

Artistic and Arts-Based Methodologies in Art Education Master's Theses at Aalto University During 2010–2015

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Abstract

In this article, I write about my master's thesis, in which I analyzed art education master's theses that used arts-based and artistic research, which were completed at Aalto University during 2010-2015. I have organized the theses according to their topics and central concepts. My research shows that the research topics, concepts, and literature used in the theses were often homogenous. The common concepts that emerged from the data included artistic process, experience, embodiment, and tacit knowledge, as well as the difficulty of writing about or articulating them. The theses often used a hermeneutic and/or phenomenological approach.

Keywords: Artistic research, arts-based research, conception of knowledge, embodied knowledge, master's theses

Bio

Outi Koivisto is a visual artist working with various printmaking and drawing techniques. Her works have been presented in many private and group exhibitions. She is also an art educator and currently teaches drawing and printmaking at Pekka Halonen Academy vocational college. She received her MA degree in art education from Aalto University in 2016.

The use of artistic research as a method is often justified by stating that it is a different way of knowing. In my thesis research for the Aalto University Art Education program, I asked what this different way of knowing has meant in student research. By studying all the arts-based or artistic theses submitted by graduate students during the period of 2010-2015, I explored what the data collected from 81 graduate theses reveal about the traditions and ways of conducting artistic research. I explored the kinds of topics, key concepts, and theories that were used in the theses. What conceptions of knowledge were they based on? How is knowledge being produced through art?

In Finland, there are several distinct ongoing discussions concerning artistic and arts-based research. The early phase of artistic knowledge production considered research that took place at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts at the beginning of last decade, and it was influenced by the traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology (Kallio-Tavin, 2013). In Finland, artistic research has been formulated and conceptualized at the Academy of Fine Arts since 1997, when the university launched the doctoral program in fine arts. There is an emphasis in the Academy of Fine Arts on practical experience, as well as an emphasis on production and deepening of knowledge about artistic work. Thus, the focus is a pursuit of increasing the knowledge of visual art about itself, as well as knowledge produced in terms of artistic work (Hannula, 2001). Finnish artistic research has been influenced mostly by approaches developed in European countries such as the United Kingdom; however, artistic and arts-based research within the field of art education has been primarily informed by the North American approaches to arts-based research (Kallio-Tavin, 2013). Some of the studies in the field of art education use methods that aim to use art for producing knowledge about a particular subject. In such studies, art is not applied to the research as a separate production but instead as methodological strategy (Kallio, 2010).

The 81 theses used in my research as foundational data to be analyzed suggest that arts-based and artistic research approaches cannot be thought of as mutually exclusive or entirely different methods. Although this sample included both artistic and arts-based theses, the theses did not necessarily and clearly differ from one another, and making a clear distinction between the two was difficult. Therefore, in my research and analysis of the theses studies conducted by art education students in the Aalto University Art Education program, I

did not make a distinction between artistic and arts-based research but simply referred to both of them using the term *artistic research*.

My data consisted of master's theses from the Art Education program of Aalto University in 2010-2015 that employed artistic methods. During that time period, a total of 219 theses were completed, 81 of which used artistic research methods. Artistic research stands out as the most popular research method applied by students during this time period. For the purpose of analysis, I categorized the theses according to the themes that emerged from the data. While initially reading all the abstracts and then reading the theses more carefully, I recognized recurring thematic elements that seemed interesting. The most common themes and concepts within the data were *artistic processes* (identified 58 times), *identity* (46), and *dialogicality* (31). These themes were also often perceived and discussed as closely related. For example, artistic process and identity appeared together in many cases as major foci for study. Other reoccurring themes that I identified were *experience of a place* (20), *narrativity* (12), *pedagogical approach* (10), *performative writing* (7), *autoethnography in artistic research* (8), and *therapeuticity* (7). The themes were often intertwined in these theses, and usually, a thesis included multiple of these themes. As a key element, the artistic theses often included arranging an *exhibition* (46) of artwork.

The theses including the most common theme, artistic process, usually illustrated the artistic process of the author or the production of an artwork. In some cases, these theses focused on the influence of the author's personal life on the artistic process, inquiring into the ways personal life experiences are present in paintings or other artworks and exploring what guides his or her actions within the painting process.

The second most popular theme was that of identity. Studying one's identity and contemplating different roles that influence one's identity was part of several theses. In the research process, these authors pondered their place in the world and contemplated different roles, such as that of a teacher or an artist. In some theses, the author's own parenthood became part of the research process. The third most popular theme, dialogicality, often refers to a dialogue between verbal and visual components of the process or study. Dialogicality can also be a dialogue between different roles of a researcher as part of an artistic process. The theme *pedagogical approach* refers to theses that have some sort of a pedagogical basis. In some theses, artistic activity was coupled

with pedagogical workshop activity. Some theses employed interviews and inquiries. Theses included in the category of therapeuticity often associated artistic activity with therapeutic effects.

The most common mediums utilized in the theses were painting (34), photography (14), and sculpture or installation (13). Some theses employed more than one medium. Other common mediums were drawing (9) and printmaking (8). Only seven theses used video as an artistic form. Environmental art was used in five theses, four of which focused on natural environment, and one on urban environment. In four theses, the authors used mediums that do not fall under the abovementioned categories, such as performance.

The methodological literature used in the theses was quite homogenous. A majority of the theses used one or more of these books: *Taiteellinen tutkimus* by Kiljunen and Hannula (2001); *Otsikko uusiksi* by Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén (2003); Mira Kallio's (2008, 2010) articles in *Synnyt/Origins* journal; and Jyrki Siukonen's *Tutkiva taiteilija* (2002). Regarding their theoretical backgrounds, the theses usually adhered to a hermeneutic and/or phenomenological approach. The most popular theoretical writers utilized were Juha Varto and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Also, doctoral dissertations from Aalto University, especially dissertations conducted by Jaana Houessou (2010) and Jouko Pullinen (2003), as well as Tarja Pitkänen Walter's dissertation research from the Finnish Academy of Fine Art, were widely used.

Following the initial stages of content and thematic analysis of the theses studies identified as artistic in their methodology or methods, I composed a prototype of a fictional master's thesis. This prototype of an artistic thesis exemplifies the typical qualities and characteristics of the theses based on the prevalence of themes and literature. In addition, this fictional thesis served as the object and testing of my analysis. I critically examined it through the literature employed by the theses. Because the theoretical approach of my thesis is data-driven, in effect, it is based on the data, the fictional thesis illustrates the ways in which the themes appeared within the data and how theory and artistic methods were used. The fictional thesis I created does not imitate any particular thesis among the data, but the crucial aspect in the story is its internal logic. It is in a way a generalization, which combines the most frequently occurring themes. It is a possible one, although not very probable.

My intention is not to claim that all the artistic master's theses are identical. The theses display a considerable amount of variation, and each author had his/her own approach. However, when the theses are observed from afar, certain themes appear as very similar. My objective is to show that despite of all the variation, individuality, and originality, there are repetitive conventions and elements in the methodological approaches and in the use of concepts. Even though some theses within the data did not participate in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition of artistic research, they are a minority.

What emerged as commonalities in relation to the conception of knowledge were researching artistic processes, emphasis on experience and/or embodiment, tacit knowledge (including tacit knowledge related to skill), and difficulty verbalizing knowledge. Knowledge is often perceived as produced through art by intentionally focusing on the artistic process, which in turn is assumed to provide knowledge about artistic knowing.

A common familial topic recurring in the theses was the author's relationship with a childhood family member, and the objective was to find the author's familial roots and articulate identity in the continuum of his or her family. These themes were often serious, even tragic. The authors often processed feelings of sorrow or dealt with difficult life issues in/through their artistic work.

Artistic process was commonly studied by keeping a diary about observations, and it was often documented through photographs. As a presentational and analytical method, it was typical to seek dialogicality by placing diary passages along with the theoretical text. This placement is assumed to bring about a dialogue between theory and praxis. The pursuit for dialogicality regarding the research method was common, especially in relation to visual dialogue. Firsthand experiences were strongly present in the theses, and the topics were often personal. Approaching the topic of a specific study through artistic process and dialogical method often brought the concepts of embodiment and tacit knowledge into the analysis. Embodiment is connected to different phenomenological writers, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The difficulty of verbalizing artistic work and embodied experience was present in many theses.

Overall, the research topics were often personal in the theses embodying these themes. Through these recurring themes, artistic research and knowledge produced by art appeared as mere self-expression and increasing self-awareness. Most of the thesis authors made artwork independently and then arranged

an exhibition to display them. However, this artwork was seldom connected to the professional art world.

Many theses did not seem to participate in the international discussion on arts-based research, and their participation in the Finnish field was also very limited, even though applying different literature and perspectives could provide different approaches and, as a result, diversify forms, methods, and knowledge generated by students. Artistic research available to students prior to 2015 has mainly been defined in Finland by theoretically oriented authors, and even though they treated the method favorably, their writings lacked a relation to practical artmaking. The hermeneutic model, as applied by student researchers, is also problematic because it results in fashioning artistic research after philosophy; art is more material and more prone to close observation in comparison with philosophy. It would also be worth discussing whether referring to artworks produced by contemporary artists, or any product of visual culture, could constitute the theoretical framework for art education master's theses. The theses used in this study did not usually refer to artworks, which resulted in disconnectedness from the art world and lack of relation to the knowledge emerging from contemporary art. My overall analysis of the thesis studies is that the rather theoretically limited perspective could be shifted so that a model for artistic research would not be sought in the way art conforms to the norms of research but in what can be done with art while keeping art in the center of the question.

The data seem to imply that the conception of what kind of knowledge is being pursued through art—or whether it should be used to pursue knowledge in the first place—has not become any easier because the literature upon which the tradition was built was published 15 years ago. To prevent the question from becoming buried under the conventional research practices, the discussion on perception of knowledge, artistic research, and its objectives should be continued.

Reflection on Research Process, Data, and Analysis

The goal of my thesis was to examine the research tradition, not to isolate any particular student or to critique or evaluate a particular method. There are some limitations in my analysis, one of them being the use of a fictional thesis, which offers only a delimited and generalized description of a thesis that does not exist. This approach was nevertheless necessary, and I created

the fictional thesis based on the data in order to avoid focusing my critique on any singular student. Another limitation of the fictional thesis is that it inevitably left a huge number of different perspectives out of the analysis.

Although it was necessary to focus my data by deciding on the criteria for inclusion as well as to evaluate them as a whole, it can also be considered a limitation that I did not evaluate the parts of the theses that were successful. I believe that this solution was necessary because it made it possible for me to show the repetitive forms in the theses. In the group of 81 theses, there were many works that did not include the common methods. I could have focused on analyzing these theses and highlighting the differences instead of similarities, but I thought that the repeated phenomenon was so significant that it was important to point out.

My analysis is also limited because of the way I compiled my data. It only included the theses' abstracts, introductions, theory and method chapters, and references. Analysis and conclusion chapters were left out of the data, and I did not include the artworks from the theses in the data. My analysis therefore only dealt with a limited part of the theses. However, my aim was to initiate further discussion and research, and I hope that by using the fictional thesis to exemplify and critically examine this phenomenon of artistic research in art education theses, my work will generate more discussion concerning what "research by art" could mean in the Art Education program at the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture.

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