

Artistic research and development

in Sweden, 1977–2008. Some reflections on a history that appears to repeat itself

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Summary

In the major reform of Swedish higher education in 1977, artistic study programmes became integrated into this sector. Ahead of the reform, representatives of the field emphasized that the unusual admission and examination procedures and courses of study characterising these programmes warranted special attention. The right to research funding in the field was also asserted and its distinctiveness emphasised. Development and renewal work pursued by institutions of art education should, it was thought, be given special funding in a unique category of its own. These arguments won the day and in 1977 this funding (from the beginning for artistic development work) was set up, albeit on a modest scale compared with the academic component of higher education.

The field of artistic research and development has now existed for 30 years. However, it has yet to succeed in fully establishing itself and gaining the recognition of the Swedish Government and the academic community at large. The Research Policy Bill of 2008 still refers to the field as 'developing'. One hypothesis is that this may be perceived as a symptom of an ongoing, protracted struggle between different cultures, and between professional or occupational fields, that has not yet been resolved. This struggle originated, first, in profound mutual distrust between the art colleges on the one hand and the spheres of higher-education bureaucracy and politics, along with the academic community, on the other; and, secondly, from divergent attitudes among the artistic educational areas themselves. A reading of historical documents dating from 1976 to 2008, of activities in artistic research and development, and of evaluations of and political directives for the same, permits the Government's stance to be interpreted as expressing an ambivalence that is generated by the intercultural struggle. The Government has never been fully convinced that activities have developed into what they ought to be. This does not exclude the assumption that, over the years, the field has

also been beset by difficulties of various kinds. However, the question is how these difficulties have been defined, and what yardstick has been used to measure the shortcomings observed and the expectations fulfilled. A review of the evaluations and surveys of artistic research and development carried out in 1985, 1993 and 2007 shows that the problems in this field have persisted. Criticism has addressed a recurrent lack of written documentation of the projects implemented. In retrospect, the work carried out in these projects has proved very difficult to examine and evaluate. The field also displays a striking heterogeneity, and there have been no concerted efforts to develop 'methods' or routines for documentation. It is also evident that, in this field, the term 'artistic research and development' has been perceived very differently: here, academically oriented models compete with in-depth explorations of knowledge of a more purely artistic nature. The fact that the area is strikingly heterogeneous, with contradictory perceptions, and the recurrence of criticism indicate a total lack of uniformity of expectations as to the results of research and development work and, accordingly, what kind of product is to be mediated and quality assured. It involves, on the one hand, knowledge production in a fairly precise (and academic) sense and, on the other, more openly determined in-depth enhancement of specialist expertise of an essentially artistic kind. There is now therefore cause, after more than 30 years' work, to start posing questions about why problems in this field tend to recur and why the assessment of activities pursued has followed similar patterns. A study of the history of the area provides no answers as to which solutions may be chosen today, but it affords scope for examining habitual perspectives. A study of this kind could provide not only an opportunity to reflect on the static positions that most of the stakeholders have adopted and the motives and conflicting ideals that have promoted them, but also a chance to study the actual work carried out over the years. Today, we know very little about previous practical work in artistic research and development, and about what it has generated in the way of progress and benefits for the area of study, in educational and artistic terms alike. Temporarily directing our attention towards history may, perhaps, be one way of changing the attitudes that currently seem to be driving the field's practitioners round in circles.