

## Ruben López Cano interviews Paulo de Assis

### What kind of differences do you observe between the work as an artist (in the traditional sense) and an artist/researcher?

Before answering this question, it would be important to understand what exactly is meant by the wording “an artist in the traditional sense” and an “artist/researcher”. It seems to me that these entities (in this formulation) imply a clear-cut (and problematic) distinction between “art” and “research”—the slash placed between the words “artist” and “researcher”, making this separation rather strong. Thus, what for me is an “artist-researcher” (the hyphen indicating continuity and intermingling of activities, practices, and perspectives), in the question above is the “artist/researcher” (the slash indicating the separation of activities within the same person). Where I see a convergence of different modes of expression and communication, the question assumes an ontological divergence between art-making and research. The phrase “an artist in the traditional sense” is also not obvious at all, especially as there are probably as many “traditions” as there are artists. Additionally, I think it would be really necessary to add a third element to the question, namely the “research” *tout court* without pretensions of being art or “artistic” (think of art history or musicology). On the other hand, I agree that all of us working in artistic research still work sometimes as “pure” artists (in my case as a classically trained pianist), “pure” researchers (in my case writing essays), and some other times as artist-researchers (in my case making new modes of performances and installations, as well as writing new kinds of essays). Thus, if you allow me, I would like to rephrase your question in the following manner: “What kind of differences do you observe between the work as an artist, a researcher, and an artist-researcher?”

To answer this question in a simplified way, I will make use of a suggestive idea presented by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in the last chapter of *What is Philosophy?* (1994), which addresses art as a distinct mode of thinking. In a thought stimulating formulation, they write: “Perhaps art begins with the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 183). Besides the horizon-widening recognition of artistic agency before and outside of human makers, this idea stresses the centrality of two processes: a sensory-motor action of introducing something new into the world (the design, carving, making of a territory), and the articulation of heterogeneous components in some kind of coherent aggregate (the construction of a house). Crucially, the house is not built to accommodate pre-given entities, nor is the territory made to contain pre-existing elements. It is the concrete making of the territory and the house that carry with them the emergence of new functions and new groups: “[...] the territory implies the emergence of pure sensory qualities, of sensibilia that cease to be merely functional and become expressive features [...]” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 183). It is this emergence of unprecedented sensory qualities that Deleuze and Guattari qualify as being “already art, not only in the treatment of external materials but in the body’s postures and colors, in the songs and cries that mark out the territory” (ibid., 184).

With these ideas in mind, my answer to your question is rather simple. When someone is "working as an artist", he is actively designing a territory, moving things around, marking some of them, defining constellations of matters and forces, exploring particular combinations, exposing some components more than others, emphasizing singular points or regions, taking specific postures and colors, constructing new arrangements that have the potential to host unprecedented sensations and understandings. Once such *new territories* and *new constructions* are made, others will come that will look at them from the outside, examining and analyzing them, measuring them, establishing relations of affiliation and dependence between them, trying to understand how and why such new arrangements came into being, how were they produced, how can they be replicated, etc. These are those that work "as a researcher", crucially coming into play *after-the-fact*, after those who work "as an artist" deposed their results. In the division of artistic labor prevailing from the middle of the 18th century to the late 20th century, these have been the two central figures in the arts: the "creative artist" and the "analytical researcher". One is marking the territory, and the other is analyzing those markings and those constituted territories.

The emergence of artistic research around the turn of the millennium, significantly moves away from such partitions of labor, both in academia and in art schools and practices. The "artist-researcher" is someone who is marking new territories and constructing new houses, but that at the same time checks their precise contextualization, calibration, and articulation, also in relation to other modes of thinking and generating knowledge. This artist-researcher is both a maker (and a *marker*) of new territories and a symptomatologist who critically senses and investigates these territories and their binding connectors. In a certain way, artists always have done so. They always did some sort of "research" in-and-through their artistic modes of expression to come to new results. There is no creative act without any research component, and there is no analytical or historical research without a hint of creativity. Still, the kind of "research" done by "pure" artists is neither central to their activity nor expected from the spectators. It is not necessary to convey it explicitly, even if during the 20th-century artists and composers increasingly wrote more and more texts and essays. On the contrary, within artistic research, the research component has to be clearly articulated, contributing to a broader system of knowledge production and distribution that goes beyond the making of fixed *monuments* and *results* and aims much more at stressing creative *processes* and variable *functions*. The artist-researcher is an "animal", carving out a territory in all its aesthetic implications, and at the same time, an inhabitant of this territory, exposing the territory's epistemic contents and its articulation in terms of shared knowledge. The "artist in the traditional sense" mentioned in your question is probably that who worked between the middle of the 18th century and late 20th century, the period of (human) art history dominated by that aesthetic regime of making and distributing art objects that Jacques Rancière labeled as "the aesthetic regime of the arts". At the dawn of the 3rd millennium, it is perhaps time to move beyond this regime, including non-human expressive agencies, natural-planetary expressivity, as well as soma-aesthetic and aesthetic-epistemic modes of expression. Arts in the "traditional sense" will not deliver this change; it is the role of artistic research to contribute to it pro-actively. The historical function of the "vanguard" is no longer in the hands of artists (who increasingly became simple amplifiers of widespread opinions and clichés), but of artist-researchers.

## What methodologies have you used in your research?

The field of artistic research is frequently posed with questions about its methodologies, many artist-researchers being not aware of the plurality and diversity of working methods they use daily. Thus, very often, artist-researchers hesitate or even tremble in the face of this question. On the contrary, I think we need to pro-actively provide compelling answers to these questions, especially to avoid the “anything goes” mentality that unfortunately characterizes a significant number of projects in artistic research. In my view, it is crucial to keep three aspects in mind: (1) an artist-researcher can make use of well-established methodologies from any other discipline, such as art history, historical or systematic musicology, performance studies, music sociology, composition, etc.; they will provide analytical and creative tools that are beneficial for the making of new territories and their precise investigation; (2) the choice of methodologies has to be made according to the concrete needs of the project at hand; there are no “fits-all-sizes” methodologies, and one should not artificially impose methodological constraints upon one’s own work; (3) every single project in artistic research is unique and often unrepeatable; thus one has to invent tailor-made methods, which need to be designed, developed, adopted, and also explained to the peers. These three points indicate that a *plurality of methodologies* supports artistic research. For different types of questions, there might be different kinds of methodologies.

Following my distinction of four basic types of questions in artistic research (factual, analytical, speculative, and creative), we can summarize things this way:

- (1) For factual questions, one can look at research methods that enable data collection. Thus, one should be well-versed in working with documents, having a basic knowledge of historical methodologies, the evaluation of sources, and the study of secondary literature.
- (2) For analytical questions, one can use diverse analytical tools and methods. In music, there are many kinds of music analysis, and one has to find out which is better suited to each specific project —one might focus on the study and analysis of pitch, form, metrics, multimedia, technological extensions, etc. If needed, an artist-researcher can invite experts from a given field, not to commission them a job, but to work together with them, accompanying and directing their work according to the specific needs and goals of one’s project.
- (3) For speculative questions, one can read and think a lot to find intriguing questions and inventive hypotheses. It is especially helpful to read with a critical view of the author, always trying to find a link to one’s own problems and practice.
- (4) For creative questions, one must be imaginative and experimental, enhancing one’s imagination and capacity to see creative structures in advance. One can construct new links between different things by putting heterogeneous objects close to each other, analyzing the resulting shape and connectors, and evaluating the arrangement’s emergent properties.

On a more personal note, I would like to refer to a specific working methodology that I developed in the framework of my European project "musicexperiment21" (2013-2018), one specifically thought for artistic research. It is a kind of over-arching methodology that integrates different methods and types of questions into one circular system that generates new events. Factual research and the collection of basic data and materials, belong to an *archaeological moment* of research; analytic and speculative questions are bundled together in a *genealogical inquiry*; and the creative moment develops within a field of *problematization* that requires artistic practice and postulates the centrality of the making of art within artistic research. This three-part methodology creates a circularity that lends itself to the generation of *series of outputs* (different instantiations of the same starting materials), and *modules of research* (illuminating different parts of the new territories and showing them under different perspectives).<sup>1</sup>

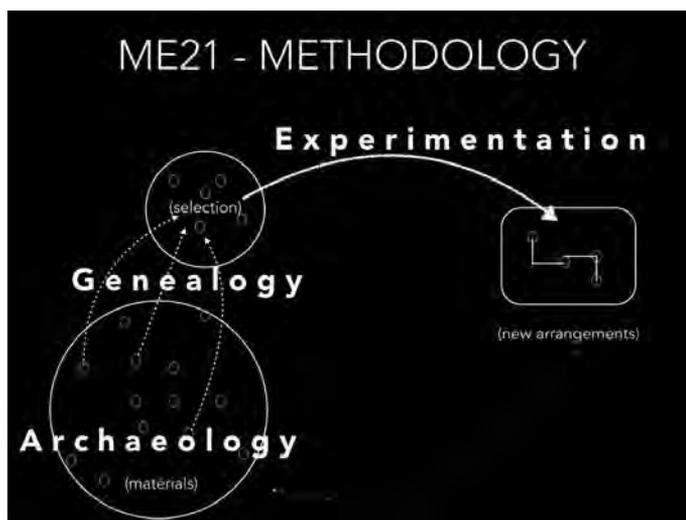


Figure 1 / Paulo de Assis's Methodology for Artistic Research in Music.

### How has your artistic practice been integrated into the different research methodologies you have employed?

If you look at the scheme above, you immediately see that the two first phases (the archaeological and the genealogical moments) can be very well tackled by "pure researchers",

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1. An example of series of outputs can be found in my project Rasch-X (on Schumann's Kreisleriana) and an example of *modules of research* in my journal article *unfolding waves* (on Luigi Nono's *...sofferte onde serene...*). Access them following these hyperlinks:

Rasch-X: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/64319/64320>

*unfolding waves*:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/51264>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/66815>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/65676>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/52252>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/52184>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/52251>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/52254>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/65791>

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/51263/52089>

they don't require an immediate creative intention or direction of work in order to produce valuable and significant results, which can be conveyed as texts, essays, and presentations. But as soon as you look to the third phase, the experimental (re)combination of artistic and theoretical materials into new constellations, the artistry becomes inescapable. This is the research moment in which the artistic activity, imagination, and power of invention come to the fore. It is the exact moment for the artist-researcher to convey a message *through artistic means*. In my case, this has always been the place to conduct research in real-time, in front of the audiences, in that particular situation of maximal physical and emotional exposure that we call "concert" or "performance". Let's not forget that (at least in my view) another fundamental aspect of being an artist-researcher is the willingness to expose oneself in front of an audience, crucially not remaining comfortably protected behind a screen, a book, an audio- or a video-recording. But you can only claim that live-performance is a moment of research if you situate performance within a broader process of research, crucially moving away from the idea of performance as performance-of-a-fixed-work and embracing the notion of performance-as-exposition-of-materials. The former remains caught within the aesthetic regime of the arts, the later moves towards an aesthetic-epistemic regime of distributed knowledge.

### **Have you used autoethnography or any kind of self-observation techniques in your work?**

I think this is one of the big misunderstandings about artistic research, the idea that self-observation, self-analysis, or (even worst) self-evaluation of one's artistic work can lead to valuable research results. I do not doubt that self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis might be useful for some individuals' inner lives in some specific circumstances. What I profoundly doubt is that such self-referential exercises carry any form of universal knowledge that could contribute to further developments of artistic practices. Additionally, in autoethnographic research, we often see uncritical self-celebrations of the working methods of those doing them. In very prosaic terms, I ask: "who cares if this person starts working at 5 am or at noon?" However, this is the kind of question that those autoethnographic researchers pose. And then, you have people writing working diaries, taking notes of their emotions while playing an instrument, looking at the color of the pencil they use for notating a score, etc. This is actually ridiculous, but unfortunately, there are doctoral programs that stimulate such tasks. There are also doctoral programs that accept dissertations of composers writing about their own musical works for their own sake. This not only confuses the object and subject of research but implies the assumption that those works are "good" and deserve being the object of a doctoral reflection, a shameless assumption, to say the least. Completely different is to situate one's artistic work critically, within a broader context or problem that the own practice tries to address. In such cases, the compositions might contribute to a wider discourse, providing processes or solutions that might have some more universal interest. And in such—more interesting—cases one moves away from autoethnography. Thus, autoethnography is something that artistic research should avoid at any cost.

### **What outcomes have you generated in your research projects: performances, compositions, writings, conferences, audiovisuals?**

I have been working in artistic research for twelve years now, and the majority of my activities in this period have been devoted to this emergent field of practice. In all my projects in artistic research, I have always tried to get as many and varied outputs as possible. Thus, I have generated performances, installations, compositions, books, journal and conference papers, audio and video recordings, as well as a great number of online research "expositions" (a term used in the web-based platform Research Catalogue). I have also been the convenor of several conferences and symposia, the most important of which is the biennial conference on Deleuze and Artistic Research (DARE), which explores the intersections between contemporary philosophy and artistic research. For those interested in the variety and depth of those outputs, I would recommend visiting my webpages at the Research Catalogue and Academia.edu.<sup>2</sup>

### **What is the relationship between artistic and theoretical-discursive outcomes in your artistic research?**

Every single theoretical interest of mine comes from a concrete artistic impulse or even necessity. Artistic research starts with the making of art and aims at the generation of it. But it fundamentally questions and redefines our practices, terminology, and understandings of what art is. It articulates this process of questioning and reshaping thought. In my work, I try to keep a strong connection to the artistic trigger throughout the whole research process, making recurrent reference to it (though others can do it differently, of course). Thus, for me, there is a continuum between artistic practice and discursive elaborations. The crucial point is to transform aesthetic experiences into objects for thought, constructing an aesthetic-epistemic discourse. As Foucault has shown, every practice can only take place within a discourse, and every discourse implies a complex set of practices; at the same time, there is no one-to-one, transparent correspondence between practices and discourses, and one has to be very careful and critical when relating them. What we say is not what we do, and what we do is not what we say. It is in the interstices between one and the other that life (and art) happens; in the exploration and invention of such lines of escape, artistic research finds its ideal milieu of activity and expression. If the artistic practice and the discursive practice remain too separated from each other, you don't have artistic research; you might have "applied musicology" or "informed performances", but not artistic research.

### **What particular troubles have you faced during your research?**

I think most artist-researchers frequently face three fundamental difficulties that relate to communication, contextualization, and funding.

First, there is a recurrent problem in communicating what we do to all those working outside of artistic research. For traditionally trained musicians who live their lives in conservatories

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2. Further reading: Research Catalogue: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/?person=46970> ; Academia.edu: <https://orpheusinstituut.academia.edu/PaulodeAssis> .

and music schools, what we do is usually seen as too theoretical and too intellectual, making them very skeptical about our work and profile. Less problematic, but still uneasy, is the relation to academia, where musicologists and music philosophers doubt the pertinence of using artistic modes of inquiry for the production of knowledge. Thus, artist-researchers find ourselves in a grey spot, being criticized a priori by people that often do not know what we do. This leads to a huge amount of work and energy to explain what we do, instead of using it merely in doing what we do.

Secondly, there is difficulty in finding the right context for our activities. As a result of the skepticism from academia and the art schools, it is not easy to find a place or an institution that embraces emerging practices, such as artistic research. In this respect, I am particularly lucky as I work in one of the most advanced centers for artistic research, namely the Orpheus Institute, in Ghent, Belgium. Interestingly, this institute is neither part of a conservatoire nor a university; it is a public institute for advanced research. While this is an advantage and a clear sign of the relevance of artistic research in the knowledge society, it also shows the reservations of both academia and technical schools in supporting new practices and new modes of articulated knowledge.

Thirdly, there is the problem of funding, which relates to the noticeable disciplinary partition of most funding agencies. A project in the arts applies for funding in art councils, while one in musicology goes for funding schemes in human and social sciences. Artistic research always has to find a way to express a project so that it fits either the art councils or the social and human sciences departments. And this has consequences in the evaluation process as artist-researchers and their projects are often evaluated by musicologists or by “pure” artists. The former tend not to accept artistic modes of knowledge production; the latter make objections to the use of theory and discourse. Before even reading the proposal, before a close reading of what is intended and how it will be done, projects in artistic research are often condemned in the earliest stages of evaluation. Also, in this respect, I have been in the privileged position of having received a grant from the European Research Council, which allowed me and my team to do great work for five years. But this has been and remains a huge exception. Getting funding in and for artistic research remains a very difficult task.

### **Has research influenced your creative habits? How?**

In my case (which is probably impossible to generalize), given the kind of research methodology that I developed, the research moment profoundly transformed not only my “creative habits” (another term that would require a longer discussion) but my overarching understanding of the role and function of art in our world. People tend to think that to be creative is to write novels, to carve sculptures, to compose musical pieces, etc. While this has been the case for the last centuries, and while this is still possible today, I think that creativity is moving in many other directions that diverge from those work- and genius-centered perspectives. Knowledge is distributed, and so is creativity. Thus, an essential aspect of my work for the last seven years has been collaborative creative practices, involving a team of artist-researchers thinking and designing projects and performances together. This has been done mainly with a core group of people working with me in Ghent (Lucia D’Errico, Michael Schwab, Juan Parra Cancino, Paolo Giudici, a.o.), but also abroad, with short-term workshops with professional people and ensembles (WDR Symphony Orchestra, Ensemble Interface, Hermes Ensemble, Marlene

Monteiro Freitas) and music students from major international conservatoires (Singapore, Oslo). The discovery of the powers of collaborative creative practices *for artistic research* (and crucially not *for composition*) has certainly entailed a major change in my working habits.

### **Working on artistic research influenced your professional profile? Has that benefited you?**

The objective answer is "yes": working on artistic research influenced and substantially changed my professional profile. After studying piano up until the highest possible degree in Germany (*Solistenexam*) and after a PhD in music analysis dedicated to post-serial works by Luigi Nono, my profile was that of a classically trained pianist (playing mainstream repertoire) with growing expertise in "contemporary music" from the second half of the 20th century (including particular attention to Luigi Nono, Camillo Togni, Pierre Boulez, Helmut Lachenmann, Brian Ferneyhough, Morton Feldman, and Emmanuel Nunes). As a pianist, I played "traditional" concerts (solo recitals, chamber music, concerts with orchestra); as a musicologist, I wrote essays on those composers, I edited several volumes with translations of their writings, and I authored hundreds of program notes for respectable venues. The impact of my turn to artistic research, which happened around 2008, after the invitation of the Orpheus Institute, cannot be underestimated: I stopped playing "traditional" concerts and started developing a new kind of *experimental performance practice*. I stopped writing about others and started writing my own thoughts and ideas, an exciting development that led me to transdisciplinary cross-overs with contemporary philosophy, psychoanalytical theory, epistemology, quantum theory, and, more recently, molecular biology and Serial Endosymbiotic Theory. From a personal point of view, all these transformations have been extraordinarily enriching. They brought me to a whole new level of aesthetic and intellectual worlds, enabling events and experiences that I would not have had if remained sited at the piano practicing the same piece again and again, or respectfully reading and interpreting the work of others. My "old" colleagues and friends (pianists, musicologists, and composers) may think that I deserted them. Still, if so, I can only say that I found new oceans, new islands, and new planets where I continue my restless search for new worlds and new modes of expression.

### **What differences and problems have you found between "thinking for creation" and "thinking for reflection"? Have you found incompatible, different, complementary modalities of thought? Have you been able to integrate both?**

To think—the activity of intentionally thinking—is not something that we do naturally, without a trigger, reason, or purpose. According to physiology, 40% of the daily actions by our bodies are not even conscious, and from the remaining 60%, many are the result of automatisms and habits. Only a minor part of our actions are the result of conscious, intentional, directed thinking. Our whole body is far less controlled by our intentional consciousness than we tend to believe. On the other hand, "to think" implies a problem to solve, be it the direction and intensity of a body movement, the response to a given event from the external world, the making of a decision, the design of an idea, the marking of a territory, or the construction of an object. To think always entails violence against the *habitus*, the prevailing status-quo of things, your own body and its habits. It is a way to break-through into new arrangements and

concatenations of matters, forces, and functions. In this sense, if one is willing to put something new into the world, every single human activity starts with an act of thinking, that confronts (human, all too human) *opinions* and (cosmic) *chaos*. Deleuze and Guattari famously stated that art, science, and philosophy are the “three great forms of thought” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 197). Philosophy thinks through the invention and development of concepts, science through the invention of functions or referential propositions, and art through the invention and construction of events and composite sensations (ibid.). All these modes of thinking share the inventive moment, the creation of something unprecedented that establishes new relations between materialities and forces. Thus, “thinking” carries fundamental creative agency, and vice-versa: “creativity” is a mode of thinking. As thinking requires reflection, there is no creation without reflection, and as reflection involves the mental construction of a problem and its possible developments, there is no reflection without creativity. In more direct relation to your question, I suppose that what you mean by “thinking for creation” could be “the thinking of art”; and your “thinking for reflection” could be “the thinking of science”. In this case, the main difference is that the arts think through *sensations*, which are composites of percepts and affects, while scientific/academic thinking is based upon and directed towards the *reference*. And here we come back to my initial considerations on artistic research, as artistic research is a particular field of practice in which both *sensations* and *references* are fundamentally needed and productively merged. When one starts working on a new project—be it a composition, a performance, an installation, a book or a shorter essay—one starts thinking, and enters into a world of creative thought—imagining forms and shapes, devising sequences of events or arguments, sketching junctures and connections, building relations and shifters, constructing prototypes and models. The medium doesn’t matter—a musical instrument, a sheet of paper, a computer keyboard and screen—: the creative mode of thinking (artistic, scientific, philosophical) generates very similar workflows and inner energies. It always leads to an energized body that channels ideas, emotions, knowledge, and feelings towards the putting-into-the-world of something new, unprecedented, unexpected, challenging, overwhelming, and shattering, but crucially coherent and graspable. Otherwise, we risk reiterating the *opinions* we wanted to fight or “precipitating us into the *chaos* we wanted to confront”. Beyond the aesthetic regime of the arts, artistic research is the ideal place for merging and integrating different modes of thinking, including stimulating encounters between concepts, references, and sensations.

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## Bibliography

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