

## Underpinnings, Issues and Challenges of Art-based Enquiry: a Chinese perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Scholars have become keenly aware of the growing importance attached to art-based enquiry in discussions of art and art education over the last two decades, and it has become a crucial topic among the Western academic community. However, it is not of major concern in Hong Kong, China or Taiwan. Only a small number of articles were found in which art-based research methodologies and methods in the Chinese context are discussed in any detail. It is evident that art-based enquiry is a topic unfamiliar to the Chinese academic community and that a re-conceptualisation of enquiry methods is called for. In light of the above, this paper provides a philosophical analysis of the discourse on the fundamental underpinning, enquiry approach and context of art-based research. It examines topics relevant to this issue in the Chinese context. It argues that expanding discussions on art-based research will be beneficial to methodologies and methods used in the fields of both art and art educational research.

### Introduction

In the contemporary cultural context, there is no clear line between visual technology and social culture. As social and cultural developments keep pace with technological advancements, visual products and visual images contain elements of visual technology and socio-cultural meanings. Media and visual products now carry both visual technological and social significance and rely on visual perception to provide information about their meanings. In this context, and with the fundamental importance of understanding visual perception, one has to apply new enquiry methods that are recognised by academia to examine and interpret the meaning of art. It is necessary to search for a legitimate means of knowledge production so that the knowledge acquired can be turned into legitimate written material that adds meaningfully to the discourse of understanding art and its visual properties. Since art can be oriented to both science and society, research studies that aim to understand art under contemporary cultural conditions need to be conducted through both scientific and socio-cultural approaches in order to be pertinent and complete. Therefore, the scientific and socio-cultural aspects of art research are of great importance in understanding our contemporary visual cultures.

In the new age of contemporary visual culture, I argue that it is necessary for researchers to re-conceptualise research methodologies and methods for interpreting art in both the art and art educational contexts. One of the many forms of enquiry that have been introduced recently is the art-based approach that highlights art as a way of re-searching and understanding the world in the

contemporary cultural context. I have become keenly aware of the growing importance attached to art-based enquiry in discussions of art and art education over the last two decades, and how it has become an important topic among the Western academic community. However, I have also realised that it is not of major concern in Hong Kong, China or Taiwan. In researching this area, only a small number of articles were found in which art-based research methodologies and methods in the Chinese context are discussed in any detail. It is evident that art-based enquiry is a topic unfamiliar to the Chinese academic community and that a re-conceptualisation of enquiry methods is essential.

In light of the above, this article provides a philosophical analysis of the discourse on the fundamental underpinning, enquiry approach, and context of art-based research by examining topics relevant to this issue in the Chinese context. One of the premises put forward in this article is that visual perception can provide fundamental insights when used in art-based research methodologies and methods, since it intimately integrates art and science; the following discussions begin with an examination of this integration. Moreover, while art-based research might have become a significant topic, discussions on the enquiry method are usually made from a narrow perspective that centres on enquiries into studio art. Therefore, two hypotheses are put forward here. Firstly, expanding discussions on art-based research will be beneficial to methodologies and methods used in the fields of both art and art educational research. Secondly, while expanding the concepts of art-based research, a certain ambiguity and vagueness should be allowed. I see this ambiguity and vagueness as producing “discovery spaces” which have academic value. These unknown areas of study will allow scholars to explore further the possibilities of art-based enquiry.

## **Theoretical frameworks of art-based inquiry**

### *A visual perceptual perspective on art-based inquiry*

From the perspective of visual perception, art and science both emphasise the use of integrated methods of understanding the world. The development of the use of visual perception in research can be traced back to Arnheim’s (1969) studies of the connections between visual experience, visual thinking, and perception in the 1960s. Later, Gardner (1983) led research in the direction of spatial intelligence by adopting an integrated approach to studying visual perception from an art and art education-centred perspective. Leavy (2009) further suggests applying integrated methods for arts-based enquiry, in particular including various art forms such as music and visual arts. These research approaches indicate the importance of integration. They make a valuable contribution to art-based research, especially to the issues of reliability and validity in academic research. In art-based research, the integration of art and science can become a powerful research tool which is both sensible and perceptual. Such a research tool is particularly useful in research on visual perception. An example is the contemporary cognitive theories related to art. Contemporary cognitive theories build stronger theoretical underpinnings for research into visual perception. In a study of creative thinking in music and science, Root-Bernstein (2001) calls this quality “correlative talents”, which indicates that creative thinking itself is transferable. He cites 40 scientists who are also composers as examples, and points out that these scientists demonstrate different talents in different areas. From the perspective of correlative talents, this can be interpreted as adjustments and associations of skills, forms, cognitive modes, kinesthesia, imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, and analogical and analytical ability (Root-Bernstein, 2001).

A balanced relationship between subjectivity and objectivity is the key factor for the successful integration of art and science in visual perception. Campbell (2004) claims that the most persuasive argument for the integration of art and science is that all thoughts and ideas are generated from images and both art research and science involve interpretation through scientific or social enquiry methods. Visual thinking and problem solving are important in art and visual thinking and problem solving are crucial to science education of a high quality (Campbell, 2004). In a controlled

experimental study conducted by Longo, Anderson and Wicht (2002), qualitative interviews were combined with research into visual thinking networking which promoted problem solving achievement and metacognitive learning strategies. In the study, 56 ninth- grade students were invited to construct network diagrams on paper using black pens or coloured pencils to make their drawings in earth-science learning. The findings indicated the importance of using colour in visual-thinking networking strategies. The use of colour enhanced the higher order thinking skills used in problem solving. Not only do the results of this experiment and the integration of visual and linguistic types of expression assist in the comprehension of cognition, the results also indicate that visual images are linked with language in expression.

Visual thinking is presented in a non-linear way. Thoughts are usually presented as shapes, graphics and models. In a learning context, if students are capable of advanced visual thinking, they often do significantly better in problem solving and complex thinking (Campbell, 2004). It has been found that the brain appears to be more active when one attempts to understand things in a visual way (Marsano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). In summary, both art and science can spark the imagination, trigger humankind's will to explore the world, bring countless surprises and give spiritual satisfaction. These common attributes bring art and science even closer to each other.

#### *A socio-cultural and educational perspective*

Visual perception can be merged with anthropological and sociological methodologies and methods in the exploration of knowledge. It possesses scientific and socio-cultural qualities, which make it reasonable when linked with socio-cultural research. Such a link is applied in anthropological and sociological research methods in the educational context. Since research studies in anthropology and sociology are based on different socio- cultural perspectives and set in different socio-cultural contexts, they have developed into different branches: for instance mainstream studies like visual anthropology (El Guindi, 2004), visual ethnography (Pink, 2007) and visual sociology (Harper, 2006). Whatever the approach, the philosophical notion behind anthropologically or sociologically oriented research methodologies and methods is built on the idea that art is a socio-cultural product.

Anthropological and sociological inquiry methods and visual perception are related since they both rely on visual perceptual experience as a way of understanding the world. To study this relationship is to investigate how humankind establishes societies and cognitive systems through images and metaphors (Crotty, 2003). In anthropological and sociological terms, research into images and metaphors refers to the study of the human visual system. The visual system, images, objects and interpretations are regarded as vital keys to understanding the world and can be investigated in a scientific and sociological manner (Banks, 2008; Rose, 2001). In research, visual data like photographs and drawings can be objects of analysis because important symbols and maps of social structure lie behind these visual presentations. Symbols and social structures are perceived visually since they have cognitive, socio-organisational and scientific qualities (Ball & Smith, 1992).

With regard to research design and procedures, anthropological and sociological research emphasise the visual enquiry method. Rieger (1996) suggests using the visual discovery method to study society. A typical research example is his study of the relationship between visual changes and social changes. Adopting both anthropological and sociological research methodologies, this research had four main foci: (1) citing life changes as examples for evaluation; (2) analysis of the landscape of an American small town; (3) using photographs; and (4) combining traditional quantitative and qualitative research methods (Rieger, 1996). Non-visual methods were used in the research. For instance, he surveyed statistics of changes in population and employment. There are several other research studies relying on visual methods, which have focused on visual elements in the collection of data. In a study of students using photography as a tool of self-assessment in school, Schratz and Steiner-Löffler (2006) emphasised the importance of visual data in their research.

The research aimed to study the inner world of school life by examining photographs taken by the students, thereby assessing the school through the students' eyes.

Combining visual and non-visual research methods is more common in anthropological and sociological research in the educational context. One example is the comparative study conducted by Collier and Collier (1986). In their research they explored cultural patterns and the formation of values in local cultural groups by comparing the work of school vice principals. The researcher used visual perception as the means of discovery, combining visual and non-visual research methods, including field study, observation, notes, interviews and the analysis of subjects' responses to visual data. From the examples discussed above, it can be concluded that art-based enquiry is important in anthropological and sociological research methodologies and methods used in the fields of art and education. As a result of their use in anthropological and sociological research methodologies and methods, art-based enquiry approaches are now receiving the attention they deserve in research.

### **Current issues in the development of art-based research**

Research methodologies and methods that can be used in art and art education have been developed for the most part on the basis of educational research and social research theories. Stokrocki (1997) identifies six major types of qualitative art education research: ethnography, microethnography, phenomenology, educational criticism, case study and social critical theory. Similarly, Wilson (1997) and Stokrocki (1997) emphasise the importance of the use of the educational criticism methodology developed by Eisner (1993) in art education research. According to Chapman (1999), research methodologies can be divided into three areas: historical, philosophical and observable. In *Research Methods and Methodologies for Art Education* (Pierre & Zimmerman, 1997), various methodological approaches and methods which may be employed to conduct research into art education are listed. These include qualitative research methods, historical research methods, standard and authenticity tests for validity and reliability, postmodern feminist research strategy and action research.

Although the literature has been influential on scholars in art education research, mainly in the way they organise and outline research approaches, the art-based enquiry method is not covered in the book mentioned above. According to a study on the research methodologies used in art educational manuscripts published in *Visual Arts Research* between 1994 and 2000, most authors apply ethnography and narratives in their research and there are also a large number of authors who choose the case study as their research method (Thurber, 2004). Evidently, these research methodologies and methods with their socio-cultural leanings have become the mainstream in research. On the whole, it appears there are a limited number of methodologies in use in art education research.

Art-based research provides a path to understanding the value of art in great depth, which is the basis of research methodology. Seeing the artist as a theorist enables the theorisation of art practice (Sullivan, 2005). This research method has a cognitive quality and allows for knowledge transfer, which carries the interpretations of visual art and scientific research. To Sullivan (2007), the practice of art is a form of creativity and human critique. Although creativity is seen as one of the major contributions of art, it has never been considered as a basis of understanding, cognitive discovery or as an indicator of intelligence (Garoian, 2006).

The development of art-based research has given rise to a range of academic terminology: Barone and Eisner's (1997) term "art-based educational research", and the term "arts-informed research" coined by Cole, Nisnereilson, Knowles and Luciani (2004). In Canada, terms such as "A/R/Tography", introduced by Irwin and De Cosson (2004), used to describe art-based research, emphasise the use of the creative process itself to underpin research; this includes subjectivity and memory, and is similar to the ideas of Mitchell, Weber and O' Reilly-Scanlon (2005). Some studies

emphasise the use of self-research in art-based research: for instance, that of Candlin (2000), and Frayling's (1997) practice-based or practice-led research. There is also art-based research for the purposes of art therapy, which takes the direct participation of researcher and participants in artistic expression as the systematic research method (McNiff, 1998). Whichever terminology is used, the main concern is with having the concept of art as the focus of the research.

Art-based educational research has become a much-discussed topic. The discussions focus on adopting a qualitative approach as the basis for the research. However, there are a few controversies, one of them being whether the theoretical underpinnings of art-based research methodologies and methods follow the principles of qualitative research. Since different artistic mediums have different qualities and different requirements, there is no one fixed pattern to be followed by research into all artistic mediums. Methodologies and methods are not transferable: there are notable differences between the structure of Rasberry's (2001) research on writing and the structure of Pollock's (1998) research on performing. Yet, both studies possess the qualities of general qualitative research. The research examples mentioned above share one quality in common, that is they rely on the combination of art and words and turn life experience into qualitative research essays. It is believed that qualitative data formed by the combination of images and words produce more reliable results than data obtained from just words or just images (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005).

All the art-based researchers referred to above were asking the same question: that is, can art forms be used as the basis of educational discovery? Sullivan (2006) thought that the answer was, yes. Research methods adopted by general educational and scientific research are somewhat limited, and thus may be incapable of investigating successfully the complexity of human learning. Art-based research thus provides a vision from which to develop research methods. When art is used as the basis of research, reliability and validity in the research will inevitably need to be assessed. Critics claim that it is difficult for art-based research to achieve credibility in academic circles (Slattery, 2003). It is therefore necessary for art-based research to expand the theoretical scope of studio art practice (Sullivan, 2001). Barone and Eisner (1997) compared and contrasted art-based research and science-based research; they found that the former can provide various notable angles on educational phenomena. They even claimed that art-based research brings up new points in education discussions which have a trans-disciplinary approach.

Although art-based research is supported by logical arguments, it has been open to criticism. Art-based educational research as proposed by Eisner (1993; Barone & Eisner, 1997) in the 1990s followed traditions of educational research methodologies and methods, yet considered the unique qualities of art and focused on research into art itself. Sullivan (2006) criticised the arguments put forward by scholars like Eisner on the grounds that although they suggested methods of using art to change education, the applicability of these methods is limited in the field of social science research. The qualitative research method of analysing and generalising is merged with modernist, formalist, aesthetics as the basic design of research.

Artists have long been thought to neglect theoretical exploration, only paying attention to exploring imagination and creativity; however, artists, in fact, are deep philosophical thinkers (Sullivan, 2006). Sullivan (2006) described the quality of art-based research in terms of thinking in mediums, thinking in languages and thinking in situations. He stated that all three types of thinking include creativity and critical connotation, which is quite important to the spirit of research. These research methods can acquire knowledge through experimental procedures using different mediums, in the same way as traditional empiricist research based on observation. He believes another argument for the value of art-based research is that since artworks have been used as vehicles to portray social and political activities, critical thinking is therefore an essential way of obtaining knowledge and developing thinking in Western philosophy (Sullivan, 2006). When critical thinking is placed in a studio setting, the focus of research becomes the theory and practice of visual images. From this perspective, it is helpful to both artists and art educationists (Marshall, 2007).

Art-based research studies can be categorised as either studio practice or the discovery of visual images (Sullivan, 2004). Marshall (2007) suggests three contributions to art education made by the use of artistic practices in research: (1) it enables the development of the idea of visual literacy; (2) it provides a brand new angle in understanding art history; and (3) it gives rise to a concern about the role of visual thinking and visual images in research. The theoretical underpinnings of art-based research are consistent with constructivism, emphasising the artists' reflection on practice and constructing meaning through the expression of visual images (Gray & Malins, 2004). Art-based research connects scientific and social viewpoints. It sees the practice of art as a research topic, visual images as a focus of research, and explores the nature of visual experience. The exploration of this nature is of great importance in understanding the contemporary world because it also shapes the contemporary world (Macleod & Holdridge, 2006). Art education research can transform concepts and knowledge, which is meaningful for school education. In research, many arguments rely on social and scientific viewpoints, and research results are reflected concretely in the cognitive domain of visual images.

In different contexts, researchers all use similar methods and methodologies. Taking art education history research in Asia as an example, research methods and writing in *Taiwan Arts Education History* (Zheng, 2008) focus on historical and narrative enquiry and the particular time when Taiwan art education history emerged. In *The Development of Hong Kong Art Education: 60 years (1939-1999)* (Wu, 2000), Wu examined literature and social data and conducted interviews. Although these two pieces of historical research were carried out in different regions and contexts, they both apply similar research methodologies. In Taiwan, Liu (2004) suggests taking qualitative research viewpoints as the theoretical underpinning of creative visual art research methods. He notes the controversial issues surrounding research methods in creative art research. He suggests applying qualitative case study and action research methods, and reflects on the creative process through Eisner's (2003) qualitative art critique method. However, this view focuses solely on the theoretical underpinnings of studio art. It will be the task of future scholars to develop concrete research methods or beyond the procedures of studio art.

In China, scholars have also discussed art education research methods. Research into methodologies and methods which may be applied in art education is still in its infancy, but it should be noted that some scholars have become aware of the importance of the issue. Cui (2007) adopts educational research methods as principles of research, including traditional methods such as documentation, case study and observation; and methods that researchers usually use in educational research. He notes that the integrated method is the most suitable for teachers, since the humanistic quality of art objects can hardly be examined using absolute quantitative standards. Qualitative methods can fulfil the needs of this type of research. The mathematical analysis involved in quantitative research is also of great value as it increases the reliability of the results. With regard to Hong Kong, if one takes *Asia-Pacific Journal for Arts Education* as an example, among the manuscripts published in the journal between 2001 and 2008, not a single one was on art research methodologies and methods. It is evident that art education research methodologies and methods in the Chinese context is an important topic that has been neglected for a long time.

### **Remarks from a Chinese perspective**

Academic discussions of art-based research methodologies and methods in the Western academic community have involved diverse debates about a variety of philosophical foundations and methods of inquiry. The last two decades have seen growing importance being attached to research into the application of art-based methodologies and methods in art and education. The beginning of the 1990s witnessed a number of attempts to validate the hypothesis regarding the use of art-based research methods. For several decades the literature evidences discussions surrounding definitions and research approaches. Such discussions were initially only on epistemology, then they expanded into discussions about concrete discovery methods, citing numerous applied

examples taken from actual practice. Nevertheless, art-based research methodologies and methods have not been developed in the Chinese context.

An examination of the major journals published in the three regions from 2002 to 2010—*Research in Arts Education* in Taiwan, *China Art Education* in China, and *Asia-Pacific Journal for Arts Education* in Hong Kong—revealed that only two articles published in the field of research in arts education thoroughly discussed art-based research methodologies and methods (Liu, 2004; Lau, 2010). With a dearth of relevant discussions in academic journals, it is clear that art-based research methodologies and methods have not been seriously addressed in any of the three regions. The discussion of art-based research enquiry has not drawn the academic community in the Chinese context. Regrettably, scholars in these three regions have not participated in discussions on the development of art-based research, nor has the use of the art-based approach in art and educational research increased noticeably.

### **A proposed framework for research process**

In the Chinese context, I have rarely found a common language being used for art-based research methodologies and methods that is widely accepted in Hong Kong, China and Taiwan. Such a situation is not conducive to creating the space for the growth of academic discussions. The current lack of support for this type of research in the existing literature and the absence of any sort of serious discussion within the Chinese scholarly community suggests that there is, at present, no firm basis for establishing the philosophical premises for a new Chinese perspective in this area. Nevertheless, if we can find a common language for art-based research methodologies and methods, provide a framework for the research process in art-based research, and gain recognition in both the West and the East, we will be able to create a dialogue between the two regions, engage in exploratory discussions of the topic, and identify possibilities for the development of art-based research methodologies and methods in the Chinese context. One assumption behind the proposed framework is that it should suit the needs of the theoretical frameworks of art-based enquiry from the visual perceptual perspective and the socio-cultural and educational perspective, as discussed previously.

In these circumstances, I suggest that Crotty's (2003) scaffolding framework for social research could be an appropriate model for art-based research in the Chinese context. His framework could be applied as a reference framework in the development of research methodologies and methods. It could also become an effective language for communication between members of the Western and Eastern research communities. Besides, using this framework could enhance the validity and reliability of art-based research, and facilitate discussion of issues relevant to art-based research methodologies and methods.

According to Crotty (2003), the scaffolding for researchers in developing a research proposal includes four major elements, namely epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. These elements offer a solid foundation for any research process. They inform and interact with each other, establishing a stable direction leading towards the construction of the research process. Crotty (2003) defines epistemology as the philosophical grounding for the particular knowledge the researcher is seeking to acquire in order to ensure that the means of knowledge production is legitimate. The 'theoretical perspective' refers to "the philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology" (Crotty, 2003: 7) and "a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. It involves knowledge, therefore, and embodies a certain understanding of what is entailed in knowing, that is, *how we know what we know*" (Crotty, 2003: 8). With regard to methodology and methods, Crotty describes the former as the strategy and rationale for the choice of methods and the latter as concrete techniques or procedures (Crotty, 2003).

In the framework, each element has its own category representing its specific entities. For example, epistemology includes main entities such as objectivism, constructionism and

subjectivism; theoretical perspective includes major perspectives such as positivism, interpretivism (symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and hermeneutics), critical enquiry and postmodernism; methodology contains various approaches such as ethnography, phenomenological research and ground theory; and methods covers different techniques such as questionnaire, observation and focus group.

If we use Crotty's four elements to examine the methodologies and methods mentioned in the articles published in the main art education journals in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, we find that from 2002 to 2008, 10 articles out of 46 published in *China Art Education* (China), 42 articles out of 42 published in *Research in Arts Education* (Taiwan), and 11 articles out of 11 published in *Asia-Pacific Journal for Arts Education* (Hong Kong) can be categorised under Crotty's proposed research scaffolding framework. These figures suggest that researchers already tend to apply social research methodologies and methods to conduct their research. Surprisingly, they have demonstrated their concern for art education, but very little attention has been given to the discussion of art-based research methodologies and methods. I therefore suggest that researchers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China consider applying the framework to construct their art-based research.

## The challenge

There are numerous challenges ahead for the development of art-based research in the Chinese context. As Eisner (2006) states, one of the biggest challenges is tertiary institutions' attitude towards this type of research and its quality. He points out that since the methods of artists as researchers are vastly different from traditional scientific rational research methods, a certain tension will be created, and this tension will undoubtedly affect the development of art-based research methodologies and methods (Eisner, 2008). Grierson and Brearley (2009) also highlight the fact that the politics of methodology becomes a challenge for the development of art-based research. This challenge is critical since it affects the choice of the research approach, particularly when researchers are considering the quantifiable measures and funding aspects of doing research. They remark:

Confirming the traditional methodologies of research in the social sciences and scientific disciplines there is a global return to empirical research and cognitive, rationalist or instrumentalist approaches to knowledge formulation. This move is consistent with the globalised spread of economic rationalism and managerialism evident in institutions of higher learning with their input-output accountabilities attached to quantifiable measures of investment and funding. Yet it is clear that vested attention to pragmatic and instrumentalised approaches to research may not be suiting the best interests of those in the creative fields of making, performing, inventing ... There are inherent challenges to be faced via the methodological approach and choice (Grierson & Brearley, 2009: 4).

Finally, Eisner (2006) asks an interesting question: does art-based research have a future? His answer is that, under certain conditions, it does. However, even in the Western academic community, there are still many debates among scholars on this question. Needless to say, it will probably take some time for the academic communities in Hong Kong, China and Taiwan to gain a clear perspective on this issue.

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