Reflection – Action – Artistic Research: A toolkit to introduce practice-based research using the metaphor of the Filipino board game Sungka.

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Five years ago the practice-based course on artistic research became a mandatory part of the premaster programme at Sint Lucas Antwerpen. It can be seen as a crash course to guide students with almost no background in research to activate the approach of research into their practices.

This toolkit touches upon the most important parts of the course which runs over two semesters and alongside the work students create in their artistic context. Through links, exercises and examples, this text will take you through the process. It all starts from the student's artistic practice; in the premaster they are challenged to experiment at large and go outside of their comfort zone. They are also encouraged to document and reflect on every step they make, and they are invited to share their ideas and thoughts with their peers. At the end of the year the students are evaluated on their artistic research process, not on their artistic project since they will have their master year to develop this further. The hardest part for the students is to let go of what they know and are comfortable with and to discover what they do not yet know, but that is exactly what research is all about. It helps them grow in their artistic practice as they are asked to look at their practice in a different, critical way.

The Sungka game works as a nice lens to visualise the toolkit, as it is known to improve strategic, observational and mnemotic skills. It is a two-player turn-based strategy board played with seven shells. Rules differ from region to region and from family to family. One can start the game wherever one wants and one builds on each others shells. Thus it encompasses the collaborative and ongoing aspect that is part of artistic research. It also relates to the non-linear character of research and the sharing of sources.

1. ARTISTIC RESEARCH – WHAT'S IN THE NAME?

Exercise: *Harvest what artistic research could entail through either a collective brainstorm, or first through reflection in smaller groups and then share the outcome with each other.*

As Florian Dombois illustrates in his speech, it is "Research by Artists with artistic methods in the interest of the community of artists".
Artistic research starts from your practice and entails experimenting, documenting, contextualising, meta-reflecting, writing and above all creating and sharing with peers.

Interesting read: *Florian Dombois, "Our Way to the Venice Obligations". A Speech*, JAR, *2022: https://jar-online.net/en/our-way-venice-obligations-speech*

2. A POSSIBLE RESEARCH PATH

The research path used during the course is built upon the philosophy of design thinking. It is a non-linear and iterative process that challenges you as an artist to explore as much as possible before finalising a project. There are several models of design thinking. The one used in the course is the path structured around three stages: Inspiration, Ideation and Implementation. It is the model designed by Tim Brown (2008) for human-centred purposes.
Inspiration (over the two terms): Explore, Experiment, Learn, Contextualise, dive into theory on critical design, ethics, influence of values and culture
Ideation (in the first term): Brainstorm, try-out/prototype, iterate
Implementation (second term): Define research scope, peer feedback, presenting research

Interesting read*: Tim Brown, "Design Thinking"*, Harvard Business Review, *2008, pp. 1-9.*

3. A WAY FORWARD IN THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS

Practice-based research is not just about reflecting on artistic activity, but also reflecting whilst in action. Here the course refers to Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* (published in 1983), a publication that continues to influence how we look at professional practice today.
It is both reflection-on- and reflection-in-action that go hand in hand in the artistic process. Whilst reflection-on-action focuses on the experience that you already had as an artist, reflection-in-action is what happens when you are in the moment and one describes what is happening in that moment.
In the course the reflective process is built up through three tools:

A. POSITION YOURSELF

Exercise: *Show through a Wunderkammer who you are as an artist/designer, what drives you, what troubles you,what inspires you, how you critically relate to society…The format is free. The presentation can take up to 7 minutes.*

One might question why I use the format of a *Wunderkammer* for this exercise, due to the specific meaning of the tool

in a colonised context since it was a mode of collection that was actively used to decontextualise and display stolen objects from colonised communities. It is actually that complexity that challenges students to see their work in a wider context and brings them in a critical reflection mode about their position as an artist.

Interesting read*: Charlton, P. et al (2018) "Wunderkammer: Powerful Metaphors for Tangible Experiential Knowledge Building"*. Multimodal Technol. Interact., *2(3), 34; https://doi.org/10.3390/mti2030034*

B. REFLECT AND DOCUMENT

Exercise: *reflective diary (ongoing) – process folio (for a specific project): In order to document your process and reflect on what you are/have been doing/reading/seeing/experiencing, students are asked to start with a reflective diary. It documents explorations, experimentations, manipulations. It shows the development of their artistic work. It can contain sketchbook and notebook pages, visuals, drawings etc …*

It urges the student to go deeper into self-critical practice. It teaches them to observe, analyse the how and why of an experience or concept. It helps to make connections and to constantly ask questions. It also helps to open up to new ideas and connections, and not to get stuck at the first idea. It helps to evolve in their practice and thinking. Thus reflective journals enhance critical self-reflection.

Interesting read: *Catherine Tang, "Reflective diaries as a means of facilitating and assessing reflection". Educational Development Centre, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2002. https://www.scribd.com/document/904975603/ReflectiveDiaries-CatherineTang*

C. DEEPEN YOUR THINKING THROUGH WRITING

Exercise: Visual essay. *The visual essay focuses on a specific topic from the reflective diary. The number of words in the case of the premaster is limited to 2500 words in order to make sure students work on what is essential.*

The brief is as follows:

• Carefully select the visuals • Write a text that supports your topic and your images • Write from your point of view • Structure the essay with an introduction, body, conclusion • Make the story work • Note that the essay should be an add on to your studio project • See it as a mini-publication accompanying your work. •

Interesting read: *Scarneci-Domnisoru (2019), "Presenting results of social research through the visual essay"*. Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, *Series VII: Social Sciences • Law • Vol. 12(61) No. 1. https://doi.org/10.31926/but.ssl.2019.12.61.1.10*

4. WORK ON THE RESEARCH AREA AND TOWARDS A RESEARCH QUESTION?

Exercise: *Play around with keywords important to your work, question words: why, how, what … and verbs to discover your area of research.*

The brief:

• Start from your own practice • It is something you want to uncover • Question why and how • Question whether there is a link with the broader artistic/design field. • Question what is key to your research • Find focus through iteration: experiment/ideate/test/narrow down • Play around with the possible question. • Narrow down • Get as concrete as possible •

Interesting read: *Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam published* Hands on research for artists, designers and educators *in 2024. The way they make one play around building research questions is also a good tool to start with (p. 59).*

5. ETHICAL THOUGHTS

Exercise: *Challenge students on the importance of ethics in their artistic research. First see what they come up with and then prompt them to go deeper and take time to critically look at each of the outcomes because in the case of for instance 'do no harm' the connotation might differ from culture to culture as Carolyn Fluehr-Lobann marks in her book* Ethics & Anthropology*: "Harm is whatever a particular culture defines as a harmful act" (2013, p. 17).*

It could be interesting here to use the visual from the *Guidelines for ethical visual research methods* (2014, p. 8) as a conversation starter after the exercise involving confidentiality, consent, representation and audiences, authorship and ownership, minimising harm and fuzzy boundaries: https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/3647/1/Ethical-Visual-Research-Methods-2014.pdf

6. POSSIBLE TOOLS

Exercise: *let the students share possible tools they might use in their research. Then dig deeper and propose possible alternative tools.*

Artistic research is practice-based or practice-led research. Next to the classical research tools such as observation, interviews and roundtables, tools like walking, participatory research, cultural probes, arthography and visual ethnography are very helpful as possible research methods.

7. SHARE AND CHALLENGE EACH OTHER

Research is about sharing. Sharing means to open up to feedback. Feedback is a gift. Learning how to give feedback and how to receive feedback from peers is therefore an important aspect of this course. It comes at the end in order to give students the confidence to dive into the methodology of feedback.

Exercise: *Have a student pitch a thought for 5 minutes, followed by peer-to-peer feedback using a specific feedback methodology.*

POSSIBLE PEER FEEDBACK TOOLS:

Dasarts Feedback: https://www.musework.nl/nl/page/491/dasarts-feedback

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process/

Karim Benamar's set of feedback tools: The Presenter's Question, Affirmative Feedback, Perspectives feedback, Open Question, Concept Reflection, Gossip, Tips & Tricks, Personal Letter: https://karimbenammar.com/category/online-courses/