
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Groth, Camilla; Mäkelä, Maarit; Laakso, Harri; Helke, Susanna
Catalyses, Interventions, Transformations

Published in:
Synnyt/Origins - Finnish studies in art education

Published: 30/12/2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please cite the original version:
Groth, C., Mäkelä, M., Laakso, H., & Helke, S. (2018). Catalyses, Interventions, Transformations: Introduction. Synnyt/Origins - Finnish studies in art education, 2018(3 (Special issue)), 1-11.

This material is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

Catalyses, Interventions, Transformations

Editorial for the Proceedings of the 6th Art of Research Conference, *Catalyses, Interventions, Transformations*, November 29-30, 2017. Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture. Department of Design, the Department of Film, Television and Scenography and the Department of Art.

Authors:

Camilla Groth, Maarit Mäkelä, Harri Laakso & Susanna Helke

Introduction

Aalto University had the pleasure to host the 6th Art of Research Conference in November 29-30, 2017. Over the past two decades, the Art of Research conferences have had a significant role in promoting continuous dialogue and fruitful convergence between art- and design-related research practices. The conferences have contributed to the development of rapidly growing and spreading contemporary discourse on artistic and practice-led research. Thus, the Art of Research conference has been widely appreciated as an unconventional and highly-interactive format for discussing, exhibiting and performing different modes of discourse within art and design practices.

This year the conference was co-organized between three different departments within the Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture; Department of Design, Department of Film, Television and Scenography and the Department of Art, offering an academic framework for discussing proposals drawing on the full spectrum of artistic and practice-led research including contemporary art, film, photography, scenography, craft, design, media and architecture.

Moving on from previous years' preoccupations within the field about ontological or epistemological foundations, this year the conference invited proposals that addressed the agency of the artist-researcher as a catalyst, that would challenge established ideas and produce new thinking through artistic and practice-led research. The conference committee posed the initial questions in the conference call:

- *How do artistic research activities act as catalysts in the domain of different praxes?*
- *How can ideas and/or practices of catalysis be considered within particular research processes, or in relation to larger contexts and realms of art, politics and society?*

In the context of artistic research, catalysis is understood as an action that causes *reactions* and continues to activate critical thinking that provokes further reactions. Therefore, Art of Research VI focused on the multitude of bodies of artistic and practice-led research and their effects towards producing new knowledge, new experience, new materialities, new theoretical insights, new praxis and poetics.

The topics and concerns of the 26 contributions formed six themes that sets the stage for discussions; Art as Catalysis, Social Dimensions, Mark Making, Being Human, Materiality and Representation & Transformation. These will all be presented and discussed in this proceeding. Following the Art of Research tradition, the significance of the creative output in the form of the artefact was acknowledged through the building of an exhibition during the conference days. The accepted contributions including artistic pieces were included the exhibition, enabling the audience to gain a fuller comprehension of the research undertaken, enabling also the implicit meanings embodied in these artefacts to emerge.

Keynotes

The conference keynotes; Tim Ingold; Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, Dorita Hannah; Research Professor of Interdisciplinary Architecture, Art & Design at the University of Tasmania, Australia, and Mona Livholts; Associate Professor in the Department of Social and Welfare Studies, Linköping University, Sweden, epitomised the theme of the conference through their speeches.

Tim Ingold talked about the *Art of paying attention*. In his speech, Ingold says that both scientists and artists attend to things, however in different ways: “Whereas method, experience, observation and the search for truth entail a kind of attention that draws us into a sympathetic relation with matters of our concern, methodology, experiment, objectivity and the search for factual accuracy hold things at bay, rendering us immune to the contagion that might come from too close an involvement with them. Art cleaves to the former; science to the latter”. For the purpose of this proceedings however, Ingold has chosen to submit an essay that takes these notions and ideas further. The essay is based on a later talk in Turin and further explains the meanings and shifting positions that are entailed in artistic and scientific research. In this essay Ingold argues that: “research is fundamentally a practice of art, in which science has consistently fallen short”.

Dorita Hannah talks about *Processes of performance*. She says that; “Design performativity and its catalytic nature develops notions of a Critical Spatial Practice”. She describes this notion through her own interdisciplinary artistic research, which operates across and between architecture, performance and the visual arts. She presents and discusses ‘performance design’ formulated to challenge and reveal our prescribed conceptions of how sites, bodies and media interact and inform each other. Within this frame, three thematic clusters are introduced: ‘*dance-architectures*’ that uncover buried histories and mythologies through the body performing in urban and wilderness sites; ‘*table-talk*’ that draws on food to open up social room; and ‘*event-space*’, which exposes the inherent politics of place and our complicity in its construction. Dorita Hannah is not contributing with a text for the proceeding, however, you may listen to her talk via the video link.

Mona Livholts tells us about the *Writing subject*, a topic much discussed also in the presenting of artistic research through the format of text. Livholts says that; “Writing is an act of translation and transformation, an embodied, material and spatial activity through which researchers’ design and shape knowledge”. Livholt’s artistic practise is the act of writing, and her artefacts are pieces of texts that are very intimate and open. She asks: “What are the potential possibilities of narrative life writing genres to contribute to shape creative and performative art based practice for scholars across the arts, design and science?” In her paper Livholts explores the epistemological questions about the author as creator and story-teller in art based practice. She further suggests that the expanding field of narrative life writing genres, where the written word often interacts with visual culture, is useful as a catalyst for such practices.

The video recordings of these keynote speeches are available at the conference website:

<http://artofresearch2017.aalto.fi/>

Art as Catalysis

There are a multitude of different ways of looking at the agential and transformative aspects that the artistic practice gives opportunity for. While it may be the practice in itself that catalyses thinking in the artist and that feeds back into the practice and related research, it may also be the artist and the related practice or artefacts that form the catalyst, affecting a whole community and ways of thinking in a larger scale. London based Marsha Bradfield and Shibboleth Shechter conducted practice-based research in cultural production beyond academia, as they involved the neighbouring community of

their design school in artistic practice in The Millbank area. The Millbank *Atlas* is a map that aims to create a particular kind of space that both exemplifies and challenges the new participatory paradigms that has marked the social, cultural, economic, technological and other dimensions of life in the UK in recent decades. The making and distribution of the knowledge created and envisioned through the mapping of the area challenges conventional views of how the area is perceived. In this way, the Millbank Atlas expresses civic learning for a civil society.

Similarly, Brigitta Stone-Johnson, explores the use of the site-specific within the arts and design, aiming to understand the relationship between the users of space, and the traces which they make during interactions within temporary occupation of spaces. She is thus considering the potential use of such markers to facilitate spatial agency. As Stone-Johnson is situated in Johannesburg, a city divided by apartheid and spatial planning, this research has a potential in understanding city planning from a situated and embodied point of view, bottom up rather than top-down. She examines the use of *speculative practices*, within the arts and architecture as a vehicle through which we might explore complexity within such spaces, and learn about the city through the body as the site of the making of place.

The ways in which art and design affect the human on a psychological level are touched by Tonya Sweet and Fiona MacDonald amongst others. Sweet makes us aware of how we, as inhabitants of a rapidly evolving planet, are confronted with the impacts of change, including the intensification of natural disasters now and in the possible near future. With this awareness, our personal sense of vulnerability has increased and this in turn has exposed us to a uniquely contemporary breed of anxiety. Sweet feels that while design works towards adapting to our contemporary ecological challenges, alternative approaches that prioritize the needs of our psychological condition require further exploration. Through her case study she proposes the development of artefacts designed to foster psychological resilience in the context of pending disasters.

Fiona MacDonald approaches the issue of psychology in artistic practice from another point of view. In her practice, she has involved another species, the fox community around her neighbourhood, in the practice of mark making and shared activities. She discusses the role of touch, intimacy and shared vulnerability in her experience of developing this ‘feral practice’, which seeks out intimate co-productions with the foxes. She explains that what gets produced by these meetings is artwork, but also a series of transformations: in knowledge, aesthetics, agency, and relationships. The aesthetics of each artwork become tied to its ethical intent and interspecies context: the artist’s desire and control over the work’s formal qualities must continually adjust to the need for the nonhuman participant(s) activity to be elicited and foregrounded. Here the artist is facilitating a cooperation that is responded to and changed by the agency of the “non-human” *other*.

Social Dimensions

While creating a personal artistic practice, collaborative interventions give the practice multiple meanings. In these situations, the participants and artefacts may all have agentic and catalysing roles. Collaborative artistic practice, led by the artist or designer may shift power relations and even empower the members, creating a change in them but also facilitating change in the participants communities. Essi Kuure explores the meaning of workshops in art and design practice, beyond the concrete outcome achieved in them. Kuure extends the perspective from artist and designer to other participating stakeholder groups, and reflects through their experiences which kind of collaborations, aims and modes of working the workshops can catalyse.

Melanie Sarantou, Taina Kontio and Satu Miettinen further describe such collaborative processes in their paper *The Hero's Journey*. Through an embodied game activity their participatory art-based activity served as a research instrument in a development context in southern Africa, involving marginalised *San* youth. One of the outcomes of employing this art-based activity was the development of the GRACE model which encompasses grass-root participation as well as creativity, embodiment, expression and empowerment. Their paper especially discusses how improvisation facilitates power distribution when participatory art-based methods are applied.

Similarly, Riitta Lahtinen, Camilla Groth and Russ Palmer study deafblind participants in an arts-based workshop. The participants, some of who had experience and education in musical practices, discovered new ways of expressing themselves through voice and sound improvisations. These sound improvisations were empowering on a personal level, but additionally have the potential to aid in translators' auditive descriptions made from haptic aesthetic experiences, and suggest these as artistic supports to traditional linguistic descriptions for blind people. Thus, these artistic experiments facilitated new ideas that may in the future benefit the participants' extended communities, including peers, translators and guides working to support deaf and blind community members.

Mark Making

The artistic practice is also transformative on a personal level. In drilling our skills and in interpreting our surrounding we transform not only our way of thinking but also our way of seeing, acting with and interpreting the world. Tero Heikkinen explores his personal drawing experience and discuss the use of exaggerated drawings as a way to *get hold of* difficult forms. This approach arises from an interpretation of advice and images presented in drawing manuals and literature, that are then applied to his own drawing practice. Rather than being tacit and impenetrable, Heikkinen sees portions of

drawing skill appear as a combination of different kinds of knowledge, such as procedural knowledge. At the same time, he says that to understand drawing through practice is to examine time scales that go beyond single drawing. In this way, the practice is not simply advanced by drawing the intended outcome repeatedly, but by shifting the drawing's exploration to address different topics and kinds of drawing.

Armando Chant, explores the nature of the drawn image as a visual and imaginative activator or disruptor when enacted by bodily gesture, and in a performative context. Drawing in connection with time-based media, such as film, and the performative body he describes as an interactive, reflective, and durational act that highlights fluid intersections between body, image, and screen. He proposes that drawing, created through acts of subtle disruption by an imaged or surfaced garment, can be considered a catalyst for evolving forms of drawn interpretation, facilitating the expansion of art and design practices and its outcomes. By utilising the moving image new hybrid drawn images and forms can appear and be revealed – part body, part image, part constructed space.

Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, on the other hand explores drawing, painting and pattern making in the context of creative textile design processes. Korolainen specifically looks at the role of inspirational sources in her practice-led artistic processes. She presents us with the example of Claude Monet as an inspirational source for her weaving practice and shows how the famous artist and his work is interpreted, modified and utilized in her practice. Through her in-depth narrative description, including diary notes and her own artefacts, we are led through her processes of attending to, artistically processing and presenting her interpretation of the theme.

Being Human

Looking at the world as an artist, and displaying it through artistic practice, can give us alternative interpretations of the world as well as alternative ways of paying attention and processing the understanding of what it is like to be human, in our time.

With a focus on movement and landscape, in particular walking, Louisa King discusses strategies coming from creative walking practice, which embed walking within the spatial-temporal realm of the ‘environmental crossings’ of climatic change and earth system collapse. King offers her strategy as an alternative to typical design approaches to these dilemmas, which see the environment as a problem to be solved, and seek moral responses of guilt, fear and resulting paralysis. Instead she advises walking to locate the *thought place* or *places* where we might encounter the socio-ecological concerns in non-binary response terms. In her paper she points to how walking accesses, through the

‘intra – actions’ of the body, the phenomena of the landscape, the sensitive zones for earthly contemplation.

Eva Berglund and Tomás S. Criado offer in their paper a review of collaborative methods in anthropology. They introduce their work in the European Association of Social Anthropologists’ #colleex network, describing some of the art and design-inspired methodological experiments presented at its first workshop ‘*Ethnographic Experimentation. Fieldwork Devices and Companions*’. Their mode of research offers a set of ingredients for reflecting on emerging objects of anthropological collaborations with artistic and design practices, that are different from the critical approaches mostly seen so far. Their interest is on the production of venues or opportunities for knowledge creation in which artistic practice and anthropology may be mutually parasitizing, or ‘cross-pollinating’ each other.

Materiality

In a conference on artistic research the issue of materiality is handled in all contributions in some way. The multiple dimensions and qualitative differences in which materiality is approached are however quite overwhelming. While in some processes materiality is treated as a concrete extension of the body, others use materials to point at the immaterial dimension of their work. Derek Ventling considers his relationship with metaphorical light and its potential influence on creative consciousness and endeavour. Through his artwork of experimentally assembled material arrangements, that are documented photographically and developed into animated sequences projected within installations, he is seeking for moments of emotive resonance. Through these immersive installations, Ventling invites viewers to contemplate perception and consciousness, and consider their own embodied relationship with light.

Similarly, Barbara Jansen creates visual experiences through the use of light; Her paper discusses two of her artworks; *Colour Flow* and *Colour Collage*, that explore the visual effects of movement using coloured light as a continuous time-based medium in the field of textile design. They present new forms of *textile instruments*, that are like interfaces which allow displaying light compositions inside textile surfaces. The projects thus proposes new ways of thinking whilst designing with changeable material expressions. *Light* and *Time*, both used as physical and non-physical forms of material create instruments and that fuse together and display new forms of expressions.

Many artistic endeavours and projects presented in these proceedings revolve around the body and our material interaction in a way or the other. In the wearing of clothes this aspect becomes even

more tangible as the whole body is covered in materials and the tactile and experiential aspect is of great importance in the design of garments and shoes.

Katve-Kaisa Kontturi and Vappu Jalonen feel that “the affective relations of movement and tactility that happen between the cloth and the body are essential for understanding what clothing is and how it works”. They introduce the concept *cloth-bodies* that they describe as “compositions that are *more-than-human*”. Kontturi and Jalonen connect the cloth-body with the practice of writing and present us with what cloth-bodies “can do” by exploring how clothing participates in extending or constricting the movement of the *writing body*. They connect their idea to the notion of entanglement, relational materialities and co-becomings and describe clothing as a non-human actant in human relations, not just as a signifier of cultural identity.

In this view, material is vibrant and displays a voice of its own, leaning towards philosophical and political post- humanistic ideas and new materiality. The independent agentic power of materiality is, in this line of thinking, claiming equal authorship for the design and making process of artefacts. Bilge Aktas and Riikka Mäkikoskela shed light over this matter in their respective fields of art and design practice;

Riikka Mäkikoskela studies the experience of three-dimensional visual art practice through her own artistic research. She claims that art practice involves the body, materiality and continuous movements and she demonstrates this through a narrative research framework and analyzes her artistic processes through a multidisciplinary theoretical analysis, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and perspectives of new materialism and feminist thinking. In Mäkikoskela’s practice, the chiasmatic relationship between the artist and the work of art reveals the resistance of material making, this she claims, opens the possibility for the artist to change working perspectives. She further discusses the variation of perspectives in art practice and research, and presents us with examples of how the method of artistic research challenges research paradigms, their presentation, writing and reporting.

Bilge Aktas on her part, presents her explorative process of studying her chosen material; felt, and her interaction with the material through different ways of felting. Coming from a product design background, Aktas is used to designing as a response to facts, needs, or reasons. However, when she started practising felting, she realised how the material reforms itself with the movement of her hands, creating continuous new patterns by recomposing the fibres. Aktas discusses this material interaction in her practice-led approach through examples from different phases of felting. She examines how the wool reacts as the maker works with it in the process of making. She suggests broadening the concept of design by positioning the material as a co-designer in the creative process as this can propose new ways of understanding the creative practice and the material’s role in it.

Representation & Transformation

As mentioned earlier, artistic practice may be transformational in many respects. Not only does the artistic practice transform matter, ideas, or society, it may also be transformative on a personal level. This aspect is clear as the personal artistic process is fundamental and concerns the most intimate and grounding processes of the artist at the same time as it is fed through the interaction with external factors such as the society, other actors and the material that the artists have chosen as their medium. Susanna Suurla examines her personal process of materializing lived experiences into an installation, and how this process affected how she perceives those experiences. The process is investigated through a practice-led process and as an example Suurla discusses her installation the *Edges of the Existent* in detail. She says that: “materializing experience is seen as a form of transference, a catalyst through which lived experience is turned into tangible material artefacts, which perform, express and interpret the embodied, emotional and reflected content related to experiences”. In her case she was able to process the loss of a family member through her artistic process.

Similarly, Dan Elborne explores artistic means of getting a grip of the unimaginable and to develop an artistic practice that could effectively and sensitively address events of war and traumatic memory. His theoretical and arts based research takes particular focus on the Holocaust and its subsequent visual representation, which involves the investigation of memorialization, legacy and memory in the context of visual art. The research positions existing artwork, and Elborne’s own artistic work to challenge ideas surrounding ‘aura & memory theory’ in order to establish new terminology relating to the representation of traumatic memory and experience.

As well as feeling the transformation in the act of transforming material or in processing ideas, the artist has the possibility to be an actant and to transform his surroundings and affect society in this way. Gian Luigi Biagini describes his praxis of Disturbanism (Disturb Urbanism) and himself as the Anartist (Anarchist Artist), who is the agency-character of this praxis. The text is written in a narrative biographical style to show the contingent situation of the Anartist as a heterogeneous catalysis. Through two examples of his artistic practice Biagini discusses the potentiality of the Anartist as “transpersona” and his role as a “marker” in the “emergent refrain of the Heteron, that is an outsider-refrain generated inside the capitalist medium”. Biagini describes the Anartist as an avatar that “allows access to the sacred experience of a chaosmystic event, unleashed by a Disturbanist Intervention”. Biagini’s artistic practice is thus based on interventions that have a transformational purpose for the spectator. Other ways for transformation is of course the outward physical transformation of performers and actors. In Biagini’s performance, he is wearing a hood concealing his face, allowing him to fully transform into the Anartist.

In her practice as a mask maker for performances, Johanna Oksanen studies the relationship between the design of theatre masks for contemporary performance, their function as an actor's working tool and their fabrication via a novel technical experiment, the traditional art/craft of crocheting. In her paper she discusses the methods of practice based, artistic research from the viewpoint of her mask project *The 'Actor's breath meets the mask*. She introduces new approaches for investigating her artistic practice and presents an methodological aim for the project in its entirety, proposing an integrated approach to a *practice-based, costume-led and craft-oriented* research in the international field of costume research.

Endnotes

During the conference, many important issues surfaced in the discussions after the presentations and keynotes, thus not captured in the proceedings at hand. Often occurring themes were the level of academic rigour and the balance between the academic and the artistic forms of presentation. Artists raised their voice on the pressures from academia on the paper presentation format and on the detachment of the artistic intention and the forced template. Whereas voices questioning arts place in academia were also heard. Should arts based research be called a "study" rather than "research" if it does not compile with the strict requirements of academic research? And does art lose its potential as art when forced into the template of academic research? The Art of research conference was concluded with the endnotes of selected participants discussing this issue, agreeing in the end that this conference displays a more rigorous "academic" side of the large spectrum of artistic research available, also due to its close link to and inclusion of design research. Having said that, the importance of the artefacts as a contributing form of publication alongside the written words of research papers was highlighted. As this proceeding displays the written form of the artistic research, simultaneously another forum for artistic research in relation to the Art of Research Conference, is being published in the Ruukku Journal <http://ruukku-journal.fi/>. As the Ruukku journal utilizes the Research Catalogue platform, artistic research may be published as expositions, displaying the artistic research through audiovisual means and clustered in freely designed compositions. We encourage our readers to familiarize themselves also with the extended contributions of the Art of research Conference and hope to see you in the next conference.

Disclaimer: While the papers have been accepted to the AOR conference through a double blind peer review, in this special issue, the editorial team does not take responsibility for the individual author's use of references or the accuracy of, or their permissions for, their used sources.