Adelheid Mers creates poetic and analytic diagrammatically presented interpretations of art institutions, exhibitions, public lectures, studio visits, and written texts. An associate professor of Arts Administration and Policy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Mers teaches across the topics of grant writing, curatorial practice, cultural and media policy, and arts economies. She graduated with an MFA from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and attended the University of Chicago on a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). A recipient of grants from the British Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Illinois Arts Council, among others, she has exhibited and curated widely and serves on the editorial boards of several journals. In 2007, she was voted teacher of the year at SAIC.
Jacelyn Kee: In your talk at the Shapiro Symposium, “Critique as Creative Technique,” what did you hope to bring to attention?

Adelheid Mers: By presenting and contextualizing an example of a diagram-aided conversation with an artist, I wanted to discuss how artists and designers have evolved a specific and generative way to speak about their practices. A generative conversation propels work forward. This mode of conversation has emerged from the arena of the studio. There artists may freely intersect with, but do not rely on, adopting modes of thinking and speaking from the sciences or humanities; neither do they require these neighbors in academia to speak for them, while they may still be quite interested in conversing with them. What I wanted to bring to attention is that there exist not only art modes of making, but also of thinking and speaking.

JK: How do you see “research,” in relation to the history of art education, as coming to have a place in art schools like SAIC?

AM: Two poles frame this broad discourse, one institutional, the other immanent to practice. The institutional variant saw art education emerging from a field of vocational training into the larger family of academia, where it was then (and continues to be) put upon to contend with a demand for standards. In response, university art departments—and later also independent art schools—are aligning with those disciplines already at the table. This discourse is framed differently in various parts of the world, but always revolves around accreditation and, with that, access to funding contingent on formal evaluation. As Howard Singerman states about the emergence of art departments in universities, “the model, clearly, is independent scientific research, the production of new knowledge in new fields . . . Because he researches and because that research is pure, the artist has a fundable place in the university.” The second conversation is driven by artists, but also by sociologists, media theorists, and philosophers, and focuses on art modes of thinking. Henk Borgdorff calls it “research-in-the arts.” He characterizes it as an immanent and performative perspective that “seeks to articulate . . . embodied knowledge throughout the creative process.” Between these poles, other frames are being worked out, variously named research for, through, or about art.

JK: Where does research sit in the making and thinking of contemporary art?

AM: Often the term sits uneasily, mainly because the placement along the spectrum outlined in the question above is not always carefully determined. Artists’ studies are likened to laboratories, where materials are developed and forms are worked out through iterations. Inspiration is found in publications and museums, work is discussed at symposia. But what if artists supplement research in geography, or draw on biology to engage in political debates? If border-crossing activities and their

A matrix by Mers based on a conversation with artist Anna Friz.
standard modes of conduct are laid bare, the terms become quite useful in furthering the work at hand, by establishing collaborations and allegiances, or clarifying methods.

JK: When studying the lexicon that a sampling of SAIC MFA students used to describe their artistic processes, I noticed a tendency to draw from their own experience and to create their own mixed metaphors using words from a variety of disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, the physical sciences, and, certainly, art history. How do you think this fits in with the “critique” component of contemporary art education?

AM: A perspective on nonacademic professional discourse that seems to closely mirror artistic conversation conventions was proposed by Donald A. Schön in the 1980s. It claims a central place for verbal reflection by and among practitioners. Drawing on the work of Michael Polanyi (philosophy of science), Christopher Alexander (architecture), Chauncey Ballard (management theory), and others, Schön introduced forms of situated, professional assessment (not exclusively, but also, in the arts) by describing a process he terms “reflection-in-action.” Among other tools, “reflection-in-action” uses generative metaphors and analogies from a repertoire of previously experienced situations to access “tacit knowledge-in-action” that is operative in otherwise “indeterminate zones of practice.” For “teachers, managers, engineers, or artists—reflection-in-action is the ‘prose’ they speak as they display and develop the ordinary artistry of their professional lives.” The “ordinary lives” of SAIC students include exposure to many disciplines, which then are expected to figure in their critiques. Under my assessment of critique, it becomes important to emphasize to students the specific type of discourse—reflection-in-action—they are inviting the other disciplines to enter into.

JK: What are some of the things you noticed in your interviews with artists on how they work? How did these insights take shape in your own work?

AM: Emerging from my own preferences in regard to both perceiving (input) and presenting (output) that move between reading, interpretation, visualization, and various material practices, cognitive diversity has become an area of interest. In a way, I think this term is a good candidate to replace the ongoing focus on discussions about interdisciplinarity. In talking to artists about how they work, I am able to explore many varieties of cognitive engagement. Physical awareness, movement, methods to focus or unfocus attention, engagement with neighboring disciplines (for example, poetry or music) all figure large. Very observable are stages of reflectivity. More recent practitioners may cast about more (not aware of all they know, but performing it already) than artists with much experience, or also PhDs, who, at the other end of the spectrum, have explicitly decoded their own ways of working while also contextualizing their practices.

JK: Where do you see the place of “research” in the context of your set of interests?

AM: Clearly, there has long existed a tension around the question: Can artists make art knowingly? By introducing a description of critique as a creative technique, as a way of knowing, we may be able to abandon longstanding, traditional dichotomies between intuitive making and rational thinking as they pertain to the arts, and instead focus more on artists’ modes of thinking that bridge perception and reason in action, in more than one way. Thinking about artistic research, particularly in its guise as research-in-the-arts, can aid in this endeavor.

This interview fell into place serendipitously over Adelheid Mers’s Art Economies class. My appreciation goes to Mers, who responded swiftly and ever so generously with copies of write-ups she had done for a conference, diagrams she had been working on, and, thereafter, an interview by email.

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