

Image-based techniques in artistic research

Relevance for visual arts and spatial research

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This paper focuses on artistic research methods used to create images or image spaces. After providing a brief introduction to the significance and visual readability of these methods in the context of image studies and artistic work, the paper goes on to discuss the interpretation of general artistic methods in the various disciplines in which they are employed. It concludes by outlining a range of specific artistic methods and practices with reference to my own art and research projects.

The growing significance of the image in all aspects of life and research is undeniable (Breckner 2010: 9). In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the scope and intensity of academic research into this topic (Meier et al. 2014: 12). Academic disciplines that employ phenomenological approaches, such as visual anthropology, ethnology, human geography, and promenadology (Burckhardt 1985, 2004, 2006), have developed research methodologies that involve the use of artistic methods. This *iconic, pictorial, or visual turn* (Burda/Maar 2004; Mitchell 2008; Bredekamp 2004) is reflected in the growing number and specialization of publications in the fields of image studies and sociology and is also occurring in pedagogy, design, and film and literature studies. For example, “photography transformed art history into a field of image studies because it became a research tool instead of a mere object of research” (Bredekamp 2004: 367, own translation). In addition to highlighting the ubiquitous presence of images, this *visual turn* also addresses calls for a differentiated and interdisciplinary approach to image studies.

In an academic context, images are increasingly being used both for collecting data and for communicating ideas. Against this backdrop, it has also become evident that “in the medium of the image, in the medium of iconicity, processes of understanding and conveying meaning take place; to date, there are very few empirically and methodologically sound approaches for interpreting these processes” (Bohnsack/Krüger 2004: 3, own translation). Images are not merely visual representations, they also present the world as a book in their own language. It is no longer just the written word that is usurping the place of reality (Blumenberg 1983 [orig. 1981]: 17)—due to its universal availability and simultaneity, the image is also attributed with making reality obsolete as a definitive, unambiguous concept. “Comprehensibility is increasingly oriented toward aesthetics”

(ibid.: 20, own translation). This means that artistic methods can also convey aspects of reality instead of merely capturing them empirically. In this context, artistic methods can be used to acquire knowledge in areas where quantitative research methods are unable to reach individual stakeholders or groups. However, from an academic perspective, the subjectivity of qualitative artistic approaches is often viewed critically due to the challenges of obtaining verifiable results, and therefore intersubjective verifiability is typically preferred. This is not always possible, as demonstrated by a range of receptions in an artistic and academic context—for example, people who visit a photo exhibition may have very different experiences of works, which are open to interpretation. In contrast, written academic findings should not be open to interpretation. In the context of an academic publication, the readability of images, which are typically used as supporting evidence, is assured by means of an explicit caption within the text. In an artistic context, on the other hand, images place different demands on viewers. With regard to the academic interest in artistic methods, the following aspects can be noted:

- Artistic methods are regarded as epistemic tools of knowledge in order to generate data, conclusions, and results that cannot be obtained with conventional academic methods. In addition, the use of intuitive artistic approaches opens up the possibility of researching topics that may be inconceivable from an academic perspective. At the same time, artistic expression opens the door to a wider audience (for instance, by staging an exhibition or production).
- Artistic methods and artistic media have been used to envision information (Tufte 1990): in other words, to represent, convey, and illustrate discoveries, knowledge, and findings visually.
- Artistic methods are also deployed in art therapy in the fields of depth psychology and therapeutics, although this lies beyond the scope of this paper.

The second purpose for visualizing information—namely to convey information (e.g., in publications, exhibitions, or as *maps*) more quickly, easily, and clearly to the academic community or interested members of the public—is application-oriented. This form of artistic practice is more process-oriented and involves the use of artistic methods and media as tools in order to fulfill a specific purpose. “Mapping artistically requires you to explore spaces, question conventional wisdom, and make new discoveries.” (Busse 2008: 20, own translation). Maps that were not produced during an interview or sketches that were not drawn during a walk or while inspecting a material (see Section 3.2) and that serve merely for visualization purposes have a graphic and illustrative, but no artistic character, notwithstanding the use of creative media and methods. Leaving aside the definition of contemporary art as having no purpose, there are a wide range of influential studies inspired by nature, whether as drawings, etchings in books, or photographs, such as Karl Blossfeldt’s plant studies, which were released in 1929 in an international publication as *Art Forms in Nature* (Stump 2000: 11). These images were originally intended as teaching materials for his plant modeling course (1899–1932) at the Kunstgewerbeschule school of arts and crafts in Berlin during the Jugendstil period. In 1926, a gallery owner exhibited his photographs for the first time alongside other works from the artistic avant-garde. In addition to facilitating the publication of this unique collection of plant im-

ages, the exhibition also presented Blossfeldt's extensive photographic works in an artistic context for the first time. His photographs subsequently came to be regarded as the "Neue Sachlichkeit" style of German art.

The exceptional example of Karl Blossfeldt is testament to the regularity of the aspects listed above, as his extensive photographic work on plants involved the use of an artistic practice that became a work in its own right. This, in turn, is consistent with the definition of artistic methods as epistemic tools of knowledge.

Strictly speaking, only this first aspect can be interpreted as the type of artistic method found in a work. Artistic methods arise from a creative process, in connection with an interest in divergent effects and efficacies, as well as a desire to capture spatially aesthetic and social contexts using different mediums of notation, such as sketches, travel drawings, mental maps, photography, film, and video. If, over many years and projects, an artistic method evolves into a comprehensible and replicable system of artistic approaches, a work of art may be created by the artist or collective. A more detailed analysis of the role of work and artist, as well as the concept of art in this context, is not within the scope of this paper.

1 Arts-based methods

The sociologist Patricia Leavy defines arts-based methods as a "transdisciplinary approach to knowledge building that combines the tenets of the creative arts in research contexts" (Leavy 2019: 4). This definition of creative arts is very broad and encompasses all forms of artistic expression, including designs and artisanal practices. It therefore goes beyond the application-oriented approach of McNiff, who defines arts-based research "as the use of artistic expression by the researcher, either alone or with others, as a primary mode of inquiry" (McNiff 2014: 259). McNiff's definition focuses on the art-therapeutic approach, while Leavy and Chilton refer to a wide range of methodical approaches and terms, such as *art-based inquiry*, *arts-based social research*, *performative inquiry*, *practice-based research*, or *aesthetic research practice* (Chilton/Leavy 2014). Their definition of arts-based research methods therefore encompasses all investigative approaches used in sociology, psychology, pedagogy, psychotherapy, and anthropology that are based on an understanding of art. No reference is made here to artistic methods within visual arts. For the purposes of a residual definition, do artistic research methods include all instruments that cannot be precisely described (McNiff 2019: 31)?

A wide range of different approaches can be subsumed under the term arts-based research methods, which cannot be addressed comprehensively in this paper—just as it is not possible to provide a comprehensive definition of the concept of art or artwork. However, artistic research methods can be clearly explained through their original disciplines—the visual and performing arts—in which procedural creation plays an elementary role.

2 Process orientation

Process plays a key role in art as the outcome is generally open-ended. Adopting an open-minded approach is essential when engaging with an encounter or phenomenon. Allowing accidents, failures, surprises, and impressions that differ from expectations and viewing this as an open-ended process is comparable with *heuristics* or *grounded theory* in sociology. This is a process-oriented strategy that does not necessarily require the use of a linear approach. Process orientation is an iterative process in which the proposition is gradually consolidated in numerous phases. The conception of an exhibition or the creation of an image space for viewers typically takes months, from the initial research and collection of information through to the choice of theme for field research, the choice of images, and the exact content, installation, and composition techniques.

The following section outlines a few of the image and image-space generating artistic methods (Bürkle 2016: 39–45) that I have employed in my capacity as an artist and academic and provides an in-depth analysis of their artistic processes and qualities, as well as their content-motivated application in the context of an art and research project.

The following seven criteria from Patricia Leavy (2015, 2017, 2019a) summarize the essential characteristics of artistic research methods:

- Artistic methods must be suitable for the research topic in question, and should be transparent and precise.
- The meaning and effectiveness of the work must be considered.
- The results must be made available beyond the world of academia (wider public).
- The research participants must play an active role.
- The result must be authentic and have artistic merit.
- The research method should lead to the creation of a new and unique work.
- Artistic research methods must also comply with ethical standards, such as safeguarding the privacy of participants and respecting copyright.

Within the framework of the art and research projects I have worked on in collaboration with interdisciplinary teams of artists and academics, I have developed a series of interrelated and mutually influencing methods for arts-based research. In addition to fulfilling Leavy's evaluation criteria, these methods have enabled me to better combine my own artistic work with qualitative socio-spatial research with reference to *objective hermeneutics* (Oevermann 2002; Scherf 2009). Using the example of an artistic research project on migration, spaces, and the identity of architecture in the context of Turkish remigration, the following section provides an overview of the artistic methods I have developed and practiced during my research projects (Bürkle 2016: 39–45).

3 Artistic methods in the art and research project *Migrating spaces/architecture and identity in the context of Turkish remigration*

During the course of this art and research project, spatial perceptions and built spaces of Turkish returned migrants were investigated under the assumption that the intercultural

tural reality of migrants and their construction of identity corresponded to their experience of architecture. Using a series of approaches derived from spatial theory, the project also identified clear two-way relationships between physical space and social phenomena.

The project team investigated the design and spatial characteristics of houses built by returning or commuting migrants in Turkey. By conducting a visual analysis of their building culture, the team was able to draw conclusions about continuity and change in the lifestyles of returning migrants. The aim of the project was to create a typology of architectural styles against the backdrop of the migrants' transnational links—in other words, a typology of spaces in the context of Turkish remigration (see Fig. 4 and 7).

In addition to demonstrating how a migratory background determines the design of a migrant home in their country of origin, the project also revealed how perceptions of images and spaces from Turkey and Germany influence, supplement, overlap, or contradict each other. At the same time, the research showed how the link between identity and architecture (see Schoper 2010) reflects the relationship between remigrants as home builders and their homes—the images and spatial models on which the vernacular architectural styles of Turkish remigrants are based.

3.1 Visual field research

As a multidimensional (sociological, ethnographic, and artistic) method of perception, visual field research constitutes an important methodological basis of artistic research. In the context of this project, it enabled the team to access interviewees via the visual appearance of homes, which indicated the German migration background of the occupants who built them. Using a set of predefined criteria, such as identifiable deviations from the local building style as an indicator for homes that might belong to German-Turkish returning migrants in the project *Migrating Spaces* (Bürkle 2016: 41), the team shortlisted potential interviewees and formulated a strategy for making contact. Interviewees were contacted either directly or through neighbors. A “snowball sampling” (Akremi 2014: 272, own translation) strategy was then deployed to identify other potential interviewees from Germany who had built a house in the local area. In this context, the inclusion of photographs in field work implies the broadening of visual perspectives (Boost et al. 2018: 30).

In addition, in the context of urban environments, visual field work can itself be used as a method of participant observation. For example, photography and videography can be used to collect spatial data (such as locations) in the form of static and moving images of homes and the surrounding urban environment. In this context, visual field research encompasses both sociological methods and artistic practices. In the interdisciplinary team, this method of visual research was extended in a specific way, as the project involved both the description of spaces from a visual cultural studies perspective and socio-spatial analysis, all underpinned by an artistic understanding of spaces as *place* and *space*. The results of this research project are consistent with the thesis of Löw et al. (2008: 354)—as symbolic agglomerations, images are fundamentally based on materiality, and as visual arguments, provide interpretative models for political, historical, and normative meanings, which must be sociologically linked back to the materiality of spatial con-

stitution. Visual field research therefore describes and analyses the self-constitution of individuals in and through space.

3.2 Using mental maps in structured interviews

As a first step to narrow down the field of research, a convenience sample (Akremi 2014: 272) was used to interview Turkish migrants living in Berlin about their perceptions of space. In 2013, the research team developed a questionnaire for these interviews based on previous student research projects in the Department of Visual Art at Technische Universität Berlin. The questionnaire was designed to provide insight into perceptions of built and urban space. Respondents were also asked to draw (from memory) their house or apartment in Germany and the home they had built in Turkey.

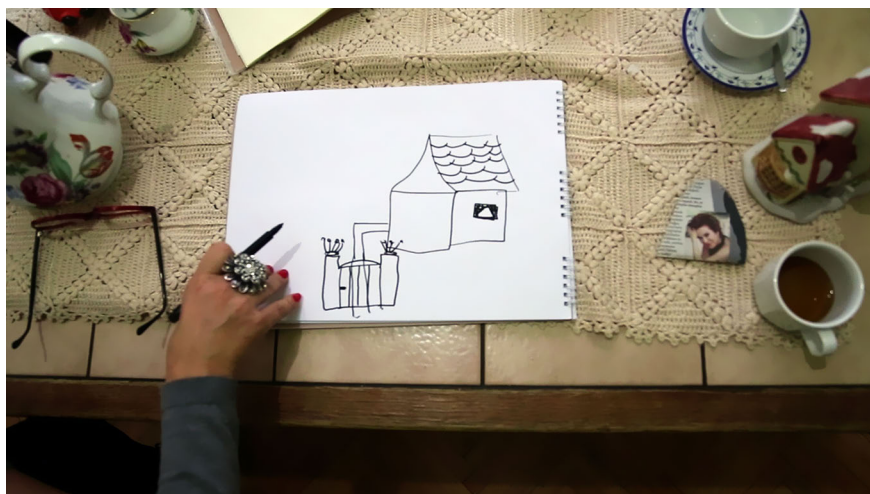


Fig. 1: Mental map drawn by an interviewee | ©Stefanie Bürkle/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2013

This mind-mapping method laid the groundwork for an in-depth discussion of space with the interviewee. As a form of graphic notation, the mind map played a supporting role in conveying the subjective spatial knowledge of the interviewees and enabled the interviewer to ask more targeted and specific questions to encourage the expression of implicit spatial and planning knowledge.

3.3 Topological matrix

To enable the systematic collection of data and a comparable overview of selected images, statements, and textual information, a multi-dimensional topological matrix was developed with the aim of bringing different sources together relative to the spatial-locational relationships in thematic categories. As a form of information architecture and as a tool for presenting spatial data, it provided the foundation for an integrative, aca-

demic, and artistic reappraisal of the previously evaluated data and results. During the research project, the constantly growing and changing topological matrix provided the interface between the investigation, research, and analysis phase as it created relationships that transcended biographical and spatial references. The topological matrix is itself a knowledge space and is consistent with the model of *visual grounded theory*, which was developed by sociologist Krzysztof Tomasz Konecki using his “multisliced” model of image analysis.

“The multislice imagining is a grammar of visual narrations analysis that accents the following stages: a) an act of creating pictures and images (analysis of context of creation); b) participation in demonstrating/communicating visual images; c) the visual product, its content and stylistic structure; d) the reception of an “image” and visual aspects of presenting/representing something.” (Konecki 2011: 131)



Fig. 2: Topological matrix | ©Stefanie Bürkle/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2011

In this statement, Konecki describes the outcome of a consolidation of visual languages that occurs as a result of process orientation. The resulting multimedia walk-in spatial art installation generated by this topological matrix offers a multitude of refer-

ences, which encourage participation and create an individual experience (see Fig. 2). The installation is thus itself an image and in turn creates images as an experience.

3.4 Exhibition as a curated knowledge space

Photographs, texts, and videos from the visual field research and structured interviews were exhibited together with the topological matrix in an artistic spatial context as part of a walk-in, multisensual knowledge space (Bürkle 2018: 131). A key part of the exhibition was a multi-channel video installation, which merged the film, interview, and image sequences in an image and perceptual space (see figs. 3, 5, and 6). This gave the socio-spatial investigation into the architecture and identity of Turkish remigrants a spatial dimension within the exhibition spaces—in other words, visitors were able to experience the spaces for themselves. This constituted a transformation, as well as an educational experience. By presenting the results of an artistic research project in the form of an exhibition, we enabled a wider public beyond the world of academia to access socially relevant themes from potentially unusual perspectives, both aesthetically and sensually. Images, research texts, and discourses were then collated in an art-themed academic publication, which was published in place of a classic exhibition catalog, thus giving the visitors “access to sensual, physical, affective, emotional, and aesthetic spaces” (Boost et al. 2018: 30, own translation).



Fig. 3: *Migrating Spaces* exhibition at SALT Istanbul, 6-channel video installation | ©Stefanie Bürkle/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2016

This multi-methodological approach enabled spatial-analytical and migration-related sociological issues to be explored by the various disciplines involved (art, sociology, philosophy, and planning studies) from new perspectives. To facilitate these exchanges, two discussion panels comprised of members of the public and guests were organized during the Berlin exhibition at *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*. The fact that the exhibition

could be shown both in Berlin and at SALT in Istanbul had additional significance: The same exhibition was received very differently in Berlin compared to Istanbul—this alternative perspective also revealed the explosive nature of the topic in a socio-political context.



Fig. 4: *Migrating Spaces* exhibition at SALT Istanbul, mapping and typology | ©Stefanie Bürkle/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2016

The empirical sources from the field research were developed into an artistic and sensual concept and made accessible to the academic community, as well as the wider public: an example of an innovative form of academic communication. In principle, a distinction should always be made between exhibitions as a form of free artistic expression and exhibitions that merely serve an illustrative purpose in the sense of “Communicating academic findings in an artistic form” or even the “Eventization of academic disciplines” (Gauß/Hannken-Illjes 2013/2012, own translation)

In an artistic context, exhibitions do not have a didactically mediating or purely knowledge-oriented purpose—instead, they exhibit “open works” as defined by Umberto Eco. In his observations on “open works” and “works in movement,” Eco notes, “Our Western aesthetic tradition forces us to take ‘work’ in the sense of a personal production, which may well vary in the ways it can be received, but which always maintains a coherent identity of its own” (Eco 1973: 56, own translation). These works are characterized by the invitation to *create the work* together with the artist (Eco 1989: 139, emphasis

in original). With regard to the specific scenography of the *Migrating Spaces* exhibition, visitors were presented with an “open work” in the sense that they did not see a linear, documentary-style narrative but rather a composition of four translucent video screens that were freely positioned throughout the space (see Figs 3, 5, and 6).

4 Interpretation, ambiguity, and irritation

The *Migrating Spaces* exhibition was arranged such that visitors were unable to view all four video projections simultaneously from any point in the room. The soundtrack, which contained responses from interviewees and sound recordings (ambient sounds from the local surroundings), was played via speakers in the room. Subtitles in Turkish and English were projected onto the walls of the room to ensure they were easy for visitors to read (see Fig. 3, 5, and 6). As they walked through the exhibition space, each visitor pieced together their own film—no two visitors saw the same identical video installation. In addition, as the videos were shot from a tripod and no pan shots were used, visitors only saw fixed-position frames (videographies). Like stage portals, these show views of framed urban environments with changing scenes, such as moving vehicles and pedestrians crossing the road. As it was not possible to identify the source of the narrative on the video screens, some visitors attributed the “backstage” voices to other people in the exhibition room. This spatial interweaving of image, sound, and viewer created an almost theatrical, participatory dimension to the exhibition.



Fig. 5: *Migrating Spaces* exhibition in Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, 6-channel video installation | ©Stefanie Bürkle/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2016



Fig. 6: *Migrating Spaces* exhibition in Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, 6-channel video installation | ©Stefanie Bürkle/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2016

From Eco's perspective, there are many ways in which a work can be completed; as such, it must always be "open" in order to give viewers the space to interpret it in their own way. "The artist offers the interpreter a work to be completed: He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretative dialog, a form that is his form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen." (Eco 1973: 55, own translation)



Fig. 7: *Migrating Spaces* at SALT Istanbul, video portraits | ©Stefanie Bürkle/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2016

Receptions of art are ambiguous, cannot be replicated, and vary depending on the viewer. This is an inherent component of contemporary art. As a result, the unambiguity demanded by academic research is fundamentally at odds with the nature of visual arts. The use of artistic methods in academic research for the purposes of presentation and visualization should be regarded as illustrative in nature. The integrated application of academic and artistic methods as epistemic tools of analysis within the research process and their equivalent application for the purposes of producing academic texts can generate new perspectives and results for interdisciplinary research teams, and thus for the adoption of true interdisciplinary approaches. As demonstrated by the *Migrating Spaces* exhibition, empirical sources from artistic field research can be developed into an artistic, sensual, and spatial experience and made accessible to the academic community, as well as the wider public. The result was a physical knowledge space that gave visitors a sensual, multi-perspectival insight into the topic of research, and in doing so, encouraged visitors to complete the exhibited work through their interpretation of the space.

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