Methodological Considerations for Research
in the Arts within Academia

Sylvie Fortin e Pierre Gosselin
Universidade de Québec
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The aim of this paper is to share an important moment in the clarification of what is, what could be or what will be research in the arts within academia. Providing a simple definition of research in the arts is not easy because the terms are still being defined. To answer the question "What is research in the arts?" the *Art Research Journal* will possibly become a reference. I make the assumption here that those who conduct, and publish research, are indirectly framing it by their own point of view.

At this stage, we can posit that research in the arts in the broadest sense applies to research that is conducted into the field of arts. It is a way to approach the artists, their process and their products. It can include research on the arts (for example, understanding dance music of the 18th century), research for the arts (for example, understanding the impact of electronic devices between dancers and lighting), research in the arts (for example understanding the embodied knowledge of a choreographer or performer). This last category is the most controversial because it blends theory and practice throughout the creative process and in the art object. Given these above variables, it is clear that, searching for a monolithic definition of research conducted in the field of the arts is counterproductive since it will change over time with the artists who will make art, who will pursue different goals, and who will use different methodological tools.

Before continuing, I would like to position myself to provide a context from where I speak. In 1997, at the University of Quebec in Montreal (Canada), we developed a Doctorate in the Study and Practice of the Arts which combines

dance, theater, music, visual and media arts, design and art history. Since the program's inception, I teach research methodology courses, which has a workload of 90 hours. These courses are taught by two professors. I often teach with Pierre Gosselin, with whom I developed the ideas that we present below. The program offers three possible pathways: theoretical thesis, intervention thesis, and practice-based thesis[1]. We will discuss these three pathways, but it must be emphasized that the program was created with the purpose of enabling artists to develop practice-based research in the arts. Thus in this article, we present a conceptual model we developed to help us accompany the doctoral students. We want to emphasize the impermanent character of our conceptualization since doubt should be the heart of academic inquiry. The development of a conceptual model is always marked by its transitory and evolutionary nature.

Research and Paradigm

In our experience, it happens that graduate students still consider the dominant positivist/quantitative research model that pervades Western society as the valid research model. Although perception and subjectivity are deeply valued in their practice of art, these notions sometime vanish when it comes to their research endeavours within academia. We observed that, when they enter the university environment, students go through a stage in which they no longer know how to take advantage of their expertise. Their source of professional knowledge is temporarily shaken. They aspire to a certain respectability, to which they link, strangely, with the dominant model of research, which is positivism. Therefore, we cannot avoid addressing, for a few moments, some basic assumptions about research paradigms.

A paradigm is a set of assumptions, beliefs and values that determine the point of view of a discipline or a field of knowledge. Paradigms are frameworks that standardize the construction of knowledge. According to the positivist paradigm, there is an observable and measurable reality, which is divisible into variables that can be studied according to hypothetical and deductive models. Every

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[1] For this article, we decided to translate the French term *recherche-création* by practice-based research in the arts. In the English literature, the terms art-based research, art-led research, art-informed research are used. For distinctions between the terms see Knowles and Cole (2008) and Leavy (2009).

phenomenon can be explained as an effect of the variables that cause it. The reality is independent of the observations and the values of those who describe it. The methodological procedures are based on large representative samples in order to make the theories generalizable to large populations. The aim of positivist research is to predict and control phenomena. Studies in the art which fall within the positivist paradigm are rare. An example, which shows a trend in the 1970s, is the work of Pelland (1980) in visual art. Her hypothesis was that people who have the ability to touch an object, in addition to seeing it, acquire a better ability to draw than those using only visual information. Thus, she conducted an experiment involving forty people invited to draw an artichoke. Six professional artists judged the anonymous drawings, in order of merit. Results showed that the drawings of those who had touched the artichokes were better than those that had not touched them.

By contrast, a study in post-positivist paradigm does not attempt to predict a phenomenon or search for general laws. The post-positivist/qualitative paradigm postulates the existence of multiple constructions of reality from the points of view of researchers. It differs from the positivist paradigm in the belief that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower. Based on the assumption that reality is a social and cultural construction, individuals can only understand and represent realities through symbols. The post-positivist paradigm is more appropriate than the positivist paradigm for artists engaged in practice-based research in the arts since they focus on aspects of individual' subjective or intersubjective experiential world.

However, some artists and researchers wonder if practice-based research in the arts requires a paradigm of its own right. The answer is not clear-cut because of the wide variety of research conducted in the arts, and because of the avant-garde research deployed by postpositivist researchers whose work sometimes shows a striking resemblance with the ways artists practice. Actually, because of similarities in research conducted in the arts, and alternative research conducted by researchers in social science, we tend to situate practice-based research in the arts within a postpositivist paradigm.
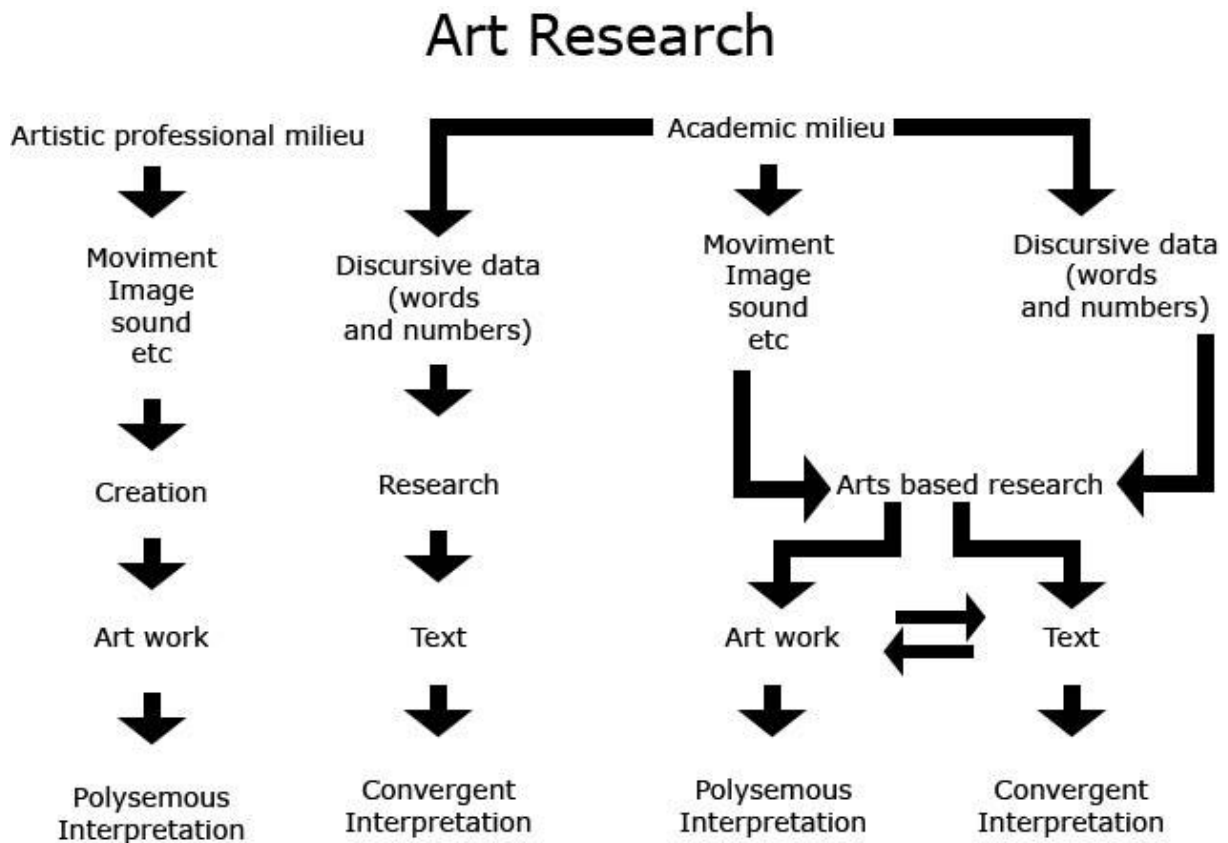
Chart 1: Research Paradigms

Assumptions	Paradigms	
	Positivist/Quantitative	Post-positivist/Qualitative
Ontology	Reality is apart from the researcher but apprehensible Reality can be known	Reality is subjective and multiple Reality is not apart from the researcher
Epistemology	Researcher is independent from what is researched Findings are true	Researcher produces what is being produced Findings are created / produced
Axiology	Value-free research	Value-laden research
Method	Determined in advance Random large sample	Flexible, may change Purposive, small sample
Instrument	Objective instrumentation	Researcher is primary instrument
Use of research	Generalization	Contextualization

A retrospective look at the development of postpositivist research reveals that in the 1980's, many social scientists felt constrained with the academic orthodoxy. They began to question the objectivity, neutrality, distance and impartiality that the researcher is supposed to preserve. They wanted to expand the ways to express the complexities of the human world. They were looking for an alternative to positivist research. Since they were observing how artists often tackled socio-political issues and confronted public audience with their artwork, social artists began infusing artistic processes and art forms into social science inquiry. In the following pages, we will address postpositivist research as a framework worth investigating for the artists. We will present post-positivist research on a continuum, from the most traditional to the most innovative, namely postmodern ethnography. Before, we will briefly touch upon the challenges raised by the recent inclusion of the arts within universities.

Artists in universities

Historically, artists create work of art outside universities. They are usually trained in a conservatory environment, in which the practice of the arts is the focus. In the professional milieu, artists use sound, movement, image etc., to engage in a creative process to produce pieces of art that will be interpreted in many different ways by the receivers. We can say that this is a form of data and that art work is polysemous since it has different meanings for different people. We just have to think of the many interpretations of Da Vinci's painting, *Mona Lisa*. In contrast to this, professors in universities usually use discursive data, words and/or numbers assembled together through reason rather than intuition. With this discursive data, they engage in a research process that ends in a text-based work, which will be published and entail a more or less convergent meaning for the readers. Recently, artists have joined the universities and this created the challenge to welcome the artists while safeguarding their creative work in an academic environment where theoretical knowledge is mainly valued. With the coming of artists into academia, it became necessary to develop the concept of practice-based research and practice-based thesis in order to recognize the type of knowledge produced by artists within university settings.

As shown on chart 2, the end result of a practice-based thesis entails both a piece of art and a text-based product. At UQAM, students cannot graduate by producing only an artistic work. In the institutional policy of UQAM, artists are asked for a demonstration of skills and knowledge. Major grant agencies, that offer financial support to artists in universities, have the same demands. All practice-based research in the arts involves practical and theoretical knowledge as components of the doctoral thesis. It is not possible to undertake practice based research and to report it only using an art form.

Chart 2: The art research

Art Research

Artistic professional milieu

Moviment
Image
sound
etc

Creation

Art work

Polysemous
Interpretation

Discursive data
(words
and numbers)

Research

Text

Convergent
Interpretation

Academic milieu

Moviment
Image
sound
etc

Discursive data
(words
and numbers)

Arts based research

Art work

Text

Polysemous
Interpretation

Convergent
Interpretation

Doctoral students vary in their appreciation of this requirement. Some remain reticent about the theoretical part of the thesis. They argue that the creative process and the artwork are sufficient and that there is no need for a written part. The opposite attitude is also found. Some artists want, above all, to deepen the discursive component of their practice-based thesis. They want to better understand their artistic practice or at least understand it differently.

When engaged in a practice-based thesis in the arts, students formulate their own research question and answer it through a back and forth process between practical exploration of their artform and theoretical understanding of what is at stake in their specific project. Courses in research methodology offer an opportunity for a dialogical relationship between theory and practice, without one being subordinate to the other. In the methodology courses at UQAM, students read about paradigms, research traditions and research methods in order to see if their project echoes some tenets of postpositivist traditions, no matter if they

are engaged in a theoretical thesis, intervention thesis, or a practice-based thesis.

The different traditions of post-positivism

Drawing on Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), we present the post-positivist paradigm with three philosophical traditions, associated with a specific line of thought held by a number of thinkers. First, there is phenomenological /hermeneutic thought which encompasses research aimed at describing and understanding a situation, with authors such as Husserl and Gadamer. Secondly, there is critical thought, commonly named critical theory, which encompasses research aimed at producing change in a concrete situation by integrating action into the research process. It is generally attached to the Frankfurt School, the Chicago School or here in Brazil, the work of Paulo Freire. And thirdly, we have postmodern / postructuralist thought, which involves research that questions the very foundations of knowledge and reality by presenting the plurality of different viewpoints, by showing the processes of subjectification, and by playing with the polysemy of language. Lyotard and Foucault, but also Derrida and Deleuze play an important role in the constitution of postmodern/postructuralist thought.

Different types of ethnographic research are the result of these philosophical traditions being invested by researchers. Here, the term ethnographic indicates a very broad general orientation, which can assume a variety of uses of field data. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), we can speak of interpretive ethnography (linked with phenomenological / hermeneutic thought), critical ethnography (linked with critical theory) and postmodern ethnography (linked with postmodern /postructuralist thought). For a researcher in interpretive ethnography, the people involved in a situation construct reality. Thus, it is possible to describe this situation as a way to understand it better. For a researcher in critical ethnography, reality is masked by a set of social, political and cultural structures that are important to address because they involve relations of power and inequalities. The purpose of research is to contribute to change. For a researcher in postmodern ethnography, reality is always partial and problematic because it depends on language. Therefore, it is necessary to reveal the plurality and polysemy of language in the conduct of research.

Interpretive, critical and postmodern ethnography can be linked to different methodologies based on the generic questions underlying a specific study. As shown in chart 3, in the interpretive ethnographic approach, when the question is related to understanding the essence of a phenomenon, the methodology will be designated as phenomenological; when related to understanding cultural practices of a group of people, it will be designated as ethnomethodological, etc. Similarly, within the critical ethnographic approach, if the situation is related to desire for change, or desire for greater equality, or desire to validate each person's contribution, one can speak of action research, feminist research, or participative research. In interpretive ethnography and critical ethnography, students may choose different methodologies, but data collection (such as observation, diaries, documents, etc,) is always fundamental. Different types of analysis (thematic phenomenological, systemic analysis etc.) are also usually clearly delineated (Fortin, 2009). Before turning to postmodern ethnography, which functions very differently, we give two examples of interpretive ethnography; the first one is a theoretical thesis, and the second is a practice-based thesis. Then we will illustrate an intervention thesis as an example of critical ethnography.

Chart 3: The post-positivist research

Philosophic Tradition	Hermeneutic Phenomenology	Critical Theory	Poststructuralism Postmodernism
Authors	Husserl Gadamer Heidegger, etc.	Frankfurt School Chicago School Paulo Freire, etc.	Lyotard, Barthes Baudrillard, Foucault, Deleuze, etc.
Ontology	Reality is constructed by people involved in a situation, but it is possible to describe reality in order to understand it.	Reality is the result of social, political and cultural structures that have to be challenged because they imply inequalities of power.	Reality is always partial and problematic because it relies on language. Thus it is necessary to show the processes of subjectification, and to play with the polysemy of language.
Type of ethnography	Interpretive ethnography	Critical ethnography	Post-modern ethnography
Goal	Describe Understand	Improve Emancipate	Deconstruct Destabilize
Methods	Heuristic Phenemenologic Etnomethodologic Systemic etc.	Action research Feminist research Participatory research etc.	Creative Analytical Practice (auto-ethnography; creative writing; narrative; poetry; dramatic text; stratified account alternating fiction and theory; collage of emails; montage of conversations, etc.)

In her theoretical thesis, Dena Davida's (2011) addressed the concept of "dance event". More specifically, she wanted to understand how people gave meanings to Ginette Laurins's choreographic work *La Luna*. She interviewed not only the choreographer, but also the dancers, the collaborators, the audience, the critics, the broadcasters and the administrative staff. She collected more than 240 pages of handwritten notes recorded during 135 hours of attendance in the rehearsal studios or theaters, as well as 25 individual interviews, 7 group interviews with the above informants and lots of documentation. Our experience

in methodology courses leads us to believe that a minority of students will adopt a typical interpretive ethnography such as Dena's. However, most doctoral students will need to accumulate empirical data to answer their research question pertaining to their own artistic work or the work of another artist.

The second example is Johanna Bienaise' practice-based thesis that addresses how dancers adapt to the demands of different choreographers. Three different choreographers, each created a 20 minute solo for her. Inspired by Schön (1983, who claims that individual can learn from their own professional experiences, she consciously looked at her emotions, experiences, actions, and responses, adding to her personal knowledge and weaving it to existing knowledge on adaptation. She filmed the rehearsals, kept a research diary, and recorded her conversations with the three choreographers. She tried to theorize from the inside out rather than relying on exogenous theories, i.e., theories from outside the field of Dance (Philosophy, Sociology, Psychoanalysis, Cognitive Science, and Education among others). Although unfinished yet, we chose Johanna's thesis as an example to show that a practice based thesis may be relevant for choreographers as well as dancers. In both cases, the creative work is presented in a public performance, and is evaluated by a panel of practitioners and theorists.

Katherine Rochon's intervention thesis will now serve to illustrate critical ethnography. Intervention thesis may include artistic projects or not. Katherine Rochon chose to engage in a visual art creative process with a group of 15 immigrant women aged between 18 and 30 years. She asked the women to tell the stories of their immigration. In parallel, the women worked on creating a paper dress from the perspective of a self-portrait. Data collection involved the observation of the creative process in addition to women and Katherine's research diaries. The goal of the research was to offer to these women rich aesthetic experiences while working on their new immigrant identity. The intervention thesis is not finished yet but we chose Katherine as an example because her work demonstrates how projects can take place in different contexts.

Dena's theoretical thesis, Johanna's practice-based thesis and Katherine's intervention thesis borrow from more or less familiar methods in the social sciences. Interpretive, critical or postmodern ethnography indeed can inspire a methodological *bricolage* in terms of theories, methods, data collection tools and data analysis strategies.

This leads us to a less widespread methodological approach, the postmodern ethnography, which presents striking differences from previous traditions. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2005) argue that the political and ethical responsibility of postmodern researchers is to get out of usual research frameworks to create new forms of knowledge visible through new forms of writing. These new forms of writing do not always require data collection, and thus open the door to new ways of evaluating research. In a perspective of postmodern research, language does not reflect a social reality; it literally creates this reality.

New forms of writing

In the last decade, a growing number of researchers adopted postmodern ethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2003) listed the many forms it can take: autoethnographic narrative,[2] poem, polyvocal text, e-mail collage, accounts alternating fiction and theory, dramatic retelling, scenic performance, etc. Richardson (2000) presents a good overview of this diversity while classifying it under the heading of creative analytic practices (CAP). We agree with Richardson since writing is a place of incorporation of sensitive knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge, and a place on integration of emotion as much as cognition.

Inspired by the authors mentioned above, we distinguish among CAP, two poles which we recognize are questionable: the autoethnography and creative writing (the later entails more or less fictional character). In the postmodern ethnography literature, something seems clear without ever really being stated: certain texts emphasize the research process, while other focus more on the form of writing. Several studies often fuse the two, but the fact remains that autobiographical texts are different from stories, tales or poems.

Two examples will help us to distinguish between form of writing and research approach. Emilie Houssa's theoretical thesis (2011) in cinema illustrates the importance given to the form of writing. For Émilie, images invade all aspects of our daily life through their aesthetic inscriptions. In her thesis, she analyzes three documentary films and presents three creative writing to make her point.

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[2] Ver: Ellis, Carolyn; Adams, Tony E. & Bochner, Arthur P. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview [40 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Art. 10, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108 [Nota da editora].

One creative writing is a tasty imaginary dialogue between Adam and Eve, who watch the television news. Émilie chose a fictional writing to sharpen the readers' view towards a dominant way of representing the world. Her fictional creative writing truly pursues an aim of research by inviting the readers to realize that reality is always partial, fragmented and that knowledge is always to be placed in historical context.

As an illustration of autoethnography, we offer the work of Lise Lussier, who just finished an exhibition of her Japanese calligraphy. In line with Valéry (1921), she argues that through a creative process, what is at stake is the transformation of the artists themselves. Lise conceives her calligraphic practice as a practice of self-transformation. Lise firstly wrote her life story and, during a stay in Japan, she wrote a detailed diary of her calligraphic practice. This data was then analyzed in a thematic way. It was only after the analysis that she constituted an autoethnographic narrative. The writing evokes her sensory, visual, tactile, mental and spiritual experiences. Autoethnographic writtings usually do not focus that much on the objective story, but rather aim at communicating many aspects of the author's own experiences.

The challenge of postmodern ethnography is therefore to welcome fiction and subjective individual experiences, while maintaining the credibility and rigor of research. At UQAM, subjectivity and fiction are highly valued when engaged in the making of the artistic objects, but carefully framed in the discursive part of the thesis. Students are invited to be careful when venturing in the innovative field of postmodern ethnography. "To be acceptable in an academic context," state Bennett and Shurmer-Smith (2002, p. 202), "the alternative texts should always be framed by a more conventional explanation". In other words, as a doctoral work, students cannot produce only a poem, that opens up the door do different meanings. They need to frame their creative writings in a more conventional, convergent manner, no matter if they are engaged in a theoretical, intervention or practice-based thesis. In the later case, students have to conform to the obligation of the double production: a piece of art and a text-based. The written part of the thesis can include all sorts of narratives and creative writings but the polysemous writing must be only a part of the total text-based production since the evaluation of the written thesis requires a shared understanding (see chart 2).

As postmodern methodological research opens many unconventional possibilities, some people may think that everything is acceptable. Therefore, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) set out five criteria of quality of creative analytical practices:

a) substantial contribution: does the text help to deepen our understanding about the phenomenon?

b) aesthetic merit: is the text well crafted artistically, satisfying and complex? Does it escape being tedious?

c) reflexivity: how the authors were led to write this text?

d) impact: how the text is likely to affect the reader?

e) expression of a reality: is some sense of the real, individual or collective credible expressed through text?

These criteria are far from the usual criteria used in interpretative and critical ethnography, which are usually based on: (1) credibility, i.e., the prolonged involvement of the researcher in the field; (2) transferability, i.e., some results of the study can be transferred to different contexts thanks to rich descriptions of the study; (3) reliability, i.e., corroboration of multiple instances and triangulation of data collection tools.

Conclusion

In this article, we presented three forms of thesis that students can engage in at UQAM: theoretical, intervention and practice-based thesis. We also presented three types of ethnographic research: interpretive, critical and postmodern. We think that this classification can help students no matter their type of thesis. A methodological *bricolage* allows many possibilities within this conceptual framework. We see practice-based thesis as pushing boundaries of existing research traditions in the postpositivist paradigm rather than requiring a complete new research paradigm.

On a last note, we reiterate the evolving nature of our conceptual model. It is necessary to consider interpretive, critical and postmodern ethnography as adjustable tools applicable to all kinds of art projects, whether theoretical or practical. Conceptual models are offered to be regularly reviewed, evaluated, contested and improved.

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