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Distinguishing data and art in artistic research

By Gunnar Krantz

In my research I have used the lithography printing technique to better understand how comics were developed in the mid 19th century by Swiss artist, writer and schoolmaster Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846). He not only created and published what today is considered to be the first comics in the modern sense but also reflected on and published two essays about his findings.¹ An advancement in lithography called *autography* (i. e. transfer lithography) was crucial to Töpffer's publications. I had identified a lacuna of knowledge of this technique in contemporary comics research, which I hoped to fill by conducting an artistic research project called "Autographic double exposure – the narrative characteristics of the inked black line", funded by the Swedish Research Council. What interested me was the practices of drawing and writing in relation to autography with a focus on the aesthetic embedded in the technique – the thin clear lines, the combination of image and text created with the same tool, and the relatively fast workflow from drawing to printed result, compared with other printing techniques at the time.

During my research, I gathered materials of various kinds: collected, copied, downloaded, photographed, bought and borrowed. I also produced materials of my own: notes in notebooks or on pieces of paper, Word documents and pdfs, as well as photographs, drawings, prints and physical artefacts. This material contributed to the results of the project, which I have presented at scientific conferences, in scientific articles and articles in trade magazines, in public presentations, lectures and exhibitions. The material is stored in folders, binders and boxes, on hard drives and cloud services. Some of it is at my office at Malmö University, another part in my studio, and some at the facilities of our comics research platform – Malmö University Comics

1 D. Kunzle, *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer*, (Oxford MS: University of Mississippi, 2007).

Hub/MUCH. Most of it is documentation, consisting of copies, pdfs or printouts of articles from books, journals and other sources. Some of it comes from communication and interaction with practitioners and scholars. Some could be labelled art, and some might be categorised as *research data*. The last category differs from the others, since it is the only one that I am legally obliged to archive and publish. And this is where the problems begin. What of the material in this cluster of things is data, and how does this label affect the material in relation to storage, ownership and possible artistic value?

According to *Guidelines for research data management*, research data at Malmö University shall be “handled in accordance with good research practice, relevant legislation and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity”,² a statement that presents some interesting problems in relation to the production of artistic research. Research data are generally not protected under intellectual property law and thus cannot be owned, but the medium that carries the data (paper, servers etc.) is in this case owned by Malmö University. Research data are official documents and should therefore be stored and be possible to request by others. Research data are generally not covered by the *teachers’ exemption*, but the result of the research is. Research data must also be retained for at least ten years, before they can be destroyed.³

What is data?

Defining data within the context of artistic research is difficult, since most of the time this is being taken as settled and seldom problematised. But a closer look at the literature suggests a wide variety of perspectives, ranging from the position that everything is data and that data surround us like water surrounds fish to a reluctance to even use the word. Brinkmann criticises the former attitude by commenting that “if everything is data, then nothing is data”⁴. Becker describes data (in the social sciences) as observable physical objects: traces or marks made by humans or machines, which are recorded and preserved as part of the process of gathering evidence in order to understand something.⁵ Blaikie states that in the social sciences, data “are simply regarded as something we collect and analyse in order to arrive at research

2 Malmö University, *Guidelines for research data management at Malmö University* (Malmö: Malmö University, 2024) <https://mau.app.box.com/s/dx2ot18iuy6dlv83abjihpngtlhdq91w>. (Accessed 2026-01-29).

3 Ibid.

4 S. Brinkman, “Doing Without Data”, *Qualitative Inquiry*. 20:6 (2014), p. 720–725. DOI: 10.1177/1077800414530254.

5 H. S. Becker, *Evidence*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

conclusions”⁶ and that they are often equated with empirical evidence produced by “the products of systematic ‘observations’ made through the use of the human senses”.⁷ Blaikie argues that how data “are viewed depends on the ontological assumptions about the social phenomenon being investigated”.⁸ Data distances the researcher from the phenomenon being researched on three levels: *primary*, *secondary* and *tertiary*. Primary data are generated by the researcher in charge of how a study is designed and conducted and are new in the sense that they are produced to answer specific research questions. Secondary data are raw data, collected by someone else, either for general information purposes or for research projects. Finally, tertiary data are the result of an analysis of primary and/or secondary data.⁹

Within the social sciences, data are either quantitative or qualitative, or as Blaikie says “numbers or words”.¹⁰ Brinkmann refers to three general forms of qualitative analysis: *induction*, *deduction* and *abduction*. Induction is based on the idea that the collection of data in itself “leads to theory”.¹¹ In deduction, “theory determines data in the sense that hypotheses are articulated on the background of data”.¹² This is then used within different theoretical frameworks. After having problematised the first two, Brinkmann introduces the notion of abductive data, as something produced by a tool-user, a bricoleur, or craftsperson. Abduction is neither driven by data or theory, Brinkmann states, but by *breakdowns*.¹³ Alvesson and Kärreman discuss the concept of breakdowns as a form of reasoning that can be used in uncertain situations where the researcher needs to understand what is happening. “It is the unanticipated and the unexpected – the things that puzzle researchers – that are of particular interest in such encounters.”¹⁴

These definitions of data and different methods for their use, as explained in the literature on research methods, are today accepted as common practice both within contemporary art and artistic research (c.f. Brinkmann’s tool-user, bricoleur, craftsperson). So how then make a clear distinction between research and art practices in relation to research data?

6 N. W. H. Blaikie, *Analyzing quantitative data from description to explanation*, (London: Sage, 2003) p. 15.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 20.

9 Ibid., p. 18–19.

10 Ibid., p. 20.

11 Brinkman 2014, p. 721.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 722.

14 M. Alvesson & D. Kärreman, *Qualitative research and theory development mystery as method*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), p. 15.

The definition of art

Since much of my research has been conducted by artistic practice, and the result of this (i.e. drawings and original prints) can be exhibited at art galleries or art institutions, the notion of depositing them in an archive is not that appealing. As research data they would be freely accessible to anyone, thus contradicting the current norms of artistic practice, where selection, limited output, uniqueness and consecration (in the Bourdieusian sense) are tools for increasing cultural capital and hence pecuniary value. To consider one's art as research data and store it in an archive, creates a conflict, both with the doxa of the field and (perhaps) with one's own personal artistic values. Then again, artistic research implies something other than artistic practice. Research is not about creating new art; it is about creating new knowledge. The result should therefore relate to the research questions formulated within the project. Being an artist who has accepted the position of researcher might therefore result in a division that creates friction on both personal and professional levels. But even full immersion in the research practices of academia does not rule out that data could also be considered as art. The *institutional theory of art*, as formulated by George Dickie, states: "A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public."¹⁵ All research data can thus be transformed into art, given the right context and circumstances.

Experiments with autography

In my project I tried to find out how Rodolphe Töpffer created drawings, which were possible to reproduce by the lithographic printing technique called autography. To be able to use the same materials – in this case, specially prepared paper and ink – as described by Töpffer in his reflections of the practice¹⁶ I had to manufacture them myself. This was done by using manuals and recipes found in the books by the inventor of lithography, Alois Senefelder¹⁷ and one of its early adopters, George Hullmandel¹⁸ as well as

15 G. Dickie, "The New Institutional Theory of Art", in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, eds. P. Lamarque & S. H. Olsen, (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 47–53.

16 R. Töpffer, (1842). "Notice sur les Essais d'autographie, Courriere de Genève 1842-07-02", in *Töpffer: L'invention de la bande dessinée*, eds. T. Groensteen & B. Peeters (Paris: Hermann, 1994), p. 172.

17 A. Senefelder, *Vollständiges Lehrbuch der Steindruckerey enthaltend eine richtige und deutliche Anweisung zu den verschiedenen Manipulations-Arten derselben in allen ihren Zweigen und Manieren, belegt mit den nöthigen Musterblättern, nebst einer vorangehenden ausführlichen Geschichte dieser Kunst von ihrem Entstehen bis auf gegenwärtige Zeit*, (München: Bei Karl Thienemann, 1818).

18 C. Hullmandel, (1820). *The Art of Drawing on Stone: Giving a Full Explanation of the Various Styles, of the Different Methods to be Employed to Ensure Success, and of the Modes of Correcting, as Well as of the Several Causes of Failure*, (London: Longman, 1820).

in a recipe from a manual on lithography from the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm.¹⁹ By using these, I managed to manufacture all the necessary materials and could then test them by creating drawings to produce matrices on lithographic stone. By documenting both the process of manufacture and the use of the material, I gathered more documentation and artefacts. The results (the actual printed proofs) could then be compared with Töpffer's own original editions which created even more notes and photographs.



Figure 1. Collecting data at Bibliothèque National de France, Paris (2024).

To manufacture autographic ink, I used Senefelder's recipe²⁰ consisting of: Shellac, wax, tallow, mastic, soap and lampblack. The ingredients were heated to burning in a kettle on a propane gas stove until the mass was reduced by half. The burning of the ingredients produced a thick black smoke that eventually caught fire, resulting in blazing flames. The remaining residue was then shaped into sticks, similar to wax crayons.

¹⁹ F. A. Frohm, *Kompendium i litografi*, n.d.

²⁰ Senefelder 1818, p. 169.

The research data thus collected consisted of documentation of the process in notes, photographs and videos, the sticks of ink, and some drawings made on paper.



Figure 2. Manufacture of autographic ink. (2024).

To manufacture transfer paper, I used Frohm's recipe²¹, where sheets of paper were coated with an organic glue consisting of water, flour, rice starch and gelatine. When the glue dried, it resulted in a hard and glossy surface that was easy to draw on with a steel nib pen and lithographic ink. When dampened, the glue became mucous and released the ink to the lithographic stone, after pressure was applied. The stone was then prepared into a matrix and proofs were printed.²²

²¹ Frohm n.d.

²² G. Krantz, "Tusch, stålstift & autografi: Om serieestetikens ursprung", *Bild & Bubbla* 45:4 (2025), p. 68–77.



Figure 3. Ingredients for the preparation of transfer paper (2024).

The research data thus collected consisted of my documentation of the process in the form of notes and photographs, sheets of transfer paper, drawings made on the transfer paper with autographic ink, the discarded transfer paper after application to the stone, with only traces of the drawing left, first proofs and some prints.



Figure 4. Lithographic stone with transferred drawing (2024).

Conclusion

In this experiment I manufactured all materials needed to produce autographic prints. I then used them in accordance with documented statements in the literature to create matrices and print proofs, hence using secondary and producing primary data.

The experiment was overall successful, and the outcome of it demonstrated that there exist some important differences between traditional drawing materials (i.e., pen, ink and paper) and drawing materials used for transfer lithography, and that these could possibly explain some of the characteristics of Töpffer's drawings and his narrative style. This result would not have been possible to obtain without the self-fabricated tools and materials and the embodied experience of using them. The primary data that were produced during this experiment consisted of a combination of artefacts, notes, lithographic prints, tools, materials and photographs. When reviewing this, it became evident that it was possible also to identify some of it as works of art, especially the drawings and lithographic prints. As mentioned above, research data cannot be owned, only the medium on which they are created, and then not by the researchers, but by the universities they work for. However, such ownership does not contradict that these data can also be categorised as art. This does not mean that all research data qualify as art – or that all artworks produced during artistic research necessarily are data. But some are arguably suspended, over a period of time, in a state where they can be both.

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