What Is Wrong with the Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research?

Florian Cramer, Nienke Terpsma

Essay – January 21, 2021

In June 2020, the *Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research* was published by seven European umbrella organizations for higher art education (representing art schools, conservatories, architecture, and film schools), two art school accreditation bodies, the public arts sector organization Culture Action Europe and the Society for Artistic Research (SAR). The *Vienna Declaration* is the first international policy document on artistic research, meant to provide concepts and definitions for integrating artistic research into European higher education. According to its authors, it addresses "political decision-makers, funding bodies, higher education and research institutions as well as other organisations and individuals catering for and undertaking AR". Although the *Vienna Declaration* will likely become a future constitution and framework for artistic research in European art schools, no public debates of its content seem to have taken place in the six months after its publication. Florian Cramer and Nienke Terpsma think that it is time to speak up – and fundamentally disagree with its concept and framing of artistic research.

Found Footage

'Artistic Research (AR) is practice-based, practice-led research in the arts which has developed rapidly in the last twenty years globally and is a key knowledge base for art education in Higher Arts Education Institutions (HAEIs).'

'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 predominately 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; ensuring appropriate physical and virtual infrastructures as well as archiving and disseminating means; 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 recognised 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.'

This is not conceptual poetry; these are quotes from the *Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research* signed on 20 June 2020 by all major organisations of European art schools. Of the many things that rub one the wrong way, two stand out: next to the grotesque neoliberal-bureaucratic language, art schools' land-grabbing claim to own and define artistic research. Both, of course, done with the best intentions to emancipate artistic research.

The *Vienna Declaration* doesn't mention artists at all; they literally don't exist in its text.

From Artistic Research to AR; from Descriptions to Prescriptions

For future art education in Europe, the *Vienna Declaration* may become as influential as the *Bologna Declaration* of 1999 (on whose basis continental European higher education was reorganised into the Anglo-American Bachelor and Master system). It dwells on the same shaky grounds of not actually being a legal text or governmental policy document. Factually, it is a manifesto for institutionalising artistic research at European art schools, by intrinsically linking what in most cases used to be two separate things: artistic research and doctoral study programmes. [1] Written in a language that reads like its own parody, with its abundance of tacky logos reminiscent of spam messages, the *Vienna Declaration* doesn't pretend any semblance to a manifesto written by artists in support of artistic research. It is of course (and, for its intended purpose, needs to be) a bureaucratic policy document; but beyond that, it is a constructed foundation myth and institutional power grab.

With the research project job openings associated with it, the *Vienna Declaration* reframes artistic research as a top-down practice where projects, subjects and research questions formulated by academic institutions and artists need to fit into pre-defined projects and calls, forms, formats and methods. [2] Artists ultimately won't have the freedom of refusing to participate, because these programmes will be among the few remaining opportunities to be paid for their practice. But what is wrong with new openings for precarious practitioners?

The *Vienna Declaration* claims that artistic research is 'still a relatively young field', thereby ignoring the long history of artistic research as artists' self-initiated and self-organised practices. *Explicitly* – that is, literally under the name 'artistic research' – research as an artistic practice has existed for more than sixty years; implicitly for centuries if not millennia.

To give only a few examples, with no pretensions of completeness or lack of bias:

- In his 1957 *Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus*, Asger Jorn wrote that 'artistic research is identical to "human science," which for us means "concerned" [i.e., engaged] science, not purely historical science. This research should be carried out by artists with the assistance of scientists'. [3] With Piero Simondo and Guiseppe Pinot-Gallizio, Jorn founded an artistic research lab in Alba, Italy, that eventually merged with the Situationist International. Simondo went on to found the 'International Center for an Institute of Artistic Research' (IRA) in 1962.
- In 1976, the Swiss artist, experimental art educator and collaborator and translator of Marcel Duchamp, Serge Stauffer, wrote a manifesto 'Kunst als Forschung' (Art as

Research) in which he demanded that 'art-research [...] has to avoid serving those in power' and 'requires its own methodology; it cannot use the scientific methodology but let itself inspire from it'. [4]

- Artistic research semi-explicitly existed in the UNOVIS collective founded by Kasimir Malevich in Vitebsk and the LEF journal edited by Vladimir Mayakovsky and designed by Alexander Rodchenko, in French surrealism and its 'Bureau de recherches surréalistes' established in 1925, in the *Acéphale* group around Georges Bataille and André Masson founded in 1936; in the Situationist International (which worked under the moniker of a research group and published its periodical as a research journal), in conceptual art, feminist art and institutional critique, by Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Hans Haacke, Art & Language, Hito Steyerl and Andrea Fraser among many others.
- Today, artistic and speculative research is the sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit basis of Afrofuturist arts (such as in the Black Quantum Futurism collective), of transdisciplinary artist-researcher collectives (such as Homeshop in Beijing, ruangrupa in Jakarta and Kunci in Yogyakarta, to name only a few). It is also the explicit basis of many artists' publishing initiatives (such as *Re / search Publishing* by V. Vale and *DisplayDistribute* in Hong Kong) and artist-run universities (such as Joseph Beuys' *Free International University*, the *Copenhagen Free University, Gudskul* and *Floating University,* Berlin).
- Musical composition was part of the Western scientific research canon for centuries (with music being part of the scientific 'quadrivium' next to astronomy, arithmetic and geometry from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance), and doctoral degrees in music have existed for more than a century. Electronic music composers and practitioners organised themselves in research groups such as the French *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (Musical Research Group, GRM) in 1958, Natlab in the Netherlands and university-affiliated electronic music studios all over the world. They also created their own artistic research disciplines such as sonology. Outside the Western classical music tradition, practitioners such as the Sun Ra Arkestra understood their work as research. [5]
- Design research existed, as a Western discipline, at least since the Bauhaus, architectural research since the Renaissance.
- Aside from these examples, artistic practices do and always have involved research: material research, field research, anatomical research, technological research and experimentation, to name a few.

By calling artistic research a 'young field', the *Vienna Declaration* makes us worry that its authors weren't even aware of the history sketched above, and unfamiliar with many if not most of the artists and artistic research practices mentioned. At least, the *Vienna Declaration* doesn't speak their language. We couldn't phrase it better than the Swiss art researcher Michael Hiltbrunner who, reflecting on Serge Stauffer, wrote in 2019:

Academic priorities and the requirements of the PhD programme force current artistic research into an unproductive formalism. Now, studying art means conforming to a system with rules that are not defined in the spirit of art. Moreover, problems lie in the fact that a language of art pedagogy and curatorship is used. [In the *Vienna Declaration*, we should add to Hiltbrunner, not even that.] What is needed is a vocabulary founded in the researching practices of artists themselves.

On top of burdening artistic research with 'an unproductive formalism', PhD degrees as a new focus or centre of artistic research could, in the worst case, mean a regression, since academic standards and accreditation criteria require PhD research to be individually identifiable and gradable, which is structurally incompatible to collective (let alone anonymous-collective) artistic research (such as that of Acéphale, GRM, the Black Audio Film Collective, the Cyberfeminist International, Laboria Cuboniks, ruangrupa and many more). The standard academic requirement for PhD research – independent individual

development of original research and original contributions to knowledge – could even create a reactionary rollback within the arts, back to the model of the hyper-individualist, heroic artist-genius. Even without this extreme, we already know examples of artist research collectives that disintegrated after their members went on to pursue individual PhD degrees.

The *Vienna Declaration's* pre-emptive obedience to established academic norms (such as peer review and validation) conversely wastes a larger opportunity – namely that of bringing artistic research into academia as a critical trojan horse in order to rethink and revise the standards and research culture of all academic disciplines.

For these and other reasons, we are not against the institutionalisation of artistic research. To quote Hiltbrunner: 'It is important that artists can conduct research with institutional protection and public payment. Viewed in this light, doctoral study is important for the autonomy of the arts and should therefore be designed in such a way that it is in the interest of the artists.' [6]

The Emperor Is Naked

In its characterisation of artistic 'research practice', the *Vienna Declaration*, however, does not refer to the interests of artists, but to the task of 'HAEIs to interact with related enterprise Research & Development, and to contribute directly to the creation of intellectual property in arts, entertainment and media'. Firstly, this squarely contradicts artistic research practices – such as those of the Situationists – that questioned and even undermined intellectual property.

Secondly, it positions the task of artistic research institutions in neoliberal-technocratic terms as 'building links with business and enterprise in order to stimulate the impact of research'.

Which artistic research projects then would still have a place in the framework created by the *Vienna Declaration*? Would even widely recognised, canonical examples of fairly scholarly artistic research be admitted? What has been the 'validation' of Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)? Would Adrian Piper's *Funk Lessons* (1983) or Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014) have passed peer reviews? Or built links with business and enterprise? We shouldn't even mention the experiments of the Surrealists, which in their time were attacked as irresponsible by clinical psychologists – or the use of time travel as a critical artistic research method in Black Quantum Futurism.

When Siegfried Zielinski – former director of the art school HfG Karlsruhe and thus experienced in the managerial side of art education – sketched the departments of a future academy, he demonstrated the possibility of alternative visions:

Faculties for an Academy of the 21st Century:

Dignity
Hospitality
Unconditioned dialogue
Unusual activities
Paleofuturism
Phataphysik
Cultura experimentalis
Chaos pilots – Kairos-poets
Critical engineering
Non-censurable systems
Knowledge of the winds / Navigations
Scale / Skalierung

Sustainability
Projections
Variantology

– Siegfried Zielinski, Shanghai Nov 26, 2019

In other words, policy documents, executive language and institutional formatting do not need to be as impoverished and limiting as in the *Vienna Declaration*. Just as any material, they can be tools of self-critique, inspiring and imaginative, food for thought, starting points for artistic imaginations and practices, broadening rather than confining.

'AR' as a New (Institutional) Art System

When an innovation develops a network of people who can cooperate nationwide, perhaps even internationally, all that is left to do to create an art world is to convince the rest of the world that what is being done is art, and deserves the rights and privileges associated with that status. At any particular time and place, certain ways of displaying work connote 'art,' while others do not. Work that aspires to be accepted as art usually must display a developed aesthetic apparatus and media through which critical discussions can take place. Likewise, aspirants to the status of art have to dissociate themselves from related crafts or commercial enterprises. Finally, aspirants construct histories which tie the work their world produces to already accepted arts, and emphasize those elements of their pasts which are most clearly artistic, while suppressing less desirable ancestors.
– Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 2008 [1982]

What are the characteristics of the new system of institutional 'AR' as opposed to previous practices of artist-run research?

With the *Vienna Declaration* focussing on art schools, universities and doctoral degree programmes, its concept of 'AR' closely resembles institutional research lab art, or what has been known since the late 1960s under the name 'Art-Science'. Its origins lie in the journal *Leonardo*, in electronic music composition at research studios such as IRCAM or the State University of New York at Buffalo, new media and bio art / bio design labs at ars electronica, MIT and elsewhere. Only in such environments, 'AR' can deliver what is being promised in the *Vienna Declaration*: 'AR is validated through peer review covering the range of disciplinary competences addressed by the work', among others after having been published in one of the 'international peer reviewed scholarly journals in the discipline'.

While such an 'AR' system is already in place – and makes sense among others for art school tutors who take temporary leaves from teaching to deepen their research interests and research skills, or for artists who want to pursue a particular research project in an academic environment, with institutional support – it to date has made no monopoly or ownership claims on artistic research. Instead, artistic research in institutional projects has been defined as the individual research contributions of participating artists; in other words, as their way of working, not as something initiated or defined by the institution.

The focus of 'AR' on the PhD as an individual, validated degree is doomed to boil down to the exclusion of collective and do-it-yourself practices – and hence the most contemporary forms of artistic research – unless these issues are being addressed from the beginning (which the *Vienna Declaration* doesn't).

With educational institutions now claiming ownership of artistic research, and introducing their own quality and validation standards, they factually create their own art system, as described above by Howard Becker. As a result, artistic research will be split into two forms and systems: 'AR' in art schools as opposed to artistic research in art practice and art worlds at large.

Is this desirable? We don't think so. Instead of creating hospitable spaces, infrastructures and institutional recognition for artist-run research initiatives (from the *Bureau de recherches surréalistes* to the *Community Futures Lab* of the Afrofuturist Affair in Philadelphia or *Lifepatch* in Indonesia), 'AR' is in danger of ending up as its own self-referential system, with artistic researchers and projects that are recognised only within that system, and the system serving the ultimate purpose of preserving itself[7]; in other words, a land-grab for an ivory tower.

In its well-meaning attempt to achieve academic and governmental recognition of, and budgets for artistic research, the Vienna Declaration rehashes the worst of technocratic higher education jargon and business rhetoric. Not only does this do, for the sake of short-term political gains, a long-term disservice to artistic research, it also amounts to the very opposite of what traditional scholars and academia expect and hope to gain from artistic research – namely, a different concept and imagination of research than 'the standards described in the European Standards and Guidelines'.

So What? Now What? Some Loose Ends & Dubious Ideas

- Can we develop art with the new jargon: AR, HAEIs, HEIs, EUA, *Salzburg Principle*s, *Florence Principles*, *Frascati Manua*l, *Vienna Declaration*, *third mission*, *knowledge triangle* – plus the words left out in the text: triple helix, quadruple helix and quintuple helix, track record, performance indicators, impact factors, knowledge valorization, brain parks?
- Can the two art worlds – contemporary art and 'AR' – merge into a new, neoliberal conceptual art and capitalist realism? Can it be accelerated till it crashes? Can it be appropriated and twisted in a judo-move? Can it be rendered so abstract and absurd that it stops functioning?
- Can we publish our illegitimate versions of the 'international peer reviewed scholarly journals in the discipline' (to quote the *Vienna Declaration*)? What is the recognition of artistic research that is not validated and, by today's academic standards, even invalid (but: made-up, dubious, pataphysical, perhaps even fraudulent)?
- Can the 'opportunity for harvesting research data and statistics from the AR field' (to quote the *Vienna Declaration*) be made a humorous conceptual art practice?
- Can academic peer review be judo-twisted, from gatekeeping back to the cooperative feedback it probably once was / is intended to be, not only for 'AR', not only for artistic research, but for whole academia – so that artistic research can repair a broken culture?

Florian Cramer is a reader at Willem de Kooning Academy / Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam and volunteer for the Rotterdam-based arts initiatives PrintRoom, De Player and Awak(e). 'When I worked in university humanities, people were romanticizing the arts – as a realm of unrestrained experimentation, freeing them from the constraints of academic research. When I went on working in an art school, people were romanticizing research – as the last resort of artistic autonomy.' He is author of the book *Anti-Media Ephemera on Speculative Arts* (2013) and co-author of *Pattern Discrimination* (2018).

Nienke Terpsma is an artist and book designer, co-founder and -editor of *Fucking Good Art*. From the beginning, *Fucking Good Art* was learning-by-doing, we founded our own MA and PhD degrees, and at the same time we are the director, editor in chief, the assistant, coffee lady/man, and toilet cleaner all rolled into one. Prof. Leszek Brogowski, in a symposium on artistic research, stated: "In this joking vein, Robert Hamelijnck and Nienke Terpsma are saying something quite serious, which is that – at root – the form of their art is that of research, a thesis to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. In consequence, I myself, Leszek Brogowski, Professor at the University of Rennes 2, [with this paper] am beginning the process of academic validation of the knowledge produced by *Fucking Good Art*, by considering their work as part of the history and sociology of contemporary art." (Leszek Brogowski, in "Art and Knowledge: a scientific sharing of meaning. Understanding art worlds through *Fucking Good Art*", Symposium *Artcand Research, Shared Methodologies in Artistic Practice*, Universitat decBarcelona, Spain, 4-5 december 2014.)

With thanks to: Kristoffer Gansing, Clara Balaguer, Rob Hamelijnck, Michael Hiltbrunner, Renée Turner and Danny Giles for their comments, agreements and disagreements.

Footnotes

1. With the notable exception of Sweden, Norway and Finland where doctoral programmes in artistic research are now firmly established.
2. This continues a development that had its origins in hard science research groups and has trickled down to the continental European humanities since the 1990s. In this new system, many if not most PhD dissertations are no longer individually developed by the candidates, but take place in larger funded research projects and thematic research clusters. In the humanities and cultural studies, this has already resulted in more conformity and hegemony of academic schools, terminological fashions and imitation of hard science methodology for the sake of meeting scientific research standards.
3. Asger Jorn, 'Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus' (1957), Bureau of Public Secrets, bopsecrets.org.
4. Serge Stauffer, 'kunst als forschung', in *Kunst als Forschung: Essays, Gespräche, Übersetzungen, Studien* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013 [1976]), pp. 179–80.
5. Among others, with the double album *Sun Ra Research* (2006).
6. 'Künstler_innen sollen forschen können, mit institutionellem Schutz und öffentlicher Bezahlung. Der PhD ist aus dieser Sicht wichtig für die Autonomie der Künste und sollte so konzipiert sein, dass es im Interesse der Künstler_innen ist.' Michael Hiltbrunner, 'Drop Out of Art School, Research meant trying new things: The F+F School in Zürich around 1970 and artistic research today', *Fucking Good Art* #38*: What Life could be or the ambivalence of success* (Zürich: edition fink, 2019), pp. 124–27.
7. Thus, as a textbook example of institutional autopoiesis as defined in Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995 [1984]).

Tags

Art Discourse, Open! Academy, Research

This text was downloaded on November 22, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/what-is-wrong-with-the-vienna-declaration-on-artistic-research