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What are the core competencies that be unfolded by artistic research? What are its interfaces with science and technological development? What can artistic research contribute to the transformation of societies? This paper outlines the history of artistic research in Europe as a counterpart to developments in Africa, inviting both sides to articulate axes of difference, similarity, contrast, and accordance.

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EXPOSURE TO THE UNKNOWN: ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN THE EUROPEAN SPHERE

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What are the core competencies that can be unfolded by artistic research? What are its interfaces with science and technological development? What can artistic research contribute to the transformation of societies? This paper outlines the history of artistic research in Europe as a counterpart to developments in Africa, inviting both sides to articulate axes of difference, similarity, contrast, and accordance.

As Achille Mbembe summed up the characteristics of colonial regimes, he referenced a number of phenomena and structures. Among them, all kinds of war to impose regimes on countries and their population, combined with the expropriation of land, the extraction of resources, and the coerced migration and forced labour in the slave trade.[1]

Other features were racism, segregated city spaces, forced resettlements, and racial distribution of agriculture spaces. On a cultural level, the colonised societies had foreign identities imprinted on them, oftentimes bound to a teleology that said: African societies are not yet the European societies that they are destined to become. The homogenisation move in this is evident.

Frantz Fanon started to describe the existential wounds and deformations generated by the colonial regimes, and, in a philosophic retrospect, these times appear as a long series of missed opportunities for respectful dialogue and exchange with other ways of thinking and of living.[2]

The colonial regimes are gone by now, *but* some of their structures linger on, in modified and in less open ways. In the postcolonial space, progress towards liberty could be achieved, but dictatorships also emerged or state and social structures disintegrated, giving way to yet another death culture that weighs on the living impulse.

Mbembe states all of this and connects his analysis with the demand for a new "Afropolitism" where the other human being is acknowledged in their fragility and vulnerability.[3] And many other voices also call for tremendous reconstruction works in the symbolic order, to create new spaces and identities, new distributions in the economic, cultural, and social field.

The instability encountered in so many places across sub-Saharan Africa is said to carry immense potential for devising "Afrotopias," for building new structures in society.[4] In all these processes, artistic research is supposed to play a major role, as the arts are, by definition, able to analyse and criticise, to open new horizons, and to create future scenarios. And this artistic research work could also be an axis of dialogue and exchange between African and European spaces.

In our European sphere, there is a growing realisation that the complex problems and questions in society call for contributions from the arts and for new dialogues between arts, sciences, humanities, and tech development.

Our networked societies are currently going through transformations in all their areas and layers: in their knowledge cultures, in their economic systems, in their media landscape, and in their social fabric. And artistic research is indispensable to co-design these processes.

However, artistic research can achieve this only if it can work autonomously in its own element and is not over-shaped by criteria from other fields. In the early 90s, artistic research was for some time subjected to criteria from the sciences and met with broad rejection in the European landscape, but in the course of a vivid discussion then came to be acknowledged as a genuine and autonomous way of research.

Artistic research works in its own languages. One example is the pictorial language of photography or the audio-visual language of film. Whereas the sciences and humanities think in the verbal language of concepts or in symbol systems, none of these languages can be reduced to the other; their arc of tension builds up, time and again, in different ways and their dialogue remains in constant motion.

Artistic research uses its own tools and methods; it follows its own laws and criteria. This is evident in artistic practice as well as in artistic reflection. Artistic practice means "tracing a trace": it articulates itself with the unknown, it orients itself while walking, it opens up new spaces and horizons. It is not searching for a way to

reach a known destination point. Artistic reflection is a way to let yourself in on your own craft, to compare yourself, to look at contexts, and to enter into a dialogue with other views.

In its autonomous profile, artistic research can contribute three competencies to the transformation process of society.[5]

The first competence is analysing and criticising

Artistic research illuminates the structures and processes of society. It questions ways of thinking, attitudes, and forms of behaviour. It analyses forms of perception and desire. It asks how the identity of individuals is built. It reflects on the media and the means of artistic work.

An example is the film *Mulholland Drive* by David Lynch. It analyses power structures in the Hollywood film industry; it shows how they work in the individual psyche and, at the same time, it reflects on the medium of film.

In its analyses, artistic research puts us at a distance from the self-evident—it makes familiar things unknown and thus allows us to see them anew, to rediscover them.

The second competence is projecting and designing

Artistic research opens up new horizons. It sets up new spaces. It creates new meanings. It builds cultural and aesthetic identities. It projects new ways of being in the world. It creates a knowledge of the possible. It thinks in scenarios.

These scenarios can be whole utopias or dystopias. An example is the film *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott—an intense meditation on time, mortality, and what is specifically human.

The third competence is drifting and navigating

The transformation of society often takes the form of a turbulent current. That is, we encounter an unknown future that is not already determined in advance by the laws of the past. In breaks and leaps, unforeseen spaces of possibility, chance and risk, adventure opens up.

Art has experience with movements of this kind. It constantly deals with the unknown. It is constantly in dialogue with something that calls for form. In its daily experience, art builds up a knowledge of how we can move in open systems, in turbulent currents.

In its autonomous profile, artistic research can interact with other knowledge cultures. As two different ways of determining and shaping the world, art and science meet in common productivity. In this convergence, however, it is precisely the differences that are exciting, and that are precious in cooperation. From Arts@CERN: "Far from commenting on scientific facts, illustrating science or communicating advanced technologies, art provides a framework for discussing the complexities that underly our contemporary scientific culture."[6]

Artistic research opens traces and achieves results that can be picked up and developed by science. One example is the "Strandbeesters," filigree and animal-like machines, which react to the weather and move with the wind. They were created by Dutch artist Theo Jansen "without order" and then served NASA as a template for the development of landing vehicles.

Artistic research and tech development can join hands in their approach and in their mind-set. Jaron Lanier, the father of virtual reality, recollects: "When my friends and I built the first virtual machines, their purpose was to make the world creative, expressive, empathic and interesting."[7] An artistic inspiration.

Artistic Research can be the concrete impulse for tech development. Out of their artistic research work with sounds, the industrial band Throbbing Gristle has developed a new sound system that was required so that they could play their music. And so forth. Artistic research has *never ever* seen technology as a given instrument but as an open space of possibilities that it can co-design.

So, arts, sciences, humanities, and tech development enter into new productive dialogues. If they cooperate at eye level, they achieve novel results and can assume their responsibilities in society and for society in an efficient way. One of the areas where this is to be seen is urban development.

In its motion drift, the city space reflects and co-designs the transformation of societies in all their areas and layers. And it is the space in which we design how we want to live and live together.

Artistic research opens up new ways to read the city space, to look at the built environment, and to analyse the very production of urban space, on a macro level as well as on the level of individual existence.

And artistic research designs new ways to build and to be in a built space. On both sides, artistic research can cooperate with social sciences, with architecture, urban planning, and a whole lot of other disciplines.

And, as African and European city spaces are very different, this would be a privileged area to start cooperation of this kind and to learn from each other.

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Notes

1 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

2 Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*.

3 Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*.

4 Sarr, *Afrotopia*.

5 On the competences of artistic research cf. Winter, 'Artistic Research in Its Impact on the Urban Space'.

6 cf. Heuer and Bello, 'CERN: Great art for great science'.

7 Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget*, 33.

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