*, March 20th, <https://publicseminar.org/2018/03/fake-art-and-inauthenticity-in-philosophy/>.

**PART 2 | CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC
RESEARCH PRACTICES**

DELAY AS A CONDITION FOR NEW METHODOLOGIES

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The recent introduction of practice-led PhD programmes in Italy – formalized only in 2023 – marks a significant institutional shift, prompting a reconsideration of artistic research not merely as a definitional issue, but as a structural one. It requires the repositioning of artistic research within pedagogical and institutional frameworks that move beyond inherited Eurocentric, patriarchal, and class-based paradigms, fostering a genuinely cross-disciplinary field of inquiry. At the same time, current debates tend to prioritise new tools and methodologies, while overlooking the conditions under which research is produced and validated¹. It is undeniable that there is an issue of form and content for the arts researcher: while the academic discourse tends to privilege the formal articulation of research outputs alongside their demonstrable contribution to knowledge, artistic practice remains fundamentally oriented toward processes of meaning-making – processes that often resist, or exceed, the conventions of traditional academic frameworks². Furthermore, in consideration of the Italian context, it is particularly evident the need to critically engage with the national cultural and artistic specific framework, which remain central

¹ See Knowles J.G., Cole A.L., 2007, eds., *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, Sage, London.

² Biggs M., Büchler D., 2012, «Research into Practice and A/r/tography: A Study of Kinship», in *Visual Arts Research*, vol. 38, n. 2, Winter, University of Illinois Press, Champaign (IL).

yet insufficiently theorized in an international perspective. This is especially relevant within a national system still shaped by consolidated structures of monitoring, management, and evaluation, which continue to regulate access to research funding and, more broadly, the recognition of artistic practice as research.

Over the past three decades, the expansion of doctoral programmes in fine arts academies and art schools has generated a substantial body of literature attempting to define artistic research. This corpus – composed predominantly of journal articles, alongside a smaller number of monographs and edited volumes – reveals a set of recurring concerns: the comparison between artistic and scientific research; the problem of evaluation; and the role of writing within processes of academic validation. While these debates have been productive, they often remain framed within oppositional models that risk obscuring the specific epistemological conditions of artistic practice.

These issues also emerged during the seminar *Theories and Practices of Contemporary Artistic Research: A Transdisciplinary Approach*. The speakers in the session *Contemporary Artistic Research Practices* – Samuel Bianchini, Elena Cologni, Akram Zaatari, Rosita Mariani and Leonella Grasso Caprioli (Luca Marenzio National Conservatory of Music, Brescia) – contributed to identifying different domains within artistic research. Their contributions highlighted points of convergence and divergence, as well as differences in the evaluation of research across various international academic systems.

The discussion that followed brought into focus a range of methodologies within university research related to artistic practice, including the potential hybridisation with approaches derived from scientific fields. It also reaffirmed the equal status of practice in relation to theoretical research, a principle that underpins both practice-led and practice-based artistic research.

In light of these discussions, and in relation to the newly established PhD programmes at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, the present text articulates its inquiry through two foundational questions: how can artistic research be defined in relation to practice-based methodologies? And through which processes can such approaches be legitimised within academic systems that often remain rigid and, at times, exclusionary? This text addresses these questions by situating them within a broader historical and pedagogical perspective, engaging with the experiences of those who have designed and implemented doctoral programmes in artistic practice, in order to understand how validation operates within – and is shaped by – specific institutional frameworks.

1 | Artistic Practice as Research: Between Formation and Method

A useful point of departure lies in reconsidering the processes through which artistic and academic subjectivities are formed. In traditional academic trajectories, the transition from post-graduate study to independent research is marked by the production of a first substantial written work – often a monograph – which establishes the researcher’s capacity for critical reflection and methodological autonomy. A parallel transformation may be observed within artistic practice. The passage from a single exhibition – such as a graduate show – to a sustained artistic trajectory requires not only technical development, but also the gradual construction of a critical framework through which the artist is able to interrogate their own work. This process unfolds over time through experimentation and continuous engagement with broader artistic and theoretical contexts. It is within this expanded field that artistic practice acquires the potential to operate as a form of research. Such a perspective makes it possible to move beyond reductive distinctions between artistic activity and artistic research. What

is at stake is not the opposition between subjective and objective modes of knowledge, but rather the capacity of artistic practice to generate questions, to develop methods and produce forms of understanding that may be shared, discussed, and evaluated within a given context.

In this regard, the work of Griselda Pollock remains particularly influential. In establishing the PhD programme in Fine Art at the University of Leeds in 1992, Pollock proposed the “«double axis of validity and significance» as a guiding principle for both theoretical and practice-based research. According to Pollock «the researcher is obligated to look to the left and the right, to evaluate the state of research in the area [...] in the field into which s/he wishes to intervene», and must make a «significant contribution/intervention, that mark itself off as making a difference, extending knowledge while still belonging to what currently ‘makes sense’»³. This formulation emphasises, on the one hand, the necessity of situating one’s work within an existing field of inquiry, and on the other, the importance of producing an intervention capable of extending that field in a meaningful way. From this point of view, artistic practice may be understood as research when it is structured through a set of questions and methods that allow it to be positioned within a broader discourse.

However, as Pollock also argues, it is essential to distinguish between creative production and research as such. Artistic outputs – whether visual, performative, or sonic – do not constitute research in themselves but may function as components of a broader research process when situated within a framework of critical reflection.

This implies the necessity of environments in which artistic practice, theoretical reflection, and historical inquiry are not treated as separate domains, but are instead brought into

³ Pollock G., 2008, «An Engaged Contribution to Thinking about Interpretation in Research», in *Working Papers in Art and Design*, vol. 5.

continuous relation. Fine art academies are particularly well positioned to sustain such an approach, as they bring together expertise across these domains. However, it remains essential to challenge established disciplinary boundaries, moving beyond the traditional division between theory and practice in order to foster new forms of knowledge. Here Pollock explicitly sought to «defy the existing and well-entrenched divisions between fine art and art history, and between art practice and theory, between theory and history». Through the establishment of a feminist, practice-led PhD programme, she created a space of triangulation among artists, art historians, and cultural theorists. These groups engaged collaboratively around shared thematic concerns – such as feminism or the archive – within a pedagogical model that integrated studios, technical facilities, specialised libraries, and collective formats including reading groups, critiques, and symposia. Over time, this approach fostered «new forms of thinking, making and writing at these intersections and translations».

Similarly, the perspective of time in research is articulated also by Jeroen Boomgaard, who, reflecting on his experience at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and the Sandberg Institute, suggests that the question “what is artistic research?” may no longer require a definitive answer. He said: «The question is no longer: what is artistic research? That is behind us; we’ve been there, done that. The answer to that question lies in the practices that assemble under this name here and at other schools and venues»⁴. Artistic research is constituted through a plurality of practices and can only be understood retrospectively, in relation to their specific contexts. It operates as a speculative mode of inquiry, often exceeding discursive reasoning and privileging long-term reflection over immediate

⁴ Boomgaard J., 2022, «Hanging On – Closing Speech on Artistic Research», in *Gerrit Rietveld Academie Website*, October 13rd, <https://rietveldacademie.nl/nl/page/24342/hanging-on---closing-speech-by-jeroen-boomgaard-on-artistic-research>.

resolution. Framing such practices as “research” creates a conceptual and temporal space for delay, indeterminacy, and open-ended exploration, allowing artistic processes to unfold according to their own logic rather than external demands for closure.

2 | Towards a specific contextual frame

If artistic research resists a fixed definition, it nonetheless produces a field structured by recurring methodologies and patterns. The attempt to legitimise this field through comparison with scientific research has often resulted in the marginalisation of artistic practices, which are frequently dismissed as overly subjective or lacking broader social relevance. However, such comparisons overlook the extent to which all forms of research are governed by historically contingent criteria that determine what may be recognised as knowledge. Rather than opposing artistic and scientific research, it becomes more productive to consider them as distinct yet coexisting modes of inquiry, each operating through its own procedures of validation. In this sense, the question is not one of equivalence, but of recognising the specificity of artistic research within a broader epistemological landscape. Already in 2010, Torsten Kälve­mark observed that artistic research had entered «a stage of maturity. Policy documents for good practice and more rigorous quality assurance regimes in many countries have helped to shape deeper respect for doctoral training and research activities in art schools»⁵. His work contributed to the recognition of artistic

⁵ Kälve­mark T., 2011, «University Politics and Practice-based Research», in Biggs M., Karlsson H. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, Routledge, London, p. 22.

research as a legitimate field, while also highlighting the need to develop appropriate evaluative criteria⁶.

Within this framework, the philosopher Anke Haarmann provides a possible compromise in her book *Artistic Research*⁷. She makes a distinction between two modalities of imagination: on the one hand, as a tool for deconstructing and reconfiguring existing relations; on the other, as an aesthetic mode through which alternative realities and transformative possibilities may be accessed. For this reason, Haarmann suggests that the outcomes of artistic research should be understood not simply as knowledge, but as *Einsicht* (*insight*). The notion of *insight* foregrounds the situated and interpretative character of artistic processes. Instead of producing objective data, artistic research generates forms of understanding that remain open, negotiable, and embedded in specific contexts. In this sense, as also argued by Antje Velsing, «artistic research should also be understood as a space of action and negotiation, within which alternative cultural or sociological realities may emerge»⁸.

Considering the above, artistic research must be understood as a structured yet evolving field, shaped by recurring approaches and methodologies. Within this framework, writing is not merely documentary but operates as a critical instrument through which artistic thinking is articulated, situated, and historically grounded. Far from occupying a marginal position,

⁶ Källemark was senior advisor at the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education until 2007. For several years, he was head of a working group on practice-based artistic research within the Swedish Research Council and dealt with the recognition of artistic research in the Swedish university system encouraging those responsible in arts schools and departments to develop standards and methods in order to increase the respect for this field.

⁷ Haarmann A., 2019, *Artistic Research: Eine epistemologische Ästhetik*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag.

⁸ Velsing A., 2024, «State of the Art», in *The Bodies We Are (Not)*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, pp. 29–54.

artistic research offers a privileged standpoint from which to interrogate the very conditions of knowledge production. Yet, precisely because of this, it remains exposed to the risk of becoming an instrument of regulation and regression. Its critical force can only be sustained insofar as it actively resists its own disciplinary consolidation, preserving instead a capacity for self-reflexive critique, openness, and transformation.

BETWEEN ART AND RESEARCH

A Test-Exhibition Format as a New Mode of Publicization

Samuel Bianchini

If publishing is, first and foremost, about making something public, between science and art, academic necessities and artistic requirements, how can we envision new modes of publication, modes of “publicization” that allow for new forms of encounters with audiences, primarily through the use of active and interactive non-textual forms, media, and situations, or at least those not based on text?¹.

“Publish or perish”: this well-known expression underscores the emphasis placed on publication as a key factor in the academic validation of research. These academic publications are primarily conceived as well-documented articles for specialized journals or presentations at peer gatherings such as conferences. In fact, they are primarily aimed at communities of experts. While scientific “popularization” can help reach wider audiences, it is undoubtedly necessary to consider other avenues, other modes of access to this knowledge and experience, by giving more space to the “sensitive” (aesthetic) dimensions in which art and design possess a certain expertise.

¹ This question was already at the heart of the project (2017-2018) entitled «Non-textual Publications: The Aesthetic Experience as a Publicization of Scientific Research» directed by the author of this article and winner of the 2016 call for projects of the Laboratoire d'excellence des arts et médiations humaines (Laboratory of Excellence of Arts and Human Mediations – Arts-H2H) supported by the University Paris 8 Vincennes – Saint Denis with the École des Arts Décoratifs as a partner.

Indeed, unlike scientists, artists and designers have powerful “mediums” at their disposal to make their work public: exhibitions, live performances, the production of objects, the dissemination of media productions, and so on. Between these academic conventions and these types of artistic productions and situations – which facilitate engagement with an audience – can we forge new paths that meet the demands of both the academic research community and the creative circles? While the intersections between arts, design, and sciences are valued, how can we explore alternative paths by drawing on both sensory experience and the transmission of knowledge? Consequently, could hybrid forms of dissemination allow us to address both experts and broader audiences? How can we experiment with these new formats, measuring their impacts to better model them?

If these questions argue for cooperation between scientific and artistic disciplines, then the latter must be considered from a new perspective: the development of research in art and design, practice-based research, and “research-creation,” which is currently experiencing exponential growth worldwide. This development of “research-creation” is now part of a surge in radically multidisciplinary work. Thus, at EnsadLab (the laboratory of the *École des Arts Décoratifs – PSL*), at the confluence of academic research and artistic creation, we have been conducting projects for several years with multidisciplinary teams involving artists, designers, engineers, and researchers in anthropology, ethnography, cognitive science, physics, chemistry, and biology. It must be said, we were particularly supported and stimulated for these multidisciplinary experiments, from 2017 to 2023, by the Chaire arts & sciences of the *École polytechnique*, the *École des Arts Décoratifs – PSL* and the *Fondation Daniel et Nina Carasso*.

It is within this dynamic that we proposed exploring alternative ways of engaging with audiences and society through new “dispositifs”, new publication formats, ideally not based on text. The strategy proposed here consists of hybridizing

approaches, including exploring and revaluing secondary, sometimes outdated or undervalued, academic paths whose forms can resonate with artistic practices: demos, workshops, tutorials, poster sessions, roundtables, etc. It is these new forms of hybrid publications, with a strong artistic focus and capable of reaching non-expert audiences, that we have termed “publicization” to distinguish them from traditional publications, from “papers.”

Thus we have experimented with new forms of poster sessions conceived as meals², debates staged with objects in the manner of dissection sessions of past centuries³, demos designed as performances, performed thesis defenses, public multidisciplinary workshops integrating a radio⁴ or a real-time publishing system, the design of furniture for public speaking⁵, multi-platform visual publications with the .able magazine⁶.

We would like to return here to one of these formats which we have already begun to experiment with but whose potential remains to be exploited: “test-exhibitions”.

Artists are expected to exhibit. Evaluating artifacts, especially with respect to potential users, is becoming common in engineering sciences and beyond in the cognitive sciences. At a time when interdisciplinarity must make it possible to better respond to the complex issues of our societies, combining arts and sciences as well as research and creation is an increasingly understood and well-supported approach.

Within this context, how can one rethink exhibitions as embodying the convergence of these two approaches; how can one consider this public situation no longer as about presenting

² See: <https://reflectiveinteraction.ensadlab.fr/symposium-hors-doeuvres/?lang=en>.

³ See: <https://dispotheque.org/en/dissect>.

⁴ See: <https://reflectiveinteraction.ensadlab.fr/workshop-behavioral-matter-centre-pompidou/?lang=en>.

⁵ See: <https://reflectiveinteraction.ensadlab.fr/les-assises-du-design/?lang=en>.

⁶ See: www.able-journal.org.

intangible results signaling the end of a process, but rather as a place for negotiation and evaluation with an audience?

Associating these approaches should make it possible to change the actual format of exhibitions by offering the audience a new form of experience that is as much aesthetic as reflective. While retaining its demanding artistic criteria, exhibition can thus become a platform for observation as well as qualitative and quantitative evaluation, requiring a rethinking of protocols along with spatial, temporal and socio-technical arrangements. In order to make the most of this convergence, rather than simply juxtaposing a living lab and a white cube, how can we design and create an original research exhibition? The new test-exhibition format making it possible to combine aesthetic experience and scientific experimentation for the benefit of audiences and researchers, and beyond that, of society as a whole.

Early in 2018, an event titled *Nous ne sommes pas le nombre que nous croyons être/We Are Not the Number We Think We Are* was organized to launch the activities of the Chaire arts & sciences. More than five thousand people were welcomed at the Cité internationale des Arts in Paris for this thirty-six-hour event: one day, one night, and then another day. In this framework, a first “test-exhibition” was organized to present what we call “behavioral objects”: non-figurative robotic works of art, which, through their movement and capacity for interaction, demonstrate “behavior”. Coming from a long-research project beginning in 2012, a series of that kind of objects created by the team were presented – in this “test-exhibition” – one by one on a small stage and evaluated for their expressive capabilities by colleagues from related disciplines (as Cognitive Sciences and Anthropology) and attendees. Works specifically “put to the test” were *Bug Antenna* (2018) by Raphaëlle Kerbrat, *Toasters* (2018) by Olivain Porry, *To be not perfect* (2018) by Cécile Bucher, *Unidentified 001* by Aurélie Hoegy (2018), *Fauteuil handicapé* (2014–2019), and *Hors Cadre* (2015) by myself, the author of this text.

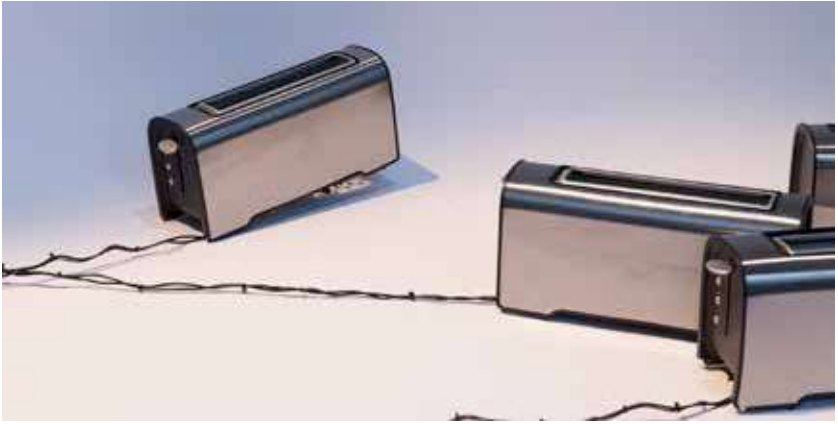


Figure 1 | Olivain Porry, *Toaster*, 2018. *Nous ne sommes pas le nombre que nous croyons être / We Are Not the Number We Think We Are*, Cité international des Arts, Paris, February 2018. Photo: Amélie Canon, EnsAD.

The invention of this new exhibition format stems from several observations. First, when creating artworks that incorporate cutting-edge technologies, and even more so interactive technologies, exhibiting them to the public is always a challenge, especially the first few times. These initial exhibitions necessarily retain an experimental character. They test these works in a new context, which, because they are interactive, influences them. It is then difficult to anticipate all the ways in which the context will interact, starting with human actions. In this case, when the works engage the public's physical activity, when they become "praticables"⁷, a particularly complex field opens up: how to configure such works so that they react appropriately to their audience in this specific context? It is now necessary to observe, study, and evaluate how works and the public interact in order to take these experiences into account and evolve the works accordingly, with works now being able to become incremental and therefore "versionable".

⁷ Bianchini S., Verhagen E., 2016, eds., *Praticable. From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA).

There are a few models that can serve as references for developing this type of exhibition format, such as “living labs”: spaces designed to experiment with users on new products or services. While this is a relevant model for us, it is more closely linked to user research, focusing on objects or devices where activity is driven by the tasks that these devices allow to be accomplished. Another area of reference should then be considered: the humanities and social sciences, or even cognitive sciences, which require experimentation with audiences. Indeed, whether they employ a qualitative and/or quantitative approach, many studies conducted in these disciplines rely on data collection methods with human cohorts. Thus, we can draw inspiration from methodologies ranging from anthropology (semi-structured interviews, guided tours, etc.) to ergonomics (self-confrontation of participants asked to comment on their filmed interaction), or even from quantitative experimentation conducted with dedicated technical devices on human subjects, as in cognitive science. Let's take a concrete example at the intersection of these different fields: in 2014, Les Abattoirs, a Contemporary Art Center in Toulouse, in the south of France, hosted an exhibition by the artist Céleste Boursier-Mougenot. Among the numerous installations presented, *offroad* featured three motorized grand pianos that moved independently in a large space, sometimes gently colliding with one another. The public was invited to enter space. Leveraging our close relationship with this artist, we were able to set up a qualitative and quantitative study with a small team of cognitive science researchers to analyze the various ways in which the public interacts with the artwork. This allowed Florent Levillain, Elisabetta Zibetti, and Sébastien Lefort to conduct this analysis and publish an article the following year at the CHI conference⁸.

⁸ Levillain F., Lefort S. & Zibetti E., 2015, «Moving on its Own: How do Audience Interacts with an Autonomous Moving Artwork», in *CHI EA '15: Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 695-702. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2702613.2702973>.



Figure 2 | Left: Céleste Boursier- Mougenot, *offroad (hors piste)*, 2014. Mixed media. Floor dimensions 15×17 m. Three motorized grand pianos; weathervane and anemometer installed outside the exhibition space; video-assisted control; contact microphones; amplifiers. Produced by Les Abattoirs / Frac Midi-Pyrénées, Toulouse. Installation view, *Céleste Boursier- Mougenot, perturbations*, curated by Olivier Michelon, Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, January 31 – May 4, 2014. Photo: Benoit Viguiet. Right: Zenital camera view on the installation used to analyze the situation by computer vision; and a graph to express the analysis: four clusters emerge when we consider the combination between the time spent at the periphery of the installation (y axis) and the time spent in contact with the pianos (x axis). Image and visuals published in Elisabetta Zibetti and Florent Levillain, *offroad: Profiling the Artwork and the Audience Experience* in Bianchini, S. and Quinz, E. (Eds.). (2016). *Behavioral Objects I: Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, a Case Study*. Sternberg, pp. 125-153.

When, in 2019, I was invited to chair the “Robotics & Art” program at the major ICRA conference⁹, the concept of a “test-exhibition” became all the more compelling, as this exhibition was primarily intended for a community of researchers – nearly 5,000 of whom were expected in Paris in June 2020. The theme was also a natural fit, since my colleague Emanuele Quinz and I had already been developing this research program on “Behavioral Objects”¹⁰ for almost eight years. Thus, as curators, we conceived this “test-exhibition”, which ultimately did not materialize due to the Covid-19 crisis that swept the globe that year. Nevertheless, it remains an original and quite ambitious concept that can be

⁹ IEEE – International Conference on Robotics and Automation.

¹⁰ See: Bianchini S., Quinz E., 2016, eds., *Behavioral Objects I: Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, a Case Study*. Sternberg, London.

presented here as a project yet to be realized or as a reference for future projects in this field.

Behavioral Objects was an exhibition experimenting with this new format; it was designed as a test-exhibition: a presentation of robotic artworks combined with a process to observe and analyze these pieces of art and design as well as their connections with the audience. In an original scenography developed by well-known architect Philippe Rahm, spectators are offered an aesthetic experience of robotic objects in the field of art and design, alongside a study in which the same audience can take part.

Featuring pull, surprise, suspense, attention, avoidance, emotion and projection factors, the artworks involved are indeed likely to provoke distinctive relationships. All are what we might label behavioral objects. In other words, these non-figurative objects with forms that are abstract or utilitarian, such as chairs or bags, lack the capacity to express living character through their visual appearance; yet they move, and their movement infuses them with a life¹¹. Having become quasi-subjects, they challenge us and hold our attention, provoking reactions and arousing new types of relationships that we must then observe in order to better understand them. To examine these relationships between humans and robotic objects, the exhibition features a distinctive built-in system combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, involving the participation of a group of researchers representing a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography, ergonomics and cognitive sciences. Based on advanced interactive machine learning techniques, these observations are then made possible thanks to a set of graphic data visualizations specifically designated for this situation. Presented on two video walls visible from the outskirts of the exhibition, these visualizations are aimed at both scientific observers and audiences, thereby playing a mediating role between the analytical system and the artworks themselves.

¹¹ See: Bianchini S., Quinz E., 2023, «Behavioral Objects: Beyond Media?», in Weibel P. (ed.), *BioMedia – The Age of Media with Life-like Behavior*, Spector Books, London, pp. 44-51.

This dual dimension, taking us from exhibition to evaluation, from reflection to contemplation, forms a complete experience that is offered to the audience, starting with ICRA, which is essentially composed of researchers. Far from being mere spectators or testers, members of the audience are invited within this framework to alternate between engaging in aesthetic experience with works and reflecting on their relationship with this new type of object.

What is at stake at the heart of this proposal is the notion of behavior, shared between human and nonhuman entities, underlining the extent to which interaction is also the incarnation of interdependence. Bordering on animism, all the works presented pay particular attention to this behavioral dimension – both operational and ontological – forming the very bedrock of robotics.

The exhibition gives an account of this approach through some 20 artworks, based on a selection that may be revised according to the context within which they are hosted. They include historical works of art and design such as a *Float* by Robert Breer or those of leading or emerging artists and designers, including Cod.Act, Sofian Audry and Rosalie Dumont-Gagné, Paula Gaetano Adi, Ying Gao, Petra Gemeinboeck and Rob Saunders, Christophe Guberan, Raphaëlle Kerbrat, Aurélie Mossé, Jonathan Pêpe, Olivain Porry, Delphine Reist, Robotlab, Arcangelo Sassolino, Fabien Zocco, etc.



Figure 3 | Samuel Bianchini, *Snakable*, robotic cable and inverted TV, 2020. *BioMedia – The Age of Media with Life-like Behavior*, ZKM | Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, December 2021 – August 2022. Curators: Peter Weibel, Sarah Donderer and Daria Mille. An artwork that was supposed to be displayed and tested in the *Behavioral Objects* test-exhibition. Photos: Samuel Bianchini

To implement this new test-exhibition format, it seemed obvious to us that we also needed to work on its form and scenography. Open to experimental forms and enjoying close ties with the art world, architect Philippe Rahm has designed an original scenography specifically for this new test-exhibition format. While this scenography was initially conceived for a particular location (that of the Palais des Congrès de Paris dedicated to ICRA 2020), it was also imagined right from the outset as being adaptable to different contexts. Thus, the principle conceived – a platform – can be thought of at different scales and in different forms on the ground by simply resting on it. Like an open stage, this surface raised 24 cm off the ground welcomes behavioral objects as visitors, while allowing for wandering and observation by turning around it.

Entitled *Intensity variation without intent*, this scenographic project features a particularly horizontal open space, a kind of continuous ecosystem. Integrating movable elements and plants, the stage implements a flat ontology designed «to equate people and things, without granting privileges to the subject», in the words of philosopher Manuel de Landa as quoted by Philippe Rahm. Avoiding any hierarchical and linear effect, Rahm instead relies on a luminous and colorimetric atmosphere offered by a neon lattice that creates soft gradients, a variation of light intensity between darkness and blinding light, heat and cold.

The onstage experience enables a direct relationship with the artworks, whereas looking at them from a distance, from the platform's surroundings, encourages reflexivity. The very response is then evoked or even provoked when the audience discovers, in a second step, the screens displaying data visualizations that reflect their experience, on the back of the walls forming the platform's contours. Offering a space for experience and then the conditions for reflexivity, this scenographic proposal thus fully embraces the dual dimension of the test-exhibition.

With this new test-exhibition format, the exhibition is no longer just a place for the presentation of results, but instead part of the research as a platform for both observation and evaluation. In order to set up such a project, a socio-technical apparatus must be

associated with the exhibition to study the relations between the audience – human beings – and the artworks presented, which all integrate a behavioral dimension through their robotization.



Figure 4 | Philippe Rahm, project for the scenography of *Behavioral Objects*, a “test-exhibition” part of the “ICRA-X: Robotics & Art Program” of the IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation (ICRA) in 2020.

Our proposal consists in deploying a real-time system for capturing, analyzing and visualizing a certain amount of data related to human-robot interactions within the observation platform. Essentially based on a network of 3D cameras and open-source developments, this dispositive integrates advanced techniques of interactive machine learning offering powerful means of analysis to the scientific community associated with the system. The latter is indeed designed and deployed in close collaboration with a multidisciplinary research community, ranging from anthropology to ergonomics and cognitive sciences, which define the modalities for using interactive learning as well as the types of qualitative and quantitative data to be collected in relation with their studies.

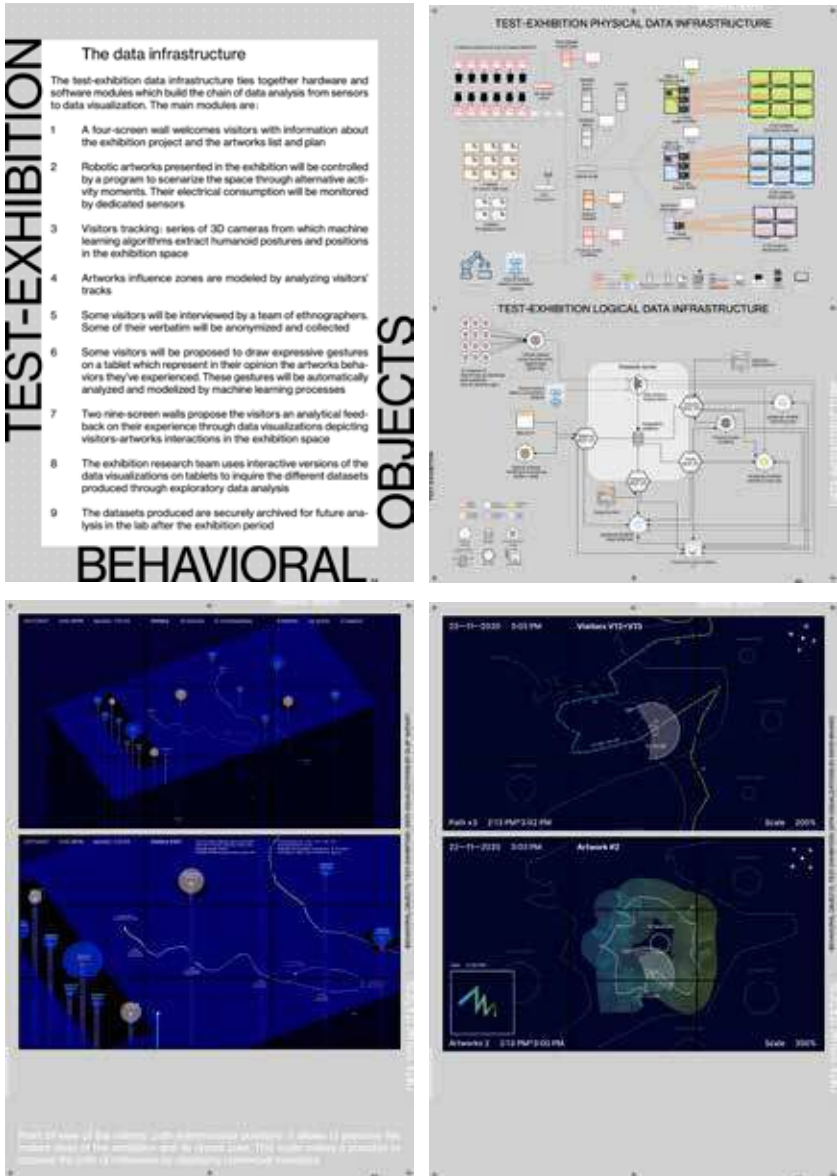


Figure 5 | Pages from the exhibition brochure of *Behavioral Objects*, a “test-exhibition” part of the “ICRA-X: Robotics & Art Program” of the IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation (ICRA) in 2020: here, the data infrastructure and examples of data visualizations, by Olaf Avenati (left) and David Bihanic (right).

All data and analysis are subject to visualizations that facilitate the understanding of what is observed and even, to a certain extent, enable initial on-the-spot, real-time examination. Although they may appear to be intended primarily for researchers associated with the system, the data thus represented are also intended for ICRA audiences. They are thus an integral part of the exhibition's scenography, being presented on screen walls around the platform where the artworks are displayed.

Three main studies have been selected by these researchers, each exploring one facet of human-robot interactions through a suitable protocol. The first study aims to build a model of engagement on the basis of data on visitor trajectories and postures captured and analyzed with the help of machine learning during the exhibition. The second study seeks to evaluate the expressive parameters of a robotic artwork, using a new methodological tool based on the automatic capture and analysis of gestural imitation data produced by visitors. The third study makes use of traditional ethnographic methods to assess the social, symbolic and cultural dimensions of the relationship to robotic objects, allowing visitors to qualify this relationship. Such studies generate data, and we have therefore anticipated the ecological and ethical management of this data.

While data collection systems can produce precise data, the latter can however be quite abundant. In order to reduce the amount of data very early in the technical chain, so as to retain only the essential with which our teams will be able to work, we wish to adopt a modular data processing system designed to reduce the amount of data directly at the stage of camera output before it is aggregated. This should enable a significant reduction in the processing and storage of data, which can thus be done at a lower energy cost.

The use of computer vision, confined to skeleton data detection, means people are in no way recognizable and this automatic abstraction thus ensures their anonymity. In addition to this technical guarantee, our sociotechnical system complies with the prevailing ethical rules. In order to ensure this respect and compliance, our entire observation and evaluation project would have been submitted to an ethics and research committee for approval.

This project, planned for June 2020, could not be realized because the entire world was in lockdown. For ICRA, we ultimately developed an alternative exhibition format in just a few weeks: “Art Tease,” to bring the artwork *Dear* (2015), exhibited for the occasion in Beijing at the studio of the Chinese artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, to life remotely. Unable to experience it in a “real” space, the public could, via the web, experience it in real time, triggering the artwork to see it come to life for them, in response to their actions.



Figure 6 | Screenshot of “Art Tease”, a web-based exhibition of the artwork *Dear* by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, for the ICRA-X Robotics & Art Program, from June 1 to June 4 2020. This web exhibition was curated by Samuel Bianchini (ICRA-X Robotics & Art Program Chair), Emanuele Quinz and Xiaoying Juliette Yuan. The web system and interface were developed by the EnsadLab’s Reflective Interaction Research Group. This project benefits from the support of the Chair arts & sciences of the École polytechnique, the École des Arts Décoratifs – PSL and the Fondation Daniel et Nina Carasso and the collaboration of the Galleria Continua (San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana / Roma).

While test-exhibitions represent a new format, they are nonetheless exhibitions: they offer the public optimal situations for aesthetic experiences. It is important to remember that. And if these exhibitions are augmented by this dimension, which also makes them testing platforms, this augmentation must be fully embraced from an artistic perspective, as well as being finely articulated with the presentation of the works: it is a promise of a complementary experience. Indeed, the conditions for observation and analysis must be integrated in such a way as to be artistically relevant (for both artists and curators) as well as perceptible and understandable to the public. The public must then be able to decide whether or not to contribute to the study. Neither the artworks nor the public should be held hostage by such a proposition. On the contrary, adopting this type of exhibition format requires working on it as such, well in advance, to ensure it is fully coherent and impactful. The aim is to offer a new situation to artists, researchers, and the public alike – a context that is both experimental and “experimentable” open to experimentation by the public. Everyone could be transformed by it. Beyond this situation, as museums increasingly question how to renew their relationships with their audiences and as the sciences seek to rethink the modalities of their social impact, it is the cultural institutions themselves that could thus be reimagined.

ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH AS ART

An Artist's 25-Year-Long Trajectory Within (And Outside) the UK Academic System

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Introduction

This account traces the evolution of my art practice research to reveal how it interwove with the increasing understanding of art as a vital research tool. My practice has actively shaped this debate, investigating the relationship between (un)knowing and creativity, and how tacit knowledge has emerged in creative research since the late nineties.

For over two decades, researchers have explored these questions through innovative approaches embedded in art, design, film, performance, and writing. Today, the role of art-based research remains pivotal; however, I wonder whether we should distinguish practice from practice research, or whether this distinction might be outdated. Art practice research is original and rigorous, while significantly influencing academia, mainly by challenging traditional methodologies to open new paths.

I defined my work as «art practice as research as art» (Cologni, 2020), as a genre (Bishop, 2023) within other creative practices. Artistic research is often driven by interdisciplinary and collaborative methods, which are adopted in academia and beyond. By disrupting linear narratives and conventional methods, such interconnections yield unexpected results, creating new territories of knowledge that transcend the theory-practice divide. These outcomes challenge traditional cultural approaches while fostering innovative thinking and contributing to critical reflection on, and engagement with, today's crises and the increasingly eroded notion of truth, forging new paths.



Figure 1 | *Navigation Diagrams*, ©Elena Cologni 2013, MKGallery

Tracing my creative journey reveals its deep connection to the evolution of art as a vital research tool. My practice contributed to shaping the consolidation of a context of artistic academic research in the UK, and I will therefore briefly discuss it chronologically as it intersected with it, while at the time resisting rules and requirements from within, thus opening up new possibilities.

I will then refer to systems of measuring quality and impact according to the UK government's Research Excellence Framework Exercise, the latest of which I led for Unit of Assessment 32 (Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory) at my current institution. For over two decades now, researchers have explored these questions through innovative approaches embedded in various forms of art. Although research-based art is a global phenomenon, it is inseparable from the rise of doctoral programs for artists in the West, specifically in Europe, in the early nineties.

According to a 2012 survey conducted by art historian James Elkins, as referred to by Clare Bishop (2023), 73 institutions in Europe offered PhDs in studio art, 42 of which were in the UK alone, with only 5 in Canada, 7 in the US, and 4 in Brazil. So, the UK was at the forefront of this process, and this was the result of a political context supporting this success. In 1998, the Culture

Secretary Chris Smith questioned assumptions about the need to devote attention to halting the long decline in agriculture and manufacturing and instead drew attention to a group of “creative industries” – the fine arts prominent among them – that had been booming. They had, he suggested, generated 50,000 jobs and £60bn in revenues during 1997-98.

Meanwhile, over a one-hundred-and-fifty-year period, the number of artists achieving recognition and exercising influence on the international stage has also grown, in proportion to the increase in the scale of global interest in fine art. And it seems reasonable to suggest that Britain’s achievements on the international art stage point to the quality of higher education in fine art practice. A model which exemplifies the change in art university education is that of the University of the Arts London, where I completed my PhD (1999–2003), as referred to in the university’s process of validation for degree-awarding powers.

The research path in universities starts with degrees leading to M.Phil (Master in Philosophy) and PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), which in art in the UK were first awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards CNAA in 1974. Through article G33.7, this gave candidates the opportunity to add creative material to their written thesis. However, following the statement that “*the practice-based doctorate* advances knowledge partly by means of practice” (early working party report for Council of Graduate Education in the UK, 1997), in the nineties, the central question in the debate pushed this further, asking: can visual art practice be accepted as a form of research in itself? My own PhD thesis, «The Artist Performative Practice within the Anti-Ocularcentric Discourse» (2004), was an attempt to respond to this question. It was driven by practical ‘experimentation’; it included a reflective journal and its contextualisation, not much different from how I had worked as an artist until then.

My research through practice adopted strategies that challenged representations of the self in Western culture and proposed an alternative to the modernist subject, emphasising the relational nature of fruition processes. This was to evolve into

the dialogic approaches which are at the core of my practice today. More specifically, while engaging with themes of identity, memory, and place since 1999, I tested and adopted strategies to stimulate an interchange between artist and audience, leading to the current dialogic approach *caring-with* (Cologni, 2020). From the process of fruition (Cologni, 2004), to caring-with within feminist care aesthetics, my relational and dialogic art strategies have been underpinned by notions coming from psychology and phenomenology, also understood through art history¹.



Figure 2 | *Ancora Cerca*, ©Elena Cologni 1999 (detail of a video still, from documentation of CCTV performance), National Portrait Gallery, London

Research tools also became embedded in my practice and overlapped with issues of temporality and documentation in the site-specific performance *Ancora Cerca* (1999) at the National Portrait Gallery in London. At the time of my study, although

¹ Jacques Lacan's notion of *object-a*, the drive, and the desire of the other (psychoanalysis attempts to bridge the gap between the objective and the subjective), and the mirror stage (Cologni, 1999); Merleau-Ponty's *chiasmus* (intertwining for the co-functioning of self and other) (Cologni, 2004); Amelia Jones' understanding of the performative self through the *interchange* (Jones, 1997; my own re-definition of fruition (Cologni, 2004) as time-based and including a gap; a reading of Gestalt and Kanizsa in terms of embodiment (Cologni, 2011; 2024).

I was coming from a sculpture background, the performative turn was permeating culture. It had called attention to the expressive dimension of both actions and action-based events, including staged social culture. It focused on the practical dimension of the generation of cultural meanings and experiences, in order to understand the transformative aspects of culture on the basis of events, practices, material embodiments, and media forms (De Gruyter, 2016). In addition to increased attention paid to *culture as performance*, what was also groundbreaking was its specific contribution to the critical analysis of processes. The performative turn represented a reorientation, a fundamental shift from the central concept of structure to the guiding idea of social process: «performance is a paradigm of process» (Schechner, 1987).

Together with my fellow research students at the time, we were told that the task for us was to align studio research processes with research methods in the physical and human sciences, as these were accepted research practices. However, I started to question this by contributing to the debate on practice as research (PAR) in 2001. In the UK, in drama, dance and the performing arts, these issues have been the subject of an Arts and Humanities Research Board (now Council)-funded project at Bristol University, *Performance as Research in Practice* (PARIP, 2001-05). According to this context, ‘practice as research’ and ‘practice-based research’ – as well as ‘research through practice’, ‘research by practice’, and ‘performance as research’ – are contested terms that resist close definition². ‘Practice as research’ and ‘practice-based research’ are frequently used interchangeably to suggest the crucial relationship in research between theory and practice.

At the time, stressing the importance of *making* seemed to be central to the debate, and a number of new strategies also arose from considering research requirements from within. For example, data collection for research purposes also became an

² <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/faq.htm#4>, accessed on 16th March 2026.

opportunity in art, where its performative and interactive aspects could be used as creative tools, while resisting conventional quantitative approaches. This was, for me, an opportunity to take on a full and real engagement with the public, for example, in my collaborative performance *Diagrammi* (Venice Biennale 1999, Oreste, in Cologni, 2000), based on George Herbert Mead's theories of the social self. Similarly, in the multimedia *Drawing Scents* (2002), a series of scents recreated a place from my memory. These were offered to the public to respond to, and the system recorded their reactions, resulting in a coloured, projection-filled room, interfering with people's engagement with it and thus making the pseudo-scientific attempt void. A paradoxical construct, apt to show how artistic research tends not to answer questions but instead poses new ones.



Figure 3 | *Drawing Scents*, ©Elena Cologni 2002, interactive installation (scented pyramids + macs + projector), Lethaby Gallery, Central Saint Martins, College of Art & Design, London, supported by the Università dell'Immagine, Milan)

As can be seen in these works, the interchange taking place in the live/dialogic encounter is driven by an understanding of *experience as a vehicle for knowledge* (Carr, 1978, p. 8), leading to the production of a form of *practical knowledge*, understood as insight embodied in what we do in the world. I consider artistic action as itself the embodiment of knowledge, underwritten by a logic that emerges in and through the activity itself (Pakes, 2004). In the encounter process between artist, spectator, and artwork, as well as in the process of 'making', a transformation takes place, and *knowledge* is co-created, which is also tacit, situated, and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes.



Figure 4 | *Mnemonic Present, Un-Folding*, ©Elena Cologni 2005 (still from video documentation), GAMeC, Bergamo, Italy

Mnemonic Present, Un-Folding (series, 2004/06) is the outcome of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, conducted while I was a post-doctoral Research Fellow at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (University of the Arts London, 2004/06)³. This project, testing ideas of memorisation in the present, was based on a hypothesis that notions of liveness and presence can be questioned by allowing manipulation of projections and documentation in the live event to serve as the performance's opening stage rather than its point of closure, thus generating a form of mnemonic present (Cologni, 2009). The practical work partially drew on Derrida's notion of 'supplement' (documentation) and a collaboration with cognitive

³ The series of live video installations was the outcome of the project 'Present Memory and Liveness in delivery and reception of video documentation during performance art events', which received a Arts and Humanities Research Council grant while I was a post-doctoral Research Fellow at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London. It was performed at Brown University, Providence, RI, USA; GAMeC, Bergamo Italy; PARIP, Leeds; Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Bologna, Italy; University of Reading; Whitechapel Art Gallery London).

psychologist Prof. Thomas Suddendorf (self-recognition through time delay), contributing to a reappraisal of the contemporary debate on liveness at the time⁴.



Figure 5 | *RE-MOVED*, ©Elena Cologni 2008, Centre for Contemporary Arts Glasgow (CCA), Glasgow international 08, curator Francis McKee

⁴ This was led by the publicly funded Live Art Development Agency in London, UK, to promote and co-ordinate activity in this field, including at Tate (only then starting to include performance in its programming).

Continuing to investigate similar concerns, I developed *Removed*. This site/community-specific project, the outcome of a residency at the Centre for Contemporary Arts Glasgow (CCA), was presented as a one-to-one live installation looking at the erasure of social memory in the city, focusing on the redevelopment of certain areas of Glasgow in the eighties, as perceived by local communities. In this project, as in previous ones, various kinds of temporalities and their representations come into play during the present moment of the audience's interaction with me and the video archive material⁵. As I had described before:

« [...] The experimentation undertaken at the time with forms of gaps, scotoma (in the visual field), apnea (of breathing), amnesia (gap in memory), time-gap (transmission), [...] allow the audience to participate in the event because, just like a spot on a blank page, we/audience fill it in with our brain/life experience/imagination. Process which, if contextualised in relation to the Baudrillian concept of *punctum* and the perceptual Kaniza effect (a perceptual gap is where the eye goes to compensate for a loss): it enables me to define a strategy for the creative process in which the designed *perceptual lacuna* asks to be filled in by audiences» (Cologni, 2010)

This research would later lead me to continue investigating our perception of time in relation to place through dialogic practice research. This increasingly more interdisciplinary approach had proved difficult within the context of schools of art at the time, and so it took me to embark on a residency at the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Cambridge. There, working with Prof. Lisa Saksida and employing place-based and collective experiential approaches, I focused on exploring the glitches in memory processes and the experience of place in the present of recollection⁶.

⁵ Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, Glasgow international08, Scottish Screen Archives, Wysing Arts Centre, York Saint John's University.

⁶ This was in collaboration with Prof Lisa Saksida (then at Cambridge University, now director of the Brain Mind Institute, Western University, Canada).



Figure 6 | *SPA(E)CIOUS*, ©Elena Cologni 2012 (performative installation, wood + 2 projections + remote CCTV + video camera) Wysing Arts Centre, UK.

One of the outcomes of that period of research was the series *Spa(e)cious*⁷, a participatory ‘exercise’ on a pivoting platform, based on psychologist/philosopher James William’s notion of the ‘specious present’, which points to the illusory nature of presentness. One of the outcomes of this is an enhanced sense of interdependence, leading to interconnected movements and an altered sense of time and place. The notion of interdependence was also embedded in later projects, where the reciprocal dynamics of dialogic approaches were paramount (Cologni, 2016), both epistemologically and conceptually, anticipating my current research in care aesthetics.

Participatory approaches are central to my practice, and the term *praxis* also implies social and political aspects. *Praxis*, in fact, from the Greek *phronesis*, is a capacity to respond to the particularities of experience, and to evolving relationships with

⁷ This was part of a residency at the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Cambridge, in collaboration with Prof Lisa Saksida, and in dialogue with Dr Caterina Albano for the University of the Arts London. *SPA(E)CIOUS*, was presented at Wysing Arts Centre; MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, UK; Galleria Artra, Milan; Centre for Artistic Research, Berlin, Utrecht University (2012); Performance Studies international #19, Stanford University; Westminster University, (2013); Oxford University (2015).

others, which, for Aristotle, both enable and flow from living well within the polis (Pakes, 2004). For Aristotle, phronesis is associated with the domain of praxis (social action) rather than poesis (making).

Furthermore, these ideas invite reflection on the complex balance between theory and practice within art practice research. These are often referred to in an antithetic binary opposition, but one could consider art and theory as two different forms of practice interrelated through a system of interaction and transferences. Also, it is suggested that art theory and practice mutually participate in one another, if we consider the ancient Greek roots of *theoria* (contemplation-witness) and *theoros* (participant), and understand this to indicate theory as a mode of participation in practice. (Davey, 2006, p. 38).

My above-mentioned research projects are only a few of the ones developed since 1999 in collaboration with spectators, participants, and academics from other disciplines – in a trans-disciplinary way, to indicate the importance of going beyond disciplines, to break through established contexts of knowledge and point to a post-disciplinary scenario. In my experience, the process of opening up to different modes of production and disciplines is a very creative one, full of potential and unexpected outcomes. This is where art practice coincides with the research process itself, including the manifestations of its different stages (conference presentations, diagrams, sculptures, dialogues...), all of which are in turn *art practice*, or, as I defined it, *art as research as art* (Cognigni, Albano 2020).

«Today, research-based art is nothing novel; its presence is almost mandatory in any serious exhibition», states Clare Bishop (2023), implying that academic artistic research is part of a wider context or ecology for artistic research. And, as I have also argued previously (Cognigni 2009), Bishop adds »It has much in common with other trends that have arisen since the 1990s, such as the artist-curated exhibition and the ‘archival turn,’ but it is not fully congruent with either».

Current Research: *Caring With*

The dialogic approach I define as *caring with* (Cogni, 2020; Tronto, 2013) understands dialogic art as an inherently caring practice, in which attending to one another is a reciprocal process, making this interdependence necessary for the work to exist. These *caring relations*, situated within the context of the ethics of care, conceptualise persons as deeply affected by, and involved in, relations with others (Held, 2006). In addition, care ethics emphasises connection, and the need for recentring marginalities – concerns also shared with ecofeminism, both within the feminist tradition of thinkers and makers. According to Joan Tronto, caring practices «need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom to all» (Tronto, 2013, p. 23). She defines caring with in society as a condition in which all of us are simultaneously caregiver and care receiver, with these roles capable of shifting easily.

My own more recent understanding of these notions led me to consider feminist ethics positions, including Maurice Hamington's idea of embodied care – our capacity to care rooted in what Merleau-Ponty calls *perciption* – as well as Ayla Daly's affective reversibility and Elena Pulcini's model of a contaminated subject (Cogni, 2024).



Figure 7 | *Seeds of Attachment*, ©Elena Cogni 2016-18 (Women's Art Collection and Centre for Family Research, Cambridge University, and Freud Museum, London)

This investigation through practice has brought me back to consider my paintings and sculptures from the nineties and to understand that nothing much has changed in my work except my self-awareness – and that has been a journey well worth embarking on.

As my practice developed, there have been very welcome opportunities to step back and read it from a distance with the support of curators and art historians⁸. Collaborative projects are so important to ground the research and make it grow further. One such opportunity was *Seeds of Attachment*, which I developed as an independent researcher in collaboration with Eliza Gluckman, the Women's Art Collection's curator at the time, Susan Golombok, Director of the Centre for Family Research, Cambridge University, and the Freud Museum, London (2016-18, funded by the Arts Council England). This emphasised the importance of motherhood, sisterhood, kinship, and friendship (Virginia Held, 2006; Sara Ruddick, 1980; Fisher and Tronto, 1990) as caring roles in society. The foldable sculpture defined an *intraplace* (Cognigni, 2020) in the dialogic encounter with the participant on the school-run routes, while discussing where home might be, thus pointing to how the attachment between parent and child, and to place, can impact identity formation. This mutually beneficial process of exchange, I defined as *caring with*. This project was rooted in a personal need to reflect on the historical vote in 2016 in the UK to leave the EU, as a mother of two, and not yet a dual national at the time. Yet the uneasiness I experienced turned out to be shared by all those I collaborated with, and more widely, demonstrating how artistic research can cut through the fabric of society and leave a lasting impact.

⁸ Like the solo show *Elena Cognigni. Practices of Care, On Finding the Cur(v)je* (2021) curated by Gabi Scardi, in collaboration with the Italian Pavillion at La Biennale di Venezia. Here is also where the project *The Body of/at Work* by Elena Cognigni premiered at Resilient Communities public program, Italian Pavilion, 17a Mostra di Architettura 2021, La Biennale di Venezia, curated by Alessandro Melis.

Research can never be truly objective (Delbosc, 2022) because it is conducted by humans with subjective experiences and limited perspectives. But whereas science aims for a *view from nowhere* to minimise bias, artistic research centres on subjectivity, utilising the artist's personal perspective, experiences, and aesthetic choices as a valid mode of inquiry, generating, for example, situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). So, as one goes through what life brings, the research can also be a tool to make sense of it and offer some strategies more widely. The project *Towards a Feminist Care Aesthetics: From the Home to the Planet. A dialogue between Elena Cogni and Mother Art Collective* (funded by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2023) stems from this premise and awareness of personal difficulties. It developed through a period of archive research on *Laundryworks*, an artwork from the seventies by the LA-based Mother Art Collective, and continued through conversations on the environmental crisis, becoming all too real in early 2025 in LA and the wider ecological systems. This research is ongoing, and so far, has resulted in an article (Cogni, 2024) and an exhibition at the MLAC, La Sapienza, Roma in 2025, curated with Raffaella Perna⁹. The project grew from our shared interest in the domestic, as the exhibition highlighted, from recognising domestic labour (Silvia Federici, 1975) and women's paid and unpaid care work as tools to act in a much wider context, understood as a trajectory of caring from the home to the planet through site, and community-responsive work. For me, the project was a way to recognise in Mother Art Collective's practice a precursor of a new feminist care aesthetics. In this collaboration, and as in much of my work, I propose that the *caring with* approach within spatial and dialogic practices – through which one practices attentiveness, atonement, and interdependence – can generate a renewed awareness of our relationship with people,

⁹ The accompanying symposium titled *Per un'estetica della cura. Riflessioni sull'opera di Mother Art Collective ed Elena Cogni* included contributions from Raffaella Perna, Caterina Iaquina, Gabi Scardi, Elisabetta Garletti, and Ashley McNelis.

places, and the environment, while instigating a sense of responsibility to care for all. This approach was instrumental in defining what an (un)monument might be, by considering how we access and navigate public spaces in the everyday. As the research develops, different nuances of caring are also increasingly linked to the current global crisis.

The latest developments of my research are also considered for an Impact Case Study for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029 in the UK. In this context, impact refers to the demonstrable effect or contribution that research has had on the wider world, beyond the academic community. This includes its influence on areas such as public policy and services, industry and economy, cultural life, and environmental sustainability. The REF evaluates the impact of research based on real-world outcomes, showing how research has led to tangible changes in society, the economy, or the environment. This is assessed through case studies provided by institutions, which describe the specific impacts of their research and provide evidence of how these impacts have been achieved¹⁰.

Whether academic or not, the breadth of original and rigorous artistic research has had significant effects both in the world at large and within academia, breaking through established methodologies and becoming instrumental for engagement beyond institutions. Creative thinking has become more and more central to cross-disciplinary and collaborative approaches to research, education, and practice. However, one of the most important functions of art remains its capacity to disturb established knowledge structures, revealing their inherent power dynamics and constraints. Art also becomes a site for the production of different forms of knowledge ... knowledge that is ambivalent, incommensurable, and singular (Busch, 2009).

¹⁰ For previously submitted impact case studies please refer to <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/submissions/7dc1f8fc-cd77-4baf-818c-1024386ba28e/impact>, for current guidelines please refer to <https://2029.ref.ac.uk/>.

FROM DOCUMENT TO VENUS

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The title of this essay echoes Paul Valéry's critique of the museum as an apparatus that transforms works of art into documents – available for rapid apprehension, overriding their experience. His remark on a “Venus changed into document” points at a displacement: a shift from situated experience to mediated knowledge.

The century that separates us from Valéry's *Le problème des musées* (1923)¹ has witnessed a profound transformation in the status of both images and documents. What follows is not a refutation of his critique, but an attempt to inhabit it differently – through a practice grounded in the long-term engagement with photographic documents and their conditions of production, circulation, and survival.

Valéry's discomfort with the museum emerges from a fundamental contradiction: the exhibition space assembles fragments severed from their origins, temporalities, and scales. In doing so, it produces a false continuity – an artificial coherence that conceals the disjunctions constitutive of the works themselves. Against this, is evoked the model of the palazzo, where art remains embedded in the architectural and social fabric that gives it meaning. The museum, by contrast, appears as an accumulation of displaced objects, suspended in a space that neutralizes their relationality. Yet if the museum transforms artworks into documents, the twentieth century extends this condition: art becomes increasingly entangled with documentary forms and often enters the museum

¹ Valéry P., 1960, «The Problem of Museums», in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 12, Pantheon Books New York.

as sets of documents, researched, reorganized, manipulated or invented. A document is not defined by its medium – it may be textual, diagrammatic, photographic, or computational – but by its function: to register, to certify, to circulate. Photographs, in this sense, are not inherently aesthetic objects. They operate within regimes of administration, evidence, insurance, surveillance, and memory. Their status is contingent, shifting according to use.

My engagement with documents began at a young age, long before I considered it either an artistic or a documentary practice. I collected images for multiple reasons, without attributing to this activity any particular conceptual framework. It was only later that I came to understand that research, collection, and artistic production, within the frame of my work, were not separate practices. What I had treated as accumulation in fact evolved into artistic practice.

An early example of such accumulation is my collection of images of Israeli airplanes published in Lebanese newspapers in 1982. At the moment of their circulation, these images functioned as news – indices of an ongoing event. Decades later, when I scanned and reprinted them, they not only operated as evidence of specific moments, but as traces of the conditions under which such images are produced and disseminated. The visible print grid, preserved in the reproduction, foregrounds the industrial mediation of the image. Magnification, rather than revealing detail, points to the impossibility of identifying the pilots. This gesture was made in the context of *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* (2013), a work intended to honor an Israeli pilot who refused an order to bomb a school in South Lebanon. These photographs thus shift from documents of events to documents of image circulation.

The Third Enfoldment further displaces one of the images of jets in the sky that I had collected as a teenager in 1982. It reproduces it in a different context, serving a different function. Here, the image is projected onto a lacuna in the ceiling of the Uffizi – a surface already marked by multiple temporalities. The ceiling was originally painted in 1588, in the Renaissance tradition, when the building functioned as the Medici armory. Some rooms

were later remodeled in the mid-17th century, before the building was transformed into a museum. The ceiling was later damaged during the Second World War, when the Uffizi was bombed. In the postwar restoration, painters not only repaired the surface but, at certain points, inserted painted views of the surrounding destruction as it appeared in 1945. In doing so, they folded a modern scene of war into an earlier painted ceiling, introducing a temporal disjunction within the decorative program. Yet some lacunae were left blank, remaining as visible interruptions – zones of absence within this layered surface.



Figure 1 | Akram Zaatari, *Third Enfoldment*, 2023. Installation at Uffizi Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

My intervention takes place within this historically charged unfolding of the painted ceiling. The projection does not restore what the painting misses; rather, it extends the logic already at work. It inserts another temporal layer onto a reinscribed surface with a time fold. The image is neither fully present nor entirely absent. The lacuna remains, one can also that it has remained blank, yet it reflects an image. The projected image occupies a space of suspension, where historical moments coexist without resolution. What is produced is not a reconstruction, but an intensification of temporal instability.

Research As Art

My conscious involvement with researching and collecting images – as both a researcher and an art practitioner – began in 1997, when I initiated a long-term project with the creation of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, an organization I co-founded with other photographers. We began collecting photographs from our immediate circles – friends, then our parents' friends. Gradually, this expanded into travels across Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria, where different researchers-members of the foundation, sought to understand how photographs were produced and for what purposes.



Figure 2 | Akram Zaatari, *Another Resolution*, May Kassem, 1998. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery

One of the recurring patterns that struck me in family photography was the way parents photograph their children. My first project, *Another Resolution* (1998), emerged from staging poses inspired by children's photographs, but performed by adults. I was reflecting on gesture and gender, but also on how parental authority merges well with that of the photographer.

In 1998, I also conducted an extended interview with the photographer Van Leo, who was then in his eighties and would pass away three years later. I was fascinated by his self-portraits from the 1940s – produced decades before those of Cindy Sherman, though their intentions differ. Van Leo was not producing art in the contemporary sense, but rather a catalogue for his clients, demonstrating the possibilities of the photographic medium. Using himself as a model, he showed that one could appear as an aviator, a prisoner, or a lover – that one could perform before the camera and obtain an image of themselves to share.



Figure 3 | Akram Zaatari, *To Retouch*, 2017. Based on two photographs by Van Leo. Courtesy of the artist

In 1999, I worked on *The Vehicle: Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernizing Society*. I became interested in the roles modern means of transport played in people's lives and the ways they found their way into photo albums across different contexts. One photograph in particular, taken by Hisham Abdel-Hadi in Jericho in 1963, shows women from his family seated on the front of a BMW. On the back, written in English, appears the caption: "not always on a camel but on a BMW as well."

In this project, the car emerges as more than a means of transportation – it becomes a prop, almost a piece of furniture: something one sits on, leans against, and poses with. It signals status, but also fascination with modern technology. Many photographed themselves with cars they did not own; mechanics posed with vehicles they were repairing. To be pictured with a car became a visual trend that signaled a desire to look modern. These gestures circulated – once such images appeared, they generated their own repetition. In this way, photography not only records social transformation but also propagates it, shaping styles, values, and attitudes, particularly from the late 1940s to the late 1950s.



Figure 4 | Akram Zaatari, *On Photography People and Modern Times*, 2010. Capture showing Hisham Abdel-Hadi' photograph of a family on a BMW. "Not always on a camel but on a BMW as well." Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

In 2002, I embarked on a project that became a singular experience: *Mapping Sitting*. It received significant international attention and was an attempt to engage with the vast range of photographic practices that depicted the body in photography I had been researching in the Middle East. I invited Walid Raad, who had recently joined the foundation, to collaborate. Together,

we worked with dozens of thousands of portraits, reconfiguring them to reflect on how photographic practices describe and inscribe identities in formation.

We worked, for instance, with 3,000 passport portraits by Antranick Anouchian, an Armenian photographer from Tripoli in North Lebanon. We began grouping the images into categories. This echoed the way photographers themselves organized their archives – by year, by occasion, by gender, or by recurring clients. Their negatives were often stored in boxes structured around such distinctions, allowing them to retrieve and reproduce images efficiently when needed.



Figure 5 | Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, *Mapping Sitting*. ID portraiture, based on portraits by Antranick Anouchian. Exhibition view at Musée Nicéphore Niépce, 2004. Courtesy of the artists

Our use of categories, however, sought to reveal something else: shifting patterns of appearance and posture across decades. Men with glasses, mustaches, or caps; in religious attire or military uniforms. Women with hats, necklaces, chignon hairstyles, or covered hair; dressed in white or black. These categories produced constellations of gestures

and features that, when seen together, mapped a visual language of portraiture. In the exhibition space, these groupings formed dense clusters across a single wall, where categories overlapped and interacted. In the book, they appeared as grids, unfolding spread by spread. The same images operated differently depending on their mode of display – either as immersive constellations in exhibition or as systematic sequences in book form.

Another section focused on itinerant photography, featuring the work of Hashem El Madani, who would leave his studio in the afternoons to find clients by the seaside in Saida. No one would come to the studio during hot summer afternoons – everyone was by the water. He moved through public space, offering his services and capturing images outside the studio.

We began to examine the codification of gestures in his work: the same poses he proposed to different clients. These gestures, though appearing spontaneous, were structured and widely adapted and circulated. They became recognizable as his signature.



Figure 6 | Walid Raad and Akram Zaatar, *Mapping Sitting. Itinerant Portraiture*, 2002. Based on photographs by Hashem el Madani, Saida, 1950s. Courtesy of the artists

Mapping Sitting also included work by those known as “surprise photographers” – photographers stationed in public squares who would take pictures of passersby without prior consent, then approach them afterward and offer them the possibility of purchasing the image. Many never returned to claim their photographs. Their images remained on rolls of 35mm film and never printed.

We scanned selected sequences of photographs, from these rolls, taken against fixed backgrounds, in which figures appeared moving through the frame. We assembled these into animated video sequences – *Tell Square East* and *Tell Square West*. The result resembles accelerated surveillance footage, although the images date back to the 1950s, before video technology existed.

Seeking to identify coded patterns in images – despite its justified necessity and relevance especially in large bodies of work the photographers of which were no longer living, naturally turns its back to the conditions that produced these images, and that are in this case not known. In privileging code over the search for historical context, the work revealed its own limitation: Repetitions are pleasing to look at, fun, witty, the whole construct gives the impression of depth, density, but stays at the surface of photographs. The absence of information on subjects, situations, and histories gave way to formal traits and photographic trends to dominate the reading of photographs. But their narratives in most of the time stayed inaccessible. The archive, in this sense, is not only a repository, but also a site of loss.

Excavation at Studio Shehrazade

This realization led me gradually to redirect my interest from classification to excavation. With Hashem El Madani, whose studio archive remained intact and whose memory was still accessible, the photograph re-emerged as a site of encounter

rather than abstraction. The studio became an excavation field, where images, objects, and stories intersect. The excavation indeed considered recurring patterns, but these were tied to conditions under which images were made, circulated, and understood and most importantly they were grounded in social and urban history of the city.

My work with Madani and the archive of Studio Shehrazade became an archaeological inquiry into a modern photographic studio – its layers of practice, its entanglement with individual and collective histories, and its evolution alongside changing technologies of image production. Over seventeen years, I went through nearly a million images in his studio, selecting roughly one third and securing their legal transfer to the archive of the Arab Image Foundation. This became the body of material I worked with.

In my conversations with Madani, I asked questions no one had posed to him before: how he directed posture; whether gender shaped them; how cinema influenced fashion; how he selected accessories for his clients. We spoke about war, when people began bringing weapons into the studio to be photographed with. We discussed disguise, intimacy, and social norms. In a conservative city like Saida in the 1950s, men and women were never photographed kissing – it was considered improper. Yet men would sometimes pose kissing each other, one performing the role of a woman; the same would apply to women. At the time, such images were perceived as playful, not as expressions of same-sex desire. These shifts reveal how codes of behavior transform across decades.

Madani's studio was located one floor above Cinema Shehrazade – hence its name, established in 1953. Many clients would come directly from the cinema to be photographed. This proximity shaped the visual and social atmosphere of the studio. My first publication from this body of work, *Studio Practices* (2004), emerged from the study of the studio as a theater to play out identities.



Figure 7 | Akram Zaatar, *Objects of Study: Hashem el Madani: Studio Practices*, 2006. Courtesy of the artist

Through Madani, I also came to understand the tensions and negotiations embedded in photographic practice. This led me to the story of the scratched negatives. Madani recounted how a man once accused him of photographing his wife without his consent. Together, they searched through recent negatives and identified her. The husband demanded the negatives; Madani refused, insisting they remained the property of the studio. They eventually agreed to scratch the negatives, rendering them unusable. By mistake, another portrait was scratched before hers. The woman – known to us only as Mrs. Baqari – would have remained one among thousands of anonymous subjects. Nothing in the image would have attracted my curiosity, but the act of scratching transformed it. The damaged negatives became traces of violence, inscribing a story onto the material itself. In enlarging them, I sought to foreground that trace. What might have remained an ordinary portrait became a singular document – marked, disrupted, and charged with the conditions of its making. In this context, the photograph is not a fixed object, but

a node within a network of relations – economic, social, and performative. The gestures of subjects, the instructions of the photographer, the spatial organization of the studio, and the expectations of clients all contribute to the image’s formation. To excavate the archive is to engage with these layers simultaneously.



Figure 8 | Akram Zaatar, *Damaged Negatives: Scratched Portrait of Mrs. Baqari*, 2016. Made from a 35mm scratched negative found in Hashem el Madani’s archive. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery

I also developed another chapter on Madani’s photographs taken in sites of promenade in Saida. *Promenades* focused on four such locations in the city where he would go during festivities and holidays. “Hunting” for customers who were not part of his studio’s clientele; he had to be present in public space in order to find them and draw them to be photographed. For this, he would dress with great care. He often repeated: «you must be extremely well dressed to radiate respect – you want people to trust you with their image».

Later, in 2007, I developed a more performative project using Madani's photographs. I worked with images of shop owners standing at the entrances of their shops in the early 1950s. At the time, there was no electricity inside during the day, so Madani would ask them to step slightly outside and stand in the doorway in order to be photographed.

I identified photographs' locations and, when possible, people in them. With the support of the Arab Image Foundation, I printed modern copies, framed and reinstalled them in the same shops today. This required negotiating with current owners – some of whom were the children of those depicted, as in the case of Abdel Ghani El Attal, whose son now runs the same shop in Haret El Keshek. Three of the original shop owners were still alive at the time and continued to manage their businesses.

I also produced a map featuring 42 photographs installed in 33 locations across the old city. To view the work, one had to travel to Saida, follow the map, walk through the old city, and enter each shop. In doing so, visitors retraced Madani's own itinerary and encountered the city through the path of a photographer.



Figure 9 | Akram Zaatari, *Hashem el Madani/ Itinerary*, 2007. Two captures, the first showing Abdel-Ghani Attal sitting at the door of his shop at Haret el Keshek in Saida in the 1950s. The second shows his son Mohammad at the door of the same shop in 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery



Figure 10 | Akram Zaatari, *Twenty-Eight Nights and A Poem*, 2010. Installation view at Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Photo credit: Åsa Lundén – Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem (2010-2015) was both the title of a film I made about Madani and an installation composed of display cabinets containing photographs, video and Super 8 projectors, and tablets. I selected a wide range of objects from his studio and treated them as if they had emerged from an archaeological excavation. I approached even the most modest tools with particular attention. I was drawn to simple, worn objects – pens and pencils that had been entirely consumed, yet never discarded. Madani would extend their life by attaching sticks to them and continuing to use them. I photographed and filmed them, displayed some within drawers like classified artifacts, and edited others into short videos shown on tablets. The title of the film refers to a set of twenty-eight such objects, presented in twenty-eight drawers and classified in three categories as desk tools, objects for sale, and archives. In print form, they appear like a contact sheet – hence *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem*.

Against Photography

Having approached the photographic studio through multiple facets – looking at photographs in context and at the practice that produced them and disseminated them – I moved further, in *Against Photography* (2017), to observe photographs as objects. Here, attention shifts from the image to its material support. The photograph is no longer approached primarily through what it represents, but through what has happened to it. Scratches, stains, chemical degradation, and environmental damage become legible as inscriptions of time. These marks are not external to the image; they constitute another form of recording, one that operates independently of the photographer's intention. In this sense, a photograph is not defined only by the moment of its exposure, but by the accumulation of events that affect it over the course of its life as well. Its meaning is not contained only within the frame, but distributed across its material transformations. The history of a photograph is not to be separated from that of its diffusion and

deterioration. A negative might be altered entirely by flooding, decades after it was taken, leaving marks indicative of its history. Within this project, I found a glass negative that had been subject to flooding. Originally depicting an athlete, the plate – measuring 10×12 cm – had lost a substantial portion of the emulsion that recorded the image. It is no longer possible to determine whether the athlete, posing with one foot resting on a football, was entirely naked or not. I recreated the plate but enlarged it far beyond its original size so that it stands freely, with the figure rendered life-sized, and titled the work *Archaeology*. I applied layers of earth, broken glass, and acrylic to its surface, giving it the appearance of an object freshly exhumed from the ground. What began as a photographic description by Antranick Anouchian is transformed, through this recreation, into a discursive work – one that evokes both my own excitement and the disappointment of encountering an artifact only to realize that it has lost crucial parts.



Figure 11 | Akram Zaatari, *Archeology*, 2017. Based on an eroded photographic capture on glass by Antranick Anouchian (Tripoli) from the collection of The Arab Image Foundation / Mohsen Yammine. Installation view at Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples. Photo credit: M3Studio srl – Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

The work of Antranick Bakerdjian exemplifies how deterioration and image can operate together, producing a third meaning. Produced under precarious circumstances in Jerusalem in 1948, his negatives bear the marks of their own survival, including those that document the destruction of his own home in the Armenian neighborhood. Deprived of proper processing conditions, his negatives from that period deteriorated in ways that obscure, distort, and at times cast a heavy shadow over the images they carry. Yet this deterioration does not simply erase the photograph; it produces another layer of information – one that introduces a non-figurative dimension to the image, affecting both its structure and texture.



Figure 12 | Akram Zaatari, *The Body of Film*. Based on the damaged negatives of Antranick Bakerdjian. Exhibition view part of the exhibition *Against Photography* at K21, Dusseldorf. Photo credit: Achim Kukulies. Courtesy of the artist

From here, the question of exploring another dimension in photograph shifts once more: not how images signify, nor how they endure, but how they can be reengaged, performed or set in motion. In *Photographic Currency* (2019), photographs are no longer treated simply as images to be published, but as sources from which data – in the form of designs – can be extracted and reconstituted. Hashem El Madani photographed

quilt makers posing with quilts they had just finished. His photographs were intended as records to be kept and shown to potential clients, functioning as a kind of para-catalog, after the quilts would be taken by them. Patterns found in these photographs are then used to produce new quilts – objects that bear no images yet remain structurally dependent on photographs.



Figure 13 | *Photographic Currency*, 2019. Satin cotton quilt made by Mustapha Al-Qady, Saida, Lebanon; 18 x 27, 200 x 180 cm. Installation view at Sfeir Semler Gallery in Hamburg. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery

In this process and mode of production, the photograph ceases to function as an end. It becomes a resource, a form of capital. What is extracted is not the image itself, but what it describes, now rearticulated in another medium. The resulting objects are not representations of photographs, but performative reformulations of something in them.



Figure 14 | *Photographic Currency*, 2019. Photo of quilt by Hashem el Madani, Saida 1950s. Archival silver gelatin fiber-prints, printed on glossy harman gds fb. Photo credit: M3 Studio. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery

There is a performative approach to the use of photographs here, yet it differs from that of *The Third Enfoldment*, where images remained visible even as they were displaced, from a 1982 newspaper to a 2013 art gallery space, landing as a projection on the inner surface of the painted ceiling of the Uffizi in 2023. In *Photographic Currency*, the image disappears, allowing the quilts to emerge in its place. What persists is a form of kinship: the quilts are photographic not because they depict photographs, but because they derive from them. Their significance lies in this relation – a continuity that survives the absence of the image.

If Paul Valéry lamented the transformation of Venus into document in 1923, contemporary artistic practices instead embrace the proliferation of documents – particularly photographic – not only as representations, as attempts to recreate beauty, or as quick notes, but as bearers of material to be extracted, transformed, and rearticulated in different forms.

SENSITIVE ANIMALS

A Somatic Approach To Dancing Humans

Rosita Mariani

Accademia Teatro alla Scala

Before starting, I would like to ask you to take a moment to enjoy silence.

I have a question for us: do we have a body, or are we bodies? Posing this question is a precondition for me to work with people, professional dancers or not, in any kind of dance project, and here and now, with you. You are probably thinking that we are not dancing in this moment, as we are seated, but if we assume that we are on our chairs as bodies and not having been carried here by a body, in a deep part of ourselves, it is possible to feel the presence of a rhythm. Very small movements are going on; our inner life is moving, in an invisible way.

If you would like, I ask you to close your eyes for just a little while and bring your attention to yourself: What do you perceive? What do you feel?

Take your time.

When you would like, put your attention on your hands and start moving them in the space around you.

Just touch the space and feel the space touching you.

Reach with your hands to some point in the space of the room and pull it towards you.

Touch, penetrate, caress, cut the space.

Feel the quality of your movement, the rhythm that is being created.

If you want, open your eyes and enjoy being together in movement with others.

Close your eyes again and take the time to feel the resonance of this experience in yourself.

Slowly open your eyes and gradually connect your inner self to the environment immediately around you, to the people close to your seat, and then open your attention to the distant space, to the audience.

How do you feel?

This brief moment of tuning, from a somatic experience to a little dance, prepares us to dive into a speech about somatic practice and dance-making, through dance teaching.

To talk about *Sensitive Animals*, I would like to draw out some key words from this experience.

Somatics and Dance

What do we mean when we talk about somatic practices? The field is wide, but it is possible to find a key principle in the recognition of body intelligence. On a deeper level, body cells recognise themselves, giving us an experience of awareness definable with the word 'embodiment', something completely subjective that finds support in the universality of principles of biology and physiology, while anatomy maps reflect the basic project that all humans share. The focal point is on humans as bodies, and not on humans with bodies, as we experimented at the beginning: we are a unity, an integrated body-mind living self, who feels, communicates, thinks. And dances.

The development of somatic practices in the twentieth century was interconnected with dance in many ways. In my experience, the potential of this relationship emerged after encountering the approach of Body-Mind Centering about 20 years ago, which produced a sort of deflagration in my dance practice as performer, dance maker and teacher, radically changing my sensitivity and my gaze on contemporary creation.

What is Body-Mind Centering?

The study of Body-Mind Centering, initiated by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen in the 1970s and still very much alive, is based on the foundations of anatomy, physiology, psychology, and knowledge of

the development of movement from conception to the first years of life. It uses a variety of theoretical-functional principles and practices in the exploration of all body systems, breathing and vocalization, senses and perception, through the art of hand touch and movement.

Not a technique or a method, BMC is an approach to the person: we are the study material, our body and our mind are the tools for the exploration of the infinite aspects of movement and its expression. The BMC approach is the one I use in my work and that I have chosen to share with dancers, students, and artists.

Dance

Dance could be defined in many different ways: focusing on steps, rhythms, or aesthetics. Usually, the difficulty is resolved by specifying a genre, like ballet, contemporary, modern, hip hop, etc. But what remains if the labels of dance genres are taken away? Over the years, I have negotiated many times with that question, and I don't have just one, exhaustive answer. I can only collect and give back what my daily love story with dance has left me over the last forty years.

Dance is the art of humans in movement, a direct way to express ourselves. It is a communication process, a concrete artistic practice requiring a higher level of exposure (and much sweat) to protect vulnerability. It could be an expression of a community, but also a means to build a community.

Dance is an intentional dialogue between space, time, and energy, as well as a way to honor kinesthetic intelligence. As an art of the body, it inextricably intertwines nature and culture: a dance practice can easily connect biology with poetry.

Dance requires a real presence, total existence in a body-mind self. An intangible and impermanent art, dance remains as a vibrational trace in the cellular memory of those who have danced and, through mirror neurons, those who have seen dance, just in a unique, unrepeatable "here and now". A dance should be transformative, subversive, sacred. Dance, sometimes, is a dialogue with the invisible.

Choreographer/Dance Maker

At this point, who is the choreographer? I prefer to use “dance maker” to define this role, because it makes it easier to accept the position of those who don’t know. In real practice, one often maintains a global vision of the project and the necessary processes, but not total control over the concrete realization or the final result, and that is the most interesting part.

Dance makers, I think, must be sincerely interested in people. They work as guides, mediators, maieutic operators, available to be passed through by their own process, open to deviations, capable of re-elaborating what happens, able to trust dancers and themselves.

Dancer

And so, who are the dancers? For more than three decades, I have periodically engaged in “human watching”, observing the movement of people in public spaces. I have seen many “dancing humans”: some totally unconscious, others with a secret dance, managing their balance on the subway, a collection of autobiographies revealed through walks and postures. The person who dances with honesty and full involvement, whatever the reasons for doing so, becomes in that moment a biopoetic creature, a being in a “state of dance”, to use Simone Forti’s words¹. In contemporary languages, professional dancers, dance students, and movers are, in my experience, curious explorers of movement; sensitive animals always balancing on the hyphen between body and mind. No longer limited by formal or aesthetic references, their

¹ «I think there’s a state of dancing, like there’s a state of sleeping, or a state of shivering. Some people have a shyness about entering that state, but everybody does it sometime. Often, at parties, people drop their shyness and enter a dance state. And when I’m in a dance state, the movement that comes out through me enchants me. It can be very simple movement, but it always comes with a sense of wonder, and as one of life’s more delicious moments», Forti S., 1974, *Handbook in Motion: An Account of an Ongoing Personal Discourse and Its Manifestations in Dance*, Kasper Koenig, pp. 108-109.

interest has shifted towards research on movement, to the discovery of a personal dancing voice, becoming engaged in a circular dialogue between the signals of a subtle interiority and the expansion of action in the space of the world. Therefore, dancers are, in different ways, co-authors of dance work.

Seeing dancers as sensitive animals inspired the name of this artistic research project, dedicated to dance-making, and addressed to dancing people. What started as an exploration of the dialogue between somatic experience, contemporary code transmission, and artistic creation gradually, over time, took shape as a corpus of practices that welcome differences and are open to meeting other languages of art.

I did not create the project; it is more accurate to say that the project has created itself over time, exploring, studying, creating, and teaching in a daily practice of sharing dance-making with diverse groups, including professional dancers and musicians, young dancers in educational programs, dance teachers in training, performers and authors in creative processes, children in public schools, multidisciplinary research groups focused on the body, people with different abilities, and adults and elders in love with movement.

The aim of the project is to develop creative processes, facilitate awareness of resources, discover and nurture a personal dance voice, and create common grounds to share ideas and performances.

Process

Over the years, my dance work has met different communities. A somatic approach creates a comfortable environment, a safe zone in which it is possible to feel welcome and respected, an essential condition to be free to express.

When I approach a new project, course, or creation with different subjects and different purposes, my first starting point is always related to people, proposing embodied experiences to create a spoken and unspoken vocabulary within that specific dance

community. In this way, at the same time, people are the center of the process, and the project is at the center of a circle of humans. Creation is a shared practice, carried forward taking care of the process itself, of the people involved, and of the quality of communication, inside the artistic group and, consequently, in the fundamental relationship with the audience.

In my practice, this approach, based on an experiential link between the universality of human body principles and the uniqueness of the individuals, creates the necessary conditions to move together on a common ground and, from this point, to activate a dialogue with choreography, music, text, images, or other languages involved. The somatic experience is not the subject of the creation, but is an underlayer that resonates, informing the dance and facilitating the integration of sensation, feeling, and action.

Performance is the last part of a long journey, frequently not finished and thus open to other future developments. The final form is the result of the living process of those who create and inhabit it, made by a living, reactive, and elastic web that connects the project with the moment, the place, the conditions, but, above all, the human beings involved, including the audience.

The embodiment is the key element of this connective web. Pushing a little bit on the web imagine, in this shape, the communication between elements we are playing with can find different pathways to create connections, like the fascial tissue of the body, offering to feelings and intuitions short ways to be translated into movement and words. In a web structure, I feel that I can be a mediator, in a maieutic relationship with the dancers. The questions I ask myself and the dancers are the same I asked you before, in our little practice: What do you feel? What do you perceive? And going on: what do you see? What do you imagine (watching, moving, dancing, touching)? Can you answer just by dancing and not speaking with words?

I guide the process of organizing and re-discussing materials that arrive from dancers, proposing dance materials to work on, to be broken down and recomposed, or tasks to stimulate a specific quality of presence or a particular flavor of movement. Together

with dancers, I collect, connect, choose, associate, reprocess, sometimes cut materials, create scores or underscores, to arrive at a final form. What I search, in the end, what continues to fascinate me in making dance, is the power of an honest human presence in the process and in a performative space.

Over time, *Sensitive Animals* has become a generator of dance-making projects, in progress with different classes of students with different purposes. It also offers support to other artists in their own processes through sessions of shared research. The principles of the research path are the underlying key to a participatory art performance in progress.

The next step is to look for answers to these questions: How can such an approach redirect the meaning of higher dance education, considering that those who are trained now will, in turn, train others in the future, and will work for decades in a communicative dimension in which the body will have the main voice? How is it possible to relate dance practices to social and political issues, connecting the embodied vision of dance-making with citizens? Could a group of dance creators be a good ingredient in a small community or in the complex dynamics of a city?

In the end, I would like to bring out a last word from this overview of somatic and dance. At the end of a somatic experience, I always invite people to feel the vibrational residue of the process just gone through, its RESONANCE. Being in resonance creates a space to let the experience write itself deeply into cellular memory, so that it can be accessed again at other times and in other contexts and can inform subsequent stages of processes at that level.

Resonance inhabits the field of vibration, the primary form of communication between cells, and the first basic neurocellular pattern of all matters, living and non-living. It has to do with sound, with the frequencies that matter emits. Recent studies have shown that cells “sound”. Dance also sounds in silence, in the brain and in the space where it is happening. Probably, after all this talk, we can redefine dance as the biopoetic testimony of the vibrating energy of the animals that we are: in conclusion, the art of life resonance.

**PART 3 | KEY ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY
ARTISTIC RESEARCH**

THE ROLE OF OTHERS. FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Lorella Scacco

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Today, artistic research focuses on themes that explore the complexities of contemporary life, including identity, technology, ecology, and the aftermath of globalisation. What issues in our society need to be discussed more? This is a difficult question to answer. However, the elaboration of experiences of the world is constantly shaped by the development of inter-human relations. This way of thinking may open artistic research to ethical considerations. Some of these issues emerged during the third session of the seminar *Theories and Practices of Contemporary Artistic Research: A Transdisciplinary Approach*” which I chaired. In particular, the speakers – Kristin Bergaust, Alessandro Bonizzoni, and Antonio Somaini – focused on the following key issues: the relationships between humans and non-humans, artificial intelligence (AI), and sustainable architecture. Drawing on their respective expertise in media art, architecture, and art theory, they offered new perspectives through an interdisciplinary approach. In this section, I introduce their essays alongside some of my own reflections on these topics.

A Network of Interspecies Relationships

One of the main issues in contemporary artistic research concerns how our relationship with non-human animals is represented, negotiated, and questioned in visual culture. It is important to problematise the self-centredness of this phenomenon and to bring the agency of the non-human to the forefront of artistic

inquiry. Indeed, this kind of research not only addresses ecological concerns but also suggests that relationships between humans and non-human significant others co-evolve in complex and irregular ways. With her concept of “companion species”, Donna Haraway deconstructed human exceptionalism and the boundaries between humans and non-humans¹. After all, to be human means to exist within a network of interspecies relationships. In his essay *Nature*, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty had already challenged the human/nature dualism by positioning the human body as an integral part of the sensible world (“flesh”). The human and the non-human are not opposites but continuous: the human is a “fold” of nature, a being who perceives and is perceived, immersed in an intra-corporeal and pre-reflective structure shared with animals and the natural environment².

Through her work, Kristin Bergaust seeks to inspire action and to reimagine our relationship with the natural world. A pioneer of the Norwegian media art scene, she explores contemporary conditions through performative and technological strategies informed by cultural history, scientific data, and narrative practices. Her work blurs the boundaries between art and research, emphasising sensory and communicative experimentation. Her transdisciplinary and transcultural approach to evolving environments is evident in projects such as *Oslofjord Ecologies* (2016-present). In this book, Bergaust presents her project *Ocean Connections*, a two-channel video installation that intertwines visual and auditory technologies with Indigenous and agricultural traditions. The project was developed in collaboration

¹ See Haraway D., 2003, «The Companion Species Manifesto», in Prickly Paradigm Press and Haraway D., 2008, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

² Thanks to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's preparatory notes and the typewritten notes of some listeners, his courses at the Collège de France between 1956 and 1961 were published in France in 1995: Merleau-Ponty M., 1995, *La nature: Cours du Collège de France 1956-1960*, (Séglard D., dir.), Seuil, Paris. Italian translation: Merleau-Ponty M., 1996, *La natura: Lezioni al Collège de France 1956-1960* (Carbone M., ed.), Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano.

with the scientists Guillermo Garcia Sanchez and Evangelos Vakavoupoulos to investigate the history of biodiversity in the Oslofjord. Bergaust states:

« [...] Working on *Ocean Connections*, talking to scientists, I found that some of my questions about the development of biodiversity and ecological balance, do not have answers. Life forms and environmental conditions cohabit in a complex, intertwined and unpredictable ecosystem, which also encompasses our lives. Humans are watery bodies; we are part of the water cycle, of the ocean and its flows. Its primordial waters, in which life was born, fill our cells. Whatever we do to the oceans, we do to ourselves»³.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is the second theme investigated in this section. This transformative technology, capable of performing tasks usually associated with intelligent beings, is rapidly developing across many domains, including the cultural sphere. For many, it marks an epochal shift, with consequences that are not only technical but also social and political, redefining cultural and professional horizons. The role of others – understood as human beings, workers, policymakers, and citizens – becomes crucial not only in the management of technology, but above all in the ethical and strategic definition of AI⁴. In fact, an inclusive approach to AI development ensures that diverse human perspectives are taken into account, with the aim of fostering more equitable systems. The scholar Antonio Somaini addresses this topic drawing on his extensive expertise, which includes a five-year research project

³ Bergaust K. (n.d.), *Ocean Connections*. Retrieved March 7th, 2025, from www.kristinbergaust.com/kopi-av-ocean-connections.

⁴ Úbeda-García M., Marco-Lajara B., Zaragoza-Sáez P.C., & Poveda-Pareja E., 2025, «Artificial Intelligence, Knowledge and Human Resource Management: A Systematic Literature Review of Theoretical Tensions and Strategic Implications», in *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, vol. 10, n. 6.

on the impact of AI technologies on images, visual culture, and contemporary artistic practices, conducted as a Senior Member of the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF). More recently, he also served as chief curator of the exhibition *The World Through AI* at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris. In this exhibition, Somaini, together with his team, explored the world of artificial intelligence by identifying four thematic areas: AI cartography – matter, space, and time; analytical AI; generative AI; and generative writing. He selected works produced between 2016 and 2025 that raise the question of how we experience the world “according to AI” or “through the prism of AI”⁵.

As a theorist and researcher, Somaini provides a significant framework for understanding the rapidly evolving landscape of visual culture in an age increasingly shaped by AI. Today, contemporary generative artificial intelligences in art, photography, cinema, literature, and music elicit responses ranging from amazement and enthusiasm to fear and scepticism, while developing at an accelerated pace across all areas of culture and science. In his essay, he asserts the necessity of a “theory of latent spaces” within the field of image studies. Indeed, the theory of images and visual culture should incorporate the crucial role played by the latent space – an abstract mathematical construct in machine learning and AI – and its practices of visualisation, which are structured through mathematical objects known as vectors. The latter can be understood as data points within a multi-layered space. The scholar analyses four artistic strategies for the production, dissemination, and archiving of latent spaces in the future through artistic practices, including those of Trevor Paglen and Hito Steyerl. Moreover, Somaini seeks to highlight the human, cultural, and aesthetic questions raised by these new forms of creation, ranging from co-creation to collective

⁵ Jeu de Paume, (n.d.), *The World Through AI*. Retrieved March 8th, 2026, from <https://jeudepaume.org/en/evenement/the-world-through-ai/>.

memory, and from AI models and their generative images to fictional memories. As Somaini states, «the more you know about AI, the less you are affected by it»⁶.

Transdisciplinarity

A transdisciplinary approach integrates methods, insights, and perspectives from multiple academic fields of study to tackle complex issues and acquire a multidimensional understanding. It transcends traditional boundaries, allowing for comprehensive solutions to convoluted issues like climate change or AI ethics. Here, the role of others – referring to diverse experts, stakeholders and collaborators – is central to this process, as it brings in multifaceted perspectives and methodologies necessary for a better understanding. Currently, in visual arts, practitioners employ transdisciplinary approaches, share skills and knowledge for a collective creation, with an increased participatory aspect and free circulation.

In the third essay, Fosbury Architecture – a collective studio based in Milan and founded in 2013 by Alessandro Bonizzoni, Giacomo Ardesio, Nicola Campri, Veronica Caprino, and Claudia Mainardi – introduces its architectural and curatorial practice. Fosbury Architecture approaches architecture as a tool for mediating between collective and individual needs, sustainability and pragmatism, and environment and humanity. Committed to expanding the boundaries of their field, the collective engages with urban strategies, adaptive reuse, temporary installations, exhibitions, publishing, curatorial work, and education. Their practice focuses on spatial qualities that envelop audiences and foster a sense of inclusion. They represent a new generation of

⁶ Quinz E., 2025, «Want to Understand AI? Don't Miss the Artificial Intelligence Exhibition in Paris», in *Domus*, May 1st, www.domusweb.it/en/art/2025/04/29/exhibition-artificial-intelligence-paris-jeu-de-paume.html.

“Spatialists” that embraces the potential of design to challenge social conditions⁷.

“Spatial” thus refers to an expanded notion of the architectural field: to intervene in space is to work on the relationships between people and places that underpin every project. Moreover, their spatial practice employs transdisciplinary approaches to push architecture into unexplored territories. Fosbury Architecture has participated in major biennales, including Lisbon (2019), Chicago (2017), and Venice (2016). Among their most recent projects is their work in 2023, when they curated the Italian Pavilion at the 18th Venice Architecture Biennale⁸, with a project entitled *Spaziale: Everyone belongs to everyone else*, which involved several Italian practitioners, groups, and advisors from different creative fields in dialogue with local interlocutors.

Based on the concept of architecture as a collective practice, this project was composed of two parts, the first preparatory to the second: *Spaziale presenta (Spaziale presents)*, from January to April 2023, which activated nine site-specific interventions across Italy; and *Spaziale: Everyone belongs to everyone else*, presented within the Italian Pavilion from 20 May to 26 November 2023, which articulated the formal and theoretical outcomes of the processes initiated in these nine locations. This collective and collaborative work exceeded the notion of the architect as author and of the individual artefact⁹. Indeed, the future of architecture also requires transdisciplinary networks, increasingly fluid and multidisciplinary skills, and new ways of weaving and creating relationships.

⁷ A reference to Spatialism, an artistic movement initiated by Lucio Fontana around 1946.

⁸ Ministero della Cultura. (n.d.), *Padiglione Italia 2023 – Fosbury Architecture*. Retrieved March 3rd, 2026, from <https://creativitacontemporanea.cultura.gov.it/padiglioneitalia2023-fosburyarchitecture/>.

⁹ Milan L., 2023, «Padiglione Italia: Largo ai nativi sostenibili, ma non lasciamo l'architettura fuori dalla porta», in *Il Giornale dell'Architettura*, May 22nd, <https://ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com/2023/05/22/padiglione-italia-largo-ai-nativi-sostenibili-ma-non-lasciamo-larchitettura-fuori-dalla-porta/>.

From my point of view, the contributions by Fosbury Architecture, Somaini, and Bergaust demonstrate how consideration of the role of others will become increasingly important in future society: from the collective care of the common good in design and architecture, to the analysis of how AI operates and its implications for communities, and to the relationships among humans, other living organisms, and technologies. Indeed, the role of others can be enhanced through interdisciplinarity, interaction, an ethical approach, and sustainable practices.

In conclusion, the visual arts appear to be increasingly shaped by practitioners from diverse backgrounds. It is therefore crucial to foster a transdisciplinary approach that bridges academic and creative fields in order to better understand the methods and aims of emerging practices, and to connect diverse domains of creativity so as to nurture new visions. From practice to theory and vice versa, this reciprocal exchange can encourage the production of artistic insight, experience, and knowledge that often challenges societal assumptions and, more broadly, helps us to grasp more fully the sensory and visual field in which our bodies are immersed.

ECOLOGY OF THE SEAS: ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN TRANSDISCIPLINARY ENVIRONMENTS

Crossing Contemporary Art, Technology, Ecology, and Marine Biology

Kristin Bergaust

The purpose of this essay is to unpack how artistic research in a transdisciplinary context can evolve. The example I will put forward is a two-channel video installation with the title *Ocean Connections*. The work was commissioned as part of NaturArchy in a series initiated by the SciArt project at the Joint Research Center of the European Commission. The aim was to promote and initiate collaborations between artists, scientists and policy makers. I collaborated with Guillermo García Sánchez, a mathematician and then a Ph.D. candidate, and Evangelos Voukouvalas, an environmental engineer. I was also informed by marine biologists, marine ecologists and other experts both at the Joint Research Center in Ispra, Italy and in Oslo. Employing scientific mathematical modeling as a story-telling tool, I wanted to investigate, express and make visible forces and characteristics of the water body in a fjord that are invisible and not perceptible to our human senses or to instruments we typically use. Before discussing *Ocean Connections*, I will first introduce other research collaborations to form a background and the foundational principles that influenced my artistic research in interdisciplinary environments.

*Oslofjord Ecologies*¹ started as a workshop in the context of a Creative Europe project Renewable Futures in 2016.

¹ Cf. www.oslofjordecologies.net.



Figure 1 | Kristin Bergaust, *Ocean Connections* installed in IMAL, Brussels 2024. Image courtesy of the author

The workshop lasted ten days and gathered around 50 participants. Following this, ideas and discussions led to an exhibition and activity program at RAM Galleri in Oslo in 2017. A presentation of the workshop and exhibition gave an invitation to exhibit a new version in Aalto University in Espoo, Finland in 2018 during the Hybrid Labs Symposium².



Figure 2 | Sketch plan of the first *Oslofjord Ecologies* workshop. Courtesy of the author

² Cf. <https://hybridlabs.aalto.fi>.

In 2020, materials from the workshop, activity program and exhibitions were collected in a book, *Oslofjord Ecologies. Artistic Research on Environmental and Social Sustainability*³. The book encompassed ten research articles by authors from different fields and a section documenting artistic works and activities. Two contributors were PhD fellows and artists, relaying artistic research in the form of written articles as well as artistic works. Three articles were written by researchers in art theory, art pedagogy and science theory, while five artists reflected on artistic research and artistic work in an ecological context.

Through the work with *Oslofjord Ecologies* a question of arose: Can artistic methods and ways of engaging with the environment have an impact beyond the artwork's effect as a tool of communication or as an object positioned within the art context itself? In short: What can art do in a dire ecological crisis? The experience of *Oslofjord Ecologies* made me think of the artistic method as an inherent quality of the artwork and a possible asset in interdisciplinary collaboration.

Artistic practice may create relationships, and interactions across epistemologies. This is because methods are invented by the artist while referencing other practices, research paradigms or aesthetic, theoretical and professional perspectives. The method carries meaning and contributes to layers of interpretation and reception as well as facilitating innovative production. My essay *How to Set the Table for Collaborations: Artistic Sensibilities and Methods*⁴ develops these thoughts further.

To be informed by updated natural science is inspirational and important to my artistic work and research. Since 2016 senior research scientist (PhD) Eli Rinde⁵ in the marine biology section

³ Bergaust K., Smite R. & Silina D., 2020, eds., «Oslofjord Ecologies. Artistic Research on Environmental and Social Sustainability», in *Renewable Futures*, n. 3, vol. 18, "Acoustic Space". Creating together <https://rixc.org/en/acousticsspace/issue/788/>.

⁴ In Bergaust, Smite, Silina, *op.cit.*, pp. 169-174.

⁵ Cf. <https://nva.sikt.no/research-profile/12978>.

of the Norwegian Institute for Water Research (NIVA) has contributed information about the state of the Oslo fjord in several instances of artistic research collaborations. Over these years, the ecological conditions have deteriorated, while there are still hopes of restoration. For example, extensive regulations put a ban on fishing in large areas at the beginning of 2026, which might over the years help consolidating species that are still present, especially cod⁶.

With a flexible view on ecology, writings such as *The Three Ecologies*, the 1989 essay by Félix Guattari⁷ offer broader insight into what ecology means, as Guattari layers the physical environment with mental and socio-political issues and shows their interdependencies. Consequently, *Oslofjord Ecologies* has been about economic and cultural history, storytelling and knowledge of relations and entanglements between people, environments and organisms through time. Donna Haraway's view on science as situated knowledge and the concept *sympoiesis* or "creating together" from her book *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*⁸ was part of the foundation for *FeLT – Futures of Living Technologies*.

*FeLT*⁹ was an artistic research project, financed by national funds for artistic research as a three-year interdisciplinary project at the Faculty of Technology, Art and Design in the OsloMet University. Visual artists of different backgrounds, ICT-researchers and art theoreticians collaborated in a group that also encompassed a

⁶ Langangen Ø., Kaartvedt S., Hylland K. & Durant J., 2026, «The Collapse of Atlantic Cod in the Oslofjord», in *Frontiers in Marine Science*, vol. 13, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2026.1746235>.

⁷ Guattari F., 2000, *The Three Ecologies*, The Athlone Press, London-New York.

⁸ Haraway D., 2016, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC).

⁹ Cf. www.oslomet.no/en/research/research-projects/felt.

PhD candidate and a Postdoc researcher¹⁰. Our main research areas were described as follows:

- Making with, or *sympoiesis*: multispecies communication and co-creation. Practices of communication and co-creation with living organisms – such as microorganisms, plants, or animals – might involve technologically complex systems as well as agriculture or Indigenous knowledges and traditions.
- Living technologies: living environments, humans, machines, intelligence, life, and emotions. By “living technology,” we refer to the complex structures and functions of living organisms that have entered hybrid and synthetic technologies. By including critical perspectives on the merging of technology and areas involving emotions, sensing, and empathy, we question possible and speculative convergences of machine technology, artificial life, artificial intelligence, and human bodies.
- Sensorium: how we experience, interpret, and develop applied aesthetics today. To reconnect with the environment, we are expanding the senses technologically, inside and outside institutions. Technologies continuously provide new ways of filtering our experiences and different means of relating to the living environment. Aesthetics today are also affected by perceptual complexity, relating to experiences that transcend art and include a vast array of both natural and constructed environments. Can the sensorium, as an expanded aesthetics, provide new modalities for connecting with natural resources? What new opportunities exist for interaction, and how do technologies extend and provide explorative possibilities within sensation?

¹⁰ Tapio H., Bergaust K., Christensen-Scheel B. & Nichele S., 2022, «Chapter 23: Artists Encoding New Meanings through BioArt and Unconventional Computing», *Unconventional Computing, Arts, Philosophy*, pp. 381-395, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789811257155_0023.

Further documentation of FeLT's activities and results are in the process of being summed up and collected in available formats such as book, websites and exhibition during 2026. The PhD fellow in FeLT, Hege Tapio¹¹, will defend her Ph.D project and dissertation *METABOLOME. Speculative Artistic Practice Between Life and Technology* in June 2026.



Figure 3 | The Oslo fjord map projection with Lagrangian descriptor figuration as protagonist. Courtesy of the author

¹¹ Cf. <https://nva.sikt.no/research-profile/1244370>.

Stemming from a perspective on *Sympoiesis* and experiences from the research tracks of FeLT, ideas for further artistic research work with the Oslofjord emerged. I began to envision the fjord in a subjective role as a body of water characterized by forces as well as complex connections and relationships, encompassing physical and meteorological factors, organisms from microscopic levels to whales. The most pressing change of perspective was to stop looking at the surface or relying solely on representations formed by human eyesight. Even if this is a constructed approach, the shift of perspective influences fundamental notions of human positioning.

Mathematical modeling was one response to the wish to represent forces and phenomena of waterways that cannot be perceived by human senses and presentation of the Oslofjord as a subjective entity, a protagonist rather than a geographical site. These interests could be realized in *Ocean Connections*, an interdisciplinary artistic research project in collaboration with scientists Guillermo García Sánchez, CTO Digital Earth Solutions, Ph.D. in Applied Mathematics, Madrid and Evangelos Voukouvalas, external consultant at the DG Joint Research Centre, Italy with me as the lead artist and initiator. Guillermo contributed his mathematical modelling of ocean pathways developed with Lagrangian Descriptor¹², while Evangelos who joined us after the project was started, helped locating, depicting and interpreting relevant data. The collaboration was set up in the context of NaturArchy by the SciArt project at European Commission's JRC Joint Research

¹² As written by García Sánchez in a 2024 personal communication: «the Lagrangian descriptor measures the total distance traveled by a fluid particle starting from a specific location over a given time interval, both forward and backward in time. It essentially quantifies the complexity of the particle's path in the flow field [...]. By calculating the Lagrangian descriptor for a grid of initial points in the flow field, one can visualize these LCS as sharp ridges or valleys in the resulting M field. This makes the Lagrangian descriptor a powerful tool for uncovering the hidden geometric structures that govern transport and mixing in complex, time-dependent flows like ocean currents».

Center in Ispra, Italy. The Norwegian Meteorological Institute provided meteorological data. The work was also informed by published scientific and historical data of biodiversity in the Oslofjord¹³. The artistic work was done by me in my studio, samples and ideas were presented and discussed in regular online meetings. During the process, Guillermo García-Sánchez and I also had two common residencies at the JRC after the first introductory summer school in preparation to formulate a project. The residencies gave us opportunities to discuss issues with a broad range of researchers and scientists. To devise the initial plan, we began with a short field work, visiting some of the Oslo fjord by boat and finding time to start building a language of common references.

After several months' work and exchange, the two walls of the installation told different stories in parallel. One wall focused on biodiversity, invasive species and changes in climate and environmental conditions, while the other depicted details, such as local pathways among the islands, transporting microalgal bloom and passing by the locations of deposits of contaminated material in the inner fjord.

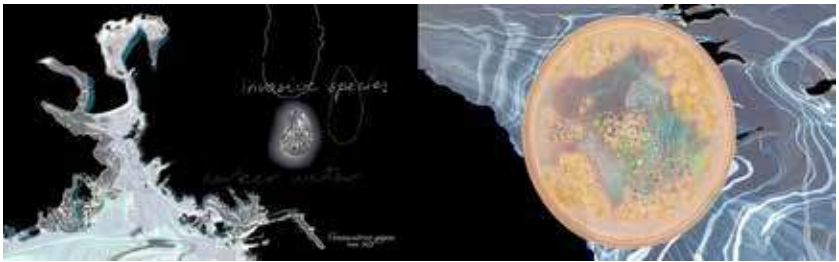


Figure 4 | An overview of the Oslofjord to the left and a diatom viewed through a microscope to the right. Courtesy of the author

¹³ Dornelas M., Antão L.H., Moyes F., *et al.*, 2018, «BioTIME: A Database of Biodiversity Time Series for the Anthropocene», in *Global Ecol Biogeogr.*, vol. 27, n. 7, pp. 760-786, <https://doi.org/10.1111/geb.12729>.

Combining the visual data created by Lagrangian descriptors with animation, historical material and artistic storytelling, these experimental methods lead to new constructions where imagination and fantasy were as present as science. Scientific tools and methods can provide exits and alternative viewpoints. Since cod has become close to extinct in the Oslofjord during my lifetime, the last twenty years, I started to think about what happened in earlier times. The bluefin tuna disappeared around 1920. Many other fish species have vanished from these waters over the last century, as shown by marine biologist Professor Even Moland in 2024¹⁴. New invasive species emerge and disappear again at high speed. Due to human activity many species are introduced into environments where they do not originally belong, a few will thrive in their new setting and negatively influence the ecological balance by displacing other endemic species, as we have seen the Pacific oyster displacing and replacing the local blue mussel in the Oslo fjord¹⁵. Rising temperature is a factor in how these processes unfold. Many such phenomena are referred to in the installation, sometimes accompanied by handwritten notes. Depicting the fjord as a map opened another line of thought regarding representation of nature, namely the visualization of geography. This topic had to be largely set aside behind on this occasion but can be revisited in further projects.

Observing processes rather than photographed moments, or a course of events unfolding through measuring and modeling, might lead to different perceptions of the environment. Using scientific imagery along with artistic methods and modes of presentation, we explored ways of creating immersive experiences of the ocean, full of life but also threatened by dire environmental crises and ecocide. By experimenting with changes

¹⁴ Cf. www.oslofjorden.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Even-Moland-Historisk-tilbakeblikk-pa-Oslofjorden-HI.pdf.

¹⁵ Bodvin T., Rinde E., & Mortensen S., 2014, «Faggrunnlag Stillehavssøsters (*Crassostrea Gigas*)», in *Institute of Marine Research*, n. 32. <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/280655>.

in sensuous input, in the hope of influencing human conduct, instilling empathy and spurring action, we aim to become more understanding of and communicative with the non-human. Facts and figures do not influence human decision-making enough to change behavior and policies.

Donna Haraway writes: «It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories»¹⁶. These words are an encouragement to think of art, artistic expressions and aesthetics as profound and meaningful qualities carrying meaning in exchange and communication.

¹⁶ Haraway, *op.cit.*, p. 12

ART AND MACHINE LEARNING

A Theory of Latent Spaces

Antonio Somaini

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In this lecture, I am going to talk about a body of work I have been developing over the past few years on the impact of AI technologies on images, visual culture, and artistic practices in fields such as photography, film, video, and video installation. This is a research project I pursue both as a scholar and as a curator.

As a main reference, I will use an exhibition I have curated for the Jeu de Paume in Paris, on view between April 11th and September 21st, 2025. The exhibition is titled, in French, *Le Monde selon l'IA*, and in English, *The World Through AI*¹.

Why did we choose this title? Because, for some time now, there has been a growing awareness that AI technologies – algorithms and models – are permeating all layers of culture and society. They are increasingly embedded across virtually every domain: culture, society, economics, finance, technology, and, of course, military operations. My interest has been to explore and analyse the ways in which artists have responded to this expanding presence of AI within our cultural landscape².

¹ Cf. <https://jeudepaume.org/evenement/exposition-le-monde-selon-ia/>. After Jeu de Paume, the exhibition is currently traveling, with new iterations at Sesc Campinas, Brazil (*O mundo através da IA*, November 26th, 2025 to April 26th, 2026), Sesc São Paulo (opening: August 5th, 2026) and at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany (June 10th – September 20th, 2026). In each new iteration, the exhibition enters in relation with the local cultural, environmental and political context: new artists are invited to participate, and the exhibition's sections are reorganized.

² For more information, see the exhibition catalogue: Somaini A., 2025, ed., *The World Through AI*, JBE Books – Jeu de Paume, Paris.

In some cases, artists embrace these technologies as new media through which to create, modify, or circulate texts and images. In other cases, they develop strategies to counter them, seeking to protect themselves from their often-invasive presence. In yet other instances, artists appropriate these technologies, transforming and reorienting them towards purposes different from those for which they were originally conceived.

In speaking about the impact of AI on images, visual culture, and contemporary artistic practices, we need first to clarify what we mean by AI today. The term itself was introduced in 1955 and has evolved significantly since then, accompanied by shifting meanings, discourses, and ideologies. Today, AI generally refers to a range of learning algorithms and models which, after a phase of training, are able to perform autonomously increasingly complex operations: for example, generating images, texts, sounds, and voices, and modifying them according to a whole spectrum of techniques.

We encounter the presence of AI systems everywhere. At the same time, however, these systems tend to become increasingly discreet – sometimes even invisible – operating at levels that elude direct perception. For this reason, images play a particularly crucial role in the present historical moment. They function as a kind of visible surface upon which the impact of AI on culture at large becomes perceivable, and therefore open to discussion and negotiation.

Images, moreover, are being profoundly transformed by AI technologies. Algorithms are now embedded in the cameras of our smartphones, and each photograph we take is no longer a single capture of what lies before the lens. Rather, it is the result of a series of algorithmic operations, often involving the combination of multiple images.

As you know, platforms such as Midjourney, ChatGPT, Adobe Firefly, and others allow users to generate new images or to transform existing ones. We can produce both still and moving images. Increasingly, models such as Sora (recently withdrawn) and Runway Gen-3 make it possible to generate videos directly from prompts.

The entire field of visual culture – and, indeed, artistic practice more broadly – is thus either being transformed by these technologies or provided with new possibilities for engaging with them. In studying these transformations, I came to realise that a new kind of entity – a complex mathematical structure – was progressively infiltrating our culture, and that it needed to be addressed from the perspective of visual culture theory, as well as cultural theory more generally.

This entity is what is known as “latent space”. Until only a few years ago, this term circulated primarily within the field of computer science. Today, however, it arguably needs to become part of our shared vocabulary for discussing contemporary culture – much as terms such as “database” entered the humanities thirty years ago.

What, then, are latent spaces? They are complex mathematical spaces composed of data points defined by vectors – essentially long sequences of numbers – within which, once training is complete, generative AI models encode and organise the images and texts on which they have been trained.

To take the example of ChatGPT: the reason it can generate images from prompts is that, during the training phase, billions of interconnected images and texts are transformed into vectors and positioned within this abstract vector space.

We can attempt to conceptualise latent space by analogy with a conventional three-dimensional space. In such a space, every entity is defined by three coordinates – typically X, Y, and Z – which indicate height, width, and depth. Any object existing within this space can be identified and positioned through these coordinates. A latent space in a generative AI model, however, does not consist of just three dimensions; rather, it may encompass hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of dimensions. As such, it is impossible to perceive or fully imagine. One might instead think of it as a vast matrix of numerical values.

The prompt that we use to activate text-to-image or text-to-video models are a way to enter these latent spaces and steer the generative process in a given direction. In this sense, whenever we

interact through prompts with generative AI models, we are effectively exploring these latent spaces, attempting to extract and render elements from them. These outputs may take the form of texts, images, sounds, voices, or complex combinations thereof. Latent spaces thus emerge as an invisible yet highly consequential presence within contemporary culture.

In many respects, latent spaces today play a role that is, in certain ways, comparable to that traditionally performed by archives. Archives have historically functioned as sites for the storage and organisation of cultural content, enabling the public to access, retrieve, and transform it, and to elaborate new forms of knowledge and cultural production.

They have been places in which vast domains of cultural production and cultural memory were stored, positioned, and made available to be reinterpreted and reworked. Latent spaces, in a similar manner, absorb enormous quantities of cultural production and memory – largely drawn from the internet – transforming them into vectors, numerical values, and data points, and thereby allowing users to generate new cultural artefacts from them. There is, however, a crucial difference. The cultural contents embedded within latent spaces are not retrievable as such. They are converted into data points that can be processed computationally, but the space itself remains fundamentally opaque. We do not possess a map, a comprehensive catalogue, or a transparent means of navigating it. And yet, despite this opacity, their role in the processing and transformation of culture is, in many respects, analogous to that of archives.

This raises the question: how are artists engaging with latent spaces? What emerged from my exploration of contemporary artistic practices responding to AI is that many artists are actively grappling with the presence of these spaces – particularly with their inaccessibility, invisibility, and opacity. They can only be explored in an indirect and often uncertain manner, through prompts, inputs, and iterative experimentation, observing which regions of the latent space are activated.

In response, artists have developed several distinct strategies.

A first approach consists in producing autonomous latent spaces: that is, working with generative AI models outside the dominant commercial platforms – such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, Adobe Firefly, or Gemini – and instead constructing smaller, more controlled latent spaces. This can involve, for instance, the use of Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), which allow for a greater degree of control over the types of images that can be generated.

A second strategy consists in working within commercially available latent spaces but exploring them in non-standard ways: attempting to bypass their constraints, evade their blind spots, and probe their limits in order to produce unexpected images – avoiding the clichés and stereotypical outputs that such systems often generate.

A third strategy seeks to influence future latent spaces by disseminating images across the internet that may, in time, become part of the training data for subsequent models. In this sense, artistic practice extends into the shaping of the datasets – and thus the imaginaries – of future AI systems.

Finally, a fourth strategy involves treating latent spaces as a form of archive: vast repositories in which cultural material has been encoded, and from which it becomes possible to retrieve and recombine fragments of the past. This may involve generating images that evoke alternative histories, counterfactual narratives, or fictional memories.

Let me now briefly turn to some examples of these different artistic practices.

This is, for example, the approach adopted by the contemporary artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, who has been working extensively with AI for several years. In a series of installations initiated in 2018 and continuing to the present, she has employed models such as Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), which allowed her to train AI systems on image datasets she personally selected. These were subsequently used in installations such as *This is the Future*, first presented at the Venice Biennale in 2019.



Figure 1 | Hito Steyerl, *This is the Future*, 2019. Installation view, image courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery

In this installation, Steyerl develops a broader reflection on AI as a predictive apparatus, addressing how financial, social, and political forecasting is increasingly delegated to algorithmic systems. A distinctive aspect of her work lies in the fact that she trained the model using her own curated set of images. As can be seen in a later work – *Animal Spirits* (2022) – she describes her role as that of being in charge of “latent space architecture and pathmaking”. By this, she suggests that the artist’s task is to construct the architecture of a latent space and to trace trajectories within it, thereby regaining a degree of control and agency over these systems, rather than relying on pre-constituted and prefabricated models.

Another strategy, as mentioned earlier, consists in exploring existing latent spaces in non-standard ways. In this case, one works with available models, fully aware that they carry their own biases, clichés, and tendencies.

An artist who chose to adopt this strategy, Erik Bullof, for example, chose to work with Lexica, a generative AI model which is essentially based on Stable Diffusion³.

³ Cf. <https://lexica.art/>.

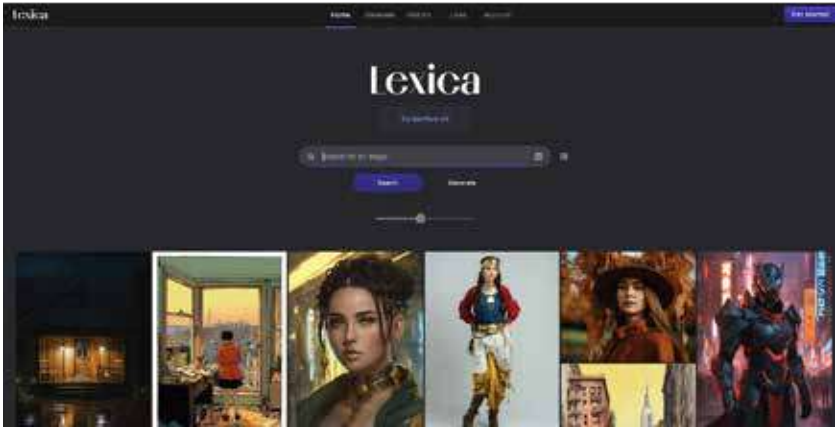


Figure 2 | The starting webpage of the generative AI model Lexica. Screenshot from website, courtesy of the author.



Figure 3 | Erik Bullot, *Cinéma vivant* (The Living Cinema), 2024. Image courtesy of the artist

Left to its own devices, this type of model tends to produce images that are often clichéd, standardised, repetitive, or even kitsch. However, through careful and deliberate work with prompts, it becomes possible to steer away from these tendencies and to explore regions of the latent space in which markedly different kinds of images can emerge.

Working with Lexica, Bullot developed in 2024 a project entitled *Cinéma vivant* (Living Cinema), in which he seeks to visualise a series of utopian ideas about what cinema might have become. These ideas were originally formulated in the 1920s and 1930s by writers and artists associated with movements such as Surrealism and Symbolism, such as Saint-Pol-Roux, whose writings about cinema have been posthumously published precisely with the title *Cinéma vivant*. Bullot's work attempts to give visual form to concepts that remained largely theoretical – ideas that were never materially realised, but which can now be rendered, at least hypothetically, through a non-standard use of generative AI models.

A third possible strategy consists in attempting to influence the latent spaces of the future. In this context, the work of Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst is particularly significant. Both artists, who started working as musicians, have in recent years developed a number of compelling projects aimed at envisioning alternative models of AI – systems that are collective, open, and transparent, grounded in principles of consent, shared authorship, and equitable distribution of value.

Their work advocates for forms of AI based on consensual data practices, the use of copyright-free or voluntarily contributed materials, and new economic models centred on the sharing of revenues generated by AI systems. In one of their projects, titled *xhairymutantx* (2024), they explicitly seek to intervene in and influence the formation of future latent spaces⁴.

⁴ Commissioned for the 2024 Whitney Biennial, the project can be accessed on the Whitney Museum website: <https://xhairymutantx.whitney.org/>.



Figure 4 | Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, *xhairymutantx training costume*, 2024. Image courtesy of the artists



Figure 5 | Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, *xhairymutantx*, 2024. Image courtesy of the artists

They began by analysing how the image of Holly Herndon circulates across media. As one can observe, her representation tends to follow a limited set of recurring visual patterns. Current

latent spaces, as encoded in AI models, have internalised these patterns and reproduce them in a standardised way. In response, the artists developed a text-to-image model designed to generate large quantities of exaggerated variations of this visual cliché.

By producing and disseminating these images – particularly through their presentation on the website of the Whitney Museum of American Art – they aim to influence future latent spaces. The expectation is that subsequent AI models, trained on datasets that may include these images, will incorporate and reflect a transformed representation of Herndon – one that has been deliberately shaped through this intervention.

This suggests that, alongside the possibility of creating one's own models, another strategy consists in distributing images across the internet in targeted ways, with the aim of influencing how subjects are represented by generative AI systems. This approach is closely tied to the idea of latent spaces as meta-archives.

Latent spaces can indeed be understood as vast systems of data points in which large portions of cultural memory have been encoded, translated into numerical form, and rendered processable. From this perspective, they may be used not so much to pre-visualise the future as to rethink the past: to return to archives, collections, and historical materials, and to generate not only what has been documented and preserved, but also what might have been.

In this regard, it is useful to recall a concept proposed by the late German filmmaker Alexander Kluge in his last book *Der Konjunktiv der Bilder* [*The Subjunctive of Images*] (translated in English as *The Dragonfly Eyes*, 2024)⁵.

Remarkably, at the age of ninety-three, Kluge began experimenting with AI after a long career in documentary filmmaking. In this work, he suggests that the images generated by AI operate in the subjunctive mood – “the grammatical mood of our

⁵ Kluge A., 2024, *Alexander Kluge: Der Konjunktiv der Bilder: Meine virtuelle Kamera*, Spector Books, Leipzig, Germany.

sense of what is possible” – and constitute a specific modality through which to visualise “hypotheticals and heterotopias.” Such images, therefore, do not simply represent what is or what has been, but rather what could be: they evoke possibilities, alternative pasts, and even potential presents.



Figure 6 | Grégory Chatonsky, *La Ville qui n'existait pas* (The City That Did Not Exist), 2023. Image courtesy of the artist

There are many artists working along these lines, including, for example, Grégory Chatonsky. Chatonsky has developed a large-scale urban project specifically conceived for the city of Le Havre, comprising sculptures, billboards, postcards, video installations, and films. The project, titled *La Ville qui n'existait pas* [*The City That Did Not Exist*] (2023-26), employs text-to-image and text-to-video models – particularly Stable Diffusion and AnimDiff, with fine-tuning – in order to visualise different moments of a counterfactual history of the city.

More specifically, Chatonsky trained an AI model on images drawn from the photographic archives of Le Havre and subsequently used it to generate alternative historical scenarios – imagining a Le Havre that might have existed but did not. In this sense, the project exemplifies how generative AI can be mobilised not only to reproduce or extend existing visual cultures, but to speculate on unrealised trajectories of the past.

This, I would argue, represents one of the most compelling possibilities opened up by these technologies. It also demonstrates how artists are responding, through a wide range of strategies, to the emergence of this entity – latent space – which, until recently confined to computer science, is now exerting a significant presence and agency across contemporary culture.

In conclusion, latent spaces are likely to assume an increasingly central role within a visual culture that is ever more deeply shaped by AI models. As vectorial structures composed of vast quantities of data points, they can be understood as repositories of virtual images, only a fraction of which can be actualised at any given moment. At the same time, they function as spaces of remediation: complex systems in which different media forms – text, image, sound – are translated into one another and continuously reconfigured.

What is encoded, embedded, and organised within latent spaces are not simply datasets, but extensive domains of cultural production and cultural memory. For this reason, they may be approached as a kind of “meta-archive”: a space in which it becomes possible to navigate not only what has been recorded, but also what might have been – alternative pasts, counterfactual histories, and fictional memories. In this sense, one might even speak of a renewed archival impulse, reconfigured through the logic of generative models.

Within this evolving landscape, a key question for artists, photographers, and filmmakers concerns how to engage with latent spaces. Should one work within existing, hegemonic models, with all their constraints and biases? Should one attempt to intervene in and reshape them? Or, alternatively, should one seek to construct autonomous latent spaces, over which a different degree of control may be exercised? It is likely that artistic practices will continue to unfold across all of these directions, as latent spaces consolidate their role as one of the defining infrastructures of contemporary visual culture.

EVERYONE BELONGS TO EVERYONE ELSE

Fosbury Architecture

Design and architecture collective, Milan

This essay is an adaptation of the contribution by Fosbury Architecture for the catalogue of the Italian Pavilion at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, published by Humboldt Books in 2023, which in turn formed the basis of their presentation at “Theories and Practices of Contemporary Artistic Research.” English translation by Bennett Bazalgette-Staples.

Almost by definition, an architecture exhibition serves to raise strategic questions, with designers invited to help reinforce the initial thesis and a curator to historicise the phenomenon. While we shall not shy away from this task, we are not so much concerned with making an intuition universal as we are with providing a snapshot of a ‘movement’ – yet to fully emerge in Italy – that we are documenting, of which we are a part, that is only now offering its first fruits and that will perhaps lead to something, or perhaps the mountain in labour really will give birth to no more than a mouse¹. Be as it may, this Italian Pavilion will provide the chance to channel all the energies gathered thus far into actions.

¹ The expression derives from the Latin phrase *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus* which, literally translated, means: «The mountains will be in labour, and a silly little mouse will be born», Horace (13 BCE). *Ars poetica*, Verse 139.

We represent a generation that grew up in a state of permacrisis². The neologism, elected Word of the Year in 2022 by Collins Dictionary, expresses a recurring dimension of catastrophic occurrences that perfectly describes the unfolding of events of the last twenty years. After the near miss of the Y2K bug, the century began with the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers: the crisis of the West being screened on live television. We enrolled at university during the 2007-2008 financial crisis and, once we graduated, we started to look for work in the smoking ruins of the market. And then over the past two years, like everyone else, we were largely confined to our own homes. Today the energy crisis, tomorrow the environmental crisis; and this is only a partial representation of reality. To the Western malaise we must add the humanitarian crisis surrounding us, the geopolitical crisis just around the corner and all those other disasters that constantly catch us off guard.

The global consequences have produced obvious repercussions on our profession and, while the age of architectural exuberance came to an end with the 2008 crisis³, the pandemic has broadened that widespread awareness of the total depletion of resources⁴. These altered boundaries, instead of helping us to close ranks, have triggered a strategic retreat. As Harriet Harriss and Rory Hyde suggest in *Future Practice*: «All crises have spatial consequences that architects are well prepared to deal with, yet instead of diving into them, we seem to be experiencing our

² Permacrisis, or in Italian *permacrisi*, as described in the entry under the ‘Neologismi’ section of the online Italian encyclopaedia *Treccani.it*, refers to «a state of permanent crisis, characterised by a series and overlapping of emergency situations».

³ On the role of the crises with regard to the architectural discipline, see the interview with Mirko Zardini in: Fosbury Architecture, 2023, ed., *Spaziale. Everyone Belongs to Everyone Else*, Humboldt Books, Milan, p. 320; and Doglio F., Zardini M., 2021, *Dopo le crisi: 1973, 2001, 2008, 2020*, LetteraVentidue Edizioni, Siracusa, p. 20.

⁴ Durastanti C., 2022, «Tutto esaurito», in *Sotto il Vulcano*, August, n. 4, pp. 34-39.

own crisis: one of relevance»⁵. The clear risk is that the umpteenth internal discourse within the discipline makes us lose sight of how architecture, rather than providing solutions, is often part of the problem.

Data do not generate empathy, but even the most trivial data, when interpolated, paint a remarkable picture of the state of the art. On the one hand, the construction sector is responsible worldwide for 39% of the amount of carbon dioxide dispersed into the air, 36% of electricity consumption, 50% of the extraction of raw materials and 33% of the consumption of drinking water⁶: on the other hand (especially in Italy), the increase in land consumption⁷ corresponds to a contraction in the potential market⁸ and levels of chronic dissatisfaction among those working in the sector⁹. An inversely proportional relationship between growth and development that lays the foundations for an unprecedented alliance between the environment and professionals in the

⁵ Harriss H., Hyde R., 2013, *Future Practice: Conversations from the Edge of Architecture*, Routledge, London, p. 17.

⁶ Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction (2020). *2020 Global Status Report for Building and Construction*. UN Environment Programme.

⁷ Data from the National System for Environmental Protection of 2021 show that in the two years of the pandemic, despite the slowdown in the construction sector, 2.2 square metres of ground were consumed per second in Italy.

⁸ Cf. Ippolito F., 2019, *Paesaggi frantumati. Atlante d'Italia in numeri*, Skira, Milano, pp. 698, 702: «According to CENSIS, architectural firms win only 16% of the architectural design market in Italy, according to ANCE 14%». An apparently small figure, but one of the highest in Europe if we consider that: «Among the countries that absorb the largest share of the potential market for design services, after Germany and Italy is Denmark with 13.4%, followed by the Netherlands with 10.6%. Turkey, Portugal, Belgium, Switzerland and Greece absorb between 8% and 7%. The United Kingdom absorbs 6.5%, the Czech Republic and Austria absorb around 5%, Latvia 4.2%, while Finland and France absorb just over 3%».

⁹ Ibid.: «In Italy, architects' satisfaction with their work is below the European average». Mainly because: «In Italy, architects have an average annual income of under €20,000, in Europe about €29,000».

sector. An opportunity for architecture to evolve, albeit only opportunistically, in order to survive.

There is a generation of sustainable natives who, in our view, have already accepted the challenge and seek to develop antibodies to disillusionment on a daily basis. Those we call *Spazialisti* ('Spatialists') – creative mediators between emotional power and pragmatic potential¹⁰ – are those who use the codified tools of design to question the social conditions of the places where they intervene. Accustomed by training to operating within a regime of scarcity, these practices foster transdisciplinarity as a means of pushing back the limits of architecture to hitherto little-explored fields. *Spazialisti* search beyond local ground maps, beyond the quest for inventiveness or for novelty, only to rediscover *space* as both a physical and symbolic dimension, a system of known references and a territory of potential.

Numerous examples from the present and the recent past¹¹, the very appointment of Lesley Lokko¹² as curator of the 2023 Architecture Biennale, and the awards received by the designers invited to *Spaziale*¹³ confirm that the 'trend' – albeit little more than a niche within the vast panorama of the discipline

¹⁰ Cf. Harriss H., Hyde R. & Marcaccio R., 2021, eds., *Architects After Architecture, Alternative Pathways for Practice*, Routledge, London, p. 9: «In this version the architect is recast as creative mediator, bridging between different forms of knowledge [...], building and combining emotional power with pragmatic potential».

¹¹ If we limit ourselves to the most meaningful European experiences, we might mention: the prestigious Turner Prize awarded to Assemble (London) in 2015; the Swiss Art Award to studio TEN (Zurich) in 2018; the Golden Lion to Raumlabor (Berlin) in 2021; and the winning of the W Award for research to the collective Part W (London) in 2023.

¹² Not only a designer but also a successful writer, journalist and educator, for a complete biography, see: www.africanfuturesinstitute.com/lesley-lokko.

¹³ Among the awards received by the *Spazialisti*, we might mention: Parasite 2.0, winners of the YAP MAXXI prize in 2016; Orizzontale, Young Talent of Italian Architecture Prize, announced by CNAPPC (National Council of Architects, Planners, Landscapers and Conservators) in 2018; Studio Ossidiana, first prize in the Kunstpaviljoen competition, Flevoland 2020, Almere; Post Disaster, winners of the third edition of Creative Living Lab in 2021 with the project PDR Ep03.

– is already a reality. While detectable at all latitudes, in Italy this phenomenon has its roots in the radical architecture of the 1970s, often explicitly inspired by collective experiences such as that of *Global Tools*:¹⁴ an incredible moment of democratisation of creativity. In a context of transformations in many ways akin to those we are experiencing today, the alliance between architects, political activists and intellectuals fuelled a cultural revolution that for years to come was to contribute to increasing the perception of Italian architecture and design as a form of outright excellence.

The similarities with the past, however, end there. Although marked by the oil crisis, the 1970s were followed by the rapid rebound of the neo-liberal market – thus offering new areas in which to translate the emerging theories and approaches into practice – while the decade following the 2008 financial crisis certainly did not benefit from any such similar rebound. In their early years, even those who went on to become archistars largely produced research; however, the centrality of research for the post-2008 generation did not coincide with the construction of artefacts but rather with the production of thought and actions in order to cope with contemporary contingencies. The very definition of the form of professional collaboration, for the *Spazialisti*, became a project in itself. A counter-tactic to pyramid structures, as Charlotte Malterre-Barthes argues, promoting a feminist, intersectional and horizontal approach. For «Ultimately, it is by fixing the internal operative structures of our broken architectural practices that the built environment may be repaired»¹⁵.

Although the term ‘curator’ may lay claim to an etymological basis in theology, referring to the ecclesiastical function of caring

¹⁴ Borgonuovo V., Franceschini S., 2019, eds., *Global Tools 1973–1975: When Education Coincides with Life*, NERO Editions, Rome.

¹⁵ Cf. Malterre-Barthes C., 2023, «Kill Your Darlings: Why the Office Must Be Fixed to Fix Architecture», in *Fosbury Architecture*, *op.cit.*, p. 328; cf. also Malterre-Barthes C., 2025, *A Moratorium on New Construction*, Sternberg Press, London, where point n. 6 of the manifesto is ‘Fix the Office’.

for souls, today this mission seems to have fortunately been scaled down. Moving away from an authorial position, the curator is rather an intermediary between institutions and the public, but also a figure capable of absorbing and metabolising pressing issues and intervening when necessary. Fleur Watson in *The New Curator*¹⁶ argues that the last decade has seen such an absorption of the verb ‘to curate’ into the common lexicon that it is now used to describe even the most everyday actions: a *dé-tournement*¹⁷ that Mary Anne Staniszewski – capturing the zeitgeist – describes as “curatorial euphoria”. At the same time, we may note how curating is now widely practised by professionals from the most diverse backgrounds. For us, over time, curatorial practice has proven to be a powerful tool to shift from archiving to action. Recognising its necessarily ethical dimension, we decided to use the Italian Pavilion as a pretext to activate pioneering projects, concrete actions that go beyond the six-month duration of the Biennale. In this complex and lyrical process, our role has been that of facilitators between various constellations of agents and promoters in a network of migrating intelligences at the service of a shared project.

Ethics also lies at the heart of the discourse when questioning the meaning and impact of temporary events of this scale: be they exhibitions, fashion shows, concerts, sporting events or fairs, they are all extractive processes that dissipate a great deal of energy and resources. In order to continue to celebrate moments of confrontation and contamination in a sustainable manner, it is now urgent to drastically rethink formats, flows and temporalities.

¹⁶ Watson F., 2021, *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture and Design*, Routledge, London, p. 13.

¹⁷ Ibid.

To convert consumption into investment and the end into a beginning¹⁸. *Spaziale* is divided into three parts. The first is 'Spaziale presenta': in the run-up to the opening of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, the observatory monitored the activity of nine site-specific interventions in nine selected locations throughout Italy. The second is 'Spatial. Everyone belongs to everyone else': inside the Italian Pavilion, the exhibition embodies the formal and theoretical synthesis of processes triggered elsewhere. The third is 'Spaziale': a platform that will be launched after the opening as an incremental laboratory with a long-term perspective.

Alongside the expansion of the programme, the choice was made to implement a contraction of the set-up and a displacement of resources. Therefore, in addition to defining the life cycle of all the materials used, we decided to leave the first half of the pavilion completely empty. An operation that allows us to use only the surface area strictly necessary and magnify the intrinsic qualities of a space, systematically saturated by the contents it houses. For the first time, and thanks to the support of the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity, the exhibition plays an active role in the production of local projects, allowing us to say while the Italian Pavilion may be downsized in Venice, it is still spread out across the whole country.

Spazialisti, the term used so far to describe the architects invited, is a poor translation of the definition coined by Jane Rendell for those involved in what she calls 'critical spatial practices', i.e.: agents operating «at a triple crossroads: between theory and practice, between public and private, and between art and architecture»¹⁹. The mere fact that there is still no official Italian

¹⁸ On the topic of the end as a beginning and on the end of time, see the reference to François Hartog in Bassoli N., 2023, «Time Is Running Out», in *Fosbury Architecture*, *op.cit.*, p. 353.

¹⁹ Rendell J., 2003, «A Place Between Art, Architecture and Critical Theory», in *Place and Location, Proceedings of the Estonian Academy of Arts*, pp. 221-233.

translation reflects the degree of the disconnect between our country and the rest of the world. In this volume²⁰, also thanks to the contribution of dpr-barcelona²¹ in dialogue with Markus Miessen and Anna Puigjaner, it becomes clear that in order to codify new approaches, new languages must be used. Not using classical tools for an architect can be as destabilising as not using words to express oneself, but as always, it is in bewilderment that paradigms are altered²². Not seeing Architecture in a project does not mean it lacks it, but simply that there are not yet the tools – in our case, not even the normative ones – to acknowledge and describe it.

This is why, with Calvinian lightness²³, the projects selected tackle an agenda of urgent research topics for the Italian context and for the discipline as a whole: open questions that may be traced back to the transition scenario – and not only the ecological one – that we have been dealing with over recent years. For each intervention, our invitation was to focus on one of the following: living with disaster, reconciling with the environment, multicultural coexistence, reappraising the heritage of unfinished building works, decolonising recreational activities, the food transition, the regenerating of urban outskirts, overcoming the digital divide and achieving carbon neutrality. An incomplete list of ‘impossible’ challenges that have been up for debate for

²⁰ *Fosbury Architecture, op.cit.*, where the present essay was originally published.

²¹ See the conversation between the authors in *Fosbury Architecture, op.cit.*, p. 340.

²² In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) Thomas S. Kuhn – in turn citing Max Planck – reminds us that: «A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it», Kuhn T.S., 1962, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (IL), p. 151.

²³ As we were reminded by Sabrina Ferilli at the 2022 Sanremo Festival: «Take life with lightness, for lightness is not superficiality but is like planning over things from above, and having no millstones tied to one's heart». See Calvino I., 1993, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Vintage, New York.

decades, hyperobjects²⁴ or rather elephants in the room big enough to make your pulse race, yet which – on the scale of the micro-histories of local contexts – are capable of producing tangible results.

The definition of the themes guided the selection of as many designers under forty, who in their daily practice develop independent research in line with our curatorial proposals. Identified on the basis of the approach with which they operate, the territories in which they intervene, the means they use, the questions they raise and the answers they put forward, they were called upon to develop site-specific actions for the Italian Pavilion. In other words, the works on show are an abstraction of the collaborative projects initiated in the nine local Stations. Each practice is associated with an Advisor: nine professionals supporting the designers, from various fields across the creative industry, capable of informing and enhancing the ongoing projects, making them an undoubtedly transdisciplinary product. The installations were implemented in sites representative of conditions of fragility or transformation of our country: nine Stations narrating an unprecedented Italian landscape, a series of symbolic destinations on a renewed *Italian Journey*. Each collaboration was supported by one or more local interlocutors: public or private institutions such as museums, music festivals, film festivals and cultural associations, which as Incubators helped to root the projects in the selected Stations.

In 1932, Aldous Huxley published the first edition of his *Brave New World*²⁵. The book describes a dystopian future in which every aspect of life is planned with stability in mind. Humanity, reproduced in test tubes, has surrendered all forms of freedom in favour of welfare, and is controlled through the administration of drugs and the gratification of pleasures. Some groups of 'free' humans survive in nature reserves and are used as tourist

²⁴ Morton T., 2013, *Hyperobjects*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

²⁵ Huxley A., 1932, *Brave New World*, Chatto & Windus, London.

attractions. The protagonist is one of them: a 'savage' who grew up reading Shakespeare²⁶. The critical reading of the distortions of our society is evident, as is the empathy provoked by the *bons sauvages*, and you find yourself at the end of the novel wondering which of the two realities you would rather belong to. An ambiguity in preference is instilled that even leads us to doubt which really is the 'new world'. Doubt is the protagonist of another work, this time a painting from 1791, which coincidentally bears a very similar title: Giandomenico Tiepolo's *Il mondo novo* (*The New World*)²⁷. The painter turns the representation on its head, and the throng of people crowding into the foreground prevents us from seeing what lies behind. Intrinsic to the frenzy of the characters is a feeling of profound disquiet and the imminent end of an era. With the same trepidation and uncertainty, we scour the horizon in search of some clue to help us decipher its future, in the hope that it will be a space in which «Everyone belongs to everyone else»²⁸.

²⁶ The book title, *Brave New World*, comes from a famous passage in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare: «O wonder! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that has such people in't!».

²⁷ Giandomenico Tiepolo, *Il mondo novo*, 1791, detached fresco, Ca' Rezzonico, Museum of 18th century, Venice.

²⁸ In Huxley's *Brave New World*, the motto 'Everyone belongs to everyone else' describes a society where family ties have been abolished thanks to automated conception. For us instead, it strengthens a sense of global community aware that the actions of some may lead to consequences for everyone.



Figure 1 | *SP1 Post Disaster Rooftops EP04*. Ph. Piercarlo Quecchia DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 2 | *SP2 La terra delle sirene*. Ph. Piercarlo Quecchia DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 3 | *SP3 SOT GLAS*. Ph. Alessandro Saletta Melania Dalle Grave DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 4 | *SP4 Uccellaccio*. Ph. Alessandro Saletta, Melania Dalle Grave DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 5 | *SP5 Concrete Jungle*. Ph. Melania Dalle Grave DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia
Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 6 | *SP6 Sea Changes*. Ph. Delfino Sisto Legnani DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia
Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 7 | *SP7 La casa tappeto*. Ph. Piercarlo Quecchia DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia
Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 8 | *SP8 Belmondo Tracks*. Ph. Alessandro Saletta, Melania Dalle Grave DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture



Figure 9 | *SP9 Belvedere*. Ph. Michela Pedranti DSLstudio. Padiglione Italia, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – La Biennale di Venezia Courtesy of © Fosbury Architecture

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Kristin Bergaust is a pioneer in Norway's early self-organized media art scene, integrating feminist and relational perspectives into her practice, exploring contemporary conditions through performative and technological strategies informed by cultural history, scientific data, and narratives. Her work blurs boundaries between art and research, emphasizing sensory and communicative experimentation. Educated at the University of Oslo and the National Academy of Fine Art, Kristin is a professor at OsloMet's Faculty of Technology, Art, and Design, where she became vice-dean of research in June 2024. Her transdisciplinary and transcultural approach to evolving environments is evident in projects like *Oslofjord Ecologies* (2016–present). She led *FeLT – Futures of Living Technologies* (2020–2023), which bridged artistic research on living organisms with advancements in AI, robotics, health tech, and biocomputing. Her recent focus includes fostering ecological awareness and multispecies relationships within marine phenomena. Collaborating with scientists Guillermo García Sánchez and Evangelos Voukouvalas (2022–2024), she co-created the video installation *Ocean Connections*, utilizing mathematical modeling, scientific data, and biodiversity history to portray the Oslofjord as a living entity. These themes continue in the *Oslofjord Triennial* (August 2025), a curatorial and artistic event on an off-grid Oslofjord island. Kristin is also collaborating on *Eco-Cultural Tides: Submerged Narratives of the Danube and the Oslofjord* with MetaSpatiú, Timisoara, Romania, merging ecological storytelling with artistic innovation.

Samuel Bianchini is an artist and professor at École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (EnsAD, PSL University), where he leads the Reflective Interaction group at EnsadLab, focusing on research into interactive “dispositifs.” From 2017 to 2023, he

co-headed La Chaire arts & sciences, a program launched with École Polytechnique and the Daniel & Nina Carasso Foundation. He is a member of the SACRe Laboratory at PSL University, actively supervising PhD research in art and design, and is affiliated with the Hexagram network in Canada and the Matters of Activity cluster at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Bianchini's work has been widely exhibited, including at prestigious venues such as the Centre Pompidou, Jeu de Paume, Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Benaki Museum (Athens), Art Basel, Red Brick Museum (Beijing), Nuit Blanche (Toronto, Paris), and the ZKM (Karlsruhe). His interdisciplinary approach bridges art and research, and his contributions extend to over 70 publications with esteemed publishers, including MIT Press, Springer, and Les presses du réel. As editor, he has overseen seven books, notably *Practicable. From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art* (MIT Press, 2016), co-edited with Erik Verhagen. He also founded the journal *able*, an international, image-based platform published by Actar, supported by the Daniel & Nina Carasso Foundation. Blending theory, practice, and innovation, Bianchini's work reflects his dedication to expanding the boundaries of art, research, and interactive engagement.

Giovanna Cassese serves as President of the National Council for Higher Arts and Music Education (CNAM) under the Ministry of University and Research. A prolific author, she has published extensively on art history, art collecting, design history, and cultural heritage conservation, including two notable works on Italian art academies' cultural heritage: *Patrimoni da svelare per le Arti del Futuro* (2013) and *Accademie/Patrimoni di Belle Arti* (2016). A professor of Art History at Naples Academy of Fine Arts, she was Dean from 2007 to 2014 and currently leads its School of Conservation while curating the Plaster Gallery. Between 2015 and 2021, she contributed to the Technical Committee for Conservation Schools, co-founded by the Ministries of Culture and University and Research. She also presided over Faenza's School of Industrial Arts (ISIA) from 2016 to 2023 and led the Conference

of ISIA Schools (2019-2023). Currently, she oversees the Technical Commissions for Conservation Schools and for the protection of cultural heritage in Italian higher arts institutions, jointly established by the Ministries of Culture and University and Research. She directs the PhD program in «Conservation, Restoration and Enhancement of Cultural Heritage» at Naples Academy of Fine Arts, advancing innovative research in these fields.

Elena Cogni, PhD, MRSS, is an artist and Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Critical Practice at the Cambridge School of Art (Anglia Ruskin University), where she was Research and Innovation Lead and Postgraduate Research Coordinator (2029-2025). Cogni led the Research Excellence Framework submission in 2021 and is now working on the 2029 submission for UoA 32 Art and Design. Cogni studied at the Brera Academy of Art in Milan, Leeds University, and has a PhD from the University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design, where she also pursued her postdoc. She held several academic positions at York Saint John University, the University of Cambridge, and ARTEZ University in the Netherlands. Cogni's practice has been developed in partnership with, and presented at, academic and art contexts internationally, including: Brown University, Stanford University (US); Utrecht University (Netherlands); Venice Biennale, Venice, GAMeC, Bergamo, MAMBO, Bologna, MLAC, Rome (Italy); Women's Art Collection at Cambridge University, CCA Glasgow, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, MK Gallery, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Tate Modern, (UK) and more.

Fosbury Architecture (FA) is a collective studio founded in 2013 by Giacomo Ardesio, Alessandro Bonizzoni, Nicola Campri, Veronica Caprino, and Claudia Mainardi. FA approaches architecture as a tool to mediate between collective and individual needs, sustainability and pragmatism, and the environment and humanity. Dedicated to expanding the boundaries of the discipline, FA addresses urban strategies, adaptive reuse, temporary installations, exhibitions, publishing, curatorial

work, and education. FA curated the Italian Pavilion at the 18th Venice Architecture Biennale. Other notable curations include *Characters* at Magazin Gallery, Vienna (2022), the Urban Center at Centro Pecci, Prato (2021-2022), and *Milan 2030* at the Milan Triennale (2019). FA has participated in major biennales, such as Lisbon (2019), Versailles (2019), Chicago (2017), and Venice (2016). Their work has also featured in group exhibitions like *Take Your Seat* at the ADI Design Museum, Milan; *The State of the Art of Architecture* at the Milan Triennale; *Re-Constructivist Architecture* at the RIBA Gallery, London; *Adhocracy* at the Onassis Center, Athens; and *Mean Home* at the British School in Rome. FA's exhibition designs include *Supponiamo un amore* (2024) at Fondazione Officine Saffi, *Senza Fine* (2024) for Dedar in London, and *Verde Prato* (2019) at Centro Pecci, which earned a Young Prize 2021 mention. In collaboration with Alterazioni Video, FA published *Incompiuto, La nascita di uno stile* (2018), awarded honorable mention at the 2020 Compasso d'Oro.

Leonardo Franceschini has taught philosophy at universities in Spain and China. He is the author of *Decolonizing Culture* (Ombre Corte, Verona, 2013; L'Harmattan, Paris, 2024), as well as of several articles and short essays. He collaborates with the UPF Center for Vattimo's Philosophy and Archives and the National University of San Marcos.

Eva Frapiccini undertook her Ph.D. practice-led at the School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies, University of Leeds. She is artist and Professor at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, where she is Head of the MA Programme of Photography and Member of the PhD program in *Research and Digital Transition in Museums and Art Galleries*. Her work has been exhibited in solo shows at MADRE, Naples; MAGA Modern Museum of Gallarate, Italy; BOZAR Palais des Beaux Art, Brussels; Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm; Kim? Contemporary Art Center, Riga; Townhouse Gallery, Cairo; Maraya Art Center, Sharjah; and in several group shows hosted in museums and art spaces, among which Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

Foundation, Turin; Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam; HVB Kunst Palais, Munich; Maison de la Photographie, Paris; Martin Gropius Bau Museum, Berlin; MUSA Museum auf Abruf, Wien. Frapiccini's work has been included in several festivals, including the XII International Exhibition of Architecture in Venice and the first edition of the Biennale Son, in Switzerland and permanent collections such as the UniCredit & Art, the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation, the MAXXI Museum in Rome, and the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art. She published three monographies: *Muri di piombo*, Skira 2008; *Il Pensiero che non diventa Azione avvelena l'Anima*, Silvana Editoriale 2017; and *Dreams Archive*, bruno. Venezia, 2023.

Leevi Haapala is a curator, art writer, and researcher of contemporary art. He currently serves as Dean of the Academy of Fine Arts at the University of Arts Helsinki. From 2015 to 2024, he was Director of Kiasma, Museum of Contemporary Art/The Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki. Prior to this, Haapala was Praxis Professor of Exhibition Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Arts Helsinki (2014-2015), and served as Curator and Deputy Chief Curator for Collections at Kiasma (2007-2014). During his tenure at Kiasma, Haapala oversaw solo exhibitions featuring artists such as Mona Hatoum, Grayson Perry, Ragnar Kjartansson, Pilvi Takala, and Dineo Seshee Bopape. He co-curated two major international survey exhibitions: ARS17: Hello World!, exploring the digital revolution, and ARS22: *Living Encounters*, examining individuals' and communities' everyday lives and aspirations. Haapala is a Board Member of CIMAM (International Committee of Museums and Collections of Modern Art) and has co-commissioned the Nordic Pavilion for the Venice Biennale (2018-2024). He also serves on boards such as Kuntzi Art Foundation (since 2021), OP Bank Art Foundation (since 2023), and previously for the Design Museum Foundation, Helsinki (2016-2022). Additionally, he contributed to the Pro Arte Foundation and IHME Contemporary Art Festival (2009-2019). Haapala is a long-standing jury member for the Young Artist of the Year Prize and the Ars Fennica Award, further shaping Finland's contemporary art landscape.

Johan A. Haarberg has extensive expertise in shaping framework conditions for higher arts education, artistic research, and quality enhancement procedures. Educated in philosophy and public law, he has significantly contributed to the development of artistic research and institutional strategies. From 2009 to 2013, he served as Director of the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme, a nationally funded, cross-disciplinary organization designed to promote artistic research within higher arts institutions in Norway. This initiative is now integrated into the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills. Previously, Haarberg was Director of the Bergen National Academy of the Arts (1996-2009), now part of the University of Bergen as the Faculty of Fine Art, Music, and Design. He was Vice-President and Treasurer of the Society for Artistic Research (SAR) from 2013 to 2018 and has served as SAR Executive Officer since 2018. Haarberg has held external board roles, including at the Faculty of Architecture and Design at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (2013–2021) and Stockholm University of the Arts (since 2014). He also advises the Rhythmic Music Conservatory in Copenhagen on artistic research. Actively engaged in the international arts and research community, Haarberg is available as an advisor, coach, and consultant. His work reflects a profound commitment to advancing artistic research, fostering innovation, and enhancing the global arts education landscape.

Nicoletta Leonardi is Professor of Photographic History and History of Printing and Print Culture at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, where she also serves as Curator of the Historical Photo Archive and member of the doctoral board in Techniques and Tools for the Study, Conservation and Valorization of Cultural Heritage. Her research lies at the intersection of art history and media history, advancing a systemic approach to photography and media as interconnected networks of technologies, practices, and materialities. A central strand of her work focuses on women in photography and on the forms of labour and cultural processes that have historically obscured their contributions.

Another major area of research investigates photographic collections held by academies of fine arts and educational institutions as teaching tools and infrastructures of visual knowledge. In this field, she has directed projects dedicated to the cataloguing, digitization, and valorization of photographic collections at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, the Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti, and the Museo di Antropologia Criminale Cesare Lombroso. Her research also explores the relationship between photographic history, archives, and contemporary artistic practice. Her most recent books include *Mechanical Objectivity and its Discomforts. Photography, Criminal Anthropology and Print Media in Italy, 1861–1939* (2026) and *On the Method of Making and the Method of Seeing: Photography at Italian Academies of Fine Arts, 1840–1930* (with Monica Maffioli, 2026). Her research has been supported by major national and international institutions and funding bodies. She was a Fulbright Fellow and President Fellow at Columbia University, Researcher in Residence at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, and Wallace Fellow at Villa I Tatti – Harvard University. She was Principal Investigator of *IartNET – International Platform for Artistic Research and Cultural Heritage at Italian Higher Arts Education Institutions* and Associate Principal Investigator of the PRIN project *Fotografiste: Women in Photography from Italian Archives, 1839–1939* (PI Linda Bertelli). She currently serves as chair of the Advisory Board of the Fondazione Alinari per la Fotografia and as a member of the Governing Board of the Società Italiana per lo Studio della Fotografia.

Jacob Lund is Professor of Aesthetics and Culture and Director of the Centre for Research in Artistic Practice under Contemporary Conditions at the School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University. He is editor, with Geoff Cox, of the book series *The Contemporary Condition* with Sternberg Press (since 2016). He was the Editor-in-Chief of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 2007–2023. Lund has published widely within aesthetics, art studies, critical theory, and comparative literature on topics such as

image-politics, subjectivity, memory, mediality, enunciation, and contemporaneity. 2015-2021, he was PI on the research project *The Contemporary Condition*, which focused on the concept of contemporaneity and changes in our experiences of time as these might be seen to be registered in contemporary art: www.contemporaneity.au.dk (funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research). Currently, he is engaged in the research project *Artistic Practice under Contemporary Conditions*, running 2022-2026 and made possible by an Investigator Grant from the Novo Nordisk Foundation. His most recent book is *The Changing Constitution of the Present: Essays on the Work of Art in Times of Contemporaneity* (Sternberg, 2022).

Rosita Mariani, captivated by movement in all its forms – children, animals, clouds, water – embraced dance after her experiences as a gymnast, mime, clown, and physical theatre performer. She trained extensively in post-modern dance (Diane Madden, Simone Forti, Vicky Shick, Jeremy Nelson, Lance Gries, Juliette Map, Gary Hoffman Soto), contact improvisation (Ivan Wolfe, Urs Stauffer), ballet (Deborah Weaver, Valter Venditti), Limón technique (Ruth Carrier), and experiential anatomy (Eva Karczag). Mariani holds certifications as an SME Somatic Movement Educator (Body-Mind Centering®) and Danzeducatore® (dance educator). She also practices C.A.T. (Continuous Activation Training), Qi Gong, and Tai Chi Chuan – Yang style. From 1986 to 2001, she worked as a freelance professional dancer, collaborating with Deborah Weaver (BTT), Teri J. Weikel (TIR Danza), Ariella Vidach (Aiep), Roberto Castello (Aldes), Robert Wilson, and Meg Harper (Piccolo Teatro di Milano), among others. She performed improvisations with artists and international jazz musicians like John Surman, Antonello Salis, Gianluigi Trovesi, and Mal Waldron. In 1994, she co-founded Trio Colibrì with Igor Sciavolino and Paolo Franciscone, exploring the interplay between body and sound. With Cinzia Severino, she co-founded *lucylab.evoluzioni*, a group dedicated to researching humanity in motion. Between 2006 and 2023, she directed the company, creating performances for diverse

spaces – stage, urban environments, museums, and private homes – producing site-specific works and dance films. A contemporary dance teacher since 2000, she currently teaches at Accademia del Teatro alla Scala, contributing to professional and educator training programs.

Domenico Quaranta (PHD, University of Genova) is a contemporary art critic, curator and teacher. His research focuses on the mutual interferences between technology, culture and society, and on how our understanding of the human and our sense of the world evolve. His texts have appeared in numerous magazines, newspapers, books and catalogs. He is the author, among other things, of: *Beyond New Media Art* (Brescia, 2013); *Surfing with Satoshi. Art, blockchain and NFTs* (Milan, 2022); *Net Art. Scritti sull'arte nell'era dell'informazione* (Milan, 2023) and editor of several volumes, including *GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames* (Milan, 2006, with M. Bittanti). Since 2005 he has curated several exhibitions, including *Collect the WWWorld. The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age* (Brescia 2011; Basel and New York 2012); *Cyphoria* (Quadriennale 2016, Rome); *Hyperemployment* (MGLC, Ljubljana 2019-2020) and *A Leap into the Void. Art Beyond Matter* (GAMEC, Bergamo 2023, with L. Giusti). He teaches at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Brescia and at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, Milan, where he serves as Director of the School of New Technologies of Art since 2024.

Lorella Scacco (PhD, University of Turku) teaches Phenomenology of Contemporary art at the Brera Academy of Fine Art and at the University of Milan-Bicocca. She is interested in the intertwining of visual arts and philosophy. Her research has been supported by fellowships and grants awarded by several sources, such as the Finnish Ministry of Education and the Danish Arts Council. She is a member of the scientific committee in the project *Emergence of Video Art in Europe (1960-1980): History, Theory, Sources and Archives*, conducted by the University of Paris 8 and ECAL,

Lausanne (2022-2025). Among her lectures and seminars: INHA, Paris (2019), University of Copenhagen (2019) and University of Helsinki (2018). She authored three monographs: *Estetica mediale. Da Jean Baudrillard a Derrick de Kerckhove* (Guerini, 2009), *Northwave: A Survey of Video Art in Nordic Countries* (Silvana Ed., 2009), and *Alberto Giacometti e Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Un dialogo sulla percezione* (Gangemi, 2017). She also works as curator and journalist. Since 1999 she has curated exhibitions and catalogues for art exhibitions in public and private art spaces, such as *Artext*, Triennale (Milan, 2006), *Mobile Journey* (coll. event, 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007); *MASKS. Multiple Identities from Antiquity to Contemporary Art*, Serlachius Museum (Finland, 2024).

Antonio Somaini is Professor of Film, Media, and Visual Culture Theory at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris and a Senior Member of the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF). His current research focuses on the impact of artificial intelligence on visual culture and contemporary art, exploring how AI reshapes the ways images are created, analyzed, and understood. Somaini's work delves into the intersection of technology and visual representation, a theme reflected in his recent publications. These include the article «Algorithmic Images: Artificial Intelligence and Visual Culture», published in *Grey Room* 93 (Fall 2023), and the book *Culture visuelle. Images, regards, médias, dispositifs*, co-authored with Andrea Pinotti. The latter, published by Presses du Réel in 2022, is a revised French translation of their earlier work *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi* (Einaudi, 2016). This publication examines the evolution of visual culture through the lenses of media theory and image studies, offering valuable insights into how images function within contemporary cultural and technological contexts. Somaini's contributions extend beyond academia, influencing debates on how AI technologies intersect with artistic practices and societal issues. His research highlights the transformative role of latent spaces and algorithmic processes in shaping visual media, prompting reflection on their cultural and political implications. As both a theorist

and researcher, Somaini's work provides a vital foundation for understanding the rapidly evolving landscape of visual culture in an age increasingly defined by artificial intelligence.

Akram Zaatari has created over fifty films and videos, a dozen books, and numerous installations featuring photographic material, unified by a commitment to writing histories. His work explores excavation, political resistance, the lives of former militants, the legacy of a waning left, the circulation of images during wartime, and the temporal play of letters lost, found, or delayed in their journeys. Zaatari has been instrumental in shaping Beirut's contemporary art scene, contributing to its formal, intellectual, and institutional framework. As a co-founder of the Arab Image Foundation (1997), an artist-led initiative dedicated to studying and preserving photography in the Arab world, Zaatari has made profound contributions to discourses on photography, archival practices, and preservation. He has broadened the scope of photography to include film, social media, and performative and research-driven practices, frequently informed by a queer perspective. His two-decade-long project on Studio Shehrazade (1953-2016) and its founder, Hashem el Madani, offers a singular exploration of five decades of image production, seen through the lens of an artist studying a photographer's universe. Zaatari's work has been featured at Documenta13 (2012) and the Venice Biennale (2013), where he represented Lebanon. His films include *The Landing* (2019), *Twenty-Eight Nights and A Poem* (2015), and *This Day* (2003). His works are held in prestigious collections worldwide, including the Guggenheim Museum, MoMA, Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, and Sharjah Art Foundation. Zaatari remains a leading figure in redefining contemporary art and photography.

Santiago Zabala is ICREA Research Professor of Philosophy at Pompeu Fabra University of Barcelona in Spain. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, among others. He is the author

of several books, most recently, *Why Only Art can Save Us. Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (Columbia University Press, 2017), *Being at Large. Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), *Outspoken. A Manifesto for the 21st Century*, edited with Adrian Parr (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024), and *Signs from the Future. A Philosophy of Warnings* (Columbia University Press, 2025).

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Firmly Holding Your Gaze On Your Own Time

Domenico Quaranta

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The Role of Others. Future Directions in Contemporary Artistic Research

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Ecology of the Seas: Artistic Research in Transdisciplinary Environments. Crossing Contemporary Art, Technology, Ecology, and Marine Biology

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Art and Machine Learning: a Theory of Latent Spaces

Antonio Somaini

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Everyone Belongs to Everyone Else

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What does it mean to do artistic research today? Bringing together voices from across disciplines and geographies, this book explores the questions, methods, and urgencies shaping contemporary artistic research.

Originating from the international seminar *Theories and Practices of Contemporary Artistic Research: a Transdisciplinary Approach*, held at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in March 2025, and developed within the IartNET project, the volume reflects a pivotal moment for Italian higher arts education following the introduction of doctoral programs in 2024.

Structured in three sections – Defining Contemporaneity, Contemporary Artistic Research Practices, and Key Issues in Contemporary Artistic Research – the book moves from theoretical reflections on time and global crises to practice-based approaches, and on to pressing themes such as ecology, artificial intelligence, and sustainability.

By weaving together perspectives from leading scholars and practitioners, this volume positions artistic research as a vital tool for interpreting and engaging with the complexities of the present. Featured authors: Kristin Bergaust, Samuel Bianchini, Giovanna Cassese, Elena Cologni, Fosbury Architecture, Eva Frapiccini, Leevi Haapala, Johan A. Haarberg, Nicoletta Leonardi, Jacob Lund, Rosita Mariani, Domenico Quaranta, Lorella Scacco, Antonio Somaini, Akram Zaatari, Santiago Zabala.

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