

Published in NADA magazine n.15, 2010.

### Art Research



"In the Beginning there was the Word" 2008

What is art research and what is its methodology?

Is there such a thing as art research and if so how can we define in, describe it or even draft some guidelines to evaluate it?

This is the time of the Bologna Agreement in the European Union. Great things are being planned for the Education at the University level all around Europe. How can procedures be standardized in order to achieve a common policy in all of the European Universities so that graduates can freely travel and obtain jobs in other EU countries?

Part of this complex process seems to involve the incorporation of Art Schools (which in many cases have always been separate from Universities) in the official higher education system at an academic level.

It is exactly the art practice, and the research within, that concerns me the most as an artist interested in researching new ways of representation in the visual arts.

It appears to me that when most people consider art practice, they never think of it as the result of research. Most frequently this vision is correct, as perhaps the most visible side of Art does not require significant research. However, several examples can be found where art is a direct result of research in new methodologies, new media, and new practices, which in many cases do not just emerge from the work and research of only one artist but rather from many artists, working around the world on similar concepts.

It should be noted, however, that not only this art research is mainly invisible to most people, but it is also frequently conducted without the support of an infrastructure (namely academic) by several individuals who pursue their own projects and have a variable impact on the field of art.

Art research and practice have always moved forward through the refusal to submit to control and “domestication”, and art has always been proud to break the “canon”! Will the process of integration in the academia lead to the definition of routines for the documentation of art research, and all the knowledge therein produced, that may represent a loss of the characteristics that make art original, unique and “mysterious”? Will the knowledge and scrutiny of the “process” kill what art has of mystical by trying to structure, document and reveal its processes? Is it within those processes that lie the essence of art? In what we have not dared, or just could not, try to understand? All great, and not so great, works of art are unique and individual, but they still touch most of the public who experiences them, will we really lose that? Do we have such little confidence in art that we are afraid of losing it by attempting to understand it a bit better?

But returning to the subject at hand – the need for a review of art research – I believe has many origins. First, if we need to assimilate Art practice and research into European Universities it is necessary to have a complete understanding concerning these issues.

Second, the field of art has always been open about issues like boundaries and rationalization, and this is one of the most important defining characteristics about the nature of art that we must preserve, while being assimilated into the enormous machines that Universities are, where everything is levelled, and frequently by the lower basis of excellence (unfortunately).

For me personally, I believe this transition period is one of the major challenges of our time. I am an art practitioner and an art researcher, as are many of my friends. I have had difficulties during my undergraduate years to develop my practice and research under the conventional higher education structures. Subsequently, while a graduate student I could only find opportunities for the development of my interests within the study of art history and theory, that are not my strongest competence. I really feel art research can be developed in parallel to the area of art theory and not just as integral part of, or in competition with, or even as an alternative.

So we arrive again at the starting point of the text: What is art research?

What is the difference between art research and art practice?

I believe that to address these questions it is useful to consider the reality of other creative endeavours that imply research, and also practice and application.

As I am an artist who has researched about art and science, I believe science, and biology in particular, offers good examples from where artists can learn.

It is, thus, my conviction that science – as research, practice and application - offers a good model for the integration of art research and education into the University system around Europe, as a complement of the current art theory.

I will explain the reasons I believe give support to this proposition.

It is my understanding that science, as art, has developed from an individual point. What I mean is that it progressed from a series of individuals dedicating themselves to their experiments and hypothesis without the organized support of institutions and with difficulties in sharing ideas in the way we do nowadays (almost instantly). These early scientists shared their discoveries, of course, by letter, personal publications or even meetings, but nothing like today, even if contemporary scientists still get frustrated with the slow review of their papers prior to publication. The way science is conducted today is very far away from the conditions one century ago, when research was being conducted in small personal laboratories, often in the basement of scientists' own houses with only one or two assistants. Although today science is no longer conducted as an individual endeavour, it started out like that. However, at a certain point in its history it could not continue to progress at an individual scale, and changed its process to function more as a global system of collaborative efforts and not individual discoveries. We find today's science being produced in buildings and institutions where many researchers work together in the most varied fields, sharing not only the infrastructure, equipment and services but most importantly the company of fellow researchers. If we think of people like Madame Curie, Einstein or Darwin we are considering individuals that conducted their research alone, or nearly alone, before presenting their ideas publically. Sometime in its history, science could not continue to progress as efficiently as it would at the individual scale and changed its process to function more like an organization based on a system of collaborations and team efforts that involved several areas of science. It does not make much sense anymore to say that any country is more developed scientifically than other when so many publications are the result of international collaborations. Science has no nationality any more.

Likewise, there has been a tendency in the art of today to move towards a more collaborative endeavour. In many cases, being presented in festivals and exhibitions of new media, it is necessary to bring together a team of people with different expertises for the completion of an artwork. However, unlike research institutions in science, it is infrequent to find in the arts a clear system providing collaborative support to the process of contemporary art research. In science, it has been increasingly difficult to identify the individual genius behind a discovery (as demonstrated by the increasing number of authors per scientific communication or the rarity of Nobel prizes that are not shared in recent years). In the same way, the idea of a single artistic genius is a myth that has been artificially preserved by artists, gallery managers, collectors and buyers for a very long time.

The advances in art are also, like in science, being supported by the shoulders of giants who preceded the more recent creators. In spite of this, in science and in art, there are a few researchers who push more intensively the general knowledge of the field and acquire a more prominent notoriety.

Therefore my point is that art as research is now conducted the collective of art researchers contributing for the general and global knowledge and not by individual geniuses isolated from their peers. As such, the research in art, as it generates a form of knowledge, could and should be incorporated into the Universities as research groups, with clearly defined research projects, and objectives, and subjected to evaluation, just like in happens in science. One may think this is already the case, but the current projects dealing with this field are frequently associated to knowledge in art theory or history and not in knowledge connected specifically to art practice. It is not clear to me the existence of many examples of art research in new artistic practices at the infrastructural level of the Universities. And where such research programmes exist they are often centred in the theory of the researched practices or in the production of more artworks by the artist themselves. We are missing a research in new media of artistic expression, new processes, new fields of artistic practices, new strategies of production and exhibition, new methodologies, new policies of funding, new technologies, and new aesthetics.

At the undergraduate level, in the same way as science undergraduates have training periods in research laboratories, it could be conceived that art undergraduates could also benefit from similar training periods. But it is my view that the core of the research should be mainly developed at the post-graduate level, like in science, within the Universities' research departments, sharing infrastructures, equipment, services and most importantly contact between peers (and including colleagues from related fields, such as the theory and history of art).

The pure artistic practice is not, however, something that needs to be incorporated into the university and, in my opinion, should not be absorbed by the academic system. Nevertheless such practice should be able to benefit from the academic knowledge, by incorporating it or even challenging it. I should clarify, I do believe all artistic practice does involve research, in fact, art always implies some level of research as it is conceived, developed, produced and also exhibited. However, the academic research should lead to an impact within the field beyond the outcome of a given artwork or a series of works.

The research being developed within the scope of art theory and history, strong theoretical fields, have been associating research in art to its theoretical content and context, and not connecting research in art to the relevance for the practising artistic community in general. It seems that the major outcome in these research projects is the contribution they bring to the theoretical fields and not putative contributions to advances in terms of artistic practice, for artists. This last type of outcome would appear to me a more relevant contribution for a field with the name of artistic research. Please note that while attempting to understand and define which would be the main objectives for an academic research field with the denomination of artistic research, it feels redundant to have these objectives coincide with other two existing research fields which have the added particularity of being theoretical.

I have the strong conviction that, like art itself, artistic research should be mainly a practical research field, without it being reduced to a mere simple exercise in art production. This does not imply that the artwork cannot be criteria for evaluation in art

research. The artwork is the real proof or demonstration of a complex process, with investigative components. However, an artwork is not a thesis in itself (in principle), or even a hypothesis. If anything it can be compared with an experiment that contributes to the demonstration of an hypothesis. As such, the argumentation about the process of conception, research, production and even the result of its exhibition can be fundamental to the clarification of an idea and its contribution to the field of art. The way by which all this process adds to an already existing body of knowledge should be the major criteria for the possible evaluation of artistic research. In other words, the relevance of a research project should not be determined by the quality of the artwork itself but rather by the novel contribution brought to the artistic field: what new media, new technology, or new paradigm, is provided by the artist/researcher that can benefit other artists that will use these knowledge for their own research and/or art practice.

In biology it does not make sense to ask a doctoral student to present a written thesis about the history of biology until that moment. Such student must show that they understand the context in which his or her research problem is included, but not a comprehensive history of the scientific developments that biology has had until then. He/She should rather prove, conclusively, that he/she has spent 4 years, sometimes more, discovering if the hypotheses proposed at the beginning are true and in what way this confirmation or refutation adds to what has been discovered before. Similarly, practice and research in art must be made with a significant degree of knowledge about the related theoretical fields. Therefore, there are real advantages in working in parallel with the different disciplines devoted to different aspects related to art and that have so many interests in common.

As an illustration of the consequences of lack of definition between disciplines I wish to refer to a concrete example from Portugal, where there is a single governmental institution attributing research grants in all fields of knowledge. Under this institution, research in the general area of the arts is called "art studies", which includes art history, art practice, and art theory. As a consequence, there is a single panel that evaluates in competition all proposals from those related fields. As a consequence, there is a general dissatisfaction from artists applying for these grants, as not even the forms are adapted to the distinct characteristics of different topics: for instance, there is an emphasis on publications and journal articles, while outcomes in terms of exhibitions are absent from the - forms. Although many artists argue that a special form should be made for art practitioners, I believe the problem lies not in creating a field for exhibitions in the form, but in the fact that art research in the academic field needs to be properly defined.

Given art research is not generally defined as an academic discipline, there are very few academic journals in the field, and it is even difficult to find the right peer researchers to act as expert reviewers in the evaluation of new projects or publications. This situation leads to a conundrum regarding the evaluation of art research projects. As a consequence, these proposals are often evaluated by experts in art theory. Thus, not surprisingly, the projects are often considered as not strong enough at the theoretical level. I do not have the perfect solution for the conundrum described above. However, I believe that a good starting point would be

to make sure there would be a better definition of the expected outcomes in art history or theory projects and art research projects, even if they remain being evaluated by the same professionals from the art theory field.

In order to achieve a clarification between the expected outcomes and characteristics of art theory and art research, it is necessary to revisit the starting question of this text: What is art research?

I will start by explaining my personal prejudices concerning art research, and the reason for considering myself an art practitioner as well as an art researcher.

I am an artist. As such, I practice art and create artworks that are shown in galleries, museums and festivals around the world. I sell some artworks, some others are difficult to sell. This is my practice. I have created artworks that use live material, and live organisms, modulated to explore a certain concept that is important to me and my practice. Concepts like identity, fairness, manipulation, authorization, human and animal condition, and above all the natural – artificial dichotomy.

The fact that I have used live material and materials, as well as methods borrowed from science, to perform and create my work is also part of my practice, but most importantly, I place it into the realm of art research. The reason for considering the process for the development of my biological artworks as art research is due to the fact that the very nature of the process implies the use of live material for artistic expression. This is something that is often being developed for the first time, making it relevant for the field of art practice in general, and not exclusively for my own practice. The more I explore the field of science and biology to create my artworks, the more I expand the possibilities for other artists to develop their work, and this I consider as an objective of art research. In the same way, I have been benefiting from knowledge generated by other artists, and inclusively I had the opportunity to work with some of them, namely SymbioticA in Australia. This process of producing new knowledge with potential impact in our area of work must be a primary objective of any investigative endeavour. The more experiments I make with the variety of materials I have at my disposal, and the more projects I pursue with different scientific partners, then more experience I will gather, as a researcher, to share with other artists. My challenge, a personal one, has been to write about it as a researcher only, and not also as a practitioner; or as a practitioner only, and not as a researcher as well. Is it at all possible to do the writing of the two perspectives separately, or is it meaningful to try to do so? It is a delicate balance to write about artworks that are the outcome of a given process of research and attempt to generalize enough to make it relevant for others. It is also difficult to describe a method related to my field of work without being taken as a “preacher of bioart”. I do not aim to have followers. I rather try to open, above anything, ways to my own evolution in the processes I follow, not necessarily looking for competition. What I do, and how I do it, can be relevant to others without necessarily meaning that those others will have to do the same things as I do.

I speak of my own practice because it is easier for me to do so. But there are several art practitioners and art researchers that can fit the description that I made of my own

professional activity. Several in the specific field of art and biology, but many others involved in art practice related to other areas of science, like robotics, mathematics, physics, ecology, and even others more concerned with politics, social studies, economics, or games. Probably the common denominator in all these practitioners/researchers, if any, is the focus on a border (or interface) between art and another discipline. This does not mean that art research will always have to exist exclusively in the exploration of such borders- But there is no doubt, however, that it is far easier to innovate if we search for ideas from other areas and apply those to our own field. Luckily not all of us opt for the easy route...

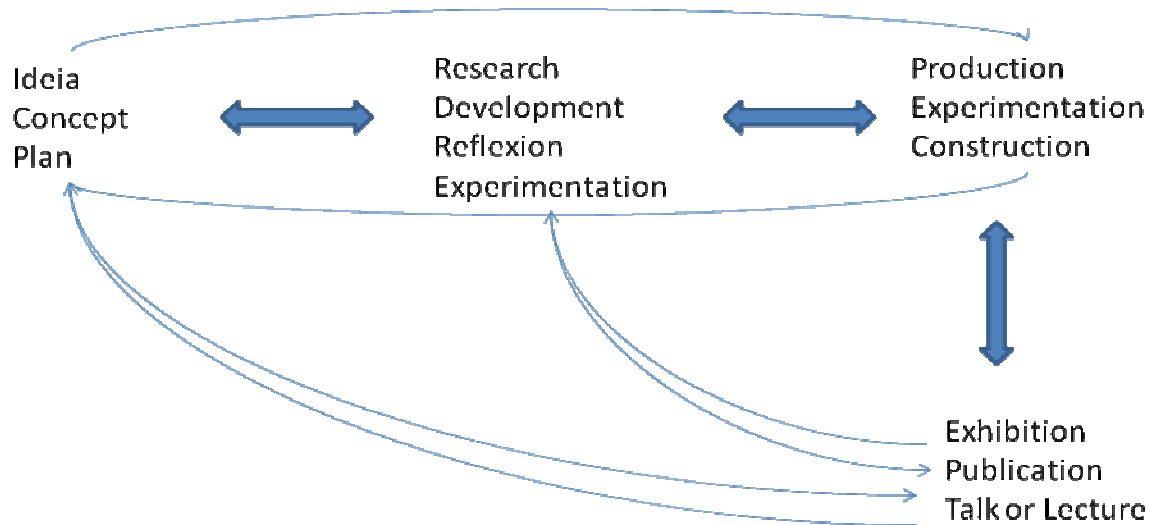
I imagine most artists would argue their practice involves significant research, and I agree with them. But the difference resides in the nature of that research and in the framing of such research. I believe important advances can be made with the "simple" (which is not simple at all) research that any artist must undertake to develop any new work of art. However, the research conducted in an academic environment, in collaboration with a supervisor or a research group, is deemed to have a different depth that is expected to add significance to the potential of your argument/thesis/hypothesis. Furthermore, the overall impact in the community should be validated through peer review, publication and evaluation. It should be noted that this process of art research can be done with enough critical mass of practitioners outside the academic realm, through the process of engagement of several people in the development of a new process, methodology and or material. The field of art and biology demonstrates this issue, although some quasi-academic research structures have played an important role in catalysing this process, being Symbiotica (in Perth, Australia) the best example. I argue, however, that the insertion of this process, which has until very recently been happening only outside universities, into the academic domain will be a tremendous driving force for the advancement of art research.

I am also concerned that art practice and art research are not taken seriously enough by academics from areas of art theory and history, or even studio art professors, as relevant contributors to the field of artistic knowledge or any other. This is something puzzling because the objective of art history and theory should create a privileged platform for the recognition of innovation and experimentation as something involved in the development of the major advances to their field of study over the times. I fear not only that the practice of art and experimentation process is being put aside as a most relevant method of development for art research because, within art theory and history, there is little precedent for the critical evaluating of the practical research. Very much in the same way theoretical physics benefited enormously from the development of experimental physics (that did not take its place), so would art theory benefit from a complementary discipline with a strong experimental character.

At the risk of becoming tremendously repetitive, I would like to revisit yet again the opening question: What is Art Research?

I would like to propose a framework to accommodate the ideas discussed above, even risking being considered utopian. The following diagram represents a schematic view of the process/method of the development of an art project (process/method

which is not exclusive to the art world, nor it is universal). If we take a typical art project and divide it by stages of development we can distinguish:



This way, and following the arrows, one can observe that with very little or no investigation, an idea can move very quickly to being produced or constructed to become an artwork to be publically exhibited. However, the research developed can originate a set of ideas leading to new directions of research and even to the alteration of the final artwork to be produced.

In a similar way, the exhibition of a project while it is still in research stage (work in progress), or while the final shape/form is still just a prototype of the possible final product, can be subsequently reformulated in response to the public response.

In summary, all phases of any given artistic project can be re-evaluated and the progress is not unidirectional or even unique, leading to a single artwork. The most important conclusion is to understand that the academic art research can happen on any of those steps and processes. This research can be solely referring to the artist making the artwork, but should always contribute to the common knowledge of the field of art in general, and being relevant to the art community. The research process described can even refute, in time, the scheme I have proposed. Although the proposed diagram, and conclusions I have presented simply contribute to clarifying my way of representing my own process of art creation with a strong link to the scientific process. This model will undoubtedly get opposition, maybe even from me in the future, when I reformulate my own way of making and thinking art... All these processes should be dynamic and subjected to scrutiny.

I believe the field of art research is endless and could be efficiently organized using the example from scientific research. As in science, it should be possible to have both basic research and applied research in any Faculty or Academy of the Arts. In those academic centres, it should be possible to find theoretical researchers, including art historians and art theorists, critics and curators to develop new strategies for exhibition and contextualization of the works; but also practical art research with artists professor/artists, and students (and in particular graduate students) to develop new ways for art. Research groups from many distinct fields of



expertise would then be fundamental to catalyse the development of the different areas involved, and most importantly, to the development of the field of art.

Ideally (and we must always aim high) we will one day be able to see the very nature of art without trying too hard to define it. And we will achieve this state, in my opinion, through art research. The definition of art has always been a problem, especially when trying to explain the compulsory need we have to make art to the general public. I always find non-artistically sensitized people find comfort in trying to define what art is, when discussing art issues with an artist. And although we (artists) have all been there and done that, we know that it has not been a very useful exercise, in the short or long run, because we can always find the exception to the rule that we will still have to include in the art bag we have just defined. And that is undoubtedly one of the most important characteristics of art!

It has been my experience in art and biology that when presenting artworks to a non-specialized audience the first and most urgent question is how can we differentiate what is art from what is not art. I have a suspicion that much more interesting than trying to define art, would be to understand a bit better the nature of art, in all of its irreverence and rebellion, paradoxes and worries, questions and partial solutions, smart and conscious ways of thinking about all the issues that concern us so intimately as humans and animals in this world, without the absolute and controlling need to understand how things works.

Art for me is very very close to freedom, to be and not be at the same time! How can we not include this in the preambles of knowledge!