

## Avoiding “a Kind of Physics”: Arts-Based Educational Research

Raphael Vella  
University of Malta

**Abstract:** This article studies the viability and significance of arts-based methods in the context of educational research at the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. It contextualises the field in its cultural and institutional settings, describing some of the challenges that arts-based methods of research have faced. It compares these creative methodologies to more empirical research methods that are generally associated with the field of education, illustrating the innovative combination of the role of the artist with that of the educational researcher by referring to two arts-based dissertations submitted by Masters students at the Faculty of Education. Finally, it argues that the value of arts-based educational research is located in its attachment to the actual experience of making art and the transformative capacities and specificity of art itself.

**Keywords:** arts-based educational research, art education, artist teacher

### Introduction

Given that the evolution of studies in Fine Arts at the University of Malta has been a prolonged and challenging process that still awaits some form of 'closure', it is not surprising that arts-based forms of research are still in a relatively early stage of development within the university. There are various historical, institutional and educational reasons that may help us to explain this belated development. This is not the place to discuss these reasons at length but a brief outline will suffice to contextualise artistic research in Malta. First of all, conceptual, feminist and other contemporary artistic practices which facilitated a bridging of theory and practice at an academic level internationally (Candlin, 2008, p. 101-102) evolved fairly slowly and erratically in Malta (Vella, 2008), a situation that is echoed in the absence of a museum or centre of contemporary art, the relative scarcity of studies in art history and criticism that document and analyse changes in Maltese twenty-first century art, and the traditional mindset that has tended to characterise

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**Corresponding author:** Raphael Vella, [raphael.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:raphael.vella@um.edu.mt)

pedagogies at state-funded educational centres like the Malta School of Art in Valletta. A situation that is more intrinsic to the University of Malta is the dispersal of human and other resources in the various visual arts-related courses offered by at least four faculties, which has contributed to the creation of a diversity of new academic programmes (assisted by some cross-faculty collaborations) but has probably also served to hinder the growth of a standard, undergraduate programme in Fine Arts. In contrast, the recent setting up of the School of Performing Arts at the University of Malta provided Dance, Music and Theatre students with a focused site offering a range of first-, second- and third-cycle degrees in the creative arts which, in principle, should facilitate a synthesis of practical and theoretical concerns.

Nevertheless, one could argue that it is precisely the relative novelty of contemporary art forms in Malta coupled with a heightened theoretical discourse within some Maltese academic and artistic circles that make a debate about arts-based research a necessity at this point in time. At a moment when theoretical discourse has not only caught up with but has arguably overtaken practice in the Western art world, a critical understanding of the relationship between theory and practice plays the indispensable role of coming to terms with the possibility that artists today, even in Malta, are resorting to theory to liberate themselves “from the danger that their art would be perceived only as a local curiosity” (Groys, 2012). Similarly, the recent budding of arts-based research in some quarters at the University of Malta could perhaps be understood as a means of securing long-term relationships with the wider, international academic community. While arts-based doctoral research in the visual arts at the University of Malta is still largely undeveloped, the university does have a small core of lecturing staff who completed a PhD in Fine Arts abroad, a fact that should help to propel university initiatives onto a more international stage. At the same time, given the fact that the UK still tends to attract the majority of Maltese postgraduate or doctoral students in the visual arts, one could also conclude that the international academic networks or educational models spawned by such third-cycle activity are still limited or even hegemonic. A recent, international, small-scale case study about third-cycle research in the arts in Malta, in fact, pointed out that

the potential cultural hegemony of a particular educational model might also require consideration, as the majority of PhD bearers operative in the creative arts in this context had been formed in the British educational system. An important consideration in the future development of third-cycle awards through the creative arts in Malta is likely to be the specificity of a small country with a narrow population base and a modest number of research students in the arts...Whichever development pathway is adopted, it seems likely that a key consideration will be that of addressing the particularities of the Maltese context rather than simply importing predefined 'off-the-shelf' strategies for artistic research degrees. (Wilson & van Ruiten, 2013, p. 108)

This paper seeks to explore how the University of Malta can integrate artistic practice more firmly within its research agendas by addressing contextual particularities and simultaneously avoiding the insularity and limited interest of a “local curiosity”. Rather than respond to the broader questions associated with the relevance of arts-based research in fine arts, the article will focus more specifically on the use of artistic practices in educational research, which is generally referred to as Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER). Like other arts-based forms of research in other disciplines such as music, fine arts, design or theatre, ABER employs aesthetic forms of presentation like art and fiction and has slowly but surely carved a unique niche for itself in educational research even though it is definitely not as widespread as more accepted qualitative methods of research, such as ethnographic approaches. Although hundreds of institutions around the world offer possibilities of arts-based research, the epistemological questions that revolve around the actual nature of 'knowledge' in the arts are still contested today. Questions like: Can an artist's work be considered to be a form of research? In what ways can it be a contribution to knowledge? How can artistic research or knowledge be assessed? Within ABER, similar questions are raised, but are rendered even more complex by the fact that art education is, by and large, institutionally part of the wider field of education rather than fine arts.

Given that I coordinate art education programmes within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta while continuing to sustain an artistic practice, this co-existence of education and artistic practice and the inevitable paradoxes generated by such a co-existence have a personal relevance that, nonetheless, is shared by many of those who distribute their time between the two activities. This personal connection is supported by the fact that my own practice has often explored themes, environments and materials that are closely associated with education, like books, childhood, indoctrination and classrooms. These educational 'ingredients' are starting points for reflections about the transmission and reliability of knowledge, hence offer the possibility of a discussion about education itself, yet I do not intend to focus on this personal aspect here. Rather, this paper will offer some thoughts about how an art education university programme in Malta and its students can engage with art practice and arts-based research. In coming to terms with such a field, it is also important to remember that visual artists in Malta have traditionally adopted the teaching profession as a career after following academic training for artists, even though this trend is clearly no longer as strong today as it was until the last couple of decades of the twentieth century (Vella 2007, p. 11-12). A less-researched development is the relatively recent inclination of some qualified Maltese teachers with a first degree in art education to supplement their artistic background with postgraduate studies in fine arts and to support university-based degrees by teaching courses in specific media like painting and drawing. Such developments show that the

overlapping of artistic practice and teaching is not only extant but also quite complex at the individual level.

### **Flexible Researchers: Arts-Based Research in Education**

The nomadic (or opportunistic) behaviour that seems to characterise the lives of practitioners of contemporary art in an age of global circuits, biennials and art fairs is also reflected in the fact that artists in many cultural contexts tend to have unstable or even precarious work patterns. Artists tend to have a rather adaptable and fluctuating income, depending not only on sales or commissions but also on government grants and secondary employment. This is the case even in more economically developed countries such as Canada, where the livelihood of women artists, Native, Black and other people of colour is even more uncertain and more dependent on secondary income (Robertson, 2006, p. 269). There are often huge gaps separating the livelihood and careers of fine artists, especially fine art graduates, and those who work in more commercial design-based fields of the arts, who tend to have more stable and even better-paid jobs (Cherbo, 2008).

While it is difficult to generalise about a 'career' that is by its very nature almost impossible to define, it is quite evident that artists are increasingly feeling the need to be more entrepreneurial, involving themselves in different collaborations and occupations that may involve spending days outside their studios. Professional artists in some contexts like the US have become more attracted to the dual identity of 'teaching artist' (see, for instance, Tannenbaum, 2011; Jaffe, 2012). Teaching artists are generally professional artists who also engage in long-term or short-term educational projects in schools and communities by integrating their creative working processes and ideas across different curricular and cultural areas. A central goal of the teaching artist is to stimulate creative responses in others while remaining committed to a continual and critical development of one's own practice. However, in spite of the fact that such dual careers clearly exist in the educational and cultural sectors, university programmes for prospective teachers of art do not often reflect such realities. Instead, on the whole they tend to reflect traditional distinctions between two kinds of academic preparation: the educational background that is considered 'appropriate' for teachers and another, different sort of educational setup for artists. Daichendt (2010, p. 3) writes that it is fair to assume that most graduate students in Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees spend most of their time doing studio practice and art theory while students in art education programmes are usually expected to dedicate more time to educational theory, even though, as he argues, "the actions, philosophies and contexts we work within as artists inform much of what we know and teach".

The professionalisation of art education within the academic discipline and departments or faculties of education did not only have an impact on the specific theoretical angle that characterises such degrees but also on the place of art practice within the discipline and its research parameters. Students following undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in education are generally introduced to research principles rooted in the social sciences when they attend courses on educational research methods but are less likely to be exposed to research in the creative arts (Mason, 2005, p. 566). Textbooks they are asked to refer to also tend to focus on empirical ways of generating knowledge through qualitative and quantitative methodologies (for example, Punch, 2009; Johnson & Christensen 2012) because such research methods are generally considered to offer the most effective ways of systematically exploring and evaluating different teaching and learning processes.

A parallel situation used to be evident in art education journals and publications until a few years ago, where a clear distinction could be drawn between publications and articles intended for practical classroom use, which are generally illustrated with many images, and academic studies, in which written texts and numerical tables usually played a more dominant role (Emme, 2001, p. 57). In recent years, it has become more common for peer-reviewed, educational journals to include arts-based research, though it is safe to say that journals still tend to prefer evidence-based methodologies and 'serious' presentations of research. This preference is supported by the rhetoric of educational and cultural policy-makers and administrators, which has increasingly shifted towards an emphasis on researchers' accountability and the economic relevance and use-value of research, especially in the European context. Educational research, like most research, also has a political dimension that cannot be ignored: it can provide policy-makers with reliable, unbiased data that is based on valid evidence that might lead to concrete reforms in schools, curricula and the everyday lives of teachers and students. In an academic context that favours the applicability of research over most other criteria, it is not difficult to understand that more creative forms of research might be perceived as being relatively untrustworthy and of little 'statistical significance'.

Institutionally, the idea that one is *either* an artistic practitioner *or* an educator/researcher is perpetuated not only by the separation of different course programmes, facilities and university settings but especially by varying interpretations of the role of creative modes of inquiry in rigorous or legitimate research. Nevertheless, this either/or mentality has also been challenged in recent years. Eisner (2006, p. 16) has consistently argued in favour of ABER for its promotion of "a de-standardization of method" and a broadening of representational forms that study education by using creative methods like fiction and film that are not normally included among standard forms of empirical research. Apart from broadening methods of representing

lived experience and allowing more ineffable occurrences (like a performance) to speak with their own voices rather than being translated discursively, Eisner and others have refuted the idea that research is the exclusive domain of the sciences or social sciences because artistry has been present in the best research projects in a variety of disciplines, including supposedly non-artistic ones (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 6-7). They have argued that form and content are inseparable and that ABER is often ambiguous, expressive and personal, just like a work of art. Hickman agrees with Barone and Eisner's ideas about the inseparability of form and content in ABER, writing that "like an artwork, the whole is significantly more than the sum of its component parts" in arts-based research; however, Hickman wants to push the goals of ABER further by putting forward "the notion that visual art forms (and performance) can serve a useful purpose in educational research by conveying 'truths' about educational phenomena which are intuitively felt, expressed and communicated" (2008, p. 21).

Several art educators who champion ABER propose a synthesis of creative and more scientific methodologies rather than an either/or setting, because the "literary, visual, and performing arts offer ways to stretch a researcher's capacities and knowing, creating a healthy synthesis of approaches to collect, analyze, and represent data in ways that paint a full picture of a heterogeneous movement to improve education" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 4). What this synthesis also implies is that researchers need to develop artistic skills that not only describe or analyse lived experiences but generate new ideas about these experiences. This generation of ideas occurs in a medium that could be something *other* than language; hence, through ABER, educational research also opens itself to the expressive possibilities of the visual, the aural or the performative. This notion of arts-based research as a "performative practice" (Rolling, 2010, p. 107) allows researchers in education to adopt artistic habits, such as flexibility and the transformation of processes and results as they unfold. It simultaneously allows artistic practitioners to join a range of other researchers like art historians, philosophers and sociologists who have generally studied the arts from the 'outside'. Such artist-researchers can contribute to the field by supplementing other researchers' knowledge with the processes of art-making as they occur, transforming artistic research into a "construction site" (Sullivan 2005, p. 84). By producing meanings creatively, artist-researchers working in educational contexts can help to shape new curricula (Rolling, 2010), engage themselves and learners in social issues pertaining to the field of education (Kreahe & Brown, 2011) and challenge prejudices like racism through counternarratives and other forms of critical research (Hanley, 2011; Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2012). The use of the arts within educational research can therefore challenge dominant norms in society at the same time as it encourages an intersection of qualitatively acquired data and other capacities and values that are more easily associated

with artistic practice, such as process, emotion, interaction and adaptability to context.

Different versions of arts-based research paradigms are now being introduced in faculties and departments of education in various countries, where they are helping to reform the nature of inquiry in the field of education. Some faculties, such as the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, have established themselves as leaders in the field, with many doctoral dissertations engaging in a practice-based methodology called *a/r/tography*, which combines and studies the identities of artist, researcher and teacher, submitted since the mid-1990s (Sinner et al. 2006). *A/r/tographic* research is often presented in poetic forms; it transgresses disciplinary boundaries and embodies the ambiguities of artistic experience, stimulating reflection about such ambiguities even in the field of education. In other academic contexts, such as the Institute of Education at the University of London, creative alternatives to more traditional forms of data collection and reporting are also being explored, allowing students with a fine arts background to sustain their practice and simultaneously acknowledging “the relevance of students' prior knowledge and experience” (Robins, 2013, p. 160). What such strategies share is the desire to present multimodal, rather than mutually exclusive, approaches to meaning-making and educational and/or artistic research.

### **ABER in the Maltese Context**

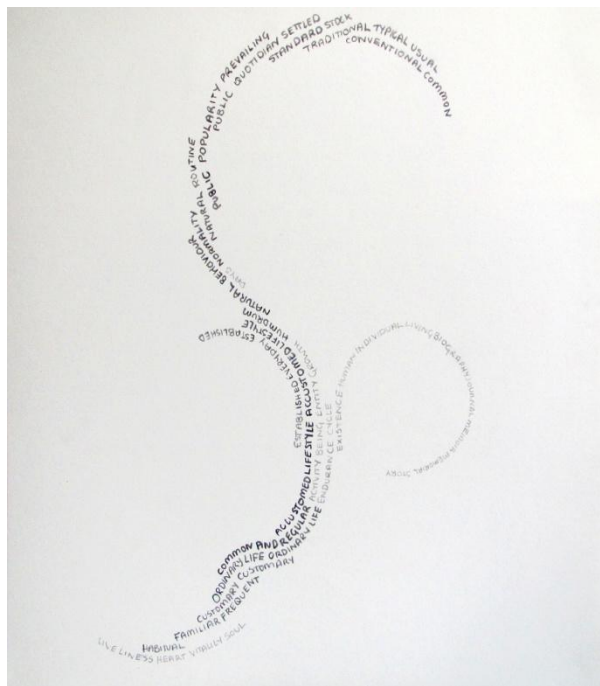
Since their inception, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in art education at the Faculty of Education (University of Malta) have encouraged students to view artistic practice as playing a central role in their formation as art teachers. When the B.Ed. (Hons) course in art was initiated in 1984, it was the only degree at the University of Malta offering credits in art practice and remained the only one for more than two decades. Lecturers in these programmes have included some of Malta's more established artists in a variety of artistic fields, and a number of art education students still go on to become both teachers and practising artists – possibly even more so today now that the programmes are more in tune with contemporary artistic practices than they were when the undergraduate programme took off. Studio practice and public exhibitions are now supported by theoretical, critical and historical credits, which serve to train students in developing conceptual linkages between theory, educational issues and contemporary artistic practices. On the other hand, the very broad nature of the programme (combining studies in two main subjects with education studies and other related areas) has sometimes been perceived as one of the programme's possible drawbacks, in that students sometimes need to juggle artistic with other academic subjects in a restricted period of time.

Students in art education also reflect about their hybrid identities as prospective teachers and artistic practitioners and are encouraged to think flexibly between the two domains and about their role as researchers in education. Given that students in these courses are invariably Maltese, they usually bring with them the challenges they have themselves experienced in an educational system in which the creative arts, for the most part, are granted little more than fringe status. In this scenario, the more subversive and critical aspects of contemporary art come into play by exposing students to the dynamic relationship between art and society, the poetic and the pragmatic, conformity and change. Students' fluid identities as prospective art teachers and artists mirror the habits of the contemporary artist, who "adopts many patterns of practice that dislodge discipline boundaries, media conventions, and political interests, yet still manages to operate within a realm of cultural discourse as creator, critic, theorist, teacher, activist, and archivist" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 225).

As pointed out by Mason (2005) in reference to her work in art education at Roehampton University, courses in research methods at the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta are similarly delivered by colleagues specialising in qualitative and quantitative research and deal mainly with these methodologies. Students also follow courses in educational theory and art teaching methodologies and undertake periods of classroom teaching practice under the supervision of their lecturers. Yet, the most popular classes amongst art education students are arguably, and understandably, the studio practice sessions in which they develop new work in media as varied as painting, drawing, wood, ceramics, photography, video and installation. As I have indicated elsewhere, students in the Faculty of Education's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes have been found to develop strong identities as *both* artists *and* teachers, associating art with the capacity of giving a voice to one's 'self' and to others in a creative and passionate "space where individuals can breathe the oxygen of freedom" (Vella 2012, p. 380), as one Masters student and art teacher pointed out.

ABER is still tentatively finding its place alongside other research methods at the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. I will draw briefly on the dissertations of two M.Ed. students submitted in recent years to exemplify some aspects of ABER in the context of the art education programmes at the Faculty of Education and to highlight the relevance of art-making in educational research. One M.Ed. student, Carmen Aquilina, studied the ways drawing can be used as a communicative thinking process by engaging in a/r/tographic research which combined her own investigative drawing with that of a group of thirteen 14-15-year-old students in a boys' secondary school.





Carmen Aquilina, *Ordinary Life* drawing

In a nutshell, her research analysed an artistic dialogue she initiated between herself and these students, in which she used drawing and discussion as their main communicative media. Her drawings progressed during the period of research along with those of her students; she discussed her own sketches with her students and her work was itself informed by her students' drawings, ideas and feedback. The project's references to issues of interdependence and collaboration created a community of practice in which 'teacher' and 'learner' were often interchangeable, while the students' self-awareness was heightened by their regular discussions with their artist-researcher-teacher. This is how Aquilina reflected about this reciprocal process:

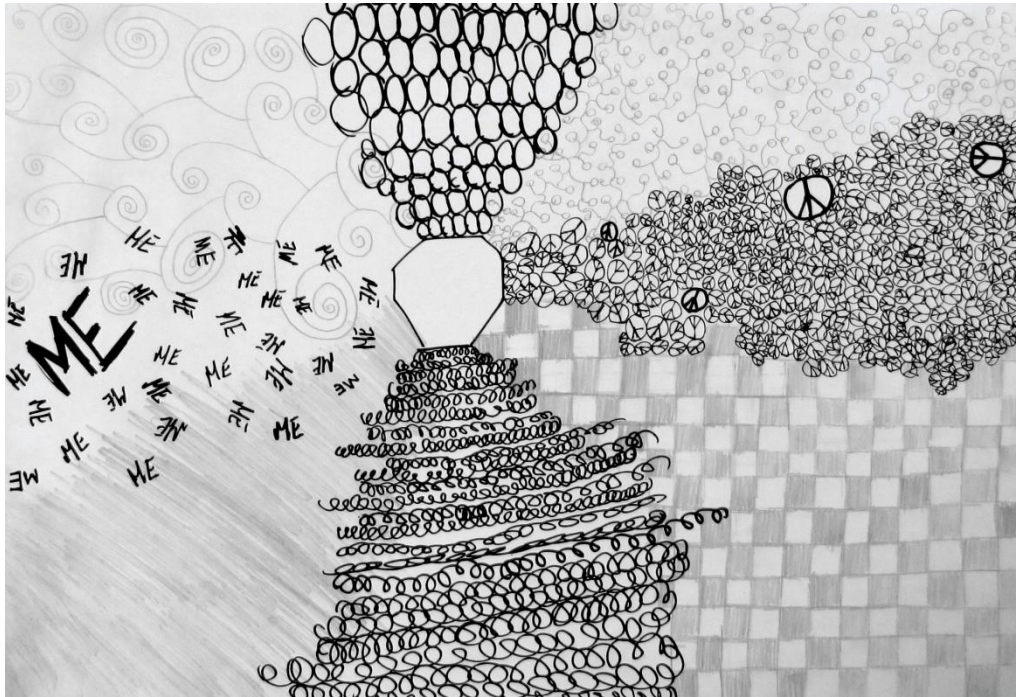
The purpose of my research was to interrelate creative processes and artistic methods in my drawing practice with that of the students. The aim was to constantly inform, enhance, evoke, and provoke one another. Therefore, this art-based research was structured in a manner that all participants were able to contribute and borrow knowledge...(Aquilina, 2011, p. 48)

As Sullivan notes, this “element of discussion and debate is characteristic of visual arts inquiry, whether undertaken in the studio or in the public space of the classroom” (2005, p. xxi). It is also a useful resource that helps teachers to assess and transform problematic situations encountered in educational contexts. Aquilina picked drawing as a focal point for her studies because her prior teaching experience showed her that many of her students tended to resist the medium, especially imaginative drawing. In contrast to object

drawing, imaginative drawing often relies on one's visual memory and the use of creative thinking processes that represent each person's individual vision of human experience. One of Aquilina's central aims was to use her a/r/tographic inquiry to help the students find their own individual timbre as they became more confident during freehand drawing projects inspired by a couple of wide-ranging set themes. Her own drawing practice often references family, personal life and social contexts, so she presented 'Ordinary Life' and 'Memories and Childhood' to the students as topics for investigation in an effort to motivate them to use their own homes, localities and childhood experiences to reimagine themselves in drawings and communicate their experiences as visual metaphors. The students could record their ideas on any surface or use elements of collage and were encouraged to jot down written reflections linked to a series of guiding questions she had developed. These annotations helped both the students and Aquilina to overcome some initial feelings of apprehension in connection with the 'openness' of the project, i.e. its dependence on a generous sharing of ideas about each individual's relationship with materials and people around them. Students not only became aware of the intimate links between one's art and one's life experiences but also gained insight into the way we learn more about ourselves and about art-making by learning *with* others and *in relation* to others.

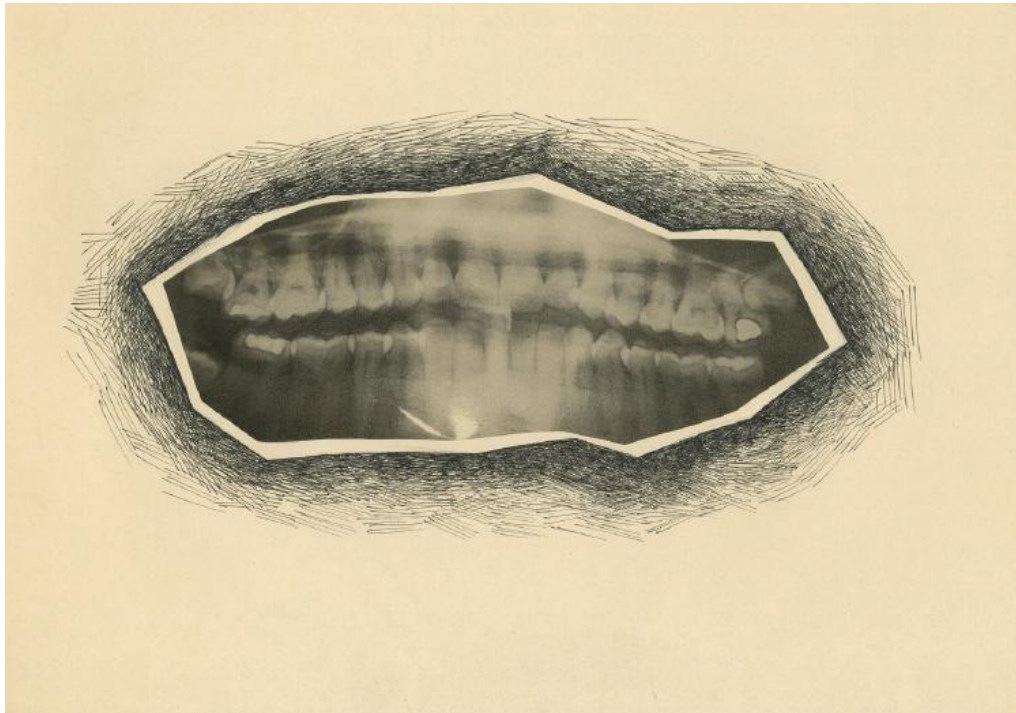


Ian, *Ordinary Life* mixed media drawing



Frank, *Friendship* drawing

This emphasis on art as experience is naturally reminiscent of the work of Dewey, whose self-proclaimed task in his well-known text was “to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (Dewey 2005, p. 2). For Dewey, an aesthetic experience is superficial if it is distanced from the everyday life of the people who lived at the time of its production and if it is not “inherently connected with the experience of making” (2005, p. 50). The contextual and communicative relevance of Aquilina's arts-based research was articulated within the lived, changing experiences of the participants, including the actual experience of making and encountering drawings, learning with others and reflecting with others about one's learning. True to the spirit of ABER, her classroom project wove learning into the fabric of artistic practice. The a/r/tographic stance of her research suggests that “knowing emerges from being engaged with art making and teaching/learning through living inquiry” (Sinner et al. 2006, p. 1251).



Mark Anthony Lughermo, *Study 2*

In contrast, the contextual remit of the research question of Mark Anthony Lughermo, another M.Ed. student, was mainly located beyond formal schooling, even though his study traced the origins of the subject under study to the participants' and his own childhood. Lughermo's study was prompted by his own fascination with death in Gothic youth subcultures and the representation of death in art, music, the mass media and other forms of expression. Through practice-based research, Lughermo aimed to understand the artistic, philosophical, musical and other sources and implications of his own artistic practice and its relationship to his own teenage obsession with death and social taboos associated with human mortality. In order to better contextualise his own practice, he also studied contemporary Gothic art practices in Malta, interviewed seven young, 'underground' Gothic-inspired artists and made a comparative analysis of his and their work in relation to their musical tastes and art training. The dissertation delved into strategies used by the participants to learn Gothic expression and set out to analyse creative possibilities within the genre.



Mark Anthony Lughermo, *Illustration*

Lughermo's approach to art-making was very exploratory, basing itself on many sketches, diary notes and photographs as well as readings stemming mainly from French theory, like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. He also analysed the subject of death in the work of other contemporary artists like Andres Serrano. Even though he wrote extensively and across disciplines while documenting his work, his dissertation is also heavily illustrated with drawings and documentary evidence of installations, because he realised that language cannot possibly portray the full extent of a visual art-work. In contrast, the work of the other participants in the study tended to be less experimental and less theoretical and was generally based on received notions of Gothic expression. Most had received some basic training in art at school and some furthered their studies alone, progressing from traditional media like drawing and painting to photography and digital manipulation of images. While the work of each participant showed some elements of stylistic individuality, the different artists' works were also remarkably similar in their subject matter, world views and sources of inspiration, often derived from heavy metal music. Victorian clothing and macabre representations of the body tended to dominate the actual images they produced.



Participant in Lughermo's research: *Fantasy Concept*

Lughermo's research is connected to learning in that it uncovered a correlation between one's artistic education and the kind of artistic models emulated in one's work, and also noted important differences in the participants' perceptions about what constitutes 'finished' work. While the participants derived their ideas from contemporary forms of Gothic subculture, especially Gothic-inspired illustrations in books, the artist-researcher referenced contemporary fine artists and his work grounded itself more self-consciously in a theoretical framework. His work stemmed from extensive periods dedicated to reading, reflection and exploratory sketching of ideas while the participants tended to prefer to go straight to the final stage and were satisfied with their work only if it looked 'finished'. The irony that became more apparent to him as the study progressed was that the subversive subject-matter preferred by the participants was not echoed in their approach to image-making, which tended to be imitative rather than radical. Lughermo concluded that reflective practice helps to develop innovative ways of dealing with specific subjects in art while the absence of critical reflection leads to work that replicates what is already known about that subject. His study thus advocated for a stronger emphasis on reflective practice in educational contexts.

The two dissertations described above are methodologically hybrid but locate the authors' artistic practice at the centre of the various stages of research, including the interpretation of the work and the actual generation of 'data' that is related to the work of other participants in each research project to

create a unique dialogue of minds. In both cases, a rigorous study of the field was enriched by the researcher's personal, imaginative and direct experience of the area under study. The field was actually transformed during the research project; in Lughermo's case, this transformation mainly affected the researcher himself while in Aquilina's case, it was evident both in the researcher's work and in the participants'. While the art work that was produced in relation to the research project evolved and *became* something else as it came into contact with others, the theorisation of the field and of educational research in the arts also shifted from a focus on something 'out there' to a more personally engaging response that includes the researcher within an imaginative space that does not separate art from experience, or the educational researcher from the artist.

### **Conclusion: Learning from the transience of art**

During a conversation with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the interviewer asked him about the influence of two Polish 'teachers' he had at Warsaw University, Stanislaw Ossowski and Julian Hochfeld, both of whom are little-known in the West. Bauman replied that he was grateful to his teachers because they had both vaccinated him

against the idea that that sociology is (or should become) a kind of physics which leaves its own history behind and never looks back, and that, if sociology has not yet quite reached that level, it is because of its 'immaturity' or failure to discover the right and proper research methodology which will put paid to controversy and doubt. What I learned from them is that sociology has no other – and cannot have any other – sense (and no other utility either) than of an ongoing commentary on human 'lived experience', as transient and obsessively self-updating as that experience itself. (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 20)

Interestingly, according to Bauman, it is precisely the incompleteness of sociological research that makes it 'helpful' to others in their daily struggles. Could we apply this sense of transience and incompleteness that Bauman grants to sociology to research in art education? ABER – this middle ground between artistic and educational practices – perhaps provides us with an ideal breeding-ground for a healthy incredulity toward the idea that educational research is “a kind of physics”. As has been stated elsewhere, the arts-based researcher leaves gaps in his/her research for the reader to explore and interpret (Quinn & Calkin, 2008, p. 11). These gaps can ensure that ABER remains relevant to contemporary developments in research and simultaneously avoids the hegemony of imported academic models in a microstate like Malta. How can it do this? First of all, like artistic practice it must remain open to the localised meanings and personal experiences that emerge from a variety of sources found not only in formal educational

contexts like schools but also in other community settings where ideas are communicated and learned in unstructured ways on a daily basis. This, for instance, was the approach adopted in the research carried out by Lughermo, outlined earlier.

Secondly, ABER does not simply describe or organise knowledge that already exists in a field but transforms and critiques it by engaging in ongoing inquiry and in the critical processes that are inherent in the actual practices of contemporary art. The identity of 'artist' that is coupled with that of 'researcher' in different versions of ABER does not only introduce a performative aspect into the research process but also a critical stance that challenges norms and preconceptions. This is especially important in contexts where new understandings of art (and hence, new pedagogies of art) grow in rather unfavourable circumstances. In these kinds of conditions, ABER needs all the support it can get from other members of the academic community, as Eisner stresses when he writes of the “sense of estrangement” (2006, p. 17) that is experienced by individuals involved in arts-based research (not to mention individuals involved in contemporary artistic practices in the Maltese university context!).

Thirdly, the combined roles of 'artist' and 'researcher' also change the artistic practitioner. ABER is not 'business as usual' for the artist; rather, as Mick Wilson has proposed, it is “about creating a context in which there is a wilful orientation towards becoming something other than that which one already is, a willed change in the positionality of the subject who wishes to know something not yet known” (2013, p. 204). The Masters students whose dissertations were described earlier both evolved as they came to terms with the tensions of their own complex identities embodied within their research, a research process in which risk-taking is not only tolerated but nurtured.

Finally, and importantly, beyond the 'use-value' of the arts in educational research, the specificity of the arts and their methods needs to be advocated. The arts should not be validated merely because they might be good at doing the same kind of work that some other methodologies already do. Rather, their own non-discursive existence *outside* standard methods of doing research must be constantly upheld because arts-based research cannot afford to betray its affiliations with art itself. Only by bearing witness to a sense of ambiguity and transience embodied in the very processes of art can arts-based research remain relevant to educational communities and to society at large.

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