

# PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH AS AN APPROACH IN BRIDGING THE VISUAL ARTS AND ETHNOGRAPHY IN SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDY

Y.M.Rafee<sup>1</sup>, A.H.Awang Arshad<sup>2</sup>, H.Siri<sup>3</sup> and A.T.Javeril<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>*Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia*

---

## Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the theoretical aspect on how Visual Arts can be applied in the Ethnographical study by using practice-based research. The introduction provides some definitions and methods used in ethnography, visual arts, and practice-based research. Based on the comparative study made between visual arts and ethnography approaches, common characteristic between these two disciplines has been identified. The discussion argued that the application of visual art approach in ethnographical research can be made more effective through the combination of practice-based and visual ethnography method. Thus, it is suggested that Visual Arts Practice can be explored and become one of the alternative approaches in visual ethnography method by employing practice-based research. It is hoped that this approach opens up interdisciplinary studies by bridging the potential association between Social Science and Visual Art discipline in higher education system research.

**Keywords:** Practice-based Research, Ethnography, Visual Ethnography, Visual Arts

---

## INTRODUCTION

For many artist and designer, research indicates practice. The concept of practice-based research will lead to understanding the nature and forms of research in art and design and is important introduction discussion for a future researcher in the field to be familiar with. The research is then communicated through work exhibited, and through objects, system performances, and even facilitated or created. Arising from particular needs and purposes, knowledge is gained and externalized through a continuous process of finding out, trying out and making out, within a framework of critical reflection and contextualization (Danvers, 2003). Practices will increase the knowledge that is gain throughout the process of doing a research. Bresler and Sullivan (2005) adding that an understanding practice describes the way visual arts knowledge is framed, encountered critique, and created during the research process as insight is achieved and communicated. The researcher is not only doing a research, but at the

same time also gaining knowledge about the practices that he or she been doing, as for example, if the researcher is applying visual arts practices into his research, indirectly he will gain knowledge about the process and knowledge throughout the process of doing the research.

From the early previous research, there is less emphasis on applying visual arts practice in doing ethnography research, especially involving visual data collection. When it comes to visual arts, the visual is to be a concern the most important. Visual is a medium of the message, as in visual ethnography the visual data is being emphasized rather than the other type of data collected. In visual arts, there is mentioned about art practice as research. Gere and Gardiner (2010) stating that the production of knowledge, i.e., research, is seen as a way of dealing with these internal needs, and hence, whilst art production is seen as central to practice based

research, art production itself is not generally seen as yielding knowledge.

In the past, research, particularly in visual arts disciplines, was problematic and its progress was hindered by the lack of suitable methodologies. Qualitative methodologies (including phenomenological, hermeneutic, axiological, ethnographic, holistic, naturalistic, descriptive, experiential, dialectical strategies, etc.) promoted the value of subjectivity, individuality, complex interaction, involvement, etc., and are now considered legitimate procedures. They offer researchers in Visual Arts guidance towards more appropriate procedures for research methodology (Gray and Malins, 1993). Due to this problem, this paper attempts to unravel the possibility to see the practice-based research in the visual arts to be developed into a discipline of social science research, especially from the point of culture and ethnography. The discussion below will explain basically about ethnography and visual ethnography methods that commonly used in social science research.

### Ethnography

Culture which includes knowledge, belief, arts, law, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Biber and Leavy (2006) clarify that ethnography research is aim to get an in-depth understanding of how individuals in different cultures and subcultures make sense of their lived reality. From this statement, can clarify that ethnography is a study about culture. In other words, ethnography is all about “writing a culture”. The ethnographers will go inside the social worlds of their research setting. In their research setting, the ethnographers will provide a detailed account of everyday practices and customs of one’s culture, subculture or a group. When conducting the research, the research setting is needed to be at the “natural” state, and not to be “set up” by the researcher at a specific site.

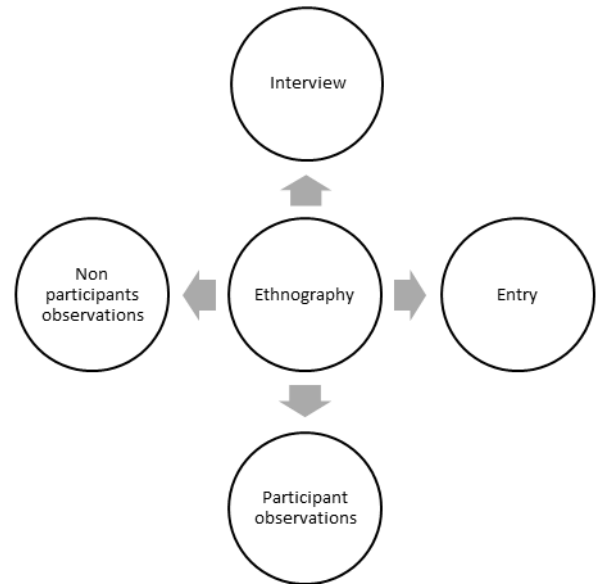


Figure 1: Method used in conducting Ethnography

As seen in figure 1, participant observation is claiming to be the primary research tool of ethnography and its practice. It requires the researcher to live or make extensive visits to the setting they are studying, observing as well as participating in the activities of those they are researching (Biber and Leavy, 2006). The participant’s observations said to be the primary research tool as to get an understanding through direct observations of behaviors and interactions with others in one’s research setting. Gobo (2008) also mentioned in his writing claiming that ethnography gives priority to observation as its primary source of information. Gobo assumes that ethnographic methodology comprises two research strategies: nonparticipant observation and participant observation. This ethnographic methodology as stated by Gobo gives priority to observation as its primary source of information. This is supported by Gobo’s statement as he said that: The researcher establishes a direct relationship with the social actors, Staying in their natural environment; With the purpose of observing and describing behaviour; by interacting with them and participating in their everyday ceremonials and rituals, and learning their code (or at least parts of it) in order to understand the meanings of their actions.

The entry also plays an important role in ethnography research. Gaining access is a major concern in

qualitative research. There has been a great deal of attention paid to the challenges of what is understood as an entry (Madison, 2012). Madison stated that as an ethnographer, he or she must consider how to enter the terrain of his or her subjects in ways that are appropriate, ethical and effective.

There is another term used in ethnography that is focused ethnography. The expression 'focused ethnography' was coined by Knoblauch (2005) to denote a specific type of sociological ethnography adopted in applied research. In Gobo's writings, he said that focused ethnography involved relatively short-term fields visit and their short visit duration being offset by the intensive use of audio-visual technologies for data collection and analysis.

To argue about the common sense of ethnography, there are many who argue that ethnography is a highly subjective method, in the sense that it is very sensitive to the researcher's attitude and perceptions (Gobo, 2008). This is can tell that if different researcher visits the same setting, they will see different things, and as a result, their audiovisual data, for example, will record different aspect. The result of ethnography can be generalized. For example, if the researcher is focusing on behavior, then the result will be generalized to behavior. This is depending on the researcher plans on what to study about the culture itself.

Overall, the idea and practice behind ethnography have been identified. From this, the theory and practice can be identified to gain the information needed in order to find the suitability that can be incorporated in the context of practice-based research.

### ***Visual Ethnography***

Visual Ethnography has long been used as one of the methods adopted in the study of anthropology and social science. According to Eddy (2013), visual anthropology (ethnography) is a subfield of social anthropology that is concerned, in part, with the study and production of ethnographic images, photography, film and also new media. More recently it has been used by historians of science and visual culture. According to Harper (1998), Gregory Bateson and

Margaret Mead largely reinvigorated the use of the visual methods in anthropology. Their book entitled 'Balinese Character' (Bateson and Mead, 1942) showed the potential of visual ethnography in the study of culture, but it did not inspire a revolution in visual ethnographic methods. However, Rafee et. al (2015) claimed that visual ethnographic methods can also be applied in the production of Visual Arts. They also stated that Visual Analysis gave a definite strategy for examining the implications built up by the synthetic relations between the peoples, places, and objects delineated in Visual Ethnography images. In other words, the features of Visual Analysis has an important role in Visual Ethnography method especially for analyzing the visual images. Collier (2001) also added that analysis of visual records of human experience is a search for pattern and meaning, complicated and enriched by our inescapable role as participants in that experience.

Visual ethnography, the 'field' of ethnography where the study and production of ethnographic visuals are being emphasized, such as the usage of photography and film as a mean to develop a research, or as an outcome of an ethnographic project. The turn of the twenty-first century was a key moment in the development of visual anthropology as the technology of visual data recording tools are developing.

There are two ways to consider the relationship of visual ethnography to academic disciplines and interdisciplinary fields (Pink, 2013):

1. One is to ask to which disciplines might visual ethnography practice be relevant, and from that perspective to consider how the theoretical tenets of those disciplines and fields might inform the way it is practiced.
2. Consider which disciplines have overlapping concerns in seeking to understand visual images, audio-visual media, mobile technologies and the internet

The result of treating the interdisciplinary of visual ethnography from these two perspectives is that it allows us to go beyond simply seeing visual ethnography as a practical device that can be used to produce knowledge, to understand it further as a

practice and way of knowing and learning in the world that might be equally analysed.

“To develop the understandings of visual ethnography practice I apply in my own work I draw, sometimes critically, on a range of disciplines and fields, including visual anthropology, media anthropology, visual sociology, media and internet studies, visual studies/visual culture studies and art history and geography”-

Pink (2013)

The idea of an interdisciplinary approach to visual ethnography is close to its roots in visual anthropology where disciplinary boundary crossing has brought together, for instance, the theories and practices of art and photography with anthropological theory and practice. Meanwhile in Schwartz (1989), she discusses the use of photography as a methodological tool as well as a means of presenting in doing social research. In her article, she quotes how Byers (1964) argues about the two-headed view of photography:

1. It is either an art- technology is used to “produce a creative photograph of which the photographer is the ‘source’.
2. Precise machine made a record of a subject - the main concern is accuracy and hence, “the subject is the ‘source’.

Byers’s second argument has underestimated the aesthetic value of ‘practical’ photographs and overlooked the possibility of doing ethnography as an art practice. The first statement from Byers argues that by using technology, it can produce a creative photograph of which photographer is the source. But to be considered, the photographer and subject are both important. Why not combining both of the two-headed of photography to makes visual recording more impact.

Broadly conceive ethnography is the study of culture. The ethnographic report is however usually presented in written mode (Michael and Gregory, 1992). In an ethnography research vision is often primary, as the frequently overlooked metaphoric used of the term observation attest. Photograph of people and things

stand as evidence in a way that narrative cannot. This explains why visuals play their role in doing an ethnography research as the observation needs visual to support the evidence or data to contribute to the research. The witnesses and observations are transformed into a written account or more likely to say experience is transformed to written account. The works of eyes are done by language.

The standard use of visual in an ethnography research as suggested by Michael and Gregory (1992) consist of; (1) as part of ethnographic reports and (2) as a resource for the examination of visual phenomena. The question is, is the practitioner of the field knows how to create visual data that will impact on the understanding of the visual itself? This relies on how the practices of practitioners itself whether he has the knowledge of how to create visual that has the impact on how the visual can communicate through the visual itself.

Ethnography is popular as one of the tools to study culture but, there are differences between visual ethnography and ethnography. In an ethnography research, the ethnography researcher only pins down the most important steps in gathering data in an ethnography research, which is either by interviewing or by participant’s observations. It only depends on which one comes first. Ethnographer only prioritizes about the data collecting that is gain through interviewing and based on observations only. Visual data are not to be prioritizing important as the data by observation and verbal takes converted into dried text. The role of visual in doing an ethnography research is for evidence only.

The acceptance of ethnography or can call the representation of culture thus takes place in through the medium of language, are neglecting the visual modes of representation. Images are translated into words, the visual is mediated verbally. As in visual arts, the practitioners of this field knows how to create better visual, but they do not know the ideology of ethnography and vice versa.

### **Visual Arts**

Since visual ethnography methods used in the study of ethnography, it is seen associated with the visual

arts. According to Oxford Dictionary (2010), the visual is described as of or connected with seeing or sight. Visual describe as a picture, map, a film, etc., used to make an article or a talk easier to understand or more interesting. Whereas art is described as the use of imagination to express ideas or feelings, particularly in painting, drawing or sculpture. Visual arts are art forms that create work that is primarily visual in nature.

The example of visual arts is such as painting, sculpture, printmaking, design, craft, photography, drawing, ceramics, video, architecture and filmmaking. The outcome of visual arts can be in 3-dimensional or in 2-dimensional.

The meaning of visual is, it is something that we see. We as human use our eyes senses to see something. Every artwork involving visual arts requires the combination of art elements and principle design. The elements of arts are a line, color, appearance, textures, shapes, and space. The elements of design are harmony, contra, balance, diversity, rhythm, movement, and unity.

As stated by Gray and Malins (2004) there is as yet no universal accepted approach to research within art and design. By this statement, the traditions within other disciplines should not be neglected, new procedures must be based on cultural, contextual and specific response to the felt and need and the nature of practice. Allison (1991) has suggested seven principles of research procedures which have been applied to Art's research programs as shown below (figure 2).

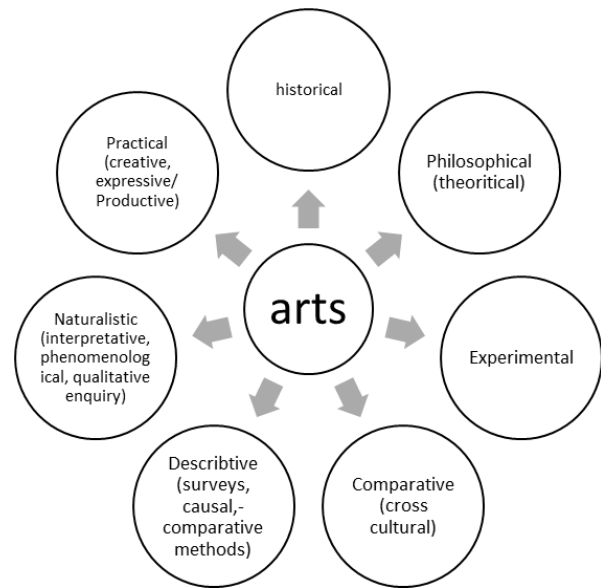


Figure 2: Principle research procedures of Art

The term “visual” also can be linked with communication. As mentioned by Sless (1981), visual communication is communications through visual aid and is described as a conveyance of ideas and information in forms that can be read or looked upon. Visual communication in part or whole relies on vision. Primarily, it is presented or expressed with two-dimensional images.

Visual communications contain image aspects. The interpretation of images is subjective and to understand the meaning communicated in an image requires analysis. Paul (2006) states that images can be analyzed in six perspectives; personal perspective, historical perspective, technical perspectives, ethical perspectives, cultural perspective, and finally critical perspective.

The study of ethnography can be said the study of culture. So in this situation, the best perspective to prioritize is the cultural perspective. As stated by Lester (2013) in cultural perspectives, symbolization is an important definition. Cultural perspectives involve identity of symbols. The used of words that are related to the image, the use of subject matters of the image are the symbolization of the image. By means, the subject matters captured or recorded is symbolized something to the society. But in visual communications, there is no further discussion on how the image was made. In the case of image

making, it is reliable on the knowledge and practice of practitioners of the image making itself.

### **Practice-based research**

Before we see how practice-based research can connect the visual arts and ethnography, we need to understand what is meant by practice-based research first. According to Candy (2006). Practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken to gain new knowledge partly means of practice and the outcomes of the practice. Claims of originality and contributions to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes which may include artifacts such as music, designs, models, digital media, performances, exhibitions, and images. However, in this research, images are being the emphasis.

To further elaborate on practice-based research, Furlong and Oancea (2005) argue that practice-based research is an applied research that is undertaken either to determine possible uses for the findings of basic research or to determine new methods or ways to achieving a specific and predetermined objectives.

The term practice based research and practice-led research is often being linked to each other, but there are differences in the concept of this methodology. According to Dallow (2002), he define the grammar of “practice” as a research by creative practitioners through their own arts practice, then is where the process of making, producing or creating cultural presentations, and the explorations and transformation which occur in the process, is taken as an act of the research itself. He added, investing art practice requires charting something of the “doing” involves in the return of movement from the unknown of imagination to the relative known of the artifacts or production of artistic practice. In creative arts, the undertaking of its practice usually means to advance with or without theory or to go beyond the theory itself.

The use of photography in the context of practice-based research is for acquisition of visual data, storage or management of visual information, analysis of visual data and the representation of research findings involves the selections and framing

of particular section /aspect of the activity/environment, for research purposes photos need to be annotated, identifying the kinds of data presented in order to be useful (Gray and Malins, 2004, p. 108)

### **Visual Arts and Ethnography in relation to Practice-based Research.**

Ethnography is a study about culture, the genre of the visual data collected through this research can be classified as in the realism genre. According to Barret and Bolt (2004), realism is one of the oldest theory of art, upheld by the ancient Greek. If a case to be made that visual data plays a useful role in ethnography, then the issue of realism must be directly addressed. Barret and Bolt added that Strand (1923) believes that the photographer ought to have a real respect for the thing in front of him namely reality and that very essence of photography is absolute unqualified objectivity. In addition, Weston (1980) added the camera should be used for the recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself.

When dealing with visual ethnography, it can say that the ethnographers will be dealt with the actual, by means he/she will be dealing will actual people, places, ceremony, of the culture that has been chosen. Dealing with the actual, the ethnographers must learn not to only accept the fact, but to treasure it. Realism is closely associated with ‘straight photography’.

“Rely on your camera, your eye, on your good taste and your knowledge of composition, consider every fluctuation of color, light and shade, study lines and values and space division, patiently wait until the scene or object of your pictures visions reveals itself in its Supremes moments of beauty.”

Hartmann (1904)

Based on Hartmann’s argument, he states what is needed to think of whenever artist wants to capture a realism based images. Every knowledge about visual images and the use of technology must be used wisely and not forget the photographer’s practices in doing photography.

Based on the discussion, it can be seen that ethnography, visual ethnography, visual arts, practice-based research, and realism are related to each other. There are reasons why these things need to be considered. In ethnography, it is stated earlier that this so-called method aims to get an in-depth understanding of how individuals in different cultures and subcultures make sense of their lived reality. However in ethnography context, the visual is for the purpose of documentation only; the image making method is being neglected. Whereas in visual ethnography, it only prioritizes about the technology that been used in the making of visual ethnography. There is no further elaboration on how the creation of visual images based on visual arts perspectives.

Both visual ethnography and ethnography needs visual as a source of evidence, then the ideology of visual communication is needed to strengthen the needs or the importance of creating visual that has an impact on the audience. The impact of images to the audience will be depending on how the ideology of visual arts and realism be applied in the practice of the practitioners. So the practice based in visual arts and ethnography knowledge will be a guide in applying all the ideology of combining visual arts in doing visual ethnography.

## **CONCLUSION**

To date, no other method can be universally accepted for research in the visual arts. Thus, the approach or combination of other disciplines cannot be ignored and must be taken seriously. The new procedures must be based on the reaction of culture, context, and specific requirements that meet the needs of each other. Therefore, a new approach that is responsive to the needs of these will join forces to ensure a sustainable research. It is clear that most of the scientific research has elements of visual art in their research but were not developed thoroughly. Perhaps the main difference lies in the general impression, verifiability, replicability, and universality. The main criticism is always viewed from the perspective of the classical 'scientific method' that visual arts are very subjective and lack of firmness.

The purpose of practice-based research and to look into other disciplines are to ensure that this research

process is clear by taking advantage of latest technology. One of the most challenging issues for researchers in visual art today is to question and debate the research policy. As well to propose what we called as an 'art methods', that comply with the methodological approach that is less stringent and respected of the 'scientific method', but full accordance with the nature of Art. Thus, it is suggested that Visual Arts Practice can be explored and become one of the alternative approaches in visual ethnography method by employing practice-based research. It is hoped that this approach opens up interdisciplinary studies by bridging the potential association between Social Science and Visual Art discipline in higher education system research.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This paper was published under FRGS research grant [FRGS/SSI09 (01)/984/2013(25)] supported by Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

## **REFERENCES**

- Allison, B., & Council for National Academic Awards, London (United Kingdom); (1991). *Allison Research Index of Art and Design: A Summary Report to the Department of Trade and Industry*. Council for National Academic Awards.
- Barrett, E., & Bolt, B. (Eds.). 2014. *Practice as research: Approaches to the creative arts enquiry*. Ib Tauris.
- Bateson, G., & Mead, M. 1942. *Balinese character: A photographic analysis*. New York, 17-92.
- Bresler, L., & Sullivan, G. 2005. *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts*.
- Byers, P. 1964. Still photography in the systematic recording and analysis of behavioral data. *Human Organization*, 23(1), 78-84.
- Candy, L. 2006. *Practice-based research: A guide*. CCS Report, 1, 1-19.
- Collier, M. 2001. Approaches to analysis in visual anthropology. *Handbook of visual analysis*, 35-60.
- Dallow, P. 2003. Representing creativeness: practice-based approaches to research in creative arts. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 2(1), 49-66.
- Danvers, J. 2003. Towards a radical pedagogy: Provisional notes on learning and teaching in art & design. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 22(1), 47-57.

- Eddy, M.D. 2013. The Shape of Knowledge: Children and the Visual Culture of Literacy and Numeracy. *Science in Context* 26: 215–245.
- Furlong, J., & Oancea, A. 2005. Assessing quality in applied and practice-based educational research: A framework for discussion. Review of Australian research in education: counterpoints on the quality and impact of educational research—a special issue of the *Australian Educational Researcher*, 6, 89-104.
- Gardiner, H., & Gere, C. (Eds.). 2010. *Art Practice in A Digital Culture*. Ashgate Pub.
- Gobo, G. (2008). *Doing ethnography*. Sage.
- Gray, C. & Malins, J.P. 2004. *Visualising Research – A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*. Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Gray, C., & Malins, J. P. 1993. Research procedures/methodology for artists & designers.
- Harper, D. 1998. An argument for visual sociology. *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers*, 24-41.
- Hartmann, S. 1904. A plea for straight photography. *Photography: Essays and images: Illustrated readings in the history of photography*, 185-188.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. 2006. *Emergent methods in social research*. Sage.
- Knoblauch, H. 2005, September. Focused ethnography. In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Vol. 6, No. 3).
- Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. 1952. *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*. Papers. Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, Harvard University.
- Lester, P. 2013. *Visual communication: Images with messages*. Cengage Learning.
- Madison, D. S. 2012. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Performance, and Ethics*.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Pink, S. 2013. *Doing visual ethnography*. Sage.
- Rafee, Y. M., Awang Arshad, A.H., Dim, A. R., Siri, H., & Samaroon, M. J. 2015. Visual Ethnography and its Applications in Ethnographic Painting. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 211, 399-406.
- Schwartz, D. 1989. Visual ethnography: Using photography in qualitative research. *Qualitative sociology*, 12(2), 119-154.
- Sless, D. 1981. *Learning and visual communication*. London: Croom Helm.
- Strand, P. 1923. The Art Motive in Photography. *The British Journal of Photography*, 70, 612-615.
- Weston, E. 1980. Seeing photographically. *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, 206-211.