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Come out of your shell! Arts-based research as a method for transformative research

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COME OUT OF YOUR SHELL!
ARTS-BASED RESEARCH AS A METHOD
FOR TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH

Contents

Abstract

This article deals with *arts-based research* (ABR), a method in which knowledge is (re) produced through art. ABR formats rely on the way art can be experienced through the senses, as well as on the public, jargon-free accessibility of art as a medium capable of mediating. The paper presents the use of ABR in the context of a study on suburban living environments. The artwork produced is a result of the research process and aids the reception of and reflection on the object of research (through designs and interpretations) with the aim of transforming the perspectives of researchers and those involved in the process.

Keywords

Arts-based research – designs and interpretations – sensory perception – reflection – transformation

1   Introduction

'… but as a ceramist, I remained to some extent a foreign body.'

With this statement, Ms R laid[1] the foundation for an experiment which became an exploratory field test for transformative research[2] as part of my study on suburban living environments[3]. In my role as researcher, I wanted to understand what constitutes the suburban and how it plays out in everyday life by experiencing it, hence I actively participated in the living environment of the participants in my study. For this purpose, Ms R invited me into her home, including her studio, and became a participant herself, as she acted not only as an expert on suburban life, but also in her profession as a ceramist, i.e. as a co-designer of the research process. Within this process, we shared our living environments – her artistic one and my scientific one – in order to jointly develop something *new*: the snail shell, a work of art made of clay. This symbolises both the process and the result of the arts-based research.

In the following, I would like to show exactly what is hidden within the shell. In section 1, I start by explaining what ABR is and what constitutes this method. Section 2 presents the experiment with Ms R in practice. The conclusions (section 3) end with a non-final reflection about the advantages and disadvantages of ABR, as well as its challenges in comparison with other methods.

1.1   What is ABR?

ABR is 'defined as research and discovery *by means of* aesthetic/artistic activity' (Schreier 2017: 8). McNiff defines it as 'the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies' (2007: 29). Thus, ABR connects the apparent dualism of art and science (Leavy 2015) via their immanent commonalities, 'in their attempt to explore, illuminate, and represent aspects of human life and the social and natural worlds of which we are a part' (Leavy 2017: 3). ABR approaches integrate and enrich existing methods within the discipline, use synergy effects and are therefore regarded as 'holistic' (Chilton/Leavy 2014; Leavy 2011). They interlink artistic and scientific contexts in order to create 'innovation(s)' (Leavy 2017; McNiff 2007).

In this arts-based mode of knowledge production, communication and reflection, ABR concepts represent a third paradigm alongside quantitative and qualitative social research (Schreier 2017: 20). In contrast, ABR does not aim to generate discursive, generalisable knowledge which can be written down, but rather to produce intuitive knowledge and to open up new perspectives and potentials, in which art takes on a mediating function (ibid. 2017; Leavy 2015). Barone and Eisner therefore describe ABR as an 'effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communica-

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1   Ms R was a participant in the study.

2   In this article, s*uburban* refers to living environments in spaces based on their phenomenological manifestation, i.e. their characteristics that can be described and perceived by the senses (Sieverts/ Koch/Stein et al. 2005: 154). They can neither be clearly differentiated spatially nor conclusively defined, but they clearly differ from other elements in the urban region.

3   This refers to processes in which perspectives are transformed through critical (self-)reflection – in this case through art – in order to change and expand the processes.

tion in order to express meanings that would otherwise be ineffable' (2012: 1). The focus is on the temporary and revisable nature of knowledge and on its dependency on context and location (Schreier 2017; Eisner 2008). The use of ABR as a research tool is therefore always appropriate when 'research aims not merely at explaining phenomena, but at gaining an understanding of phenomena' (Kagan 2017: 162).

1.2   What constitutes ABR?

ABR approaches are characterised by openness, diversity and flexibility. ABR therefore also functions as an 'umbrella category' and covers a broad repertoire of art forms (Leavy 2017: 4). These include literary (novels, poems), performative (theatre, dance) or visual (photography, painting) formats, which are distinguished in their degree of abstraction as well as in their reference to the object of the research: the less referential the artistic expression is, the more room there is for ambiguity and ambivalence in the interpretation (Schreier 2017: 5). Permitting differential meaning horizons can 'democratize meaning-making and decentralize academic researchers as "the experts"' (Leavy 2017: 10).

ABR relies heavily on 'paradigmatic and participatory formats' (Schreier 2017: 11), i.e. on the integration of very diverse participants (specific to the context or issue) in various phases of the research process. Learning from and with one another and researching together 'not only brings new methodical elements that allow an enriched interdisciplinary research work [...] it also requires that the researchers learn and develop new sets of competences and skills that help scientists research the complex unity of the world beneath, between and beyond disciplines [...] contributing to the development of transdisciplinarity' (Kagan 2017: 162). ABR practices are participatory or transdisciplinary if different players are involved collaboratively in order to generate, (re)integrate and apply 'new' knowledge. 'The duality of researchers and participants is expanded in ABR into the triad of researchers, participants and recipients – whereby individual roles [...] may be combined' (Schreier 2017: 11). The aim is therefore a reciprocal partnership between the participants.

With this in mind, ABR approaches can also be used to question stereotypical (human) images by means of sensitisation and critical perception, to initiate identification and communication processes and to interlink individual and social elements (Leavy 2017: 9 et seq.). 'The research carries the potential to jar people into seeing and/or thinking differently, feeling more deeply, learning something new, or building [...] understandings across similarities or differences' (ibid.: 9). In the process, concepts, stories and ideas emerge which (can) address how to deal with social problems, as well as questions about collective values, 'in the service of cultivating social consciousness' (ibid.: 8). Therefore, the use of ABR is aimed at reaching a broader (non-academic) audience and therefore the public usability and accessibility of the research results (ibid.: 5; 11). Its utilisable value consists in the production of an *outcome* in the sense of public science (ibid. 2011; 2015; 2017), which is firstly free and open to all, since it has a low threshold of comprehensibility (jargon-free), and secondly takes place specifically at locations which are accessible to a large public. 'It is therefore ultimately also about empowerment through research, about research

towards social change and about the breaking up of positions of power' (Schreier 2017: 5). These aspects thus refer to the transformative paradigm (Mertens 2008), which incorporates the complexity and multiplicity of realities (by means of participatory/transdisciplinary research), permits contradictions and therefore attempts to include real living conditions particularly authentically in the research process.

1.3   What is special (or especially difficult) about ABR?

'Science states meaning, arts express meaning'
(Eisner 2005: 210).

The special aspect of ABR is the medium of art. As an interface between preconceptual and conceptual knowledge, art has a different effect, on both those who make it and those who view it. This is because art – whichever form of expression it uses – affects us immediately, before we can grasp it intellectually (as an *embodiment*[4]). Art triggers more or less intense, positive or negative emotions (states of being) and can be experienced through the senses. Nobody can escape this effect. It occurs both in the process of making art and in the process of interpreting and reflecting on it, which is why research designs that include ABR might never be entirely completed (Finley 2008).

ABR is characterised by openness, diversity and flexibility. However, this also means that neither the form nor the use of this method are set or standardised. These characteristics are optional; they can be a component of ABR but do not have to be. Thus, participation – in the form of involvement (on an equal footing) or in its effect (social-transformative, etc.) – in the process of arts-based research can vary and is dependent on who is providing the impetus. It can therefore be said in summary that the science of ABR is currently nowhere near being able to answer all the questions about its object of inquiry conclusively. Is the result of ABR deemed to be art or, conversely, is every work of art deemed to be research if ABR is defined by generating new perspectives and alternative knowledge as a medium and mediator? Or does it require specific criteria such as the explicit interest of the researcher in generating knowledge, the reflection of the work of art and cooperation with other players in order to be real ABR? The preliminary conclusion is that ABR approaches are very heterogenous in themselves and are hardly comparable with each other. The only thing they have in common is that they are perceived via the senses and the body, and that this perception is elicited through the mediation of art.

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4   *Embodiment* describes the bodily understanding of aesthetic perception (Berleant 2004: 83 et seq.). This draws on the individual's own involvement and therefore self-evidently includes sensations (Böhme 2001: 73 et seq.)

2   The experiment

> *'Once a bat went astray here and flew into my house by accident.* [...]
> *This was an unprecedented encounter with nature.* [...]
> *Never before had I been able to observe a bat so closely.*
> *It was beautiful, so black and shiny.'*

This is Ms R's account of an experience from her living environment. In this unique situation of proximity and immediacy, the bat resembles a work of art which affects her and moves her emotionally. This occurrence and further everyday episodes from suburban life formed the basis for the creation of an ABR work made of clay[5]. Because handling clay and shaping it into ceramics (as with other forms of art) cannot be achieved without prior knowledge of the material, process and tools, Ms R (as an expert on ceramic art) and I developed this together. The resulting experiment lasted over 12 months.

2.1   From an idea to a work of art

The transformation of my research topic into an implementable form made of clay marked the beginning of the ABR process. On the basis of a qualitative interview with Ms R, I 'formed' her expressions and statements (raw data). The biggest issue was to find an appropriate form (structure) without knowing the research results at this point.[6] The work being produced therefore had to be open to new findings from the further research process (Leavy 2011; 2015). I therefore decided on a design made of individual fragments which would 'work' on their own, but also as a whole (original design – design 1). This idea-finding phase was characterised by the intersection of our individual, specific knowledge. This included an intensive exchange and the learning of a common language for a better understanding of each other's perspective.

In the subsequent phase, the work of art was produced through handicraft. A sketch was made, followed by its 'freehand translation' into clay. This was cut to size, pressed and given a texture in the process. The embossed pattern was provided by a material with holes which was laid between the press and the clay in order to add a third (interpretive) level to the planar surface. Using this process, I produced 17 individual parts with the aid of Ms R. After a drying phase of several months (essential for the further process), the material changed, firstly due to loss of water content (shrinkage of the parts by approx. 10%) and then by the bisque firing (plasticity). This was followed by glazing and refiring, which again transformed the shape, colour and form of the material.

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5   The term *ceramic*, from the Ancient Greek *keramos* (κέραμος), refers to the raw material, the clay minerals and the dimensionally stable products manufactured from it by firing. Today, it designates both the technique by which such OBJECTS are made (the handicraft) and the product thus produced (commodity or ornamental object).

6   The research design (data collection in the form of interviews and focused, observant participation) was only implemented when the ABR commenced.

At this point, however, the transformation was not yet complete. The production phase was followed by the presentation phase of the work of art. In this case, the ABR practice of research and insight included the alternative composition of the work of art by means of its individual segments. This process was intended to inspire further co-production of knowledge and reflexive understanding and/or experiencing. In general, this phase could (or should) take place in an exchange between the researcher, the research subjects and the co-researchers, in order to (re)integrate new knowledge into the work. So far, however, the discussion has only taken place between Ms R and myself. The original design I developed (design 1 – the snail shell)[7] served merely as a discussion foil on the basis of which further designs (2 – the tribal and 3 – the zip) were created.

In the following, the perspectives and understanding of Ms R and myself will be presented using three designs (variations) of the work of art and (proposed) interpretations on suburban living environments. These are neither conclusive nor complete; rather, they represent the initial associations of the research object. Because these are short reflections, the approach to the work's iconography is fairly superficial. The common denominator of all the design variations lies in their composition of 17 individual parts, with segments of different dimensions (5–20 cm long, 1–7 cm wide and 0.5 cm high), the same surface texture (which varies in its direction and intensity) and coloration (iridescent, changing from dark green via green to grey).[8]

2.2   From design to interpretation

'This here, this clod, this little clod and this house here, for me they are home, my home, they provide protection and comfort.'

The snail shell
In these words, Ms R addresses a central point which is essential for the construction of her living environment in the suburbs and that of many other study participants: her house with its garden – metaphorically 'her clod'. By using repetitions, she makes it explicit that these spaces have a particular relevance in her living environment. Thus, Ms R perceives the suburban primarily from the inner perspective of her private space and appropriates this in the mode of a retreat or of a 'sub-local' orientation (Menzl 2007; 2014). The home is the centre of her living environment, the place of identification, autonomy and freedom of action. The design of the snail shell corresponds to this interpretation (the snail shell as a clod), which describes a protected space with the possibility of retreat from the outside world.

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7   As findings were made, they were continually integrated into the research process.

8   These form-defining characteristics can also be read figuratively: the differences in dimensions can be interpreted as representing household structures or living spaces, the pattern could stand for temporal parameters such as duration of residence or age, and the arrangement of colour for different furnishings, how the space is arranged or as urban to rural manifestations of lifestyle.

If this perspective is changed, the individual fragments of the snail shell can also alternatively be interpreted as clods. Then the individual clods stand for individual living environments in neighbourhoods or built-up areas. As a whole, they constitute the snail shell, representing the community of the suburban space under examination. This interpretation focuses on the spatially manifested composition of suburbia. Around the unequivocal middle (centre), the snail shell (city/municipality) grows with each structural, functional or social expansion (by the addition of a new clod or its loss in the case of shrinkage). Variations in size and composition can be designed by placing individual clods closer to or further away from each other, in order to indicate structural and social proximity or distance between the inhabitants. This could also enable conclusions to be drawn about social cohesion. In addition, the spiral shape of the snail shell respects the transformation potential of suburbia as open, unfinished spaces which continue to (be able to) change.

Fig. 1: The snail shell / Photo: Angelina Göb

The tribal

When reassembled, the segments form this design that resembles a tribal or tattoo motif. Originating in the word *tribe*, this interpretation concentrates on the aspect of homogeneity and cohesion. In the hierarchy, the community is located above the individual, and commitment to joint goals, values and rituals (as a basis of trust) is at the forefront of coexistence. However, this commitment to and display of a common motive (*tribal*) also indicates a clear demarcation from other places as a result of a

(tribal) identity. Nevertheless, every individual in this *tribe* (segment) is unique, does not appear twice in this form and occupies a self-determined place in the collective context. Whereas social, life-cyclical, normative and structural homogeneity was characteristic of suburban space for a long time (e.g. Menzl 2007; 2014), the increasing individualisation of suburban living environments (through generational change, demographic change, etc.) enables increased heterogeneity (e.g. Aring/Herfert 2001; Jahn/Lanz/Bareis et al. 2000). Thus, this design could also indicate a desired development in which the home stands behind the homeland in the sense of identification by and with the tribe or space (and does not, as in interpretation 1, primarily rely on a privatised 'sub-local' orientation).

A further interpretation focuses on the chaotic position of the individual pieces, i.e. on a state of entropy, which describes the inequality and disorder within a system. An intensification of this tendency towards the expansion of free spaces between the segments could then be interpreted as a disturbance or danger within the community, which could lead to segregation and separation and would possibly require (planning) control.

Fig. 2: The tribal / Photo: Angelina Göb

The zip
The juxtaposed individual parts constitute a design in which the elements are visually (linearly) connected. The heterogeneous links are interconnected in the form of a chain. This composition represents both a bond between the segments – despite difference (in the subjective living environments) – and an attachment to the core city and its potential structures. When arranged as a beam, the design might be interpreted

as a line of vision or orientation towards the city which characterises suburbia as a dependent, unemancipated space without an autonomous identity and quality of life, in which each person lives for themselves or in transit between the core city and suburbia and is present neither here nor there.

In the interpretation of the zip, which is focused on the meshing of links, the opposite emerges. The dynamic of opening and closing shows two faces of a suburban continuum: it unites 'the best of both worlds' between city and country (with regard to ways of life and infrastructures). This interpretation emphasises the individual perspective of its inhabitants and their potential subjective interpretation in their local coexistence; it entrusts them with the decision between proximity and distance (spatial, social, functional), inner and outer, or private and public. Accordingly, having a bit of everything does not constitute a compromise, but rather a complement which suburbanites (as inhomogeneous links in a chain) can make (optional) use of, flexibly and according to the situation (e.g. balancing out the neighbourly relationship between familiarity and social control) – unless the links become entangled (in the event of conflicts).
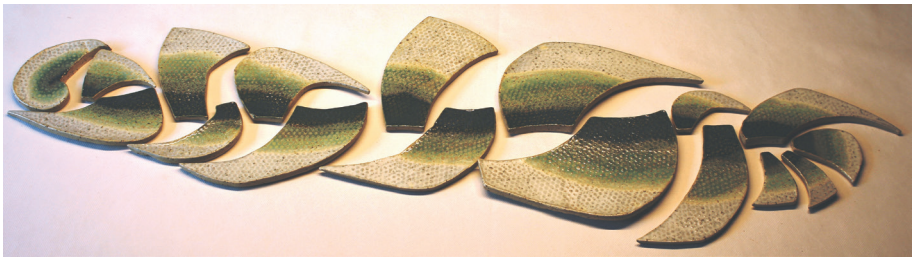

Fig. 3: The zip / Photo: Angelina Göb

This brief discussion of designs and interpretations reveals the diversity of the various observations and interpretations of the suburban space and/or its inhabitants.[9] The interpretations constitute temporary, revisable, contextual knowledge and could be understood or arranged (and thus interpreted) completely differently by other players that (may) need to be integrated. The work of art can therefore be repeatedly (re)produced and transformed by 're-designing'.

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9   Hence the conditional formulation. Since there has been no reflection of or on the interpretations with further players, the interpretation above is provisional, allowing for the knowledge generated about suburban living environments to be supplemented and modified.

3   Conclusions

'The path for me now is to find what fits.'

Ms R is searching for alternatives, just as I am. She is doing this in the context of shaping her everyday life (in order to no longer be a 'foreign body'), while I am trying to uncover alternative ('new') knowledge about suburban living environments which the ABR method offers me. This method tries to find what 'fits' by means of a searching process. As shown here by the example of a ceramic work of art, ABR approaches can be an alternative research tool for transformative research. However, before using such a method, the advantages and disadvantages should be carefully weighed up.

3.1   Reflections on ABR

Because of its openness, diversity and flexibility, ABR can simultaneously be a blessing and a curse, because it offers innumerable possibilities. A lack of definition and delimitation compared with other methods makes the classification and use of 'correct' ABR difficult in the context of one's own research. Further challenges emerge in the 'translation' of the data (Who is capable of this? Which assumptions are made?), the choice of the medium or form of expression (Who chooses what and according to which criteria?) and in dealing with the fact that there are no evaluation criteria (Is there good and bad ABR? Is it the better the more characteristic elements, such as transdisciplinary approaches, broad access or orientation towards social change, are implemented?). Answers with regard to the necessity of interest in generating knowledge and to interpretation which is developed into explanation are still outstanding. In practice, a major criterion for ruling out the use of ABR is evidently the high investment of resources (in terms of time and funds: equipment to produce the work of art) that does not come with a potential for creating a direct connection between the findings and the research question (e.g. due to a lack of explanation by the recipients).

It remains unclear whether ABR approaches are really as innovative as is claimed, or whether they are simply 'packaged' differently. A methodological approach known as 'auto-ethnography' has existed since the 1980s (Bochner/Ellis 2016) which unites personal experiences with scientific documentation and reflection and places them in a socio-cultural context. This has 'large areas of overlap with "traditional" qualitative social research' (Schreier 2017: 4), which also covers many features of ABR (e.g. openness, reflexivity and the role of the researcher in the research process). Furthermore, there are overlaps with performative methods (Gergen/Gergen 2011). In addition, however, ABR also integrates elements of transdisciplinary (Bergmann/Jahn/Knobloch et al. 2010) and participatory research (von Unger 2014), the approaches of which also aim at the co-production of knowledge, as well as social transformation. Possibilities for using ABR can also be found in emergent methods, which respond to methodological weaknesses as a result of social or technological changes (Hesse-Biber/Leavy 2010a, 2010b). Arts-informed research (AIR), like ABR,

uses artistic formats, whereby the scientific gain in knowledge is subordinated to the presentation of the result (Cole/Knowles 2008). The work of art also has greater importance in artistic research, which coincides with ABR in its content/practice (Borgdorff 2012).

3.2 Come out of your shell!

In summary, it should be noted that the disadvantages can equally be interpreted as advantages of the method, because they give us freedom (of research). ABR relies on broad accessibility and comprehensibility, as well as on turning science into something that can be grasped in people's everyday lives. It enables an artistic, playful generation of knowledge and a reflection of relevant topics by and for the participants, and reveals alternative access points to forms of experience and expression. 'ABR requires us to think in these different ways as we develop projects, make sense of what we have learned, and transform the essence of what we have learned into a coherent expression' and also 'transform[s] the practitioner throughout the process' (Leavy 2017: 11; Barone/Eisner 2012).

The title 'Come out of your shell!' not only refers to the (original) design and interpretation of the work of art that was created, but should also be understood as a plea for more boldness in research. If researchers wish to carry this out as public science, they should, by all means, depart from established paths and try out something new, take their research into the 'outside world', and make it transparent and comprehensible. Although this ABR experiment owed its existence to a chance event, an encounter with a suburban artist, a more planned use of the method can generate added value for all participants beyond the normal research process. The use of the medium of art is enriching because everyone can express themselves, but also experience themselves, through it. Art can be (co-)designed, received and reflected on, and integrates individual and collective perspectives. In the context of ABR, I have expanded my research activity to include an artistic one and shown first, provisional designs and interpretations of the suburban in a transformed form. My conclusion is that ABR was and is an alternative that 'fits', since it produces new perspectives, inspires a process of understanding between disciplines, encourages participation and has been an enjoyable experience for me.

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