

## Research Acts in Art Practice

Graeme Sullivan

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

This article argues that art practice is a creative and critical form of human engagement that can be conceptualized as research. Conceptions of research are critiqued that raise questions about the purposes of artistic and educational inquiry and the institutional and political influences that shape them. Notions of arts-based research, arts-informed research, and practice-based research are compared according to their policies, practices and methods. In framing art practice as research, various research acts are described that circumscribe the forms, agencies and actions that are part of the theoretical, structural, interpretive and critical traditions found in the visual arts. These research acts are creative and critical; feature complex forms of imagination and intellect; and make use of processes and procedures that draw from many traditions of inquiry. Consequently, it is argued that art practice can be conceptualized as a form of research that can be directed towards a range of personal and public ends.

A positivist legacy expounded so clearly as a research maxim or a curriculum mantra asserts, *if you don't know where you're going, how do you know when you get there?* The assumption is that clearly defined intentions, whether expressed as hypotheses, research questions, lesson objectives, or standard statements, position the purpose of educational acts within the context of what is already known. Consequently outcomes can be readily assessed according to the conceptual limits imposed as this gives a measure of utility in comparing the new with the old. Knowledge in this sense is expressed as a difference in 'degree' or quantity and is compared to other things we know. This is how we construct probable theory. However, as many in the arts and the sciences have argued, the formal specification of intended outcomes does not necessarily mean that valuable, unintended consequences are not possible—one just has to be open to possibility and curiosity. With this in mind, an interpretivist perspective would assert that *if you don't know where you're going, then it is best to surround a problem in order to solve it*. Here, research and educational inquiry are based on the assumption that knowledge emerges from an analytic and holistic account through consensus and corroboration where patterns and themes are the elements used to represent complex realities. Knowledge in this sense is explored as a difference in 'kind' or quality, where insights are characterized by their particularity. This is how we construct plausible theory.

But, how do we construct theories of 'possibility'? An arts researcher would more than likely subscribe to the view that *if you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there.*<sup>1</sup> Rather than seeing inquiry

Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to the author at the Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, Box 104, New York, NY, 10027. E-mail: gs354@columbia.edu

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<sup>1</sup>Versions of these three aphorisms about purpose and direction can loosely be attributed to the curriculum theorist, Ralph Tyler, feminist Gloria Steinem, and the late Beatle, George Harrison.

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as a linear procedure or an enclosing process, research acts can also be interactive and reflexive whereby imaginative insight is constructed from a creative and critical practice. Oftentimes what is known can limit the possibility of what is not and this requires a creative act to see things from a new view. An inquiry process involving interpretive and critical acts is then possible as new insights confirm, challenge or change our understanding. If an agreed goal of research is the creation of new knowledge, then it should be agreed that this can be achieved by following different, yet complementary pathways. What is common is the attention given to systematic and rigorous inquiry, yet in a way that emphasizes what is possible, for to 'create and critique' is a research act that is very well suited to arts practitioners, be they artists, teachers or students.

In recent years art educators have been exploring these research approaches as the arts disciplines try to claim a foothold in an information-based economy of educational rhetoric. Art educators, however, learned long ago that efforts to isolate human behavior into discrete, observable chunks did not capture the complexity of what it is to come to know something. Following procedures that clearly describe where you are going and what outcomes might be expected is a rational plan for pursuing questions that build on the stock of existing knowledge. Although it is readily acknowledged that hypotheses need to be measurable and testable they need not lack imagination. Research methods, therefore not only need to be systematic and rigorous, but also inventive so as to reveal the rich complexity of the imaginative intellect as it is encountered and enacted and within individual, social and cultural settings.

Art education researchers responded to these changing demands and the search for more adequate methods resulted in the development of a slew of new research practices that take many forms. These approaches are being applied at the level of schooling, where research investigates learning in classrooms and represents it in all its artistic complexity, and in higher education, where the role of art practice within the academic research community is being questioned. Various terms are used to describe these developments, such as *arts-based research* (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Eisner, 1993), *arts-informed research* (Cole, Neilson, Knowles & Luciani, 2004), *Arttlography* (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004), and *practice-based research* (Candlin, 2000; Frayling, 1997).

These orientations focus on different constituencies. Arts-based researchers, for instance, are generally interested in improving our understanding of schooling and how the arts can reveal important insights about learning and teaching. Arts-informed researchers, Artographers, and the like, have a similar interest in schools, community and culture, but their focus is on developing the practitioner-researcher

who is capable of imaginative and insightful inquiry. Practice-based research (also known as *practice-led research*) is a term more commonly used in visual arts programs in higher education where studio art practice is being reconceptualized as questions about degree programs beyond the MFA are addressed. These constituent interests also reflect a geographic emphasis, with arts-based and arts-informed research in its various forms being taken up with enthusiasm by arts educators within the United States and Canada. Debates about practice-based research in higher education is being pursued in art schools and art teacher education programs in the UK, northern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, where the challenge is to define studio-based teaching and art learning practices as scholarly inquiry.

The genesis of the debate about practice-based research within the university setting can be tracked back to the 1970s and 1980s in the United Kingdom when questions were raised about the status of arts programs in higher education within the context of microeconomic reform. Within the wake of global economic rationalism this discussion soon spread to other countries.<sup>2</sup> However, so did opportunities to reconfigure how the visual arts might be positioned in relation to institutional practices such as research, as well as to artworld connections (Balkema & Slager, 2004; Macleod & Holdridge, 2006). The changing circumstances that thrust art schools, art teacher education programs, and other studio-based professional courses into unified university systems occurred in most of the countries mentioned above and this caused something of an identity crisis. There was a curious clash of confidence as relationships were forged, structures reframed, and in some cases control relinquished to others. But some past complacencies were given a jolt. Student learning could no longer be believed to result from the mere presence of an artist in the room. Art programs needed to be more than a private rite of passage of personal discovery. The possibility of new academic career paths within the university setting opened up for visual artists. They became eligible for professional support through research funding because those in universities teach and do research. Artists who work in art schools in universities also teach. But do they do research? At issue arose a critical question: *Can visual arts practice be argued to be a form of research?*

Arts-based researchers ask a similar question: *Can artistic forms be used as the basis for educational inquiry?* Realizing that educational research that merely adopts methods from the sciences cannot fully address the complexity of human learning in all its artistic richness, arts-based researchers seek to extend the methodological landscape opened up by qualitative researchers. The border skirmishes over research paradigms have been going on for a long time and need not be taken up here.<sup>3</sup> Currently, however, a more pressing form of political scrutiny and

<sup>2</sup>There are several government sponsored reports and professional association responses and conference papers that track the political changes and legislated frameworks put in place during the 1980s and 1990s as the visual arts came under close scrutiny in higher education. For example, in the United Kingdom, see the Harris Report (1996), Frayling (1997), Green (2001). Within the Australian context see Strand (1998).

<sup>3</sup>For a summary of the quantitative-qualitative paradigm debate see Creswell (2003, Chapter 1), Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998, chapters 1 and 2), and Reichardt & Rallis (1994). For an extended response to questions about methodological issues in qualitative research see Eisner & Peshkin (1990).

discipline debate faces educational researchers as the notion of what constitutes 'evidence' is given increasingly narrow definitions. Within an environment of standardization and testing a misguided tendency that favors scientific rationalism as the only valid form of educational research philosophy is prevalent.

A return to a regime of educational research, where scientific positivism reigns, and randomized field trials are believed to be the standard for compiling valid and reliable evidence,<sup>4</sup> has little chance of accounting for ends as complex as learning and teaching, let alone advance our knowledge of constructs such as imagination or visual cognition. Educational researchers who challenge policies and practices that favor the gathering of evidence by such narrow means draw attention to the need for both short-term and long-term interventions (Chatterji, 2005), mixed methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), and more diverse interventions and outcomes measures (Raudenbush, 2005). Conceptualizing and operationalizing strategies for studying educational processes that take place in diverse socio-cultural settings using conventions that favor reductive measures and other procedural controls has little chance of validly accounting for the variation we find in our classrooms and communities. The challenge for arts researchers at all levels of education is doubly difficult. On the one hand there are critics to be found within the research community who have a hard time accepting artistic forms as credible research protocols, or the art studio as a valid site for research practice. On the other hand, there are even harsher critics in the political arena who have an easy time proclaiming research policy that is especially limiting and which bears little relationship to actual educational practice.

Notwithstanding the need to respond to these short-term and long-term challenges it is necessary for arts researchers to continue to build more powerful theories and models of research practice. There is, for instance, a common feature evident in the inquiry practices being advocated by researchers interested in educational outcomes and those expanding our understanding of the theoretical scope of studio art practice. A central thesis is that research is a *transformative* act that has an impact on the researcher and the researched. Further, if the purpose of research is the creation of new knowledge, then the outcome is not merely to help explain things in causal or relational terms, but to fully understand them in a way that helps us act on that knowledge. Consequently, arts researchers at all levels of education need not solely rely on the methodological conventions of the social sciences as a means of defining the research identity of the field. We have to be confident that by following different, yet complementary pathways, we can create important new knowledge. After all, this is what is at the heart of art, and it is what research strives to do. Therefore the question addressed

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<sup>4</sup>The Campbell Collaboration in education in the United States (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>), which was modeled on the Cochrane Collaboration in medicine (<http://www.cochrane.org/indexO.html>), promotes the testing of hypotheses within experimental studies and the use of randomized field trials as the basic design for evidence-based approaches to educational research. Standards for assessing empirical studies in education that are based on a similar conception of scientific research have been developed as a way to enact Federal Government educational policy that is consistent with the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) legislation (<http://www.whatworks.ed.gov>). All websites last accessed December 16, 2005.

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here is: *What kinds of research acts are characteristic of, and common to, arts inquiry and art practice?*

### The Promise and Problems of Arts-Based Research

The loosely labeled term “arts-based research” is used by those seeking to broaden forms of inquiry that can take advantage of the way the arts offer unique insight into the human knowing and understanding (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Jipson & Paley, 1997). As a long time advocate of the importance of artistic forms of knowing, Elliot Eisner grounds his vision of inquiry in curriculum theory and practices from the arts and humanities in his quest to extend the methodological scope of educational research.<sup>5</sup> The methods used draw on traditions of art criticism and rely on the power of the evocative word-image to capture the complex reality of educational life. Eisner’s recent text, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002), consolidates the cognitive claims made about artistic experience, yet his sensory-based learning and the unique insights that artistic knowing has to offer remain wedded to his writing from past decades and carry his essentialist stamp. He does, however, make persuasive arguments about the transformative power of art learning that can be aligned with the capacity of arts-based research to be a transformative form of research.

Most arts-based researchers in the United States position their practice within the domains of education and the social sciences. Some proclaim the integrity of the artistic product as a site of knowledge (Barone, 2001), while others argue that the arts can enhance the direction and breadth of data representation and thus more adequately deal with complex realities found in educational research (Cahnmann, 2003). Arts-based educational inquiry describes and interprets phenomena through “seeing” and “sensing,” which is the basis for compiling thematic patterns of evidence from which meaning is made vivid. Arts-based researchers favor those features of qualitative research that encourage the use of reflective and responsive approaches whereby data gathering involves creating rich descriptive word portraits and visual documentation that reflect the insight of the insider and the intense focus of the observer (Hoffmann Davis, 2003). While the mode of communication is language-based, the means of representation invoke many artistic forms that are used to capture, reflect, and inquire into the multiple textural realities being explored.

Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997) outline the basic features of arts-based research and contrast it to the more pervasive science-based research and claim that arts-based research offers a distinctly different perspective on educational phenomena. What distinguishes this kind of research is the multiplicity of ways of encountering and represent-

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<sup>5</sup>For an overview of the emergence of arts-based qualitative methods and a series of caveats considered in relation to the parameters common to psychological research, see Eisner’s (2003) chapter in Camic, Rhodes & Yardley. See also a special edition of *Curriculum Inquiry*, (2002), 32(2), dealing with arts-based research: <http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~ci/32.2.html>

ing experience, and the use of forms of expression that can effectively communicate these phenomena. The use of a broad range of inquiry methods is argued, as is the need to be able to attend to the rigor necessary for undertaking educational inquiry. Arts-based researchers make use of methods found in the arts and humanities that emphasize literary traditions and therefore the “artistry” characteristic of the research is akin to art criticism and narrative storytelling.<sup>6</sup> Arts-based research, with its emphasis on constructivism, interpretation, and contextualism, is adaptive and lends itself to interdisciplinary approaches where the emphasis is to offer new perspectives on educational issues.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Diamond & Mullen (1999) for essays on arts-based research that deal primarily with literary-based inquiries, and McNiff (1998) for arts-based strategies applied to art therapy.

<sup>7</sup>The Center for Arts-Informed Research (CAIR) established by Adra Cole and J. Gary Knowles comprises a network of faculty, students, and arts researchers whose mission is to explore new methods of research that infuse arts practices within scholarly inquiry. The Center is located within the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. The CAIR site carries descriptions of research projects and an extensive list of research resources and publications. See <http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch/airhome3.html> (last accessed January 10, 2006).

There is a need, however, to be clear about what Eisner and others present as arts-based research. The argument of arts-based researchers is that the arts provide a special way of coming to understand something. The claim, therefore, is that as research methods broaden within the domain of qualitative inquiry in the social sciences, there is a need to be able to incorporate the arts as forms that more adequately represent the breadth of human knowing. The approach taken argues for an expansion of inquiry practices, yet this is undertaken within existing research paradigms. Although Eisner and others make a strong case for educational change that is informed by the arts, there are limits to what can be achieved if the conditions of inquiry remain locked within the constraints of the social science research. The analytic and inductive strategies adapted from qualitative research neatly align with formalist aesthetics from the arts and these structures are used to create an ‘elemental’ approach to research design. The assumption is that the inherent qualities of phenomena are able to be revealed through sensitive and perceptive analysis that mostly takes literary form. Consequently, despite efforts to respond to the uncertainty of complex educational phenomena, some descriptions of arts-based research remains locked into limiting modernist conceptions of art. As such, essentialist concepts are reified rather than contested, and perspectives remain passive rather than critical. For some, the quest to embrace more artistic forms of representation results in decorative research rather than critical inquiry (Fox, 2001).

Other arts-based researchers who focus on the perceptive educational practitioner as the locus of inquiry more consciously deploy a range of creative processes as part of the ensemble of research practices (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Neilsen, Cole & Knowles, 2001; Mitchell, Weber & O’Reilly-Scanlon, 2005). The role of lived experience, subjectivity, and memory are seen as agents in knowledge construction and strategies such as self-study, collaborations, and textual critiques are used to reveal important insights unable to be recovered by more traditional research methods. Cole and Knowles (2001) describe this approach as “arts-informed research.”<sup>7</sup>

Arts-informed research brings together the systematic and rigorous qualities of scientific inquiry with the artistic and imaginative qualities of the arts. In so doing the process of researching becomes creative and responsive and the representational form for communication embodies elements of various arts forms—poetry, fiction, drama, two—and three-dimensional visual art, including photography, film and video, dance, music, and multimedia installation. (pp. 10-11)

Incorporating and embodying creative arts practices within research frameworks characterizes approaches taken by other arts researchers in Canada such as Rita Irwin,<sup>8</sup> Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell.<sup>9</sup> Discipline boundaries are not seen to limit the opportunity for collaboration among institutions, communities, schools, and the public, and this sense of collective identity is used to communicate using a range of literary and visual forms. Faculty and students at the University of British Columbia are also exploring innovative examples of arts-based research that incorporate studio explorations within rich theoretical and cultural contexts. Expanding on ethnographic approaches such as autoethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997), autobiography (Smith & Watson, 2002) and self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2005), Rita Irwin and her colleagues have developed a research approach they call “A/r/tography” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). A/r/tography references the multiple roles of Artist, Researcher and Teacher, as the frame of reference through which art practice is explored as a site for inquiry. A useful way to consider these roles as research practices may be to view the Artist as someone who *en-acts* and embodies creative and critical inquiry; the Researcher *acts* in relation to the culture of the research community; and the Teacher *re-acts* in ways that involve others in artistic inquiry and educational outcomes.

A characteristic of the arts-based research emanating from Canada is the strong element of reflexive engagement that makes insightful use of the creative and critical features of artistic knowing in its many forms. Some in the research community are skeptical that non-linguistic forms of artistic engagement such as performance, time-based media, and the plastic arts, can be defined and defended as research modalities. This caution may be well meaning, but it reflects an allegiance to a conception of research that remains determined by conditions and protocols framed by the social sciences, and a perception of art that is limited to aesthetic traditions that have little to do with contemporary art practice. The strength of arts-based research can be found in the work of those who ground their educational intentions in inquiry methods that consciously draw on practices from the artworld in all its various forms. Here, imaginative and cognitive capacities are evident as art practices cut across media, make use of the textual richness of symbolic

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<sup>8</sup>See the A/r/tography website at: <http://m1.cust.edu.ubc.ca/16080/Artography> (last accessed January 13, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>The Image and Identity Research Collective established by Sandra Weber from the Department of Education at Concordia University (Montreal), and Claudia Mitchell from the Faculty of Education at McGill University (Montreal) documents research projects that use image-based approaches and interdisciplinary explorations to investigate a broad range of cultural, gender and educational issues. See <http://www.iirc.mcgill.ca> (last accessed January 12, 2006).

forms, and dislodge the divides that have historically separated the artist, viewer and the community. By taking their cue from the complexities of contemporary art, researchers are less likely to fall into the trap of excessive instrumentalism where arts-based inquiry becomes merely a method or means for serving only educational ends. The outcomes of research should have institutional currency and relevance within disciplines and domains located within communities and cultures. Developing arts-based research practice that has credibility in the classroom, in the studio, and on the street, is a dilemma also facing college art educators working in visual arts programs where developments in *practice-based research* are taking place.

### The Parameters and Politics of Practice-Based Research

Historical perspectives chart the development of art education in schools and colleges as a curious mix of differing discipline interests, aesthetic traditions, social influence, patronage, and politics (Efland, 1990; Nochlin, 1988; Singerman, 1999). In many countries, discrete art schools provide discipline specific programs that mostly draw on the atelier traditions of the academy, or upon the internationalism of Bauhaus inspired formalism and other modernist perspectives. A challenge for many teachers in art programs is to re-define their studio-based teaching and art learning practices in broader professional ways.<sup>10</sup> Within the current professional, vocational, and educational demands there is an increasing expectation that visual arts and art education faculty and students are able to undertake research that has credibility within the academy and within the artworld. Therefore approaches to visual arts research need to be positioned within existing frameworks but not be enslaved by them. An argument being made by practice-based researchers is that visual research methods can be grounded within the practices of the studio and that these are robust enough to satisfy rigorous institutional demands. The enduring concern about institutional status is yet to be supported by a profound debate in the United States about the way the visual arts can contribute to broader cultural discourse and understanding that is the outcome of *what artists do*.

What artists do of course is to make art, and as an object and subject of study art has been well picked over by aestheticians, historians, psychologists, sociologists, critics, and cultural commentators for a long time. But what artists do in the *practice* of creating artworks, and the processes, products, proclivities, and contexts that support this activity is less well studied from the perspective of the artist. As an “insider” the artist has mostly been content to remain a silent participant, even if the inquiring eye of interested others has given plenty of insights into artistic experiences and activities. When circumstances require a more clearly articulated account of *what* visual art experiences, objects and

<sup>10</sup>Within the College Art Association (CAA) there are moves afoot to expand the range of academic opportunities open to studio faculty in the visual arts as questions about the adequacy of the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) as the exit credential for university level teaching is debated.



outcomes are, and *how* they might contribute to the stock of human knowledge and understanding, the arguments often retreat to essentialist claims that are hard to defend, or offer well-meaning instrumental reasons that are easy to dismiss.

The search for a theory of practice has been less of a concern for artists although there is a rich history of explanatory efforts to locate the essence of the imagination. The enduring tendency to partition Western thought into thinking and feeling dualisms often relegated artists to the role of visual tricksters or sensory romantics. The more recent legacy of the modernist mantra that “form is all” rode roughshod over any theoretical attempts to suggest that there might be something more than meets the eye. For many artists there is no need to talk about their work because no words can ever substitute for what the image can do. Another reason artists remain silent is because they are mostly content knowing that practical knowledge and the intelligence of creativity has been drastically underestimated by those outside the field of practice. Where others may talk of reflective action as a procedure or a protocol, artists’ practice, with less concern for functionalism, can be seen as a transcognitive and reflexive response to the impulse of creativity (Sullivan, 2001). Perceptions about artistic practice are therefore shaped as much by what others say as artists themselves readily mythologize it. This makes it easier for artists to pass on the job of defining and defending what they do to aestheticians and historians. But to delegate authority to others is no longer an option as the nature of artistic practice has changed the responsibilities of artists as cultural theorists and practitioners. Greta Refsum (2002) describes these conditions.

Artists and the field of visual arts deal primarily with that which happens before artworks are made, this is their specialist arena, what comes afterwards is the arena of the humanistic disciplines. If the field of visual arts wants to establish itself as a profession with a theoretical framework it must, in my opinion, build its theory production on that which happens before art is produced, that is, the processes that lead to the finished objects of art. (p. 7)

The status of knowledge production in the visual arts remains a vexed question for many. A typical distinction asks whether knowledge is found in the art object, or whether it is made in the mind of the viewer. This debate is ongoing and insightful accounts are beginning to appear that seek a more profound philosophical basis for situating art practice as a form of research within institutional settings (Diaz-Kommonen, 2002). Brown (2003), for instance, presents a realist perspective whereby artworks as institutional artifacts are seen to exhibit properties that are primarily objective, theory-dependent, and knowable, and this gives access to insights that can be intuitive, mindful, and discoverable.

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When seen in relation to the demands of research, Brown maps an extensive set of “symptoms of practice” that highlight different areas of shared emphasis between art making and research practice. If taken from the perspective of the artist, both knowledge production and the functions to which knowledge is put is best understood as a dynamic structure that integrates theory and practice and contributes to our individual and social systems of understanding.

A good example of the interdependent relationship among the artwork, the viewer, and the setting is seen in conceptualizing practice-based research in higher education as all these forms interact within the art studio and an interpretive community (Macleod & Holdridge, 2006). A similar system surrounds arts-based educational research as the field practitioner makes use of an array of images and objects as a means of representing the experiences observed and how these are considered in relation to broader constituent interests and institutional contexts. What is common with inquiry that takes the studio experience as the primary site for investigation is that the traditional notion of research is disrupted. Instead of framing issues and questions according to what might be probable or plausible, the quest is to ponder the possible. The research strategy that unfolds is diligent in connecting what is revealed in relation to what is already known, for this is in keeping with the rigor of research, irrespective of the paradigm preferred. As David Hockney observes, “I ask such questions and make the theories only afterwards, not before—only after I have done something” (1993, p. 130). Therefore the method that characterizes the best of practice-based research and arts-based educational research is one that represents a “create to critique” mode of inquiry (Sullivan, 2005). Some of the research acts involved in art practice are briefly described in the following section.

### **Framing Research Acts Within Art Practice**

When art practice is theorized as research, it is argued that human understanding arises from a process of inquiry that involves creative action and critical reflection. As a significant means of human understanding, art practice is very mindful work as it makes good use of cognitive processes that are distributed throughout the various media, languages, and contexts used to frame the production and interpretation of images. There is an inherently transformative quality to the way we engage in art practice, either as learners or teachers, and this dynamic aspect has to be embraced if the idea that the studio experience can be conceptualized as research is to have legitimacy. The researcher and the researched are both changed by the process because creative and critical inquiry is a reflexive process. Similarly, a viewer or reader is changed by an encounter with an art object or a research text as prior knowledge is troubled by new possibilities. Many educators acknowledge the

reality of reflexive research, which “works against” existing theories and practices and offers the possibility of seeing phenomena in new ways (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).<sup>11</sup> At issue is the role of interpretation and the need to be able to identify how data, irrespective of its visual or verbal form, are used as evidence to support the views held or the claims made. The challenge for the arts researcher is to maintain and monitor a creative and critical perspective so as to be able to document and defend the trustworthiness of interpretations made.

A series of research acts that, it is argued, help identify ways of thinking about art practice as research are shown in Figure 1, which is organized around three elements that characterize studio processes as a cultural practice, namely *structure*, *agency* and *action*.<sup>12</sup> Art practice involves giving form to thought in a purposeful way that embodies meaning and this is negotiated in many contexts. The relationship among artistic structures, agencies and actions resists any fixed notions, yet there is much to be gained by looking closely at some of the research acts that are embedded in studio practices. For instance, a useful way to think about this seemingly elusive aspect is to consider painting.

<sup>11</sup> For a postmodern critique of research methodology see Brown & Jones, 2001; Pink, 2001; Scheurich, 1997; Stronach & MacLure, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> More fully developed arguments that theorize art practice as transformative research can be found in chapter 3 of *Art Practice as Research* (Sullivan, 2005).

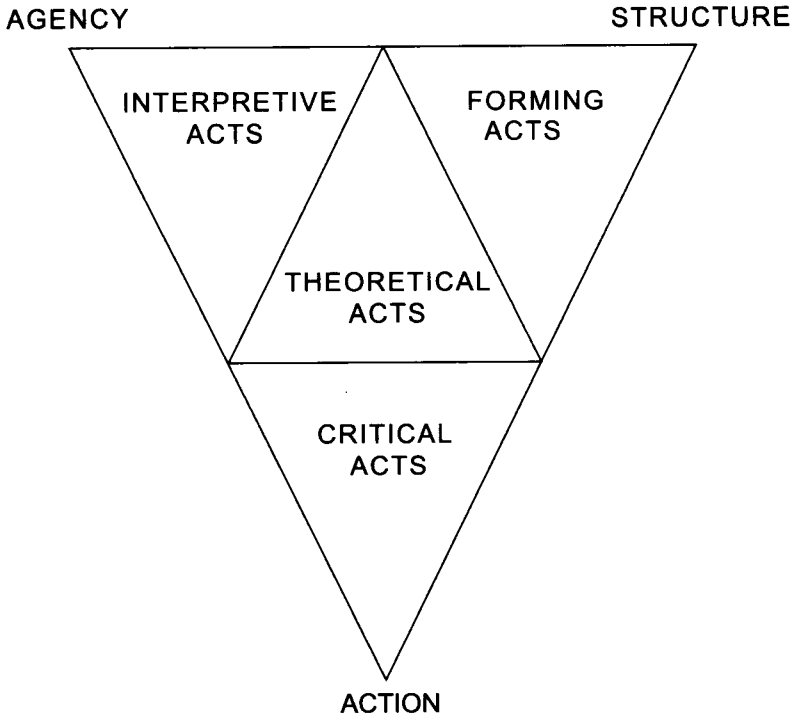


Figure 1: Research Acts in Art Practice

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The term 'painting' is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, there is ready acceptance that painting, as an object, has creative and material form, provenance, and a host of interpretive regimes through which it can be squeezed. However, when seen as a verb we get a sense of the way that painting as a practice is determined by the act of doing it. In this way, distinctions among terms such as painter, object, and viewer melt away as the circumstance or setting influences the meanings invoked in artistic efforts and encounters.

What this does *not* mean is that studio practices such as painting, which are a means of creative and critical investigation, are too ephemeral to consider within the rubrics of research. As Raney (2003) notes, "Research' has to a large extent replaced 'expression' as a model for art practice... and research provides a concept to link the activities taking place in different fields" (p. 5). Whether seen as process or product, art practice can indeed be argued to be a robust form of human engagement that has the potential to reveal new insights and understandings. To argue this point further, the following discussion describes the research acts that are embodied within studio practices and those that surround them.

### **Theoretical Acts in Art Practice**

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of art practice to emerge from the linguistic challenge posed by postmodernism, whereby sign systems and visual culture are seen to be explained by language structures, is the move away from media as a defining characteristic. Artists in general can no longer be seen as individuals whose singular identity is best described by the way that they manipulate media. 'Style' is an impoverished concept these days. The intellectual and imaginative space within which an artist works cannot be confined to pushing around pigments or pixels. Nor for that matter is the artist's studio the only physical space where this occurs—productive artistic activity takes place in just about every setting imaginable, from the classroom to the community, the industrial park to the Internet, and the subway to the highway. The critical point is that messing around with thoughts has joined messing around with media as the primary artistic practice that shapes studio processes.

Yet, artists have always been deep thinkers. What has expanded, however, is the range of conceptual tools, creative approaches, and communal contexts, within which artistic practice takes place. A characteristic of this practice shows that artists periodically "think in a medium," "think in a language," and "think in a context" (Sullivan, 2004). The creative and critical intent of artists who "think in a medium" emphasize formal and expressive properties that are revealed by their explorations of media. For artists who "think in a language" a rich

interpretive landscape is opened up because art experience is extended through dialogue and discourse. On the other hand, artists who “think in a context” are interested in creating critical artistic encounters that change the way we think about things around us. Consequently, in considering art practice as theory, the way artists think about studio processes *as* forms, ideas and actions, as shown in Figure 1, gives a sense of the rich theoretical underbelly that propels art inquiry.

Conceiving art practice as a theoretical act within a framework of inquiry sets in place the prospect of doing research *in* artmaking. When used as a site for research, art practice brings into play the seamless relationship between the ‘researcher’ (artist) and the ‘researched’ (art practice) and this builds on all the discursive arguments that disrupt untenable dichotomies such as the fictive subjective-objective divide. Or to put it another way, the task is to claim a legitimate place for the artist in the research process, and to do this, other research acts can be taken up.

### **Forming Acts in Art Practice**

Although the mind is the medium that most clearly shapes art practice, for many art researchers art materials are still the most tangible means that give form to imaginative thought. Therefore, when undertaking studio research where there is a focus on structural qualities among other interests, the artist really does think in a medium. In this process the artwork becomes the primary site and source of knowledge, just as with painting where questions, problems, and insights emerge as part of the practice. Research acts such as visual problem finding and problem solving are characteristic of this kind of inquiry process whereby forms, materials, properties, and qualities become the means by which concerns are explored and expressed. This reflective intent fuels an exploratory tendency as new forms and images are created, and these open up the possibility of new meanings. A characteristic of these research acts is that understanding emerges within the process of media experimentation, and this performative knowledge can be likened to more traditional grounded strategies such as observation and empirical confirmation. A further feature is that the forming or making systems within which an artist-researcher explores and creates incorporates all kinds of visual and virtual fields.

### **Interpretive Acts in Art Practice**

For those art researchers whose focus of inquiry pursues an interpretive interest this can invoke a somewhat different set of research acts. There is an acknowledgment that art practice is not only a personal pursuit but also a public process that can change the way we understand things. Consequently, the ideas expressed and communicated have an interpretive utility that assumes different textual forms as others make

sense of what it is artists have to say through what it is they see. Interpretive research acts build on the rich conceptual traditions associated with image making whose purpose is to open up dialogue between the artist and viewer, and among an interpretive community whose interests may cut across disciplines. The linguistic turn of postmodernism has done much to disrupt the easy equation that presumes an artwork and its 'reading' by viewers is a simple matter of encoding and decoding visual forms. Interpretive acts open up the space among the artist, artwork, and the setting as different interests and perspectives are embraced. New understandings result as they are filtered through the interpretive community of art writers and theorists. As Arthur Danto (1981) reminds us "You can call a painting anything that you choose, but you cannot interpret in any way you choose, not if the argument holds that the limits of knowledge are the limits of interpretation" (p. 131).

### **Critical Acts in Art Practice**

Art practice also draws on critical research acts and this stance has always been part of the history of art. There is an enactive or 'doing' element here, for critical action implies both a reactive and proactive stance, which is responsive to circumstances and contexts that require attention. Artworks have long been used as an instrument of social and political action, yet artists are sometimes hard pressed to show what their actions actually achieve. For some arts commentators, the presumed social role of artistic inquiry is misguided and should be left to the social scientists and political theorists (Hughes, 1993). Maxine Greene (2003), however, is fond of saying that art cannot change the world, but it can change someone who can. She talks of the "social imagination" as a site where what is possible can take flight, and where incompleteness and uncertainty are relished as habits of mind. For an arts researcher inspired by a call to critical action, any inquiry is undertaken for personal and public ends. A questioning attitude that is socially and culturally directed readily maps onto methods of inquiry and research acts that are responsive and exploratory. Yet the most crucial element within this inquiry process is the need to be able to create forms from which critical options can be more clearly assessed and addressed. This will require moving in and beyond the comfort of prescribed discipline knowledge, as issues and concerns demand approaches where new perspectives are opened up. Consequently it is the creation of new opportunities to see beyond what is known that has the potential to lead to the creation of new knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

The arguments presented here are based on a rather simple proposition that art practice is a profound form of human engagement that offers important ways to inquire into issues and ideas of personal, social

and cultural importance. This practice is creative and critical; features complex forms of imagination and intellect; and makes use of processes and procedures that draw from many traditions of inquiry. Consequently, it is argued that art practice can be conceptualized as a form of research that can be directed towards a range of personal and public ends. An overview of the research acts that are characteristic of the various research practices is given and these incorporate the theoretical, structural, interpretive and critical traditions found in the arts. It is further contended that art practice, in its most elemental form, is an educational act, for the intent is to provoke dialogue and to initiate change. Consequently, it is an easy task to position art practice within educational discourse. For some arts-based researchers, however, there is a tendency to rely too much on the instrumental capacity of the arts to be drafted into service when used in educational contexts. Such a move diminishes the creative and critical capability of the arts for there is much more that art practice can do. If the challenge is to chart new roads that will help us understand the complex worlds we live in then there is little to be gained by merely following paths mapped by others. The task is to vision anew what is possible, but in a way that allows others to share the view.

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