

## **Art-based action research: participatory method for decolonization in the North and the Arctic**

**Timo Jokela**

University of Lapland

### *Abstract*

*This article is a part of larger conversation we have had for years with staff and doctor students in University of Lapland to develop art-based action research (ABAR) dissertation in art education. ABAR is an approach that aims to develop the professional methods and working approaches of the artist-teacher-researcher or artist-researcher, or to seek solutions to known problems and future visions. The ABAR -method is clearly linked with international art based educational research (ABER), artistic research (AR) and participatory action research (PAR). This article aims to clarify the differences between participatory essence of ABAR and action research as artist-teacher self-development. The article also introduce links between ABAR -methods and challenges of the North and the Arctic and discusses how the ABAR -method aims to promote art education in the changing North.*

### **Introduction**

In University of Lapland, Finland (UoL), like in the art universities across Europe, the pressure to create doctorates of arts created discourse about research in the field of art and design. Since then a lot has been written about the artistic research and art-based research, and the phenomenon has got various names and recognition (see Borgdorff, 2011; Gray & Malins, 2004; Hannula et al., 2005; Leavy, 2008, 2017; McNiff, 1998; Mäkelä & Routarinne, 2006; Sullivan, 2005; Varto, 2009).

Concurrently educational researchers had begun to use artists' and arts critics' practices to conduct educational research. These art-based method are normally connected to researchers educational practices and there is a variety how scholars identify the role of the arts in research strategy and processes. (see Eisner, 1976; Irwin & Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2017). Latest years there has been lot of discussion on how art-based research method should be essential part of doctor dissertations in art education. (Sinner, Irwin & Adams, forthcoming). In UoL in northernmost art and design university in Europe, art-based education research was closely linked with action research –method (Jokela et al., 2015a, 2015b).

## **From art-based self reflection towards participatory action research**

According to Cole & Knowles (2008) action research allows practitioners to investigate and solve problems within their practice. All forms of action research underline the use of action and reflection to solve real-life problems (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Traditionally action research is described as a cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection leading to improved practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2004). Action research has many branches varied from teacher self-development to participatory intervention for positive changes in societies.

In education action research as teachers-artist self-development has long roots. According to Clarke & Bautista (2017) teacher-as-researcher movement emphasizes on self-development and importance of combining action research and reflective practice to achieve a more holistic approach to teacher development. They point out there are two prominent branches of self-reflective action research. Evocative autoethnography centers on the delivery of an uninhibited and emotional text that stimulates further conversation. Analytic autoethnography may incorporate the emotive aspects but it provides an analytic, theoretical perspective as well. Both of these self-reflective autoethnographical action research branches are often critiqued as lacking in replicability, scientific objectivity and evidences.

Critical self-reflection has traditionally been regarded as text-based activities. Yet, alternative methods for building a reflexive practice exist with much growing support arts-based approaches as invaluable to successful reflective work. Clarke & Bautista (2017) advocate arts-based narrative and storytelling for educator development because both the author and the reader get closer to the experiences, emotions that are often inaccessible in theoretical perspective. Artistic expression often remains a method of getting into alternate ways of learning. Action research as teacher's self-reflective development is close to the ongoing discussion on artistic research as artist's self-reflection common in fine art academies as well as autoethnography in art education (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004).

Action research is often noted as progressive method in teacher education. According to Hine (2013) there are clear evidences to suggest that action research is a valuable exercise for teachers to undertake. He notes that action research offers teachers a systematic, collaborative and participatory process of inquiry. Additionally, action research provides teachers with the technical skills and specialised knowledge required to effect positive change within classrooms, schools, and communities (Stringer, 2008).

This was in mind when in art education programme in University of Lapland (UoL) art-based action research -method (ABAR) was developed collaboratively by a group of art educators and researchers together with art education students, both in doctor and master levels. Even when many of the developers at UoL worked as an artist the key goal to develop art based action research -method was not the artist-teacher-researcher's own artistic expression or self-reflection. But rather the interaction between other cooperating teachers, artists, researchers, communities, and participants. This means the ABAR in UoL was based

on community-based and participatory approaches of action research. Objectives of the ABAR –method development address community empowerment, social change, and an increase in environmental responsibility and sense of community (Hiltunen, 2010; Jokela et al., 2015a).

### **Dialogical contemporary art as art-based action**

Changing the research focus from artist-teachers' self-reflection towards people and communities was based not only on the essence of action research, but also on principles of contemporary art. In his writings on relational art, the philosopher Bourriaud (2002) saw artistic practice as a process that always entails making connections between people. Contemporary art as a foundation for art education is marked by contextual, process-based, and dialogical activity instead of technical skills limited to the control of tools and methods of expression. Individual work has been supplemented by communality and engagement. In community and environmental art in particular, the emphasis is on the situational aspects of art, its links to people's everyday activities, events and places, not on the universal aspects typically stressed in modernism. (see Kester, 2004; Lacy, 1995; Lippard, 1997.) While critical contemporary art and artistic research usually try to bring matters into the open and to stimulate discussion, the objective of ABAR is to identify problems and find solutions. Communality means a new method of examining and understanding people's connections, spontaneous networks and common pursuits as a counterforce to extreme individuality and consumption. Communality offers a new perspective for examining the connection of contemporary art, indigenous art and craft and education in the North. ABAR was elaborated as a method which allows art-based creative and visual method to facilitate reflective practices (McIntosh, 2010) and development of art education and relational applied visual art (Jokela et al., 2013)

When adopting the models of relational contemporary art, education has moved away from the prevailing opinion that art education conveys the same worldwide cultural values and that the best methods for implementing education are the same everywhere. Bringing the operating modes of socially active contemporary art through art-based action research projects into northern contexts the need for decolonizing, cultural-sensitive art education research was identified in multidisciplinary collaboration with the university's northern network (Hiltunen, 2010; Huhmarniemi, 2012; Jokela et al., 2015a, 2105b).

### **Challenges for art-based action research in the multicultural North**

The development of art education may not be automatically connected with the North. A close examination, however, reveals dimensions that show how the North and Arctic environments and social-cultural settings can work as a laboratory for art-based education research and act as an arena for the development of context-sensitive methods for art education that observe the special conditions of rural and semi-urban places outside the cities and cultural centers.

Scholars in several disciplines have pointed out how northern environment is changing rapidly and how its cumulative impacts on nature, economy and livelihoods affect in a very visible way the social life, well-being, and culture of people living in the region (see Nordic Council of Ministers, 2011, 2014). Simultaneously the youth in the North, like in all peripheral places, are sent to have their education in the South or in bigger cities (see Corbett, 2007). This has led to an erosion in certain social structures in small towns and villages, and has created a series of recognized problems, including ageing of the population, youth unemployment, decrease of cultural activities, and psychosocial problems often caused by the loss of cultural identity.

The blending of indigenous cultures and other lifestyles is rather common in the whole circumpolar area. This multinational and multicultural composition creates elusive sociocultural challenges that are sometimes even politicized in the neocolonial settings of the north and the Arctic. In recent years there has been a rising interest in rewriting the forgotten cultural history of the Lapland. (Lähteenmäki & Pihlaja, 2005; Tuominen, 2011). Attention has been paid to the role of the arts as representation of the North (see Grace 2001; Marsching & Polli, 2011). Kuokkanen (2007) discussed the need, significance and objectives of an 'indigenous paradigm,' which is a way of decolonizing the indigenous values and cultural practices by 're-centering' the research focus on their own concerns and worldviews. One of the main objectives of such a paradigm includes criticism towards the Western Eurocentric way of thinking. Smith (1999) challenges the traditional Western ways of knowing and researching, and calls for the 'decolonization' of methodologies of indigenous research. Many scholars have called the indigenous knowledge system as a basis of indigenous research in the fields of culture, art, and design (Guttorm, 2014). In multicultural and multiethnic North we can apply Guttorm's concept and talk about 'northern knowledge system'. According to Aamold (2014), several artists in the Scandinavian North, Sapmi, utilise their multi-ethnic background and environmental knowledge as a basis of their art. Thus he argues that a mix of indigenous and critical methodologies is required in research on contemporary art in the North.

Keskitalo (2010) has stressed the importance of paradigm change and decolonization in Sámi schools as a counterforce to colonialization. She followed Smith's (1999) vision of decolonization as a long-term process, which includes dismantling the power of administrative, cultural, linguistic and psychological colonialism. In addition, scholars of northern cultures have stressed the need for decolonization among other multiethnic communities, for example, Lähteenmäki (2005) in mixed Sámi-Finnish societies in Central Lapland Finland and Corbett (2007) in Nova Scotia coastal fishery communities in Canada.

These paradigm changes have led to a re-evaluation of how art is taught and researched in schools and universities, and highlighted the aims of culturally sensitive approach in art education (see Manifold, Willis & Zimmerman, 2015) and the objectives of UNESCO for ecologically, socially, culturally, and economically sustainable development. These objectives incorporate current issues such as the survival of regional cultures combined with the inhabitants' self-determination of their own culture while securing social and economic stability for all communities. In art education in the North, the question is not only about

safeguarding the cultural heritage but rethinking the nature of school education policy and curriculum. This was pursued by acknowledging and respecting northern knowledge system and developing participatory and engaging art-based action research projects with the various actors of the university's northern network. (Hiltunen, 2010; Huhmarniemi, 2012; Jokela et al., 2015b.)

### **Art-based action research projects in doctoral dissertations**

In the University of Lapland, one of the salient pragmatist objectives is to unite art and the university's multidisciplinary research expertise of the changing North and the Arctic. Doctoral thesis models used in the University of Lapland offer flexible opportunities to apply the ABAR -method run research and development projects which are normally funded by external bodies (Jokela, Hiltunen & Huhmarniemi, forthcoming).

Representatives from the education sector, art and culture institutions, tourism and business life and, naturally, the local communities are often involved in these ABAR research projects. The presence of varied interest groups, including indigenous voices, enables dialectic interaction and polyphony in reflection and thus ensures participation and commitment during the research process. (Jokela, 2012; Heikkinen et al., 2007).

ABAR -projects are started with socio-cultural and visual analysis of the place and the community, using also the visual arts techniques modified for the purpose (Jokela et al. 2006). A diverse reflective research data typical for action research is collected from the processes, consisting of research diaries, individual and group interviews, learning portfolios, photos, videos and other materials. Doctor students articles, which later will be part of their article-based dissertation are often important parts of the larger research project run by university's professors or senior researchers. Art-based action research activities in cooperation with art educators, contemporary artists, researchers and other stakeholders have had a special significance for the development of northern expertise in art education at the UoL.

### **Three examples of the art in ABAR thesis**

The next three art projects will illustrate how current doctoral students have used the ABAR -method in a northern context and how they have produced exhibitions and articles as part of their art-based action research dissertations.

Doctoral student, artist and art teacher Antti Stöckell carried out *Spring* art project as a part of his thesis (Stöckell, 2013). He merged natural science and autobiographical self-reflective approaches in this art-based action research project. The artist's personal northern identity and expression as well as developing a new working method with nature and northern stories was an important dimension of this project. Yet, there were some features of community based art as well. The project was created closely with artist's family and close

friends, the art project united the generations around northern cultural heritage and ways of knowing. Even when the question is not about indigenous people, the concepts of decolonialization and knowledge systems are useful when valuing the aims of the artist-researcher.



Photo: Antti Stöckell

Stöckell visited natural springs around the town of Rovaniemi in typically forested natural parts of Lapland, collected samples from nature and spring water, made sketches, photographs and notes. At each spring he made traditional birch bark ladles (tuohilippi) to taste the spring water, sometimes with his close friends, but mostly alone. He described the method: “I analyze springs as natural scientific places, then as lived experience, and finally as narrative that also combine the previous levels” (Stöckell, p.40, 2015).



Photo: Antti Stöckell

Through the hiking trips to the springs, Stöckell created a narrative about how one's own life attaches meaning to northern places. The spring water appeared as a metaphor for a autobiographical story connecting generations. In traditional nature science way the samples, like the quality of the samples of the spring water reveals much about the surrounding area and the soil characteristics and condition. These elements formed the basis of the sequence of installation exhibitions which at the same time introduce the process and the results to the viewer. Stöckell introduced the theoretical frames, methodological choices and results of his art project in the article *Spring: An artistic process as narrative project* ( Stöckell, 2015).



Photo: Antti Stöckell

The second project Stöckell carried out was *Wooden Spoon* during the years 2016-2017. The installation was shown as a part of international *Interwoven* exhibition in Rovaniemi, Finland and in Reykjavik, Iceland. The theme of the exhibition was the encounter of traditional craft and contemporary art in northern art and design( Huhmarniemi, Jonsdottir, Guttorm & Hauan, 2017).



Photos: Antti Stöckell

Instead of an artist's self-reflection the process was now concentrated on other peoples experiences. Stöckell gathered around the campfire people who were interested in craftsmanship. They were asked and guided to carve a wooden spoon with knives and discuss the meaning of making by hand. An essential part of the spoon carving was the traditional burning process of the spoon's nest with glowing charcoal embers picked up from the campfire. Regardless of the participants' previous experiences of carving wood, everyone was able to make the spoon's nest using the traditional way by blowing on a glowing charcoal. To stay and work together at the campfire without any hurry let the dialogue about making by hand grow smoothly. As an action researcher, Stöckell worked as facilitator and observer, he documented the process at campfire using still photography and video.



Photo: Antti Stöckell

In this project, Stöckell examined the dialogic space at campfire created by community-based art, as well as the possibilities to gather experience-based data for his research. The participants' craftsmanship skills as well their relationship to art varied a lot. For every participants the inclusion of their own spoon into the art installation in international Interwoven art exhibition was a fascinating experience and stimulated the debate of the cultural tradition in Lapland and the meaning of hand making in it. Discussion was closely linked to questions about northern knowledge systems and the role of traditional hand making as decolonization. The completed installation provided the ideal space and situation to look at the results of the work done and to recall common experiences. Results of the art-based action research will be presented in article (Stöckell, forthcoming)

The third example *Our Arctic* –video installation is part of Elina Härkönen's ongoing research for dissertation, she is studying cultural sustainability in intercultural art education in the North (Härkönen, 2018). Her interest is especially in such art-based activities that are done in collaboration with international student groups and local communities. To research the actions taking place, she is using art-based action research as her main approach. She is focusing her study in participatory art as a mode of action and decolonisation. The way of producing knowledge that is striven from the participators is based on the northern knowledge system.



Photos: Elina Härkönen

Härkönen and her colleague Annamari Manninen lead an art course *Our Arctic – Perceptions of the Arctic through art-based* for international student group who were to reach out local school pupils from northern Finland and Norway and together with them produce documentary art videos about life in the Arctic. The aim was to give floor for the young people living in the Arctic to tell their perceptions about what is Arctic to them. The videos were collected together to a video installation and exhibited in the international Arctic Spirit congress in Rovaniemi, 2017. The exhibition was a combination of collaborative video art works, sculptings and visual representations of the thoughts brought up in the course about life in the Arctic. Härkönen's role in this was the teacher-facilitator and also producer for the exhibition. Results and the theoretical frames of the art-based action research will be presented in article *Teach me your Arctic – Place-based intercultural approaches in art education* (Härkönen, forthcoming).

## Conclusion

The target has been to introduce the art-based action research method developed and used in University of Lapland northern contexts and to clarify the interaction between artistic activities and research orientation. One of the main question has been how to merge together aims of social improvement typical for action research and artistic creativity typical for art-based research. In North this means use of cultural-sensitive and decolonizing activities and respect on northern knowledge systems when making community- and place-specific art.

Research project fulfilled demonstrates action research makes the development work know and distinguish for researcher from other disciplines and other collaborator which are not familiar with art. Art realised using pedagogical, dialogical and community based methods of relational contemporary art evokes emotion and effects directly among participator. Together art and action research makes new solution visible, evident and easy to take in practice. Doctor student learn how to develop new knowledge and practices directly related to their research activities.

ABAR -projects have also been characterized by bringing together people of different ages and generations, and understanding, conveying and renewing the significance of the cultures of northern places and communities through art. To use of ABAR -method to foster participation of locals has worked as needed decolonization process in the North.

## References

- Borgdorff, Henk (2011) Knowledge in Artistic Research. In Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (pp. pp. 44–63). London: Routledge.
- Aamold, S. (2014). The Role of the Scholar in Research into Indigenous Art. In G. Gunvor & S. Somby (Eds.) *Duodji 2012. International Conference on Duodji and Indigenous Craft and Design* (pp. 69–94). Sámi allaskuvla / Sámi University College.
- Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics* Paris: Les Presse du Réel.
- Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2008). *Researching teaching: Exploring teacher development through reflexive inquiry*. Big Tancook Island, NS: Backalong Books
- Corbett, M. (2007). *Learning to leave. The irony of schooling in a coastal community*. Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Clarke, A. & Bautista, D. (2017) Critical reflection and arts-based action research for the educator self. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*. Volume 18, Issue 1, 2017, 52-70
- Eisner, E. (Ed.). (1976). *The Arts, Human Development and Education*. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.

Hine G. S.H. (2013). The importance of action research in teacher education programs. *Issues in Educational Research*, 23(2), 2013: Special Issue 151

Grace, S.E. (2001). *Canada and the idea of North*. Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Gray, C. & Malins, J. (2004), *Visualizing Research. A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*, Hants: Ashgate.

Guttorm, G. (2014). Sami Duodji Methodologies. In G. Gunvor, & S. Somby (Eds.) *Duodji 2012. International Conference on Duodji and Indigenous Craft and Design* (pp. 51–68). Sami allaskuvla / Sami University College.

Hannula, M., Suoranta, J. & Vaden, T. (2005). *Artistic Research – theories, methods and practices*. Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki and University of Gothenburg / ArtMonitor, Sweden: Espoo: Cosmoprint Oy.

Heikkinen, H.L.T., Huttunen, R. & Syrjälä, L. (2007). Action Research as Narrative: Five Principles for Validation. In *Educational Action Research* 15 (1), 5–19.

Hiltunen, M. (2010). Slow Activism: Art in progress in the North. In A. Linjakumpu & S. Wallenius-Korkalo (Eds.), *Progress or Perish. Northern Perspectives on Social Change* (pp. 119–138). Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate,.

Huhmarniemi, Maria (2012) Berry Wars – A science centre as a forum for a dialogical, interdisciplinary art project. *International Journal of Education through Art*, 8:3. pp. 287–303.

Huhmarniemi, M., Josedottir, J., Guttorm, G. & Hauan, H. (Eds.) (2017). *Interwoven*. Rovaniemi. University of Lapland.

Härkönen, E. (Forthcoming) Teach me your Arctic – Place-based intercultural approaches in art education. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*.

Irwin, R. L. & de Cosson, A. (Eds.) (2004). *A/r/tography: Rendering self through arts-based living inquiry*. Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.

Jokela, Timo (2012) The art of art education and the status of creative dialogue In Carl-Peter Buschkuhle (ed.) *Ein Diskurs zur künstlerische Bildung* (pp. 359–76). Oberhausen: Athene.

Jokela, Timo (2013) Engaged Art in the North: Aims, Methods, Contexts. In Timo Jokela, Glen Coutts, Maria Huhmarniemi & Elina Härkönen (eds.) *Cool – Applied Visual Arts in the North* (pp. 10–21). Rovaniemi: University of Lapland..

Jokela, T., Hiltunen, M., Huhmarniemi, M. & Valkonen, V. (2006). *Taide, yhteisö & ympäristö / Art, Community & Environment*. Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopisto. Available from URL: <http://ace.ulapland.fi/yty/english.html> [Retrieved 5 February 2018].

Jokela, Timo; Hiltunen, Mirja & Härkönen, Elina (2015a) Art-based Action Research – Participatory Art for the North. *International Journal of Education through Art*, Vol. 11 (3), pp. 433–448.

Jokela, Timo; Hiltunen, Mirja & Härkönen, Elina (2015b) Contemporary Art Education Meets the International North. In Mira Kallio-Tavin and Jouko Pullinen (eds.) *Conversations on Finnish Art Education* (pp. 260–279). Aalto University series Art+Design+ Architecture 5/ 2015. Helsinki: Aalto ARTS Books.

Jokela, T., Huhmarniemi, M. & Hiltunen, M. (forthcoming) Art Based Action Research - participatory art education research for the North. In A. Sinner, R. Irwin & J. Adams (Eds.) *Intellect*

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2004). Participatory action research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Keskitalo, P. (2010). *Saamelaiskoulun kulttuurisensitiivisyyttä etsimässä kasvatusantropologian keinoin*. *Diedūt* 1/2010. Guovdageaidnu: Sámi allaskuvla.

Kester, G. (2004). *Conversation pieces. Community + communication in modern art*. London: University of California Press.

Kuokkanen, R. (2000). Towards “an indigenous paradigm” from a Sami perspective. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 20 (2), 411–436.

Lacy, S. (Ed.) (1995). *Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press.

Leavy, P. (2008). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. New York: Guilford Press.

Leavy, P. (Ed.) (2017). *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*. New York: Guilford Press,

Lippard, L. (1997). *The Lure of the Local. Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press.

Lähteenmäki M. (2005) The White Man’s Burden? Settlers in Finnish Lapland in nineteenth century. In M. Lähteenmäki, & P. Pihlaja, (2005) (Eds.). *The North Calotte. Perspectives on the History and Cultures of Northernmost Europe* (pp. 70–82). Publications of the Department of History. University of Helsinki.

- McIntosh, P. (2010) *Action Research and Reflective Practice. Creative and visual methods to facilitate reflection and learning.* London: Routledge.
- Manifold, M., Willis, S. & Zimmerman, E. (Eds.) (2015) *Cultural Sensitivity in a Global World: A Handbook for Teachers.* New York: National Art Education Association. In Press.
- Marsching, J. & Polli A. (Eds.) (2011). *Far Field, Digital Culture, Climate Change and the Poles.* Intellect.
- McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-based research.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publisher.
- Mäkelä, M. & Routarinne, S. (Eds.) (2006). *The Art of Research. Research Practices in Art and Design.* Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki.
- Nordic Council of Ministers (2011). *Megatrends. TemaNord 2011:527.* Copenhagen.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples.* London: Zed Books.
- Stringer, E. T. (2008). *Action research in education* (2nd ed.). New Jersey: Pearson.
- Stöckell, A. (2015). Spring: An artistic process as narrative project. In T. Jokela & G. Goutts (Eds.) *Relate North: Art, heritage & identity* (pp. 38-59). Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press.
- Stöckell, A. (Forthcoming) In T. Jokela & G. Coutts. *Relate North: Art and design education for sustainability.* Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press.
- Sullivan, G. (2005). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts.* CA: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Tuominen, M. (2011). Where the world ends? The places and challenges of northern cultural history. B. Johnson & H. Kiiskinen (Eds.). *They do Things Differently There. Essays on Cultural History.* Cultural history – kulttuurihistoria 9, Turun yliopisto 2011.
- Varto, J. (2009). *Basics of Artistic Research. Ontological, epistemological and historical justifications.* Helsinki: Publication series of the University of Art and Design.
- Whitehead, J. & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action Research: Living Theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.