

Metropolis M Books

The Postresearch Condition

With

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EARN Working Groups

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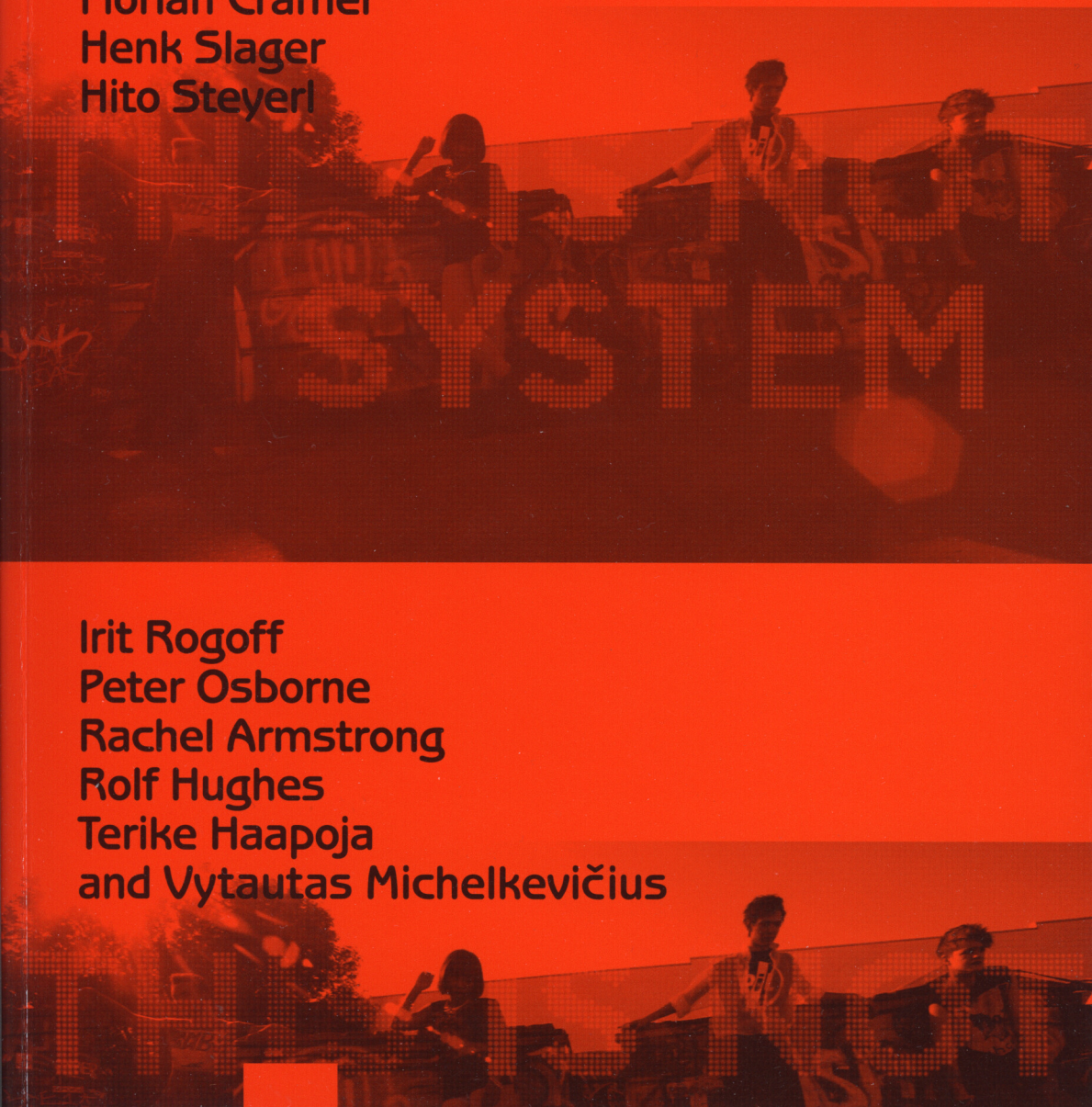
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Artistic Research – dead on arrival?

Research practices of self-organized collectives vs. managerial visions of artistic research

Florian Cramer

Artist-run research

Since at least the early 20th century, artist groups have called their work “research”. Canonized examples include the “Bureau des recherches surréalistes” (“Bureau of Surrealist Research”) founded in Paris by André Breton and fellow Surrealists in 1925 and the Situationist International which, from 1957 to 1972, operated under the moniker of a research group and whose periodical had the form of a research journal. Since then, artist-run research groups and projects have only grown in number and increasingly involve non-art practitioners next to professional artists. The Free International University founded by Joseph Beuys is another such art history textbook example, as is the research-based “Institutional Critique” from the Art Workers Coalition in the 1970s to contemporary feminist, queer and PoC artist-activist collectives.

Today, transdisciplinary art/research collectives seem to be a more common contemporary art practice in non-Western regions than in Western countries where art systems are more institutionalized.¹ At the time of this writing, self-organized artist-research collectives are still mostly known to people working in or in close neighborhood to art practice, not to wider audiences.² This may change with the forthcoming documenta 15 in 2022 that will, for the first time, be curated by an art/

research group, the Indonesian ruangrupa collective. Documenta 15’s preliminary participant list, published in summer 2020, almost exclusively lists transdisciplinary collectives that work at the boundaries of art, research and community organizing: “Fondation Festival Sur Le Niger (Ségou, Mali), Gudskul (Jakarta, Indonesia), INLAND (various locations, Spain), Jatiwangi art Factory (Jatiwangi, Indonesia), Question of Funding (Jerusalem, Palestine), Más Arte Más Acción (MAMA) (Nuqui, Choco, Columbia), OFF-Biennale (Budapest, Hungary), Trampoline House (Copenhagen, Denmark), and ZK/U – Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (Berlin, Germany)”. Is the practice of these artist-run collectives and projects identical to what has been discussed, since the 1990s and mostly in a Western European higher art education discourse, as artistic research?³

While this question might have been purely academic ten years ago, it has become political and epistemological in a time where, on the one hand, artistic research is being more firmly institutionalized – among others, through PhD programs – and where on the other hand even art theory has narrowed down Western contemporary art to curatorial white cube art.⁴

For the sake of simplicity, I would like to focus on the work of two contemporary artistic research collectives – the aforementioned Jatiwangi art Factory (Indonesia) and 展銷場 Display Distribute (Hong Kong) – by contrasting their research practices with artistic research as it is institutionally defined in the “Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research” from 2020. To clarify my own position, I need to mention that I worked with those two collectives in the research project “Bridging Art, Design and Technology through Material Practices” and its public conference “Making Matters II” that took place in November 2020 at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. The Vienna Declaration on Artistic

1 For an overview of the former, see (vanhoe)

2 Exceptions include electronic music and architecture with their long, well-documented history of artistic research in collectives. For contemporary art in the more narrow sense, there is practically no overview literature, with perhaps the exception of (Vis)

3 With (Frayling) being one of its earliest documents

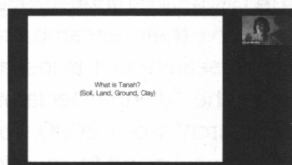
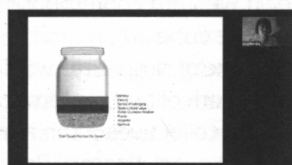
4 A prominent example of the latter is (Osborne)

Research has been authored by, among others, the European art school umbrella organization ELIA of which my art school is an active member and in whose research conferences I have participated. Therefore, any incompatibility between artists' and institutional concepts of artistic research creates a dilemma for my own work as a researcher working at an art school.

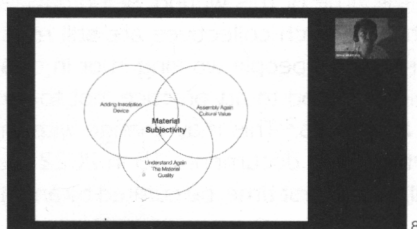
Jatiwangi art Factory and 展銷場 Display Distribute are part of a larger global phenomenon of self-organized, commons- and community-oriented collectives whose respective practices are highly specific to their own local environment while, at the same time, being internationally networked. These collectives consist of people with mixed or overlapping backgrounds as artists, researchers, theorists, activists, journalists and community organizers. They often focus on one specific material practice – "tanah"/clay in the case of Jatiwangi art Factory, publishing and logistics in the case of 展銷場 Display Distribute – that is being turned into a social experiment and artistic-philosophical inquiry.

including festivals, with an international artist residency program. Ismal Muntaha, a founding member of the collective, explains how JaF's activities tie into the history of Jatiwangi, a village 200 kilometers East of Jakarta, as Indonesia's post-colonial industrial production site for roof tiles. The area's major natural resource is clay or "tanah", the Indonesian word for soil, ground and clay. JaF's work investigates the history and culture of tanah and reactivates it in new forms: "digging again the memories, spiritual value, ritual, proudness, cultivating attitude from our tanah as local material as a tool of subjectivity".⁶

Collective activities organized in the village community include a "Zero Point Ritual" whose participants "choose the zero point of Terracotta City as the beginning of a new clay culture, a city based on the people's desire and their collective agreement".⁷ It involves the creation of a terracotta structure on a piece of land in order to prevent its privatization and keep it as a public community space. JaF also organizes a music festival with community-built clay instruments. Altogether, JaF's projects amount to a post-colonial poetics and discourse analysis of tanah and the Jatiwangi region. This research is not published in scholarly papers or textbooks, but through JaF's public performances and presentations. The research outcomes are not only practical, but also theoretical as shown in this diagram of 'Material Subjectivity' that JaF presents as one of the insights of its research:



Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF) calls itself a "community-based organization focused on examin[ing] how contemporary art and cultural practices can be contextualized with the local life in [a] rural area, both [in] form [and] ideas".⁵ JaF combines local community activities,



5 (Jatiwangi art Factory)

6 (Muntaha), conference abstract

7 (Muntaha), conference video recording, 28:55

8 (Muntaha), conference video, 22:05

9 <https://displaydistribute.com>, Accessed 3/1/2021

Subjectivity and politics of materials and their communal exchange also characterize the work of the 展銷場 Display Distribute collective in Hong Kong. Its English name is a literal translation of the Chinese “展銷場” (Zhǎnxiāo chǎng), a type of small pop-up store common in Hong Kong whose spaces can be from retail estate owners on very short notice, without much paperwork, and for a short period of time. Accordingly, 展銷場 Display Distribute calls itself a “now and again exhibition space, distribution service, thematic inquiry, and sometimes shop in Kowloon, Hong Kong”.⁹ Its web homepage lays out the typical stock of such a store (“手袋及襪子 Bags and Socks / 條紋襯衫 Striped Shirts / 中國人壽保險 [海外] China Life Insurance (Overseas) / 出版物 Publications / 日本設計師手錶 Japanese Designer Watches”) and links it to actual pop-up shop manifestations, projects and appearances of the collective.¹⁰



展銷場 Display Distribute, homepage

Never mind the diversity of trades, activities of the collective are focused on artists’ and activist DIY publishing and its communal distribution. 展銷場 Display Distribute’s members conduct many practical, and often performative, experiments with publishing, retail, distribution and cross-border transport that reflect the political situation of Hong Kong as a simultaneous capitalist experiment and part of the communist People’s Republic of China. The collective experimentally participated in the semi-legal commercial cross-border transportation of retail goods into the PRC,

and runs as its most elaborate project a self-organized worldwide courier system “LIGHT LOGISTICS” for DIY publications and other merchandise. It runs on the basis of private travels of volunteer collaborators and is coordinated through 展銷場 Display Distribute’s own tracking-and-tracing bureaucracy that assigns an alphanumeric ID to each shipment and documents its way on its website.



展銷場 Display Distribute, screenshot from ‘Making Matters’ presentation

The above screenshot is part of a live video performance “Packaging as Propaganda: On circulation, new psychogeographies, and the discursiveness of boxes” from November 2020.¹¹ Referencing psychogeography, 展銷場 Display Distribute continues an artistic research discipline that was invented in the Lettrist and Situationist International (with forerunners in surrealism and symbolism). When interviewed for a Chinese multi-disciplinary arts magazine and asked about her working definitions of “open platform”, “architectures of commerce” and “documentary gesture”, 展銷場 Display Distribute member Elaine W. Ho replied: “Together, these questions refer to a socio-politics of syntax informing various paths of artistic research. For example, the LIGHT LOGISTICS project with 展銷場 Display Distribute instigates a series of encounters based around the act of reading. We want to support independent publishers whose work contributes to the discourse on grassroots, radical, and critical practices in East and Southeast Asia. Considering the power of reading as a 1:1 form of exchange, there is still something to be said for kindling these small mo-

10 Ibid

11 (Display Distribute)

ments of encounter between individuals with similar interests or that can support by way of coincidental mobility. Setting up this albeit crude infrastructure of a logistical operation makes use of slow couriers' movement to physically and immaterially transport art, ideas, and practices in ways that may be difficult for independent practitioners otherwise. By playfully highlighting the banal details of this circulation, we want to lay bare the systems of production as they are embedded within the everyday and trace new possibilities for a distributed but self-organized community.¹²

This fully meets the proposition text for this publication and its characterization of "artistic thinking" as "open-ended, speculative, associative, non-linear, haunting, thinking differently".¹³ Elaine W. Ho's statement also clarifies and underlines that artistic research does not merely exist as an institutional or higher education discourse, but being claimed by artists as their own practice.

What was research again?

So far, I have dodged the question of how to define research, in the literal sense of drawing boundaries between research and non-research, and between artistic research and art practice. "Research", like "art", strikes me as a word whose semantics relies on a superficial social consensus that evaporates upon closer inspection. Even in Western languages and cultures, "research" is not the same thing. To take only the three (geographically and linguistically) neighboring languages and cultures of my daily use, English, Dutch and German, not even the words are similar: "research" in English, "Forschung" in German and "onderzoek" in Dutch. Their meanings differ as well.

In German, "Forschung" includes the humanities and effectively everything that a scholar publishes. Not only the interpre-

tation of Shakespeare poems by a literary scholar counts as "Forschung", but also the publishing of those poems in a critical-philological edition. This humanistic concept of research, which dates back to Wilhelm von Humboldt, has the least incompatibilities with artistic research. One might even argue that some forms of German humanities "Forschung" such as Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas and Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, were already hybrids of humanities and artistic research.

Unlike German academia and even the German language, Anglophone academia differentiates "research" and "scholarship". Warburg's and Benjamin's projects would likely fall under the latter rather than the former category. This begs the question whether higher-education "artistic research" isn't a mistranslation, or continental European pidgin English, for a discipline that should rather be called artistic (or creative) scholarship.¹⁴

In the Netherlands, the word "onderzoek" has a strong semantic bias towards empirical research. Linguistically, it is not differentiated from "investigation" and can also refer to investigative journalism and police work. The empirical bias of "onderzoek" often manifests itself in daily life, from acceptance problems of non-quantitative research as research in Dutch academia to the requirement of specifying data management in every Dutch research funding application.

In other words: Even before questioning "research" as a Western concept and epistemology, one needs to be aware of the fact that "research" is not even a consistent or unified concept in Western countries. Discussions of the institutional legitimacy of artistic research are part of that disagreement.

In linguistic terminology, "research" could thus be called a floating signifier; and even more precisely in film terminol-

12 (Huang 80)

13 <https://www.hku.nl/en/study-at-hku/hku-college/pre-phd-programme/the-postresearch-condition>, Accessed March 1st 2021

14 The term "artistic research" still is much less common in Anglophone countries than in continental Europe. I have been told by colleagues from the UK that the word "artistic", as an equivalent of "artistiek"/"artistique" in Dutch and French or "künstlerisch"/"kunstnerisk" in German and Danish, is much less commonly used in English and even avoided by many artists

ogy a MacGuffin: a package that is passed along and shared between different parties who may not even have the same idea of what it contains. A MacGuffin is an ultimately empty device with the only function of tying together a plot. While “research” in its diverse meanings may have MacGuffin tendencies (as a device that ties together academia with its extremely diverse disciplines and epistemologies), artistic research in particular is a word on which two or more parties can reach conversational consensus while having something radically different in mind. It is therefore prone to becoming transactional rather than epistemological, or – to use linguistic terminology again – defined by pragmatics rather than semantics.

Leonardo di Leo’s 1972 semi-famous gangster b-movie *Milano Calibro 9* opens with a long MacGuffin sequence in which a suitcase is handed from person to person. The suitcase initially contains money but, at the end of the chain, turns out to be a bomb that kills its final receivers. Similarly, artistic research is understood among others as a project-oriented contemporary art practice, as lab science done in collaboration with artists and designers, as art school PhD trajectories or as academic research whose outcomes are audiovisual and performative rather than research papers. But the question is whether, with its institutional establishment, some or most of these understandings will be marginalized or in the worst case killed off.



Timelapse of the opening sequence of *Milano Calibro 9*

Perhaps the first literal mention of “artistic research” is in Asger Jorn’s 1957 Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus, the founding manifesto of a project that eventually became part of the Situationist International. This text was written in Switzerland, first published in French and later translated into English so that it remains unclear whether Jorn departed from the word “forskning” in his native Danish (which is derived from the German word “Forschung”) or from French “recherches”, and to which extent his text reflected the prior use of the word “recherche” in, among others, French Surrealism and post-war experimental music groups such as Pierre Schaeffer’s Groupe de Recherches de Musique Concrète (founded in 1951).

Even in this early, geographically and culturally limited stage, “artistic research” was a speculative and semi-dubious affair, rooted simultaneously in poetic-absurdist science and laboratory experimentation, and manifesting itself in such artistic research disciplines as pataphysics and psychogeography. (Jorn actively engaged with both; in the psychogeographic “atlases” he jointly made with Guy Debord, and in a critical essay on pataphysics as “a religion in the making” for the journal of the Situationist International.¹⁵



Head of the Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research

“A.R.”

Today, however, this type of thinking is no longer what is being expected from artistic research as it has been defined for European higher education. In June 2020, the “Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research” was published by seven European umbrella organizations for higher art education (representing art schools, conser-

15 See (Jorn and Debord), (Jorn, 1961)

vatoires, architecture and film schools), two art school accreditation bodies, the public arts sector organization Culture Action Europe and the Society for Artistic Research (SAR). According to its authors, the Vienna Declaration addresses “political decision makers, funding bodies, higher education and research institutions as well as other organizations and individuals catering for and undertaking AR [artistic research]”.¹⁶ In a critique of the Vienna Declaration I wrote with Nienke Terpsma from the artistic research collective Fuck-ing Good Art,¹⁷ we quoted parts of its text as absurd capitalist-realist poetry:

“Artistic Research (AR) [...] has developed rapidly in the last twenty years globally and is a key knowledge base for art education in Higher Arts Education Institutions (HAEIs).” “AR is well suited to inspire creative and innovative developments in sectors such as health and wellbeing, the environment and technology, thus contributing to fulfilling the HEIs’ ‘third mission’. AR must be seen as having a unique potential in the development of the ‘knowledge triangle.’” “Within this frame, AR is aligned in all aspects with the five main criteria that constitute Research & Development in the Frascati Manual.” “HAEIs operate predominantly within a research context and have a responsibility to conduct AR. It is also common for HAEIs to interact with related enterprise Research & Development, and to contribute directly to the creation of intellectual property in arts, entertainment and media through research practice.” “This environment requires funding for: educating the next generation of researchers through doctoral programmes; [...] building links with business and enterprise in order to stimulate the impact of research.” “AR is validated through peer review covering the range of disciplinary competences addressed by the work. Quality assurance is

undertaken by recognized independent, international QA bodies and assures the standards described in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.” “[T]he establishment of AR as an independent category within the Frascati Manual, establishing the opportunity for harvesting research data and statistics from the AR field.”

These quotes may be self-explanatory for my initial diagnosis of artistic research being dead on its institutional arrival. To summarize the core points of our critique: by becoming “AR”, artistic research turns from a speculative and poetic endeavor into a “peer-reviewed” and “validated” affair: “data and statistics” can be “harvested” from it, which feeds into “enterprise Research & Development”. The “Vienna Declaration” thus mainstreams artistic research, respectively “AR”, into an almost comically exaggerated neoliberal technocratic agenda, in a way that reminded us of Soviet-era conceptualist poetry – by Vladimir Sorokin, Dmitri Prigov and others – that mimicked and hyperbolized Soviet bureaucratic language.

Most remarkably, the Vienna Declaration does not contain a single mention of “artist” or “artists”. Nienke Terpsma and I therefore read the document as a “land-grabbing” attempt of art schools “to own and define artistic research”.¹⁸ The idea of artistic research as an artist-run, self-organized, non-institutional practice seems to be completely alien to the “A.R.” described in the Vienna Declaration. Instead, the European art school system constructs its own, parallel art world through “A.R.” where artistic research projects are no longer created by artists, but defined by institutions.

Therefore, “A.R.” perfectly fits the New European Bauhaus project that has been announced by the European Commission

16 (AEC et al.)

17 (Cramer and Terpsma)

18 Ibid

19 (Huang, 80)

20 This would be a riff on the plot of Johann Peter Hebel’s 1808 short story *Kannitverstan*

21 (Lütticken, 59): “Autonomy has also gotten a bad name in the field of art. In the United States in particular, the association of the concept of autonomy with Clement Greenberg’s restrictive understanding of modernism has made term seem toxic and beyond reappropriation.”

in 2020/21 and whose logo is the following:



“New European Bauhaus” logo

The verbal and visual languages of “A.R.” and the New European Bauhaus create a stark if not grotesque contrast to the practices like those of JaF and 展銷場 Display Distribute. Peer-reviewed and validated “A.R.” seems to have nothing in common any more with artistic research as defined by Elaine W. Ho and its “crude infrastructure [...] playfully highlighting [...] banal details of [...] circulation” in order to “trace new possibilities for a distributed but self-organized community”.¹⁹ Comparing these two strands of artistic research, the issue is even greater than that of the semantic shifts between “research”, “Forschung” and “onderzoek”: the question is no longer only about different research cultures, but whether people still mean the same thing at all with “artistic research”.

I am mentally picturing a sitcom where representatives of an Indonesian DIY collective meet art school managers and, throughout the show, perfectly misunderstand each other while believing that they are talking about the same subject.²⁰ If “artistic research” becomes

even more a MacGuffin than “research” in general, it will ultimately become an object for, instead of a characterization of, such poetic transactions as 展銷場 Display Distribute’s “LIGHT LOGISTICS”.

But it may be time for a more fundamental critique. “Research” – which from Jarry’s ‘pataphysics to JaF’s tanah research was an emancipatory project for artists and non-artists – may need to be revisited in the same way as other enlightenment and modernist tropes: as concepts that are broken, and in the worst case even “toxic and beyond reappropriation”, to quote Sven Lütticken’s critical revision of the term “autonomy”.²¹ Then, the “post-research condition” would become a very literal and practical matter.

From pataphysics to LIGHT LOGISTICS, artistic research has, on the other hand, always amounted to a “post-research condition”. When institutions retrofit it into a mainstream academic research epistemology, they may think that they are emancipating the arts. In reality, however, they rather seem to emancipate themselves from them, in times where art institutions have outgrown the arts.

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Colophon

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After an omnipresent Research Decade, the concept of artistic research currently seems to be in need of a recharge. Pressing questions are: Should we talk about a postresearch situation or a post-research condition? Could this be compared with how poststructuralism relates to structuralism as its philosophical comprehension and the elaboration of its consequences? And how could a postresearch condition address contemporary art practices?

To answer these questions, an intensive program of workshops, presentations, propositions, and screenings took place as EARN/Smart Culture Conference in Utrecht in the spring of 2021.

This publication reflects further on discussions and debates, while providing programmatic elements for a future artistic research agenda.

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