



ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN ART AND VISUAL STUDIES

ART-BASED RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Edited by **USVA SEREGINA**
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Chapter 1

Wandering with Wonder: From Social Practices to Artistic Practices and Back

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this chapter is to share, with a practical approach, our experience as artist-scientists (Janesick 2001) or artist-scholars (Leavy 2019), encouraging more researchers to create and exhibit their art-based research (ABR). We would also like to contribute to the discussion of how this process is changing in a global pandemic context.

ABR combines the tenets of the creative arts in research contexts (Leavy 2019), employing artistic methods to gather, analyze, and/or present qualitative data (Hervey 2000) in different fields, such as Anthropology, Sociology, Education, Marketing and Consumer Research, to name just a few. Art that is based on scientific studies has, so far, offered a multisensory, multifaceted, discursive, experiential, and subjective

understanding of an investigated problem, not just to researchers, but also to fieldwork participants and to art show visitors, because of the co-creative dialogue that is established among them (Seregina 2020). When thinking about their scientific studies through media and senses that are not the ones they are used to (i.e., the written paper and the oral lecture), scholars are forced to step outside their comfort zone. In our practical experience, we have been able to deepen and rethink our interpretations of research data while interacting with field participants, while planning our artwork, while building art pieces, and while talking to visitors during exhibitions, in an iterative process where errors become opportunities.

In this chapter, we first describe three practical examples of ABR to fuel readers' reflection, commenting on all steps of the destabilizing, insightful, and open process that is fieldwork and community participation, data interpretation, art conceptualization, and art execution. We proceed to compare the advantages of ABR that previous scholars have discussed with the added advantages that our own art-based research has tapped into. Finally, we reflect on how the intersection of arts and sciences might change after the global pandemic.

PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

The first couple of ABR examples we herein describe originated from the second author's participation in two international artistic residency programs. The first project, entitled "Soy Mandala", was conducted in Mexico City from 2015 to 2017, after an invitation by the InSite Foundation. The second example dates from 2017 and took place in the United States, in Natchez, Mississippi, following an invitation by the National

Endowment for the Arts, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and IDEAS xLab. The third example is an ongoing project that started in 2019, led by the two authors and by Dr. John Schouten, in the Brazilian countryside village of Vitoriano Veloso, best known by its nickname “Bichinho”. Despite each project’s specificities, they all operate in zones of indiscernibility and intersection among art, anthropological research and social practices, sharing the underlying premise of authorship dilution through collective processes.

Soy Mandala

Since their creation in 1992 in the particular non-place (Augé 1995) between the United States and Mexico, the projects commissioned by InSite have contributed to defining the situational and co-participatory practices present in the lexicon of actions called Public Art (Insite 2021). A retrospective look at InSite’s history contemplates more than 150 works, which fed back into an international contemporary art scene and served as an introspective rite of passage for many of their participants. Artists Francis Alÿs, Rosângela Rennó, Silvia Gruner, Mark Bradford, among many others, negotiated city space, collective empathy flows, and daily rituals, in dialogue with their personal poetics. As of 2014, after a break of almost 10 years, the endeavour abandoned the macro-political theme of migration and borders – mainly due to the difficulty of working between Tijuana and San Diego after September 11th – and opened its headquarters in the neighbourhood of Santa Maria la Ribera, in the Mexican capital. The place became known as Casa Gallina (Lafuente 2018).

Santa Maria la Ribera’s main urban mark is its square, where the Franco-Arabic-style iron and glass pavilion from the 1884 New Orleans International Exhibition, known as Kiosco Morisco, was reassembled. Facing the square, is the Museum of Geology of the

Autonomous University of Mexico and, a few blocks away, the Chopo University Museum, which houses critical transdisciplinary heterodox initiatives in visual, literary and performing arts. Social porosity, absence of gentrification, and dialogue between past and future were the determinants that led the Insite Foundation to establish itself in a mansion in that region. The property was completely renovated, and, for five years, it housed cooking, household finance, and IT classes for the elderly, a vegetable garden, a neighbourhood stories centre, an artistic residency, and all kinds of projects that enabled horizontal creative linkages with the locals, under the core concepts of home and hospitality (Lafuente 2018).

The second author started his fieldwork, interacting with the organization, the community and the place, in an ethnographic and cartographic way. The objective here is neither to detail the empirical steps of data gathering, nor to offer a scientific data interpretation report, but to show how ABR may potentialize those methods. As an artist-ethnographer, he engaged in participant observation, taking notes in a field diary, and conducting unstructured interviews (Arsel 2017). As an artist-cartographer, he let himself be traversed by the ever-evolving affects, forces and becomings, inherent to that existential territory, in an attempt to describe processes, and not a state of affairs (Ferigato and Carvalho 2011). Artistic residencies at Casa Gallina began with an immersion: guests should not arrive with pre-established ideas, instead they should walk, in the company of curators and anthropologists, through the eighteen previously mapped blocks. During these incursions, they were updated on the businesses and activities developed in the area: pet shops, hairdressers, bars, auto repairs, gang perimeters, distinguished residents, and healers' tents. All that had been listed by the Foundation was shared with the artists, whose role was to repeatedly visit those places, feel affinities, and, after an incubation

period, try to get closer to owners, consumers, and dwellers. Accepting the drift as a companion is essential in this prospecting, inductive phase. A soft availability, based on deceleration, must be pursued, towards the detachment of intimate time from the time of the world. The aim is to introduce a home-grown science, with its own methods, which provides the transition from a spectator to a participant stance. To transform the lived into a narrative is to trust the plumb that inhabits chance.

In this spirit, the second author understood, felt, and lived the endeavour taking place at Casa Gallina as a set of politically engaged decisions, imbued with the edifying power of art as a social, economic, and psychological force for transformation, marked by no disregard for other types of knowledge constituted in everyday life, and free from an intellectual foundation considered hierarchically superior. Artists were not in a knowledge-emitting position, they were just part of the house's research constellation, more interested in the erosion of power structures than in producing works of art. The focus was on the community, and not on its extractivism.

As for the neighbourhood, he experienced it as a domain of sociability, a familiar portion of the urban space with which the individual, to a greater or lesser degree, identifies. A public space in progressive privatization. An area of expanded intimacy, in which, based on dwelling, grounds for negotiation are produced among those who belong to that environment, or to other urban contexts. It is a learning zone, where tacit collective agreements are implemented through codes of conduct. For InSite, artistic co-participation would be one of the possible ways to maintain the sustainability of the social contract. A restorative practice marked by the acceptance of its own fragility and by the impossibility of complete consolidation in everyday life, but which offers the necessary

exchange of perspectives for the strengthening of community ties. Diversity is exercised in manifestations of this nature, and is capable of building its political arm, proposing changes in shared spaces of creation, before they take place in reality.

After some frustrated insertions in a small food business and a foundation for the blind where he intended to work as a volunteer, out of desperation and almost randomness, the researcher enrolled in a dance class for the elderly, and after a detailed interview, he was accepted, not without suspicion and reservations. Twice a week a group of women aged between 58 and 89 met at the Casa de Cultura. There they developed choreographies on Latin rhythms such as danzon, cha-cha-cha, cumbia, salsa, and bolero. The leader was 62-year-old orchestra conductor Juanita. Previously a student, she inherited the class, after the former instructor's death, because she used to jot down learnt dance moves in a notebook. The group was organized and professional. "Las chicas de ayer, hoy y siempre", as the "abuelitas" were known, performed at civic events and celebrations. Following an initial period of wariness, in which exoticism created a zone of reciprocal interest, trust was established. Besides dancing, there was something else that united them. They all crocheted and gathered in smaller groups to exchange templates and appreciate each other's work.

A parallel was found between the two activities. The researcher was faced with complementary manifestations of those women's femininities, both of which could be seen as choreographies: one of the small, and the other of the big muscles. Weaving and dancing were closer practices than one would suppose. A possibility arose for encrypting collective memory in a spun dance score. But one last symbolic and temporal element

was missing, considering that cartography does not aim at a steady snapshot; rather, it understands territory as a space-time dispositif (Deleuze 1990).

Months of research went by – studying colour combinations, trying to find equivalences between crochet movements and dance steps and, mainly, convincing the ladies of the importance of deconstructing what would be produced, because the process of construction and deconstruction should work as a metaphor for time passing. Artist and participants finally arrived at a design inspired by the floor plan of the neighbourhood's architectural symbol, the aforementioned Kiosco Morisco, as the basis for a mandala. Mandalas in the Eastern Tibetan tradition are celestial architectures, built with patience, favouring the incorporation of transcendent values that are acquired with the silent wisdom of selflessness (Kaul 2019). Its physicality must be overcome by dismantling the entire structure when completed. Textile crafts often follow that same circular expansion and are also perceived as domestic micro rituals (Üstüner and Holt 2007).

Considering the ladies' household chores responsibilities, dancing practices, and limited knowledge of weaving techniques, it became clear that the structure-weaving process was for experts. Thus, a collaboration was established with artisan Esperanza, one of the founders of Tejiendo otro Mundo, an NGO that produces blankets for the homeless. The artisan gathered a women-only team, which started the work. Young women paid homage to elderly women in a gesture of respect for their stories. Each day the group would weave for hours a structure measuring 6 by 7 meters. A complex task in itself, but made to be dismantled at the end, it proved to be a real feat of interweaving engineering. The production took 7 months, during which period the elder ladies rehearsed their moves. In partnership with Esthel Vogrig, dancer and choreographer, a routine was designed based

on steps from other numbers performed by the group. “Las chicas” were capricious, unwilling to change their way of dancing to fit the art project, which made sense, as they had found rhythms perfectly suited to their age. The design should harmonize with them, not the other way around.

Two years since the beginning of the project, everything was ready for the ceremonial about life and finitude. Until that moment, more than 30 people had already been involved with the project; curators, producers, anthropologists, dancers, artisans, photographers, designers, sound designers, musicians, and many other collaborators represented the thousands of gestures that built a network of affects and skills, without whom it would have been impossible to advance. At the end of 2016, they were all gathered at the Julio Castillo Theatre, inaugurated in May 1957 with “Bodas de Sangre” and “La Casa de Bernarda Alba”, by García Lorca. On that very stage, during two days of filming, 11 anonymous ladies unravelled everyone's work.

The description of the entire chain of symbolic and logistical decisions that permeated those 48 hours would be extremely long. But it is easy to imagine the level of each participant's involvement when giving up a long artisanal process in favour of an absence. However happy and proud of their contributions they might have been, the professionals of this transdisciplinary web understood that the fruit of their dedication would get tampered with and vanish. As in an inverted ritual, the totem previously constructed would disappear, providing the imaginal liturgy of an implied world. It is important to point out that there are still two small replicas of the mandala, which were displayed along with the film that resulted from the video recordings, at the Jumex Foundation Museum

in Mexico City, and at the 35th Panorama of Brazilian Arts that took place in the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art.

It became evident that there is an intersection where cultural contexts, age differences and other means of distinction can be dimmed. Once we perceive the other as co-protagonist in the construction of the plot, and we manage to tolerate collective uncertainty until directions are insinuated, the physicality of the matter and its traumatic disappearance will be treated with tranquillity due to the exercise in coexistence and the invaluable empathy it creates.

Observation, fieldnotes and ethnographic interviews became synergistically entangled with the artistic process, which can be seen as an action of intervention as preconized both by cartography and by action research, enriching field data that should no longer be analysed in isolation. ABR has potentialized what originated from the field and fuelled iteration in a way that pure ethnography would not. Interpreting field data, the researcher was able to find similarities between the caravan effort and what Nietzsche (1883/2005) called “the three metamorphoses of the spirit”. In the first metamorphosis, one self-accepts as camel. For the hard crossing, travellers transform their soul into a beast of burden and accumulate trials that bend their knees in hope of lashing the ego. Tenacity is selflessly tested in the face of world's violence. Aware more of their limitations than of their virtues, they go through the second metamorphosis. One perceives oneself as lion, when they no longer want to follow any master, but rather exercise their desire without fear. This is when one wants to conquer the sacred right to say no. The beast is needed to prey on old values and open up the choice, even if faced with duty. But what can the child do before the lion? Because it is innocence and forgetfulness, the child complements the

lion. From aggressiveness to sweetness, offering the understanding that the new is born of foolish steps, and that maintaining the infant state is the only way to play the game of creation. This is the third and final metamorphosis of the spirit.

This was the necessary transformation to reach the emotional links, dear to this project, which, like an echo, made temporary physical circles possible. What was accomplished with these ladies and the entire production team was this crossing of affects through the world of invisible forms. That which was delicately cultivated in a ring-a-ring o' roses, protected by comrades in arms, should change everyone and, as a collateral consequence, leave something fleeting in this plane. The intersection of that encounter was destined to disappear, but not before a labour of disentanglement.

Castañeda (1991) claims that death must await the warrior's last dance. If one designed a life of intense events, the choreography will be long. Death will gladly spectate before leading them. Its company in all moments of existence serves this latent alert: to remind us to choreograph at the limit of the unthinkable, of joy, pain and sweetness. And not to announce the end. The end is for us to determine. A revolution without dance is no revolution at all (Goldman 1931).

Fig 1.1
Soy Mandala



Equity Platform, Girls'n Pearls Soap Sculpture, and Button Soap

Artists who work in residencies face interesting dilemmas. Programmes vary a lot, so does the duration, and the enforcement of results. But, with greater or lesser institutional pressure, participants always need to come up with something materialized from the investigation. Even if one cannot define what art is, it feeds a very concrete network of agents and articulators – critics, curators, artists, collectors, galleries, museums, private and public foundations, auctions, magazines, fairs, biennials, universities –, which orbit the capital. Therefore, artistic residencies depend on the contours of form, whatever they may be, and not solely on content, to maintain themselves in the material process of financial sustenance in the field. This requires both pragmatism and frenzy to keep the compass of achievement going. The project carried out at the invitation of IDEAS xLab, through funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation during 2017 in the city of Natchez, Mississippi, was an example of this unstable balance.

There were important premises to be observed and somehow connected. The work should engage local businesses and/or artists of African-American ancestry, address racial segregation and the diseases associated with the colonial legacy, and articulate a group of young people tutored by an organization known as the National Coalition of 100 Black Women (NC100BW). This organization began as part of a coalition founded in 1970 in New York, among the many initiatives for gender and race equality accelerated by the murder of Martin Luther King two years earlier. NC100BW currently has thousands of members and representation in over 25 North-American states (NC100BW 2020). The Natchez unit is responsible for accompanying young people from 8 to 18 years old through biweekly meetings. The purpose is to prepare the group for the challenges of

growing up in a sexist and segregationist society. The main mediator between the researcher and the 15 teenage girls was Hannah Drake, a spoken word artist from Kentucky, with experience in social work and co-participation. Her presence, as well as that of the entire team, was fundamental for the resulting artworks. Drake explained the concepts under study, disembarrassed the dialogue, and generated synergy.

The researcher was particularly affected by the lack of age separation among class participants. The girls, between 11 and 17 years old, were always together. They were treated equally. Tutors claimed that this generated a natural lineage of care and advice. Some taboo subjects of the passage from childhood to adulthood are not shared with adults, but could be shared with slightly more experienced peers. This type of support network reinforced the maintenance of the group beyond official meetings. Upon learning about the democratic coexistence, the researcher decided to measure their heights and organize them alphabetically in a square in which the tallest girl would be at ground level, and the others would be positioned on plateaus of varying heights, but evenly levelled. Mainly because they were growing adolescents, their stature would still vary a lot, and whatever was built would function as a momentary portrait of the collective. A snapshot that should capture a stage in time and, at the same time, reveal a process of transformation. But what material should be chosen for the stepping structure?

Regular visits to the city's archives, to the Museum of African-American History, and interviews with museum employees revealed rich information on the context of the context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). After the official abolition of slavery in 1863, the first communities of freed black people settled on the banks of the Mississippi River, supporting themselves, above all, by washing clothes for the plantation houses located on

the other bank, in the state of Louisiana. One can imagine that buying soap for this operation was no simple task. But the region's harbour activities – which generated an enormous exchange of knowledge since the French colonization from 1699 to 1763 (Bunn and Williams 2007) – guaranteed the dissemination, to all segments of the population, of the productive techniques of soap as a domestic tool. Enslaved black washerwomen made their own soap out of lye, which left them with recurrent chemical burns (Hunter 1997, Oak Alley Foundation 2021).

There are several versions for the history of soap. One of the most widespread myths, which may or may not be true, dates back to Mount Sapo in ancient Rome (Garzena and Tadiello 2004). At the site, animal sacrifices were carried out from fire. The mixture of vegetable ash and animal fat produced a substance, which, when in contact with rain, accumulated on the banks of the river nearby. Residents claimed that clothes washed on this site were cleaner. This learning was incorporated into hygiene habits and, today, detergents are so common in our daily lives that we no longer reflect on how much this discovery unleashed immeasurable advances in the longevity and expansion of our species. The interplay between the history of the black community and soap opened up exciting possibilities.

The researcher started to source for entrepreneurs who manufactured soap. Luckily there was a store in town, Scent From Natchez, owned by African-American mother and daughter, who worked from old handcrafted recipes (the researcher later found out that the town's mayor belonged to the family and started the activity as a hobby with his grandmother). The low cost of the ingredients, soap's visual resemblance to classic statuary materials – such as marble or granite –, its condition associated with self-care

and intimacy (let us confess that daily soap visits us in places that only a few go), and the possibility of involving local traders were the pragmatic factors that confirmed what the intuition had pointed out. If we allow ourselves to be fabled by poetry, we can think of soap as a sculptural block, and of the researcher/participant as a pottery wheel, moulding, being moulded, and becoming one. Soap is something that, through contact with the epithelium, models content and continent. The medium for this? The watery element, immemorially associated with the passage of time. “One does not bathe twice in the same river,” taught Heraclitus of Ephesus.

For the institutions sponsoring the residency, racism should be addressed through its medical consequences. The most direct effects of racial oppression on physical and mental health are hypertension, diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, drug abuse, and domestic violence (Williams and Jackson 2005), affecting a layer of the population that has scarce resources to prevent or regress these conditions. Healthcare in the United States is rarely free of charge (Fisher 2012). For the capitalist ethos, non-gratuity could stimulate competition and offer better services at attractive prices. However, that is not how things work. High financial costs are one of the main reasons why people avoid going to the doctor and immerse themselves in an endless universe of options for self-medication and self-care (Noone and Blanchette 2018).

During unstructured interviews with Natchez residents, the researcher learned that herbs, plants, and other less industrialized options were not commonly adopted by them, despite the rich diversity of the local flora. The researcher was studying scents for the soap that would be produced for the artwork, in line with the discussion around racism and health that was required, and was inclined to find fragrances within what was known in the

region, with no interest in producing something like a “Tylenol scented” medicinal soap. He was looking for a natural substance that would alleviate the symptoms of the diseases of colonial legacy, and raise awareness to the fact that balms might also sprout in Natchez’s backyards. A group of artists will not produce pharmaceuticals, but, through ideas and achievements, they can provide immunosymbolic means of protection, escape, or even playful strategies that contribute to concrete behaviour change. This is how, collectively, they arrived at magnolia.

The magnolia tree, named after French botanist Pierre Magnol in 1703 (Ayello 2003), is an ancient genus native to temperate, subtropical and tropical areas of Southeastern Asia, eastern North America, Central America, the Caribbean and parts of South America (Magnolia Society International 2021). Mississippi is officially known as the Magnolia State (McPherson 2013). The tree and its fragrant dazzling flowers blossom in numerous domestic gardens, parks, and streets in the state (Gilman and Watson 1994), symbolizing joy, dignity and nobility (IDEA xLab 2017). A particularly large flower specimen is abundantly reported in the region, the white magnolia grandiflora, blossoming from thirty-meter-tall trees (Gettleman 2003). Herbal products originating from the magnolia plant have been used for thousands of years as supplements in traditional Chinese and Japanese medicine (Snyder 2020) to sooth anxiety, depression, insomnia, stress, and digestion problems. In more recent scientific studies, the use of magnolia tree’s compounds has been reported in treatments of cancer (Ranaware et al. 2018) and Parkinson disease (Xiangdong, Cui, and Chen 2006).

As a symbol of Southern US traditions, the plant informs the “Moonlight and Magnolias” myth. When analysing co-constitutive relationships between commercial mythmaking

and popular memory, Thompson and Tian (2008) reported that “Moonlight and Magnolias” used to represent Southern women’s virtues and vulnerabilities and that, by influence of the protofeminist movement of the suffragettes, novelist Margareth Mitchell (1936/2020) reconstructed that myth, under the metaphor of the steel magnolia, infusing Southern womanhood with Scarlett O’Hara’s indomitable resilience and imperturbable inner strength. However, there is a racial subtext to both the “Moonlight and Magnolias” myth and the “Steel Magnolia” myth, for the women they described were white, operating in a context where black women were “African American slaves, portrayed as childlike figures who possessed undying affection for their aristocratic masters and who cheerfully performed the duties to which they were naturally suited” (Thompson and Tian 2008, 601). This discussion added a critical lens to the magnolia’s role as an environmentally and culturally bounded component that would address the health syndromes the artwork intended, albeit poetically, to alleviate. The racial subtext translates into a scent that invisibly fills the air around the discussion. It is there and it needs to be acknowledged.

The girls from Natchez NC100BW dubbed themselves Girls’n Pearls, in reference to an object they associated with femininity and beauty. Learning about the nickname, the researcher was struck with new layers of meaning that helped unfold another sculptural piece for the project. The pearl is one of few biogenic gemstones, others include amber and ammolite. Its formation takes place as a self-defence mechanism. Upon detecting the presence of a foreign body, the oyster releases a substance, known as nacre, which isolates and coats the parasite. In nature, the phenomenon is very rare – as the oyster defends itself quite well with its own shell – occurring once in every ten thousand animals. In the early 20th century, the Japanese invented a simple way to speed up the process, introducing a small amount of mother-of-pearl, three-quarters of the desired final size, into the shell

(Nagai 2013). This information offered the possibility of perceiving the pearl as the birth of beauty from an integration of traumas.

Roundness is the cosmogonic reason for the creation of life (Hellborn 1963). On the cover of William Harvey's *De generatione animalium* (1651), we see Jupiter holding two halves of an egg. The god watches the desecration of the perfect casing, from which dolphins, children, and moose surface. The young women from Natchez also experienced a form of pregnancy, from an external womb, in which they cradled creative potencies for themselves. With the help of local artist Lorraine Griffin and her husband, researcher and participants took silicon moulds from the negative space between the teenagers' hands positioned in a shell-like manner. Inside the hollow, a stainless-steel plate was placed, engraved with words the girls had chosen, during a group dynamic with Drake, to represent their future selves. Each plate had a concavity to hold a pearl. The adolescents were responsible for pouring the liquid magnolia soap into their individual moulds. After drying and unmoulding, they were encouraged to keep the object as a relic and use it in the distant future. The dilution of the temporal capsule will confirm if they inhabit the aegis of the words they had wished for.

As the researcher observed, Natchez has a series of characteristics common in small-town United States, mainly in the South, where local economies are impacted by the arrival of large multinational chains and shopping malls. Small urban centres are connected to larger cities by highways, and, alongside those highways, stores like Walgreens, Office Depot, McDonald's, C&A, Boots, among others, proliferate, suffocating small businesses and depriving town centres of different types of firms and services. In addition to the direct consequences this has on jobs, despite the opening of some posts, one of the

implications of this model is the emergence of food deserts (Donald 2013), which are large urban areas where it is difficult to find unprocessed food and non-industrialized consumer items. In most cases, one can resort only to convenience stores in gas stations and fast-food restaurants, decreasing the quality of food. The consequences arising from such corporate constrictions, therefore, appear in the practices people are forced to adopt to sustain their bodies and support their livings, in a silent, perverse, and hard to break cycle.

Because of this contextual characteristic, the researcher was seeking a component for the artwork that could help revigorated local businesses and, hopefully, generate some income to the Coalition members. Working with soap makers was one way, but still not enough. It was from another visit to the city's historical past that emerged an object associated with the region's sad source of livelihood for hundreds of years. One of the most common artifacts found by archaeologists in Forks of the Road, Natchez's slave market, was clothing buttons (IDEAS xLab 2017). Between 1823 and 1863, the site housed the most important human buying and selling post in Mississippi's most active slave-trading city (Hoelscher 2012). There, buttons belonging to those who were sold and to those who sold them remained indiscernible beneath the earth, in abundance, until uncovered in archaeological excavations. Reflecting about these small items, one could easily associate each of them with an individual and all of them with the collectivity they made up, both due to their garment condition, and due to their modular constitution, exemplifying and measuring the countless lives, whose stories are associated with the place.

Up to this point, the ABR project had sprouted the personal pearl-filled “shell” of each member of the Coalition, entitled Girls’n Pearls Soap Sculpture, and a large podium developed with soap plates, the Equity Platform, onto which the girls would step and become equal in height, representing liberation and equality. Those physical artistic outcomes were made from the same material, with the same aroma, and the same symbolic healing potential for self-care. But with the distinction that the former was already individualized for consumption, while the latter was an inert monument weighing 350 kilos.

That was when the fate of the two works amalgamated. The team determined that, after Drake activated the platform with a performance of the young women climbing onto the structure with their right arms outstretched and fists clenched – in reference to the Black Panthers salute, celebrated by athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics (Kilcline 2017) –, and sang together the song Rise Up by Andra Day, the platform was going to be sliced and diced, turning into several individual soap bars. The estimate was to produce 2,000 units.

For a week, the girls, the tutors, and the production team, all voluntarily taking turns, cut and packaged the entire sculpture and inserted in each bar one magnolia tree wooden button handcrafted by the same couple who had made the silicon moulds. The bars were sold at the Coalition's headquarters, in tourist stores, and on the IDEAS xLab website for US\$10 each. The money raised was converted to NC100BW’s activities. Stamped as a label, a text by local actor and tour guide Jeremy Houston revealed that there was a hidden button inside, which, after the soap was used, could be sewn into a piece of garment, serving as a symbol for the movement against racial segregation. A delicate

microsculpture that would identify, throughout Natchez's cityscape, those sympathetic to the urgent cause. A pearl.

Fig 1.2
Equity Platform



Fig. 1.3
Button Soap



Self-Portraits in August

Amidst the installations of the 2018 Consumer Culture Theory art gallery¹ in Odense, Denmark, the idea for a research on social enterprise in semi-rural Southeastern Brazil was born. Over coffee, Professor John Schouten described to the first author of the present chapter how he had been studying social enterprises in Canada, which sparked a conversation about Oficina de Agosto (OdA), a folk art studio, school and shop, located in the countryside state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. They then started a project that would seek to understand, with an ethnographic approach, identity and community transformation propelled by OdA in the 2000-inhabitant village of Vitoriano Veloso, dubbed “Bichinho” (meaning “small animal”) by locals and tourists alike. In 2020, the second author of the present chapter was invited to join the still ongoing endeavour, which took on an ABR approach as well, to uncork hidden potentials by providing the research process with different ways of thinking about the topic under study, to infuse new-born knowledge with more layers of meaning, and to broaden its reach with aesthetic outputs.

Schouten spent two weeks in Bichinho in April 2019. The second author visited the site in January 2020. The first author lives nearby and has been doing fieldwork on and off since the beginning of the project. A first round of observation sessions and ten in-depth interviews based on oral histories were conducted with OdA’s social entrepreneurs Toti Bech and Sonia Vitaliano, other local entrepreneurs, and artisans currently and formerly employed by OdA. After that, the idea for an art installation arose, with the objectives of not only conveying research findings through artistic media, but also of

¹ Consumer Culture Theory is a research tradition affiliated with the interpretive paradigm, dedicated to the study of consumers and markets in their social and cultural contexts. Every year, the Consumer Culture Theory Consortium holds an international conference that includes, besides the traditional format of paper presentations and roundtables, an art gallery, where scholars may exhibit their ABR projects.

helping widen data collection and deepen interpretation. The installation will comprise a series of sculptures created by OdA's employees. So far, five artisans have sculpted a self-portrait commissioned by the researchers, using techniques and materials from their daily job. Upon delivery, sculptures were used as triggers for identity discussion during individual interviews with their makers, as part of an autodriving projective exercise (Heisley and Levy 1991). More sculptures, and therefore more interviews, are on the way. The final set of three-dimensional self-portraits will form the installation, whose details, like display arrangements, are still going to be developed by the team.

We are at a point in this ABR project similar to the one when the temporal element was about to be found in the Soy Mandala project. Or to the moment right before the decision to slice the Equity Platform and transform it into 2,000 button soaps. There is something missing right now and we will find it – an element capable of expressing process, temporality, transformation, and community. This is why we decided to include in this chapter a project that has not been concluded yet. To show how being on the verge of our knowledge can push us toward new discoveries.

From the interviews, we have learned that, until 1991, there was no electricity in Bichinho, roads were not paved, farm animals roamed freely along the main street that connects the town's Catholic church, built in the late 18th century with simple architectural features to ward off possible burglars, to villagers' equally simple houses. That was the year when Antonio Carlos Bech (also better known by a nickname: Toti) arrived from São Paulo, fleeing the violence and chaos of big city life. In Bichinho, Toti started OdA, hiring an all-local work force, comprised of men who used to work in construction in larger cities far from their families and women who used to stay back and take care of their children,

sometimes working as maids in nearby towns. Toti taught them how to make and sell folk art. The most talented ones went on to start their own studios, selling part of the production to OdA. Bichinho's first telephone landline was installed at OdA's headquarters. The same happened later with Bichinho's first Internet connection. Bichinho is now a bustling touristic destination. Currently, there are 21 employees at OdA, among welders, carpenters, painters, artisans, and sales staff. But prior to the economic crisis of 2008, there were around 70.

From the aesthetics at OdA and Bichinho, we have identified a series of social imaginaries that we hope will inspire the next steps in this ABR project: the "ex-voto" (a votive offering to a saint, usually in return for a cure or miracle. It may be a painting depicting the miracle or a wax model of a healed body part.); baroque art and architecture from Minas Gerais (which are central to Brazilian colonialism); ancient and Catholic liturgies; candlelight and shadow projections; fantastic self-portraits and chimeras; syncretism and miscegenation; wood carving; the sacred and the profane; tropicalism.

Many stories have emerged from fieldwork so far. There is Toti and the power of an individual vision. There is the move from individual art to collective art. There is the generative nature of social enterprise: how it creates jobs, encourages entrepreneurship and ecosystem development, and confers dignity and hope. Through the proposed art ensemble, we seek to better understand some of these stories.

By asking employees at OdA to depict themselves in a sculpture, we want to explore their right to imagination (or lack thereof). Following Sennett (2008), we want to encourage an encounter with oneself via manual labour. For this author, there is a silent wisdom

present in materials, which is revealed through intimate, slow, laborious, and monotonous contact with them. For Miller (2010), things do things to us and not just the things we want them to do. If neomaterialist epistemologies and object oriented ontologies about consumer culture have studied how products' agency transforms consumers, Sennett (2008) proposes the understanding of how raw materials, ingredients, parts, and components may transform subjects even prior to the finished object itself.

We would like to scrutinize artisans' identity, by analysing: self-portraits as markers of time passage and identity transformation (before and after working at OdA); belonging and differentiation; individual and collective identity; and reciprocal transformation. We are guided by the following ABR questions: to what extent: (1) does the artist make the art?; (2) does the art make the artist?; and (3) does the art studio assemblage (the social enterprise) make the art, the artist and the community?; to what extent is the artist aware of her/his authorial role when s/he is part of an arts and crafts context seen as non-erudite and destined for consumption; and, finally, when exercising the construction of self-portraits, would creators feel autonomously allowed to abandon usual models so as to engage in deeper dives into their subjectivities?

Besides discussing the aforementioned issues, the self-portraits also tap into the current global pandemic context. While we were writing this chapter, the problem in Brazil was escalating, with the country occupying the second place in the worldwide death toll ranking (Thompson Reuters Foundation News 2021). Unemployment and eviction have rendered at least 40 million Brazilians incomeless, and many of them homeless, as "economic refugees of the Coronavirus pandemic" (McCoy 2021). The 2020 pandemic hit us right in the middle of this ABR project, which could have led it to a halt. Fortunately

it did not, because the idea to commission self-portraits from OdA's current and former employees was fuelled by the pandemic as much as by the research questions previously described. Besides offering the artisans a financial compensation for their work, albeit modest, the self-portrait commission also offered them a practical momentary goal, and a symbolic means to seek transcendence through art. Encouraging them to bond with their own subjectivities, this could be an existential project that might help them keep going, despite the abominable health and economic crisis.

The first author met with six artisans, selected by Toti, who focused on those who were not on OdA's formal payroll and, therefore, lacked a steady monthly income during the pandemic. After introducing the outlines of the ABR project to them, she described the researchers' expectations regarding the commission: it should be three-dimensional, and it should be a representation of their selves. It did not need to be realistic, and they could use whatever techniques and materials they wanted. They received the first instalment of their payment upfront. The second instalment would be paid upon delivery of the sculpture, when they would also be interviewed about that specific artwork and about their relationship with OdA.

After two months, the first author contacted the six artisans and managed to meet with five of them. One of them seems to have abandoned the project, becoming unreachable. At a quick glance, the sculptures we have so far can be described as: a pair of blue wooden wings, an enclosed glass box containing two masked ballerinas, a paper-mache red devil holding a watermelon, a distressed white paper-mache head with few facial features, and a colourful very detailed cartoon-like head. During interviews, the self-portraits were used as third people onto which artisans were expected to project themselves (Rook

2006). The interview protocol followed Arsel's (2017) recommended steps for reflexive inquiry (for an ethnographic report of this research, please see Walther and Costa, 2021).

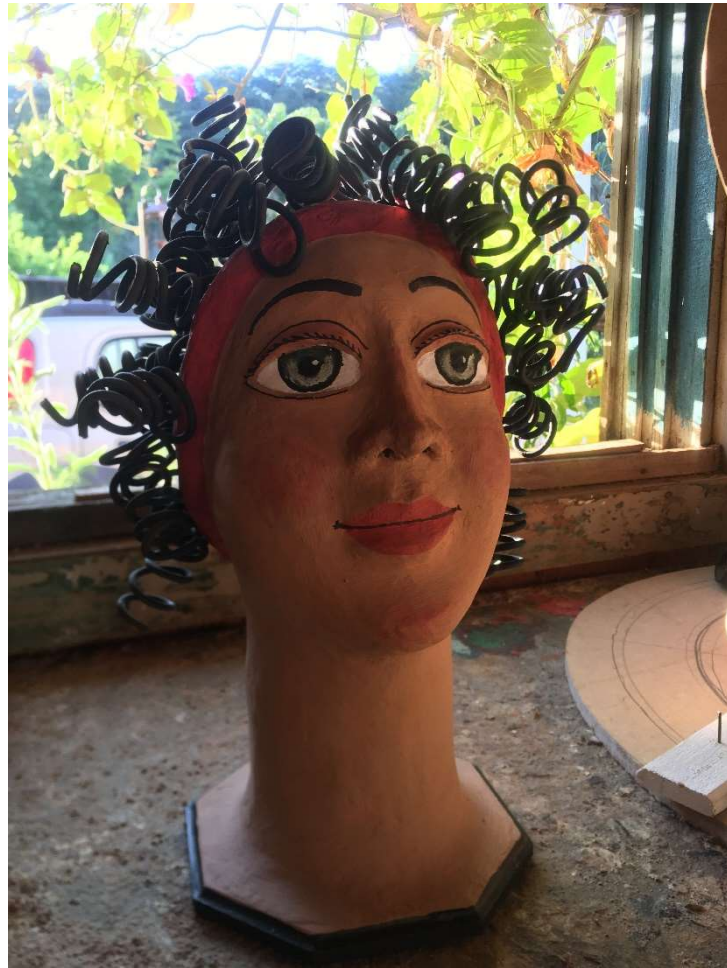
Although the pandemic did not stop the project, it did slow it down. As the virus spreads in the country, research funding shrinks. With no incentive from the Federal Department of Education, nor funding from national agencies, this ABR project persists. The next steps will include more self-portrait commissions, field data interpretation, and, hopefully, the eureka insight that will tie it all together in an artistic manifestation, to be discussed in future publications.

Artists at Oda work with reforested or reclaimed wood, metal, pigments, used paper, crystals, found and repurposed objects. Society's waste is welcome there and regarded with good will. Piles of raw materials clutter different parts of the acreage where the studio sheds are located. Waiting. Trusting time. Time will cure both the material and the eye of the maker. When this happens, paucity becomes potency. Strivers become creators. And as we try to make sense of our own piles of field data, researchers become artists.

Fig 1.4
Studio shed at
Oficina de Agosto



Fig. 1.5
Self-Portraits in August



DISCUSSION

Leavy (2019) states that ABR can be undertaken by any researcher, even the ones with no prior artistic experience or skills, as long as they are open to creativity, innovation and intuition, are willing to learn as they go, are capable of thinking conceptually, symbolically and metaphorically, and possess an ethical value system. ABR becomes easier if they are researchers with art backgrounds or artists turned qualitative researchers (Leavy 2019). Doing ABR as a cross-disciplinary cooperation (Seregina 2020), the first author of the present chapter identifies as the former, while the second author as the latter.

In this section, we non-exhaustively list the advantages of ABR that have been described by previous literature, in order to create a backdrop for the added advantages we have encountered in our work. Despite ABR's novelty as a research method within the interpretive paradigm – or as a paradigm on its own (Leavy 2019) –, its qualities have been profusely and efficiently scrutinized. This is why this section will only list them, without diving into their details. Our focus will be on ABR's benefits brought about by the three practical examples we described in the previous sections.

Barone and Eisner (2012), Seregina and Christensson (2017), Leavy (2019), and Seregina (2020), to name just a few of all the authors who have written about ABR as a methodological approach to research, use the following adjectives to describe knowledge and meaning that accrue from artistic inquiry: immediate, jargon-free, contextualized, process-oriented, non-linear, non-sequential, iterative, interactive, holistic, transdisciplinary, collaborative, communal, participatory, co-created, intersubjective, dialogical, empathetic, visual, aesthetic, material, spatial, tactile, multisensory, kinaesthetic, perceptual, imaginal, metaphorical, symbolic, discursive, expressive, evocative, provocative, multisided, multifaceted, experiential, affective, emotional, engaging, reflexive, critical, political, transformative, intrasubjective, immersive, embodied, long-lasting, lived. The semantic overlap stresses the most prevalent in literature, and perhaps most helpful, characteristics of ABR. We believe that everything we have described from our three ABR projects confirms each and every one of the aforementioned advantages of taking on artistic practice as part of the research. But, for the purpose of the present discussion, our focus will lie on three of those features: communal participation, iteration, and opening gaps as a way of knowing, as follows.

ABR can be produced either by researchers, subjects, or both (Seregina 2020). Interactions between researchers and viewers at an art show may also feed new ideas back into the artwork and into data interpretation (Seregina and Chistensson 2017). Because it welcomes field participants' and audiences' input, ABR gains a critical approach, which serves to unsettle stereotypes, challenge dominant ideologies, and include marginalized voices (Leavy 2019). Artwork created in such manner may hold up a mirror that reflects back (Modrak 2015) the problems inherent to power structures within consumer culture and within the Academia. ABR creates connections among communities, researchers, and audiences, extending power and control to the former (Seregina 2020), allowing the latter to engage with the experience as it is lived by people within the phenomenon (Seregina and Christensson 2017), while researchers are affected in both directions. Therefore, ABR has unlimited potential to educate (Leavy 2019), not just the viewer and the reader, but also the researcher and the informant. While fostering empathy in the audience (Leavy 2019), ABR actions may transform communities and raise public awareness to their struggles.

It is evident in our descriptions of the three ABR projects in this chapter how socially-engaged they were. The academic ethos in which those studies were conducted enables their detachment from a market ethos. There is no pressure to commodify artistic outputs and put them for sale in galleries or art shows. This may extend project duration in a healthy way, allowing more time in the field and stronger rapport building between researchers and the investigated group, which may catapult the transition from a touristic outlook to an anthropological perspective. For an art project, this is especially fruitful, because it sustains a longer period of uncertainties, which is what pushes us beyond the threshold of what we know.

Living with the community and creating art with the community forge an affective nexus, precisely the type of involvement that the positivist paradigm would admonish us to avoid. However, art affords us that – adding to the tenets of the interpretive paradigm and of the qualitative approach, which accommodate researchers’ subjectivity and, therefore, their emotions. In our ABR projects we seek inclusion and a decolonial ethic, alert to the pitfalls of patronization and usurpation.

As for the iteration, ABR watchword could be “rethink”. Using artistic thought to engage with the phenomenon forces new perspectives on field data and constant awareness, resulting in reformulation. Exploring and expressing meaning becomes a trial-and-error process of doing and redoing (Seregina 2020). There is no fixed recipe for conducting ABR. Our three practical examples showed that ABR can be combined with ethnography (Arsel 2017) and action-research (Thiollent 2011), methods that, although iterative, do preconize a clear step-by-step set of instructions for fieldwork and data interpretation. But ABR may also work with a free-flowing method, like cartography (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), which provides looser guidelines for researchers’ interaction with a context and a phenomenon, matching ABR beautifully, since they both focus on the process of research, rather than on its product. In our examples, artistic decisions arose at different moments of the studies, at different paces, and for different reasons. One of the methodological decisions that was common to all our projects, nevertheless, was the openness to error and the will to go back and reformulate.

If we look at oriental culture, we might recall Japanese Wabi-Sabi philosophy (Weiss 2013), which encourages the acceptance of non-permanence and imperfection. The

artistic idealization developed in the country during the Muromachi period, around the 15th century, was based on the principles of Zen Buddhism, ascribing to beauty that which is imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. If a piece of china is broken, for example, it should not be discarded, but repaired, with the damaged area acknowledged and enhanced. For that, the cracks are filled with a gold alloy that connects broken pieces together. This technique is known as kintsugi. The filling does not disappear with the marks, it makes them even stronger.

The Japanese believe that when something is damaged, it acquires a story, becoming even more worthy of appreciation and value. In this ancient practice, the “errors” are exposed without fear or embarrassment – on the contrary, they are celebrated as reminiscences of small and large accidents experienced by the artifact in its trajectory of existence. Such philosophy must be welcomed in creation, as a way to alleviate the anxieties and frustrations that plague us in search for perfection. Or, more specifically in the research realm, in search for theoretical, methodological or practical contributions. In every project we find difficulties and flaws, but we must not hide them, instead, we should analyse each occurrence.

It is necessary to create alternative ways to emphasize that it is not up to the skilled hand to have unattainable prior knowledge, but, rather, the whole body should be up to incessant learning, acquired by s/he who actively inquires and questions what is placed before them. Those in art-based research processes should be awakened to realize that, regardless of the nature of what they are developing – be them paintings, installations, sculptures, packaging, clothing, websites, animations, or any other prism through which creative activities multiply –, what differentiates the quality of work is the ability to define

a problem and push it to new limits through good metaphors. This exercise does not occur without the confluence of an authorial investigation, combined with an analytical and technical thought capable of incorporating doubts, errors and successes contained in the research process. In short, what we need is to replace the word “error”, in “trial-and-error”, with the word “errant”.

ABR creates research gaps instead of closing them (Barone and Eisner 2012). Seregina (2020) further explains that ABR constructs understandings not as a result of zeroing in on a claim or solution. Knowledge is found in opening up a topic for discussion and criticism. By forcing researchers to step outside their comfort zone and embrace media they are not used to, artistic forms of research tend to make one question existing assumptions. Artistic practice pushes us to step to the very edge of what we know, encouraging us to go further (Collingwood 1938). Unknowing, i.e. searching outside the known, is one of ABR’s most powerful keys to unlocking new questions, or vital questions that were masked under the old conceptual disciplinary maps that we, as researchers, were used to (Bresler 2019).

The natural oscillation between failure and success administered as a method sets off movements that impose greater attention to the investigative process than to the final objective. This posture, in addition to dispelling chimerical anxiety-raising fantasies, provides a rich terrain of possibility that can, in future projects, serve as a trigger for new ideas. This means to encourage learning and rediscovery of real-world facets through a generous form of scrutiny that, in tandem, organically implements and prospects. In our research, we have felt that it is increasingly important to rely on this creative, poetic element, even more so when you deal with people. You are implementing your study and,

at the same time, you are prospecting future research that, at this point, you are still unaware of. This is a very common practice for an artist – a studio practice.

In many scholarly circles, there is a commitment to pragmatism, to functionalism, which, in art, is more ambiguous or suspended. In a world of so much statistical data, of pressure for results, the adoption of an empirical process-oriented perspective can improve the relationship between Social Sciences and the populations they aim to study. It stimulates the researcher to identify inductive, emic discoveries, when they present themselves in the field.

CONCLUSION

We live a daily life of excess and hyperstimulation, with little contemplation and silence. We all suffer the results of these toxic environments and instead of lowering the amount of information we consume (or perhaps sheer consumption disguised as information), we trust that it is by increasing mental activity that we will manage to get out of where we are incarcerated. However, the solution may lie in the body and in the affects emerging from human interaction, as social isolation has shown us. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a nature of observation and inclusion, which once again admits intuition, and any other vanishing lines leading to daydreams and adventure. If possible, leading to failure as well, so common in the vocabulary of creativity, but which we began to reject in the name of competitiveness. Especially in academic and institutional environments.

There is a Tibetan saying, which sums up encounters in the field: “At the top of the mountain I saw an animal. At the base I found out it was a man. When I approached it, it

was my brother.” Opportunities such as the one developed in Natchez remind us that creative potential is within everyone’s reach, as long as dialogues are open and time for maturation is offered. Something only achievable when everyone involved engages in a process of communion that contains some method, anarchy, and receptivity to serendipity. We tend to elect certain sources or events as hierarchically superior to others in terms of their ability to communicate and construct concepts. But the power of chance cannot be underestimated. Horizontalizing, not judging, suspending classifications such as “hits” and “misses”, replacing the “error” with “errant”, are all fundamental to turn our existences into insurgent instruments of a poetic ontology of presence. ABR propels us to wander with wonder.

But how can we do that in a global pandemic context, when face to face field interaction became dangerous and, thus, discouraged? Brazil, in particular, has been plagued twofold. By the COVID virus and by religious and political obscurantism, which dictated government’s decisions so as to manage the pandemic in the country. New forms of financial, social, and physical loss brought about new forms of affect, bonding, and solidarity, mediated by technology. Social isolation accelerated the construction of relationships, ranging from trivial conversations to more complex work tasks, through technological platforms, with seemingly no turning back. Technology was responsible for keeping us informed, entertained, working, and even loving, despite the financial, technical, and cognitive difficulties raised by the adaptation process, which, in less affluent countries like Brazil, is still complicated. All teachers and professors, from pre-school to higher education, are working under uncertainty, trauma, and exhaustion. Many are paying for the adaptation out of their own pockets, in solidarity with students, who would have, otherwise, interrupted their intellectual growth or dropped out. Artists have

put together, with or without financial return, virtual concerts, plays, exhibitions and all sorts of live performances, to help keep us going.

We believe that the resumption of self-esteem required by all these circumstances of loss and solidarity may be ignited by expanding the intersection of arts and sciences. The confluence of scientific and artistic methods may debouch in the more affective, erratic, intuitive ways of thinking that art offers, hopefully renewing people's belief in science, especially in a country like Brazil. Poetry, for instance, is a way of dodging death, since one comes to exist in people's minds through one's creations. Poetry may scare death away, while reinventing life.

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