

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340210649>

'My Piece of Heaven': Explorations of resources in arts-based research and making environments

Article · March 2020

DOI: 10.34130/2233-1277-2020-1-100-119

CITATIONS

0

READS

4

1 author:



Melanie A. Sarantou

University of Lapland

25 PUBLICATIONS 21 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Acting on the Margin: Arts as Social Sculpture (AMASS) [View project](#)



Women Living on the Edges of the World; Profi 2 [View project](#)

Министерство науки и высшего образования Российской Федерации
Федеральное государственное бюджетное
образовательное учреждение высшего образования
«Сыктывкарский государственный университет имени Питирима Сорокина»
(ФГБОУ ВО «СГУ им. Питирима Сорокина»)
Ministry of Science and Higher Education
Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education
“Pitirim Sorokin Syktyvkar State University”
(FSBEI of Higher Education Pitirim Sorokin SyktSU)

Человек. Культура. Образование Human. Culture. Education

Научно-образовательный и методический журнал
Research and instruction journal

*Входит в перечень ведущих рецензируемых изданий ВАК
Минобрнауки РФ (Перечень ВАК)*

*On the list of leading peer-reviewed publications of the Higher Attestation Commission
under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation
(Higher Attestation Commission List)*

№ 1 (35) 2020

Сыктывкар
Издательство СГУ им. Питирима Сорокина
Syktyvkar
SyktSU Press
2020

Melanie Sarantou

University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

'My Piece of Heaven': Explorations of Resources in Arts-Based Research and Making Environments

The article discusses improvisatory processes through the recognition and actuation of affordances within specific environments and situations. The synergistic relationships between resourcefulness and improvisation, and people's interactions within their given environments, will be addressed through two arts-based activities that were conducted with a student community in Arctic Murmansk, Russia, as part of the Margin to Margin project. The article will discuss and analyse the role that affordances play in intricate, familiar and unfamiliar environments, especially those that are associated with making, the arts and improvisation. The arts-based activities drew from varied art-based methods and narrative approaches to data collection and analysis, such as storytelling, textile arts practices and making, narrative analysis, self-reflection and diarising. The outcome of the article explores the dynamic role of improvisation to address challenges by recognising and actuation affordances within the environments in which art and design makers, but also researchers, work and function.

Keywords: Arts-based research, textile arts, narrative, improvisation, resources, environment.

Мелани Сарантоу

Лапландский Университет, Рованиеми, Финляндия

«Мой кусочек рая»: исследование ресурсов в искусствоведческих исследованиях и создании окружающей среды

В статье обсуждаются процессы импровизации через признание и активацию доступных возможностей в конкретных условиях и ситуациях. Синергетические отношения между находчивостью и импровизацией, а также взаимодействия людей в их конкретной окружающей среде будут рассматриваться на примере двух художественных мероприятий, которые были проведены со студенческим сообществом в Арктическом Мурманске, России, в рамках проекта «Край к краю». В статье рассмотрена и про-

анализирована роль, которую доступные возможности играют в запутанной, знакомой и незнакомой окружающей среде, особенно такие, которые связаны с созданием – искусство и импровизация. Деятельность, основанная на искусстве, опиралась на различные художественные методы и нарративные подходы к сбору данных и анализу, такие как повествование, художественные практики и производство текстиля, нарративный анализ, саморефлексия и ведение дневников. Конечным результатом статьи является изучение динамической роли импровизации в решении насущных проблем с помощью признания и активизации возможностей в среде, в которой дизайнеры и художники, но также и исследователи, работают и функционируют.

Ключевые слова: искусствоведческое исследование, текстильное искусство, повествование, импровизация, ресурсы, окружающая среда.

Introduction

This article explores the role of improvisation when dealing with challenges and difficulties in arts- based research contexts. By proposing improvisation as a strategy, the article seeks to understand how challenges, both in research and creative contexts, can be overcome. This article draws on a specific project context. *Margin to Margin: Women living on the edges of the world* (2016–2021) was an art and research project that took place between four geographical margins: regional South Australia, Finnish Lapland, Russian Kola Peninsula and Namibia. The project, through arts-based and ethnographic research, engaged in various contexts, such as Indigenous arts practice, socially engaged arts, and geographical remoteness. As an arts and research collaboration between artist communities, the project's goal was to explore the relationship between art-making and empowerment of artefact makers living and working 'on the edges'.

The research viewed the concept of marginality predominantly from the position of geographical isolation, thus this unique cross-continental collaboration explored and presented the making processes of artists who were facing challenges of isolation and remoteness. The *Margin to Margin* project aimed to give voice and visibility to peripheral artists and their communities, on their terms, through workshops, exhibitions, documentary video, blogs and social media platforms. By design, the project adopted a bottom-up approach to encourage, within the participating communities, agency and ownership. The project sought to empower participating communities by enabling them to design the

interventions with the artist-researchers. This means that suggestions of project ideas were discussed amongst the participating groups and artist-researchers, and then implemented by the communities to suit their needs according to their contexts. However, there are limits to what can be planned prior to entering the field, so some challenges were experienced in the activities.

Physical and digital participation was encouraged by the artist-researchers who sought and created opportunities for representing the artworks produced by the communities in meaningful ways (Sarantou, Akimenko & Escudeiro 2018). However, one of the major challenges the project dealt with throughout, was the use of digital tools to manage the *Margin to Margin* project over the three continents. Multiple digital and social media platforms were used and developed to stimulate connectedness and communication, such as a website and blogs, to share research and art outcomes for the benefit of the research participants and artist-researchers alike. Although at least some of these digital sharing activities were included in the project design, their specific formats resulted from feedback and ideas received from the participating communities. Initially, communication with the communities was conducted mostly via email and where possible, face to face. At the end of the project, and mostly due to the interest of communities to grow the connections between continents, many participants and the artist-researchers expanded their communication strategy to include social media, blogs and text message applications, such as Messenger and WhatsApp.

The ongoing collaboration with the communities remained flexible and open to change as the artist-researchers had to feel their way through the participants' needs, ethical considerations and changing project environments. The artist-researchers used digital approaches for virtual meetings and day to day communication. All virtual and face to face research meetings were digitally recorded as these discussions served as data that was utilised for ideas generation, project and research planning, analysis and reflection. Apart from digital strategies, this article will explore the varied ways the participating communities engaged in to connect and express their storied identities.

During the *Margin to Margin* project the artist-researchers twice engaged with a student community from the Murmansk State University. Two arts-based and storytelling interventions came about in December

2016, and one year later in December 2017. The results from the two interventions, which will be central to this article, were exhibited widely in Rovaniemi, Espoo and Streaky Bay. The first exhibition, titled '*Narrating the Marginal*', was displayed at the *Katve 1* and *Katve 2* galleries at *Arktikum* (December 2016 – January 2017). The second, '*Naisia Maaailman Laidalla*' (Women from the edges of the World), was exhibited at the *Helinä Rautavaara Museo* in Espoo, Helsinki (August – October 2017). The third exhibition, '*My Piece of Heaven*', was displayed at the *Hämärä* gallery at the University of Lapland (January 2018). The fourth exhibition, titled *Voices*, was located at the gallery of the Port Augusta Cultural Centre – Yarta Purtli in regional South Australia (February – March 2018). The last exhibition, '*Margin to Margin: Artists from the Edges of the World*' was shown in Streaky Bay of regional South Australia as part of the *Visible* arts festival (December 2018 – January 2019). In both interventions the Murmansk community was invited to participate with the communities in Rovaniemi, South Australia and Namibia to produce collaborative textile installations. During the first exhibition, many of the students also contributed individual art works.

This key objective of the article is to explore the synergistic relationships between resourcefulness and improvisation in artistic interventions. The article further proposes that the ability to identify, explore and actuate affordances within any given environment can contribute to learning, resilience and solution-oriented behaviours. The article asks: 'What were the resources that the students, project mediators and artist-researchers drew on to overcome the challenges they faced during the arts-based and research activities?', and 'How can researchers draw on the affordances within their research environments to overcome the challenges they face in arts-based research settings?'

The article is ordered by first explaining the methodological choices that it draws on. Thereafter a theoretical framework is set out, followed by a discussion about the two arts-based interventions. Finally, the findings are discussed and presented in a framework for how researchers can draw on the affordances within their research environments to learn and tackle day to day challenges.

1. Methodological outline

The research was approached by locating people (participants, communities, artists, makers, researchers) central to the research

process. Arts-based research (ABR) was the overarching research strategy adopted in the two arts-based interventions. It may appear irrelevant to apply arts-based research in artistic contexts, but the strength of the ABR approach lies in problem centeredness, and that it seeks to know 'differently' about the phenomenon under question in addition to its potential to create trust and rapport amongst communities, participants and researchers alike (Leavy 2017, p. 237-241). ABR methods cultivate empathy and self-reflection through the disruption of dominant narratives by utilising making, performance and storytelling (Leavy 2017). However, this means an increase in challenges as processes are not simplified, but rather multi-layered to encourage participation.

During the interventions, arts-based research methods assisted the negotiation of challenges through improvisation that often sustains 'self-organisation' (Fletcher 2008, p. 71). This term refers to effectiveness which is not guided or managed by an outside source, but from within a person or group, thus driving sustainability. In the interventions, but also the *Margin to Margin* project, 'self-organisation' was embraced as a practical bottom-up approach that aimed to empower the research participants. This approach relied on improvisation as a practical strategy as it incorporated pluralities and diversity, whilst drawing on broad ranges of ideas and engagement (Fletcher 2008). Research and project design are essential elements for successfully mediating projects in any research field, thus the selected analytical approach, which is an essential choice in research design, was based on the documented experiences of, and reflections by, the author.

2. Conceptual framework.

The article investigates the role of improvisation in research and creative processes. It is structured around a discussion of key theoretical but relevant concepts that relate to the relationship between art, design and improvisation, improvisation as a dynamic approach for addressing challenges, and improvisation and learning within a given environment.

Art, design and improvisation. Improvisation is an 'aspect of the broader human condition' in which creative and solution-oriented processes (Lewis & Piekut 2016, p. 2, 20), that are constituted of thinking and feeling, action and making. Within intricate environments, makers connect or disconnect steps and moments to generate agile response

to triggers within given environments. In art or design processes, improvisation could be seen as a conversation of the maker with an environment and the materials within. Improvisation has linked to wayfaring, knowing as you go (Ingold 2004), but it is also associated with the arts as it can generate new and unique outcomes in making that is solution-oriented (Lewis & Piekut 2016, p. 4). Improvisation is also strongly associated with play (Nachmanovitch, 1990), cognitive creativity and research-led practices in creative arts (Dean & Bailes 2016, p. 40).

Gerber (2007) introduced improvisation as an approach for supporting design work, but it is a key ingredient in design processes, those crucial moments in which the improviser draws on intuitive action (Nachmanovitch 1999, p. 14), enabling connectivity and negotiating challenges (Sarantou & Miettinen 2017). Norman (2010) claims that good design mitigates challenges. Improvisation is not a chaotic process or a second-best response to a challenge as is commonly assumed, but a system of accurate design in which moments of experimentation are guided by past experiences to enable discrepancies that compensate for environmental challenges (Secchi 2012, p. 8). Improvisation is also a way of creating different patterns or routines (Secchi 2012). Past experiences can guide accurate design during improvisation (Lewis & Piekut 2016).

The connective role of improvisation in design processes was illustrated by Sarantou and Miettinen (2017) through Buchanan's (2015) four design 'moments': invention, judgement, connection and development, integration and evaluation (p. 15). In line with Secchi (2012), Sarantou and Miettinen (2017) argue that the role of improvisation in design processes is to connect and disconnect the four design thinking moments, thus enabling flexibility and variety despite challenges that may be experienced within any given environment. Associations and relations between art, design and improvisations are illustrated above, but often artificial divides are set up and distinctions made between these concepts, while the interconnections and synergies between such terms receive less attention.

Improvisation as a dynamic approach for addressing challenges.

Reinterpreted, the Sarantou and Miettinen (2017) improvisation framework highlights the resources improvisers draw on, including experience, skill, intuition, experimentalism, judgement, recognition of promisingness, time and thereness. Improvisation is underpinned by risk taking during

experimentation, and overcoming uncertainties (Sarantou 2018; Montuori 2003). Thus, the resource of experimentalism enables invention, exploring unfinalised and untried techniques and ideas (Montuori 2003). Judgement is a resource for making informed decisions and a crucial step to determine desirability, feasibility and viability of an outcome (Buchanan 2015). Recognition is a resource for identifying affordances within an environment. 'Affordances are relationships', which refers to the actionable properties between individuals and their environments (Norman 1999, p. 39). Affordances thus are relationships between resources and the environment that guide improvisers to recognise promisingness (Chen et al. 2012). Improvisation is accepting and transforming what is immediately available (Leonard & Yorton 2012), while promisingness is solution-oriented. In actuating affordances for solutions to challenges, these resources shape lived experiences in work and life processes.

Tord Gustavsen (1999) advocates for improvisers to intimately *feel* the connections between separate details in processes and environments (p. 15). Jencks and Silver (2013) refer to the term 'ad hocism', urging a divorce from rule books to instead focus on lived experiences and how things are actually done, thereby overcoming challenges through adjustment and readjustment. Improvisers are resourceful as they carefully use resources in ingenious ways. Thus, improvisation should be utilised as a dynamic tool for guiding participation and co-creation through engagement in sensitive contexts. The literature explains the complex relationship and synergism between improvisation, resources and environments.

In overcoming challenges, solution-oriented making often entails a need for multidirectionality to deal with unforeseen elements and uncertainty in different environments (Montuori 2003, p. 240). Not everything goes as planned and agility is needed to cope. An improvisator needs to overcome fears of failure (ibid.). Improvisation is about minimising the dread as the unfamiliarity becomes familiar (Peters 2009). Summarised in an earlier statement by Montuori (2003), the key role of improvisation lies in coping with the lived experiences that are presented by overcoming challenges. It is as if navigation though the unknown creates new realities (Leonard & Yorton 2015).

Improvisation, learning and the role of a given environment.
Improvisation is linked to concepts of self-organisation, uncertainty and

adaptation (Lewis & Piekut 2016, p. 25). It is about finding solutions (Leonard & Yorton 2015) and managing to use what is available (Sarantou 2018). The new experiences produce learning, next to learning new knowledge on how to work with the resources that are available (ibid.). Nimkulrat, Niedderer and Evans (2015) state that many designers rely on tacit knowledge that can be gained through experience. Though improvisation, practitioners are 'willing to break with the continuity of the old and new' (Peters 2009, p. 118). The ability to continuously create new order out of challenging situations, or continuous co-evolution, ensures sustainability and facilitates learning (Mitleton-Kelly 2011). In turn, self-organisation drives sustainability and emerges as a result of ongoing learning and the negotiation of challenges. Here, improvisation plays a key role as it sustains 'self-organisation' (Fletcher 2008, p. 71).

The environment plays an important role in any improvisatory process (Sarantou, Akimenko & Escudeiro 2018). Environments can thus stimulate the shaping of new experiences through improvised processes when practitioners rely on their previous lived experiences to discover and learn (Sarantou et al. 2018, p. 1363). The learning, resources and new experiences go hand-in-hand in a holistic improvisation process (p. 1363). As the resources tell what is available and possible to do, it creates new experiences for the maker (p. 1363). Improvisers draw on experience and their acquired skills during improvisatory processes while they simultaneously gain these during the same processes (Sarantou & Miettinen 2017). They also draw on the primary resource of intuition, which are emotional experiences and automatic emotional judgements (Dunn et al. 2010, p. 1838). This resource is a cognitive process that happens intuitively and outside of consciousness in interplays of knowing and sensing (Sadler-Smith & Shefy 2004). Through improvisation it is possible to respond to stimuli within an individual's environment, as to improvise is to read the affordances of the environment by exploring both the constraints *and* possibilities created by new conditions in a given environment (Montuori 2003, p. 240; Peters 2009).

3. Two art making activities in Murmansk

In the following discussion, concrete examples will illustrate how solutions to challenges were improvised by actuating affordances in the given environment of the two arts-based interventions in Arctic Murmansk that came about at the Murmansk State University. The

intervention titled 'Повести о Пределах' (a Russian analogy to the title 'Narrating the Marginal') was hosted by the Art and Service Department of Murmansk Arctic State University (MASU) with a group of fourteen students and graduates of the department during December 2016. During the first days of the intervention the participants expressed their life stories through textile art, painting with acrylics and storytelling. During the second artist intervention the artist-researchers were not present as the activity was solely mediated virtually across the three continents of Australia, Africa and Europe.

In each of the locations the artists were given free reign to express, via textile arts and storytelling, their notions of happiness. The results from the first intervention brought forth various arts installations and the arts-based research method 'Life Story Mandala' that was widely published (Miettinen, Sarantou & Akimenko 2016; Sarantou et al. 2018; Miettinen, Sarantou & Kuure 2019). The results of the second intervention brought forth the arts installation titled 'My Piece of Heaven', which constituted of seven large collective and individual textile works of various dimensions, e.g. 1208 x 980 mm; 2005 x 2200 mm; 1895 x 1995 mm and so on). The textiles were often exhibited in a large rectangle or cube that was suspended in space. A sound installation accompanied the textile art, which was jointly produced by sound artist Jari Rinne from the University of Lapland and the participants telling their stories and using sounds to express their feelings of happiness. The participants *and* artist-researchers participated in the arts-based activities and storytelling to enhance empathic relationships between them, which was exemplary of the approach of the *Margin to Margin* project.

In both interventions, cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti 1999) were used as stimuli in the given environments. The cultural probes were designed and developed through several iterations by artist-researcher Satu Miettinen, Dean of the Faculty of Art and Design of the University of Lapland, and presented in different forms (Miettinen et al., 2019). The cultural probing kit of the first intervention consisted of circular-cut white linen and acrylic paints. The painted art works represented mandalas as the participants were asked to express or represent their life stories or cycles on the circular-cut textiles. After the mandalas were painted, the participants shared their stories that were embedded in the painted textiles. The artist-researchers participated in the first series of interventions that were hosted in all the participating artist communities

of the *Margin to Margin* project: Namibia, Finland, Russia and South Australia.



Figure 1: The Life Story Mandala installation that was created by the participating communities from Murmansk and South Australia. The smaller mandalas that form the 'nucleus' of the large mandala installation was created by the student community from MASU. This installation, which was displayed at the Dinner Room Gallery in Streaky Bay for the Visible Artist Festival, varied from the previous representations that were displayed in Rovaniemi and Espoo in Finland. Photography by the author.

The cultural probes of the second intervention, which was virtually mediated by the three artist-researchers in Russia, Namibia and Australia, consisted of written invitations to the participating communities. The words *'My Piece of Heaven'* was used as one element of the cultural probe. Through emails the participants were asked to create collaborative textiles of their choice, of approximately 2000 x 2000 mm. The participants were asked to express their notions of happiness by recording their stories or relevant sounds. Some interventions in the second intervention were partly supported by face-to-face interactions. For example, with students

from the University of Namibia (UNAM), Satu Miettinen participated in the intervention in Namibia, which was hosted at the Visual Arts Department of UNAM. In regional South Australia, the author of the article participated in the creation of the collaborative textile that was produced by the Fibrespace Incorporated artist collective, whilst she also assisted with the recording of the stories of the ArtsUp artist collective of Streaky Bay, who also contributed a work. Both Miettinen and the author participated in the textiles that were made by the group of Finnish artists from Rovaniemi. The third artist-researcher, Russian-born Daria Akimenko, collaborated virtually with the students from MASU to create their collaborative textile.

The varied stories that were recorded by the participants in all the locations, as well as the personal discussions that the author had with some of the participants in South Australia and Finland, presented good examples of the role that improvisation played in the making of their works. Many communities used the method of creating individual works that were then carefully and artfully sewn together to constitute the larger textile. Many artists enthusiastically shared their stories of making with the author, and strikingly many of them narrated varied approaches to wayfinding. For example, one participant from Streaky Bay wanted to show how the beach and the sea shape her feelings of happiness by applying re-used textiles in small sections to create the shape of a shell. She narrated how one action and decision led to the next, how she drew on her intuition and tacit knowledge of colour and textures, and went backwards and forwards to create the work.

Another participant from the Fibrespace Incorporated artist collective explained how she wanted to recreate the signs and sounds from her garden that was significant source for finding joy in her daily life. In her process she continued to discover new materials, for example candy wrappers that created particular sounds, or textiles of a particular texture, transparency or sheen that she was able to use to create a specific representation of her happy garden. The artist problem-solved according to her discoveries, findings or the triggers that she was able to find from her immediate and changing environment as she went along her daily tasks. She had a vague idea of what she wanted to express, but reported that she relied on 'aha' moments and improvisation to enable an action,

which often then paved the way for another discovery. Often, she had to undo steps to circumvent difficulties during making.

In terms of narrative sharing, the interventions in Russia presented some limitations to the artist-researchers who had to rely on their Russian-born colleague for translation and facilitation during the activities. Three MASU students communicated in English, although most students had a fair to good understanding of the language. As the project research methods were largely narrative- and story-based, it was crucial to generate understanding between all stakeholders. Interpretation was time consuming and required large amounts of energy and skill, apart from a sensitive approach by the interpreter to transmit meanings efficiently to generating understanding between the participants and artist-researchers. The formalities associated with working in the Russian academic context was exemplary of the challenges the translator had to deal with as it required sensitivity. Stemming from perhaps less formal backgrounds, the researchers had to navigate the institutional codes in order to create spaces for empathic sharing during the workshop.

The sound 'scape' created by Rinne entailed the overlapping of the storied sound within the exhibition spaces. This required focused and careful listening by the audiences to recognise narrations or sounds. With the mentioned linguistic and cross-cultural communication challenges in mind, the MASU students approached their *'My Piece of Heaven'* textile from a different perspective as storytelling in Russian may have meant that much of their notions of happiness may have not been understood. A striking connection between concepts such as hearing, listening, and perhaps the ability to communicate cross-culturally, may be embedded and represented by the *'My Piece of Heaven'* textile of the Russian students. The signs that resemble the shape of ears, or perhaps even inverted commas that are used to express direct speech in text, are presented in a large spiral that from a distance may also represent the shape of a larger ear. Thus, from the shapes that were used in the collaborative textile, one interpretation that the onlooker may take away from the collaborative art work can be connected to the ability to communicate despite the limitations that different languages present in cross cultural communication.



Figure 2: The collaborative textile installation 'My Piece of Heaven' by MASU (visible on the far left of the first image) was created from individually-made 'ear-shaped' sections that were stitched together. The image represents the exhibition that was hosted in Hämärä in Rovaniemi. The image on the right shows the details of the collaborative textile by MASU students. Image left: Photography by Satu Miettinen. Image right: Photography by the author.

The above interpretation is supported by the sound art that the students documented and that was carefully created in a sound scape by the sound artist. The sound art was strikingly different from the participant stories from Namibia, South Australia and Finland, that were mostly expressed in English and Finnish. The sound art from the MASU students was based on delicate sounds, such as a teaspoon that makes soft 'cling-clung' sounds in a tea cup, the irregular ringing of a bell that may remind the listener of the comforts of having a house pet, for example a cat nearby, bird song from a breezy garden, or soft footsteps through corridors or snow. The MASU students did not rely on spoken words to bring across their ideas, or sounds, that constitute their moments of happiness.

Another striking difference between the 'My Piece of Heaven' from MASU was that the work was not constituted by different 'stories' of the participants and then collated as a whole, but it was one large composition

that was carefully sewn together, perhaps to present layered meanings or trigger multiple and differentiated interpretations. Overlapping techniques and a spiral, representing continuity, was used, perhaps to illustrate the endurance of the stories and values the participants sought to bring across through their sound stories, which essentially will be interpreted in varied ways by the audiences.



Figure 3: The two textiles from the ArtsUp artist collective from Streaky Bay and MASU students from Murmansk (right), displayed at the Dinner Room gallery of Streaky Bay in South Australia. Photography by the author.

The author's personal reflections on, and interpretation of the work contributes to the understanding that arts-based methods may bring about in research environments where cross-cultural expression and interpretation may hamper meaningful data to be captured, thus also the transferral of knowledge is equally hampered. The *'My piece of Heaven'* presents an example of how such arts-based methods can be used to negotiate challenging research environments by presenting, as Patricia Leavy (2017) explains, opportunities for knowing differently. At the same time, this intervention serves as an example how knowing differently is not only based on textual, visual or and sign language, but also the knowledge that comes forth from engaging all the senses. The multi-

layeredness of the knowledge that can be presented, expressed through multi-sensual arts-based methods is further exemplified. Finally, the *'My Piece of Heaven'* from MASU is a quite holistic representation of, and a symbol for how to find alternative research approaches and methods that can enable the visibility and audibility of the researched communities – through hearing and listening.

4. Key findings

The resources that the students, project mediators and artist-researchers drew from in their immediate environments to overcome the challenges they faced during the arts-based and research activities, can be summarised as the following elements: a) narrative and cultural sharing, b) listening and learning, c) harnessing improvisation as a strategy, d) mediation, and e) place and temporal dimensions.

Narrative and cultural sharing. The artist-researchers improvised cultural sharing activities such as storytelling and sound performances and recordings. Arts-based approaches, such as storytelling and improvisation, actuated the participants' resources at hand. This means that the participants were able to draw on their local knowledge and experiences, intuition and insights into her own culture to navigate the context and build connections across borders and cultures. The bottom-up approach to the interventions enabled the communities to guide the art and cultural sharing processes. As a result, the artist-researchers often had to deal with challenges as they had to put aside their research agendas to focus on and centralise the activities proposed by the participants. Valuable personal connections started to shape while cultural sharing, observation and documentation occurred. The artist-researchers read the environment to be able to respond to the many creative ideas that developed.

Listening and learning. Listening is a skill that contributes a person's ability to learn and acquire knowledge. It requires a focus on the careful deciphering and interpretation of what was said and heard, which often does not generate the same outcome as messages or sounds are differently coded and decoded. Learning is the acquisition of skills or knowledge through experience, iteration, study or being taught (Sarantou, Sillgren & Pokela 2019). It is also the ability to "think, and question, and know how

to find answers” when needed (Grayling 2002, p. 158). An appreciation for the arts and ongoing education enable reflexivity, which means living more knowledgeably and having consideration and tolerance for the interests and needs of others (p. 158–159). Listening and learning in this article is argued to contribute to our ability to generate cross-cultural understanding.

Harnessing improvisation as a strategy. Improvisation enabled all workshop participants the needed flexibility to negotiate the flow of social, cultural and art making activities as they had to feel their way through the workshop. Improvisation was required on behalf of the artist-researchers for building connections with the participants through empathic art making activities. Participants had to draw on their intuition to respond to the cultural probes and according to the affordances within their given environments, and how events unfolded within their environment. Navigating not only language, but also cultural specificities were important. Despite the cultural sensitivity that the researchers displayed through their practice it was challenging to gain sufficient insight into the insider’s point of view, but through the use of arts-based methods and approaches such as improvisation and storytelling, nuanced expressions can enable equally nuanced interpretations that can enable knowledge sharing and learning.

Improvisation is essentially valuable in bottom-up research approaches to enable flexibility. The artist-researchers negotiated their changing research environments with a focus to accommodate participants’ needs, working within the research design parameters whilst considering the needed flexibility. Improvisation enabled the connection of elements, cycles and processes within this research design: it enabled research, process and project design on a practical level by considering researchers and the realities of their participating communities.

Mediation. The arts-based activities were mediated by the artist-researchers who felt their ways through the volatilities, and drawing on their previous interventions, mediation and research experiences. In terms of mediation, improvisation enabled the artist-researchers to draw on thereness (what was ‘there’, the immediate and often limited resources, including time that is often a moment outside of ‘real’ or measured time), working with basic art materials and techniques to transfer skills

and ideas to strengthen empathic relations between themselves and the participants. Through the resource of recognising thereness, the given, immediate 'natural', social and cultural environments, the artist-researchers drew on their knowledge and available materials to connect participants despite cultural, social and site-specific challenges. Intuitive actions guided the artist-researcher who used improvisation as a dynamic strategy in mediation.

The two arts-based interventions provided examples of the usefulness of improvisation as an approach to mediation as it can have a connective function in research environments. The arts-based methods selected in this project were conducive to improvisatory processes. Improvisation, which generates ideas, is plural, diverse, and *is* a solution-oriented approach that enables the navigation of stimuli within such to negotiate challenges. Offering a vivid playground for multidisciplinary and being essentially complex, creative, solution-oriented and guided by intuition, improvisation can be a dynamic approach for navigating challenges in mediation for arts-based research, art, design and craft practice.

Place and temporal dimensions. The temporal challenge inherent to all of the interventions persisted: while the time of engagement with the community was short and immediate, the topics and stories that emerged through the narrative processes included memories of the past entangled with moments in the present. The wide dissemination of the research and artistic outcomes over many months illustrate how temporal dimensions continued into the future. Additionally, the sound recordings and art were disseminated through a website of the *Voices* exhibition, which is still available online (<https://margintomargin.com/voices/>). In arts-based approaches and improvisation, time is often immeasurable, thus the time limitations for arts-based engagement challenged the stakeholders, prompting an economical approach to the use of this resource. However, strain was also experienced by the participants who juggled participation in the project, upcoming exams and the perpetual polar night period. At the same time places in the Arctic that were impacted by heavy snow storms, leaving roads in bad shape and buildings without power supply and cold, were elements that had to be managed and challenges to be overcome. The importance of places and spaces in the narrations of the recorded and stories emphasised the important role of place in

identity and art processes and expressions. The challenge, both temporal and climatic, impacted the artist-researchers who had to gauge their environment carefully in keeping with the sensitive approaches applied in the marginal communities. Practical implications meant that much time was invested in careful communication and translation, adopting flexible approaches to the institutional time tables, plans and agendas.

5. Conclusion

This article unpacked the synergistic relationship between improvisatory processes, environments and the resources that exist within them. The role of mobilising solutions to challenges via improvisatory processes through the recognition and actuation of affordances within environments is illustrated. The resources that research participants, mediators and researchers can use within their immediate environments to mitigate challenges encountered during (arts-based) research activities, were discussed. Challenges tend to inundate processes and systems with potential impasses that require innovative strategies and energy flows to overcome. It is only through recognising new relationships between available resources and challenges, which are situated within the specificities of environments, that improvisatory processes can offer new and multidirectional avenues to cope with challenges. Improvisation is an important strategy for mobilising solutions to challenges, but it also enables learning through wayfaring, discovery and knowing as one goes.

Arts-based approaches, including improvisation, intuition and flexibility, overcame the limitations whilst establishing connections between humans and communities by carefully building trust and creating empathy. Many of the multi-layered challenges discussed above were approached through improvisation, agility and flexibility. The connective role of improvisation in dealing with such challenges and uncertainty (Sarantou & Miettinen 2017), was illustrated through art-based research, art and design making. Wide dissemination through digital communication and exhibition were significant outcomes for the participating communities. The novelty of these approaches lies in the connections that were established between the participants, such as the student community in Murmansk, artist-researchers, and wider audiences.

References

1. Buchanan, R. (2015). Worlds in the making: Design, management, and the reform of organisational culture. *She Ji, The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 1(Autumn), 5–21.
2. Chen, B., Scardamalia, M., Resendes, M., Chuy, M. and Bereiter, C. (2012). Students' intuitive understanding of promisingness and promisingness judgments to facilitate knowledge advancement. *The future of learning: Proceedings of the 10th international conference of the learning sciences*, 1, 111–118.
3. Dean, R.T & Bailes, F. (2016). Cognitive Processes in Musical Improvisation. *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, 1, 39–58. Lewis, G., & Piekut, B. (Eds.). Oxford University Press.
4. Dunn, B. D., Galton, H. C., Morgan, R., Evans, D., Oliver, C., Meyer, M., ... & Dalgleish, T. (2010). Listening to your heart: How interoception shapes emotion experience and intuitive decision making. *Psychological science*, 21(12), 1835–1844.
5. Fletcher, K. (2008). *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys*. Earthscan, London and Sterling.
6. Gaver, B., Dunne, T., & Pacenti, E. (1999). Design: Cultural probes. *Interactions*, 6(1), 21–29.
7. Gerber, E. (2007). Improvisation principles and techniques for design. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems*, 1069–1072. ACM.
8. Grayling, A. C. (2002). *The meaning of things: Applying philosophy to life*. London: Phoenix.
9. Gustavsen, T. (1999). The dialectical eroticism of improvisation. *Improvisation. Between technique and Spontaneity*, 7–51.
10. Ingold, T. and Hallam, E. (2007). 'Creativity and cultural improvisation'. Hallam & Ingold (Eds.), *Creativity and cultural improvisation*, pp. 1.24. Oxford and New York: Berg.
11. Jencks, C., & Silver, N. (2013). *Adhocism: the case for improvisation*. Mit Press.
12. Leavy, P. (2017). Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches.
13. Leonard, K., and Yorton, T. (2015). *Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses «No, But» Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration--Lessons from The Second City*. HarperCollins.
14. Lewis, G., & Piekut, B. (Eds.). (2016). Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies. *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, 1, 1–38. Oxford University Press.
15. Miettinen, S., Sarantou, M., & Kuure, E. (2019). Design for Care in the Peripheries: Arts-based research as an empowering process with communities. *Nordes*, (8).

16. Mitleton-Kelly, E. (2011). A challenge theory approach to sustainability: A longitudinal study in two London NHS hospitals. *The Learning Organization*, 18(1), 45–53.
17. Montuori, A. (2003). The challenge of improvisation and the improvisation of challenge: Social science, art and creativity. *Human Relations*, 56(2), 237–255.
18. Nimkulrat, N., Niedderer, K. & Evans M. A. (2015). 'On Understanding Expertise, Connoisseurship, and Experiential Knowledge in Professional Practice'. *Journal of Research Practice*, 11, (2), 5–15.
19. Nachmanovitch, S. (1990). *Free play: Improvisation in life and art*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
20. Norman, D. A. (1999). Affordance, conventions, and design. *Interactions*, 6(3), 38–43.
21. Norman, D. A. (2010). *Living with challenge*. MIT press.
22. Peters, G. (2009). *The Philosophy of Improvisation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
23. Sadler-Smith, E., & Shefy, E. (2004). The intuitive executive: Understanding and applying 'gut feel' in decision-making. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 18(4), 76–91).
24. Sarantou, M., Sillgren, S. & Pokela, L. (2019). In her Lap. *Relate North: Collaborative Art, Design and Education*. Jokela, T., & Coutts, G. (Eds.). Viseu, Portugal: InSEA Publications.
25. Sarantou, M.A. (2018). Fashion Design: The connective role of improvisation in new learning experiences. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 6 (6), 1358–1364. doi: 10.13189/ujer.2018.060627.
26. Sarantou, M., Akimenko, D., & Escudeiro, N. (2018). Margin to Margin: arts-based research for digital outreach to marginalised communities. *The Journal of Community Informatics*, 14(1), 139–159.
27. Sarantou, M.A. & Miettinen, S.A. (2017). 'The connective role of improvisation in dealing with uncertainty during invention and design processes'. *Conference proceedings Research Perspectives on Creative Intersections*, Design Management Academy, Hong Kong.
28. Secchi, E. 2012. 'Essays on Service Improvisation Competence: Empirical Evidence from the Hospitality Industry'. All Dissertations. Article 999.