Discourses on Research: Where is the Site of Artistic Researches?

By Adhi Nugraha

Research has been categorized in various paradigms. Traditionally, it is divided into two major groups: quantitative and qualitative. According to this qualification, artistic research is considered qualitative. Unfortunately, many textbooks about qualitative research methodology and methods that mostly written by those from humanities or social sciences, rarely involve or speak about artistic research as a (new) part of qualitative approaches. Artistic research or practice-led-research does not seem to exist in many dictionaries of qualitative research. This paper aims to describe the discourses on research in general, and look for the answer for this issue: “Where is the place of artistic research in the research-world?”

I. Categorizing Research

All researches from various disciplines seem to share common values that characterize them as research rather than just some ordinary action. Following are some common characteristics of researches suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2006). First, all researches identify a research issue and aims, set out a research design (plan), gather data, establish criteria and standards of judgment, and then generate evidence from the data. They should also make a claim to knowledge and submit the claim to critique. Finally, all researches disseminate the findings by explaining the significance of the work. By doing this, they link new knowledge with existing knowledge.

In general, a research aims to generate knowledge and theory. Hutchins (quoted in Mourad 1997) suggests that the other aim of all research’s inquiry is truth. Theoretical truth tells us what is the case, and practical truth tells us what should be done. Some scholars believe that the most common goal of research is the understanding of the problems that can be theorized and shared with others.

Besides these similarities, all researches are also different from one another according to various classifications. Many research methods literatures explain that
researches might involve in various paradigms. For instances, they have been classified in such categories/patterns:

- Basic research and applied research
- Qualitative research and quantitative research
- Technical rational (empirical) research, interpretive research, and critical theoretic research
- Exploratory research, constructive research, and empirical research
- External research and internal research

Some of those categorizations will be just discussed briefly, and some will be discussed more deeply, as presented below:

1. Basic and applied research
All researches can be classified by the degree of their direct impact or usefulness in the society. In this category, there are two types of research: (1) basic (fundamental or pure) research and (2) applied research. Basic research -mainly conducted in the university and the science center- aims to seek knowledge about fundamental principles, and its findings usually get no direct commercial benefits. Basic research contributes to essential knowledge of the human world, since it emphasizes on providing basic explanation about “how things work” or “why society evolves”. Basic research is believed as fundamental to sustain the extension of knowledge.

Although brings no direct benefits, the results of basic research in a long run are very important as the source to be implemented in commercial products and applied research. Based on ideas, principles, and theories of basic research, applied research build systems and products that have direct benefits to societies and lives in general. For instance, the development of modern telephone has been based on findings of basic researches on electric-transmitting theories, combined with diaphragm and electromagnetic theories.

2. Qualitative and quantitative research
There are two major types of research derive from a general view and the use of research approaches and methods: quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative research
Quantitative research seeks relationships between phenomena and quantitative properties through some systematic empirical investigations. It aims to develop mathematical models, theories, and hypotheses in relation to phenomena. A quantitative perspective, as Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) explain, mainly derives from positivist view, which assumes that the state of objective reality can be expressed numerically using statistical measurement. Positivist forms of research believe a ‘value-free’ viewpoint, which means, the researchers may not involve their own political values to the research observed. A quantitative study are conducted by
emphasizing experimentation (in nature), measurement, and seek for relationships. The researchers keep distance with the research in order not to contaminate it. For objectivity, the research reports are usually written in the third person to reduce biased interpretation of the results.

Quantitative approach is used widely in social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, and political science, and in natural sciences such as physics and biology. In general, researchers in quantitative research apply scientific methods that are started with generating models, theories, and proposing hypotheses. They develop instruments and methods for measurement in order to make explanation to phenomena. Then, they design experimental studies to test this hypothesis through process of collecting empirical data, and modeling and analysis of data. The research is ended by evaluating and interpreting the results.

Many researchers who work using quantitative research believe that quantitative approach is the most appropriate methods that can produce objectivity and ‘truly’ scientific knowledge. However, scientific knowledge is not free from criticism. For many postmodernists, scientific knowledge is simply another discourse and not representative of any form of fundamental truth.

Qualitative research
On the contrary to quantitative, qualitative research is a type of research that produces findings not based on statistical procedures or other means of quantification (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. A qualitative approach, as Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) notes, adopts a phenomenological view that states reality manifests in the perceptions of individuals. Therefore, qualitative studies focus mostly on meaning and understanding. According to Strauss and Corbin, the scope of qualitative research can cover study about person’s lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations.

In the beginning, qualitative research used to be an approach only for discipline of sociology and anthropology. Today it is widely used in other disciplines, for examples: psychology, nursing, social work studies, education studies, women's studies, and organization studies. As commonly done in many types of research, qualitative based researchers should deal with these practical considerations when starting their research: research problem, research question, objectivity, sensitivity, technical, and nontechnical literature.

In term of forms of collecting data, qualitative researchers can employ different approaches. Some author like Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) divides qualitative research into only three main types of approaches, such as: case study,
ethnography, and action research. However, many textbooks explain that qualitative research includes also other approaches such as storytelling, narrative, grounded theory, phenomenology, critical social research, historical research, and actor-network theory. Thus, in qualitative research the data might be classified in different forms, such as interviews, ethnographies, texts, audiotapes, videotapes, and multiple methods (Silverman, 2006). The most methods used for data analysis are interpretive techniques, coding, recursive abstraction, and mechanical technique.

Among various types of qualitative research, action research is relatively a new method that is not yet quite familiar in use, concerning to its specific approach: it places the researcher, the ‘I’, in the center of research. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) explain, action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their own work. Therefore, the fundamental different between action research with other approaches is: it is done by practitioners themselves rather than a professional researcher doing research on practitioners, which is often done in traditional forms of social science research. When social scientists tend to stand outside a situation as ‘outsider’ researchers, action researchers are ‘insider’ researchers, because they see themselves as part of the situation they are investigating. Action research has been well developed in education, especially in teaching, and is now used widely across the professions.

*The differences between quantitative and qualitative*

Halfpenny (1979) illustrates fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative methods through contrasting their various keywords. Below are some contrast-features among two methods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hard</td>
<td>Soft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Value-free</td>
<td>Political</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Case study</td>
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<td>Hypotheses testing</td>
<td>Speculative</td>
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<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Grounded</td>
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(Halfpenny 1979, cited in Silverman 2000)

Additionally, there are some criticisms of both approaches. Criticisms of quantitative research are: it can amount to a ‘quick fix’, involving little or no contact with people of the field. The methods tend to down-grade the reality of the social phenomena since they reject the non-measurable factors that in many cases they are the most important. Thus, statistic measurement cannot reach a deep understanding of the uniqueness of individual cases in everyday situations, which are vital for the task of many researches, such as in social science.
In turn, following are criticisms of qualitative research. First, is about questioning the validity: qualitative research may have tendency to use the data in relation to conclusions or explanations inappropriately. Second, many quantitatively oriented social science methodology literatures treat that qualitative approach is relatively minor methodology. So, it should only be used at the beginning or exploratory stage of the research, assuming that statistical analysis is anyway the foundation of research. Other criticism is about the problem of reliability. It refers to how researchers maintain the degree of consistency. Since qualitative based researchers aim to produce long descriptive narratives (than on statistical tables), how then such researchers build the reliable categorization of the events or activities described?

To conclude, both quantitative and qualitative approach has its own strength, and in some disciplines, for example: social sciences, the use of a combination of both methods is sometimes required. This is often referred to as mixed-methods research. Ultimately, as Silverman (2000) suggests, ‘objectivity’ should be the common aim of all social sciences.

3. Technical rational (empirical), interpretative, and critical theory research

According to Ernest (1994, quoted in McNiff and Whitehead, 2006), research can also be divided into these three distinct types: (1) technical rational (empirical) research, (2) interpretive research, and (3) critical theoretic research.

*Technical rational (empirical) research*

In this category, the researcher keeps a distance with the research field to maintain objectivity. Knowledge achieved from this approach is uncontaminated by human contact. Technical rational research adopts a cause and effect relationship based on such reasoning: ‘if we do this, then will happen that’, or in simpler form, if x then y. The results are usually based on statistical analysis, which can be universally applied through generalization. These results are believed to be replicable in many similar situations and remain true for all time.

It seems that technical rational research by definition suites very well with quantitative approach that uses scientific enquiry. The researchers’ position remains external, as they discuss about research and ideas as things ‘out there’. The knower is separated with the known. The researcher treat reality and ideas about reality as free-standing things that can be studied, taken apart, and put back together in new ways. Many researchers of these approaches seem unconvinced that they are part of the same reality they are researching.

Technical rational research has directed to vast developments in technology, medical care and space travel. Many technical rational researchers assume that the methodology of the natural sciences can be applied to human practices, so they tend to view humans as machines, or as data.
Interpretive research
The researcher in interpretive research observes people in their natural settings, and provides descriptions and explanations for what people are doing. This type of research, which applies usually qualitative approach in the form of case study, is widely used in social science and educational research. It aims to study various situations in social sites to construct meanings. In interpretive research, the people who are being observed, share and negotiate their own understandings of their practice with the external researchers, but it is still the external researcher’s story that goes into the public domain.

Critical theoretic research
Critical theoretic research is a type of research, which assumes that it is worth to understand a situation in order to change it. This is based on the belief that people can deconstruct and reconstruct social situations, since such situations are created by people. Critical theoretic researchers view that taken for granted situations need to be seen in terms of what has brought them into existence, especially in term of relationship and power. They believe that research is never neutral; it is used for a specific purpose, which is often linked with the desire to predict and control.

Action research is one sample derives from this critic-theoretical approach. Action researchers view that it is not enough just understanding social situations without generating some actions to change it.

4. Theoretical, methodological and empirical research
In relation to previous classification, other way of categorizing research is proposed by Silverman (2000). According to him, there are three types of research or dissertation in relation to what methodology it uses: (1) theoretical, (2) methodological, and (3) empirical. Theoretical type of research is to develop theoretical insight by means of critical review of a body of literature. Methodological research is mainly concerned to develop a method, for examples: focus group or textual analysis, or to compare and contrast the use of several different methods. The last type: empirical, is the most common form of research and dissertation, which based on analyzing some body of data. The researcher is expected to demonstrate the understanding the strengths and weaknesses of his research strategy, design, and method (p.233).

5. External and internal approach
Finally, we can categorize researches from their epistemological view. Epistemology in this context refers to the way the researchers locate themselves to the field or object being researched (see figure 1). It is about the relationship between the knower and what is known. This categorization is based on Juha Varto’s discussion on intuitions in relation to their significance influences to the way people are
representing the world and constructing knowledge. Varto (2009) has classified human intuition into three categories: aspective, perspective, and inspective.

First, aspective intuition, is often characterized by two-dimension presentation. A person with aspective intuition draws things not in the way he sees it, but he draws in the way he knows it. As appeared in many drawings of ancient Egypt, the picture in aspective intuition is usually a map-like two-dimensional, where things and parts can be placed freely to provide best information. In this way, any hidden parts can be presented in order to be seen clearly as a whole, which is not the case, for example, in perspective drawing.

Second is perspective intuition. The nature of all perspective drawings assumes a viewer in a certain distance away from the drawing. This attitude of ‘keeping a distance’ with the observed object seems to be the most spirit of perspective
intuition. In general, the majority of scientific researches operate in the view of perspective intuition. To be objective and having adequate validity, the researcher has to keep distance with the object/field being researched.

Third is inspective intuition. Inspective intuition places the researcher in the middle of objects being researched. On the contrary to perspective intuition that maintains distance, inspective intuition requires engagement, involvement, or participation with observed objects. The researcher of inspective intuition operates like, in Varto's words, “watching the stake burn while being burned”. This approach of knowing, where the knower is not external of the known, has been applied into various works of art, and recently into researches as well.

Derives from this Varto's conception, all researches may be divided into two main groups: (1) research that is based on perspective intuition, and (2) research that is based on inspective intuition. They might be called as external approach (for perspective intuition) and internal approach (for inspective intuition). Aspective intuition is not included, because it brings no longer great influences to the contemporary thinking. On the contrary, both perspective and inspective intuition seem to be very much dominant reflected in research philosophies today.

**External**
External approach refers to a kind of research approach where the researcher, the knower, keeps a distance or being external of the things being researched, the known. In other words, what is known is assumed to be separate from a knower. According to this conception, it seems that technical rational research, scientific method, and positivist view share some common grounds with this external approach. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers may operate under this external approach. As long as the researchers maintain a distance with the research for objectivity, their work belongs to external approach.

**Internal**
Contrary to external approach, internal approach places the researchers in the center of things being researched: the knower is in the middle, so is not external of the known. People who do research, usually practitioners, see themselves as both practitioners and researchers. The research aims to increase understanding of one’s own work through self-experience, which is often unique in each moment. The theory resulted from internal research can be called as a ‘living’ theory. As McNiff and Whitehead (2006) explain, living theory is based on the ontological ‘I’ of the researcher, and uses a living logic, which means: researcher organizes their thinking in terms of what they are experiencing at the moment. In this approach, things are seen as in relation with one another. Varto (2009) argues that humans cannot freely place themselves external to anything, because they are anyhow immersed in everything. This is happens to researcher as well:
“(T)he researcher is in relation with everything else in the research field, and influences, and influenced by others. The research field cannot be studied in a value-free way, because the researchers bring their own value with them”.  
(McNiff and Whitehead, 2006: 23-26)

**Summary**

As suggested in many textbooks, these samples of research paradigms should not be seen as rigid or fixed forms. Some overlapping might appear in different levels and categories. Some approach and method may be categorized in different way, depending on the view of the conception. Each approach often still has various branches to indicate specific type of method. For example, Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) have further classified quantitative or qualitative researches into such branches. First, studies primarily quantitative in nature; consists of six types: (1) experimental research, (2) quasi-experimental research, (3) casual-comparative research, (4) correlation research, (5) descriptive research and (6) evaluation research. Second, studies primarily qualitative in nature, consists of three types: (1) case study research, (2) ethnographic research, and (3) action research.

Based on Glatthorn’s and Joyner’s classification, action research-for instance, is ‘qualitative’ in nature. On the other hand, if using McNiff and Whitehead classification, action research is a part of ‘critical theory’ approach, because it is developed out of this approach. Thus, action research is also internal type of research, if seen from epistemological paradigm.

**II. Where is the place of artistic research?**

**Artistic research**

By definition, an artistic research means that “the artist produces an art work and researches the creative process, thus adding to the accumulation of knowledge” (Hannula, Suoranta, and Vaden 2005). Considering that research publications about art have been mostly written by historians, philosophers, educators, or art theories, researches in artistic domain used to appear in typical traditional approaches. For example, researchers in art history maintained rigid historical research methods, which were embodied in the scientific method. Similarly, researchers in art philosophy applied methods and approaches of the field.

Generally speaking, compare to other disciplines such as natural sciences and social sciences, artistic research generated in art and design universities is quite a new thing. No research methodology textbooks written by those outside art and design discipline specifically include artistic research in their discussion on research
paradigms. Various art and design universities around the world have just started opening doctoral research program for several decades (see: Mottram, 2009). Many of them still try to find the ideal form for the research in their field. And many art universities simply adopt some research approaches from other disciplines; that means, they require researchers -mostly practitioners with educational background in art and design fields- doing their research the same way as historical science, anthropology, or social science researchers do. The question is, what is then the different between art (related) researches generated in art universities with those in other schools (i.e. anthropology), if the methods and approaches used are exactly the same?

Considering that each discipline has its own nature in investigating and representing knowledge contributed to the field, researches generated in art universities should have their own specific approach, which can extensively facilitate many potentialities of the field. This issue is not new. Various texts have been published proposing ideas and concepts about artistic research. Many have proposed that the most nature of artistic research is a research which involves ‘practice’ into and as part of research (see: Sullivan 2005, Hannula, Suoranta and Vaden 2005, Mäkelä and Routarinne 2006, Frayling 2008, Varto 2009, and Elkins 2009).

Wilson (2005) suggests that enquiry through practical actions in making artworks, events, or systems followed by the production of theoretical manuscripts is the factor which differentiates research in art and design from that in the humanities. (Wilson, 2005 cited in Nimkulrat 2009). Emerged during 1970s and 1980s, as Mottram (2009) notes, research through practice, with various names such as ‘practice based research’, ‘practice led research’ or ‘artistic research’, has recently become an approach that applying researcher’s professional expertise to academic world.

Today, there has been increasing number of researchers who are also practitioners that make research publications. These research publications spread in various fields such as education, health care, business enterprises, or social work institutions. In art and design fields, most of publications consist of exploration and contextualization of the practitioner’s own art and design practices (Nimkulrat, 2009: 32).

Mapping artistic research
So, where is then artistic research located in the map of research-world? First of all, it is almost sure that the nature of artistic research is qualitative. Thus, artistic research is not a kind that applies positivist view. In practice, it might use traditional methods such as case study, ethnography, phenomenology, or adopt action research.

However, what makes artistic research most distinctive with others is best shown through epistemological paradigm. Only by seeing the relationship between the
knower and what is known, the most characteristic of the field can be well distinguished with the rest of other researches. Figure 2 shows a mapping of artistic research in relation with other research approaches. In this diagram, the research world is divided into two main groups: external and internal research. There is a horizontal axel that indicates the degree of objectivity or subjectivity of research. The more left research is positioned, the more it sounds objective. Similarly, the more right-going, the more subjective it is.

This diagram shows that all quantitative approaches belong to external research, but qualitative approaches spread in external research - overlapping with quantitative approaches- to the area of internal research. The diagram confirms that artistic research is qualitative, which belongs to internal research. It also shows that artistic research approaches are different with many of those in social sciences and humanities, even though they all use qualitative approach.

Perhaps, the only approach that stands most close to artistic research is action research. In some extent they share some common characteristics. First, epistemologically, both approaches are internal oriented research, which are generated by practitioners. In searching knowledge, the researchers place themselves in the centre of object being observed. The focus of study is ‘you’: you study yourself, your own work, your practices, not other people. The researchers are questioning such “what am I doing, how do I improve it?”, not such “what are they doing, how do they improve it?” Accordingly, Nimkulrat illustrates how she as a textile artist and researcher is positioning herself:
“I do not distance myself from my textile art practice while carrying out this research, but rather involve myself in the practice and consider it fundamental to my study. While gradually creating my artworks, I simultaneously interpret and reflect on the artworks and their productions. By researching through my own practice, I become a ‘reflective practitioner’ who writes about her own specific art production and art works created as part of the study”.
(Nimkulrat, 2009: 27)

Both artistic and action research believe that knowledge is an asset of individuals, so it might be subjective and biased. Individuals have to negotiate their meanings with other knowing individuals. Therefore, knowledge is constructed from the collective experiences and discourses as a “shared world” that known by many people. In this way, the researchers perceive themselves as in relation with one another in their social contexts.

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) argue that knowledge is uncertain. Knowledge is always in process, so it is impossible to create final answers. Since everything goes continuously in a dynamic way, there is no stability of thing - no single absolute truth; the truth is the change itself. Therefore, researchers do not seek a fixed result that can be applied everywhere. They rather produce their personal theories based on self experience. They share their personal theory with other people, to show what they are learning and to invite other to learn with them.

Second, in term of methodology, both artistic and action research adopt quite a similar view: the methodology is open-ended and developmental:

“Action research begins with the experience of a concern and follows through a developmental process which shows cycles of action and reflection. It aims to demonstrate relationships of influence”.
McNiff and Whitehead (2006: 32)

In artistic research, as Turpeinen (2006) explains, the research is a process, where the end result is not known before the process is followed through. For her, knowledge is not only embodied in the artifacts, but also achieved in the process of producing them and reflected upon in the verbal format. In addition, only through producing arts or objects, the researcher is able to analyze the research problems. During this process, research questions are modified from different perspectives repeatedly until they form a unity.

Besides having many similarities, however, there are some slight differences between artistic and action research. In artistic research, knowledge is often generated through producing things, such as art/design objects, systems, happenings or installations. Action research does not aim at producing objects or products, but it focuses on improving learning with social intent. While artistic
Researchers often aim just to search understandings and meanings, action researchers aim to investigate their practice with a view to improving it with involving other people. Thus, this improvement should be primary practiced by the researchers themselves, before proposed it to other people. This makes action researchers, as McNiff and Whitehead (2006) notes, often experience themselves as ‘living contradictions’; they hold a set of values, yet do not live according to them.

Finally, research questions in action research are always focused on the ‘I’, such as “How do I improve?” or “How do I influence?” Artistic research does not seem to oblige one single form of such questioning. It can rather adopt some methods of questioning from other traditions such as humanities or social sciences.

Summary
Artistic research is a qualitative research. It shares some common values with action research, as they both treat their practices as a research inquiry. They produce knowledge through investigating their own practice and sharing it with others. The fundamental different between them with other (traditional) researches is that, they are positioning themselves at the center of things being researched; of their own enquiries. Instead of wishing to control by imposing change from without, they aim to seek understanding and improving the environment and human practices by changing them from within.

In artistic and action research, when ideas are linked with a real action, practices become knowledge sources and in turn, they are things that are continuously improved. Ideas and conceptions resulted from this approach perform theories of real-world practice. As McNiff and Whitehead (2006) notes, they can be also called as ‘living’ theories, since they change and develop as people change and develop themselves.

Artistic research provides practitioners intellectual challenges and learning experiences. It generates understandings (knowledge) that contributes to the field, both as living theories and professional practices’ enrichment. Artistic research should keep developing and stands firmly between various research approaches. There is no single science, or single truth. The main role of artistic research is to provide an alternative vehicle to experiencing and understanding the world.
References


