

## **Title Notes On Interdisciplinary Methodology of Artistic Research: A Case Study of Visual Thinking and Mapping**

### **Título in Spanish**

**Notas Sobre Interdisciplinario de Metodología de la Investigación Artística: Un estudio de caso de Pensamiento Visual y Cartografía**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of this presentation is to bridge the gap between the socially constructed identities of the artist and researcher as well as to reflect on methodologies used both by artists and researchers in humanities and social sciences.

In the presentation rich with pictures I would like to discuss several possible methodologies like mapping and visual (and material) thinking. My conclusions will be based on artistic research project *photo/carto/historio/graphies* (2007-2008) which I co-curated together with two curators. It was a collection of maps and other visual thinking artifacts with 4 exhibitions, a book and a blog. My role was multi-layered since I acted as researcher and artist producing artifacts for the exhibition together with curating the project and its exhibitions and editing the book.

At the same time we were researching and making objects which constituted an archive. After some selection, the archive was installed in the exhibitions spaces; some of the material was used during the performance. The biggest part of the archive consisted of different types of maps.

The research methods were increasing in number at the same speed as the size of the archive:

- 1) imaginary – mind maps;
- 2) spatial – the exhibition and 3D objects;
- 3) performative;
- 4) editorial – the book.

In the presentation I would like to argue mostly on the methodology of mapping as one of the most powerful and interesting way of bridging together experiences and methods of the artists and researchers. I would make a detail analysis of some maps (an example is below) and I will try to contextualize and theorize them.

### **Key words**

Mapping, visual writing, material thinking, visualization, identities and roles of researchers

### **Extended Abstract in Spanish**

El objetivo de esta presentación es cerrar la brecha entre las identidades socialmente construidas de la artista e investigadora, así como para reflexionar sobre las metodologías utilizadas tanto por los artistas e investigadores en humanidades y ciencias sociales. Tengo experiencia como artista , investigadora en humanidades y ciencias sociales y curador . Por el momento estoy teniendo una beca post- doctoral a partir de marzo 2013 a 2015 de febrero para trabajar en el proyecto " Investigación Artística: Metodologías, intersecciones con las Humanidades y las Ciencias Sociales estudio de investigación y Caso lituana Media Art ", que se traducirá en un libro.

En la presentación rico con fotos que me gustaría discutir varias metodologías posibles , como la cartografía y visual (y materiales) de pensar. Mis conclusiones se basan en la investigación artística proyecto fotográfico / carto / historiográfica / grafías (2007-2008) que co - comisariado junto con dos comisarios. Era una colección de mapas y otros artefactos pensamiento visual con 4 exposiciones, un libro y un blog. Mi papel era multi- capas ya actué como investigador y artista que produce artefactos para la exposición junto con el comisariado del proyecto y sus exposiciones y la edición del libro.

Al mismo tiempo que estábamos investigando y haciendo que los objetos que constituían un archivo. Después de alguna selección, el archivo se instaló en los espacios de exposiciones , una parte del material fue utilizado durante la actuación. La mayor parte del archivo constaba de diferentes tipos de mapas: especulaciones dibujados a mano, mapas mentales, constelaciones casi científica de los datos , las previsiones sobre el pasado , cruces intermedial , proyecciones de imágenes mentales individuales y colectivos , etc

Los métodos de investigación fueron aumentando en número a la misma velocidad que el tamaño del archivo. No había ninguna metodología clara en el comienzo de la investigación, aparte de algunas pautas. Sin embargo, mirando hacia atrás, puedo definir las metodologías de investigación artísticos utilizados en el proyecto de la siguiente manera:

- 1 ) imaginarios - mapas mentales ;
- 2 ) espacio - la exposición y objetos 3D ;
- 3 ) performativa ;
- 4 ) editorial - el libro.

En la presentación, me gustaría discutir sobre todo en la metodología de la cartografía como una de la forma más potente e interesante de tender un puente juntos experiencias y métodos de los artistas e investigadores. Me gustaría hacer un análisis de detalle de algunos mapas (un ejemplo es abajo) y voy a tratar de contextualizar y teorizar ellos.

Uno puede preguntarse ¿cuál es el estado de un mapa de este en particular o cualquier otro proyecto. Es una visualización de la investigación ? Pertenece a la teoría o la práctica? Es un proyecto en el camino a algunas conclusiones? Es el resultado de una lluvia de ideas colectiva o el proceso de visualizar lo conocido y lo desconocido? O es tal vez una obra de arte? Yo respondería : o bien ninguno de estos o todo junto, ya que entran en una zona de en - entre - ness inherente a la investigación artística.

También podemos hacer dos preguntas esenciales que delimitan la frontera entre el arte y la investigación. Si estos mapas son la investigación, cuál es el método que se basa en? Puede alguien más obtener los mismos o similares resultados cuando se aplica el mismo método? De lo contrario, los mapas pueden ser clasificadas como arte, si no son hechas por los artistas (y, más bien, por los curadores e investigadores de arte en este caso en particular ) .

### **Key words in Spanish**

Cartografía, la escritura visual, el pensamiento de material, la visualización, las identidades y los roles de los investigadores

### **Personal Approach and Reflection on Practice**

”Artistic research” has recently become a trendy word in the circles of higher art education. It has

many faces and there is no mutual agreement between artists, theorists, and science and education policymakers on its precise definition. I am aware that to define it would take some hundreds of pages. One can already identify different schools of “artistic research”, since numerous publications have emerged. The goal of this paper is to map and delineate the methodologies of artistic research in the context of media art and media studies. However, the paper does not pursue an objective and all-encompassing analysis, but is rather based on one detailed case study. Therefore, while describing the case study and analysing it, I will provide some insights about the forms in which artistic research might come. This also includes the aim to ascertain what kinds of issues artistic research might address. The factor that has necessitated these reflections is my 7 years teaching experience (since 2005) and “artistic research” practice. During these years I have been teaching humanities, social sciences and fine arts students in both universities and art academies. Therefore, I want to develop an approach to artistic research based purely on my own practice and some readings of recent literature on the issue. My interest in artistic research originates in an ambivalent practice that I started 10 years ago, when I began writing about art while being an artist myself. After several years of this practice I graduated with an MA degree in Communication Studies, having defended a thesis on the triadic model of photography analysis. In 2005 I began my PhD studies at the Communication Department of Vilnius University, and graduated in 2010 with a PhD thesis titled “Photography as Medium Dispositif in the 1960s–80s in Lithuania”. During all those 5 years I was carrying out various artistic projects as an artist and curator. The experience of my practice, research and teaching formed a basis which makes it possible to reflect and develop a few new insights.

### **Artistic Research as Practice: Case Study of Mapping Lithuanian Photography**

Coming back to my personal practice, I would like to discuss several issues in the context of visual writing. How can curatorial research be validated as artistic research? What could visual thinking reveal to us, and what distinguishes “visual writing” from textual writing? What is the role of a person who makes objects for an exhibition but is not an artist?

In 2007, together with two art researchers, dr. Agnė Narušytė and Lina Michelkevičė, I initiated a collective research and curatorial project “Mapping Lithuanian Photography: Histories and Archives”, also known as *photo/carto/historio/graphies*. We invited several other researchers, curators and artists, as well as an architect and a designer, to take part in the process, and this collective work evolved into 2 site-specific exhibitions with a collection of maps, visual-spatial objects, installations and art pieces, a blog and a book titled “Mapping Lithuanian Photography: Histories and Archives”<sup>1</sup>.

The project was based on the following research questions:

- How does history come into being? Who creates the history of Lithuanian photography and in what way?
- What visual and textual signs ‘textualise’ this history in the present?
- What personal history of photography can I draw from the perspective of here and now?
- What is artistic research and what right and power it has to rethink and replay the history of ideas?

- How can one use mapping strategies not merely as a ground for visual representation of ideas, links and contexts, but also as tools for discovering, understanding and re-creating them?

These questions formed a base for our artistic research; nevertheless, the outcomes received during the process were not based on any clear methodology devised beforehand. The research and production process was rather spontaneous and rhizomatic. Sometimes we knew what to expect, sometimes we arrived at dead-ends, but most of the time visual 2D or 3D objects came after the research and production process. Of course we had a framework in our heads and the process had to end up in two exhibition spaces. These were two galleries of the Lithuanian Union of Art Photographers, and the reputation of their programme was mostly exhibitions by their members and some classical art photography.

We placed our object of study – the history of Lithuanian photography – in the expanded field of photography and even media art; therefore, the outcomes were breaking through the classical models of photography. We did not seek positivistic objectivity, and part of our research was fictional and speculative, which was fruitful because it opened new insights and viewpoints on the researched issues. The only thing which limited the scope of our research was time.

At the same time we were researching and making objects which constituted an archive. After some selection, the archive was installed in the exhibitions spaces; some of the material was used during the performance. The biggest part of the archive consisted of different types of maps: hand-drawn speculations, mind maps, almost scientific constellations of data, forecasts about the past, intermedial crossroads, projections of individual and collective mental images, etc.

The research methods were increasing in number at the same speed as the size of the archive. There was no clear methodology in the beginning of research apart from some guidelines.

However, looking back, I can define the artistic research methodologies used in the project as follows:

- 1) imaginary – mind maps;
- 2) spatial – the exhibition and 3D objects;
- 3) performative;
- 4) editorial – the book.

Let's have a closer look at these methodologies. The first one, which I call "**imaginary**", could be described as a way of using your imagination to draw a map on a specific topic. Of course, some of the maps in our project were based on more or less detailed factual data and more or less tangible knowledge. Some of them were entirely based on facts, like "The distribution of photographers within almanacs "Lietuvos fotografija" (1967–1984) and Yearly Books of Art Photography (1997–2006)"<sup>ii</sup>". Only the hand-drawn aesthetic suggests to the viewer that this map is rough and kind of imaginary. However, all the other elements in it have connotations based on data: the wider the flow, the more pictures were published in the respective year, and the more intensive the colour – the more represented the photographer was. The roughness brings the viewer into a different level of experience and understanding, despite the factual data present. Some of the audience was merely

enjoying the form, omitting the factual content. However, if the same data was presented in more technical shape, it might have gained the status of more trustworthy research.

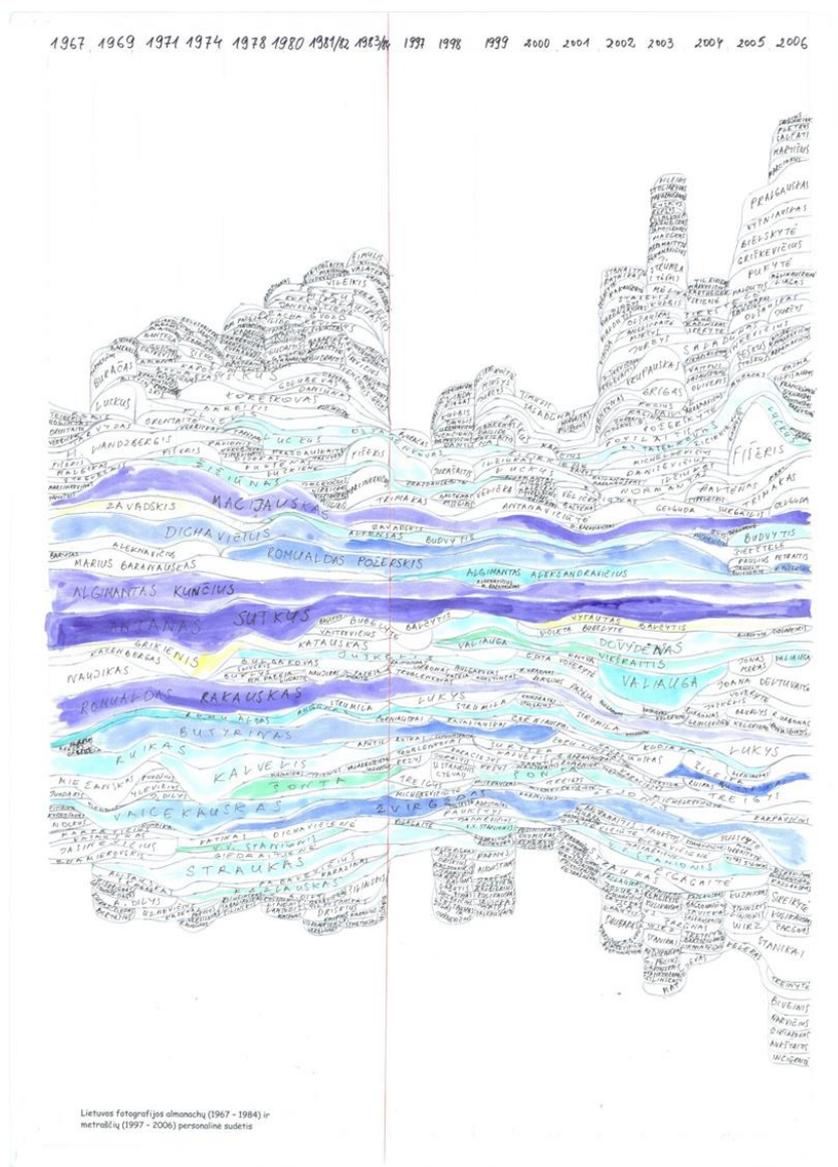


Figure 1: 3xposition.lt “The distribution of photographers within almanacs “Lietuvos fotografija” (1967–1984) and Yearly Books of Art Photography (1997–2006)

Another quite different example might be the map of history clouds titled “The Map of the History of Lithuanian Photography with White Spaces<sup>iii</sup>”. It represents individual knowledge and knowledge gaps about Lithuanian Photography. At first sight it looks very subjective and personal; however, it is based on expert knowledge in the specific field. The solid clouds represent decades researched to some extent, whereas the dashed lined clouds represent partly researched decades, and the space in-between is unknown fields, marshlands and lakes of uncertainty.

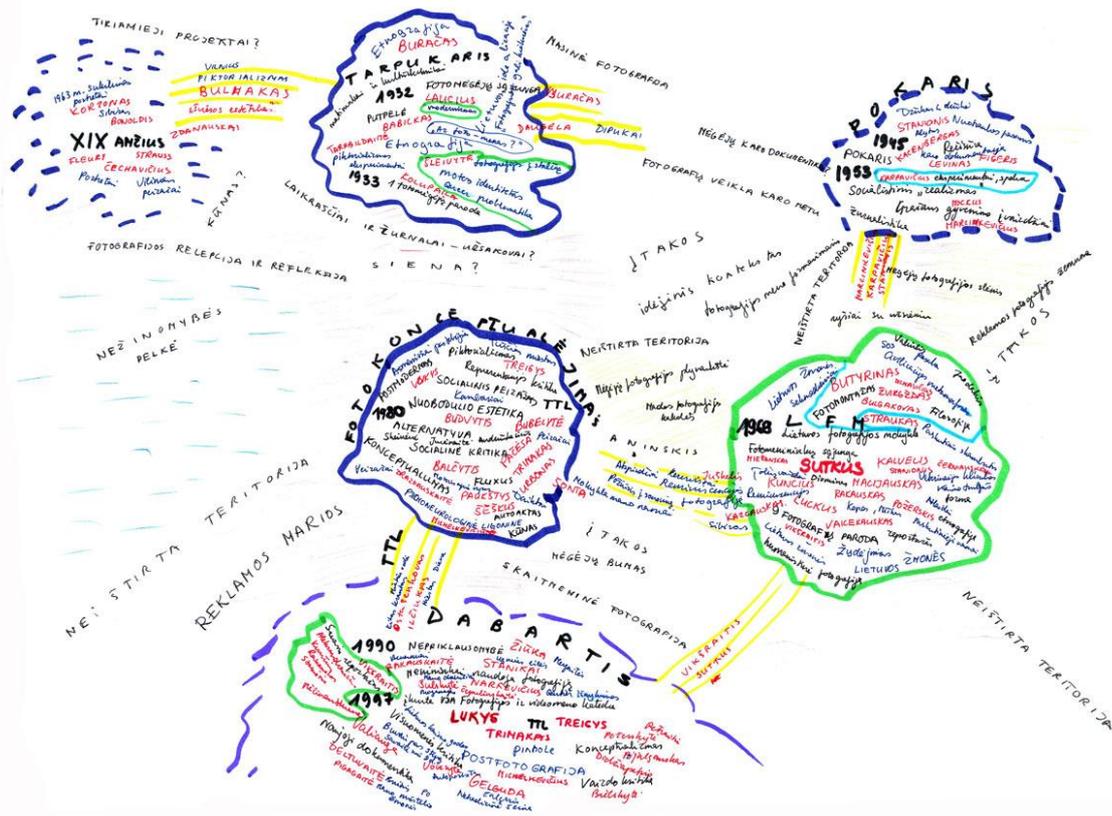


Figure 2: 3xposition.lt *The Map of the History of Lithuanian Photography with White Spaces*

One can ask what the status of a map in this project is. Is it a visualisation of research? Does it belong to theory or practice? Is it a draft on the way to some findings? Is it an outcome of collective brainstorm or the process of visualising the known and the unknown? Or is it perhaps a piece of art? I would answer: either none of these or everything together, since they enter a zone of in-betweenness inherent to artistic research.

We can also ask two essential questions that delineate the border between art and research. If these maps are research, what is the method it is based on? Could anybody else get the same or similar results when applying the same method? Otherwise, can the maps be classified as art, if they are not made by artists (and, rather, by curators and art researchers in this particular case). Without identifying a clear method and defined role of the maker, it is not easy to define what these maps are.

The maps brought new knowledge and served as sources for new experience, although they were not based on any clear methodology or artistic input. Because of these ambivalent qualities and their nature, they could be treated as artistic research. They also demonstrated qualities of both theory and practice. Therefore, it would be most accurate to consider them as the outcomes of performative thinking where new knowledge was attained during the performance of drawing and visualizing. These maps also contain both tangible and intangible (tacit) knowledge, because there is much more space for production and interpretation of a visual body than of a textual body. Both visual and textual representation of ideas gives a more complex view of the specific research issue.

The exhibition also contained 3D objects installed in the space, which qualified as **spatial** research methodology. One example would be the “Icon of Lithuanian Photography”, composed of 3

translucent cubes made of plexiglass images. The basis for this object was the assumption that it was possible to deduce an iconic image that would represent the visual essence of Lithuanian photography. We selected a certain amount of photographs, representing different interpretations of three genres (i.e. nude, portrait and landscape), which we supposed had long served as a fundament of the Lithuanian photography tradition. The most “quoted” photographs were placed in front and the rarest interpretations of the particular genre remained in the back. For example, in the nude cube the romantic female nudes were placed in the front, whereas a nude of a man was put in the back as the most unconventional approach to this genre in the Lithuanian context. Such a “diagram” was displayed in the exhibition space. Standing in front of it, the viewer experienced something “in-between”, which we considered to be an outcome of research. Nevertheless, s/he could also go around and face the individual images as particular representations of “the icon”.



Figure 3: 3xposition.lt “Icon of Lithuanian Photography”, transparent plexi-glas cubes from exhibition Mapping Lithuanian Photography, 2007

The same questions arose here. What is this cube? Is it a piece of art? Or is it an outcome of the research process? Who made it? Therefore, its status is considered to be ambivalent. From the perspective of the intention (to present the most iconic photograph), it could be called a product of curatorial research; however, its aesthetical form refers to an art piece. To be called an art piece, it lacks association with any specific author. If we want to define the methodology employed in its making, we will fail. Rather, we have to rely on Henk Borgdorff’s statement that artistic research ‘favours “methodological pluralism” and it is “material thinking”’: “artistic research centres on the practice of making and playing. Practicing the arts (creating, designing, and performing) is intrinsic to the research process. And artworks and art practices are partly the material outcomes of the research.<sup>iv</sup>” “Material thinking” is a concept which brings art practice and research closer to each other and helps to get rid of the undefined situation. When thinking translates into a visual or spatial object, one might say that it is a form of artistic research. Therefore, “material thinking” helps to define the process where researchers were doing both things at the same time: thinking and making. “Visual thinking” is a form of material thinking when somebody is thinking and leaving visual traces of the process, for example maps.

To the **spatial** research category we can also assign the installation of the exhibition itself. It has a particular spatial structure which leads the spectator through the exhibited material. The way the objects are installed adds a meaning to their content. The spectator was invited into a space filled with hanging maps for two reasons: to get a feeling of being lost and to have an opportunity to compare different views of history expressed in different maps. The maps themselves could also be

treated as products of spatial research, since they bring knowledge into geographical planes and arrange it in spatial sets of visual and textual elements. Although the maps are flat, they are direct representations of space, both real and metaphorical.

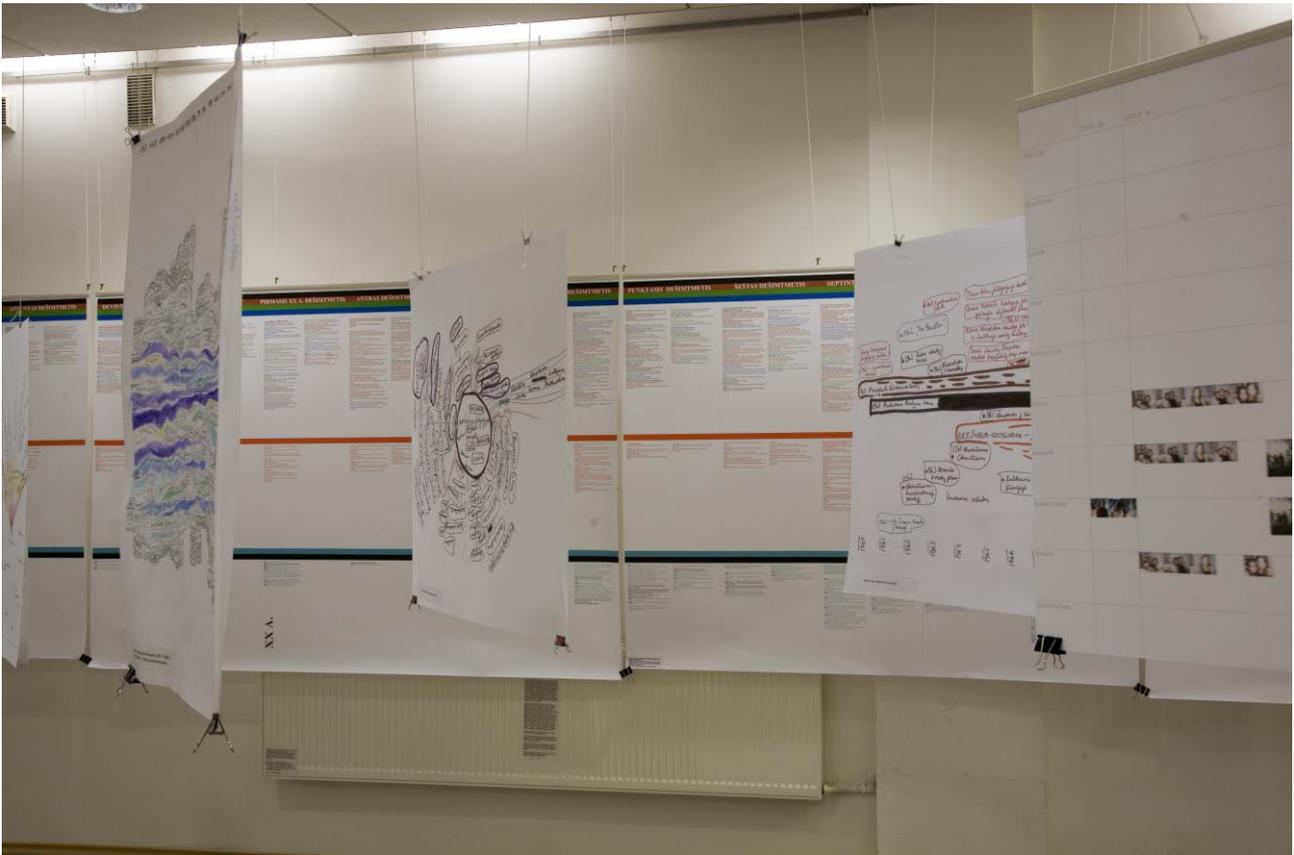


Figure 4: 3xposition.lt *Installation of maps, exhibition view from Mapping Lithuanian Photography, 2007*

The third artistic research methodology might be called a **performative** one. A few days before the exhibition, we assigned one small space in the gallery for performative research action. Each of the three curators took a pile of books and made photocopies of the photographs they liked the most. After that we came into the space with empty walls and started picking pictures and gluing them onto the walls. The constellation of pictures and their paths was guided by each curator's logic, knowledge and experience. Individual labyrinths came into life very intuitively, until they met each other, and the walls were fully covered. The performance of selection and arrangement lasted for three days, and the result was to be seen during the exhibition. We called the space "The room of abundance", and the spectator could experience the enormosity of the archive of Lithuanian photography. One could also consider it as personal walks throughout the history of Lithuanian Photography, and the final outcome might be treated as the documentation of the exhibition curators' performance. Again, it did not have any clear methodology in the beginning, but in retrospect I could say that we relied on performative thinking. What is the outcome of this performance in the light of the art and research context? It is basically a room full of pictures, where one would spend quite a bit of time to trace and follow the paths of connected photographs. If you treat this "installation" as an archive, you will not be able to identify the methodology of putting the elements into the archive. It is neither art historical research nor a product of artistic practice. One might call it an outcome of curatorial research, but it has much more levels and planes than a

curator's sketchbook.



Figure 5: 3xposition.lt *Documentation of the performance “The room of abundance” and its process in the exhibition Mapping Lithuanian Photography, 2007*

The fourth strategy carried out in this project was **editorial research**. It was based on editorial and curatorial decisions that extended the context and the scope of the exhibition. Some writers were invited to contribute to the topic and help answer the research questions. The selection of writers and translation of the task to them was a part of the research process, with a collection of final texts as a result. A graphic designer was invited to develop the collected material into a book, which was not a catalogue (documentation of the exhibition), but instead an independent piece aiming at presenting maps and installations and bringing into light new relations between different types of material. Therefore, the role of the editors was to moderate the process and to translate one type of knowledge into the other.

Moreover, the exhibition included a few pieces made by artists who were invited to contribute to the topic. In this case, their participation was viewed as traditional artistic practice – producing work that addressed the curatorial concept. From another point of view, they were also doing artistic research; however, the nature of their methodology was different from ours, and one would have to write a separate article to discuss these issues.

### **CONCLUSIVE NOTES about Artistic Research Methodologies (of Mapping)**

In the light of artistic research, maps and 3D diagrams of plexi-glass cubes, as well as other objects, could be seen as the products of both fields: art practice and research. Therefore, we can speak about them as the products of artistic research.

In the beginning of the project, it was really important to leave the preconceived notions about what is curatorial and art historical research behind, and to open ourselves up for new formats of thinking and presenting the outcomes. Therefore I can agree with Henk Slager that “the result [of artistic research] is not a fixed concept or a static point, but the indication of a zone, leaving unmarked room for the continuation of artistic experiment. As a consequence, artistic research continually produces novel connections in the form of multiplicities characterized by temporary, flexible constructions”<sup>v</sup>. These connections were seen in the multitude of maps and other visual objects in this project.

The act of “visualisation” was playing quite an important role in the making of this project. After the analysis of the project, I can agree with David Stiles’ statement that visualisation and visual

representation can be used not only to illustrate the research findings, but also as a process and method of research<sup>vi</sup>.

In their methodological book „Visualising Research“, Carole Gray and Julian Malins state that the function of visualisation is to present ideas in visual form through a range of techniques in order to 1) explore research project issues and 2) present research findings<sup>vii</sup>. Furthermore, one can add a third function: the visual overview of complex material which facilitates scientific discussion and the discovery/emergence of new insights and connections because the maps make visible the knowledge which was intangible or unseen. Visual statements are sometimes more convincing than textual because of their directness and obviousness. For example, it goes without saying that 4-5 photographers were the most popular in the Soviet times; nevertheless, only the map revealed the level of their domination in the discourse in a visually convincing way. I can add one more insight: since the maps were mostly about power networks and their effects, a corresponding method to reveal them was chosen, as visualization is more powerful to present outcomes than text, and networks are better seen when they are visual.

In order to cope with the complexity of networks, we can summon Bruno Latour with his actor-network theory. It gives us two useful notions which we can employ to validate „mapping“ as a methodology for tracing networks:

- A panorama allows one to see everything and nothing at the same time, as it is merely a framed and constructed image. Latour calls it a “big picture” view. Even though panoramas have serious limitations as they are at the risk to become too blind, local, and partial due to their high ambitions, they have to be studied carefully, because they provide the only possibility to view the whole story at once<sup>viii</sup>.
- The oligopticon is the opposite of Foucault’s panopticon in the way that it opens up sturdy but extremely narrow views of the (connected) whole<sup>ix</sup>. It is a kind of a close-up of the network.

These two notions, with the help of actor-network theory, allow us to speak about these maps as representations of networks. For a deeper look into this theory, one should read the book “Reassembling the Social“ by Bruno Latour.

To summarize the search for methodologies of artistic research, the reader can experience a range of different methods which were employed in the research process here. All of them were of a different nature and revealed different layers of knowledge and experience. This project was implemented 5 years ago, and a retrospective look helped to identify 4 possible artistic research methods: imaginary, spatial, performative and editorial. The theory was deduced from practice, and was possible only as a follow-up to practice-based research. This is very much likely to be true for most other artistic research projects. As Henk Slager argues, “the methodological trajectory of artistic research cannot be defined in a strict and clear cut matter. Method is less about given, handed-down procedures, than about approaches that have to be trashed out, forced again and again on the spot as impromptus in the course of the effort of practise-based research. Therefore, only at the end of an artistic research project is it possible to determine whether the trajectory of the operational process has indeed produced novel methodological insights. Yet, artistic research could be described as **methodicy**: a strong belief in a methodology founded on operational strategies which cannot be formulated and legitimized beforehand”<sup>x</sup>.

I have attempted to make these novel methodological insights visible in my paper, and hope that they can be developed further in future projects. The concept of “material thinking” helped me to name the processes of thinking and making, as it was the engine of all the stages of our project. The concept of “visual writing” helped me to bridge the gap between art practice and research. Mapping as a form of visual thinking and writing has proven to be productive as a method of artistic research. Mapping can also bridge the gap between writing and visual art (for instance, drawing or photography) and allows us to resolve the conflict between theory and practice more easily, since it is both at the same time.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Mapping Lithuanian Photography: Histories and archives, ed. V. Michelkevičius, A. Narušytė, L. Michelkevičė, MENE, Vilnius, 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Almanacs of Lithuanian Photography and the yearbooks of the Union of Lithuanian Art Photographers, *Lithuanian Photography: Yesterday and Today*, were and still are publications aiming to reflect the range and development of Lithuanian art and reportage photography and – recently – photography-based art projects. Although the publication has changed its title and design since 1997, it continues the same tradition. The publications do not have a theme; their compilation is based on individual photographers and their work. Thus, this map is an attempt to represent the trajectories of participation of specific photographers in publications year after year, based on quantitative data. The chosen form allows revealing photographers who have not left their positions even for a moment, and noticing a crowd of those who appear only as accidental flashes. It is easy to notice that such figures as Algimantas Kunčius, Antanas Sutkus, Romualdas Rakauskas and several other representatives of the Lithuanian School of Photography famous in the 1960s–70s have become almost ‘obligatory’ personalities here. “Mapping Lithuanian Photography: Histories and Archives”, Mene, 2007, p. 213.

<sup>iii</sup> Description of the map: „Our knowledge of the history of Lithuanian photography is very uneven. This map represents this history as a territory where certain better known and researched periods, movements and people make clusters like ‘cities’ and between them there are many white areas where the existence of certain concepts is marked as a possibility. The periods closer to the present such as the 1960s–1970s (the Lithuanian School of Photography and its main representatives) and the 1980s (social

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landscape photography and the aesthetics of boredom) have been documented better and have received more attention of researchers. They have been represented in the middle of the map, roughly where the largest cities of Lithuania, Vilnius and Kaunas, are situated, with the unclear boundaries of the present (photography-based art and new documents) extending towards Poland, i.e. our gate to the Western world. The less researched periods, the post-war, the inter-war and the 19th century photography, occupy the top of the map implying the location of the other three, smaller, Lithuanian cities: Panevėžys, Šiauliai and Klaipėda. The purpose of this map was to visualise the vast areas in need of researchers' attention. "Mapping Lithuanian Photography: Histories and Archives", Mene, 2007, p. 213.

<sup>iv</sup> Borgdorff, Henk. *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Leiden University Press, 2012, p. 123.

<sup>v</sup> Henk Slager, *Art and Method*, In Elkins, James (ed.) *Artists with PhDs. On the New Doctoral degree in Studio Art*. Washington D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2009, p. 55.

<sup>vi</sup> David Stiles, „Pictorial Representation“, in: *Qualitative Methods and Analysis in Organizational Research: A Practical Guide*, edited by Gillian Symon and Catharine Cassell, 1998, p. 190.

<sup>vii</sup> Carole Gray, Julian Malins. *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*, 2004, p. 107.

<sup>viii</sup> Bruno Latour. *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 187.

<sup>ix</sup> Bruno Latour, *Ibid*, p. 181.

<sup>x</sup> Henk Slager. *The Pleasure of Research*. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2011, p. 30.