

*Magnus Eriksson*

## Disrupting the Claim of the Metatext in Artistic Research

Artistic research is a new phenomenon in Sweden. It was established as an academic field in 1977. The definition has since then been under debate, sometimes even under attack. Swedish law defines 'artistic research' as a meta level where 'documentation and analysis of artistic processes produces and makes available new knowledge'. Usually these analyses have been directed towards the artist's own work, i.e. the writers, the visual artists, or the musicians document and comment on their own work. This should of course not be confused with traditional academic analyses of the fine arts.

Artistic research is a border phenomenon. It is not research in the traditional academic sense, but it is not art either. Or could a work of art in itself be called research? One could argue that Hermann Hesse undertook a radical analysis of the split soul in his novel *Steppenwolf*. Or that Franz Kafka analyzed alienation as a social, a psychological, and an existential category in *The Trial*. Or perhaps that

Albert Camus analyzed the absurdity of life in *The Stranger*.

Along these lines one could argue that these novels, or other works of art, could be considered research. But does that make them 'artistic research' or should we be content just calling them examples of 'art as research', a somewhat fictional category that should not be confused either with 'academic research' or 'artistic research'? I guess the jury is still out.

The demand for the metatext is probably the most decisive dividing line in the discussion of artistic research. Vasilis Papageorgiou has vigorously argued that the work as such should be regarded as research. He claims that the work itself produces knowledge, both externally as Baudelaire's portrayal of the evil and in its inner structure. It does this by just being art.<sup>1</sup>

Papageorgiou discerns the dual perspective of the work as metatext and as research-in-itself. But he emphasizes that the artistic work's immediately visible, metatextual character should not be a requirement for its status as research. The work manifests itself as research also by its aesthetic self-reflection, which is usually an implicit dimension that is revealed through the process of interpretation and in the existential effect it has on the reader's horizon of understanding.

In viewing the literary work as artistic research, we can discern two different levels: an openly metatextual level and one that does not manifest itself on the surface of the text. In the former case the novel constitutes a metatext in relation to the social, psychological or existential phenom-

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<sup>1</sup> Vasilis Papageorgiou, "The Art of Researching", *Scriptum. Creative Writing Research Journal*, Vol. 2, 2/2015, pp. 4–13.

ena it explores. In this respect, Kafka's analysis of social alienation occupies the same position in relation to the social phenomenon as a sociological analysis, although the way of reasoning is radically different.

When it comes to the internal dimension of the work, the text requires an implicit meta level of self-reflection which becomes clear in the reading and interpretation of the work. The work can of course thematize its own status as art on a manifest level. That is the case with most meta poetry. But equally interesting for the analysis of the literary work as artistic research is when this metatextual discussion emerges through the work's formal character rather than through its open thematisation.

In her novel *Trumpet*, published in 1998, the Scottish writer Jackie Kay tells the story of the jazz trumpeter Joss Moody, who was born in a woman's body. Only when Moody died, the secret was revealed. The only one who knew the secret was Joss Moody's widow, Millie. The question of how the couple's love should be described, is central throughout the novel and vital to the understanding of the psychological conflict. Joss and Millie did not see themselves as lesbians. Millie was in love with a man. When she first saw Joss' small, tightly wrapped chest under his shirt and double T-shirts, her only thought was that they could never have children together.

Not being able to have children; that was the significance of gender for Millie. The very idea of sex was also erased when Millie realized that the man she fell in love did not change or become someone else after the revelation. Millie may have fallen in love with a man, but the love she found was not dependent on gender. Their love

was the same. The two loved each other, beyond all sexual and gender-based categories. Dualities as male and female or homosexual and heterosexual become irrelevant to the love they feel. Their love challenges traditional ideas about love, sex and sexuality. It can not even be described as a ‘deviation’ from an alleged ‘normality’.<sup>2</sup>

*Trumpet* thematises gender distinction and the distinction between biological sex and social gender. On the thematic level, the novel becomes a metatext about a concrete problem, a novel that comments on a question. But it also breaks down the very idea of sex, gender and sexuality by the way in which Jackie Kay gives shape to the inherent conflict of the categories. She writes a discourse that moves beyond the polarities of male / female and homosexual / heterosexual, a discourse that only recognizes one possibility, the love between Joss and Millie. Thereby the text establishes an alternative normality of love and sexuality that moves beyond the polarities in which we usually define love, both socially, psychologically and biologically, perhaps even existentially.

At the same time as Jackie Kay discusses, visualizes, and thematises a problem, she deconstructs distinctions and definitions. It does not matter if she herself would call her novel ‘research’. We can in any case regard it a metatext that analyzes and comments on a phenomenon with the same relationship to the examined phenomenon as a scholarly study would have, but also as a deconstruction of cate-

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2 For further discussion of the novel I refer to Magnus Eriksson, *Porträtt. Essäer om diktare och musiker*. Växjö: Trolltrumma, 2016, s. 30f. The story of Joss Moody is in parts based on the life of the American jazz musician Billy Tipton (1914–1989).

gories like 'sex' and 'sexuality'. The latter is done through the consistent interaction between the text's formal and thematic levels. Jackie Kay chooses a subjective perspective, where she interprets love and sexuality in the only way that is valid for her protagonists. Through this duality of metatextual commentary and deconstruction through the work's inner structure, we can regard Jackie Kay's novel as artistic research both in a more traditional, metatextual sense and in a narrower internal meaning where ideas and perspectives emerge through the transcendence and transformation of norms and polarities. Thus the novel also gives an example of two different approaches to the idea of the literary text as research-in-itself.

In a critical discussion of the workings and significance of artistic research two Swedish visual artists, Emma Göransson and Roland Ljungberg, have argued for 'writing from within the creative process'.<sup>3</sup> They also argued that artistic research should 'write itself away' from the analytical distance of the critical text and 'out from academic tradition'.<sup>4</sup> Their article shows how this could be done. The upper side of the pages consist of the kind of 'reflective writing' about their own creative processes that the artists suggest as a method. The lower side of the pages consist, as a contrast, of a critical text of a supposedly more traditional kind. Central to their argument is the assumption that the 'reflective text' in its free flow of ideas and associations constitutes 'a searching for deeper levels of the cre-

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3 Emma Göransson and Roland Ljungberg: "Writing from Within the Creative Process", Gothenburg University: ArtMonitor, No. 8/2010, pp. 167–173.

4 Emma Göransson and Roland Ljungberg, p. 167 (in the Abstract).

ative process'.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of discussion about artistic research seems to be driven by the wish to get out of the Academy, while remaining on the university pay-rolls. The article's example of artistic research strikes me however as remarkably traditional. The reflective elements are descriptive, and the emotional motives and expressions of the creative process are described in surprisingly traditional and unambiguous imagery. The critical portion of the article then becomes a metatext explaining the relationship between criticism and reflection, which reflects a traditional hierarchy of the relationship between the analysis and the analyzed object. Although the associative flow is caught in the moment, it is subject to the same distanciation as all other writing. We cannot escape Paul Ricoeur's understanding of how the written text is referentially disrupted from its primary context, no matter how much the writers assert that their text moves beyond Western epistemology.<sup>6</sup>

A more rewarding example of how artistic research disrupts, or deconstructs, the concepts of traditional academic writing is given by the poet, translator, and scholar Helga Krook's dissertation in Creative Writing called *Minnesrörelser* (*Memory movements*).<sup>7</sup> It was put forward in 2015. The thesis consists of six separate volumes in a box. The volumes

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5 Emma Göransson and Roland Ljungberg, p. 171.

6 Paul Ricoeur, "Qu'est-ce qu'un Texte? Expliquer et comprendre", Rüdiger Bubner (Ed.): *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, II. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr. 1970, pp. 181–200.

7 Helga Krook, *Minnesrörelser*. Gothenburg: Autor, *Scriptures of Creative Writing*, No. 49, 2015.

are attributed to one writer respectively: Anja Nachaum, Elise Adrian, Greta Wiedrow, Hilde Lindroth, Linda Beel, and Helga Krook. The initials of the first five of the first name of the pseudonyms form the first name 'Helga', i.e. the name of the writer. Helga Krook writes six books, five of them under a pseudonym. In the volume that bears her own name she explains how the project is based on a 1930's material from Germany and Sweden that includes diaries, letters, interviews, and archive material. Krook also explains how she instructed a translator, a culture journalist, a critic, a poet, and an editor to 'take part of my material and my issues, identify with my biography and then write what they wanted on the basis of the material.'<sup>8</sup>

The material focused on childhood and upbringing, on eugenics and bilingualism and how family histories inevitably are interwoven with political and social history. It also raised philosophical questions about memory and forgetfulness as well as ethical questions of how guilt and responsibility are passed on from one generation to another.

This material could very well be analyzed in accordance with the demands in historical research of critical evaluation and contextualization. It could also be analyzed as language philosophy, as ethics, or as discourse. Helga Krook chooses to let her five alter egos write from different, fictitious starting points. Then she shows how 'Helga Krook' reacts to these descriptions, comments, and representations. Superficially the volume that bears the author's name might be regarded a metatext. Moreover, it is of course the same author that actually writes all the parts. It would however be to oversimplify the relationship to

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8 Helga Krook, the volume "Helga Krook", p. 12, my translation.

regard the volume that bears Helga Krook's own name as a mother-text commenting on the other volumes. The writer instead visualizes a plethora of possible relationships between the texts.

The result is an evocative and intellectually flexible, sometimes elusive, dialogue between the author-names and their writings in which associations, significations, relationships, and ideas are spread out and where we can not nail down a hierarchical relationship between commentary and what is commented on, between analysis and analysed. Nor can we immediately see how the volume 'Helga Krook' makes available knowledge about documented artistic projects, to quote the official Swedish definition of 'artistic research'.

On the other hand the project provides us with ideas, perspectives, and approaches to the understanding of documentary text, of the relationship between text, memory, and history and of the relation between oblivion and re-creation. These approaches emerge through the dialectical relationship between the texts. They are not clearly formulated or formalized results of a survey based on 'documented artistic projects.' The meta perspectives of the thesis thus emerge through association, criticism, and poetry. Its metatextuality is inherent in the text, a text that is art as much as artistic research.

Helga Krook's dissertation gives an example of how the hierarchical relationship between text and metatext is dissolved. The thesis is further of a mixed-genre character. It contains traditional academic commentary, but also poetry, aphorisms, biographical notes, and essays.

The essay as a genre might very well be the ideal form



for artistic research. Its self-reflective, self-critical, and investigative character show marked similarities with the artistic knowledge processes, writes the Swedish Literary Studies and Creative Writing scholar Gunnar D. Hansson. He concludes:

‘Methodologies, critical standpoints, and reflections can find points of support and inspiration from diverse sources. The essay is a border phenomenon. Other genres as the letter, the article, the scholarly text, the preface, the quote, the epic or the lyric short form are present in the essay. I believe that the same applies to the production of artistic knowledge and therefore is relevant to “artistic research”.’<sup>9</sup>

This argument invites us to see the essay as an artistic text that may function as metatext, but that also could be an example of art as research-in-itself. If the essay’s self-reflective and self-critical character are reminiscent of the production of artistic knowledge, it could also serve as examples of artistic forms of knowledge, not only occupy the hierarchical position of the metatext. The realization of artistic knowledge and aesthetic approaches might be formed by essayistic self-reflection, or implied by it, as well as manifestly thematized as metatext.

The view of the character and necessity of the metatext is a dividing line in the discussion of artistic research. In addition to this we have the likewise questionable idea of ‘artistic research’ being based on ‘documentation and analysis of artistic processes’ to quote the aforementioned definition. In practice this has meant an analysis of the artist’s own work and creative process. The artistic researcher thus

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<sup>9</sup> Gunnar D Hansson, ” Var slutar texten?, Göteborg: Autor, Scriptures of Creative Writing, No. 10, 2011, pp. 23-24, my translation.

becomes both artist and explorer of his own art. The idea reflects the intentional fallacy, i.e. the assumption that artists – in our case authors – possess unique and vital knowledge of the meaning and significance of their own work.

Both New Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, and Paul Ricœur's early hermeneutics show on the contrary that the author is a reader among other readers, although of his own work. The written text implies an inevitable distancing from the work's primary context, and from all allusions, incentives, and possible meanings linked to this. The text that the reader meets is a referentially disrupted structure of meaning. It is a text in a new context. Although the author may be closer to the context of the work's creation than other readers it does not overcome the ontological rift between the text and the world. Therefore, the law seems theoretically naive. Nevertheless the focus on artistic research as a metatextual comment on the authors own artistry remains as a political product.

The status of the metatext is a focal point in the discussion, but also the literary text's own character of research. Seeing *The Trial* as an exploration of social, psychological, and existential alienation is an excellent starting point for text analysis. But to see the novel as example of research from its thematisation only means that the scientific or scholarly metatext of alienation are replaced by a metafictional text. The hierarchical relationship between the analysis and the analyzed object remains.

*Trumpet* by Jackie Kay suggests another possibility for literature as research. It thematizes the issues of gender, sex, and sexuality in a way that makes it a metatext in relation to the categories with which we describe and analyze these

thought patterns. But Jackie Kay also breaks down the categories. She deconstructs the binary oppositions and definitions in her novel. Similarly, we can see how a novel like *Terra Nostra* by Carlos Fuentes, published in 1975, shows the relativity of our ordinary categories of experience by alternative histories, the a-chronological presentation of events, and the disruption of time, space, and the constraints of the human being as an acting subject without thematizing this criticism.

Are there any conclusions to be drawn from this? I would suggest that the metatext is not necessary in artistic research. I would also suggest that the literary text could be regarded research-as-such, but it does not need to take the position of a metatext to provide fruitful artistic research – whether the author intended this or not. I would also suggest that the essay in its self-reflective character and the ways in which it produces knowledge can be seen both as an artistic genre and a genre for artistic research. I would also suggest that we should not transcend the classic fallacy that is implied by the idea of artistic research as writers' analyses of their own work.

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Meine Teuersten! Herzlichen Dank für Eueren be-  
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das Geld. Mit dem Paket stimmte das. Es freut mich  
sehr, dass die Bekannten doch nicht vergessen trotzdem  
ich schon so lange weg bin. Von Annay habe ich eine  
Karte bekommen. Richtig ist <sup>aus</sup> dem Dank  
meine herzlichen Glückwünsche zu ihrem 10ten  
Tag. Wie ich sehr die, dritten Familie kommt sich  
kündigt. Ich bin sehr ungenügend auf alle die Zü-  
wächse. Wenn ich von dem Familienverband höre,  
muss ich an den Vater denken. Wie gefällt es ihm das?  
Und wie sieht es aus mit einem Pischer glück?  
Wie gern möchte ich Euch meine lieben wieder sehen!  
Wie habt Ihr Euch im Laufe der Zeit verändert?  
ebenso wie alles, was ich vor so langer Zeit verlassen  
habe. Herzlich grüßt und küßt Euch Euer Misch.

Jodkangie a Liai Van wiesch - mitsche