Drawing the line: comparison and evaluation in new disciplines

Draft 21.11.12 / Alison Gerber, Lund University / alison.gerber@soc.lu.se

Issues of quality and value are perpetually lively and contentious in both artistic and academic work, and while contemporary research on new and emerging disciplines generally takes as its focus cross- and interdisciplinary developments the establishment of an academic research culture in already-mature fields (as when artistic practice extends to artistic research) is comparatively neglected. If we imagine "artistic research" as an emerging discipline, we may expect practitioners' boundary work to play a decisive role, and to look for the ways that strong symbolic boundaries are constructed and maintained. But is boundary work the most fruitful analytical perspective on the negotiations behind the development of standards? With a focus on the Swedish artistic research field, I consider the ways that evaluations and boundaries interact in an emerging (inter)discipline. I suggest an analytical perspective focused on the relationship between commitments to boundary work and orientations to boundary objects that offers insight on the ways that new artistic and academic fields are defined and evaluated.

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In 2014 Bogdan Szyber, a well-established Swedish artist with a career spanning back to the 1980s, was accepted into an artistic research PhD program at the then brand-new Stockholm University of the Arts, in their first cohort of doctoral students. A global phenomenon with local variations, the new field of "artistic research" has been active for about two decades in Sweden. A provision in the 1992 Swedish Higher Education Act had introduced the possibility of "artistic research" on "artistic grounds" – as distinct from scientific research, to be judged on scientific grounds. By 2003 individuals could apply for funding for artistic research projects from the national research council – an organization called, in direct translation, the "Science Council" – and in 2006 the first PhDs in artistic research were awarded. The definition and boundaries of "artistic research" has been the focus of much debate in both the art world and academia since that time, even as more schools have taken on more doctoral students each year and the national research council's budget for artistic research has increased year upon year.

Szyber, like most artistic research PhD students, undertook several years of more or less independent activity that sometimes looked like a traditional art practice – exhibitions and performances were staged – and sometimes looked more like an academic practice, with seminar and conference participation and the production of a significant volume of well-referenced, bookish text. A 336 page document was submitted as a thesis, along with four videos and and two online publications, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree, and the defense was scheduled – a public event that is nevertheless understood to be entirely pro forma in the Swedish context, since doctoral students are not allowed forward unless their work has been determined to be of high enough quality to be awarded the PhD. On May 15, 2020, the defense was livestreamed, an adaptation to the Covid-19 pandemic; neither the opponent nor the members of the evaluation committee were physically present. After the discussion, the evaluation committee retreated to reach a decision, and were absent for an unusually long time. After several hours, the livestream was back; in a brief scripted announcement of about thirty seconds, the head of the evaluation committee announced that the artistic research project had failed. He apologized for the news, and wished the public a good evening.

With this, for the first time, a PhD candidate in artistic research failed their public defense, by unanimous decision of the evaluation committee. A line was drawn. Within a few months reported pieces and op-eds appeared in all of the major daily newspapers as well as all of the tabloids, and of course in the art magazines. Questions about the definition and value of artistic research were solidly front and center, with different commentators – artists, academics, researchers, critics, and funders – drawing on wildly divergent assumptions and evidentiary bases to argue for (and against) particular funding schemes, doctoral programs, artworks, and artistic practices.

This essay takes as its case the Swedish field of artistic research, where two institutions have played outsize roles in the development of the field: the national science council and those universities that award PhDs on artistic grounds. The national science council funds individual researchers, organizes and supports annual symposia and conferences, publishes books on the activities they support, and are otherwise active in both promoting and shaping the field of artistic research. University-based art schools, too, are important sources of both funding and dissemination of artistic research. They fund individual researchers – both through employment as doctoral students as through a refiguration of professors' artistic practices as "research", and thus their non-teaching hours as internally funded artistic research. They are important sites for artistic research performance, exhibition, and publications; they host seminars, symposia, and conferences; and they support more-public activities in art museums and public space.

This exploratory essay draws on a body of documentary evidence that begins with these two institutions (data includes dissertations, written evaluations, funders' reports, publications from the past twenty years, and documentation from seminars, symposia, conferences, and exhibitions), and follows artistic research as it interacts with Swedish and Nordic art worlds and, occasionally, with the general public (data including criticism published in print and online arts/culture magazines, newspaper, television, and radio reports, and documentation from public performances and exhibitions). I also draw on notes from my own participation in public events.[1] Below, I consider the ways that evaluations and boundaries interact in an emerging (inter)discipline. I suggest an analytical perspective focused on the relationship between commitments to boundary work and orientations to boundary objects that offers insight on the ways that new artistic fields are defined and evaluated.

Background

Despite its decades of history in the Nordic countries, artistic research remains a niche concern – of intense interest to a certain kind of art world and its members and almost invisible outside of it. I have observed that, when first encountering the language of "artistic research", people continually ask for two kinds of comparisons to make sense of it: most ask how it relates to the kinds of artistic practice they know or imagine that they know – "how is it different from art [practice]?", and those who work in academia tend to ask how it relates to other, more entrenched disciplines – "how, exactly, is it research?". The widespread impulse to categorize artistic research in relation and opposition to other activities suggests that boundaries may be highly salient in attempts to understand this thing we call "artistic research." But, as we will see, the impulse to erect and strengthen symbolic boundaries – actually I'm doing *this*, not *that* – is not equally distributed amongst those who engage with artistic research in the Swedish context. A particular alternative – here analyzed through the framework of boundary objects, contra and in relation to boundary work – is widespread. Below, I show that only some of those who speak on behalf of artistic research hold strong dualistic visions of the discipline – while others argue otherwise. When binary understandings come up against multiplex meanings, when and how do binaries come to matter?

Issues of quality and value are both endlessly contentious and endlessly lively in art worlds, and research on artists' efforts to balance diverse bases of value and instrumental constraints while maintaining the priority of artistic standards is well established (Ertug et al. 2016; Fang 2020; Gerber 2017; Gerber and Childress 2017; Khaire and Wadhwani 2010; Leschziner 2015; Ranganathan 2017; Velthuis 2005; Wohl 2015). Research on prizes, awards, and art school admissions give us insight into the valuation processes behind artistic rankings; those studies most often focus on sites where artists are judged on their own terms, generally by other artworld insiders (Childress, Rawlings, and Moeran 2017; Fine 2018; Heinich 2009; McCormick 2015; Sutton 2020). A distinct body of research on reception, lay judgments, and the public valuation of art and artists gives insight into outsider appraisals, but that research tends to focus on the meanings of art *for outsider audiences* and rarely draws clear links directly to meaningful effects within artworlds, especially those that are relatively insulated from commercial demands (Banks 2010; Bourdieu 1984; Rawlings and Childress 2019; Tröndle, Kirchberg, and Tschacher 2014). The interplay of insider and outsider appraisals is rarely easy to observe, and the power of outsider appraisals is especially difficult to measure in relatively autonomous artworlds. As I will show, in the case at hand, the contours of an insider/outsider dichotomy can be hard to observe, and such messiness can be problematic in a burgeoning academic (inter)discipline such as artistic research. Peer review is, after all, a cornerstone of evaluation in the academy – but who, here, counts as a peer?

Symbolic boundaries, the lines groups draw between themselves and others, are constituted by a social process perhaps best outlined by Lamont and colleagues over the last thirty years (e.g. Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007). These boundaries consist of "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality" (Lamont and Molnár 2002:168), and should be understood as closely related to social boundaries, the more-stable, objectified forms of symbolic boundaries. Research from science studies shows how central symbolic boundaries typically are in the development and legitimation of research fields. Gieryn's conception of "boundary work" points to active efforts to construct the binary between science and not-science; his work explored the ways that scientists draw rhetorical boundaries between science and everything else – excluding particular others from the scientific arena, clarifying and expanding their mandate, demanding and defending autonomy from those outsiders now excluded from science proper (Gieryn 1983, 1999). In the literature on boundary work, binaries, dualisms, and polarization abound; cultural sociological perspectives argue for the world-structuring power of such binaries in meaning-making and suggest that it is through binaries that the boundaries drawn by disciplinary entrepreneurs are made meaningful (Alexander and Smith 1993, 2001), and historical and contemporary work on disciplinarity reliably shows how hard fought boundaries can be, how fiercely defended once established, and how tightly success is bound to power (Abbott 2001; Lenoir 1993; Salter and Hearn 1997; Turner 2000). While some studies focus on the variability and mobility that can characterize symbolic boundaries (Baar 2017; Gerber 2019), the majority draw our attention to the ways that symbolic boundaries, once constructed, are prone to stabilization, moralization, and naturalization (Daston 1995; Friedman and Kuipers 2013; Lamont 1992). If we imagine "artistic research" as an emerging discipline, we may expect practitioners' boundary work to play a decisive role, and to look for the ways that strong symbolic boundaries are constructed and maintained.

Research on the development of new interdisciplinary research fields offers somewhat different perspectives, and often suggests ways that symbolic boundaries may remain porous in such fields (Frickel 2004; Small 1999) – though it is unclear whether mature interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary fields can retain commitments to such openness, especially when scarce resources are at stake (Huutoniemi 2016; Mansilla 2006). Contemporary research on new and emerging disciplines often takes as its focus cross- and interdisciplinary developments (Frickel 2004; Huutoniemi et al. 2010; Jacobs and Frickel 2009; Müller and Kaltenbrunner 2019), but the establishment of an academic research culture in already-mature fields (as when artistic practice extends to artistic research, or when e.g. police education is brought into the university setting) is comparatively neglected. If we aim to understand moments when artistic researchers draw the line – whether they say that a given object or practice is "not artistic research", or more simply "not *good* artistic research" – the literature on boundary work suggests that we pay close attention to the ways that both artistic research and its others are defined, promoted, and protected – to pay close attention to the articulation work necessary to make artistic research visible, legible, and potentially valuable (Star and Strauss 1999).

Artistic research as it exists in Sweden today is a strange animal. It is generally cross-, trans-, or interdisciplinary in form, whether involving relationships between scientific and artistic disciplines (e.g., collaborations between cognitive scientists and artists) and/or relationships between different artistic disciplines (e.g., collaborations between musicians and visual artists); no single form is dominant. It is both entirely new (20 years on, many working artists in Sweden still say they have no idea what "artistic research" means, and have no connection to it) and quite old, deeply rooted in particular art worlds and their practices as well as a globalized discussion on art, knowledge, and variable definitions of "artistic research". If we begin again and imagine that artistic research is a particular kind of problem – one fundamentally of collaboration, of diverse practitioners both in and outside of art worlds who need to get things done together – is boundary work the best analytical perspective on the kinds of negotiations behind the development of standards?

For those who center cooperation instead of competition in their analyses, the literature on boundary objects offers a distinct account of the management of difference in collective work. In a series of analyses focused on collaborations without consensus, Star and colleagues developed the concept of the "boundary object": the objects (things, ideas, places) developed among heterogenous collaborators to enable collective action by allowing teams to negotiate difference and translate diverse meanings (Bowker and Star 1999; Star and Griesemer 1989). The analytical approach has been applied widely since, and studies have explored the mechanisms by which boundary objects enable particular kinds of successes and failures (Huvila et al. 2017; de Rijcke and Beaulieu 2007; Schindler 2019; Yeo 2008). Bringing boundary objects in conversation with boundary work highlights the distinctions between the two perspectives, two of which are especially relevant here. First, while analyses that center boundary objects most often imply that diverse groups aim primarily to collaborate towards a goal, those analyses centering boundary work generally orient themselves to the ways that those diverse groups strive to maintain difference as well as hierarchy amongst groups. Second, while the boundary objects perspective need not center power, boundary work perspectives typically are highly concerned with power, inequality, and the distribution of scarce resources. Clearly, both analytical perspectives are useful;

meaningfully, their assumptions need not be in conflict with one another, especially if we assume that diverse groups are, in fact, made of up diverse actors with diverse aims. Heterogeneous groups can value real collaboration even as some or even most of those involved strive to differentiate their roles from that of other team members and pin down at least momentary hierarchies; power relations and the scarcity of resources might be more or less salient to participants under varying conditions of action. A central argument of the boundary objects literature is that the act of toggling between different visions of and uses of the boundary object is crucial for collaboration (Star 2010); this both/and vision of reality is as useful for imagining the "true" aims of groups as it is for artefact-enabled communication.

The question, then, might become: given a particular object of analysis – a particular set of activities, actors, settings, institutions, histories, and futures – what is the relative role and salience of boundary objects vis-à-vis symbolic and social boundaries? Given that we might expect individuals as well as groups to toggle between cooperation and competition, what is the relative impact of those members, moments, and activities that uphold collaboration through boundary objects contra those that engage in boundary work even if it might endanger collaboration?

The field of artistic research in Sweden – young but quickly institutionalizing despite apparently low consensus on the ideal boundaries of the (inter)discipline – is a useful site for such inquiries, not least thanks to the crisis both reflected in and precipitated by the first public moment of failure discussed above. Artistic research in Sweden is an emerging (inter)disciplinary field in which membership is unclear and clear standards are lacking. Still, significant research funding is successfully disbursed through government agencies; PhDs are awarded; decisions are made both behind closed doors and in public, largely without scandal. Until this year.

Boundary work in artistic research

In a widely-distributed yearbook on artistic research produced by the national research council, an artist sketched a vision of the future for her field and its relation to scientific disciplines. She was among the first in the Nordics to earn a practice-based PhD and is still highly influential, today sitting on the editorial board of the leading peer-reviewed journal of artistic research. For her, the line between artistic practice and artistic research is rarely well-defined: "Research is a normal part of artistic work in many areas of contemporary art (in the form of exploration, investigation, trial and error), but only rarely developed into a formal research inquiry." The reason for this is clear: "The motivation for artistic research is […] rarely the production of knowledge as such", instead generally resting in the desire to create new artworks, especially in the fine arts (Arlander 2014:30). The relation, then, between artistic practice and artistic research is ideally a productive and generative one.

In this author's telling, scientific and artistic research are much more distinct, and not without antagonism. The author writes, "It is taken as a given that the purpose of all research is to help the artist to create a better artwork. The research – be it conceptual research, archive research, fieldwork or experimentation – can be integrated into the creative process, but the outcome being sought is not primarily to increase our knowledge and understanding, but to produce a new work." She advises that rather than aiming for a singular "artistic research" methodology, "each art form ought to develop its own methods, based on the working methods employed", later writing that "Converting artistic working methods into research methods by clarifying what one actually tends to do, in what order and in what way, is a good alternative to borrowing methods from outside the field”. It is in questions of method and a sort of vernacular philosophy of science that the boundary work between art and science here are most clear: The author points out that artistic research, like artistic practice is often iterative and experimental by nature, but clarifies that artistic research “produces experimental knowledge but not mathematical knowledge. Thus artistic research differs from empirical research, which tries to find general laws.” On questions of method, this author is perhaps most clear, positioning artistic research in line with artistic practice and against scientific research; we are continually reminded that artistic research does not, and should not, aim to find “general laws” or “knowledge as such”. (Arlander 2014:28–34).

The tendencies shown above – the lack of a strong boundary between artistic practice and artistic research, and clearer boundaries between artistic and scientific research, especially as concerns aims and methods – are common amongst those engaged in discussion on this emerging field. Let us consider, first, the apparently salient boundaries between artistic and scientific research before turning to the relations between artistic practice and artistic research.

Artistic researchers regularly collaborate with researchers trained in scientific disciplines. Such projects are generally viewed positively, and artists regularly point to the possibilities of cross-disciplinary work when they move into the artistic research field. Artistic researchers draw creatively on an idiosyncratic mix of scholarly and scientific research as they deem it useful, and rarely reject individual findings or theoretical tools when they are introduced to their arena. But they do often draw a very clear boundary between their activities and something like science-with-a-capital-s – but this a science not in the English-language sense, but in the Germanic languages sense, where vetenskap / wissenschaft means simply something like ”evidence-based inquiry”. The Swedish context is one where disciplines whose English names indicate allegiance to the humanities and to alternative traditions of research and knowledge are instead termed “sciences” : art history, then, is in this context “konstvetenskap”, art science; cultural studies in Sweden is “kulturvetenskap”, culture science. It is against that specific notion of science that those who speak for artistic research position the field against – a science that centers systematic, evidence-based inquiry.

That version of science is loose and rangy, but it’s constant and powerful in the local context. We hear the head of one of the largest art schools in Sweden, an artist and artistic researcher, answer confidently when an audience member at a symposium asks about the differences between scientific and artistic research: “It's not that we want to search for a truth, but something else.” Sometimes that “something else” is positioned as explicitly anti-scientific, as when an artistic research PhD student told one of the major tabloids that it might be best to “think of artistic research as a fancy name for the mad scientist - a person who fulfils our need for the irrational” (Aagård 2009). Systematicity in method and argument are not seen as virtues, even in the doctoral thesis: a review of the first thesis in literary composition notes that the project’s method can hardly be pinned down before describing it approvingly thus: “It could be described using terms such as “montage” and “juxtaposition”. Instead of separating out and using hierarchically organised arguments, processing the research object (even if such operations can never be entirely avoided), different “realisations” are placed next to each other to create resonance” (Olsson 2015:63)

Here we see scientific ideals – distance from the research object, structured argument – dismissed in favor of an expanded vision of knowledge production. The stuff of science, though, is of course available to artistic researchers – to play with, remix, catch-as-catch-can.

My diary records an exchange between two well-known figures in the Swedish artistic research community on stage at a symposium sponsored by the national research council; they had originally met when one told the other at his dissertation defense, “actually, you are doing sociology.” After glossing over the details of what “doing sociology” might have meant, claiming that “to really get into it would be to go too deep into sociological method”, the second artist acknowledged that there might be some differences between artistic research and sociological research, with a smile: “As a professional sociologist Bourdieu would be more interested in truth, in what actually happened. Which might be a point of conflict with artistic research.” The room chuckled, and moved on.

Occasionally such boundary-drawing involves strange assertions about the ways that other disciplines work, as when the head of one of the Swedish art schols complained, in another panel at that same symposium, “People in the artistic research field are asked to explain a lot. You don't ask a researcher from another field to explain what they do.” Recall also the artistic researcher outlining her vision for the field above who suggested that empirical research always aims to find general laws; these statements are obviously untrue, but for participants in this burgeoning field they appear to feel true; the signs of widespread resonance – the repetition of these tropes about scientific research, the knowing nods and chuckles of the audience – speak to the strength of the boundary between artistic and scientific research in this context, and to the boundary work against judgment on “scientific grounds” that can be seen in the artistic research community.

But what of the boundary between artistic research and artistic practice? It should be clear from that first author considered here that these boundaries appear to be somewhat tentative, gentle, porous. But the analyst looking specifically for strong statements of the boundaries between artistic practice and artistic research will find a wealth of such articulations, if they look long enough. Here, in a leading Nordic art journal:

> “Art as research […] is a combination of contradictory elements since practicing fine art is incompatible with adhering to an academic system of rules. [Artistic research in the academy] is unfree art, conducted according to the terms of academic research. […] So-called ‘artistic research’ is undergoing a formalisation, disciplinisation, and academisation that renders it a mimetic and subservient replica of academic research.” (Ericsson 2020)

And another statement from the pages of the same journal:

> “If it is determined by a grading committee, the art is no longer free; then it is something other than fine art in the historical sense. Artistic research, for example. […] If there are artistic researchers who can still distinguish between free and unfree art – and understand why that distinction matters – they haven’t made themselves heard. Which isn’t very strange, since the whole field […] is based on an illusion; namely, that art and freedom could be sawn apart and reassembled at will. One thing is certain, just ‘feeling’ free or unfree doesn’t necessarily make it so.” (Petersson 2020)

The analyst looking for strong symbolic boundaries between artistic practice and artistic research can find them, along with the valorization and devaluation that so often accompanies such boundary work. Above, we see arguments for a very specific vision of autonomy, freedom, and purity that are held to be central to traditional fine arts practice and impossible in “so-called ‘artistic research’”.

But that same analyst, looking more closely, will notice something strange: only a small, highly vocal subset of those engaged with the field actually engage in the kinds of boundary work necessary to erect and maintain such distinctions. They also happen to be, by and large, art historians and critics – not those actually engaged in the practice of artistic research, not from artists who do not self-identify as researchers.

For those with experience with both artistic practice and artistic research, the relationships between the two are less clear, and the management of any purported boundary is highly pragmatic. Institutional links and funding are at the core of the definition for those actually engaged in practices that they call – and that others recognize as – artistic research. An MA student, debriefing with their supervisor after a conference on artistic research, perhaps said it best: “When you're applying for money and things, then it's research. I get it.” Their supervisor nodded.

Among artists – both those who do and do not claim that their activities fall under the umbrella of “artistic research” - it is common to shrug and assert that research is nothing but a label: “Words like ‘research’ and ‘investigation’ have become a part of the rhetoric of art, along with ‘radical’ and ‘critical’” (Petersson and Sandström 2015). We most often see artistic research distinguished from artistic practice simply through its home in the academy or the label placed on its funding. Even the autonomy promoted by those art historians and critics who carry the banner of freedom on behalf of artists is, artists themselves argue, easy to find in artistic research. A visual artist among the first to complete a PhD in Sweden reflected ten years later in an art magazine: “In the fine arts a number of interesting and time-intensive projects have been developed, in a way that would not have been possible through other contemporary art platforms.” (Petersson and Sandström 2015) Another, now running a large art school with a number of PhD candidates, straightforwardly said this year that “many have found the PhD programme to be an excellent opportunity, offering three years’ paid employment and time to focus on one’s work.” He rejected the notion of a strong dichotomy between artistic and academic research: “The question of academicisation is up to those of us who work here. We have the opportunity to influence what the academy should be” (Breivik 2021). Given the lack of definition in the higher education act around the content and limitations of “artistic grounds” as a basis for evaluation distinct from “scientific grounds”, and the continuing confusion about what, exactly, such a basis for research means, and the power of collegial governance in both higher education and research funding institutions in Sweden, this is not an empty dream.

There is a widespread view among artists that the main reason to enter a PhD program in artistic practice or apply for artistic research funding is the funding itself – or, in the terms that matter in this community, the time. They may underestimate the extent to which the academy or the research community may resocialize them to new norms, to be sure, but again and again one hears artists compare PhD programs favorably to other funding sources, thanks to the stable and relatively high salaries involved and the distance from other market forces that doctoral employment allows. A doctoral student told me, at a conference on artistic research, “I enjoy the artistic research thing. I don’t feel pressure to produce.” Counter to the vision of an “unfree” academic art promoted by some art historians and critics, the lived experience of those actually engaged in artistic research rarely seems to concern itself with the strictures and bureaucracy that we might imagine comes part and parcel with the academy. One artist, now head of artistic research for one of the large art schools, said in a panel discussion transcribed and published by an artists' union magazine: "When my doctoral cohort started, they asked us what artistic research could be. I kind of thought that the university should have had a clearer idea, but it gave us a lot of freedom" (Dziurlikowska et al. 2011).

Recall the art critic above who concerned himself in particular with "free" and "unfree" art, culminating in an argument that any artist engaged in artistic research is, by necessity, a cultural dupe. He concluded his piece with a sneer at "A new artistic ideal: the second-rater, perfectly adapted for an increasingly authoritarian age. One thing is certain: over the next few years, as artistic research becomes increasingly standardised and controlled, this terror of normality will spread throughout art life" (Petersson 2020). Statements like these are clear and straightforward, as though the rightness of such views is self-evident. Art historians and critics claim that they are necessary, lest artists speak for themselves (which would, by definition, damage their freedom, autonomy, and purity – according to art historians and critics, not artists and artistic researchers themselves). Compare that view with the more measured tone observed among those actually involved in the practice of artistic research; consider the role of boundary work in this context, and especially the role of those who promote it.

Those actually engaged in artistic research continually push back against the purity-and-danger framework promoted by art historians and critics – but they do it gently, with simple reference to their own experience when they must bring evidence to hand. An artist, head of an art school, writes in an art journal: "The art academy, with its affiliations with the artistic tradition's understanding of freedom, as well as the academic tradition of open critical discussion and the development of free thought, provides opportunities for artistic practice, not limitations" (Arrhenius 2020) Another artist writes, in an evening tabloid, "There are benefits to artistic research, like the legal protections afforded researchers. It makes the academy an attractive place, with a sort of freedom that, in any case, is greater than that outside the university" (Frisk 2020b). An artist tells me, offhand, that she's excited to begin her new doctoral position because she will finally be afforded access to a crucial archive that is restricted to credentialed researchers. These are offerings, not arguments.

It is that gentle pushback that suggests that not everyone here is equally committed to boundary work. I am reminded of a conversation with a friend – a tenured professor active in artistic research and committed to the kinds of embodied, entangled, contingent, and reflexive inquiry that much current research in science studies suggests might be necessary to understand life in all its fullness. He described once being attacked by a collaborator, a researcher from the sciences, in public, in a seminar. The scientist demanded to know where he stood on a particular, highly polarized epistemological issue. He did not hold to one or the other side; he did not, on later reflection, accept the premises of the question. But in the moment he recalled feeling stuck, feeling bullied. The two no longer really speak. I imagine that the scientist might still feel relatively confident in his view of the world; that if asked to recall the seminar in question – if he could recall it at all – might remember the structure and value of the binary he presented, might even belittle his former colleague for their slow, inarticulate puzzlement. There is a value in drawing lines between dichotomized objects, not least in the clarity of mind it can offer. And in a conversation between two actors – one committed to boundary work, the other open to the search for and cultivation of boundary objects – the former will often appear, in the moment, to have the upper hand, with their articulate and apparently logical arguments. But if we follow these two researchers out of the seminar room and into the future a different set of images comes into focus. The scientist (whose engagement with artistic researchers looks in hindsight like a minor dalliance) walks away, never again to collaborate with members of far-afield disciplines, much less artistic researchers. The other researcher, still active in artistic research and now a well-cited, well-funded, and highly networked figure in that field, shrugs with a half-smile and walks in another direction. If we look at the seminar, boundary work seems crucially important. But if we pay attention to the rest, and notice which of these two researchers' approach and work has actually contributed to the artistic research field, another view is possible.

Method as a boundary object

If we are to apply the boundary objects framework to the field of artistic research as currently practiced in Sweden, what kinds of objects – concrete or abstract – might we find that make coordination possible in this rangy, loose collection of practitioners that somehow, for the most part, seems to function as a field? Star and Griesemer's foundational text pointed to a few types of boundary objects they saw in action – by no means an exhaustive list, but a productive one to think with (Star and Griesemer 1989).[2] It is the notion of "ideal types" as boundary objects that I find the most valuable here; in particular, centering these boundary objects gives us leverage on the ways that symbolic boundaries are both constructed and, sometimes, avoided in artistic research. In Star and Griesemer's telling, the ideal type is "abstracted from all domains, and may be fairly vague. However, it is adaptable to a local site precisely because it is fairly vague; it serves as a means of communicating and cooperating symbolically - a 'good enough' road map for all parties." (Star and Griesemer 1989:410). Sociologists will have already internalized a version of the ideal type, with a Weberian view on the utility and adaptability of concepts like "democracy" (Weber 1949). In the artistic research field, I will point to one ideal type in particular – "method" – and will show how it functions as a boundary object before turning to its potential in boundary work.

Artistic researchers use the term "method" so often, and in so many different ways, that the mind boggles. Recall the author considered above who argued that artistic researchers should develop their own methods of inquiry based on their artistic practice, as well as the one who approved so warmly of a PhD thesis whose methods he could not quite grasp. Another positive review of another PhD thesis reads, "The text provides no thorough discussion of methodology, but it does open with a few pithy theories on methodological approaches." (Östersjö 2014:67). When we consider that method can be an ideal type used to relate both to artistic practices, on the one hand, and to scientific research, on the other, its multiplex meanings begin to settle into patterns. Amongst themselves and in conversation with artists not active in artistic research, artistic researchers are typically satisfied with vague gestures towards method. The performativity that can be associated with methodological rigor in other disciplines is openly discussed in this field: witness the author of a state-of-the-field report who writes that "In this context, the terms "method" and "methodology" are used in their broadest sense, in that they have their own aesthetic and carry with them their own gestures, discourse and history in an art work, setting up a kind of "methodological aesthetic" that is generic in the practice of research" (Dyrssen 2015:182). One report on a funded project writes quite simply that their method was "reflective practice", defined as "a focus on the dancer's practice and experience of the artistic process." The report pointed, as is common, to phenomenology, but without the buttresses of citation and argumentation that would be common in phenomenological analyses in disciplines like my own (Wikström 2014:106). An artist speaking at an art academy's annual "research week" says confidently, in a talk with students, that "You don't start with method as an artist; you finish and then you can go back and say, what was my method?”. Still, method – or the language of method, at least – is often seen as the key to presenting artistic research and its results to those outside the field. An artist active in the field writes, “Artistic research is built on the idea that artistic methods can reveal knowledge which, if made visible, can contribute not only to the artistic field but can be useful for other fields as well” (Frisk 2020a).

But the adoption and adaptation of methods talk from the sciences is fraught, and vulnerable to attack when the ideal-typical “method” in productive use in the artistic research field butts up against scientific methodologies. Compare a typical course of study for the PhD in my department with the required courses for the PhD in artistic research at the same university: while both qualitative and quantitative methods courses are required as part of PhD studies in sociology at Lund University (this on top of the research methods instruction that sociology students will have received throughout their bachelors’ and masters’ degrees), there are no required research methods courses in the artistic research PhD program – and unless we assume that artistic practice *is* the primary artistic research method, students will not typically have received any research methods training as part of their BA or MFA education. Method as an ideal type can be highly productive among artistic researchers and in relations with art worlds, but its utility in relations with scientific researchers and the academy is problematic at best. Just as the professorship appears to be an equalizing title though its form and content varies, and can function as a “coincident” boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989), when those oriented to boundary work look under the hood of method in artistic research, they don’t always see something they recognize – and that can be upsetting.

In Star and Griesemer’s original article outlining the boundary objects concept, there was language that I initially struggled with. They use the language of marginality to refer both to people inhabiting multiple social worlds and to the boundary obects that bring them together, and while I understood the old-fashioned use of the term in regards to people (addressed in Star 2010) it was hard for me to move past in reference to objects. In a venn diagram drawn to conceptualize the role of boundary objects perhaps one was required to draw them near edges, but as described boundary objects were anything *but* marginal to the diverse groups who tried to work together – they were central to their activities, if central in very different ways. But I have come to feel that in fact there is a very particular insight captured in that old-fashioned use of “marginal” that ignores center-periphery relations, and it is this: boundary objects cannot be made of stuff that strikes too deeply at the heart of one group but not the other, or they will be vulnerable to the kinds of boundary work that can threaten collaborative processes.

My own experience offers a small taste of this conflict. I attended a workshop some years ago run by friends, researchers with both scientific training and experience working with artistic research. The workshop was part of a project funded by the national science council as artistic research; it focused, in part, on edible materials, and together with other participants I worked with my hands, discussed issues close to the workshop’s theme, and tasted. The carefully curated setting included jars with ingredients, beautifully labeled; late in the workshop I asked with surprise how the researchers had gotten hold of a particular difficult-to-obtain ingredient and one answered breezily: oh, no, actually that’s not what’s in the jar, you can’t get hold of those. I was, quite literally, shocked. How dare they? This project is funded by the science council, housed at a university! How is this “research”? I was, at the time, spending much of my workday teaching introductory research methods to first- and second-year sociology students – in other words, spending my time trying to convince students to be careful in their approach to data collection and analysis, trying to help them grasp the basic rules of inquiry and evidence that we use in my discipline. It might have been my day-to-day teaching commitments that prompted my horror, or it might simply have been successful socialization into the rules of a not entirely comfortably scientific discipline – one that still feels the need to defend its methods as rigorous, legitimate, scientific. So my immediate response to this fiction was a strong one, and it took me some time to think otherwise. It took me time, space, and reflection to see it as a fiction rather than a lie, and a useful fiction at that. The researchers' methods and aims were both speculative; the label was not a key to a piece of evidence intended to reflect precisely a captured piece of reality but pointed to another truth, a fictional and speculative one, a maybe possible feeling that the team wanted us to feel, for a moment, in order to do something else.

"Method" as an ideal-type boundary object works for artistic researchers in their relations to both artists and other artistic researchers because it *is* somewhat marginal to their practice. But it's dangerous in the interface with scientific researchers, because for many of them "method" is *not at all* marginal – it is in fact at the heart of the enterprise, and is one of the central mechanisms by which boundary work happens in their everyday practice. It can be extraordinarily hard for scientists and those who are influenced by their epistemologies to accept method as an ideal type, as a boundary object.

A look back at the Swedish artistic research field over the past twenty years shows that both the impulse to engage in boundary work and the effort involved in suspending such efforts enough to collaborate around boundary objects are unevenly distributed across the field. While generous relations to boundary objects like "method" are widespread among artists – both those engaged in and distant from artistic research – relations between artistic researchers and researchers from scientific disciplines are more fragile, and are vulnerable to the impulse toward ownership that the scientifically trained can feel over hard-won disciplinary expertise in things like "methods", "research", and "knowledge".

The boundary objects perspective might prompt us to look back over another central conflict discussed above – that over autonomy, freedom, the image of the artist unshackled from institutions. As discussed above, while outsiders (especially art historians and critics) sometimes try valiantly to erect strong symbolic boundaries between "free" and "unfree" art, the artistic research field has typically shrugged and gone about their work. Very little of an art/research dichotomy can actually be seen in the Swedish artistic research field – but that doesn't mean that the moral valence of the art/not-art binary has lost any of its power for those who aim to protect the boundary.

That first public failure – Szyber's defense, discussed above – came as a shock. It also pushed a door open, just a crack; since then there have been other, more quiet failures, each one prompting confrontations between diverse evaluative regimes, between supervisors and green-light committees who gave projects the nod and the examiners who failed those projects. Why now?

One perspective would center the content of Szyber's work and imagine that his failure gave the field permission to finally draw the line – that those discussions murmured across art worlds about the quality and value of the things called artistic research have finally bubbled to the surface of the discourse. There could be something to that reading. But even a careful reader of the examination committee's written evaluation (publicly available, under the Swedish principle of open access to public documents) would find it hard to identify what, exactly, was lacking in Szyber's work and dissertation. The language is harsh and certain but rarely specific; the expectations of the examination committee seem out of step with local norms and the standards of the supervisors who enthusiastically recommended the project for the defense.

That disjuncture comes into bright focus if we allow ourselves to center boundary objects in our analysis, if we assume that artistic research is typically and historically a collaborative problem to be solved – a project we undertake together – rather than an opportunity to draw lines, to erect a boundary around the field of legitimate artistic research to keep out the rest. Looking back, Szyber's defense has the hallmarks of the Covid-pandemic artistic research defense. Despite the extreme emphasis on art objects in the field, examiners were not able to experience an exhibition or performance in person with others, instead working alone at home on small screens from video files. And despite real ambivalence about the place of scholarly texts in the field, the written dissertation appears to have constituted the majority of the work evaluated in Szyber's case. In that evaluation the kinds of oblique, indirect, and quiet references common in art objects are ignored in favor of a critique of the works cited in the written text; direct references to the analyses there abound, while specific references to the ways that art objects might have also represented forms of inquiry, analysis, or conceptual development are mostly absent.

A hallmark of the boundary objects literature is the conviviality displayed in successful collaborations; comparative studies show how fragile boundary-object-enabled cooperation can be, and how easily boundary work can get in the way (e.g. Schindler 2019). Research on the architecture of evaluation has consistently shown that organizational constraints, whether well-motivated or adopted ad hoc, have enormous influence on outcomes (Langfeldt 2001; Rivera and Tilcsik 2019). Szyber's defense deviated from tradition in significant ways – typically, examiners travel to and spend time in the local context; spend time together engaged with artworks at exhibitions and performances, usually in the company of other audiences; talk and walk and dine with the local artistic research community. They have the time and tools to orient themselves to the local iteration of artistic research – the tools, of course, being the local working definitions of ideal types like "methods". None of that happened at Szyber's defense, and it seems unlikely that the unusual architecture of evaluation in his case played no role in his project's failure.

Moments of failure in artistic research are important because they represent attempts to draw a symbolic boundary that is tightly linked to specific social boundaries. In the case discussed here, an artistic researcher received a PhD – or he didn't. That social boundary has inequalities attached and, of course, that's often the point of boundary work.

Collaborative work is hard, and requires a good deal of coordination. The boundary objects literature shows us how, even in the absence of strong top-down coordination, diverse groups can work well together, given time and trust and a common goal. In the development of the artistic research field in Sweden a fundamentally cooperative approach has reigned, one in which attempts to draw clear lines – between art and artistic research, between method and mess – have mostly been met with a shrug and redoubled efforts towards communication, collaboration, and community. But the kinds of boundary objects that have been so relationally productive in the artistic research field carry with them specific vulnerabilities. Even when they are relatively low in number, the proponents of boundary work often have articulate logic and moral passion on their side; the brief, high-stakes meetings that have replaced loitering engagements with local communities during the pandemic likely raise up their voices at the expense of others. New fields of research, new kinds of knowledge, real innovation can come from the kinds of collaborative work made possible through boundary work – but such collaborations need institutional support and an architecture to stabilize the field. Brief, high-stakes meetings would be no one's choice if the goal is field-building; for boundary work and evaluation, they can suffice.

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[1] The Swedish artistic research field is of course embedded in and interacts with others – Nordic, European, and global communities of artists, artistic researchers, university professors, curators, and art critics, to name just a few – but here I focus on the Swedish field, including voices from those other contexts when they speak within it (as when artists from Finland or Norway serve on the national science council's committees, or when Austrian and British artist/professors evaluate a Swedish artistic research dissertation). As an exploratory study, the scope is necessarily limited. Minor details have been changed in reporting on my own experiences and materials that are not taken from the public record to preserve anonymity. All translations from Swedish to English, and any mistakes, are my own.

[2] Relevant "repositories", from which diverse actors can borrow, are clear; along with the libraries and museums already in place and their archives, the artistic research field in Sweden is actively committed to building repositories that mirror more closely the peer reviewed journals and research repositories central to the scientific disciplines. The Society for Artistic Research's Research Catalogue and Journal of Artistic Research both aim to move beyond traditional formats to better capture and document artistic research, and are well known and widely used in the Swedish field. VIS and PARSE are more recent initiatives along the same lines, hosted by Swedish art schools. These new repositories allow for the accumulation, communication, and production of knowledge in the artistic research field, where neither traditional academic texts nor art objects are generally understood to adequately capture either the process or the outcomes of research. In relations with scientific researchers in particular, artistic researchers' uses of formats like full professorships and national research council funding to communicate and collaborate with the rest of the academy might best be understood as "coincident" boundary objects, "common objects which have the same boundaries but different internal contents" (Star and Griesemer 1989:410). The details of full professorships at Swedish art academies are sometimes shocking to those with "equivalent" positions in scientific disciplines – no PhD required, time-limited appointments by design, the widespread use of part-time positions – and, similarly, the eligibility requirements to apply for national research council funding deviate significantly from those in all other disciplines (most notably in that PIs need not hold a PhD). But these differences are not widely known or discussed, and through professorships and research funding artistic researchers place themselves and their practices legibly at the table, in conversation with scientific researchers. "Standardized forms", too – "methods of common communication across dispersed work groups" (Star and Griesemer 1989:411) – are obviously in conscious development, with the documentation associated with the PhD the most obvious, though standardization is slow.

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