

“What is the Meaning of Research in Fine Arts? The Making of Art by the Scholarly Researcher”

The “Fine Arts” include, but are not limited to, painting, drawing, filmmaking, musicology and musicianship, photography, theater, sculpture, architecture, digital media, printmaking, creative writing in many forms, and many other areas of creative practice. The Fine Arts are most commonly concerned with creative and innovative expression of ideas, emotions and intentions that cannot be conveyed through conventional language.

The Fine Arts and its varied practitioners have been conspicuously under-represented and nearly-absent from meaningful discourse about the question, “what is research?”, at many institutions of higher learning. Some conventional researchers narrowly assume that a dichotomy exists between the “Sciences” and the Fine Arts, particularly in the context of research, and that “scientism”, is the best, perhaps only, tool for understanding the human condition. The truth is that all civilized societies have demonstrated the need for scientific AND aesthetic knowledge in “fine arts”, and the two have complemented one another throughout human history, as companions in the exploration of the unknown.

The word “research” means to study thoroughly. To “re-search” is to “search again”, through a process of disciplined inquiry. The conventional method of research requires serious epistemological discussion that intends to generate theory for explanatory purposes, or sometimes, to a theory leading to some form of action. There are many categories of conventional research, such as empirical inquiry that is qualitative or quantitative, or some hybridized combination of the two; heuristic inquiry; narrative case study with or about individuals or groups; grounded, phenomenological, hermeneutic, and many specific forms of action research, amongst others. However, research in Fine Arts is similar, yet different. Research in Fine Arts can be described as a unique form of “praxis”, namely, a process of learning action that creatively merges practice and theory. Art-based research is a process that involves the making and use of fine art objects (visual, aural, textual works; performances; the design of buildings and interior spaces; others), as a form and basis of inquiry, as a mode of investigation.

At the College of Fine Arts and Design we teach and believe that a new paradigm, one that is more inclusive of Fine Arts and its practitioners, and more broadly understanding of “what is research”, is overdue. A new paradigm at the University of Sharjah for the concept of “research” will revitalize, inform, and contribute to greater knowledge and understanding in all fields of study. If a diverse research environment and holistic paradigm were to be encouraged throughout institutions of higher learning, such as our University, then conventionally-oriented researchers could be inspired, informed and empowered to work more creatively, and if individual researchers are encouraged to examine creatively, then innovative research could possibly rebound and resonate meaningfully and uniquely as works of artistic expression. Our primary goal at the College of Fine Arts and Design is to establish a confident, respected place for art-based “knowing and doing”, within the total context of research, including the making of art by the researcher.

Written in 2009, By Dr. E. Anthony Collins, (anthonycollinsfilm@yahoo.com).