



Methods for Change

Social Practice Art as Research

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Social Practice Art as Research is a multi-disciplinary and political practice which places people at the centre. This method can be used with individuals and large groups. It aims to foster social or political change through collaboration with individuals, communities and institutions through the creation of art, together. Social practice encompasses a number of art mediums and methods, languages and forms of art. Social Practice Art as Research often culminates in public-facing installations or performance, with a parallel emphasis placed on the process of creating and doing, as much as an end work. It is precisely the uncertainty, unpredictability and spontaneity that comes from interacting and co-creating together with participants that makes this method an exciting approach. The social interaction component inspires, drives, or in some instances, completes the project (there is not always a final art 'object'). With an agenda for social change at its heart, this method has been used to engage and empower a wide range of individuals and groups including local activists, charities, various residents' groups, NGOs, government representatives and healthcare providers.



How does Social Practice Art as Research create or contribute to change?

Social Practice Art as Research produces incremental change at all points in the research process. While the end output (an exhibit, film or a performance, for instance) might feed up to facilitate organisational change by bringing different stakeholders together, this approach is primarily concerned with the change that happens for individuals and groups in the process of creating. This change is often emotional because this approach provides a space for expression that enables participants to feel that their voices and stories matter. While such emotional change often occurs at an individual or group level, the platform and space that is provided to participants in this approach can lead to more transformative change across societies and be fed into policies. Emotional change can also occur for the researcher through the different stories, perspectives and experiences encountered. Moreover, the relationships developed with participants need to be nurtured and often become part of the reflexive practice of the researcher long after the project has ended in that it feeds back into future practice.

What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Socially-engaged models of practice - community arts, environmental arts and 'activism' - make up a rich field, led since the 1970s by Indigenous, feminist and socialist practitioners. Engaged artists collaborate with scientists, planners, politicians and communities to creatively facilitate social change. Feminist driven arts practice specifically focuses on spatial inequalities and oppression, and how those most marginalised and excluded from policy making are impacted. Resonant of other participatory approaches, Social Practice Art as Research is not a means to an end, but an end within itself. It is the experience of experimentation and creation that matters, undertaken through the forms and languages of the arts. Participants are not research subjects but rather engaged practitioners.



Why might I want to use Social Practice Art as Research?

- Social Practice Art as Research is useful when researching with marginalised groups to foreground their experiences, in order to drive action.
- It is particularly good at interrogating very specific research questions that matter to those it is engaging with. Because participants are engaged from the very beginning, the process of researching can be crafted around the needs of a group or individuals.
- This approach can open unexpected and contested dialogues. The process of creating together often takes individuals' thoughts down lesser-trodden paths, encouraging them to open up about topics they may not otherwise have thought to discuss.
- Social Practice Art as Research can enable participants to explore emotional, psychological and sensory experiences. The different ways of creatively engaging (conversation, installation, performance, photography, painting, curating, or film-making, for instance) can open diverse modes of storytelling and provide space for participants to express themselves in many different ways. Social Practice Art as Research, then, provides a means to release and discover and share knowledge and experiences.

"Telling Tales" collage, used for exhibition booklet and banners





Step by step guide to using Social Practice Art as Research:

Though each project will be unique, there are several elements of this process that are important to consider in any Social Practice Art as Research project:

1. Understand what your key issue or topic is:

You may have specific formulated research questions or an idea of a broader topic that you wish to investigate with participants.

2. Decide how location and time will be used in the context of the research:

Will the project be site specific, with activity happening in a particular place, or will it be spread across a wider geography? What timescale does the project have, and how will this impact its structure and the type, frequency and duration of activities you are able to undertake?

3. Research the socio-political context of the work:

This initial desk research into the background of the topic and location forms a crucial base of knowledge for the evolving participation and co-production with participants. It also enables an understanding of both the barriers and opportunities that might arise in the course of the project.

4. Commit to ethical practice:

It is important for researchers to have an in-depth understanding of, and commitment to working collaboratively and sensitively with participants to ensure that co-production is meaningful and genuine across the project.

5. Identify participants:

This stage involves asking who needs to be part of this project in terms of stakeholders and participants, and how will they be invited to join. Consider the inequity within the project, with regards to diversity and inclusion, and map how these issues will be mitigated or addressed.

6. Map strengths and roles in the research team:

When planning research activity, it is important to have a clear idea of who will lead which aspects of the project, how different elements of the work interconnect, and if there are any skills gaps in your team. As an arts researcher, you will likely have a particular interest or strength in your own creative practice. Ensure you are flexible in thinking through appropriate art forms for the specific project and allow new approaches to enter into the process, drawing on complementary expertise where appropriate.

Ensure you build in time within the project for reflecting on the process and for moments of meaningful exchange between the lead researchers. Enable this to inform and shape the work along the way.

7. Plan creative outputs:

Social Practice Art as Research always has creative outputs, but these can evolve in multiple ways. Think about what types of outputs will be most relevant for your project. What spatial access restrictions or opportunities will you have; and how will your outputs be in dialogue with your desired audience? Who is your desired audience? Consider the budgets you have for creative productions, materials, and expenses.



Examples of Social Practice Art as Research in the social sciences

Telling Tales (2014-2015)

Researcher: Dr Jenna C. Ashton, The University of Manchester

This project sought to bring the perspectives of five young people who had speech and language difficulties into dialogue with speech and language therapy professional practice and research. The project also involved speech and language therapy researchers and professional therapists, teachers, and wider family members. The project aimed to explore how visual creative practice opened up storytelling opportunities for these young people, and what could be learnt from that process.

The researcher worked with a group of young people over a series of months and engaged them in various creative exchanges including workshops, conversations, or the sharing of artefacts, writing, and imagery, between each other, with herself, and also in the broader context of their families, speech therapists, or teachers. These young people had identified themselves as already interested in creativity.

The final output for this research was an exhibition held at Manchester Central Library. Each young person who was working on the project had one glass cabinet dedicated to them as part of the exhibition. The researcher worked with them to create an installation

within each of the cabinets. The exhibit was driven by what the young people wanted to show, explore and display. The cabinets featured an assemblage of things including photographs, paintings and objects, each chosen by the young people to represent methods of communicating beyond speech, and what they wished to share with an audience. Each cabinet offered a unique visual 'tale' crafted between the young person and the researcher.

These tales, driven by issues relating to speech and communication challenges, focused on moments of experience, certain behaviours, aspects of imagination, or an obsessive interest.

The exhibition served to open conversation more broadly around speech and language therapy, the potential of visual arts, and it challenged perceptions of education and communication ability. The project provided further opportunities for the young people, in terms of self-development, and sharing their experiences beyond the project. Their participation contributed to official cognitive assessments.



Examples of using Social Practice Art as Research in social science research

Green Infrastructure and the Health and Wellbeing Influences on an Ageing Population (GHIA) (2016-2020)

Researcher: Dr Jenna C. Ashton, The University of Manchester

Social Practice Art as Research formed the key method of inquiry in one element of a large research project. The researcher was in consistent dialogue with researchers leading the other strands of this work, across health, geography, ageing, and psychology. The research led by Jenna (alongside a design activist and archaeologist, and later also involving students) sought to identify the barriers to engaging with green space and urban nature amongst older people. It aimed to better understand people's motivations for when they do engage with green space. Time was spent with older people in areas of high health deprivation who were already expressing actions of care and activism around urban nature. Participants showed the researchers what they were doing with the land, on their allotments, in their gardens, backyards or parks, and explored the motivations behind their activities, with a focus on who cares, and how they care.

Social Arts Practice as Research was used in this project to get beyond the spoken word and the rigidity of a traditional interview. This evolved across informal discussions at sites, group meetings, exchanges of photography and documentation, writings, objects, knitting, exhibition making, and public conversations. Conventional interviews would not show what participants were doing, their practices, or processes. The project was in-residence in the Manchester Museum, as part of the Heritage Futures Studio. This was an experiment to consider how active, contemporary 'living' urban cultures could utilise the Museum as a public space for creative and activist exchanges. It enabled the participating groups and their creative artefacts to come into contact with each other, and with other audiences. This project led to policy partnerships that supported the formation of new research, 'Community Climate Resilience through Folk Pageantry': AHRC, Met Office, UK Climate Resilience Programme. 2020 – 2022.



Where else could Social Practice Art as Research be used?

This method could be particularly useful in contexts where there are concerns regarding sensitive subjects, or an interest to work with diverse participants in a range of community, institutional, and organisational environments. As an example, other projects carried out by the researcher were undertaken in collaboration with women from diaspora and refugee backgrounds. Another very different example involved supporting research into the training needs of young dentists to respond to domestic violence cases.

Top tips

1. Social Practice Art as Research is highly interdisciplinary. If you are not an arts researcher, but want to explore a research issue via Social Practice Art as Research, then partner with an arts researcher who is located within a field of creative forms, language, and research. Social Practice Art as Research is not the same as using arts methods as an isolated form within an overarching social science methodology.
2. Do not underestimate the creativity that already exists within people, in their everyday contexts.
3. Learn to sit with uncertainty and be comfortable in 'mess' that is generated by the creative process, and is inherent in collaboration with people.
4. Keep focused on the social or ecological issue in hand; the arts practice is in service to that issue.
5. Make sure love, care and sharing underpin your practice.

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Further reading

- Jenna C. Ashton's website
- Suzanne Lacy's website
- The Pablo Helguera archive
- Common Ground website
- The Social Art Library website
- Art Util archive
- Actipedia: creative tactics that help bring about change
- FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism

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