

Local/Global communities of arts-based and artistic researchers

Editorial

Anniina Suominen

Abstract

Through this editorial, the author reflects upon the conference themes and the diverse research presented during the 4th Arts-Based and Artistic Research Conference, which was held June 28–30, 2016, at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland. The editorial discusses the topic *Rethinking Arts-Based & Artistic Research – and Global/Local Communities* and contemplates how these themes have evolved in research and scrutinizes the kind of community that artistic scholars are currently articulating through their presentations, art, and writing. This special issue is the second of the two thematic issues published based on the 2016 conference presentations.

Bio

Dr. Anniina Suominen is an Associate Professor of Art Pedagogy at the Department of Art, School of Art, Design and Architecture at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland. Dr. Suominen is a citizen of both the United States and Finland and she has completed degrees and worked in both countries. She earned her BA/MA from the University of Arts and Design Helsinki in 1999 and her Ph.D. in Art Education from the Ohio State University in 2003. Since then, she has worked for Kent State and Florida State Universities and visited the University of Florida's Art Education program. For the past decade and half, Dr. Suominen has shared her time between the two countries navigating and negotiating their landscapes, socio-cultural traditions, and institutional differences. Her simultaneous attachment to both of these geographical places has shaped her work as a scholar and an art educator. The main focus of Dr. Suominen's teaching, research, and professional service is to formulate artistic research and pedagogy that aim to build more democratic communities and more just societies. The themes she works with are conceptualized relationalities, learning in relation to place and others, gendered identities, environmental art education, diversity art education, and visual/artistic methodologies of research.

The fourth gathering of researchers, artist researchers, educators, other scholars, and community members who are interested in various forms of artistic research (AR) and arts-based research (ABR) was organized in Helsinki, Finland, in late June 2016. As a co-organizer of the conference and an editor of this special issue of *Synnyt*, I have been privileged to spend an extended period of time thinking about the themes and perspectives that were presented during the conference and then re-articulate them for this journal.

To establish an understanding of the intent and history of this gathering, it might be best to visit the proceedings from previous conferences, and the first special issue published earlier this year in *Synnyt*. This conference first took place in 2013 and was held in Barcelona (<http://hdl.handle.net/2445/45263>). The second gathering took place in Granada in 2014 (<http://art2investigation-en.weebly.com/full-papers.html>) and the third gathering occurred in Porto in 2015 (3c.nea.fba.up.pt). The themes of each conference have varied from *critical discussion concerning the intersections between arts and research* to the latest conference addressing *what is and can be considered artistic or arts-based research*. These gatherings have occurred in Europe as the intent has been to create idea exchange, fosters discussions concerning the criteria and purposes of arts-based and artistic research, provide support for European researchers and students interested in working with the arts to further research practices, and to simply share ideas. In general, these have been smaller research-sharing and idea-exchange gatherings of scholars, artists, and practitioners who feel either deep and keen connections to artful forms of research, are experimenting with arts-based or artistic forms of research or who are just curious about artistic ways of gathering, creating, and organizing knowledge in/for research.

I asked those scholars who have attended all or most of the first four gatherings what they gained from this sequence of events and their responses reflect the importance of being able to identify and meet others who share similar thoughts and research orientations. They also mentioned that these gatherings have aided in the development of vocabulary and concepts for arts-based and artistic research for researchers and students from all over Europe and aided in creating a community of scholars interested in artistic or arts-based formulations of research and writing.

The participants and presenters of the fourth gathering hosted by Aalto University in Helsinki represented Taiwan, Canada, the United States, Australia,

Chile, Cuba, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria, Norway, Sweden, and Estonia, and many more geographically and culturally diverse places were addressed through the scholarly presentations. The umbrella theme of the conference *Global/Local Communities* intentionally aligned with the beginning of mass refugee migrations that took place in 2015 and after, and many of the presentations addressed the various aspects of diversity ranging widely from the study of oppressed minority artists' work to the difficulties of renegotiating democratic local/global communities. Papers and presentations were invited to explore related concepts, including arts-based and/or artistic research existing in communities in diverse and various ways and in accord with an array of definitions and theoretical foundations.

The call for proposals and papers encouraged both the exchange of research projects and conceptual and/or theoretical inquiries. Although suggested sub-themes were proposed by the organizers, the nature of this conference and the guiding ethical scholarly principles of these gatherings are to make mere suggestions for themes, but never use pre-criteria to limit themes or foci. I will, however, share the suggested sub-categories here as these thematic calls most likely had an impact on the type of proposals we received: Arts-based research and/or artistic research, diasporic movements and nations/states or nation-states; arts-based research and/or artistic research and (un)belonging to communities; arts-based research and/or artistic research and voluntary/forced upon minority status; arts-based research and/or artistic research and the norms of communities (cultural-, geographic-, scientific-, etc).

Presenters shared artistic inquiries and other forms of research located in immigrant communities, cities, the in-between spaces within cities and “nation-states,” prisons, memorial monuments, schools, teacher education programs, and so on. Through narratives, poems, dance, drawings depicting movement, videos, analysis of activist art, photographs, and combinations of various methods, the researchers aimed to engage the senses and different ways of understanding cultural and social phenomena. It could be easily argued that none of the presenting students, scholars, artists, and practitioners who applied readily accepted or applied given methods or research tools to a project, but rather all experimented with arts-based or artistic forms of research, often with the intent to expand and further the perceptions of what could be possible and how research and arts may engage with learning to address cultural problems and normative institutional systems.

The intent of this particular conference and scholarly gathering has been to bring together people whose work has a strong artistic orientation and who work in the margins of their disciplines or between several disciplines. Whilst these scholars may be educators, artists, anthropologists, ethnographers, social scientists, visual researchers or visual culture scholars, their scholarship is rarely set on thinking, methods or patterns of inquiry that are normative to quantitative or qualitative research. Most of these presenters do not even concern themselves with this historic divide; instead, they search wider within various forms of living and evolving cultures to formulate their research. Arts-based research and artistic research have often been seen as controversial and sometimes located in contradictory territories that intersect between scientific research and artistic practice and/or artistic thinking. This is certainly still true for many of the participating scholars, yet it has changed its form and focus, as the intent is not only to radicalize or question institutionalized research practices, but to initiate broader questioning of how we think about human rights, justice, nations, communities, cultures, education, and communal memory. Further, it seeks to identify how we can redefine the forms, meaning, purpose, and intent for arts to give us options and directions in working toward cultural commonalities that are inclusive and truly appreciative of diversity.

When I began to explore artistic research and arts-based (educational) research as a student in the late '90s and continued into the first decade of the 21st century, we were busy establishing and validating artistic forms of research that were then perceived as alternatives to established forms of research and seen as expanding qualitative research. It is evident in the selection of the five articles and five visual essays that we have moved past that stage, whether it is called the post-quantitative-qualitative or post-(post)-qualitative research landscape. It is no longer the situation that we would need to expand learning, knowing, and communication (research) knowledge utilizing the arts. Rather, it is that artistic ways of knowing and being are essential and inseparable to who we are as people within communities. Perhaps what I most wish to communicate with the selection of the visual essays and articles chosen for the first and second thematic issues gathered from the fourth conference is that we do not need to be this or that by creating specific definitions of what is and is not ABR or AR, nor do we need to establish schools of scholarship that are exclusive to the ways of conducting research. I sincerely believe that

we have reached a point where we do not have to occupy ourselves with validating or establishing ourselves, but we can instead focus on developing further diversity among ABR and AR.