Claims, arguments, and challenges
in Finnish arts-based educational research methodologies

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Abstract: In this paper arts-based, and art practice research methodologies are discussed in master and doctoral research projects, in the context of art education, introducing arts-based theses projects from the programme of Art Education in Aalto University, in Finland. The paper explores three claims within arts-based methodology. The claims are discussed through and with the research project examples. These claims and their challenges and potentialities are presented and discussed for current and future arts-based research.

Key words: Arts-based, art practice, art education, methodological pluralism, singularity

In this paper, arts-based, and art practice research methodologies are discussed in master's and doctoral research projects, in the context of art education, in Aalto University, in Finland. The paper explores three claims within arts-based methodology. I discuss these claims, and their challenges and potentialities for current and future arts-based research methodology.

First, I provide examples of three arts-based projects. Two of them are master's theses and one is a doctoral dissertation, all from Aalto University. Later, I will discuss how the claims and arguments are addressed in these projects, and the challenges they raise for future research. Because of the brief amount of time allocated for presentations, however, this paper necessarily abbreviates the complexity of the claims and arguments, and passes over additional concepts and critiques involved with arts-based research.

The first example is a MA thesis from Varpu Eronen: "Our Thunderstorm – routs around experience". Varpu started her project after an astonishing experience; her family's summer cottage burned down because of a thunderstorm. She re-searched the phenomena of an extraordinary experience through different visual, narrative and

theoretical methods. Varpu used still and moving images, and made a series of paintings. In her exhibition, there were also found objects from the ash. In my opinion, the most effective visuals were her photos taken day after the fire, in which she lives the trauma through performative action, which she also discusses through writing.

The second example is an MA thesis by Elina Mäntylä that explores the formation of the sense of place of deserted houses in old Nicosia. As research materials she used journal texts, memories, reflections, visions, narratives, photographs, and videos taken in the deserted houses. After exploring the sites as aesthetic experiences and later as social places, she used the houses as a long-term gallery space for her own photographs. Employing site-specific theories, the deserted houses became internal and metaphoric landscapes. The objects inside of the houses and the people that visited the houses gained meanings that helped to Elina represent and reflect the stranger within herself. In this sense, while exploring conceptions of a deserted house as a third space, she was also able to uncover her own story.

The last example is from my doctoral thesis, "Encountering Self, Other and the Third, Researching the Crossroads of Art Pedagogy, Levinasian Ethics and Disability Studies". In it, I explore art pedagogical dimensions of dialogue and encountering with the Other. The arts-based project is grounded in the collaborative art practice of a person with autism and an art educator. I discussed the possibilities of a collaborative art practice to help create an ethical and pedagogical relationship with the Other, Self and the Levinasian Third. The pre-determined pedagogical goals and desires were challenged, along with understandings of disabled and phenomenological body experiences. By editing the video documentation and creating new interpretations, I explored the possibilities of describing, discussing and interpreting the collaboration visually.

Arts-based methods are used differently in all three examples. However, similarities are found with how the research questions and foci areas are set. Foci are in societal, cultural, political, philosophical or educational phenomena, rather than on artistic phenomena. In my research, the interest is in pedagogy and collaboration. In Varpu's work, the research focus is directed to explore questions of identity, and in Elina's

thesis, the site and place are in focus. The significance of singular experiences is emphasized in all of them. Arts are then used as a method of getting to know about the phenomena. At the same time, they are personal research projects. As typical to the arts-based projects, the researchers are deeply engaged and part of the research subject.

The first claim
A researcher, through one's own art making, is able to perceive his/her own identity, embodied being, social processes and other phenomena around and above the researched topic, and therefore bring deeper understanding to the thesis. The unique character of arts-based research methods relies upon singular experiences, which cannot be separated from personal level.

This is perhaps the reason why the method seems so suitable for art education. Pedagogues are often interested in developing their own understandings of self, and therefore may incorporate a personal level into the research. However, the singular nature of arts-based research does not mean that it would be out of reach for other people — quite the contrary. When something is deeply singular it usually makes most sense to us. Not all of our summerhouses need to burn down, for example, for us to understand the nature of Varpu's thesis: that is the essence of the experience and the meaning of place and processing through visuals and narratives.

Arts-based research project can never be repeated as such in another research context and still it makes sense to the others and helps other projects to form similar kinds of new knowledge. Personal and subjective experience becomes commonly shared experience, and a tool for others. The subjective knowledge that is constructed through individual and artistic experience transforms into critical research knowledge through critical reflective analysis. A researcher gives her/himself as an instrument to the research project. This is especially apparent in Varpu's project, in her performative images where she is using her own body. She is not taking pictures of herself as much as she is using herself as in instrument to bodily explore the phenomena she is studying. Similarly Elina uses her own body when visiting and spending time in the deserted houses.

Giving her/himself as a research instrument does not mean making a study of self. It is often criticized that arts-based research only discusses issues around the researcher's subjectivity and is mainly interesting for the researcher her/himself. In my own research, while giving myself as an instrument by making collaborative art with my artistic partner with autism, the research focus was not on my own art making, but in the events of encountering and learning about our being-with-together while making.

The second claim
Methodological pluralism and diverse interpretations make the research process more complex, but difficult to assert in a research context.

The examples presented earlier used multiple methodologies. Varpu used, for example, arts-based methods, narrative and auto-ethnographic methods, and theories from memory research, site and place and psychoanalytical theory.

Often, arts-based research projects use methods such as participatory action research, pragmatist methods, ethnography, or phenomenological, hermeneutic approaches, and, as it is the case in Elina's work, ideas of critical pedagogy, post-structuralism, postmodernism, inquiry-based, dialectical, and rhizomatic approaches. The methodological pluralism has been criticised as trying to do too much. For example, jagodzinski & Wallin (2013, 103) states that overly rich eclecticism might end up filling the method with empty signifiers.

While methodological pluralism can also be understood as a type of richness, its relationship to diverse interpretations should be explored more carefully. Diversified and multi-layered interpretations need to be contextualised: while a work of art can be interpreted in multiple ways when outside of research, within a research context, arguments cannot be made based on a work of art or visual representations alone.

Diversified interpretations can become an issue with research results. Are the referential significances clear enough to make sufficient arguments for the research results? Or, is the idea of clarity already in contradiction to the singular nature of arts-based research methodology?

The third claim

An artistic part of an arts-based research project should not be a separate art project attached to the study, but a lived part of the flesh of the work, which crosscuts the entire work.

Art practice is a particular way of conducting research and a specific method for learning, knowing and researching. The researcher gets to search issues that other researchers could never reach, when standing at two or several positions at the same time. In the first arts-based dissertations in Finland, the artistic part was separated from the research text. The problem with this model is that another person could have written the research text. So, it was relevant to ask, why one person should make both things, the art production and theory part, if they would not create anything new together?

This is not the situation, however, in all three examples. They explore the phenomena by using art practice as a crucial method of knowledge building. This is also the part of the arts-based method that gets the most criticism. The hybrid conflation of art making and knowledge building, putting together *praxis* and *poiesis*, can be understood as preoccupation of practices of self-exploration and self-rendering. According to jagodzinski & Wallin (2013, 85) this research position affects the method as an internal and persisting limitation. The criticism is current with arts-based research projects, which only justifies choices based on the will of the artist, or creativity, in a way that the research itself becomes something slippery and too eclectic, leaving no room for critical assessment of the methodology. Choices that seem to be done on an intuitive base, and which are difficult to explain through language, should not be discussed as something mystical. Often, there are difficulties to find words in a research topic that is based, for example, on embodied, multi sensorial, and experience-based knowledge. It is, however, important to realize that in a research context these processes of knowing should be critically discussed an argued.

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