A REVIEW OF GRAEME SULLIVAN’S ART PRACTICE AS A RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper reviews Art practice as a research an inquiry in the visual arts by Graeme Sullivan. It briefly discusses his positions regarding art practice as a research. The paper further discusses Graeme Sullivan’s suggestions on the options to use in conducting an art research one of which is qualitative research method. Art practice encourages qualitative research and discourages the use of scientific methods because it deals with probability and figures. Graeme Sullivan’s volume recognizes the old paradigm of conducting research, which gives the artist the opportunity to identify an issue which he imaginatively inquires into in order to create knowledge that is novel. The paper ends with a conclusion which explains that art practice as a research has opened new avenues for the artist to conduct research.

Keywords: Art, research, visual, imaginative, knowledge

Introduction

The role of visual arts in higher institutions and culture has continued to be an issue of debate and topic of discussion. In higher institutions visual arts has long history of curriculum activities and programme. It belongs to the Faculty of Arts, Creative Arts, Environmental Studies, Engineering or Environmental Design. Art history and art education have secured higher institutions curriculum placement.

In higher institutions Visual arts practice as research has a limited history. In spite of this it has generated many theories and concepts. The scope and debate on visual arts as a practice dates back to 1970 and 1980. The emergence of visual arts in the research community in some higher institutions in the UK and later in Australia raised the questions on the status of visual arts programmes. The debate was persistent because of global economic agenda which demands accountability of courses taught in higher institutions.

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Researchers in the other fields argue that what they do in their field of practice is research because reflexive and reflection approaches are used for critical inquiry to generate new insight. Lee (2005) explains that reflection on professional practice is advocated as a means of learning about practice, exploring practice through the application of structured or critical thinking to consider a particular professional event, or professional theme. She further says that reflexive is used in research to conceptualize, analyze, and make transparent to others the researcher’s relationship with the research. In contemporary times visual arts practice as a research encourages creative application of a different approach and methodology in order to solve problems.

According to Sullivan (2010), visual artists and researchers should have knowledge of the methodology used in science. The core principles of scientific methodology will enable one understand the divergence and convergence between inquiry in the arts and science.

Some art educators, art historians and artists argue that creative and imaginative inquiry must incorporate other forms of investigations in order to generate new knowledge and understanding. They answer some questions raised in higher institutions about the activities of the artist - whether what he is doing in the studio should be regarded as
research which generates new knowledge. Sullivan (2010) states that artists employ their imaginative intellect in creating, criticizing, and constructing new knowledge that transforms understanding of what is known.

What is Art Practice as a Research

Art practice as a research recognizes the independent intellectual and imaginative inquiry by visual artists. The studio serves as the site for critical inquiry. The images and how the artist goes about to make them are regarded as sources of critical inquiry which transform human understanding from simple to complex, known to unknown in order to make sense from the everyday world we know. Art practice as a research explains the significant role which the artist performs in research community where the wide use of visual images is helping to restructure methodological scope in art based educational research. Art practice generates new insight, knowledge and understanding that broaden the scope to see, reason, and appreciate things in a new meaningful perspective. Sullivan opens a new focus on how to perceive the artist, his visual image and how he goes about to achieve it. Scots (2012) posits that Graeme Sullivan shows us a first rate mind at work. Sullivan (2010) explains that with user pay policies well in place, the allocation of funding is increasingly linked to productivity demands.

The what and how of the artists engagement was fully expatiated by Sullivan’s volume. Thompson (2006) on Sullivan’s book says “he envisions the studio experience, in particular, as both a theoretical and practical source, and sees the theorizing that occurs within this process—the constant questioning and experimentation—as basic to the project of understanding as it is to the practice of understanding of visual arts.”

Art practice research and methodology

Art practice as a research does not encourage the use of systematic objective analysis and recording of controlled observation that may lead to development and generalization principles or theories resulting in production and ultimate control of specific groups which may create causes and effect of specific action but a critical inquiry which integrates the objective and subjective intuitions. Sullivan (2010) is of the view that a particular source of methodology is inadequate to be used in creative and critical inquiry. It is because of this that artists are advised to adapt to combination of mixed methods which allow imagination and intellect to play key roles in creating new knowledge. Sullivan did not provide a blue print on visual arts methodology that visual artist can use to carry out creative and critical inquiry. He argues that qualitative research methodology and other suitable systematic methods which allow the intellect and imagination of the visual artist to inquire should be integrated into visual arts critical inquiry and that legitimate research goals can be achieved by choosing different methods than those offered by social sciences (Sage, 2005). The making of visual arts image transits from concept, process, progress, and exploration of the media and it involves accidental and intentional representation of the concept to vividly communicate the generated new knowledge. Thompson (2006) states that Sullivan carefully distinguishes his own proposals from approaches to art-based research originating in the social sciences.

Qualitative research method may have been recommended by Sullivan because unlike scientific research which emphasizes neutrality and objectivity in order to reduce bias and intervening extraneous variables, qualitative research confronts directly the issue of the researcher’s relationship to the research subjects and issue of voice and presentation of the new idea that is generated. Qualitative research is concerned with the plausible irregularities and differences of issues and probable actions which form the research theory. According to Sullivan (2010) “in qualitative inquiry, the criteria for assessing outcomes rely on plausibility, not their probability. It is not difference in degree that interests qualitative researchers but differences in kind”. Qualitative research searches for probable outcomes, and it generalizes by “retrospective” which applies specific to specific. It repositions the idea from known experience to new knowledge.
and understanding in order to understand better what is known.

**The structure of art practice as a research**

Sullivan`s art practice as a research is covered in three parts; contexts for art practice; theorizing art practice as a research; and visual art research practices.

Contexts for art practice as a research discuss the historical account of the emergence and development of artistic inquiry. According to Sullivan (2010) “the status of the artist as a cultural lamplighter, human visionary, and educator is mapped along with approach to professional development of the artist and challenges faced today in a world of cultural, institutional, digital divide”. Sullivan in this context argues that art practice as a research should be grounded in qualitative method and has to be subjected to scrutiny of the outside world and that of the academia. Thompson (2006, quoting Sullivan, 2005) states that the unique ability of the artist to move among roles and yet manages to operate within a realm of cultural discourse as creator, critic, theorist teacher, activist and archivist is to be appreciated.

Theorizing art practice as a research discuses how art practice as a research developed due to the institutionalization of knowledge in the 19th and 20th century. Scientific theory was seen within this period as the new way knowledge could be conceived, conducted, and generalized by degree and quantitative analysis using representative sampling. The theory was critiqued by post modernism critical theory, which opts for alternative methods of conducting research. Sullivan (2010) explains that to continue to borrow of methods research from other fields denies the intellectual maturity of art practice as a plausible basis for raising significant life questions and as a viable site for exploring important cultural and educational ideas.

Transcognition which is the movement and purposeful searching of the artistic mind describes the creative and critical inquiry that involves the cognitive and studio. Sullivan encourages creative and critical theorizing of the artist activities which are represented in several media such as texts, languages, and contexts. Sullivan ends the part by explaining visual art practice, the role of exhibition in art practice as a research by citing some artists’ works in order to clarify and intensify ideas. He states that the capacity to analyze and synthesize requires the ability to think in new ways.

Sullivan in all his chapters speaks of the cognitive capacity of the artist. He stresses that the artist is always involved in a research by the creative and critical inquiries which he carries out at his studio and that the visual image which he creates add to our understanding of what is known.

**Conclusion**

Research is one of the human endeavours which develops the economy, education, politics, science and technology. It is carried out in every field of leaning. In the research community art history and art education are the two courses in visual art which were recognized as carrying out research that can be subjected to scrutiny. This is because they use scientific methods of research to generalize specific variables.

Sullivan in his book tries to reposition visual art research from using the scientific method of inquiry. He places the artist, his studio and visual image as focus for a critical inquiry that gives new insight. He stresses that the artist is involved in imaginative creative and critical inquiry at the studio and that he theorizes what is known into a complex perspective which can be decoded.

**References**


