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Tom Barone

Arizona State University, U.S.A

Liora Bresler

University of Illinois at Urbana—Champaign, U.S.A.

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Art Practice as Research: A Review Essay

Christina Thompson
Pennsylvania State University

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The approach I take makes the case that informing theories and practices are found in the art studio, and the image of the artist-theorist as practitioner is taken as the locus of action rather than the arts teacher. Therefore visual arts research has to be grounded in practices that come from art itself, especially inquiry that is studio based (p. xvii)

Arts-based research, currently the focus of interest in art and related disciplines, rests upon a cluster of assumptions that most arts educators would readily accept. For those who recognize the visual as a language or as a way of knowing, and acknowledge the capacity of works of art to embody thought and thus to constitute theory, the expansion of the ways and means of generating knowledge to embrace the visual seems only reasonable. And yet acceptance of these underlying ideas does not come easily, as the history of artists working in academia (and the understandings of art education in K-12 schooling) demonstrate. The status of art works, even of overtly artful representations, as research remains counterintuitive to many people. It is a notion requiring persuasive explication, an idea that

must be demonstrated as well as declared. This is the complex project undertaken in Sullivan's *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts* (2005).

What is arts practice as research?

In the tradition of all good qualitative methodologies, arts-based research is malleable in concept and method; it assumes many forms. Arts-based research may allow researchers to call upon perspectives and sensitivities developed over a lifetime of involvement in the arts in ways that shape both the generation and the presentation of data (Bresler, in press). It may expand the resources we draw upon in the act of making sense of events and situations, allowing us to recognize works of art in and of themselves as ways of representing understandings about human life. It may involve the creation of texts, objects, images, and artifacts that are indistinguishable, at first glance, from works of art created (perhaps less self-consciously) as explorations of ideas, themes and issues that matter to us, as ways of theorizing about the world. Arts-based research recognizes the existence (and equity) of multiple forms of representation, the possibility that each distinctive form offers its own "affordances" (Forman, 1994, p. 42), its own characteristic strengths as ways of knowing. In this sense, discussions about arts-based research involve epistemology as much as methodology, with profound implications for the ways in which we understand the contributions of art making to life and learning.

Current discussions of arts-based research have had an invigorating effect on the field of art education, urging art educators to think very differently about basic issues of conviction and context. Arts-based research, with its emphasis on studio practice and the aesthetics of the research experience, provides an intriguing counterpoint to the ascendancy of approaches to visual culture that tend to minimize the role of art practice in art education. For those with personal and professional histories of involvement in art making, arts-based research issues an invitation to reconcile roles that many have learned to view as discreet and distantly related. This conversation focuses attention on the continuing vitality of art in the hybrid of art education.

Sullivan's provocative volume joins a surge of contemporary recommendations for arts-based research, with precursors and precedents in qualitative research proposals originating within art education (Beittel, 1973; Eisner, 1991; Zurmuehlen, 1990) and in other fields of education and social science (e.g., Barone & Eisner, 1997; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Pink, 2001). Sullivan's text was among the first in the most recent spate of publications to be written by an art educator; it joins *a/r/tography: Rendering self through arts-based living inquiry* (2004), a text edited by Rita L. Irwin and Alex deCosson. These texts are distinctive in their highly explicit formulation of connections between artistic practice and research, and their recognition of the uniqueness of the situation of the researcher as artist (and explicitly as teacher, in the case of a/r/tography).

The position that Sullivan articulates rests on the premise that “the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research” (p. xi; p. 223). Works of art are made through a process which, in every significant respect, mirrors processes of inquiry in other fields; they result in products that embody those processes through which information was generated, analyzed, and interpreted. He envisions the studio experience, in particular, as both a theoretical and practical source, and sees the *theorizing* that occurs within this process - the constant questioning and experimentation - as basic to the project of understanding as it is to the practices of the visual arts. Sullivan submits that artists are involved daily in research practice; that works of art are essentially theoretical statements, interpretations of lived experience, positions on issues of great human significance, on par with philosophical tracts, or with research studies as they are more traditionally conceived.

Yet, Sullivan sees the goals (as well as the means) of arts practice as research as distinctive. He identifies explanation as the traditional goal of research of the kind that attempts to impose order in the form of causality, predictability, systematic and generalizable results. These concerns are not insignificant, no matter within what methodological camp one settles. Even in qualitative studies - as in the novels we read, the films we watch, the objects and images we encounter - we search for residues of meaning that can be carried forward and impressed upon other situations. Sullivan suggests, however, that these concerns may be better understood as results of a quest for *understanding* which allows us to see familiar things differently, rather than a quest for *explanation* which might allow us to see many things in their similarities. Arts practice as research increases the complexity and the wonder of things, rather than tidying the scruffy fragments of experience into neatly labeled compartments and categories. To recognize transformative potential in the messiness and complexity of works of art, we must think differently about the process of reading and interpreting research and the process of conducting research. Both artist/researcher and audience/reader are confronted with challenges that differ radically from the dispassionate encounters we have come to recognize as research. As Carol Becker (2002) observes, “Artists flock to the ambiguities and marginalities that cause others to flee” (p. 5); when art practice becomes research, these ambiguities and marginalities are preserved and honored.

Sullivan carefully distinguishes his own proposals from approaches to arts-based research originating in the social sciences, presented in a number of recent texts on visual research in sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and other fields with traditions of reliance on visual information as data. His approach is neither synonymous with modes of inquiry in art history, theory, or criticism, nor is it a variant of arts-based educational inquiry, where the visual is seen primarily as an expansion of the ways in which we gather and represent information. Particularly telling, among the series of critiques and disclaimers he offers, is Sullivan’s analysis of Sarah Pink’s text, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2001): “Pink’s text follows a strategy common to most research in critical and visual cultural inquiry in that it emphasizes the *critique* and analysis of phenomena, but has very little to say about the *creation*

of new knowledge using visual means that might be taken within a research perspective” (p. xv).

Even those who “call for a broadening of research practices that can take advantage of the way the arts offer unique insight into the human knowing and understanding” (p. xvii) fail to reach the radical understanding of art practice as research that Sullivan proposes. He mentions Barone and Eisner (1997), Diamond and Mullen (1999), Eisner (1991), and Jipson and Paley (1997) as examples of work that leans in the right direction, but falls short of the mark that Sullivan himself has set. Sullivan explains that in these proposals, “the arts continue to be seen as agencies of human knowing that are drafted into service according to educational practices already in place” (p. xvii). In contrast to these positions, which graft the visual onto accepted research practices borrowed from the sciences, humanities, and social sciences, Sullivan proposes that the construction of knowledge about art making and the theories generated through art making must be undertaken on its own terms. He suggests that different paths can lead to same destination: The understanding of significant human concerns that is the overarching goal of research can be attained by different means appropriate to different fields of study (p. 28). Sullivan notes, “the kind of research artists do in studios, classrooms, communities, and in cyberspace, shares commonalities with what our colleagues do in the humanities and in the social and physical sciences. This is a quest for knowledge and understanding, and in this creative pursuit no one holds copyright on ideas” (p. 223).

Visual arts as ways of knowing: The political benefits of arts-based research

The recognition that Sullivan seeks for arts practice as research relies upon a fundamental shift in the ways in which artistic practice is understood. Sullivan approaches this task with particular sensitivity to the marginal position of the visual arts in academia as well as in the culture at large. Sullivan recognizes that “the quest to claim a place for visual arts, as a critically important area of human knowing, requires strong arguments” (p. 223) and presents an ongoing challenge. The issue affects both education and research, a pairing that is consistently, if implicitly, recognized throughout the text. He proposes that “the task of gaining cultural and institutional credibility” (p. 65) for the arts as ways of knowing must be undertaken simultaneously on multiple fronts, lest we continue to preach to the choir: “The way the visual arts can contribute to a fuller understanding of everyday reality is rarely heard within academic rhetoric, cultural commentary, or public debate, and this leaves artists, critics, theorists, and teachers talking among themselves” (p. 65). Sullivan’s perspective as an art educator is particularly relevant here, in that he sees the connections between the promotion of arts-based research as a legitimate means of knowledge construction and the ways in which art practice is understood, valued, and approached within schools and cultures. The arguments he presents in this text have profound implications for the

justification of art education as a priority in contemporary schools and societies, and for the advocacy of particular forms of art education, those that support the construction of meaning and generation of understanding in visual form.

Much of this argument is based upon Sullivan's familiarity with problems that studio artists confront as they compete for resources and respect in a university culture in which juried publication and scientific inquiry are the norms. Sullivan casts the artist as the central figure in this piece, violating prevailing expectations within schools of art in North American colleges and universities, which tend to see the artist as maker and others in related disciplines - art education, art history, art theory - as the scholarly interpreters of works that artists have made.

The Structure of the Text

Sullivan's book is composed of three major parts. Part 1, Contexts for Visual Arts Research, provides an historical context for contemporary discussions of arts-based research, focusing on the transition from the modernist reliance on scientific inquiry to the opening of possibilities "brought forth by postmodernism, critical theory, and socially grounded conceptions of qualitative research" (Sullivan, 2005, consider "the visual arts as a culturally grounded and institutionally bound area of artistic and educational research" (p. xviii) depends upon current recognition of multiple pathways to human understanding, combined with enduring images of "the status of the artist as a cultural lamplighter, human visionary, and educator" (p. xviii). Sullivan maintains it is vital to argue from a position grounded in contemporary art practice if we are to successfully promote the validity and value of art as a means of inquiry. He writes of the resiliency that art practice has demonstrated in its adaptation to the volatile and conflicting insistences of multiple art worlds in which it exists. He describes the evolutionary process that makes this a propitious moment to articulate the claim that art is a way of knowing:

The contemporary artist these days is part theorist, performer, producer, installer, writer, entertainer, and shaman, who creates in material, media, text, and time, all of which takes shape in real, simulated, and virtual worlds. These characteristics of contemporary art practice change the way we think about the visual arts, which influences what we do in educational settings (p. 4)

He positions the artist at the center of these multiple, related endeavors, with "contemporary art as the critical and creative basis upon which artistic, cultural, political, and educational arguments can be made in support of a fresh conception of visual arts research" (p. 4). As he notes, "the artist-theorist can be seen as both the researcher and the researched" (p. xix). Sullivan's arguments rest particularly on the concerns of contemporary artists, and "the ever-expanding practices used by artists to advance our understanding of

who we are, what we do, and what we know” (p. xix). He anticipates the continuing emergence of new possibilities as artists move into unexplored spaces, both virtual and palpable.

As Sullivan contextualizes his position, the close relationship between what artists do as practitioners and teachers remains in the foreground. Indeed, the book is fundamentally about the connections between contemporary art practice and art education in schools and universities, and its status as knowledge production and cultural activity. The unique ability of the artist to move among roles and discourses is mentioned here as an asset: “the contemporary artist 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” (p. 125). Acknowledging the necessity of continuing to know the premises upon which other, now dominant, paradigms operate, Sullivan advocates amplified dialogue with researchers in other fields.

This statement of position is contextualized within a wide-ranging discussion of the history of tertiary art education, the nature of the scientific paradigm, the disjunctions of modernist and postmodernist worldviews, and the premises and pitfalls of other proposals for arts-based, or arts-informed, research. Sullivan recognizes complex networks of connection at every turn, and he follows where they lead, pursuing them with scholarly rigor and a skeptic’s reserve. Freely admitting his debt to these predecessors and contemporaries, Sullivan stands apart, as Walt Whitman might say, “both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it” (1855, p. 26).

Part 2, *Theorizing Visual Arts Practice*, employs the arguments marshaled in the first section of the text to articulate a number of central theoretical premises underlying art practice as research. Here Sullivan “argues that visual arts practice is a theoretically robust area of inquiry and a transformative approach to research” (p. xviii). He describes the process of “theorizing” basic to inquiry, with explanation as an important but not exclusive goal, while recognizing there are aspects of human understanding that lay beyond causal, inferential, predictive thinking. He examines the cognitive foundations of artistic practice, rejecting the “simplistic dichotomies that align kinds of thinking and particular ways of knowing with the sciences, and forms of feeling with experience in the arts” (p. xix).

This provides a framework for visual arts knowing which Sullivan describes as transcognition, a process that “captures the movement and purposeful searching of the artistic mind” (p. 190). Sullivan emphasizes theorizing as an everyday practice, “an approach to understanding that occurs at all levels of human inquiry and involves creative action and critical reflection” (p. 125). He includes visual arts practice within this domain of activity, as “a form of human understanding whose cognitive processes are distributed throughout the various media, languages, and contexts used to frame the production and interpretation of images” (p. 125). Further, “conceiving of visual arts practice as a form of transformative

research makes full use of the potential of visual images to reveal insights about issues of human concern” (p. 225).

Part 3, *Visual Arts Research Practice*, presents general strategies and approaches for planning and conducting visual arts research, while avoiding prescription by offering examples and commentary in place of procedures. Sullivan approaches this section with two purposes in mind: (1) to demonstrate the proposition that “visual arts research is characterized as inquiry that embraces cultural contexts, institutional settings, the digital environment, information arts, indigenous perspectives, and other realms” (pp. xix-xx); and (2) to exemplify strategies and acknowledge constraints in art practice as research.

Sullivan invites us to consider what can be learned from a painting, a photograph, a film, or a novel that cannot be learned from more objective and clinical descriptions of the same event. Reiterating his belief that “current descriptions of discipline structures, research paradigms, and methods of inquiry do not accommodate the full range of ways in which humans engage with issues, ideas, theories, and information” (p.225), he directs attention to the ways in which art making functions as creative and critical investigation. He stresses that this process is educative, for the artist, as it is for viewers/readers. He writes of the process of visualizing ideas and thinking through design problems used by the architect Frank Gehry, for example. Gehry’s planning process is frequently displayed, as it was at the Guggenheim Museum in 2004, in the form of sketches and models, composed of simple cardboard and paper shapes which undergo progressive stages of refinement as they approach the solid assurance of a “master model.” The opportunity to study Gehry’s highly gestural approach to designing allows viewers to visualize his thinking as it allows Gehry himself to visualize buildings of unprecedented dynamism and fluidity (pp. 205-207).

Examples of art practice as research are interjected throughout the book, in the form of images invariably accompanied by interpretive texts. In this section, in which provision of examples is central, Sullivan offers several examples reminiscent of Jipson and Paley’s (1997) “daredevil research” methodologies, involving juxtapositions of text and image which do not strain to stand in direct descriptive relationship to one another. Sullivan’s acknowledgement that word and text are not fully interchangeable but complementary and suggestive in their relationship is significant to the proposals presented here. Exploring multiple presentations of data affords an opportunity to reconfigure relationships between theory and practice, between artist and “art writers.” As Sullivan points out, these relationships are undergoing transformation in the contemporary art world:

Assembling new historical and critical traditions of fine arts alongside equally diverse studio practices means that the alliance between the artist and the art writer is seen as a shared collaboration that interrogates the artwork in a speculative quest to explore the unknown and to renovate the known. For the artist, the artwork embodies the questions, ideas, and images, whereas for the critic, the word becomes the vehicle to advance new realms of

interpretive possibility. In this case, the coalition between the visual and the verbal is both critical and supportive. It is not unusual to see artists working as curators and writing as theorists, and art writers taking on the challenge of creating forms and situations that are used to advance views as much as to critique positions. This kind of interchange of roles and practices is loosening conceptual chains and discipline claims, and opening up new possibilities for exchange that are responsive to the imaginative challenge of an intellectual climate that is issues driven rather than content based. (p. 188)

The collaborative relationships Sullivan recognizes are seen in many forms of crossdisciplinary work, collaborations occurring within the digital world, and in higher education generally. Sullivan suggests that the relationship between artists and interpreters is critical in the forms of research he advocates: “Perhaps the main principle to emerge from the conceptualization of visual arts as research is the relationship between the practices of creating and critiquing. These are pivotal as they form the basis by which new perception are imagined, relevant information interrogated, and alternative conceptions realized” (p. 191). Even as he recognizes the diversity of artistic practice and the myriad possibilities for engagement in artistic inquiry, Sullivan insists that the subject of any inquiry centers on art-making practices: “I argue that the experience of the artist is the core element in the creation of new knowledge and the potential for new understanding is further enhanced through research projects that may take varied forms such as exhibitions, performances, and publications” (p. 191).

Clarifying the identity of arts research as distinct from both traditional quantitative and qualitative approaches, Sullivan stresses the need to keep the larger research picture in mind. It is important for visual arts researchers to know research conventions but, Sullivan asserts, it is:

crucial to be aware of the value and necessity of using strategies embedded in the everyday strategies of artists and art teachers. . . .Whether working in the studio, in the museum, in the classroom, or on the Internet, particular approaches prevail, such as visualizing, sensing, intuiting, focusing, reasoning, questioning, grounding, comparing, and interpreting. These are the kind of capacities that characterize the ways artists work and are also attributes needed for conducting effective research in the field (p. 192)

Summarizing his position, Sullivan suggests that “visual arts research comprises practices that are theoretically robust, idea based, process rich, purposeful, and strategic, and make use of adaptive methods and inventive forms whose uniqueness is best seen as connected to, yet also distinct from, traditional systems of inquiry” (p. 225)

Conclusion

While there is a logical progression in the organization of the text, Sullivan encourages readers to approach each section as an independent position, as if it were a painting in a series, capable of standing alone but acquiring different kinds of resonance when juxtaposed with the remaining members of the group. Consistent with an approach to research that equates experience with aesthetic encounter, Sullivan acknowledges that the questions each reader brings will constitute a different, distinctive reading. The inclusion of sidebars and images (always presented with commentary) encourage this approach. Sullivan admits he consciously designed the text to honor and accommodate the ways that visual arts students and faculty access information, using multiple points of entry and a combination of word and images. In this way, he hoped to invite active reading: “This dialogical emphasis should have the reader scratching pencil notes, drawings, and diagrams in the margins of the book as issues are raised, experiences challenged, or confirmed, and possibilities pondered” (p. xxi)

Sullivan’s experience, as artist, researcher, and teacher, figures prominently throughout the text. He speaks of his own research “in collaboration with artists” (p. xxi), and describes his ongoing project of encouraging graduate students at Teachers College, Columbia University, to attempt these exploratory techniques. Although concrete examples and suggestive concepts are offered freely here, no clear and decisive principles for the practice of research appear. Sullivan’s work rests comfortably with uncertainty and openness. It is passionate, but never doctrinaire.

This is an exceptionally well-documented and scholarly text, dense with information, asides, and opinions, and offering a wide-ranging reference list current up to date of publication. It is, however, a text that does not yield its secrets easily: Sullivan has a tendency to offer intriguing tangential comments, and to veer into new topics midway through a compound sentence. Between the large exciting ideas that ground the text and the small observations that punctuate it, there is a substantial middle ground where the theory and practice of art practice as research remains to be explored, its contours mapped, and landmarks constructed. Graeme Sullivan waves us toward paths still largely unmarked, and encourages us to proceed.

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About the Reviewer

Christine Marmé Thompson is a Professor in the School of Visual Arts at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on issues of children's culture and art learning. She is co-editor, with Liora Bresler, of *The Arts in Children's Lives: Context, Culture, and Curriculum* (2002), published by Kluwer Academic Press, and editor of *The Visual Arts and Early Childhood Learning* (1995), published by the National Art Education Association (NAEA). She currently serves on the Editorial Board of *Studies in Art Education*, and as Book Review Editor for *Visual Arts Research*. Dr. Thompson was President of the Seminar for Research in Art Education from 2003-2005. A member of the Council for Policy Studies in Art Education, Professor Thompson received the Mary Rouse Award (1995) and the June King Mc Fee Award (2005) from the Women's Caucus of NAEA, and the Marilyn Zurmuehlen Award (1994) from the Seminar for Research in Art Education.

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