



# Art-Based Action Research as a Tool for Developing Practices in Art Education

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**T**he need for new research strategies and methods emerged within the recently established art education degree programme at the University of Lapland in the late 1990s (see Jokela, 2006, 2019). As a relatively young academic discipline, research and research training in art education had, at that time, commonly borrowed qualitative research methods from other fields, such as education, the social sciences and the humanities (particularly art history). At the same time, an autoethnographic approach was typical of artistic research.

Within the university-based art education programme, it was recognised that the field's knowledge interest is transformative: research was expected to look ahead and develop more effective practical working and teaching methods while addressing identified challenges through scholarly means. There was a growing demand for the integration of research and practice, as well as for critical discussions that deepen understanding and empower practitioners and communities to promote social and cultural well-being and broader sustainability more effectively.

This solution-oriented approach characterised the research interests in art education at the intersections of education, training and art encounters with the well-being and health sectors, cultural services, nature-based tourism and participatory community planning. Collaboration within the university and regional and international development project funding enabled by the European Union helped sharpen the research profile of art education. This collaboration, alongside artistic research, brought a stronger emphasis on evidence-based knowledge of the impact and potential of art education, in line with academic research conventions. In the spirit of action research, a method was developed that produces research whose results can be simultaneously applied in practice and in which art, artistic components of research and the presentation of research processes and outcomes as art are all integral elements.

ABAR was developed to address the practical knowledge interests of art education simultaneously within MA-level research studies, doctoral training and research projects. This development work itself took the form of ABAR as the method was tested

and refined – especially in externally funded projects – while considering the potential of contemporary art (Hiltunen, 2009; Jokela, 2013, 2017, 2019; Jokela et al., 2015a, 2015b; Jokela & Hiltunen, 2023; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018, 2020). The method was developed within these studies as a working mode for both multidisciplinary regional development and international circumpolar cooperation, particularly within the thematic ASAD network of the University of the Arctic (Huhmarniemi & Hiltunen, 2022; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2021; Jokela et al., 2024a, 2024b).

This article provides the background and theoretical framing for the research-strategic and methodological foundations of ABAR while also highlighting its practical implementation. Based on a scoping review, the aim is to offer an overview that simultaneously serves as methodological guidance for researchers and students planning and conducting ABAR.

The research data for this article consists of doctoral dissertations completed in the field of art education at the University of Lapland that have applied and developed ABAR (Ainalinpää, 2019; Griniuk, 2022; Heinonen, 2025; Hiltunen, 2009; Huhmarniemi, 2016; Härkönen, 2021; Korsström-Magga, 2025; Luostarinen, 2023; Manninen, 2021). These article-based dissertations include dozens of peer-reviewed research articles. The data also includes research articles intended for inclusion in three ongoing doctoral theses (Lintumäki, 2023; Oinas & Huhmarniemi, 2024; Stöckell, 2018, 2025; Stöckell & Luostarinen, forthcoming). In addition, our article draws on material accumulated through development projects in art education and the research integrated within them (e.g. Hiltunen, 2023; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2021, 2022; Huhmarniemi et al., 2021). Moreover, the supervision processes of research and theses have themselves been subject to continuous reflection in the spirit of ABAR. Within these supervision processes, the method has been adapted to various research designs, generating valuable material that evidences its practical functionality.

The analysis of the data began with a close reading, paying special attention to research designs, methodological choices and the phases of research processes. The close reading also focused on the artistic components of the material, not only the written texts; this distinguishes our approach from traditional content analysis. Interpretation was guided alternately by theory and the material itself, as well as by comparing the material to research methodology literature. We have aimed to highlight the theoretical and methodological factors that characterise the method and the stages of research progression.

The methodology has been previously examined from various perspectives in several research articles (e.g. Jokela, 2017, 2019; Jokela et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2019). Its

practical implementation has been described in handbooks produced to support art education studies (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018, 2020). ABAR has also been adopted internationally, serving as a methodological framework in European Union-funded research (Hiltunen, 2023; Kárpáti, 2023) and in studies on Arctic art which have involved collaboration with Indigenous communities (Jokela et al., 2024b, 2024c). Furthermore, ABAR has been employed in approximately 50 master's theses, a selection of which are listed as representative examples in a project pedagogy handbook (Jokela et al., 2024a, pp. 111–113).

Our article, based on a scoping review, is part of ABAR's long-term development work. Drawing on research, we update the methodology and its practical guidelines to align with current paradigms and practices in the field. We aim to support education in the discipline by providing an overview of the method's development in a format valid to both researchers and students. This article brings together two perspectives: we aim to theorise about the research strategy and methodology while also describing the stages of practical implementation, based on relevant literature and our scoping review.

In this chapter, we do not address the diverse contexts and situations in which ABAR can be applied, nor the interdisciplinary dimensions or the ethical questions related to research and artistic practice that are, in themselves, also methodologically important. Instead, our analysis focuses on the processes and phases that emerge from the material. We aim to distil and clarify the method's core features so that the processes and theoretical dimensions of ABAR become clearer. While this is a translated version of a research article published in Finnish, we hope that this article will support researchers and students in adapting the method's processes to their own unique contexts and situations.

#### Starting Points for Developing the ABAR Methodology

To begin, it is essential to contextualise the emergence of ABAR, drawing on relevant literature and our mapping of the field. At the heart of its development has been a small group – initially just two art educators, researchers and artists (Hiltunen & Jokela, 2001; Jokela, 2006, 2021). This core group has since expanded to include doctoral researchers, alumni and international collaborators. The Northern Art, Community and Environment Research (NACER) group is the primary research community where the method is actively developed and applied.

The primary objective of developing ABAR at the University of Lapland has been to provide students, as well as artist-teacher-researchers, with a functional research approach that supports their efforts to address identified challenges and advance the field's

practices and impact. Methodologically, the roots of ABAR partly lie in the tradition of action research and partly in artistic research and its offshoot, art-based research. In the NACER group, ABAR is understood as a guiding research *methodology* rather than a single, isolated method.

The need to develop ABAR is linked to a discussion that began in the late 1970s about the potential of the arts within qualitative research methods in education (Eisner, 1976). When art academies and universities, such as the University of Lapland, began investing in doctoral degrees in the arts, an active debate emerged about research methodologies that would acknowledge the distinctive nature of art and design disciplines. Artistic research has been widely discussed internationally under various terms (see, e.g. Borgdorff, 2011; Gray & Malins, 2004; Sullivan, 2005) and also in Finland (Hannula et al., 2005; Mäkelä & Routarinne, 2006; Varto, 2009).

Within the NACER group, it was recognised at the turn of the millennium that these approaches were not yet sufficiently developed to serve the needs of students in art education research and doctoral training. Ontologically and epistemologically, many aspects of artistic research appeared paradigmatically fragile when examined from the perspective of either science or art. However, this liminality of the research – existing between art and science, expression and research, emotion and analysis – opened the door to the possibility of a new paradigm alongside qualitative research (Leavy, 2009, 2017). Simultaneously, interest grew in artistic research methods, especially visual research methods, within the social sciences, such as visual ethnography (Pink, 2007) and photovoice methodology (Delgado, 2015). All these phases are equally relevant to ABAR, in which artistic practices and ways of working are integrated throughout each stage of the research cycle.

The underlying knowledge interest guiding ABAR is generally practical in orientation. Anttila (2006, p. 475; 2007, p. 23) categorised the knowledge interests of different research strategies along two axes: objectivity–subjectivity and theory–practice. Figure 1 presents Anttila’s four-field framework, supplemented here to illustrate the goals that shape research orientations. Typically, objective-theoretical research is grounded in quantitative methods such as surveys. On the other hand, subjective-theoretical research generates interpretations, understandings, meanings and theories. For example, artistic research in which artist-researchers develop and reflect on their work can be described as subjective-practical research. In this framework, the knowledge interest of ABAR is primarily located in the objective-practical quadrant but may also draw on elements from other quadrants.

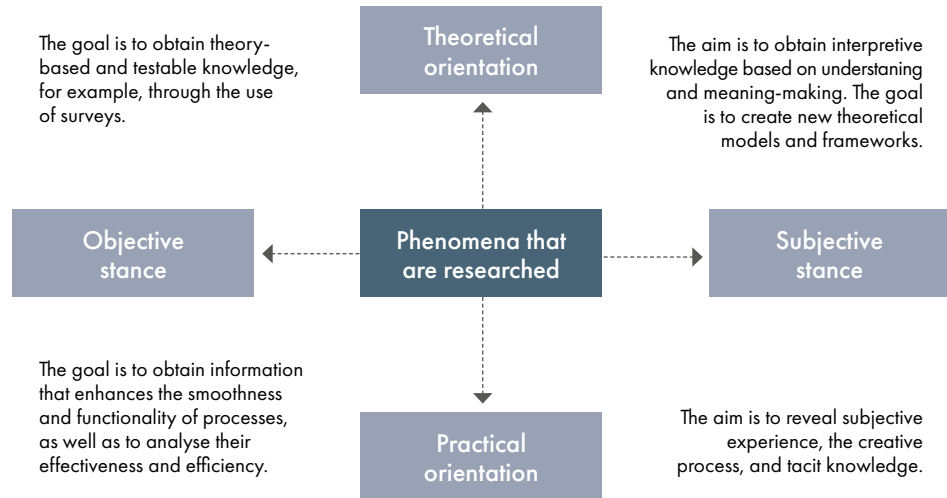


Figure 1: The objectives of research approaches (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2020, p. 44). Anttila's (2006, p. 475; 2007, p. 23) four-quadrant model of research approaches, supplemented by input from Jokela and Hiltunen.

In long-term action research, which generates diverse data sets and publications, the emphasis may shift between interests and research orientations – data can be collected from participants, subjective reflection may take place and both practice and theory can be developed in tandem. In funded research projects and article-based dissertations, ABAR appears as a methodology whose effectiveness in relation to its goals is further refined throughout the research process. In a master's theses, it is usually applied more narrowly as a single-cycle process tailored by the student to suit their specific research context. This typically involves straightforward phases of planning, implementation and evaluation, leading to, for instance, recommendations for improving the quality of art-based activities and for continuing research in the field.

## Developing the Process, the Product or Both through Research

Next, it is important to recognise that ABAR can be applied in the following two distinctly different ways: it can be applied with a process-oriented focus or a product-oriented focus (see Figure 2). In both cases, the approach is cyclical in nature, but the or-

Process-Oriented Action Research in the Field of Art Education	Production-Oriented Action Research in the Field of Art Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of pedagogical methods in art education</li> <li>• Development of operational models, organisations, pathways, and strategies within the field of art education</li> <li>• Development of various organisations through art interventions or art-based services</li> <li>• Promotion of well-being and interaction through art and art education</li> <li>• Empowering art and art education</li> <li>• Art and art education that revitalises and renews culture</li> <li>• Creation or renewal of operational models and cultures</li> <li>• Expansion of the scope of art education and applied arts</li> <li>• Broadening the sphere of community and empathy</li> <li>• Development of reflexivity and research-based practice within activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artistic and art education productions, such as art productions, exhibitions, performances, events, and workshops</li> <li>• Publications, such as handbooks, educational material packages, and media productions</li> <li>• Operational, product, and service concepts</li> <li>• Art-based products and services</li> </ul>

Figure 2: Aims in process-focused and production-focused ABAR.

ganisation of the research, the role of co-researchers, data collection methods and the expected outcomes vary significantly (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2020).

A process-oriented approach emphasises the development of working methods and operational models within organisations, groups or communities. The aim may be, for example, to support participants' learning, empowerment, strengthening of their identity and other activities that enhance well-being, work ability or social functioning. In some cases, the goal may be to create entirely new and innovative practices or to renew existing models for new contexts. While the process may generate new art productions or similar outcomes, the primary emphasis of the research remains on developing the process itself. This ensures the sustainability of the results and supports their transferability and application in other contexts. Thus, the outcome is rarely a fixed organisational practice but rather an evolving concept or model that can be adapted elsewhere.

In the field of art education, this approach can be used to develop, for example, art pedagogy.

ABAR can also be employed as a method for product development research or design research within thesis work. In this application, the aim is to achieve the best possible outcome within the given timeframe and resources rather than to establish a final, absolute truth (see Anttila, 2007). The development of a product or an art production typically involves collaboration with users, experts or both. The research cycles consist of planning, testing or evaluation and improvements made based on feedback. In development research and design research, these iterative cycles are often referred to as *iterations*.

Our research shows that ABAR can be used to create artworks, art events, art-based services and learning materials in a research-informed manner. In these outcomes, particular emphasis is placed on themes such as community-based art education, placing empathy, interdisciplinary artistic expression, environmental and political statements, and phenomena within the field that rely on interaction and dialogue.

## **The Multiple Roles of Art within ABAR**

Within ABAR, art is always present in multiple, interconnected ways: it is simultaneously an art education process and an artistic process. The outcomes of such research are improved processes, new productions, a combination of both and, most importantly, a deepened understanding of these processes and their development. The research process typically leads to an evolving process and to a product, such as an exhibition or learning material, through which the process is communicated. Whether the emphasis is on the process or the product depends on the research interest, the chosen art form and, above all, the intended audience and context in which the research is presented.

Art serves multiple functions within ABAR: it is not only the subject of development or the final result but also a tool for data collection and analysis. According to Leavy (2009, 2017), art-based research methods are used to access experiential knowledge from participants that may not be captured through conventional spoken or written research methods. Our findings show that art-based approaches can bring, for example, the tacit knowledge of local communities into the research process and its data. In addition, research outcomes can be communicated through artistic means – in other words, through forms of expression that go beyond traditional written academic publications.

## From Reflection to Criticality and Impact in Action Research

Next, we highlight key features that support the use of ABAR in developing teachers' professional competence and in advancing teacher education within the field. Hine (2013) and Heikkinen et al. (2006) noted that action research offers teachers a systematic, collaborative and participatory process for acquiring knowledge. Moreover, action research equips teachers with the skills and insights needed to bring about positive change in classrooms, schools and communities (Stringer, 2008). In the field of visual art education, action research also provides tools for the continuous development and inquiry of one's artistic practice (Ainalinpää, 2019; Griniuk, 2022; Huhmarniemi, 2016), workplace cultures (Oinas & Huhmarniemi, 2024) and pedagogical practices (Heinonen, 2025; Härkönen, 2021; Luostarinen, 2023; Manninen, 2021).

In education, action research is not a single, uniform method; rather, it encompasses a range of branches, ranging from personal professional development to striving for societal change and activist research. In the educational context, the idea of the teacher as a self-developer has deep roots. Clarke and Bautista (2017) emphasised that the international teacher-researcher movement underlines the importance of combining self-awareness with action research to develop a reflective and holistic approach to teaching practice. They identify two significant branches of reflective action research. Autoethnographic research focuses on presenting an open-ended, emotionally resonant and discussion-provoking research narrative. For this reason, it shares similarities with forms of artistic research where artistic expression functions as a pathway to alternative learning skills. Self-study action research also overlaps with *a/r/tography* (arts-based research as enacted living inquiry) (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004).

The other branch of reflective action research recognised by Clarke and Bautista (2017) is analytical ethnography. Here, action research may include emotional aspects, but it also provides analytical and theoretical perspectives on development. This also applies to the ABAR cases reviewed here in which practical and theoretical inquiry run in parallel and research topics are situated at the intersection of education, art and research.

Critical participatory action research (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014) is an approach that often aligns closely with the aims and methods of ABAR. This approach seeks a more just society and emphasises the action research process as a means for communities to shape their lives and future visions (Fine & Torre, 2021). ABAR also has parallels with service design processes in which artist-designers and practitioners of applied art aim to solve community and environmental issues through collaborative and

participatory methods (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2020; Jokela et al., 2015a, 2015b; Miettinen & Vuontisjärvi, 2016). At the University of Lapland, the method has been further developed in projects where the interests of service design and art education intersect (Hiltunen, 2023; Huhmarniemi & Hiltunen, 2022).

When examining the characteristics of ABAR in relation to other similar approaches, its nature as a learning process involving art becomes especially clear. This is particularly evident when visual art educators reflect on the outcomes of their research. The learners include facilitators, participating individuals, organisations and communities. The method also aligns with transformative action research, which emphasises that the researcher initiates change processes and, through reflection, also transforms themselves (for example, by adapting their practices to the era of ecological crises) (Bradbury, 2022). Bradbury (2022) is among the theorists who highlight the role of action research in driving transitions towards sustainability: addressing the climate crisis, achieving global sustainability goals and strengthening social justice. A focus on initiating a sustainability transition is evident in studies by Ainalinpää (2019), Huhmarniemi (2016), Luostarinen (2023), Lintumäki (2023), Korsström-Magga (2025) and Stöckell (2018, 2025), which use art to engage participants or audiences with ecological and environmental issues.

All forms of action research are sometimes critiqued for a perceived lack of repeatability, scientific objectivity and evidence-based outcomes. However, action research practitioners and theorists respond to this critique by emphasising its necessity. For example, Guba (1996) argued that it is not essential to follow the conventions of traditional research but rather one can adopt a democratic, empowering and humanising approach that helps communities expand their understanding of their situations and find solutions to the problems they face. McIntosh (2010) also emphasised that reflection itself is a form of research and, within education, it can enhance evidence-based inquiry. In ABAR, art is not merely seen as a means of producing positive change, it is also understood as a dialogical tool for critical reflection (Hiltunen, 2009; Härkönen, 2021). A hallmark of ABAR is the dialogical space created by the researcher which allows for multiple voices – a feature already present in Hiltunen's (2009) doctoral research on community-based art education which laid the foundations for the approach and has since been expanded to include more-than-human actors as well.

In Finland, action research has been the primary method of the teacher-researcher movement since the early 1980s, often linked to narrative methodologies (Heikkinen et al., 2007) which bring reflection closer to emotions and artistic writing. In educational research, Clarke and Bautista (2017) and Heikkinen et al. (2017) viewed narrative

and art-based storytelling as particularly meaningful as they enable both the researcher and the audience to engage with experiences and emotions that are often inaccessible through purely theoretical research. Heikkinen et al. (2007) proposed validation criteria for action research – such as criteria for the capacity to provoke and have an impact – that are similar to those proposed by Jokela (2012, 2017, 2019) for ABAR.

Within action research more broadly, critical reflection is usually mainly understood as the writing of research publications. In contrast, ABAR has developed contemporary visual art methods to support reflective practice so that reflection is also embodied in the processes of making art and in artistic productions. Our material shows that art (both art processes and artworks) functions as part of reflective research directed toward development – as described in the dissertations of Manninen (2021), Oinas (Oinas & Huhmarniemi, 2024) and Heinonen (2025) – or toward activism, as emphasised by Huhmarniemi (2016) and Lintumäki (2023). Multimodal approaches to visual art have attracted interest and have also been applied in other research fields (Mikkonen, 2024).

According to Leavy (2009), qualitative research is inherently value laden and art-based research is political, consciousness raising and emancipatory. This characterisation also applies to activist forms of ABAR. ABAR can be socially or environmentally political, just as the art it produces can be. The researcher's and community's values, attitudes and even political views influence the aims and implementation of the research. These underlying factors are openly acknowledged during the research process and in its reporting. The researcher must clearly explain their relationship to the topic and articulate their research intentions.

The researcher is always a key participant and learner in their research process and, in art-based research, also in the artistic process. ABAR does not aim to study the experiences of a community or phenomenon from an outsider's perspective. Quite the opposite: the aim is often to influence experiences as part of the research process, with visual art education as a natural mode of engagement. Visual art educators who use ABAR for developing their practice are often multi-skilled professionals whose expertise naturally integrates artistic skills, pedagogical competence and the ability to develop methods through research.

## **From Dialogic and Participatory Art to Posthuman Co-Research**

To identify the research strategy of ABAR and its possible applications, we next turn our attention to how the theoretical-artistic framework of the research guides the use

of the method. The theoretical framework of international arts-based research also depends on the research topic. For example, phenomenology, feminist theory and theories of contemporary art have contributed to the emergence of a/r/tography, which is well known in the field of art education (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Springgay et al., 2008). At the University of Lapland's art education programme, the research methodology has been developed in relation to environmental and community art, place-based research, community-based art education, situational learning and theories of project-based learning. Influences have come from, among other sources, social pedagogy (such as sociocultural animation), place-based methodologies, visual anthropology, and critical pedagogy (Hiltunen, 2009; Jokela et al., 2015b; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2020). Based on these background theories, the development goals of ABAR at the University of Lapland relate to strengthening the community (Hiltunen, 2009, 2025), driving social change and increasing environmental responsibility (Huhmarniemi, 2016), promoting cultural sustainability (Härkönen, 2021), supporting eco-cultural sustainability (Jokela & Hiltunen, 2024), fostering social justice (Hiltunen, 2010; Jokela et al., 2015a), exploring place relations (Luostarinen, 2023; Stöckell, 2018; Stöckell & Luostarinen, forthcoming), researching with Indigenous people (Korsström-Magga, 2023; Hiltunen & Korsström-Magga, Forthcoming), and viewing art and art education as leverage for sustainability transformations (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2025).

When the focus of research shifts from artist-teachers' self-inquiry toward communities and participation, ABAR aligns with the tradition of participatory action research on contemporary art, which emphasises dialogue. Bourriaud (2002) views art as a process that fosters connections and dialogue between people, grounded in the principles of relational aesthetics. The same theoretical premises mark the relational conception of contemporary art, contemporary art education and ABAR: contextuality, processuality, and dialogicity (Granö et al., 2018). In the early stages of developing this research strategy, many contemporary art researchers – such as Kester (2004), Lacy (1995), and Lipard (1997) – who emphasise participatory methods highlighted the spatial and dialogic aspects of art and their connection to everyday life. As a foundation for ABAR, relational contemporary art calls for a situational method for investigating and understanding connections between people, spontaneous networks and shared aspirations, the art acting as a counterforce to extreme individualism, individual centrality and consumerism. This provides the field of art education with a perspective for re-examining the connections between contemporary art, traditions, popular culture and education from a decolonial viewpoint (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2022).

ABAR enables the use of art-based, creative and visual methods to support reflective practices in research (McIntosh, 2010) and to develop art education and relational, applied visual arts (Jokela, 2013). Thus, the research strategy is also grounded in the theory of inclusive and socially engaged contemporary art. Its aims focus on strengthening communities, driving societal change and promoting environmental responsibility and inclusion (Jokela et al., 2015b).

Our mapping shows how participatory contemporary visual art is understood as a toolkit for ABAR, offering a dialogic space for reflection that all development requires. Glammer (2015) emphasised that rethinking and reimagining the relationship between art, culture and development is necessary. He highlighted the significance of art education for the advancement of social justice and advocated for the values of art in achieving sustainable cultures, alleviating poverty, promoting self-compassion, and stimulating creativity and social imagination. These impacts of art education can help push toward social change. In recent years, these themes have emerged in discussions about ecosocial civics (Salonen & Foster, 2021), eco-cultural sustainability (Jokela & Hiltunen, 2024; Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2025) and in art education and research rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and encounters with contemporary art, a discussion which has also been central in the ASAD network (Beer, 2023; Hiltunen & Huhmarniemi, 2024; Leddy, 2023).

When the ABAR at the University of Lapland has particularly focused on the rapidly changing North and Arctic regions, as well as the eco-culture and multiculturalism of its resident communities, new artistic-theoretical and ontological-epistemological questions have recently emerged that are closely linked to art education. These include the encounter between Indigenous cultures and contemporary art (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2021, 2022) and the sustainability transition (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2025). In turn, these are connected to posthumanist ideas that have gained relevance, such as Deleuzo-Guattarian and Baradian intra-action and 'entangled' ways of knowing (Barad, 2007, 2014). ABAR was not originally created as a method for posthumanist research, but it has been successfully applied in the field to expand notions of agency and researchership. Examples include art and art education involving garden and plant art and pollinators (Ainalinpää, 2019); reindeer herding families and reindeer (Korsström-Magga, 2023; Korsström-Magga & Jokela, 2022); and a study of Lapland cows and their caretakers (Soppela, 2022). Posthumanist ABAR has also been developed in contexts involving technology, the body and performance (Griniuk, 2022), as well as in the context of the visual arts classroom (Heinonen, 2025). Co-researchership,

co-formation, intra-action and many other concepts and approaches highlighted by posthumanism have expanded agency and become an integral part of ABAR (Jokela et al., 2024b, 2024c).

## Participatory and Arts-Based Research Data and Its Analysis

In this section, we will examine the types of research data used in ABAR, focusing on how they support both the development work within the process and the validation of the research (see Figure 3). A key feature of this method is its diverse, process-generated data, which is often referred to as *reflective data*. This term highlights its purpose: enabling the continuous assessment and improvement of the process. Reflective data allows researchers and participants to revisit insights and developments as the project progresses.

The research data can be created and analysed collaboratively with participants using arts-based methods (Leavy, 2009; 2017). For example, participants may reflect on their experiences through visual and verbal means, either individually or in groups. Arts-based data often includes drawings, collages, photographs, videos, environmental artworks and other creative outputs made by co-researchers. This material conveys knowledge that may be difficult to express verbally but is nonetheless valuable for the research aims.

Researchers typically conduct participatory observation and document their observations in a research diary. Keeping a research diary systematically is important; it should include, for example, feedback received and emerging thoughts. The diary can be maintained either digitally or by hand. In participatory research, data collection is often a shared task among multiple contributors. Data is also reviewed during the action phase so that methods can be adjusted if needed.

‘The process is commonly documented using photographs, video recordings, sketches, plans, artworks and meeting notes that are systematically stored. Researchers may also interview participants or record various feedback and evaluation discussions. Arts-based methods and other qualitative methods can be combined, for instance, by using visual material to support and enrich discussions.

The data is typically multi-modal and includes observations gathered with traditional qualitative research methods. Thematic and group interviews, as well as questionnaires, are often used in action research. However, similar insights can be gained by documenting the activities themselves, such as recording discussions. For example,

Typical Research Data for Process-Oriented Development	Typical Research Data for Production-Oriented Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentation of the process, such as a research diary, meeting minutes, sketches, and photo and video documentation</li> <li>• Documentation of reflective practice, such as recordings of discussions</li> <li>• Participants' artworks, portfolios, learning journals, or reflective essays</li> <li>• Interviews, such as thematic group or individual interviews</li> <li>• Feedback surveys related to the activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping of development needs</li> <li>• Mapping of best practices and solutions</li> <li>• Documentation of the design process, such as sketches, prototypes, and models</li> <li>• Documentation and description of the production, for example, through images and written accounts</li> <li>• Feedback on the piloting or iteration of the product or service from participant groups, users, and partners</li> </ul>

Figure 3: The research data in process-oriented and product-oriented ABAR.

reviewing visual documentation together with participants during discussions can serve both as a method of data collection and as a way to share the research process.

A distinctive feature of this method is that data analysis takes place during the ongoing process. The researcher evaluates interaction, engagement and the functionality of the process in order to make adjustments as needed. A deeper analysis, however, is carried out after the action phase. The researcher may categorise, theme and organise the data, using either a data-driven or theory-driven approach.

Reflective data enables researchers to return to specific phases of the process, significant insights and situations that led to changes. Often, the analysis stage resembles traditional academic writing: it engages in dialogue between the data and existing literature. However, arts-based methods can also be integrated into the analysis. For example, the researcher may create a collage from photographic material, as Manninen (2021) did in her doctoral thesis, or curate an exhibition, as Luostarinen (2023) demonstrated. This approach also supports the artistic representation of the research and allows for sharing findings through multiple channels. Visual materials, such as photographs, are also used for communicating and reporting research results.

When research is conducted closely with a community, it is recommended that the community also be involved in analysing the data. Furthermore, if the results of the analysis are presented as an artistic production, the outcome may align with a production created through a community art process. Evaluating such artistic productions is an in-

tegral part of assessing the effectiveness of the method. Completed works illustrate how successful, empowering and meaningful the process has been. Criteria for evaluating the impact of an art production include its ability to evoke thoughts, emotions and reflections on values, as well as its ability to foster a sense of empowerment that strengthens participants' trust in their agency (Jokela, 2012).

Mutual listening, respect, joint reflection and returning knowledge to the community are all part of the ethical principles of ABAR. Such principles are being further developed – for example, in Sámi research (Laukkanen, 2023) – to guide the social and cultural sustainability of research activities. Arts-based methods provide a range of tools for conducting and sharing research in socially and culturally sustainable ways, as well as in ethical ways.

## The Phases of an ABAR Process

Each ABAR project is unique, shaped by its research design. However, certain common phases can be identified. Below, we outline the general process in a concise form.

The **first phase** involves familiarising oneself with the chosen phenomenon, defining the goals and research questions, organising the research, planning activities and conducting theoretical and artistic background work (see Figure 4). The artistic activity typically occurs during the **second phase**. Research data is gathered alongside the art activities or in a subsequent phase. In the **fourth phase**, the data is analysed, conceptualised and the next research cycle is planned.

ABAR is always situational and context specific, meaning that the aims and interventions emerge from the researched phenomenon and its context rather than solely emerging from the researcher's interests or perspective. After defining the phenomenon and preliminary research goals, the process begins with background mapping – typically a place and community mapping exercise – where the researcher familiarises themselves with the research environment using suitable methods. Such mapping practices have been described, for example, in a guide prepared at the University of Lapland to support art projects (Jokela et al., 2024a). Already at this stage, mapping can employ arts-based and visual methods. Examples of these developed approaches include place mapping (Jokela et al., 2024a) and established visual methods, such as applications of visual ethnography (Pink, 2007; Jokela, 2018), the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997) (where community members photograph their surroundings) and videography (Rokka & Hietanen, 2018).

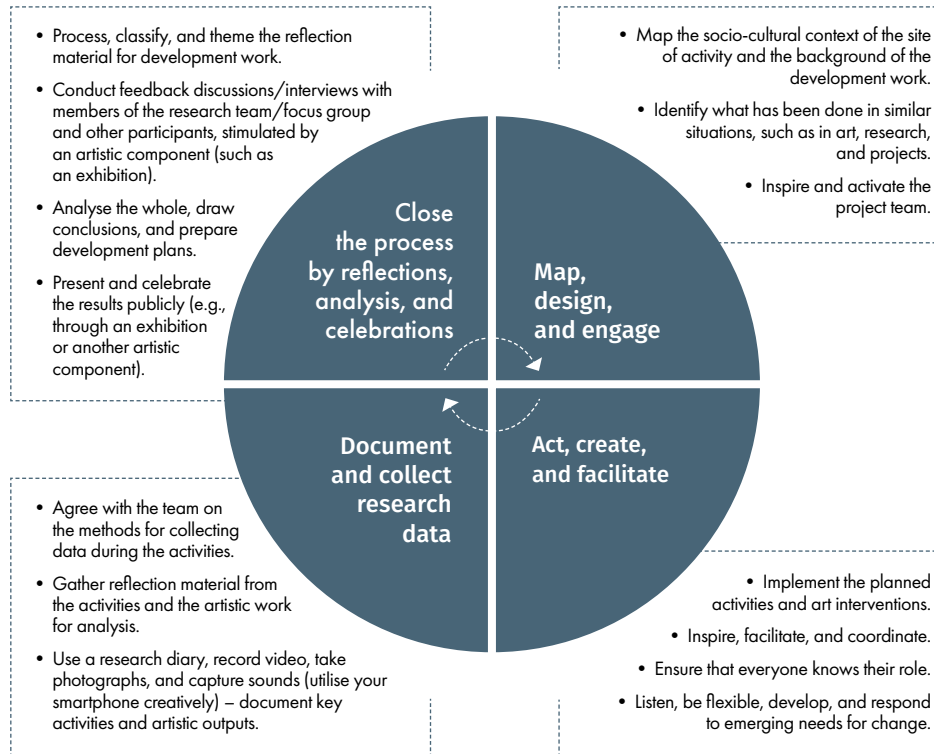


Figure 4: The stages of one cycle of ABAR defined by Jokela and Hiltunen (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2020, p. 57).

Only after developing a multi-layered understanding of the place and its socio-cultural situation can the need for intervention, its aims and appropriate arts-based methods be justified. An initial research plan is often developed in participatory interaction with the project's stakeholders, drawing on the mapping phase.

From an ethical perspective, conducting thorough background, place and community mapping is essential, especially when the target group includes multicultural or minority communities or when cultural tensions may be present. This aspect of community involvement is crucial when the researcher is an outsider to the community in some sense. From the perspective of cultural sustainability, communities must define, identify

and express their significant cultural features, as well as the needs for change and knowledge production. This is particularly important when working with local communities (Härkönen, 2021; Jokela, 2018) and in research conducted in Sámi areas (Hiltunen, 2009; Jokela, 2020; Korsström-Magga, 2025; Oskal, 2008).

Following the place and community mapping, the research activity begins either through practice-led activities or a literature and theory review. Such a review helps the researcher understand what is already known about the topic, how other researchers and artists have addressed similar themes and what knowledge they have produced. This identifies the best practices while also clarifying knowledge gaps and concepts that help refine the research task into specific research questions.

Ethical considerations are present in every phase of arts-based research. They relate to defining the research aim, the role of the target group and co-researchers, formulating research questions, the methods used in the artistic work, data collection and presenting the results (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018, 2020). These ethical choices should be identified and communicated in a transparent manner. Researchers should follow good scientific practice (Keiski et al., 2023) and the ethical principles of art, particularly as discussed in the context of community art (Kantonen & Karttunen, 2021b). Special attention should be paid to authorship, ownership and anonymisation when these aspects might conflict with each others in community-based work.

An ABAR project can be carried out in many ways, and the researcher may join the development cycle at any stage (see Figure 4). In other words, the researcher may become involved in an ongoing process. However, the most common form of involvement involves the researcher initiating the cycle. In this case, the process includes background work, organising the research, planning and implementing an art intervention, analysing reflective data and reporting the results (see Figure 5).

In practice, ABAR also leaves room for not knowing, curiosity and the courage to experiment with something not yet mastered. As is typical of action research, research questions often evolve and are refined through the progress of the research and its cycles. The process may include detours and missteps, which are also common in creative artistic work. Jokela (2008) described the process as partly intuitive, messy and based on experience and tacit knowledge; thus, the aims and chosen methods are initially indicative, and the topic and questions become clearer as the research proceeds. However, the artist-researcher does not navigate this alone. Development work is generally carried out within a team or community wherein reflecting on intuition helps steer the process towards a shared and articulated goal. Therefore, the process is not rigid, even

## 1. Background Work

- Identify the phenomenon, define the problem, and set preliminary objectives.
- Be aware of the ethical principles of research and obtain the necessary research, documentation, and publication permissions.
- Map the socio-cultural and visual context of the community and the place related to your research.
- Review existing research literature and relevant artistic practices addressing the phenomenon.
- Define the key concepts you will use and build the theoretical foundation of your research through literature, previous studies, and artistic practices.
- Clarify the research task both theoretically and practically.
- Formulate possible research questions.
- Select and justify the research methods and data collection strategies based on the nature of the phenomenon, the research interest, and the theoretical framework.

## 2. Organising the Research and Initiating Teamwork

- Identify potential project partners, their roles, and functions (users, clients, target groups, and the team you will work with).
- Create a project or research team and draft a preliminary schedule.
- Define the goals and practical development actions together with the team to pursue the research task.
- Distribute responsibilities among the participants, either in parallel or hierarchically.
- Ensure a shared understanding of the project implementation: value-based, concept, and the theoretical foundation of the artistic or applied artistic approach.

## 3. Prepare a Research / Intervention Implementation Plan

- Plan the activities or intervention together with your team in the form of an action research or design cycle.  
Plan how research data will be collected and how the process will be documented (journals, researchers' or artists' folders, interviews, questionnaires, etc.).

## 4. Conduct the Research / Intervention

- Carry out the planned activity or intervention.
- Collect the planned research data during the activity and document the process.
- Celebrate and share the outcomes of the artistic intervention already during the process (exhibition openings, meetings, etc.).

## 5. Analyse the Reflective Data and Report the Results

- Organise the multimodal research data into a usable and analysable form.
- Create summaries from the documentation material to facilitate feedback discussions, stimulate group interviews, and otherwise reflect on the activities with your team to deepen interaction in the analysis phase.
- Categorise, theme, and analyse the collected research data.
- Analyse the results and make suggestions for developing the activities or the created production.
- Write a written report of your research as a kind of development narrative structured by the research cycle.
- Present the artistic results of the research in a manner suitable for the topic and meaningful for the field of art education and the research community.

Figure 5: The stages of ABAR (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2020, pp. 56–58).

though diagrams are used to clarify it. At the University of Lapland, theses using this method are often linked to various art, education, development and research projects conducted in a project-based manner. Students are supported by a handbook on visual arts education and applied arts which describes the stages of a contemporary art project in detail, from background work and planning to implementation and reporting (Jokela et al., 2024a).

The publication of results concludes the action research cycle. ABAR is usually presented both as artistic productions and as a written research report. The research process often includes an art production, which can be a piece of work, an event or a site- and time-specific process presented, for example, in a dissertation or thesis. University-specific degree structures and study guides define whether a study can include an artistic component and how art should be defined and assessed. At the University of Lapland, the artistic parts of dissertations are evaluated as separate entities, while in master's theses, an artistic production can be presented as part of the written report.

In written reports, such as master's theses, the traditional format is usually followed, often complemented with visual elements. The report's introduction explains the relevance and significance of the research, its context and its aim.

## **Differences and Connections Between ABAR and Parallel Research Strategies**

In this section, we examine the significance of this review study and reflect on the positioning of ABAR within broader research landscapes. As discussed earlier, ABAR has been developed to address the practical knowledge interests of visual art education. It has been shaped simultaneously within MA-level research training, doctoral education and larger research projects. Alongside this development, it has been essential to clarify the strategic, methodological and procedural similarities and differences between ABAR and other artistic and arts-based research approaches used in the fields of art and art education. This comparison further highlights the practical character of ABAR and the kinds of knowledge interests to which it is well suited.

ABAR shares certain similarities with *artistic research*, where the artist's practice is understood as research or as a research method (Huhmarniemi, 2016). Both approaches are driven by a desire to transform and develop professional practices. They also share a cyclical research process that involves planning, practical action, reflection and evaluation. Typically, artistic research aims to advance artistic expression or techniques: the

research focus is often the artist-researcher's creative and practical process, which may involve technical-material or conceptual-artistic dimensions (Borgdorff, 2011).

A related phenomenon is so-called research-based art, where artist-researchers explore themes from different scientific disciplines through their artistic productions and accompanying texts. Ontologically and epistemologically, artistic research is often characterised by its openness and fluid boundaries in terms of knowledge domains, research interests and methods (Jokela, 2019). Although all the developers of ABAR at the University of Lapland have also worked as practising artists, the main goal has not been to develop the artistic expression of the artist-teacher-researcher or to deepen self-reflection. Instead, the emphasis has been on enhancing skills for interaction and teamwork in collaboration with teachers, artists, researchers and participants from various disciplines and communities. This same emphasis is visible in educational and collaborative action research (Stringer, 2008) and participatory action research (Kemmis et al., 2014; Whyte, 1991).

In parallel with the rise of artistic research, many educational researchers have integrated the practices of artists and art critics into their research processes. Researchers have conceptualised the role of art in research strategies and processes in various ways (see Eisner, 1976; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Irwin & Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2017). To distinguish this from artistic research, many scholars from different disciplines have described their research strategies as *arts-based research* (Leavy, 2009, 2017, 2018; McNiff, 1998). While artistic research is often connected with professional artistic practice, arts-based research is applied across diverse fields, including education and the social sciences. For example, in education, students' drawings and paintings can be used as research material to gain insights into their experiences. Similarly, in the social sciences, arts-based methods have been adopted for participatory data collection. Scholars have highlighted the potential impact of artistic activity on education and learning (Barone & Eisner, 2012), on the development of art education and teaching (Irwin & Springgay, 2008), on health and well-being (McNiff, 2013) and on applied arts practice (Jokela, 2019; Jokela et al., 2019).

Recently, there has also been growing discussion about *art-based education research* and the role of arts-based methods and visual approaches in doctoral research in art education (Sinner et al., 2018, 2019). Navigating the space between art and science, expression and research, and emotion and analysis has opened up debates about new forms of inquiry (Leavy, 2009, 2017). One key strength of arts-based research methods is their capacity to explore non-verbal, tacit, sensory and embodied knowledge and experience, dimensions that are relevant across many disciplines.

One widely recognised and practised strand of arts-based research is a/r/tography. Originating at the University of British Columbia in Canada, a/r/tography has been theorised under the leadership of Rita Irwin. In addition to artistic research and action research, it draws from phenomenology and feminist and contemporary art theories, particularly relational aesthetics (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Springgay et al., 2008). ABAR and a/r/tography share an emphasis on the parallel development of practice and theoretical inquiry, with research topics situated in the contexts of teaching, art and communities. Whereas phenomenology, feminist and contemporary art theories have shaped a/r/tography, ABAR at the University of Lapland initially drew from environmental and community art practices, site-specific contemporary art and community-oriented art education. Thus, participation, interaction and collaboration are central to ABAR. In contrast, autobiographical reflection and self-study tend to be more central to a/r/tography than to ABAR, which more often focuses its analytical reflection on diverse data collected from the activities rather than primarily on the researcher's experience.

In Finnish-language contexts, the approach of artistic action research is sometimes used (Lehtonen & Vehviläinen, 2021; Kantonen & Karttunen, 2021a). Unlike ABAR, artistic action research is typically situated within the realm of artistic research and may not require scientific methods. At the same time, it appears that the methodologies of artistic research and ABAR are converging as artistic research methods have become increasingly common in peer-reviewed academic publications.

## Conclusion

In these guidelines, we have outlined ABAR as a research strategy that combines elements of academic research and artistic practice while retaining a clear identity of its own. In research and development projects, as well as in doctoral studies, it takes shape as a distinctive methodology that combines qualitative research with participatory art-based methods. Its multi-cycle process is well suited to addressing the broad, practice-oriented knowledge interests of visual art education. In smaller sub-studies, particularly in master's theses, ABAR often functions as a flexible method or tool adapted to the specific needs of the research design. In these cases, the phases of planning, implementation, evaluation and further development typically follow one another in a single cycle.

The development of this methodology has involved numerous contemporary, site-specific and community-based art projects, collaborating with researchers, teachers, artists, students and various community partners (including villages, schools and

workplaces). The aim has been to produce research that generates immediate and visible practical change as well as valid, practice-based knowledge, understanding and new skills relevant to this change. Research tasks have been defined, and development processes have been created in collaboration with community members as artistic activities. This is one of the foundations of ABAR: the diverse members of communities – including non-human participants such as animals, plants and places – are recognised as co-actors and participants in the art, research and development process, contributing to art and growth in visual art education.

ABAR is well suited to innovation and development in visual art education – a field inherently oriented toward change and the future, much like education and art more broadly. It is particularly appropriate for places and communities where artist-researcher-educators develop practices through participatory research methods to address identified challenges. Action research in visual art education is always reflexive and, depending on its emphasis, may be participatory, critical or activist in nature.

This research methodology was initially developed in the spirit of place-based and situational art education, with a strong connection to Northern eco-cultures and methods of environmental and community art. This has directed attention not only to research activities but also to the cultural sensitivity and ethical dimensions of educational and artistic practices and to the roles of co-actors in the process. More recently, a posthumanist perspective has broadened the notion of participants and co-actors in research to include various ecosystem actors.

The principles of ABAR connect closely with participatory and dialogical contemporary art, co-creation, co-research and Indigenous research approaches. It can generate valid knowledge and practical, individual and collective capacity for change. It also generates research-based practical knowledge for visual art education.

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