



3. Methodologies

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Experimental methods in arts research

Artistic practitioners working with communities or groups of people are sometimes faced with the challenge of integrating their experimental or provocative strategies into participatory contexts. Some participants may not appreciate the level of experimentation that artists envision for their projects. Alternatively, artists may focus on aesthetic or conceptual dimensions that they fail to explain adequately to participants. Other factors like funding criteria, ethical requirements and partners' objectives can also be perceived as rigid institutional or bureaucratic measures that suppress creativity. Nevertheless, there

is scope for experimental methods in artistic and socially engaged research, on various levels. For instance, at a technological level, experiments in digital media arts can be compared favourably to experimental methods in science (Barker, 2013). Artists can also look beyond technical or medium-related concerns towards more processual issues, recognising the possibility of experimentation in participatory artistic strategies and radical pedagogies. Experimentation here retains its open-ended and experiential nature, but tends to revolve more around innovative dialogues and forms of democratic participation and citizenship rather than innovative uses of specific media and materials.

In the field of research, however, experimental design borrows various concepts and criteria from scientific research and aims to produce knowledge for practical application (Sørensen, Mattsson, & Sundbo, 2010). Scientific experiments aim at producing predictive and universalisable knowledge (Bakhshi, Schneider, & Walker, 2008). Experiments can also be applied in other modes of knowledge production, such as research or practice-based humanistic modes that are "interpretive, explicit, analytical, intuitive and adaptive" (Bakhshi et al., 2008, p. 16).

Open-ended experiments seek to explore new ideas, activities or methods. The thorough analysis of experiments, considering and illuminating all the uncontrolled variables of the experiments, is central to such open-ended experiments. Sørensen et al. (2010, p. 313)

approach experiment as a 'particular analytical approach which includes an array of methods and data collection techniques' instead of a 'positivist laboratory experiment'. Leedy and Ormrod (2010, p. 223) understand experiment as the best method for indicating cause-and-effect relationships and in such a design, the 'researcher considers many possible factors that might cause or influence a particular condition or phenomenon'.

The types of experiments that are most suited to the research and practice-based modes may be varied, yet, as Sørensen et al. (2010, p. 313) admit, 'soft' approaches to experimentation continue to borrow from scientific experiments. Such softer approaches to experiment design are defined by the aforementioned authors as 'different types of experiments, qualitative and quantitative; carried out inside or outside laboratories, they can have different potentials in different circumstances ... and can include a continuum of data collection and analysis techniques' (p. 315). This softer approach opens up avenues for researchers to select more appropriate and varied data collection and analysis methods that best suit the context and the phenomenon under investigation (p. 315). However, planning an open approach without due care can result in ill-designed attempts at research with no real benefit, as such attempts are usually run by 'trial-and-error' (p. 315). Experimental designs can be carried out in the following ways:

- Soft, open-ended and quasi-experiments,
- Experimental designs for pilot studies, followed by
- True experimental pre-test-post-test designs.

Quasi-experiments: Quasi experiments avoid the randomised assignment or selection of groups prior to commencement (Sørensen et al., 2010; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010) and seek to find cause-and-effect relationships between independent and dependent variables. Examples of quasi experiments are open-ended experiments, field experiments, natural experiments, time-series experiments, and non-randomised control group experiments. Some types of quasi-experiments seek to explore real life situations and are carried out in natural settings and not in laboratories or researcher-controlled environments.

Methodological benefits and limitations: When randomising is not possible or practical, quasi-experiments are useful. Not all confounding variables can therefore be controlled, and researchers need to clarify, consider and explain in their analysis all the variables that they have no control over (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The results are therefore not generalisable and are very situation specific (Sørensen et al., 2010). In these experiments, knowledge is applied practically, seeking to solve real life problems in specific contexts.

Structuring a project

Projects making use of experimental design tend to manipulate and measure the effects of different variables. Observational studies consider natural settings, while experimental interventions in the community permit researchers to understand and collect evidence about variability in the community. However, socially engaged projects can be conducted in numerous ways, often depending on the nature of the communities or participants that artists work with. The structure, working methods and overall scope of the project will depend on many factors, including some of the areas discussed above, such as the type of community the project members are working with, aims of the project or available resources.

One variant is the structure of the project in terms of the artist-participant relationship. So, for example, projects can be broadly similar in structure to those below, or a combination of two or more.

- **Artist-led** - where the artist retains creative control of the project's development and outcomes
- **Participant-led** - where the participants are given certain creative or organisational autonomy, and have a greater input into the project's direction and output
- **Pedagogical** - where the project has a more educational nature, and involves imparting information and skills, or allows for learning
- **Participants as artists** - where the participants are treated as creative professionals and allowed creative autonomy

Opening Doors (2008 - present) is a Maltese arts organisation that provides opportunities for adults with diverse intellectual needs. Training in music, dance and performance is provided by a team of professional artists, but the participants themselves are also treated as professional artists, and are empowered to take ownership of the creative work and process.
www.openingdoors.org.mt

- **Information donors** - where participants pass on stories and memories from which an artist may create work, and be guided to varying degrees by the participants

- **Co-creation** - where the artist and participants jointly contribute to an artistic creation, both guiding its content, and possibly performing alongside professional artists

The project Nuorten hyvinvoinnin ankkurit (Anchors of Young People's Well-Being) (2008 - 2010) worked with young people aged 15 and over in Lapland to improve well-being and youth exclusion, loneliness and mental health in the transition period after primary school. Group work (on large-scale sculptures of various media) proved to be a significant factor in art action models. Participants worked together, using a wide range of communication and collaboration skills, interacting, and negotiating with each other.
www.sosiaalikallega.fi/hankkeet/paattyneet-hankkeet/nuorten-hyvinvoinnin-ankkurit/main_page

- **Bi-directional integration** - refers to a mutual process in which local people and recently-arrived immigrants are given support for integration, where cultural, multicultural and local contexts are undergoing rapid change.

The ArtGear project (2015), conducted as a large number of refugees and asylum seekers arrived in Europe, aimed to create spaces for new encounters and to tackle harmful social divisions and radicalisation of youth through arts-based action. It aimed towards 'bi-directional integration', which refers to equalising access to cultural activities regardless of background for both locals and immigrants. Bi-directionality also refers to a mutual pro-

cess in which the locals and immigrants are given support for integration into the new multi- and intercultural situation.
www.ulapland.fi/FI/Yksikot/Taideiden-tiedekunta/Tutkimus/Projektit/Taidevaihdde--ArtGear

- **Participants in control** - participants can be encouraged to take on tasks of responsibility or take some control over the project, to instil a greater feeling of ownership;

The Konst Händer project (2018) took place in the district of Prästhölm, in Boden, Sweden. The project was based around the idea of the open living room - open to everyone. The public living room provided a new context, and an opportunity for a renegotiation of predetermined roles. By opening their living room to visitors, the family could change their role by changing the subject position: from the needy and waiting as a refugee to the active role of host.
www.sakaria.se/works/konst-hander

Projects can also vary in how they approach creativity and the creative process. Different approaches to creativity might look like some of the examples below.

- **Outcome-centred** - where both the creative process and final outcome are intrinsically important to the successful implementation of the latter.
- **Journey-centred** - where the creative journey of the participants is a process which is an intrinsic part of the project.

- **Culture-consuming** - where the project brings participants together through consuming culture, rather than creating it. Participants may curate or select what they would like to see.

Nuovo Armenia Cinema (2016 – present) is a multicultural cinema in the Italian city of Milan, which screens films from the numerous international cultures represented in the neighbourhood, curated in collaboration with the community. Each film is introduced by inhabitants of the neighbourhood in two languages, and the screenings promote understanding between the communities in the city.
www.nuovoarmenia.it

- **Social-gatherings** - where the project places a strong focus on allowing participants to meet in a safe environment, with creativity playing a secondary role.

The project Magdalenina prádelna (Magdalena's Laundry) (2019 – 2020) blurred the lines between art practice and social work, personal and public duties, and private and shared property. The project worked with clients of Jako doma, an organisation that provides support to homeless women, and provided a space for people to meet, listen and communicate, while waiting for their laundry. No rules or instructions were given – workshops and conversations were held in an open format, and a horizontal structure was maintained among participants.
www.iniproject.org/en/prostor/archive/2020/magdalenina-s-laundry

- **Umbrella-project** - a larger, longer-term structure which provides funding and support to smaller, possibly pre-existing projects, giving them support with less bureaucracy, and allowing for creativity and collaboration within the community.

Med början i Fisksätra (Starting in Fisksätra) (2016 – 2018), based in the socio-economically vulnerable suburb of Fisksätra in Sweden, acted as an umbrella-funder for many smaller arts projects. The project's long-term aim was to stimulate creativity, autonomy, and cooperation between different actors in the area, leading to a smaller number of larger, collaborative projects, and establishing a sustainable network among them.
www.fisksatra.se/2017/03/31/med-borjan-fisksatra

Many projects also vary in their relationship with the public, and the project's final outcome:

- **Final outcome** - an exhibition, presentation or performance can be presented and made open to the public;
- **Indirect contact** - the final outcome can be made available to the public through a publication, online film or other indirect means;
- **Anonymous participants** - in some cases, the participants may be happy for their work or the project's outcome to be shown to an audience, but may choose to remain anonymous;
- **No audience** - where the presence of an audience is not important to the project's successful implementation;

- **Long-term users** - where that being created is seen and used long-term by communities and inhabitants of the area.

CHROMOPOLIS_la città del futuro (CHROMOPOLIS_the city of the future) (2017 – present) is a biannual project which supports and enhances the creativity of young people within the city of Trieste, with the aim of improving the liveability of the city and its suburbs in particular. The project works to create new networks and synergies between artists, local authorities and communities that use the spaces affected by the interventions, and works with a collective of young professionals specialized in urban regeneration, participatory planning and usability of public spaces.
www.artefatto.info/article/pagine/edizioneincorso

Another variable is the type of creative practice used. Some artists may work exclusively within their specialisation and skill, but some project leads may be more open to allowing the group of participants and their own particular interests and talents to guide how the project works.

- **Free-disciplinary approach** - depending on and taking its lead from preferences or hidden talents of participants;
- **Multidisciplinary approach** - depending on competencies and preferences of participants;
- **Using other activities to facilitate creative work** – non-artistic but social activities such as socialising, eating together, story-telling, or walking;

- **Using digital tools** - new technology to broaden access;

- **Using existing artworks for inspiration** - such as in a museum, or using a piece of classical music or theatre;

- **Cross-over of sectors** - collaborating with a specialist from another sector, for example a social worker, youth worker, architect or someone who works specifically with the project's target group;

The project Deep Shelter, by artist Pamela Balzacchino worked with patients and staff at the Psychological Support Services at Sir Anthony Mamo Oncology Centre, Malta and was based on a framework of reflection, relation and revelation, allowing for the analysis of the experience of illness, hospitalisation and care, and relating this to the visual art process. Nurses and doctors not only worked with the artist to plan the project, but also took part in its process.
www.deepshelter.com

- **Cross-over of cultures** - combining different cultures from disparate communities or marginalised groups.

Romafuturismo Library (2016 – 2019) examined to what extent the Afrofuturistic concept applies to the Roma people, and what aspects of the liberation history of Afro-Americans might inspire the Roma today.
www.artycok.tv/en/42836/lacka-ladislava-gaziova

The role of the artist within a project

Within the structure of the project, the artist may carry out one or more roles, either simultaneously, or as time goes by. In some cases, the artist may be an instigator and project lead; in others, the artist may be brought in to work on the project alongside other professionals in different disciplines.

- Facilitator
- Teacher
- Partner

- Creative director
- Mediator
- Equal

The Jamming Project (2014 - present) in the Czech Republic supports artists with intellectual disabilities, and creates opportunities for collaboration between them and artists, who are seen as equally hindered by their academic education. The professionally equipped art studio supports the artists and is not intended to provide education or therapy.

www.jamming.cz

- Participant
- Learner
- Contributor

In Mraky (Clouds) (2011 - 2014), the artist Veronika Šváblová sifted through the history of her family seeking significant moments and seeming trivialities, using her family's history, compiled from photos, diaries, videos and a recipe. These memories have survived and remain as the fabric of family community.

www.handagote.com/en/handa-gote

- Researcher

The three-part project Utopian Nights (2017-2018) engaged with various communities and disciplines, and, in particular, involved a strong overlap between curation, creation and anthro-

pology, with many artist-researchers taking on multiple roles over the course of the project.
www.issuu.com/davidpisani1965/docs/binder2s

- Curator
- Guide
- Political Activist

During the 1960s and 1970s, theatre in Italy extended its scope to enter previously unchartered territories and collaborations within factories, suburbs, deprived areas and mental health institutions, engaging with under-represented audiences in order to restore their right to creative expression. Today, the practice is no longer unusual, and with it comes a reconsideration of the artistic value as well as the 'inclusive' potential of socially-engaged creative work (Valenti, 2004).

Ensuring an equitable balance of power

A socially engaged arts project is, at its core, a collaborative project by arts practitioners and community members. Whether the initiative for the project is generated directly by the community, or artist-initiated, it is crucial to ensure that the process involves the participants themselves and that the resultant artwork embodies the experience of participants' aesthetic of the everyday (Johnstone, 2008). In a truly collaborative community arts project, there would be no hierarchy, from the planning stage through to the implementation and eventually the evaluation of the project, but rather a sense of equity and rad-

ical interdependence. Every participant has strengths, ideas and skills that are important to the project, no matter the diversity of ideas, personalities and background exhibited by the group members.

Below are some areas which should be borne in mind when aiming towards an equitable balance of power throughout a project:

- **Accessibility** - issues of literacy, ability, perceived class and cultures should be considered throughout the project's trajectory, to ensure that all participants can contribute equally;
- **Language** - the participants should be able to use the language which they feel most comfortable with. The facilitator should be able to speak the same language; failing that, a translator should be present throughout;
- **Content** - establishing the content and subject of the project should be done collectively. The subject should be relevant to the participants and should meet the needs of those engaging with it;
- **Structure** - boundaries will provide a sense of security and safety to all participants. What is discussed during the process must be treated sensitively and confidentially by all participants. A solid sense of boundaries will enable trust and deeper interaction within the group;

- **Trust** - if trust and an element of disclosure is expected of the participants, it should also be offered by the artist leading the project. Revealing humanity and a certain amount of vulnerability, as opposed to adopting a more formal leadership style, can lead to improved team cohesiveness and a more meaningful project;

- **Dignifying incorrect responses** - 'incorrect' or unexpected responses should be treated with dignity and without inhibiting further participation.

- **Acknowledging Differences** - people are different, have different strengths and limitations, and so may be able to participate in different ways. Participants should be made to feel empowered to participate and contribute in their own way;

- **Radical Interdependent Leadership** - this is driven by the belief that leadership is a collective activity that requires mutual enquiry, listening and learning, leading to a high level of collaboration and openness. Radical Interdependent Leadership involves close observation, mindful listening and ensuring that all participants' voices are heard.

- **Close observation** - a high level of observation, particularly at the beginning of a project, will allow the artist to understand the participants' skill-set, in order to plan appropriate activities and tasks;

- **Mindful listening** - being in the present with undivided attention focused on the speaker (Shafir, 2000, page 105) helps the artist to pick up on the non-verbal cues, and understand the intentions of the speaker;

- **Equal participation** - ensuring everyone's voice is heard. Discussions that are dominated by a small number of participants with powerful personalities will stifle engagement from others who might have important contributions.

Project frequency & duration

The duration of projects can vary hugely depending on their needs and resources. While some projects deliver a 'short, sharp, shock', mobilising communities for a short, intense period of time, others can continue over much longer periods of time, and can involve generations of participants over years.

Artists can sometimes be restricted by time or resources, and have no choice other than to conduct relatively short projects. However, a short, well-planned project can often still be beneficial to participants in many ways. For example, a short project can allow for intense focus with meaningful interactions between participants. The intensity over a short period of

time can allow participants to fully engage with the process and immerse themselves in the activities. With a short period of time, where perhaps a finished outcome is not so important, creativity can become more spontaneous, and participants may feel less pressure to produce work. A shorter project can also keep the attention of younger people, in particular, or that of other participants who may not be able to commit on a long-term basis.

In practical terms, a short project may be the only available option in some cases because it is more accessible to participants who have other commitments such as work, or even, in the case of some communities, migration.

Manifesta 11 in Zurich (2016) invited artists to work with different professionals working in the city. Maurizio Cattelan worked with Paralympic world champion Edith Wolf-Hunkeler to create a wheelchair on which she glided across the surface of Lake Zurich in unannounced appearances. Artist Daniel Binswanger worked with his host professional – a journalist – and researched details of the Swiss job market, eventually turning the results into a comic printed in the weekly supplement Das Magazin. Through numerous such collaborations, the city was engaged in and collaborated with the artists' practices for an intense period of time.
www.m11.manifesta.org/en

A longer-term project will allow more time for trust to be built between artist and participant. The project's processes can be carried

out slowly and thoughtfully, with time to mature and develop. Participants' confidence can grow, along with their skills. A longer process allows for different activities, discovery of talent, encouraging changes in lifestyle, and increased participation in creative activities.

A longer project may also allow for a more ambitious 'output', with more time to plan and create.

Many variations of project length and frequency exist, including

- **An intensive month during a school year;**

Within the Hungarian project Felhőkönny (Cloudbook) (2013 – 2014), elementary school children watched the sky every day for one month, and drew the most beautiful clouds they saw. From these drawings, four writers created stories which were then illustrated by students from Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design.
www.cloudfactory.mome.hu

- **An annual festival** – participants and possibly artists will change over time, but the aims of the project can remain the same;

The Festival der Regionen (Festival of the Regions) (1993 - present) takes place every two years in different locations outside of the urban centres and cultural hubs in Upper Austria. Through its approach to confronting social issues and everyday living conditions with contemporary art, the festival's emphasis on

participation and stimulative discourse remain the same, while every edition approaches issues such as homeland, labour, asylum, and migration.
<https://fdr.at/en>

- **Over the course of a school / academic / calendar year;**

Dessine-moi la Méditerranée is an international project established in 2011 by the association EDAAV (École D'Art au Village), reaching hundreds of children of different ages, artists and educators in many countries around the Mediterranean, including Italy, Algeria, Malta, Morocco, France and Tunisia. The project asked children to produce drawings in soft pastels on black paper that interpret landscapes, heritage and colonial sites, histories and domestic or other objects they identify with the Mediterranean Sea, and involved them in a collaborative process with a photographer on the creation of a double exposure photographic work that juxtaposed their artwork in pastels with their own photographed portraits, merging their colourful images into their own faces.
<http://edaav.org>

- **Demand-led** – a project can exist long-term, but can reach out as needed, and as resources allow, to work more intensively with communities.

Sometimes it is not the length of a project that is problematic, but a lack of continuity following or between different projects. If appropriate, and if possible, contact can be kept

with the community following a project, and new activities should take into account what the community participated in before.

The Finnish nation-wide TAIKA I (2008 – 2011) studied the challenges inherent to the development of working life from the viewpoint of arts and culture, studying and assessing how well art-based methods can respond to the development needs of working life. The project was based on the premise that arts projects addressing societal challenges generally have good results, but their lack of continuity has been perceived as a problem, since proven activities have often ended with projects.

<http://taikahanke.pbworks.com/w/page/38011235/TAIKA-hankkeen%20loppuraportti>

- **A digital presentation of the project**
- **Collaborative artwork** - for example an outdoor sculpture
- **A community event** - such as a community meal, a traditional celebration
- **Storytelling**
- **Broadcast** - digital (visual or podcast) or on local television or radio
- **Film**
- **Long-term installations or physical artworks**
- **Celebratory event** - opening an exhibition, showcasing work done

Apart from tangible outcomes like those listed above, research projects - particularly those that are rooted in experimental design - can also lead to significant research outcomes that need to be evaluated and even measured, particularly in the case of funded projects. Contexts, communities and situations can be described and analysed, while 'cause and effect' relationships related to the societal impact of the arts can be assessed. Balanced evaluations of research methods and evidence also value different stakeholders' perspectives, not only those of researchers. Understanding research outcomes and impact involves researchers in questioning processes that aim to make them and others reflect on the findings. Combinations of concrete results (like performances, exhibitions, and so on) and scientific research can have a significant impact on policy.

Project outputs

Not every project must result in a tangible art-work or performance. For many participants, the most meaningful and productive part of the project is the process through which they engage with creativity. However, a definite 'result' or final presentation can sometimes provide a concrete goal for participants to work towards. Depending on the community's interests and abilities, the artist's specialisation, and the project's context and resources, some outputs can broadly be described as below.

- **Exhibition** - a presentation of participants' or artists' work
- **Performance** - a performative presentation
- **Publication** - a printed collection of imagery and/or writings created during the project

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