

ART IN ACTION RESEARCH (AiAR) AND THE GLOCAL ROOTINGS OF ART: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prof. Dr.phil. **Dominique Lämli**

FOA-FLUX and Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7171-6263>

Abstract

This paper discusses transformative research conducted from 2016 to 2021 that aimed to establish an alternative art practitioner paradigm: Art in Action Research (AiAR). This paradigm seeks to guide methodology creation for working *on* and *through* art in socio-cultural settings while considering the *global turn*. The 2021 study configures four *baseline discourses* (BD) that are needed to perform the global turn: The first BD concerns the diversity of art and the consequences of acknowledging that all art is related to traditions and histories (thus accepting the *glocal rootings of art* and thus the need to integrate diverse art notions). The second BD constructs an ideal-type model of canonization. The third BD addresses artistic research as a supranational, worldwide phenomenon and shows that increased awareness of the glocal rootings of art is essential for further developing artistic research. The fourth BD discusses the literature on practitioner research across disciplines. Finally, the study derives the principles for AiAR from the four BDs and further substantiates these principles. The study performs the global turn. It introduces an alternative paradigm, AiAR, which excludes limiting, paradigmatic assumptions about art from its research base, and issues a call to elicit project-relevant understandings of art. AiAR enables creating a methodology that serves reality-oriented, setting-specific, and people-centered art practitioner research aimed at co-creating livable futures.

Keywords: *Art in Action Research (AiAR), socially engaged art, global turn, philosophy of artistic research, practitioner research.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol22.435>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Dominique Lämli

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN: 2500-9974



Introduction

This paper discusses transformative research in global studies that I conducted from 2016 to 2021.¹ Overall, transformative research contributes to radically changing the understandings and doings of a research field, in this case fine arts.² The resulting study (completed in 2021) was motivated by three empirical observations: (1) Working with art in socio-cultural settings is rapidly increasing worldwide. Accordingly, (2) practical knowledge and know-how in the field are immense. What has been lacking, however, (3) are research methodologies that enable art practitioners to explore the issues emerging from their work environment in the context of the *global turn*. Though much has been written about socially engaged art [e. g., Ferguson et al. 1990; Felshin 1995; Kent 2016], art practitioner methodologies relating to local *and* global thoughtscales and allowing the integration of diverse understandings of art have been missing. I have addressed this shortcoming in several articles [e. g., Lämmli 2014, 2017].

Aiming to close this gap, I set out to develop a practice-fitting and robust methodology through the global studies paradigm. My 2021 study therefore started from the empirically informed hypothesis that a paradigm shift in the fine arts is needed to surmount its limited understanding of art, and that achieving this paradigm shift requires a five-step process: (1) analyze the paradigmatic assumptions about art and the previous attempts to overcome these dominant notions; (2) specify the critical features of the canonization of art; (3) contextualize and assess the limits of existing approaches within art research; (4) determine the discussed specifics of practitioner research across disciplines; (5) define the principles of art practitioner research, that is, Art in Action Research (AiAR), which constitutes an alternative approach to working *on* and *through* art in socio-cultural settings.

It is not unproblematic to postulate a paradigm shift regarding the basic assumptions of a discipline – here fine arts –, while building on another disciplinary approach (and its modes of investigation) – here global studies. The global studies perspective, however, explicitly aims to rethink and “*reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions*” and serves the “*need to rethink mainstream scholarship*” [Darian-Smith & McCarty 2017]. I discuss the general need for retooling disciplinary analysis below.

In the literature on research methodology, basic terms such as paradigm and methodology are not used uniformly [Kivunja & Kuyini 2017]. I applied them as follows in my 2021 study: as researchers we approach reality through a paradigm,

¹ The study, supervised by Professor Boike Rehbein, was submitted as a doctoral thesis in Global and Area Studies at Humboldt University of Berlin in 2021.

² The study did not consider whether the proposed Art in Action Research (AiAR) might be useful for other art practitioner research.

which is a lens through which we access reality. The principles of the paradigm guide methodology creation. We use theories and concepts that provide orientation points and help us to work on, configure, analyze, discuss and understand the reality we see. A research design includes the type of research, the research paradigm, the conceptual framework (i. e., theories and concepts), the methods, research layers, and procedures used to explore a question or hypothesis and to attain the research goal.

What follows first clarifies the terms *Art in Action* and *global turn*. Second, I describe the research design before considering the baseline discourses central to this study. Finally, I introduce the principles of AiAR.

Contextual Remarks

The literature on working with art in socio-cultural settings has largely been written by scholars based in the US and UK. They have used various terms to describe art that addresses real-life issues and that seeks real-life change. Apart from *socially engaged art*, these terms include *dialogic art* and *participatory art*. However, my many conversations with colleagues across the world have revealed that these terms are not necessarily productive. Rather, they spark lengthy discussions about Western conceptions and their limited views. Thus, these protracted theoretical discussions move(d) conversations away from the real-world activities being explored. Realizing the limitations of the existing terms, I began looking for alternatives. I finally settled on *Art in Action*, which proved helpful in practice and enabled discussing practical issues with those involved on the ground. Art in Action has probably proven effective for two reasons. First, the term is self-explanatory. And second, it is not informed by a preexisting concept of which activities are included or excluded. Art in Action is now used increasingly in wider circles.

Artists working with art in socio-cultural settings engage in highly diverse activities. Some initiatives adopt an interventionist approach, whereas others work within their living environments and follow long-term perspectives. The activities of both approaches are very broad, ranging from complaints choirs [Cheung 2015], where people come together to sing or hum complaints to their government, to nurturing communal farming and collective forestry and self-organization, thus drawing attention to regional development plans by governments and investors [Jatiwangi art factory, n. d.]. Some collectives establish “Do it with Others” cultures by setting up labs for bio- and other forms of hacking [hackteria.org n. d.]. Equally popular is the re-enactment of historical events, such as the Pitt Street Riot in Hong Kong [Lee 2015].

However, reflecting on this growing field of artistic production showed that the existing artistic frameworks did not really enable researching such developments

from an art practitioner perspective. Needed was an approach that serves to elicit the diverse notions of art informing particular settings instead of working with paradigmatic assumptions about art that claim to be universal, and thereby disguise their rootedness and limited scope [Brzysky 2007]. Inquiring into these shortcomings revealed that the need to retool paradigmatic assumptions is not limited to artistic research. Rather, the need to retool disciplinary analysis is a general problem, one rooted in recent globalization processes.

Globalization processes have been ongoing for centuries [Rehbein & Schwengel 2008]. However, since the 1970s we have witnessed exponentially accelerating interconnectedness and interdependencies [Albrow 1996]. Correspondingly, since the 1980s, scholarly work has increasingly dealt with such phenomena, leading to several waves of global theories [Martell 2007]. Among others, the insight has prevailed that varieties of globalizations exist [Rehbein & Schwengel 2008]. Moreover, the effects of globalization processes on the assumptions underpinning disciplinary analyses have been widely discussed [e. g., Beck 1997]. Importantly, reassessing and retooling basic assumptions are not limited to expanding conceptual apparatuses and research frameworks, but rather affect the paradigmatic assumptions of disciplinary perspectives. Ulrich Beck [1997] called the corresponding pressure on existing reference systems to change a *mega-change*, while Darian-Smith and McCarty [2017] have termed it a *global turn*. The need to question existing research paradigms is thus rooted in the challenges of today's world: a globalizing world, one that alters realities and thus affects the assumptions underlying disciplinary thinking.

Accordingly, research has gradually shifted from globalization studies to global studies. Nederveen Pieterse [2013] describes this shift as a methodological one. Whereas globalization studies are anchored in disciplinary theories and protocols, global studies apply interdisciplinary research frameworks and combine diverse databases. Global studies call for keeping sight of the big picture, of global dispositions, when dealing with specific issues, that is, to position inquiries in the "*local-global continuum*" [Darian-Smith & McCarty 2017].

In artistic research, transdisciplinary research designs are not uncommon. However, scholars must consider the presumptions guiding and structuring their research. In artistic research, and particularly in art practitioner research *on* and *through* working with art in socio-cultural settings, such considerations first and foremost concern one's assumptions about art. I therefore decided to investigate these paradigmatic assumptions about art through the lens of global studies and to develop an alternative art practitioner paradigm. This paradigm seeks to guide methodology creation for working *on* and *through* art in socio-cultural settings while considering the *global turn*.

The Research Design

My 2021 study applied the global studies paradigm and a fourfold conceptual apparatus: (1) the kaleidoscopic dialectic, (2) transdisciplinarity, (3) meta-narrative synthesis, and (4) the concept of glocalization. The concept of glocalization emphasizes the relational dynamics between the local and the global. Transdisciplinarity highlights the need to break down disciplinary boundaries and supports integrative, real-world, and problem-oriented research. The kaleidoscopic dialectic and meta-narrative synthesis are probably less well known in artistic research.

Boike Rehbein's critical theory, the kaleidoscopic dialectic [Rehbein 2015], critiques epistemological work that rests solely on, and therefore is confined to, the dichotomy of universalism versus relativism. Instead, he proposes a global hermeneutics that grounds generalizations in particularities. Consequently, both the research *and* the researched are understood as informed by historical knowledge formations. Moreover, both are part of contextual and historical dynamics, and thus are positioned within relational webs of various particularities. The kaleidoscopic dialectic explicitly accepts our world's factual pluralistic disposition and its implications for research. Accordingly, this dialectic allows for generalizations by grounding such claims in a relational web of the particularities being studied.

Meta-narrative synthesis involves purposively collating information from different research traditions to understand how research on a particular issue has emerged and evolved. Its methodologies have been developed, among others, in health and AI studies [e. g., Grant & Booth 2009]. Meta-narrative synthesis is a subtype of meta-synthesis, whose status as a valuable review and configuring method correlates with the exponential growth of data, with today's manifold real-world challenges, and with the pressure on research reference systems to change. Meta-synthesis aims to point out problematized research dispositions and theories, and to substantiate new interpretations of existing research fields. In my 2021 study, meta-narrative synthesis thus guided the literature sampling and configuring the baseline discourses needed to develop the principles of AiAR. It provided the critical features needing to be considered, including defining the sampling purpose, the relevant research traditions, the search strategy, and eliciting the orientation points for the subsequent configuration. Refuting the findings of a meta-narrative synthesis would require establishing which orientation points are missing and to what extent discussing these additional orientation points would change the findings.

Guided by the conceptual apparatus, my 2021 study followed a stringent five-step process, as set out in the hypothesis (see Introduction). Each of the five sub-hypotheses corresponded to a research objective (each dealt with in a separate chapter). The table below summarizes the research aims and objectives of the original study (Chapters 3 to 7).

Research Aim and Objectives

Sub-Hypotheses	Objectives	Chap.	Chapter title
1	Analyze the paradigmatic assumptions about art and the attempts made so far to overcome these.	3	The Diversity of Art
2	Specify the critical features of the canonization of art.	4	The Canonization of Art
3	Contextualize and assess the limitations of existing approaches within art research.	5	Art Research
4	Determine the discussed specifics of practitioner research across disciplines.	6	Practitioner Research
5	Define the principles of Art in Action Research (AiAR).	7	Art in Action Research

Baseline Discourses

Baseline discourses are densely configured narratives. The study configured such baseline discourses for each chapter and its specific objectives. The structure of these narratives follows the orientation points determined by configuring the meta-narrative synthesis. For instance, Chapter 3 (“The Diversity of Art”) contains fifteen such orientation points, each visible as a corresponding subtitle. These orientation points stake out the field relevant to achieving the objectives of that chapter. These range from *The Diversity of Art in Global Contexts* through *Narrow Versus Broad Notions of Art* to *Pseudo-Diversification and Universal Claims*.

Chapter 3 discusses the paradigmatic assumptions about art. The selected literature, including Brzysky [2007] and Onians [2008], is little known among artistic research scholars, but best addresses the orientation points that emerged from configuration. The chapter also considers the differentiation between narrow and broad notions of art – as seen through the lenses of global studies and other disciplines. Importantly, this differentiation is not evident from an art studies point of view, which holds that “This is art – in the narrow sense of the term – and everything else is not art.” My research, however, showed that the problem of limited art notions hinders developing an alternative research paradigm capable of making the global turn. I therefore discussed and exemplified narrow and broad notions of art by juxtaposing them.

The baseline discourse for Chapter 3 thus also reflects to what extent art history scholars have discussed the limited, and hence problematic, reach of a narrow notion of art. Among other scholars, my study draws on Anna Brzyski [2007], who discussed

in detail the key problems of art historical discourse. First and foremost, these shortcomings include not adapting to the globalizing world and not reframing the foundational assumptions of its discourses. The narrow concept of art does not cover all the art that is produced across the world at any given time. Rather, that concept has its own socio-cultural histories, works with a hierarchical, pyramid scheme, and lacks methodological self-reflectivity.

The meta-narrative synthesis in Chapter 3 further discusses several more or less successful attempts to overcome the limitedness of art history – in view of the globalizing world. The synthesis reveals that the notions of art must be removed from the paradigmatic level of research. I discuss this in reference to Onians' *Art Atlas* [2008] and his postulate to remove "*categories that depend on assumptions that are cultural.*" Chapter 3 also shows that art history's attempt to develop possible solutions so as to adapt its reference system to the globalizing world does not offer productive paths for an art practitioner research perspective.

Chapter 4 explores the canonization of art. While Chapter 3 suggested that notions of art should be removed from the paradigmatic level, it left unanswered the question which orientation points are needed to elicit notions of art that are relevant to a particular setting. To answer this question, I developed an ideal-type model of canonization based on Brzyski [2007], Westphal [1993], Morphy and Perkins [2006], among others. The ideal-type model suggests six orientation points: wisdom, authority, narratives, corpus, fluid dynamics, and pluriperspectivity. Wisdom, for instance, is the grand narrative of a community and of the belief systems that are active within that community. Belief systems can be informed by rational, cosmological, spiritual, religious, and other forces. Since diverse and wide-ranging possibilities inform a community, wisdom, in this ideal-type model, is an abstract variable for undercurrent positionings rather than a preestablished concept. Furthermore, due to the pluriverse disposition of communities, several wisdoms often coexist and inform a particular setting.

Chapter 5 discusses the literature on art research and investigates the historical, local-global conditions and emergence of art research. Artistic research *gained currency* in the 1990s, when visual arts departments began integrating into Higher Education Institutions. The transformation of art studies, from vocational studies to university studies, and the introduction of artistic research has also been influenced by supranational efforts to establish standards for measuring and reporting R&D projects, in order to support knowledge societies.

However, Chapter 5 shows that while artistic research is conducted all over the world, the literature on art research has not yet sufficiently embraced the assumptions of art underlying that research. Accordingly, glocal art rootings have so far not been sufficiently addressed either. Thus, although art research delineates modes of artistic

research, it does not clarify its paradigm (e. g., name its basic assumptions), nor does it offer guidance in establishing the methodology of art practitioner research needed to research Art in Action.

Chapter 6 thus turns to practitioner research in other disciplines to delineate the features needed for art practitioner research that performs the global turn. It shows that art practitioner methodologies are advised to best organize research as grounded research. Grounded, that is, in issues emerging from the work environment [Drake & Heath 2011]. Such issues include refraining from top-down conceptual approaches. Rather, the theories and methods needed are brought about through the research process, similarly to the procedure described above as the kaleidoscopic dialectic. Such research produces results that are setting-specific, hence particular and nongeneralizable. Practitioner researchers must negotiate multifaceted dispositions, as they are part of professional and academic communities. They also have to interrelate different modes of knowledges, are themselves often part of what they are researching, and so on. In short, heightened self-awareness and self-reflection are essential requirements for practitioner researchers.

The Principles of AiAR

Chapter 7 (“Art in Action Research”) derives the principles of AiAR from the previous chapters and further substantiates and supplements them as needed. The study first adopted a transformative stance to delineate and substantiate the AiAR principles. Accordingly, and to reiterate this point, the study postulated that art studies and artistic research need to change their mindset, and to examine and further develop Art in Action from an art practitioner perspective considering the global turn. The study concludes by introducing the AiAR principles designed to initiate such a paradigm shift in the arts, and to make the global turn.

The study established the three main features of AiAR: first, paradigmatic assumptions about art should not inform the research basis. Second, the orientation points for eliciting the notions of art should be defined as part of the research process. Third, the issue emerging from the work environment should be placed center stage. Consequently, the research design and components ought to be developed and continuously adjusted in relation to the given settings.

In Chapter 7, I divided these three features into 16 principles. Section 7.3.4 (“The Principles of AiAR”) provides step-by-step instructions on how AiAR enables creating a methodology capable of integrating diverse notions of art (as well as knowledge bases). At first glance, the 16 principles might seem to overlap. Nevertheless, they offer different perspectives on the issue researched, for example, in an exploratory undertaking or a case study. Most likely these perspectives will correspond with the respective research layers.

The 16 AiAR principles (each substantiated in Chapter 7) are:

- (1) Approach the research from an art practitioner perspective.
- (2) Focus on issues that emerge from the work environment.
- (3) Place the issue centre stage.
- (4) Do not include any notions of art in the research bases.
- (5) Remain aware of the glocal rootedness and pluralism of art.
- (6) Elicit the notions of art through the research process.
- (7) Embrace pluriperspectivity in regard to how the research is conducted and configured.
- (8) Explicitly state the thought traditions informing the research.
- (9) Configure particulars in relation to other particularities, positionalities, and histories.
- (10) Ground theories, methods, and configurations in setting specificities and in the research process.
- (11) Aim to achieve practice-relevant and setting-specific research results.
- (12) Distinguish the art practitioner research stance and arts-based methods.
- (13) Choose the theories and methods from various disciplines and for their fitness-for-purpose.
- (14) State the forms and sites of transdisciplinarity.
- (15) Construct the validity of the outcomes in relation to the research issue, goal(s), and procedures.
- (16) Address the glocal positionality of the research perspective, setting, procedure, and outcomes.

These 16 principles constitute the AiAR paradigm. A paradigm, as observed, is the lens through which the research is approached. The principles of the AiAR paradigm guide project-fitting and setting-responsive methodology creation. To do justice to the global turn, the AiAR paradigm enables pursuing an issue-centered approach aware of the glocal rootings of art and of the global-local dynamics. Correspondingly, AiAR does not allow existing conceptions of art to underpin art (practitioner) research, but instead elicits these conceptions through the research process. AiAR thus enables integrating diverse understandings of art and, in addition, various knowledge bases (I discuss this elsewhere). AiAR emphasizes diversity and pluriperspectivity, as well as glocal specificities. It thus adheres to grounded methodology and embraces increased self-reflection on the research standpoint, perspective, and procedures. Thereupon, AiAR grounds methodology creation in the research process, which centers on an issue emerging from the work environment and the relevant web of particulars, as well as their positionalities and histories.

In sum, my 2021 study (*Art in Action Research*) shows that a paradigm shift in art practitioner research on working *on* and *through* art in socio-cultural settings is

inevitable. It configures the necessary baseline discourses, from which it derives the principles of a research perspective able to accomplish a much-needed paradigm shift in art research. As such, the AiAR paradigm stands in contrast to artistic research approaches informed by Euro-American art-historical understandings of art, which adhere to and apply universal, ungrounded assumptions about art. Instead, AiAR mirrors the procedures of art practice and applies these to research. Finally, AiAR integrates the results of art practitioner research conducted across disciplines.

My 2021 study contributes to advancing art practitioner research *on* and *through* working with art in socio-cultural settings. It does so by formulating a paradigm for creating a methodology that enables carrying out reality-oriented, setting-specific, and people-centered art practitioner research that helps to co-create livable futures. As such, this theoretical venture meets an empirically grounded practical need and provides a workable solution.

Sources

- Albrow, M. (1996). *The Global Age*. Polity Press.
- Beck, U. (1997). *Was ist Globalisierung?* Suhrkamp.
- Brszyski, A. (ed.) (2007). *Partisan Canons*. Duke University Press.
- Darian-Smith, E., McCarty, P. C. (2017). *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies*. University of California Press.
- Grant, M., Booth, A. (2009). A Typology of Reviews: An Analysis of 14 Review Types and Associated Methodologies. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, No. 26 (2), pp. 91–108. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x> (viewed 24.10.2022.)
- Felshin, N. (1995). *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Bay Press.
- Ferguson, R., Gever, M., Trinh T. Minh-ha (eds.) (1990). *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. The MIT Press.
- Kent, E. (2016). *Entanglement: Individual and Participatory Art Practice in Indonesia*. [PhD thesis]. Australian National University. Available: <https://doi.org/10.25911/5d5146060c32c> (viewed 24.10.2022.)
- Kivunja, C., Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*. No. 6 (5), pp. 26–41. Available: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26> (viewed 24.10.2022.)
- Lämmlli, D. (2014). *Art in Action: Make People Think! Reflections on Current Developments in Art*. FOA-FLUX. E-article, 23 pages. Available: <https://www.researchgate.net> (viewed 24.10.2022.)

- Lämml, D. (2017). Artists Working Reality: Towards the Capability Approach, a Means of Evaluating Art in Action. *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2016*. Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, pp. 135–163. Available: <https://dominiquelaemml.ch/texts> (viewed 24.10.2022.)
- Lämml, D. (2022). Art in Action Research (AiAR): A Methodology for Researching Socially Engaged Art from an Art Practitioner Perspective [PhD thesis]. Edoc-server Humboldt University of Berlin. Available: <https://doi.org/10.18452/24144> (viewed 24.10.2022.)
- Mackenzie, N., Knipe, S. (2006). Research dilemmas: Paradigms, methods and methodologies. *Issues in Educational Research (IIER)*, No. 16. Available: <http://www.iier.org.au/iier16/mackenzie.html> (viewed 24.10.2022.)
- Martell, L. (2007). The Third Wave in Globalisation Theory. *International Studies Review*, No. 9 (2), pp. 173–196.
- Morphy, H., Perkins, M. (2006). The Anthropology of Art: A Reflection on its History and Contemporary Practice. In: *The Anthropology of Art. A Reader*. Edited by H. Morphy & M. Perkins. Blackwell, pp. 1–32.
- Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2013). What is Global Studies? *Globalizations*, No. 10 (4), pp. 499–514. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2013.806746> (viewed 24.10.2022.)
- Onians, J. (2008). Introduction. In: J. Onians (ed.). *The Art Atlas*. Abbeville Press Publishers, pp. 10–13.
- Rehbein, B. (2015). *Critical Theory After the Rise of the Global South. Kaleidoscopic Dialectic*. Routledge.
- Rehbein, B., Schwengel, H. (2008). *Theorien der Globalisierung*. UVK.
- Westphal, M. (1993). The Canon as Flexible, Normative Fact. *The Monist*, No. 76 (4), pp. 436–449. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27903354.pdf> (viewed 24.10.2022.)