

Contra Gnosis: A Con-Text on the Role of Research in Hans Danuser's Work

Jörg Scheller

Artistic research is a twenty-first century buzzword. In artistic discourse and debates on education policy, it has become almost a battle cry. Accordingly, Henk Borgdorff's definitive work on artistic research has borrowed its title from Immanuel Kant: *The Conflict of the Faculties*. It can be said, simplifying somewhat, that one side in the conflict is fighting for the autonomy of the (fine) arts—that is to say, is insisting on having its own rules distinct from those of science, politics, and society. The philosopher Christoph Menke summed up this attitude as follows: art typifies a “freedom not in the social, but from the social.”¹ The other side stands for artistic research as a genuinely interactive, collaborative, dialogical, socially rooted, and ultimately *useful* way of making art: embedded art, so to speak. Art-as-research understood in this way is part of a growing reculturalization of the arts and sees the freedom of making art as analogous to the freedom of the sciences. It regards the autonomy of art as a well-meaning myth or a bourgeois fetish.

In the often heated debate over artistic research, it can sometimes seem as if this research were something entirely new. The flurry of activity surrounding education policy skirmishes that are ultimately concerned with sources of funding, accreditation, legitimization, or power relationships conceals the fact that artists have always (also) done research—long before they were imprinted with a seal of recognition for this work, with their projects being awarded European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System points. The philosopher of culture Dieter Lesage put it pointedly: “Art that does not operate with research is bad art. [...] The institutions that now offer courses of study in artistic research *alongside* courses of study in art are making an enormous mistake.”² Because, taking up Lesage's point, when advanced art sets out for new shores, when it takes an interest in knowledge and expands horizons, when it addresses questions, problems, and challenges of more than just (auto)biographical relevance, and communicates its results (by means of art), it necessarily becomes research. This form of artistic research *avant la lettre* characterizes Hans Danuser's oeuvre.

It is not (or not just) that Danuser advocates a dialogical approach, cooperates with natural and social scientists, and was a visiting professor at the Collegium Helveticum of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH). Artistic research does not depend on scientific support; nor does it necessarily have to involve working in or with a collective obligatory. On the occasion of this retrospective, it is appropriate to recall the early phase of Danuser's artistic career in the 1980s, since both his own personal approach to research and the general features of a brand of artistic research that truly emphasized the *artistic* were crystallized during that period. Or, as Danuser remarks in an interview: “I have always believed in the image.”

Research is inseparable from the concept of the new or of the implicit that has not yet been made explicit. Research unearthing the known and familiar would be a contradiction in terms. The new, in turn, is closely related to the taboo. Wherever the truly new is being explored, controversies almost inevitably ignite—not only of a scholarly, but also above all of an ethical and moral nature. When Hans Danuser was working on his cycle *In Vivo* (1980–89), as a photographer scouting out the inner lives of nuclear power plants and chemistry laboratories, he touched on such taboos. Nuclear energy, genetic research, and the chemical industry, along with the usually unspoken-of areas of pathology and anatomy, are phenomena that most of his contemporaries knew only from the consumer side: electricity, medicines, therapies.

Danuser did not just call *attention* to these highly inaccessible yet omnipresent areas of modern societies. Newspaper articles or television reporting could do a better job of that. Danuser

presented the indexically grounded (through analog photography) and subjectively interpreted *atmospheres* of these places, and offered new perspectives on them. Even more than that—or, more precisely, even less than that—his photographs show that some things cannot be shown, that something cannot be represented in the representation, that the photographs always conceal as well as reveal. As Urs Stahel wrote of *In Vivo* in 1989, it is striking “that in several [...] photographs *one hardly sees anything at all*,” that Danuser “fades the so-called factual into the white” or allows it “to sink into the black.”³ Negation hardly ever plays a role in traditional documentaries or reportages. Danuser, by contrast, produces images that call themselves into question. But not only themselves.

Looking at the photographs of *In Vivo*, it is almost impossible to understand oneself as a sovereign subject that exercises control and mastery over that which it has created or that which was created by others. This is by no means a self-evident realization. Pictures, especially those created using single-point perspective, play an important role in the secular story of the self-empowerment of humanity, according to Martin Heidegger: “The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture. From now on the word ‘picture’ means: the collective image of representing production [...] the unlimited process of calculation, planning, and breeding.”⁴ Danuser’s photographs can be understood as a critique of such pictorial practices. Whereas, on the one hand, he opens up difficult-to-access spaces to the public eye, on the other hand, in his photographs he closes off the proverbial *unlimited possibilities* and the expansion of areas of control that people in the secular West have expected of the new since the beginning of the modern era. In his photographs, the supposed overcoming of taboos never completely emerges from the shadow of the taboo. Whether it is the production of gold, laser research, or temporary storage of nuclear waste, the photographs of *In Vivo* are dominated by the un-thought, the unavailable, the imponderable.

We might draw a parallel at this point with Danuser’s most recent works: his *Type Images*. Superficially, the two have nothing to do with one another. But, for example, when Danuser writes counting-out rhymes in colorful letters on the walls of the administration building of the Department of Health of the Canton of Zurich, he points, albeit in a more playful and more cheerful way, but nevertheless with comparable force, to the tension between control and imponderability, the open and the closed. Counting-out rhymes are, on the one hand, children’s games and, on the other, basic techniques of control, which can never truly conceal their own inadequacy and provisional nature.

Here, artistic research comes into *play*, in the truest sense of the word. In essence, it is distinguished by the fact that it shows the limits of (supposedly) sovereign, controlled and controlling, informed and informing, exhaustively explaining and intersubjectively verifying science. It points out the blind spots but does not pretend, in the manner of a miracle healer, to make the blind see—fading into the white, sinking into the black ...

In short, modern science was the discipline of the *sovereign* individual who subjugated nature and transformed it into a white cube that promised a completely transparent view over the phenomena assembled within it. Artistic research properly understood, by contrast, is the in- or interdisciplinary of the skeptical individual who dreams not of the conquest of the world and of total transparency, but rather lifts the veil of his or her surroundings in order to discover additional veils beneath it. In doing so, it never overlooks the makeup of the veils themselves but rather relates

them to the unveiled. Because much of modern art is inherently drawn to acts of deconstruction, such art can be understood as a corrective to those systems of thinking or, rather, “systems of opinion,” that do not question their own premises and transform into formalized “schools of thought.” Ludwik Fleck, who coined both terms in his classic *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* of 1935 (translated as *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*), spoke of “a closed, harmonious system within which the logical origin of individual elements can no longer be traced. [...] They are not mere aggregates of partial propositions but as harmonious holistic units exhibit those particular stylistic properties which determine and condition every single function of cognition.”⁵ Innovation needs vexation. Modern art specializes in this role. That vexation has become convention in liberal societies is another story.

If one considers against this backdrop the ideas that circulate about, for example, genetic research—clinically clean, professionally organized, strictly controlled laboratories, on the one hand, and menacing chimeras, monsters, and spectacular accidents on the other—it becomes clear what essentially distinguishes Danuser’s photographs. In works that are as unspectacular as they are portentous and atmospheric—including *Strangled Body* (1995) and *Frozen Embryo* (1998–2000)—he hybridizes two kinds of “schools of thought” and “systems of opinion”: on the one hand, the common self-image and self-perception of scientists and institutions and, on the other, the popular imagination about what might be going on behind closed doors. He opens up a space between these two poles—a space that will be discussed later. This hybridization of the established, this opening of spaces, is a basic impulse not only of the modern arts but also of research. Not coincidentally and with some justification, the curator of *documenta 13* (2012), Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, once called (advanced) art basic research.⁶

Art as research or artistic research proves that a changed *representation* of the world is already an integral part of research, since each new representation is preceded by a new *perception* of the world. Anyone who is at one with the world, anyone to whom it seems entirely familiar, will not research it. Only those who perceive it afresh will do so. The work of the photographer, which Vilém Flusser once compared to the gesture of philosophizing, since in both cases the goal is to analyze and interpret a detail of the world,⁷ is by no means limited to a *representation* of the world.

Consequently, artistic research can be understood as research in the original and proper sense: not as a walk through a brightly lit white cube, in which fully developed photographs are presented, but rather as experimentation in a darkroom full of imponderables. The scholar of science Bruno Latour remarks in this context: “While Science had certainty, coldness, aloofness, objectivity, distance and necessity, Research appears to have all the opposite characteristics: it is uncertain; open-ended; immersed in many lowly problems of money, instruments, and know-how; unable to differentiate as yet between hot and cold, subjective and objective, human and nonhuman.”⁸ For Latour, therefore, research *precedes* science. Science is the formalization and standardization of that which idiosyncratic, unconventional research unearths.

Research Is a Jungle, Science Is a Park

Long before artistic research became a watchword, when Hans Danuser was gaining access as a layman to the aforementioned institutions and companies and transforming his impressions

not in a documentary or scientific way but in a decidedly *artistic* fashion, both his methods and his results corresponded to Latour's understanding of research, and also to the more formal, normative criteria that Borgdorff cites as the *conditio sine qua non* of artistic research: expansion of knowledge, new research in and through works of art, addressing important questions, documentation, and dissemination.⁹ It was artists such as Danuser who paved the way for artistic research, without really trying to do so. They were guided by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, not by ready-made methods or "handbooks" published on artistic research. They entered the jungle before it had even been mapped.

Danuser began his career in advertising and fashion photography. He never studied art. Presumably for that very reason, he developed an independent, unprejudiced eye, and he has retained it. Research thrives on such *external* impulses and vexations. Educational institutions, in turn, tend towards over-structuring and over-organization: they strive for innovation and yet cannot help but conventionalize this striving. Danuser had the advantage that he did not first have to force his questions and concerns through the filter of a bureaucratic apparatus. Whether he was developing photographic techniques such as the so-called matograph, photographing corpses laid out in the pathology department, or cooperating with the architect Peter Zumthor and diverse scientific institutes, he did it as the photographer Hans Danuser, not as a representative of an institution. The slow, focused, concentrated, and independent work that is typical of Danuser is probably only conceivable under those conditions.

An exchange of letters between Danuser and Agfa-Gevaert AG from 1992 demonstrates how free artistic research on the one hand, and scientific and industrial research on the other hand, differ from each other, but also that it is this process of *exchange* that causes their differences to widen further. Danuser wanted to tint the coating of the photographic paper *before* it was covered with black-and-white emulsion. To develop such a complex process, he needed partners with adequate financial resources and technical infrastructure. He wrote in his request to Agfa that "this would open up new, fundamental possibilities for art photography." But the company rejected him: too expensive, too involved, too specialized. In addition, "an intervention in such an automatic and very critical procedure is absolutely unthinkable." At least since the boom in third-party funding, even research projects at universities usually have to prove their large-scale relevance and justify the expected benefits. Danuser, by contrast, gave himself the privilege of escaping this utilitarian logic—and ultimately convinced his partners in industry to join him in developing the matograph, which was included in the Swiss Trademark Register in 1996.¹⁰

Whereas artistic research at universities can have the reputation of applying art and making it useful—significantly this first became a political issue in Europe in the wake of the Bologna reforms, which sought to bring the universities closer to business—Danuser's works, or at least the finished ones, are all clearly located in the realm generally known as "free art." Naturally, this term is simplistic, problematic, and misleading, but it does signal a distinctly different direction, a different aspiration, to that of *embedded art*. Art is not free but rather the (utopian) embodiment of freedom—and freedom does not fall from the (revolutionary) sky. Its development is dependent on protected spaces and incubators. That, and only that, can guarantee "free" art.

In Danuser's works, the process of creation may play out in the applied field; it may be based on a number of technical, political, or social issues; it may depend on fundraising, sponsors,

clients, institutions, or partners from industry, but in the end it produces artefacts that are committed to the openness of the aesthetic experience. Danuser's oeuvre is thus exemplary of an artistic research that does not succumb to the temptation to pledge itself to science or fuse with its contexts, so to speak, and therefore of an artistic research that insists on its own laws precisely as it enters into contact and exchange with the sciences and other realms of life.

It is, however, also exemplary of the concept of research that Latour advocates: that research is, as it were, a nomad or a joker and cannot be pinned down to a discipline, an institution, or a milieu. While systematics may be a common denominator of all forms of research, systematics are not limited to science. Pop musicians do research when they systematically develop new sounds. Painters do research when they systematically explore new forms of representation. Beekeepers do research when they systematically experiment with new forms of beekeeping. Danuser's work, too, has all the ingredients of research: the searching, questioning, and scrutinizing, the planning, the organizing, the experimenting, the systematizing, the presenting, the commenting, and the documenting. However, Danuser deliberately stops short of the scientific program, the binding, intersubjective *conclusio*. Wherever he is making use of technical or scientific methods or working in their institutions, technology and science are always subordinated to a genuinely artistic expression. That is also true of his project *The Last Analog Photograph*, which he initiated with Reinhard Nesper at the Institute of Inorganic Chemistry at the ETH Zurich in 2007; photographs from it are published here for the first time.¹¹

This self-confident juxtaposition of the (fine) arts with their scientific counterparts, which are supposedly superior because they can be quantified and implemented in non-symbolic areas, is especially important today, because the arts sometimes put themselves in the labyrinth of the practical necessity of art as science, art as activism, art as politics, art as therapy, art as investment, art as stimulus for the creative industry, without keeping a hold of the Ariadne's thread that would help them to emerge from the labyrinth again. The open—but non-arbitrary—quality of the aesthetic is always an important corrective and a particular challenge when discourses end, when that deceptive feeling of certainty arises that your aim and your methods are good, right, and unquestionable. Who would want to object to art benefiting society? The art historian Claire Bishop observes aptly in this context: "And so we slide into a sociological discourse—what happened to aesthetics? This word has been highly contentious for several decades now, since its status—at least in the Anglophone world—has been rendered untouchable through the academy's embrace of social history and identity politics, which have repeatedly drawn attention to the way in which the aesthetic masks inequalities, oppressions and exclusions (of race, gender, class, and so on)."¹² Yet the opposite is the case. In the fine arts, but also in pop culture and in the places where they overlap, it is *precisely* the openness of the aesthetic that permits different groups and individuals to formulate and communicate their concerns and interests.

With this in mind, it pays to look back to the eighteenth century. In 1795, Friedrich Schiller wrote in his *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters): "In the midst of the fearful kingdom of forces, and in the midst of the sacred kingdom of laws, the aesthetic impulse to form is at work, unnoticed, on the building of a third joyous kingdom of play and of semblance, in which man is relieved of the shackles of circumstance, and released from all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and in the moral sphere."¹³ Under pressure from the modern "differentiation of [...] spheres of value,"¹⁴ from the

increasing division of labour, and from the excesses of the French Revolution, Schiller sought for a way to turn the “natural man” back into a man “ennobled ... as Idea.” The true revolution of society cannot occur, in his view, if “egotism,” “unbelief,” “lethargy, and [...] depravation of character” make total experience impossible.¹⁵ Since religion no longer possesses its traditional influential powers, art is now in demand, he argues: it allows man to experience wholeness insofar as it makes the synthesis of imagination and reason possible, and illustrates to the self-determined person that the uninhibited development of his or her talents can also help bring about a development of society: “For, to mince matters no longer, man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays.*”¹⁶

And suddenly the circle closes, from Schiller by way of art, aesthetics, and artistic research, to the work of Hans Danuser. Schiller’s synthesis of reason and imagination correlates to the synthesis of photographic objectivity—which, it goes without saying, is never absolute and is always relational—and open aesthetic interpretation in photographs like those of *In Vivo*. The tension that Schiller describes between the cruelty of nature and society, on the one hand, and free play, on the other, correlates to the Janus face of Danuser’s *Type Images*, in which control and systematics are intertwined with the playful, childish, and even foolish—the last being understood to be a “fragile balancing on the seams of meaning.”¹⁷ If not in a semantic sense, at least in a structural one, research of the sort Danuser does represents an intermediate position between art and science, just as for Schiller, aesthetics represents an intermediate position between nature and society.

Danuser’s five-part series *Harlequin’s Death* (1982) can be interpreted as a key work in this context. The combination of a staged photograph showing a young man covered with blood lying on asphalt at night, photographs from *In Vivo*, and images of a squad of police in the city of Zurich during the youth unrest of 1980–82, points to the constitutive role of the fool in culture and society. Like (free) art and basic research, the fool occupies the position of a mediator who is potentially anarchic and self-referential. Cultures without fools are cruel cultures. They do not permit any non-identical, non-utilitarian spaces in which one can negotiate, explore, provoke, and play without concrete results. If the fool dies out, only the serious and a rigid logic of the either-or are left to reign. It is as if Danuser wanted the subtext of all his works to be: do not believe you have to choose folly or seriousness, art or science, critique or aesthetic, context or autonomy. They all have their times and their spaces, they condition each other, build each other up, permeate each other, replace each other. Oscillate between park and jungle! Have the courage to be ambivalent and ambiguous! Do not allow the gnostic in you to prevail! But do not forget that art, the court jester of free societies, is primarily what makes this simultaneity or succession possible.

1 Christoph Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), 14.

2 Dieter Lesage, “Akademisierung,” in Jens Badura et al., ed., *Künstlerische Forschung: Ein Handbuch* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2015), 221–23, esp. 223.

3 Urs Stahel, “In vivo,” in *Hans Danuser: In vivo; 93 Fotografien*, exh. cat. (Aarau: Aargauer Kunsthaus, 1989), n.p.

4 Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in idem, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57–73, esp. 71.

5 Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed. Thaddeus J. Treun and Robert K. Merton, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Treun (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 37–38.

6 Interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/documenta-leiterin-carolyn-christov-bakargiev-ueber-die-politische-intention-der-erdbeere-1.1370514> (accessed March 2, 2017).

7 Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 106–07.

8 Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 20.

9 Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), 53.

10 *Matography* project, work in progress, part I, 1993–96, together with the research departments of Novartis Basel and Bayer Werke / Agfa-Gevaert, Leverkusen. See also Juri Steiner in *Hans Danuser: Delta*, exh. cat. Kunsthaus Zürich (Baden: Lars Müller, 1996); Ulrich Gerster in *Hans Danuser: AT*, Nidwaldner Hefte zur Kunst 1, exh. cat. (Stans: Nidwaldner Museum, 1997).

11 Project proposal *Hans Danuser—The Last Analog Photograph* at the Institute of Inorganic Chemistry at ETH Zurich, together with Prof. Reinhard Nesper, Max Broszio, Matthias Herrmann, Florian Wächter, et al., as part of the photo cycle *Hans Danuser: Landscape in Motion*, 2007–2016, part 3 of the *Erosion* project.

12 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 17.

13 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 215.

14 Uwe Schimank, *Theorien gesellschaftlicher Differenzierung* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2007), 26; Schimank describes Weber’s “view of social differentiation as a pluralization of ‘spheres of value,’ each with its own rationality.” Cf. Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der “Geist” des Kapitalismus*, ed. Klaus Lichtblau (Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 2000).

15 Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (see note 13), 27.

16 *Ibid.*, 107.

17 Michael Glasmeier and Lisa Steib, *Albernheit* (Hamburg: textem, 2011), 18.

Hans Danuser
IN VIVO
93 photographs

Lars Müller Publishers

I
Photographed
in atomic power plants,
reactor research facilities
and interim storage
of highly radioactive waste

- I 1 cooling tower basin
- I 2 shield
- I 3 cooling tower
- I 4 overalls
- I 5 cooling tower
- I 6 lock
- I 7 nuclear reactor
- I 8 shield
- I 9 barrels
- I 10 shield
- I 11 passage
- I 12 interim storage
- I 13 shield
- I 14 passage
- I 15 shield
- I 16 waste

II
Photographed
in a gold foundry,
a gold refinery
and a bank vaults

- II 1 raw gold bars
- II 2 tongs
- II 3 slag
- II 4 crucible
- II 5 raw gold
- II 6 fine gold
- II 7 molds
- II 8 furnace
- II 9 standard bars
- II 10 molds
- II 11 casting
- II 12 casting
- II 13 granulate
- II 14 standard bars
- II 15 protective grid
- II 16 standard bars
- II 17 standard bars
- II 18 protective grid

III
Photographed
in anatomy and pathology
instruction
and research laboratories

- III 1 aprons
- III 2 room
- III 3 head
- III 4 passage
- III 5 brain
- III 6 table
- III 7 heart
- III 8 dissecting room
- III 9 table
- III 10 torso
- III 11 preservation

IV
Photographed
in laboratories for
nuclear fusion
and laser research

- IV 1 deflecting mirror
- IV 2 protective barrier
- IV 3 passage
- IV 4 protective barrier
- IV 5 krypton gas laser
- IV 6 steel waves
- IV 7 free electronic laser
- IV 8 firing canal
- IV 9 laser beam
- IV 10 room
- IV 11 target room
- IV 12 beams
- IV 13 experimental layout

V
Photographed
in ophthalmology
and otorhinolaryngology clinics
and research laboratories

- V 1 eye
- V 2 infusion
- V 3 ear
- V 4 operating theatre
- V 5 lifelines
- V 6 operating area
- V 7 floor
- V 8 larynx
- V 9 nose

VI
Photographed
in pharmacology
and chemistry research
laboratories,
analysis and production

- VI 1 magnetic resonance
imaging system
- VI 2 feeding troughs
- VI 3 protective barrier
- VI 4 mixing vessel
- VI 5 experimental layout
with brain slices
in vitro
- VI 6 panel
- VI 7 panel
- VI 8 experimental layout
in vivo
- VI 9 panel
- VI 10 experimental layout
with the brain in vivo
- VI 11 ampoules
- VI 12 experimental layout
in vivo
- VI 13 labyrinth
- VI 14 mouse

VII
Photographed
in pharmacology
and agronomy genetic
engineering
and biotechnology
laboratories

- VII 1 tobacco plant
- VII 2 container
- VII 3 gene storage
- VII 4 embryo
- VII 5 incubator
- VII 6 deoxyribonucleic acid
(DNA)
- VII 7 ice
- VII 8 ice
- VII 9 ice
- VII 10 glass ampoules
- VII 11 ultrasound image
- VII 12 ice

Hans Danuser
Born in 1953 in Chur, Switzerland

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Tel. +49 551 49 60 60 / Fax +49 551 49 60 649
mail@steidl.de
steidl.de

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LANDSCHAFT IN BEWEGUNG (LANDSCAPE IN MOTION) / Moving Desert,
work in progress, Part III of the EROSION project
Analog photograph, gelatin silver on baryta paper
Several bodies of works
Detail of image no. A1
Paper 40 x 50 cm, image 21 x 46 cm
In the artist's personal collection

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