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Elena Cologni's Art as Research as Art approach in context

by Caterina Albano¹

Artistic practices whether in the fields of visual or performing arts are still perceived as an outpour of individual expression. Such bias undermines the formal, conceptual and critical reflection that underpins them. At the same time, the claim to knowledge and authority of science – though long-debated² – clouds the crucial role of the arts in the contemporary production of knowledge. This raises questions around the role and significance of the arts in society, what can be regarded as knowledge, what are acceptable forms of knowledge at any given time and within different cultures, and what are its forms of articulations. While an attempt to answer those questions is beyond the scope of this brief introduction, Elena Cologni's project, *Seeds of Attachment* (2016-18), offers us an opportunity for some brief considerations on the potential of artistic practices of being generative of knowledge – aesthetic knowledge, emotional knowledge, critical knowledge and, as Cologni demonstrates, ethical knowledge – thus pointing to the broader social and political significance of such practices. Hence, what does it mean to think of art as research and research as art?

At a basic level, in any historical period and across cultures, art is a formal investigation within specific artistic genres that deals with individual, social and/or political issues. Whether this investigation concerns the articulation or production of sound and its compositional construction, physical movement or the visual rendering of shapes or their spatial and temporal relations, art is already research. A visual artist might engage with formal questions around the rendering of a three dimensional body on a two dimensional surface, a choreographer with questions around the kinetic negotiation of space: their solutions are more than aesthetically pleasing and emotionally compelling, they are the result of research as 'the careful study of a subject' (*OED*). However, in regarding artistic practices as research, we refer to more complex and articulated investigations that entail different methodologies that intersect other disciplines and their approaches – archival research, as in the case of *Seeds of Attachment*, field work, observation, collection and analysis of data, and experimentation with materials. This goes hand in hand with a reflection within disciplinary contexts that include artistic practices but also other fields of research, as for instance, in our specific case, anthropology, geography, psychology and critical theory. Cologni applies a formal and material understanding to Margaret Lowenfeld's *Mosaic Test* (1938-54) that becomes the starting point for an investigation whose methods resonate with those of psychology and whose reflection engages with ethics as much as with aesthetics through a discussion that, as her article shows, encompasses other

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artists' work and diverse disciplinary contributions. This is itself the product of research into a subject and of critical engagement with it, from which insight is gleaned in an original synthesis.

In regarding art practices as research, we do not, however, suggest that they are subsidiary forms of historical, psychological, sociological or other kinds of investigation, but rather that artistic approaches to history, psychology or other subjects are equally generative of knowledge and reflection. It is not unusual that artists' collaborations with experts in other disciplines lead to advances in those fields through their approach, design of methodologies or analysis. Art practices, in other words, are in themselves a process of investigation that it is embedded in specific artistic contexts by relating to other artists' work, and draws on other disciplines and critical contexts to engage with topical questions, social issues and, as for Cologni, psychological processes. As her article testifies, this research generates psychological insight into attachment and outputs include academic papers or journal articles. But this research is also art. While the documentation of the work in artistic practices is as scrupulous as in scientific experiments, the final result is a body of work. For artistic practices the crucial articulation of the research that an artist has carried out and the knowledge that such research produces are artworks. The pliable shapes that Cologni has developed from Lowenfeld's *Mosaic Test* and used with the participants to her project are sculptures. They are not a copy of the shapes in the test but rather a response on which aesthetic choices (the introduction of a semi-circular shape absent from Lowenfeld, size, elastic material etc...) reflect formal, conceptual and emotional considerations. Participants responds to such choices with their engagement to the work and the mutual interaction of the artist and participants translates in series of drawings. Unlike more traditional academic outcomes, and more radically, such knowledge does not remain within the confines of disciplinary expertise, but engages audiences: it is shared knowledge that generates further reflection and engagement from the part of the viewer.
