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ART<3DATA:

Artistic research data – in theory and in practice

By Karin Westin Tikkanen

Introduction

Data has become something of a buzzword. Everyone goes on about data and all one can do with “big data” in terms of technological development and innovation, not to forget the topic of user targeted advertising.

There is an equal amount of discussion concerning the topic research data, meaning data used as the basis for analysis and research results. Research data can be collected, created or generated within a given research project. And since many universities in Sweden are also government bodies, there are plenty of rules governing the ways in which researchers are expected to manage said data. One such law (SFS 2022:818) governs the re-use of public sector information. This law states that universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are to apply this law to research data, meaning that Swedish researchers are required by law to make the data they work with available to the extent that this is possible. Research data can be deposited in data repositories, of which there are plenty, for all different varieties of research. In such repositories, researchers can search for and find data that may be of use for them in their own research.

And since research data form part of the researchers’ work within a government body, this is also considered public records and should therefore be archived in accordance with the Swedish Archives Act (SFS 1990:782). And in the case of sensitive data, for example personal data, there are additional rules that guide how they must be managed, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

In other words, researchers need to be aware of existing rules that determine how one must deal with research data within a given project, considering management and archiving. However, the thing most usually discussed

is the first item mentioned in this text, the requirement to make research data available for re-use. It must be stressed again that not all data can be shared (e.g. sensitive data, copyright protected data, and so on), but the main idea is that research that is produced with the aid of state funding should be made as available as possible. Many researchers are already familiar with the concept of Open Access when it comes to articles and books, but this requirement holds also for the data that forms the basis for the analyses presented in said articles and books.

In the following I will consider only the aspect of making research data available in a data repository. For other aspects of data management, see the chapter by Madeleine Bergquist.¹

The ART<3DATA project

The requirements mentioned above concern *all* different kinds of research. I work at the Swedish National Data Service (SND), a national research infrastructure that helps Swedish researchers in their research data management and in making data accessible, for example through the data catalogue *Researchdata.se*.² At SND we work with data from all kinds of different research areas, from natural sciences to humanities, from medicine to agricultural research. The topic of artistic research, however, has long been neglected. To change this a project was launched, ART<3DATA. The plan was to investigate artistic research with a focus on artistic research data: do artistic research data exist, and if so, what do they look like and where can one find them?

Within the framework of this study I have spoken with artistic researchers and personnel at many different HEIs, among them several of the artistic academies in the Stockholm area – the Royal Institute of Art (KKH), the Royal College of Music (MKH), as well as Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH) – but also artistic faculties at different universities, for example in Umeå, Borås, Gothenburg and Lund. I have also organised two one-day seminars on the topic of artistic research data. The first seminar took place at KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, on October 15, 2024.³ This seminar was aimed mainly at administrative personnel and dealt with the overall treatment of artistic research data – where should they be stored, and how does one locate them in a research project. The second seminar

¹ See page 32–43.

² Swedish National Data Service, *Researchdata.se*. (n.d.). <https://researchdata.se/en>.

³ Swedish National Data Service, *En dag om konstnärliga forskningsdata*. (2024). <https://snd.se/sv/en-dag-om-konstnarliga-forskningsdata>

took place on October 2, 2025, and was organised in collaboration with the Artistic Faculty, University of Gothenburg.⁴ This seminar was aimed at researchers and discussed the concept of sharing artistic research data as a way to strengthen this field of research in itself. A third seminar will take place at Lund University in the autumn of 2026.⁵

In these different contexts I have encountered a wide range of research projects, within areas such as textile design, free art, musical interpretation and performance, sloyd, opera, architecture, performing arts and photography. Some of the researchers I have spoken with find it easy to distinguish data in their research, but to others this is more difficult, not to say impossible. Many wonder: “Research data, isn’t that something you work with in a lab? Why should someone like me, working with art, have to bother with it?”

The simple answer to this question is outlined above and pertains to the current regulations. As already mentioned, the law governs all research areas, and artistic research is not excluded. Artistic researchers need to be aware of the regulations, and they need to learn to navigate them.

The matter of the *definition* of artistic research data is another, much wider and more difficult, topic. The goal of ART<3DATA has not been to arrive at an ultimate and final definition of what artistic research data are, in the sense of determining precisely what they might look like. One rather more allowing definition could be: “Artistic research data is data from research using artistic methods.” And it is precisely the aspect of “artistic methods” that makes the defining of data appear complicated. Artistic research is a wide field and artistic researchers work with many different methods and materials. Therefore, the aim of ART<3DATA is rather to investigate how those of us working with research data management can best help artistic researchers manage data in accordance with current regulations.

About artistic research

Artistic research remains a rather young field of research, and one might claim that the field is still in the process of creating and establishing an identity. An early example of this is the conversation between Mikael Nanfeldt, Nina Bondeson, Magnus Bårtås and Tina Carlsson, recorded by Magdalena

4 Swedish National Data Service, *Konst, kunskap, kontext*. (2025). <https://snd.se/en/art-knowledge-context-symposium-artistic-research>

5 Swedish National Data Service, *Artistic research data – practices, perspectives and potential*. (2026). <https://snd.se/en/artistic-research-data-practices-perspectives-and-potential>

Dziurlikowska in 2011.⁶ The mere existence of public debates concerning the to-be or not-to-be of artistic research is one element of this, as for example the ongoing discussion in the online magazine *Parabol*.⁷ One way of viewing the “critique” of artistic research raised in these debates, as well as the difficulty many artistic researchers mention when it comes to defining research data in their own projects, is to consider the difference between traditional, scientific research and artistic research. One could for example envisage a distinction whereby scientific research is about exploring the world and arriving at new knowledge, whereas artistic research can be said to be about exploring artistic professionalism and the creative process. According to Alva Noë, art is itself a method of research that illuminates our perceptions of the world.⁸ Seen in this light, artistic research is taking this one step further, making this inner research method – the creation of art itself – visible to the outside world, but following the reasoning and the experience of the artists themselves, not the art historians or art collectors.

Artistic research can take many different shapes, and the point here is not to over-simplify but rather to arrive at a simple enough description to establish the contrast. In any case, many of the researchers I have spoken to declare that they use a methodological framework that differs from that of scientific research. However, in my perspective, artistic research is not as diametrically opposite from scientific research as many, on both sides of the presumed divide (in the debate concerning the pros and cons of artistic research), would like to describe it. Research usually begins with some kind of question – you want to explore something – and then you look for ways to answer this question. Depending on the research field and the chosen method, you then collect information that will form the basis for the exploration you do. In other words, there is no real difference between “scientific research data” and “artistic research data” – there is “data from research”, irrespective of how the research itself is done. And to be clear: when I speak of *collecting* I mean the collection of information, in one way or another, from the world around us, whether in situations that the researchers manufacture themselves by way of setting up interviews, doing experiments, arranging a scene for a photograph or visual representation, but also that of making use of our own inner experiences, putting them into words on paper.

6 M. Dziurlikowska, “Bastarden”, *Konstnären* 1 (2011), 28–33.

7 See e.g. K. Westin Tikkanen, “Är konst kunskap?” *Parabol* 12 (2024). <https://www.parabol.press/ar-konst-kunskap>

8 A. Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015).

Within scientific research is fairly easy to point at this *collecting* as a process that makes research data evident within the project, whether you look at things through a microscope at very small things in a laboratory, or through a telescope at very large and very distant things in a space observatory, or at things everywhere in between these two extremes in the world that surrounds us, at present or in times distant. In short, you collect information that you then analyse to arrive at an answer to your research question.

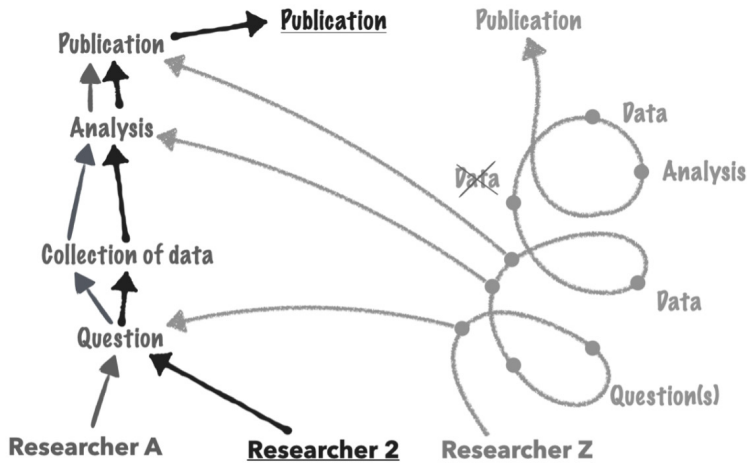


Figure 1. Examples of different possible research processes. Researcher A begins with a research question, collects data in order to do an analysis, and the work results in a publication. Researcher 2 does a replication study and follows the same process as Researcher A, starting from the question, looking at the data collection and the analysis and the published results, arriving at a separate publication. Researcher Z works in an entirely different way. They are inspired by the question posed by Researcher A but starts off with other research questions. Researcher Z also considers the analysis and the final publication by Researcher A, but makes use of other types of data, found or collected at different stages throughout the research process, and not all of the found data is considered relevant for the subsequent analysis.

Considering artistic research, this *collecting* is not always that evident, since the elements collected are not framed or used as “evidence” for the research results in the same way as is done within scientific research.⁹ The artistic process is not made manifest through easily measurable data points, unless it concerns a form of craftsmanship knowledge: “first I do stage 1, then I do stage 2...”. One should however keep in mind that this kind of practical knowledge – *techne* in the words of Aristotle and the “know how” following Swedish philosopher Tore Nordenstam – is rarely transmitted from a master to a student by way of written, theoretical knowledge only, but that the focus is on practical training.¹⁰ Many artists are also well aware of the concept of *flow*, meaning when you enter a series of thoughts that are not easily articulated into an accessible manual. In the words of Borgdorf: “The a priori of the body assumes the place of the a priori of intellectual knowledge, making the pre-reflective bodily intimacy with the world around us into the foundation of our thinking and acting”.¹¹ In other words, you simply create. The really true images come from the hand and not from the head, to quote Nils Claesson.¹²

Artistic research and data

This “a priori of the body” may make the extraction of the precise collected elements that function as data in the context of artistic research more difficult to narrate, and it might take some practice to arrive at clear image of what “data” might actually be. In many cases, however, I sense that many artistic researchers express aversion against the very expression *research data*. Some consider it an expression of “too scientific terminology”, or they think that arts education in general and artistic research in particular are forced too close to the traditional academies.¹³ Similar thoughts are expressed in the manifest presented by ELIA (European League of Institutes of the Arts), as a response to the new demands of Open Science and the sharing of research data: “The idea of data itself brings with it a particular framework and perspective that doesn’t always apply to artistic research, and in artistic research,

9 M. Bärtås, E. Røed & J. Landgren, *Om öppen vetenskap och forskningsdata* (Konstex, 2022), p. 5.

10 H. Bohlin, “Tyst kunskap: ett mångtydigt begrepp”. In *Vad är praktisk kunskap? Södertörn studies in practical knowledge 1*, eds. J. Bornemark & F. Svenaeus (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2009), p. 59.

11 H. Borgdorf, *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), p. 169.

12 N. Claesson. *Spökmaskinen. Sju förändringar och förflyttningar. Gestaltungsprocesser i animation och film*, doctoral dissertation (Stockholm: Stockholms Konstnärliga Högskola, 2017), p. 146.

13 See e.g. J. Holm. “...för vetenskap sysslar vi inte med.” *En diskursanalys om forskningsdata och öppen tillgång inom konstnärlig forskning*. Master’s dissertation (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2023), p. 32–33.

we might not even have ‘only data’. Data is always ‘sticky’, or comes with the form of performativity, or is intrinsic to a form of practice.”¹⁴

To answer the question “Does artistic research involve data?” as simply as possible, the answer must be yes, it does. Not all researchers have data, but it is also not the case that there are no data at all within the entire field. It all comes down to the process of collecting done in the research: *What* do you *collect* and *how* do you do it?

In the following, I will disregard information collected from previous publications in a particular field – all the books and articles you read – and also the many important conversations you have when doing research, with colleagues or fellow students in seminars or at coffee tables. Let’s instead consider different situations where a researcher stages a particular situation for the sake of finding material for their research.

Take for example research projects that involve studying how humans describe the feeling of different kinds of cloth on their skin (e.g. textile research), or human reactions in different situations, for example how different light settings affect the perception of a performance (a potential question within performativity studies) or a piece of art (in settings of fine art, or perhaps curatorial research). In such cases the researcher may do interviews or surveys, or might record situations as videos, *collecting* material that may be reworked into an artwork, and that may also form the basis for the analytical, written argument. If so, both the video clips as well as the interview and survey material are examples of research data.

Or consider research that involves different kinds of experiments, whether to do with music, painting or performance. What will the piano sound like *if I do this*? How will the oil paint react *if I do this*? And how will the acrobatic movement change *if I do it like this*? All such studies involve *collecting* knowledge (whether in the form of mere impressions or in the shape of documented, precise facts) that can be used to further develop the sound, the paint and the movement. Any such knowledge could in theory be labelled “data” but when it comes to the concept of *research data*, we prefer to consider only information made manifest in the form of different modes of documentation, whether by annotation or recording. Again, this collecting may not necessarily provide “evidence” for the research results, but what is collected can be seen as jigsaw pieces in the larger context of the artistic creative work.

¹⁴ ELIA. *Towards a Manifesto for Critical Openness in Artistic Research*. SCORE – Version #1. (2024) https://cdn.ymaws.com/elia-artschools.org/resource/resmgr/elia_library/Towards-a-Manifesto_for-Crit.pdf

A major difficulty also lies in determining what of that which has been *collected* might be considered as data that could be made available in a data repository, and a first line to draw is the differentiation between digital and non-digital. When we speak of making research data available, we mean only data that is already digital in form.

The second step is to distinguish *what* of all that is already digital that might be re-used by other researchers, if found in a data repository. If a folk singer experiments with her voice and tries out different expressions,¹⁵ and also records the experiments – is everything data? If a performance artist studies the presence of begging on the street scene by recording human movements in the vicinity of the beggar¹⁶ – is everything data?

On the one hand one can follow Konstex, the Swedish national network of HEIs that are entitled to award qualification in the fine, applied and performing arts. In a report from a Konstex workshop on Open science and artistic research data, it is suggested that it should be up to the artistic researchers themselves to decide what elements of their own work might be identified as research data: “Det måste i så fall identifieras av forskaren själv utifrån dess betydelse för resultatet.”¹⁷ This places a heavy burden on the researchers to first identify data and then also to develop strategies for documentation.¹⁸

On the other hand, one might consider the fact that researchers within traditional, scientific research sometimes make a distinction between “raw data” and “structured data”. Raw data means all the unstructured data collected from tests and surveys, including data from test drives, from corrupted tests, and so on. Structured data is the cleaned-up, sorted, categorised and described data, meaning the data that was deemed relevant for the analysis. In many cases only the structured data that was actually used in the project is considered worth making findable in a data catalogue. The performance artist in the example above may have a large number of movie clips of people walking in streets but may choose to make use of only a small number of them as the basis for what will become the final work of her project. In a similar way, the folk singer may have many hundreds of hours of recorded voice experiments, but only a small set of them features the quality they are after.

15 E.g. S. Rosenberg, *Kurbits-ReBoot. Svensk folksång i ny scenisk gestaltning*, doctoral dissertation (Helsinki/Stockholm: Sibelius-Akademien/Kungliga Musikhögskolan, 2013).

16 E.g. C. Parsberg, *Hur blir du en framgångsrik tiggare i Sverige? En undersökning av tiggandets och givandets bilder 2011 till 2016*, doctoral dissertation (Umeå: Umeå University, 2016).

17 M. Bårtås, E. Røed & J. Landgren. *Om öppen vetenskap och forskningsdata* (Konstex, 2022), p. 6.

18 Holm 2023, p. 44–46.

To put it in different words: not every single small sketch or note you make needs to be categorised as research data meant to be deposited in a data catalogue for the benefit of other researchers, but if you for example make recordings of iterated movements in a performance, there will definitely be something there that will bring you closer to your final work, and those elements are precisely what we speak of when we mention “data” – if only in the shape of a warning example: “This is NOT how to do it”.

Conclusion

As a final comment, I would also like to nuance the rhetoric concerning the requirement to make research data available.

For starters, research projects without research data are far from an anomaly and exist in many different kinds of research areas. Also, research data must never be seen as the ultimate mark of research quality – that a researcher does not work with research data should never be used as a criticism of the research itself. This must be communicated in a very direct way: Not all research involves research data, but the research that does must to adapt its data management in accordance with existing regulations.

Secondly, the current regulations first emanated from research within which replication and verification studies are deemed important. These fields of research are also more likely to render results that may further technological and economic development. This prospect may well feel alien to an artistic researcher, and it may seem more natural to instead consider one's own research and ask: In what way can the work that I have done be of aid to another researcher asking similar or other questions about the world and/or the creative process? What of my material could be reused by someone else? It may also be worthwhile thinking of possibilities outside of one's own kind of research. For example, the above-mentioned recordings made by a folk singer and a performance artist could be re-used by someone who explores hand and body movements in different contexts, whether by a pantomime performance artist, a linguist analysing hand gestures as a mode of communication, or a medical researcher studying human anatomy. But for that kind of re-use to take place, for the pantomime artist, the anatomist, or the linguist to realise that there are interesting data that could be reused, the data must first be shared in a trusted data repository and made accessible for other researchers to find and re-use. This is what data management advisors do, we help researchers bring the data out into the world, in a curated and trusted way.

Research data may very well be re-used in projects that are entirely different from those where they were initially generated, and this is the very point of making data available – data can come to strengthen research over a very wide scope, irrespective of where they were initially collected or generated or composed, and in all such re-use it is extremely useful to get access to as much data as possible, not only to the selection made accessible within and through the artwork or the accompanying text.

Research data, although a buzzword and on the tip of many people's tongues, remains foreign and new to some. It is not only researchers within the field of artistic research that find it difficult to define and categorise the different elements of one's own research as "data".

What is needed is a continual dialogue where researchers are invited to share their thoughts and to actively help shape the instruments and tools developed, and the manuals written, to help them manage data within their projects. Ventures such as the Creative Data Lab is an excellent way forward, and I hope to see many more such enterprises in the near future.

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