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The Integrative Potentials of Arts-based Research for the Study of Culture: A Reflection on *The Lagoon Cycle* by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison

The future of the study of culture can generate reflections from several different perspectives involving issues related to contents, methodologies, and political stances, as well as academic and/or social relevance, and epistemological ethics and responsibility. For early career researchers like myself, this can be ambiguously motivating, as a set of opportunities to engage in new and challenging endeavors, but also can sometimes seem a tiring and frustrating practice, particularly when one encounters outdated academic structures that are too rusty to be moved and transformed.

In this sense, one crucial consideration in the future of the study of culture is related to the future (or the 'crisis') of the humanities. This topic has been gaining increasingly concerned attention, mainly from scholars concerned not only with the future of their field but also with the course and extent to which human knowledge is framed and used as a tool for power and manipulation (Nussbaum 2010; Bono et al. 2008; Delbanco 2012). This concern arises from a growing and perceptible decrease in investment in the humanities and the arts in recent decades, and the consequent reduction in disciplines offered in and projects related to these fields (Nussbaum 2010; Delbanco 2012). Other symptoms of this crisis refer to mechanization processes in the production of knowledge, and investment solely in technical programs or projects that might bring immediate economic results but fail to generate a critical self-reflexive practice among students, researchers, professors, and other professionals in academic and non-academic worlds (Nussbaum 2010; Kristeva and Davidson 2014). This issue is reflected in the field's constant effort to validate the study of culture as 'science,' and its emphasis on the adoption (or adaptation) of what is accepted as a 'standard scientific method.' At the expense of this effort, in many cases, comes the disregarding of methods that are considered more ambiguous or subjective because they fail to reach the criteria of scientific measurability and reproducibility.

In an effort to address this issue, this article discusses the integrative potential of arts-based research for the field of the study of culture, in its encouragement of self-reflexive thinking processes about the statuses of academia and of

research themselves. Accordingly, this is not an empirical study based on concrete empirical evidence, but an invitation to reflection, based on the example of an artistic project that opens the possibility of thinking about research from different perspectives.

The interest in arts-based research as a potential methodology for qualitative research originated within the field of art education in the 1970s. Since the 1990s, it has been growing in connection to different academic areas, primarily within the social sciences, educational sciences, and the study of culture, but also in other scientific areas like psychology, psychotherapy, and environmental science.¹ In many cases, arts-based approaches are subordinated to fit into expected scientific accounts of measurability, applicability, predictability, reproducibility, credibility, and so on, despite that these are not always compatible to what arts-based research stands for. Scholars Natalia Ernstman and Arjen E.J. Wals describe the role of arts-based research in sustainability studies: “The arts techniques involve improvisation, intuition, spontaneity, lateral thinking, imagination, co-operation, serendipity, trust, inclusion, openness, risk-taking, provocation, surprise, concentration, unorthodoxy, deconstruction, innovation, fortitude, and an ability and willingness to delve beneath the surface, beyond the present, above the practical and around the fixed” (Ernstman and Wals 2013, 1648). These qualities are not only important for arts-based research, however. On the contrary, they are relevant to the process of innovative thinking and self-reflexive practice in any field of research, even as they require some distancing from the limitations of predictability and mechanical reproducibility. The arts, in this sense, can play a fundamental role in enabling the possibilities for overcoming a scientific-mechanical-rationality, and allow for the emergence of more humane and unexpected characteristics in the process of doing research.

First, it is important to highlight that it is not the goal of this paper to dismiss the importance of scientific research or the standards of scientific methods. Its focus lies, instead, on trying to bring unpredictable characteristics of research to the surface, and rather than denying or suppressing them, indicating their value as legitimate steps of the research process that could and should be embraced in the study of culture.

Second, there are different forms in which arts-based research can be understood, interpreted and applied and the goal here is to briefly indicate this variety

¹ References to arts-based research in relation to art education can be found in Eisner 1991; Barone and Eisner 1997; Irwin and deCosson 2004. It was also expanded to other areas of the social and cultural sciences as in the examples of Pink 2001; Pickering 2008; Knowles and Cole 2008, as well as to art therapy in McNiff 2013 or environmental sciences and education in Mantere 1998; Curtis et al. 2014; Ernstman and Wals 2013.

of approaches and to focus on one specific kind of arts-based research that is not often given credit within the scientific community, which is defined in this article as *research through art*.

1 Multiple Forms to Think About in Arts-based Research

As previously mentioned, in the last decades there has been a growing number of different approaches to arts-based research: trying to understand it, define it, and integrate it into qualitative research (Barone and Eisner 1997; Knowles and Cole 2008; McNiff 2013). From a recent literature review of arts-based approaches used in fields related to the study of culture and the humanities, there are at least three different basic forms in which the role of the arts can be interpreted in relation to research. The first and more commonly identified one can be defined as research *about* art, in which the ‘products’ of artistic practice are analyzed according to the methods of other disciplines: For example, works of art that are analyzed using art-historical methods, or some forms of anthropological interpretations of cultural manifestations. In this kind of practice, the researchers are usually not artists themselves and they are not involved in the process of production of such artistic/cultural expressions. Instead, they engage theoretically with different works of art, or cultural manifestations, and combine these personal encounters with previous knowledge and theories to produce different readings and interpretations of that work, expression, or practice.

A second role for the arts is in research *with* art, in which the artistic practice is taken as a method and is incorporated into the interpretive processes of other disciplines. This happens, for example, in approaches of visual anthropology or art therapy (Pink 2001; McNiff 2013), wherein artistic practice is turned into a process of data production or collection and is combined with other research methods to achieve the desired results of a specific project. In these cases, the researchers can also come to be the producers of the analyzed artistic expressions, or they work closely with the people producing such expressions. However, the focus usually lies on analyzing the ‘final result’ or applying the ‘final result’ as an analytical tool to attend to a specific research question. The processual aspects of the artistic production are not completely disregarded, but they do not hold as a significant role as the ‘end product.’ In many practices and accounts of art therapy, the line between research *with* art and research *through* art, is not clearly defined (McNiff 2013): Both aspects can be identified but slight differences in focus or expectations of the analysis are perceivable.

Finally, another way in which arts-based research can be understood is in relation to the very process of artistic thinking. This can be defined as research *through* art, and this is the understanding of arts-based research that is explored in this article. In research *through* art, the artistic thinking process is understood as a methodological procedure in itself and the different stages of the creative process can be identified as distinguished methods for the development of the research (Irwin and deCosson 2004; Sullivan 2005). If one thinks about the centuries-old artistic habit of writing about creative processes in personal journals or in letters shared with fellow artists, this is not a completely new idea. The practice has often simply been obfuscated in the academic world (holding some recognition perhaps only in art schools) and it is now getting more visibility in other fields of research as well. Other common practices among artists that indicate the importance of procedural development include: the sketchbooks that many artists develop during the creative phase of their work; portfolios that often highlight finalized works but that also indicate a certain ‘line-of-thought’ among these works; as well as the journal publications that invite the contribution of artist-produced texts that reflect upon creative processes. These practices demonstrate that creative thinking, although it may be chaotic and subjective, is also systematic (Sullivan 2005), and not only can it be incorporated in the process of research related to various fields, it is actually inherent to the process of developing research. However, it is usually underestimated and not taken into consideration as a method or a part of the methodology applied to research.

As already indicated, these three different understandings of arts-based research are not mutually exclusive, and varied forms of arts-based research can be identified simultaneously in different research practices. Furthermore, there are other authors that might define these (and other) interpretations of arts-based research with different concepts, indicating the multiplicity of forms in which the arts can be integrated into research.²

² Sullivan (2005), for example, focuses on the practice of research in visual arts. He develops different sets of complex triangulations between agency, structure, and action, which work in connection with different levels of research practice and theory. Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of the role of the artist as researcher and provides a distinction among arts-based research and other quantitative and qualitative methodologies, denoting the distinguished characteristics of arts-based research. He does not conceptualize the visual-arts-research practice in the same sense as it is done in this article, but the emphasis on the processual characteristics of the artistic research shows a similar interpretation for it.

2 Three Integrative Potentials of Arts-based Research

With these considerations about arts-based research in mind, there are some integrative potentials enhanced by research *through* art that are emphasized in this section of the paper, and that can make meaningful contributions to discussions about the future of the study of culture and the humanities.

An example of the ‘artworld’ that initiates such reflections and makes connections involving the practical and theoretical potential of arts-based research is *The Lagoon Cycle*, by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, more commonly known together as the Harrisons.³ While not the most contemporary work of art to emphasize in this context, nor the most contemporary work produced by the Harrisons, it has several important qualities that are suitable for this paper. Also, since it is not such a recent work, it allows the possibility for readers to find other references and reviews of this work that might be enriching for the development of their own critical analyses of the integrative potentials highlighted in this article.⁴

The Harrisons are well-known environmental artists and activists, and their artistic research usually addresses ethical issues of the human relationship with the environment. *The Lagoon Cycle* is an examination of the processes and linkages between food production and watersheds along the perimeter of the Pacific Rim, developed by the artists in collaboration with other professionals between 1973 and 1985 (Harrison and Harrison 1993). The ‘final product’ is a portable mural, which is about 100 meters long and is divided into sixty sections that show representations of their research in drawings, paintings, photographs, collages, and poems. The artistic process, however, entailed a lot more than what is perceivable in this ‘final product.’ It involved many different encounters between the artists and the environments they investigated; performative actions; the creation of poetic metaphors based on processes of self-reflection about the conditions for life; and the production of imagined maps and poetic dialogues between two characters that represented the artists themselves, the Lagoon Maker (Newton) and the Witness (Helen) (Harrison and Harrison 1993). The artists describe the work as follows:

³ I would like to take this moment to respectfully acknowledge the passing of Helen Mayer Harrison on 24 March 2018 and express my condolences to her loved ones.

⁴ Notable references for the work of the Harrisons and *The Lagoon Cycle* are: Matilsky 1992; Ingram 2013; and the writings of the artists themselves, many of which can be found at their official website: <<http://theharrisonstudio.net/>> [accessed: 25 July 2017].

This 360 foot long and eight foot tall mural is an extended semi-autobiographical dialogue, with stories and anecdotes, plays between two characters, a ‘Lagoon Maker’ and a ‘witness’, and serves to establish the philosophical basis for the ecological argument in many later works. Beginning in Sri Lanka with an edible crab and ending in the Pacific with the greenhouse effect, it seeks ever-larger frames for a consideration of survival. It looks at experimental science, the marketplace and megatechnology, finally posing the question, “What are the conditions necessary for Survival” and concluding that it is necessary to reorient consciousness around a different database. [sic]⁵

Furthermore, through their international recognition, which allowed them to expose parts of this work, accompanied by performances and manifestoes, in different museums, the artists managed to bring these local environmental issues to the attention of an international community (Matilsky 1992). In 1984, *The Lagoon Cycle* was also published in the form of a handmade book titled *The Book of the Lagoons*. The publication presents the story of the seven lagoons examined in *The Lagoon Cycle* with poems, hand-colored photographs, collages, and drawn imaginary maps: *The First Lagoon: The Lagoon at Upouveli*; *The Second Lagoon: Sea Grant*; *The Third Lagoon: The House of Crabs*; *The Fourth Lagoon: On Mixing, Mapping and Territory*; *The Fifth Lagoon: From the Salton Sea to the Pacific*; *From the Salton Sea to the Gulf*; *The Sixth Lagoon: On Metaphor and Discourse*; and *The Seventh Lagoon: The Ring of Fire; The Ring of Waters*.

The first integrative potential that I would like to emphasize in relation to this work is that there is no ‘unique’ model of the ‘ideal’ artistic research. It is always re-modeled according to the specifics of each case, as in many projects in the social sciences and the study of culture. However, in arts-based research, neither non-reproducibility nor errors and flaws are seen as negative aspects of the research process. On the contrary, they are often taken as new points of departure and knowledge creation (Sullivan 2005), enabling the artist/researcher to reconsider particularities and perceive the object of research from an unexpected point of view.

This is one of the fundamental aspects of *The Lagoon Cycle*. In the process of developing their work, the artists realized that because their perspectives were constantly affected by their experience, they needed to constantly reconsider the conceptual frames of their work:

The story concerns two characters who begin a search for a ‘hardy creature who can live under museum conditions’ and who are transformed by this search. The characters define themselves in *The First Lagoon* by the differences in their values and perceptions, with one

⁵ Information available at the Harrisons’ website: <<http://theharrisonstudio.net/the-lagoon-cycle-1974-1984-2>> [accessed: 25 July 2017].

naming himself Lagoon Maker and the other naming herself Witness. Both proceed to live up to their names although they finally surrender them as circumstances push the two characters into constructing ever-larger frames for their discourse.

(Harrison and Harrison 1993, 371)

Furthermore, in order to be able to engage with each of the different explored environments in a meaningful manner and find the connections among these environments for the larger bioregional connection, it was necessary for the artists to develop a renewed singular examination and expression based on the specific characteristics of each particular region. Their brief description of the *Fifth* and *Sixth Lagoons* exemplifies this:

The Fifth Lagoon deals with the Salton Sea, which was formed by flood flow released by human error from canals along the Colorado River. *The Sixth Lagoon* treats the entire Colorado River basin. Lagoon Maker and Witness reflect on the insights they have gained through observing aquatic systems. They expand the scale of their thinking from the Salton Sea to the Colorado River watershed, which has been changed by lifestyles that demand vast amounts of electricity and irrigation.

(Harrison and Harrison 1993, 372)

One important reflection upon issues of uniqueness and universal models in research can be related to the concept of creativity. In the academic world, creativity is usually overestimated as a form of generating completely innovative research questions, methods, and/or results that should nonetheless also be reproducible and aim for universal applicability. However, creativity is an endless exercise of combining and re-combining the material of previous experiences, re-orienting structures of thoughts, and re-creating knowledge. In artistic research, this even includes 'stealing' forms of knowledge from other disciplines and recombining them in new formats without following the strict methodological structures of such disciplines, since the artistic research feeds from other disciplines but does not necessarily have to give them back a functional product.

In this sense, artistic research is a processual and unfinished form of research. Even if there is a 'final product,' there are also always infinite new ways in which it could be expressed, re-thought, and transformed. It does not move to enhance certainty or universality. On the contrary, it looks for ambiguities and different forms to uncover the questions that have been buried by answers.

Sensibility provides a second integrative aspect of the artistic thinking process, in its basis in the multisensorial experiences and imaginative capabilities of the artist/researcher and the perceiver. Since there is no urgent need to prove or disprove any thesis, it is also open to the imagination. Its persuasive techniques seduce its perceivers and instigate both the perceivers and the artists themselves to revisit the world from a different perspective. Reimagining the

world and reality departing from their own sensorial experiences. This is nicely expressed in *The Lagoon Cycle* through the dialogues created between the two characters, the Lagoon Maker and the Witness. These dialogues involve different levels of imagination with the real experiences that the artists encountered in the explored environments, which are poetically combined and summarized in the symbolic metaphors of the cycle of the lagoons with the cycle of life:

For us it was a moment
 We didn't know it had begun
 until we were already in the middle
 Then we looked forward
 And knew how it should end
 but we didn't know how to get there
 You could as well say that knowing the ending
 we worked backward to what we must have been to begin it
 as forward to what we must become to end it

I said
 What would happen if I told
 the story just as it occurred
 You said
 How could you
 Every time we recreate the past
 it is different
 I said
 Then let us reinvent ourselves
 You said
 We are always doing that anyway
 I said
 Let's do it publicly
 You said
 From one point of view or another
 everything is visible and public
 I said
 Let us experiment with a moment
 You said
 A moment may have no existence whatsoever
 I said
 A moment may have no boundaries and
 may be expanded indefinitely
 You said
 A moment is like an atom and can be exploded
 I said
 Then let us choose a radioactive moment
 with a ten year half-life.

(Harrison and Harrison 1984a)

The (self-)reflexive practice and poetic forms of expressing it can have transformative influences on individual and collective perceptions of the world and, consequently, can instigate collective actions. As indicated by Sullivan:

Reflexive practice is a kind of research activity that uses different methods to work against existing theories and practices and offers the possibility of seeing phenomena in new ways. [...] a reflexive practitioner will question content and contexts as problematic situations are revealed within particular settings. Issues-driven inquiry of this kind not only identifies problems but also opens up areas whereby participants become responsive to potential change. (Sullivan 2005, 110)

In some of the cases of this work of the Harrisons, the process of poetic self-reflection did generate practical outcomes. Through their metaphorical, poetic, and imaginative expression of the situation of these watersheds, they generated political reactions to engage in finding solutions for some of the environmental problems of the areas that were part of the research. Many of the Harrisons' projects have indeed become long-term community projects (Ingram 2013). Nonetheless, that is not the primary goal of artistic research. The functionality of such research may arise in the process and generate great impacts (and that is of course a good thing), but the very process of artistic thinking is about finding new poetic forms of expressing something and not necessarily solving it.

The last potential that I want to emphasize for this article is that artistic research, in the sense of this example, is based on transdisciplinary collaborative work. That is not necessarily always the case, but it happens very often mainly in contemporary artistic practices. Thinking processes are developed in forms of collaborative works, which can instigate an integrative relation to the artistic 'products' and slightly dissolve the sense of authorship and ownership over a piece of artistic expression, or over the research project itself. The process of thinking depends on the act of expressing it and sharing it, in order for it to gain meaning, and be reinterpreted and transformed. Furthermore, the experience as a whole becomes a meaningful exchange of knowledge between different collaborators in non-hierarchical forms. There is no division between the value of the knowledge of the artist, the local community, or the other professionals involved in the project.

In the case of *The Lagoon Cycle*, the artists developed a first-hand study through interviews with ecologists, biologists, and community planners of the specific visited areas. After that, they created photographic narratives that identified the problem, questioned the systems of beliefs (that allowed the problem to develop) using specific aesthetic and poetic strategies like irony and sarcasm, and proposed initiatives to counter the damages departing from the process of self-reflection and imagination expressed in the poetic dialogues (Matilsky 1992). As

stated by the artists themselves: “Our work begins when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs or contradictory metaphors. Moments when reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become outrageous offer the opportunity to create new spaces – first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life.”⁶ The Harrisons actually define themselves as a collaborative team and try to turn their initiatives into community projects that can become independent of their presence:

Their work process is singular. It begins with the question, ‘How Big is Here?’ Here may be a street corner, as in California Wash or a sub-continent, such as Peninsula Europe. They only do work that is the outcome of an invitation to engage a particular place or situation. Typically, they agree to go to such a place to see, think, speak, research and engage a broad spectrum of people and groups. They will only take on a work if there is a general agreement that their actual client is the environment itself. The agenda is created by the artists in discourse with the larger community. *Thus, the Harrisons see themselves simultaneously as guests and co-workers.* They stay only as long as the invitation continues, or until they deem that they have done all that is possible for them to do.⁷ [Italics mine]

Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of bridging different kinds of knowledge among the artistic, the scientific, and the ‘popular’ spheres of human life:

The formation of ideas about complexity appears to us as a complicated process primarily because these ideas often do not lend themselves readily to translation into other forms of communication. We suspect that complexity theorists also need more grounded modes of comprehension. Our opinion is that if complexity science groups wish to make more comprehensible and concrete the imagery of complex systems, two things are necessary. First, ennobling issues need to be taken up directly. By ‘ennobling’ we mean envisioned actions that most people would accept as *prima facie* good to do, whether or not they believed they could be done. Second, we think that new language is needed that makes clear the juxtaposition of culture and ecology in a way that can be easily understood in the context of everyday discourse. (Harrison and Harrison 2007)

Although this particular quote does not refer to *The Lagoon Cycle* but to a more recent work of the artists, *Peninsula Europe*, it nicely summarizes the problematic gap that can be very common between academic research (and not only the work of complexity theorists) and other dimensions of social behavior and human knowledge.

⁶ Information available at the Harrisons’ official website: <<http://theharrisonstudio.net/>> [accessed: 25 July 2017].

⁷ Information available at the Harrisons’ official website: <<http://theharrisonstudio.net/>> [accessed: 25 July 2017].

3 Concluding Remarks

This article aimed to instigate a reflection about the integrative potentials of arts-based research for the future of the study of culture, primarily concerning methodological procedures and epistemological production. For this matter, it began with a critical reflection about the future of the humanities, its entanglements with the study of culture, and the possibilities for arts-based research. It did not intend, however, to provide an extensive review of the current state of arts-based research, nor the ‘crisis’ of the humanities. There are many controversial ideas about the benefits for the arts (or the subversive potentials of artistic thinking processes) of being given academic credit and institutionalized, then suffering a process of ‘academic commodification’ that is counterproductive to the subversive potentials and aims of artistic practice (Holert 2011). Nonetheless, this article aimed to highlight the benefits that the scholars in the field of the study of culture might have if they were to embrace some of the distinguished characteristics of arts-based research (in the sense of *research through art* mentioned above).

The article then moved to the exploration of the multiple forms in which arts-based research can be interpreted, providing a brief description of three basic forms in which the arts can be integrated in research: research *about*, *with*, and *through* art. Exposing different characteristics of each of these forms of arts-based research emphasized that they are not mutually exclusive and that different forms of arts-based research can be identified and applied within a single project. The distinction among these forms of research exemplifies the different possibilities in thinking about arts-based research without determining any hierarchical distinction among them. The focus was then directed to research through art because it is a form of research that is not commonly recognized in fields that are not necessarily related to the arts.

Finally, three integrative potentials of arts-based research were explored through the example of the artistic project *The Lagoon Cycle* by the Harrisons. The reflections about the potentials of arts-based research that emerged from specific characteristics of the work of the Harrisons were expanded to examine their benefits for the practice of research in a more general sense and in relation to the study of culture.

I would like to conclude by stating again that this article did not intend to deny the importance of scientific methods in research (which is not even the goal in artistic research); rather, it meant to indicate the ways in which the study of culture could benefit from such processes. The product of research in the study of culture is expected to meet scientific standards of verifiability, but perhaps, at least in the process of doing research, it would be beneficial to embrace some of the ambiguities, openness, and imaginative, or even utopian strategies of the

artistic thinking processes. Such strategies may even open the eyes of cultural researchers to new possibilities in their own research that they would be otherwise unable to see because they do not fit their chosen methodological models.

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