

Facing the City: Towards Artistic Research in High School Art Education

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1. Introduction

End of June, somewhere in a museum in Vienna: countless students push and shove their way through an art exhibition. Teachers in between, with a wandering controlling gaze trying not to let their students out of sight. Employees of the museum dressed in special t-shirts, guiding groups of students through the museums' space, leading from one artwork to the next, lingering briefly, explaining, asking questions, explaining further while moving slowly on to the next densely filled room—stale air. In this final week of school, museums, and their educational programmes, such as guided tours and workshops, are traditionally fully booked, often for months ahead. It is the time of the year when students and teachers go on field trips and leave the physical boundaries of their school building behind, at least for a few days. It is the time of the year when going for a school field trip becomes the phenomenon of a collective act: students and teachers explore the city to learn and teach outside the classroom. Because a school year is planned rigidly and learning outside the classroom demands additional organisation and effort, the last week of school is often the only time they are doing so.

The following essay addresses the need for teachers to leave art classrooms behind in order to meet the versatile current challenges and demands in art education, such as digitisation or the rise of an anti-scientific world view. It addresses possible outlines of artistic research to help to achieve a more versatile methodological teaching

approach towards critical art education. This essay also attempts to highlight the potential of artistic research and its establishment in art education and art didactics as a possible way of reframing today's art education. It focuses on the city and its urban areas as an environment with high teaching and learning potential and it suggests exploring the urban as a space for process-oriented and empirical learning.

2. Notes on Today's Art Classes

First and foremost: In the midst of current geopolitical conditions and difficult structural circumstances¹ as well as under the influence of digital transformation, rapidly impacting schools and teaching practices, art educators are challenged more than ever. Exploring the spaces outside of schools, more specifically the city with its historically important sites, public squares, and architectural structures, is an indispensable part of holistic art education and is also anchored in Austria's curriculum of high school art education (RIS, 2023). Going out and leaving the school building behind, and thus also its set of rules, is essential for teaching and learning, closely connected to everyday life. But escaping school buildings not only implies a physical opening of boundaries, it is also a metaphorical one: the *outside* world is an essential and determining parameter of the *inside* of the school and schools are certainly not to be understood as closed bodies within society (even though they might seem like it sometimes). However, following Foucault's (2013) concept of the heterotopia², the school

1 - Currently, in 2023, Austria faces a great shortage of trained art educators. Furthermore, art classes suffer from financial cuts, resulting in badly equipped facilities and a loss of adequate technical equipment.

2 - Michel Foucault defines the heterotopia as an institution within society, which appears as a unity with a specific set of rules that all *participants* are asked to follow. Hence, examples for heterotopias are schools, retirement homes, hospitals, vacation villages, cinemas, and others.

building operates as a self-contained site within the society, where all acting parties are not only intertwined but also continuously affect each other. The heterotopia is defined by its distinct politics and it exists along an established set of rules. Consequently, schools are sites of power as well as of hierarchy (Brümmer and Weltzien, 2020, p. 108 - 109).

Visiting places in the city involves additional organisation: it is, in short, a time-consuming endeavour within an often rigid and inflexible school system. Nevertheless, approaching sites in the city, such as historically important buildings and venues, architectural monuments, memorials, excavations, etc., contributes significantly to reach teaching and learning goals. Field trips not only deepen knowledge of culture but are essential to connect knowledge of art with real-life examples. They help to illustrate art theory in a more tangible way and to foster discussions and dialogue regarding art and its role within society. Considering the 21st Century Skills (Centre for Curriculum Redesign, 2015), it even seems to be indispensable to teach and learn outside the school building in order to build and strengthen needed skills, meeting the challenges of our century. *Critical Thinking*, one of the stated skills, is crucial for questioning and analysing existing social, economic, and political norms. This can only be encouraged by connecting school knowledge to the lived realities of students. In Margret Rasfeld and Stephan Breidenbach's (2022, p. 42) book *Schulen im Aufbruch* (schools on the move), learning without reference to life is described as "as-if learning". The authors distinguish *first-hand learning experiences* that are marked by experience and awareness of self-efficacy. Furthermore, according to the authors, the school of the future must be a place of learning through experience that is based upon awareness of the impact of one's own actions (ibid.).

Experience-oriented learning is already inherent to art didactics, as processes of artistic practice are part of art

education and are historically evident in art history and its epochs³. There are several examples in art history in which visualisation, especially of cities and urban life, appears as a dominant feature in art and artistic practice. Claude Monet's light studies of the Cathedral of Rouen or his series of the train station Saint-Lazare e. g. exemplify former research approaches on cities through an artistic process – in Monet's case mainly through painting. Artistic research and its appreciation in art education in high schools is a comparatively recent tendency, even though it appears as the perfect fit for art education contexts. Using artistic research in the classroom implies (re-)considering the classroom primarily as a research space. Artistic research⁴ furthermore implies that *Research is Art* or, vice versa, *Art is Research* (Haas, 2018, p. 77). Artistic research understands both concepts—art and research—as equal parts in a mutually dependent interrelation. According to this concept, art is seen as an equally valid knowledge practice compared to research and processes of research, which thus can no longer be attributed exclusively to science. In turn, art can no longer be exclusively assigned to the art system (ibid.). The transfer of artistic research into the context of art education therefore holds immense potential for approaching learning scenarios in novel ways that is closely connected to life. The city as a site of experience that can be researched from a perspective of art offers boundless possibilities for addressing historical, social, economic, or cultural research questions in and through art.

3. Artistic Research: Dissolving Boundaries, Collaboration, and Methods

Applying artistic research in a school environment means letting go of conventional teaching and learning settings. To a certain degree, the teaching of art must repeatedly be questioned to take account of cultural changes and current developments. This implies that traditional ways of conceptualising art and its history, for instance a solely

3 - Examples are, the Impressionists leaving their studios for working outside in the city or in rural areas in the 19th century or the 1960s urban and environmental art movement in the US.

4 - Florian Dumboi's different ways of combining the terms *Art* and *Research* and *Research into/ through/ for Art* (Frayling, 1993, p. 5) present various weightings and interpretations of the connection between art and research. It is evident that art and research are not always clearly graspable in their dichotomy. The interpretation of artistic research also depends on the way in which research is viewed, whether it is exclusively assigned to science or also to other fields. Likewise—of course—the term art opens a wide scope of possible interpretations that impact our understanding of research (Haas, 2018, p. 74).

Eurocentric way of reading art and cultural history, must be largely rejected. Teachers and students recognise and see themselves as researchers and act as such, carrying out research and collecting information (and data), while contributing to solving current issues and problems. A transition in art education towards teachers and students in the role of researchers marks a paradigmatic shift. As a result, an artistic research approach in art class is primarily not about meeting specific teaching and learning goals or making them measurable in clear scales or grades. Rather, artistic research emphasizes discussing and documenting gained knowledge in a long-term, open-ended learning process.

There has long been an increasing tendency towards creating art in a group taking hold in the art sector. A good example is the curatorial concept “*lumbung*” (Indonesian word for ‘collectively used rice barn’) of Documenta Fifteen (2022), which emphasizes the strengthening of the idea of *the collective* in art. Within artistic research, this tendency implies that collaborations can be addressed more strongly, and the collaborator is given a more significant role. In other words, teachers and students are encouraged to collaborate, to work in teams or groups as well as with external collaborators. Teachers and students take the role of active agents to co-design and shape educational processes. Urban spaces as a communal place of encounter are especially characterised by collaborations. They open endless possibilities for participation⁵ in collective endeavours. Community-based learning and interdisciplinary collaborations, which have a great potential of providing connections with experts from other scientific fields or areas—for example collaborations with architects, spatial planners, sociologists, social workers, politicians, etc.—can foster participation and dialogue on an interdisciplinary level, creating a profound teaching and learning experience. Democracy-building through art, public performance, and activism in art as well as the role of art as

a form of resistance, to only name a few aspects, especially benefit widely from artistic research approaches that directly face the city.

As artistic research offers a multi-method approach, it is particularly suitable for educational contexts, e.g., when working practically within the city or reflecting on the work processes of a communal art project during or after field trips, for example, in the form of a group discussion moderated by students. Possible research questions can include: What do we know about a specific building or about a specific area in our neighbourhood? What do we know about the history of our neighbourhood / district? What political or cultural events are tied to it? Who are the people living there?

By interviewing experts, students can furthermore learn about urban planning concepts of newly built areas when speaking to city planners, local politicians, and authorities. Later, knowledge gained from the interviews can be used as an inspiration for drawing or visualising alternative ways of mapping the neighbourhood. The information gained can serve as a starting point for creating artworks in class.

Other examples could include teachers and students working together in the city by creating short videos or collective performances to explore certain streets or to map out a specific place with artistic means. Furthermore, students can work individually, for example by writing a work diary accompanying and reflecting on communal work processes. All the collected experiences and information of all involved participants represent valuable data that can help us to understand cities and societies better, while contributing to a specific educational cause. Of course, different social forms of working together can be adapted to the method—group or team, whole class, or individuals –and can be changed at any time. Methods thus remain adjustable within artistic research projects, providing necessary room for change.

5 - The German language uses two terms for participation: *Teilhabe* (to “have” participation) and *Teilnahme* (to “take” participation in something). Participation, however, examined in the original Latin wording, consists of the words *pars* = part and *capere* = to appropriate or *to take* in that sense. It implies that participation requires conscious actions and consequently a consciously acting person. This contrasts the idea of participation as a passive act of merely being part of something (Rossmeißl 2021, p. 136).

Incorporating artistic research within the art classroom to explore the city holds great potential for art education. Urban spaces offer vast possibilities for experience-based learning outside the classroom. They foster immediate and direct learning from, through, and with living environments and their stakeholders. A field trip to the museum at the end of the school year is by no means unnecessary, but it cannot remain the only attempt to learn outside the art classroom. Particularly in art education in high schools, artistic research can help to rethink the needs of contemporary art education. A dissolution of boundaries, the detachment of the terms of *art* and *research* from fixed interpretations, collaboration and participation, and a wide diversity of methods—just to name a few parameters—should provide orientation and highlight the potential of artistic research in high school art education. Artistic research approaches provide freedom to conceive new forms of art education. They may offer new opportunities in the light of today’s challenges in schools and beyond.

Conflict of Interests and Ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Short Bio

Sen.Lect. Mag.art. Eva Greisberger studied Art and Communication at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and at the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. A Fulbright grant allowed her to work and research in the US on the interface of language acquisition through art education. She worked with several Vienna-based galleries as a writer, developing and embedding interdisciplinary educational projects. She furthermore is a member of the team of the Center for Didactics of Art and Interdisciplinary Education at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. She teaches art and design at the Lauder Chabad Campus High School in Vienna