

# How can artistic research open up new spaces for knowledge?

Notes from my research residency experience at Helsinki University of the Arts.

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photograph: Juha Rouhikoski

## Abstract-

In this text I will narrate how my experience as research resident at Helsinki University of the Arts re-contextualized and nourished my understanding of knowledge production through art practice, and mainly 'Artistic Research'.

## Key Words-

Artistic Research, social space, knowledge production.

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### Coming to Helsinki University of the Art, *Kuvataideakatemia*. (contextualization of my research)

Introductory note: The coming text was made from my experiences of a 3 months research residency I made in Helsinki University of the Arts. I thank the support of the University that hosted and supported my research, especially Dr. Jan Kaila who supervised the progress of my investigation and writing process.

Helsinki, Autumn, 2013

I saw it as coming to the most north part on Earth. I could not decide for myself whether to come or not. I did not know what to expect from such a faraway place, and I was not sure to have the strength to carry through all the cultural and contextual differences. I knew moving place would inevitably bring changes to my notions and understanding, and would mean, one way or another, a shift from what I had already projected of my research. I was not only nervous for the cold weather and the cultural differences, but specially for being able to reshape my research into new understandings.

My aim for digging deeper on Artistic Research drove me to travel to a Nordic country. As Borgdroff (2009) defends that the Nordic countries have been experiencing the most interesting turns in the field, I felt the urge to experience that discussions and to make my research participant in the construction of this relatively new field<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Caduff and Wälchli (2010) the field of discourse of Artistic Research started at the visual arts at universities in 1990s in the English speaking countries via Scandinavia and the Netherlands and more recently into German- speaking and Eastern European. PhD programs spread in the same pulse.

Together with my supervisor, Fernando Hernández, we decided, that even though it would signify a challenge for both, my work and I, it was an important input for my research, and the only possible time to make it happen was the autumn 2013.

I made all the necessary paperwork between Barcelona and Helsinki universities, the negotiations with Jan Kaila for him to become co-supervisor of my dissertation. Form my research's aim, having both guides (in the one hand the pedagogical perspective with Fernando Hernández and the platform the cultural pedagogies department in Barcelona University; and in the other hand, the artistic scope with Jan Kaila and the perspectives in Artistic Research and contemporary artistic production) was both demanding and nourishing.

When coming to Helsinki I had the target of working in one specific part of my dissertation. The controversial and long timed studied *Artistic Research*. First, I wanted to refer to knowledge production in the artistic process. So, I started tracking related topics I needed to analyze. Artistic Research not only seemed the most polemic one, but also an interesting field full of debates, folds, and opposed positions. A whole universe opened up. Even though, I have been for some years in contact with this concept from my artistic experience, through my artistic education and from my research interests, each time I come closer I find different and viewpoints that disassemble my previous notions.

By making readings, attending seminar, and visiting exhibitions, I collected a body of shared agreements and fragmented disagreements about Artistic Research, from which what intrigue me most were the breaks I could find where authors - mainly artists, theorists and curators- pointed up the 'out of tune' issues. But, even though I value the breaks and disagreements as relevant information to approach Artistic Research, I still feel the need to state a brief overlook of my understanding of what AR could mean. It is important for my dissertation to make a brief resume of the main issues of the topic, because, even though a big amount of literature has been written in this subject, and in most European cities Artistic Research is a well-known term, in other parts of the world as southern Europe and Latin America the term has been adopted recently without been critical enough about the implications and the existing differences in artistic and academic context.

My experience, first as student, then as teacher at the *Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas* in México City, and now as a doctoral student at the *Univestitat de Barcelona* claimed to revise from a general perspective what is meant with Artistic Research. Not specifically in Mexico, Latin America or southern Europe, but in different artistic localities around the world, the investigative

tune that contemporary artistic practices are pushed to adopt more and more are been normalized but not always sharing the internal polyphonic debates.

### **Presentation of my work. How to represent the processes of knowledge production, or how to re-present Artistic Research?**

“The true investigation became the question of how to present research as *research.*” (Schwab, 2010: 60)

*Kuvataideakatemia* is the name of the Fine Arts Academy that is part of the recent University of the Arts Helsinki<sup>2</sup>. The first week I arrived, I was already enrolled to the seminars and academic activities, and I was treated as a regular student. As such, I was asked to make an introductory presentation of my research. What could have been just an everyday count of my work, shifted into a turning point: how to re-narrate my research to communicate with a different body of peers?

I realized I needed to address the people I was communicating with, in this case my colleagues, contemporary artist. It was not just a matter of applying a kind communication tool, but re-phrasing the concepts and notions in my argumentation to make a common understanding. Even though in Barcelona’s program most of us have to do something with art, the context of the Cultural Pedagogies program imprints our dialogues and shapes our notions.

I prepared a presentation to introduce my work, and myself using images and documentation of the artistic process instead of the register of the ‘final works’. But, it was hard making evident the bonds between my artistic experience, and my research interests. Notions as fundamental as ‘*pedagogical*’, ‘*research*’, ‘*discursive*’, ‘*knowledge*’, ‘*practice*’ had such a different connotation in an art-practice-based context. This way, I realized I needed to introduced new argumentations that helped as mediators to bridge this gap:

The concept *pedagogical* needed to be understood outside the educational frontiers of school, as a social relational link established during the art making, re-presentation, and re-signification processes.

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<sup>2</sup> Merging together the arts academies (Sibelius- music Academy, Teak –Theater and performance Academy, and Kuva- fine arts Academy) in Helsinki was a process of arts academies becoming a university.

Legitimizing arts studies as university studies means to approve and support the knowledge production that the arts are making. In other places of the world this is discussion is set differently due to the universities organization, and therefore the conceptual and methodological debates are focus in other aspects. See Elkins (eds.) (2009) *Artists with PhDs*.

*Research* claimed coherence and transparency in the decision-making. Distinguishing a common interest or an experience from research; therefore to distinguish Artistic Research from art making. (Hernandez, 2006; 2012)

Knowledge not as a fix object that can be reached and kept but as Ellsworth (2005) defends: “If the experience of knowledge in the making is also the experience of our selves in the making, then there is no self who preexists the learning experience.”(: 2)

Space is another concept that needed to be understood away from the binary container/ content and as Lefebvre (1991) stated. (Social) space is the product of the established social relationships. This shift implies that any object or place it is not a space for things to happen but was already the result of social interactions.

In any case, these are the core concepts in my investigation, and I have been all the time sculpting them; while re-phrasing them I had re-shaped my work ones and again.

### AR practicum

One of the seminars that surprised me most in the doctoral program in Kuvataideakatemia was called **Artistic Research Practicum**. More than a seminar, it could be considered a workshop in the sense that it intends not only to explain, analyze, share or debate research, but –in the same terms Esa Kirkkopelto and Jan Kaila proposed- it seeks for disseminating the knowledge each of the student’s artistic research project has constructed.

I was part of a (more or less) 12 people group composed by both students from the theatre and the fine arts academies. The presentation’s of all the student’s research projects was the core of the Practicum. Each researcher had to prepare a 40 minutes ‘re-presentation’ to communicate what she felt relevant for others to know about her work. The main task here was to experiment with how our research could be shared, or disseminated? The question for *re-presentation* became a loop or a fold in itself; finding tactics to *re-present re-presentations* in a way they ones again *became*, they *happened*, or *occurred*; they took place. By naming and referring the re-presentation system, I was using it, making it evident. The time, the place, and the participants were relevant pieces of the happening. Neither the *white-cubeness* of a classical exhibition show, nor an academic (slide) presentation, were media sharp enough to spread the learning experience our Artistic Researches. But then, how are we going to adopt, transport, appropriate, create new formats and spaces for extent the artistic knowledge?

### *My practicum*

Due to my temporal condition as a visiting researcher, I proposed myself for the first presentation turn in the course. Since I did not have much time ahead in my stay, and it seemed as very challenging experiment, I took the chance to experiment. Ranya Kahlil, a regular doctoral student in the theater academy, and I should start the next session after we had met the group for the first time and we have conveyed the general objectives and rules for the coming sessions.

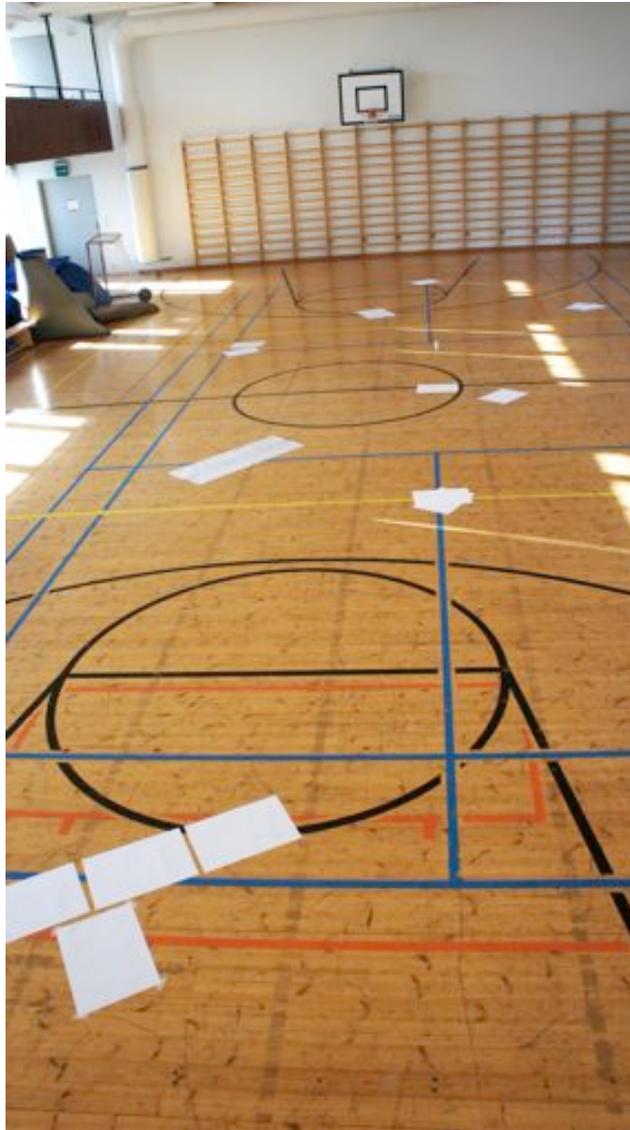
For two week I thought over and over the question that Esa and Jan planted on us: **How to present my research in such a way to make my peers part of the knowledge is being produced?** That would mean not only to tell (explain) the objectives, methodology (or way of working) and some kind of results, but to make my colleagues part of the reflexive process in the re-presentation of my research.

### *The day of the 'presentation', October 4*

Ranya started with the first presentation of that day. She performed a lecture about her work. She showed mainly videos and text quotes that inscribed her production with philosophical concepts. She quoted well-known authors to explain her interests and the train of thought through her research. She performed a neat and clear, very precise presentation of some of her video work and contextualized that with the ideas that moved her to think into that direction.

While I was listening to her, and watching her videos, I asked myself what was being shared in this presentation? And, because of my obsessive interests, what kind of pedagogical relation were we (the audience) and her, being part of? Were we actually constructing knowledge together?, and if so, was this knowledge collected as part of her research? I did not out spoke these questions since they were not part of her body of interest but from mine.

Then the time of my presentation arrived. We moved to another room, it was a basketball gymnasium in which we had more space, no chairs, and I thought it gave more the idea of making.



photograph: Natalia Calderón

Curiously, I thought about what my peers needed to do for my presentation, but I forgot myself as part of the group. After explaining my proposal (I asked from them to ‘trace the spaces of knowledge’ in their own practice) I was in the middle of the room as a spectator, a *voyeur*. I realized I was representing my researcher role not in the way I had performed through my fieldwork. I had “erased” the researcher out the situation. During the presentation I acted as a passive photographer instead of an active reflexive agent. Without noticing, I performed the role of the researcher as body-less spectator.



photograph: Natalia Calderón

In advance, I had informed the group with the some hints of my research's concepts and a list of questions to think through. I out-spoke the intentions behind my intervention: "It will not be enough to have a(n) (common) experience, anyhow that happen inevitably, but, my objective is to make that experience meaningful through the ideas that I (we) share/shape."

Then after a short remainder of Lefebvre's *social space* concept, I invited them to think in their own research practice as a social space through the questions:

- Who are the engaged agents (people, situations, concepts) in your research?
- By which places or media do you reach them?
- Trace how they relate each other.
- Identify (name / delineate) the different relations are being established.
- Shape the spaces you had constructed.
- What difficulties do you face when trying this?

People found a place in the floor to sit. Some used the white paper that I had left as an invitation device, and some used their own material. They were especially worried about if they had to make communicable their findings. I was worried to behave as a teacher saying the instructions they must follow.

At the beginning we all were expectant for the others. Some people concentrated in their thoughts and others kept watching around trying to make an idea of what to make. As some started, the others felt more confident and followed with their own.

After 20 minutes all together we commented on the experience. We spoke to decode and comprehend the spaces each researcher had traced. We did not have enough time to comment on all, but we build a common understanding of my what my research meant with tracing spaces of knowledge production.

I identified two main problems my research was facing while the common debate:

- 1- an existing gap between the *tracing* or the *artistic production of space of knowledge* and its re-presentation. In this case how my peers spoke of it make it communicable; and
- 2- the space we were creating between us debating what production of knowledge could mean in each one's research.



photograph: Juha Rouhikoski

There were several issues that my colleagues commented and worried them, such as if they had become co-researchers (at least for that moment) in my project. From my viewpoint more than adding co-researchers so easily (I wish I could), my colleagues became peers, co-informants with whom to talk and debate specialized issues.

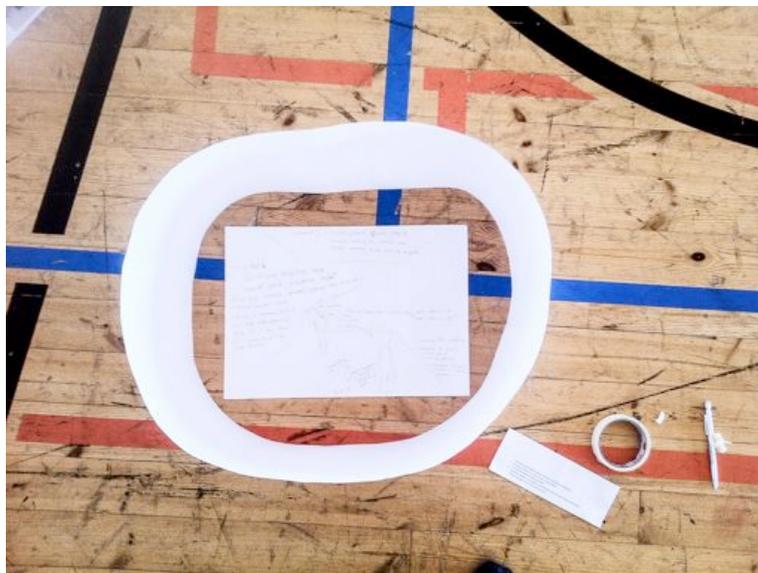
The presentation finished and each of the participants was asked to write one-page feedback for the presentations in the coming days.

### Feedback

The first feedback I received was Simo Kellokump's text. He noted about the existing distance between the lived experience and the generation of knowledge. "How do I know I know[?, ] where am I in the actions of trying to articulate through different medias my experience about this given situation[?]" I read his outline as stressing the inside-out position of the researcher when, at the same time, he has to experience the learning process and interpret it. That led me to think how a re-presentation of the lived experience happens when signifying the situation from particular cultural, contextual and political viewpoint. In any learning experience an encounter between one's previous ideas or understandings face a new situation that will be informed by time and place

specificities. The dialogue that happens between these two (or more) approaches, and the twisted re-presentation gear is, finally, the threads that weave the process of production of knowledge. At the end, living an experience, interpreting and analyze it at the same time, will be materialized in the changes the researcher suffer through his or her venture.

But to respond on Simo's shared curiosity on *how to be aware of what one is knowing?* Hernández states that the difference between experience and knowledge production is that knowledge is a signified experience (Hernández, 2008 y 2014). That means that even though any experience could bring me a learning process, knowledge is tight to the signifying action I construct; and therefore, the analysis of signifying an experience, is the possibility of the awareness of knowing. Inevitably this new experience will be *colored* by my previous ones, and its signification will not be neutral, it will drag certain standing point. At the end Simo could be aware of what he knows if he analyze the *colored* and *coloring* signification processes through his experiences.



photograph: Natalia Calderón

### Re-presentation of Artistic Research

Another important nourishing experience I had at KUVA was participating in the seminar “What do we mean by artistic research?” where I met Annette Arlander. Annette Arlander was the first artist in Finland to be awarded as Doctor in Arts in 1999 her artistic research has been built through her long time performances. While *performing landscape*, as Arlander would say of her own practice,

she has developed a body of work within the approaches of situated knowledge. She understands Artistic Research as part of a much broader epistemological perspective towards situated knowledge, embodied knowledge, and acknowledging the subjectivity away from the, sort of, Cartesian bird's-eye-view. (interview with Annette Arlander, November 13, 2013 Kuvataideakatemia, Helsinki)

Annette has been investigating since 2003 the idea of performing landscapes, documenting this with video and sound recording while standing or just being in a place for long periods of time. I decided to talk to her and ask her about how she preserves Artistic Research in her work due to my interest between space (site specificity), and embodied knowledge or localized research. I tried to explore Artistic Research through certain *pedagogical site specificity* (which I understand not limited to the scholar environment, but for any kind of learning relationship one can build with different environments or contexts).

Is there any specific space for Artistic Research? And if so, where does Artistic Research take place?

Artistic Research does not only happen in the art academies or art schools. Artistic Research includes other learning spaces, communities of knowledge production that start from the same artistic practice, converse with its audience, and relate not only with the academy, but also with society in general. Annette explained that even though for many the space of Artistic Research is the in-between zone, between the art world and the academia, when she made her dissertation she spoke about “building a bridge between this two, but much later it has evolved an area which it’s not a bridge but is really an area that has sort of tangential zones with the university, of course, humanistic university, and has tangential zones with the art world or art market and just practical world. But the core of the Artistic Research is the in-between and in that sense it’s a very especial area.” (interview with Annette Arlander, November 13, 2013 Kuvataideakatemia, Helsinki)

### **From the general to my perspective of Artistic Research.**

How to *replace* my research as a contextual based or context informed research?

When I made my introductory presentation, when I just came to Helsinki, Jan advised me to be careful not to place my research in the metaphysical level, and to narrate my own approach to this huge concept.

Slager (2012) would say that there is implicit violence in a disembodied viewpoint or attempt of knowledge production that generates fixed forms of perception, and thus of representation it can be understood “as a product of the will of represent, [...] as a rigid scopic regime where multiformity and diversity have been reduced to levels of equivalence.” (: 76).

Since “The only way one can talk in a sensible way about artistic research and artistic knowledge production is by stating from the practice of concrete research projects.” (Slager, 2012: 69), and it was not at all the aim of my investigation, to treat Artistic Research in a general or universal way, I worried to go back and rephrase the communication structure I was using. The generalizations I was using responded to a necessity to organize my understanding of an unstable, controverted and form my contextual perspective recent and not well-known field.

It is important to highlight that even though Artistic Research is currently one of the main issues for contemporary art debate, it varies from one culture to another how is it understood and achieved. Even if art schools or universities have in their program a doctorate in art practice, the approaches for bounding art and research has more to do with art historic or philosophic approaches (Elkins, 2012) that exploring new possible ways of investigating through art making.

### **Open and movable definitions of Artistic Research**

Over the past decades different thinkers: artist, philosophers, art historians, curators, sociologists, art educators have discussed thought seminars, symposia, conferences, open debates, publications, exhibitions, biennials, artistic projects, and other diverse forms and formats their different perspectives around the idea of *Artistic Research*. And although researching by art-making has been doing for centuries, the concept designates the contemporary artistic practices that seeking to direct their aims towards the production and dissemination of knowledge.

One of the most radical agreements that has not changed even though contrasting times, places and perspectives is the idea of not limiting this concept over one unique definition; that would impose one way of production of knowledge over the others. Conciliate one artistic research definition would immediately impose not only a homogenization of artistic knowledge production, but would mean making a scale of values, that would only make sense from the hierarchical perspective.

Borgdorff defends Artistic Research distinguishes from Research traditions in natural sciences, humanities or social science models for using unconventional forms of documentation and dissemination (2011: 45). “Another distinguishing feature is that contemporary art practice constitutes the relevant context for the research alongside the academic forum.” (:46) But, is

Artistic Research particularly tied to an academic forum? In parallel, Slager (2013) has a broader spectrum for where artistic research can take place not only within the academy, but through institutional environments. "...it intends to contribute to the debate on artistic understanding and knowledge production in an innovative and boundary-transforming manner; it is open to giving account of itself and subject to peer review in a discursive and public way ; and therefore, and therefore artistic research mainly takes place in an institutional environment." ( :25)

There used to be a distinction while locating the artistic production in the exhibition displays systems; I am referring to galleries, museums, art fairs, or *kunsthalls*, and in the other hand the academy, art schools or universities to be the place for Artistic Research. Through the past of years and the urgency spread to debate of artistic production of knowledge issues, not only curatorial projects, but concerned entire world wide exhibitions as *documenta 13* which dedicated time, space and thoughts to reflect on the relation between art and research and how could artistic research can be shown, displayed, disseminated.

Artistic Research cannot be denominated as such either by the environment in which it is produced, the kind issues it is questioning, the methodology is used, nor by the space in which it is shown. Therefore, analyzing *when* or *where* art making can be called or transformed into artistic research is more productive for my research interests, that making one rigid and fragile definition of it. An approach to a ground that leave the borders open to be criticized, defeated and re(in)formed.

Partly inspired by the institutional critique of the 1970s – taking place through informal, textual, expositional and didactic strategies – the practice of current of public art seems to come forth as an aesthetics defining the notion of space anew. In this aesthetics the notion of space is understood as a discursive construct: space as a platform for knowledge, intellectual exchange and cultural debate. Today artists engage in societal, social historical and political themes as fields of research. (Slager 2012:42)

Artistic Research still faces a very problematic approach, and not because of its transgressive character, but because of isolating itself from the rest of the knowledge production fields, in the romantic idea. I am sure Artistic Research can and should find new ways to research, media, methodology, formats, times and scopes, but if Artistic Research wants to communicate and debate its findings with the rest of the epistemic world, then, it need to find ways engage within the research agenda in a way researchers not only from the art field can understand and find relevant to the general cognitive sphere. Thereafter, Artistic Research can make meaningful contributions that

can even shift the agreed idea of research. This means to be in productive communication with the epistemic fields.

Beyond *taking place*, the aim of my research is to track and show how artistic research makes place, and I am specifically interested on the educational places artistic research constructs. The question I post is: How does Artistic Research makes places of learning?, either inside the academy, or anywhere?

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