

# Aspects of Research Combining Academic and Artistic Practices with Sport

*Matti Tainio*

*matti.tainio@aalto.fi*

*Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture*

*Arabia Campus*

*Hämeentie 135 C, Helsinki*

*PO Box 31000*

*FI-00076 AALTO*

## Abstract

My paper is based on my doctoral research dealing with the connections between visual art and sport. The paper makes an inspection of the relationships between the three elements of my ongoing research – art, sport, and academic research. The final results of the research will be presented as an academic dissertation, consisting of the theoretical work as well as the practical and participatory work as a professional artist and as a hobbyist distance runner. The artistic work has been presented as a series of three exhibitions during the course of the research.

The paper will deal with the connections of the three elements, how they affect each other during the research, how their different perspectives to the same subject transforms the research, and their alternating steers the research to unexpected paths. The role of the finished artworks in relation to the artistic work/activity will also be treated.

In addition to my research practices, I will deal with the possibilities and benefits of combining artistic work to the academic research as well as the dangers and failures of it.

## Introduction

This paper deals with my ongoing research about the connections and interplay between the visual arts and sports. The objective of the research is to increase the understanding about relevant recent changes both in the arts and in sport as well as minor changes in their relationship to each other in contemporary culture. The focus is on the contemporary situation, however in order to understand the current situation a broad historical survey is also included. My aim is to explore the practices of art and sport at a conceptual level and to view them as systems that are in a continuous process of change, rather than static disciplines whose changes represent only minor adjustments to the whole concept.

With the aim of integrating practice based knowledge with the more traditional research, I have included my own artistic pursuits as one element of the study. This particular

artistic endeavor was be realized in a series of three exhibitions. Two of them have already been completed for some time and the third was finished at the same time as I was writing this paper. An important aspect of this artistic work is adding a participatory element to my academic work – instead of relying only on secondary experiences on the nature of artistic work, I can use my own experience of artistic practice and artistic thinking as a source of information.

My participatory approach also extends to incorporating my own sport practice in to my work. I am a hobbyist distance runner. Because I started running in my thirties, I have no serious competitive ambitions, however I run regularly enough to be able to use my experiences to the benefit of my research. Distance running is also used as a salient example of modern sport throughout the research. In addition the benefits of being able to use my own experiences, as research material for the study, this choice is justified by the key role that running has played in the history of sport. Running has been part of the classic array of sports since the earliest days of organized competition and its significance has been sustained by ongoing developments in the modern world of sport – even if the distance running does not occupy the same position of glory today as during the 20th century. The latest evidence of its importance as a sport is the growing popularity of hobbyist running. Starting modestly with the introduction of jogging in the late 1960's it has since developed as an extremely popular form of fitness training and leisure pastime, while running marathons – previously a strenuous competition intended only for specialists – has become an everyman's sport.

The fact there are three diverse elements affecting my research – academics, arts and sports – makes my situation somewhat unique and more complex than the average research project. The central objective of this paper is to illuminate and analyze the roles of these three elements in my research as well as summarize the consequences of taking an artistic approach on the overall results of the research.



**Image 1. View from the exhibition “What I Think About When I Think About Running” (Sports Museum of Finland 2012).**

### Three Elements – Three Points of View

Each of the three elements of my research provide their own distinctive perspective on the subject, and each has a characteristic role with the capability to change the course of the study. The essential starting point in my work is the researcher's point of view; my aim is to study the subjects from the inside, from the practitioner's point of view. This is in contrast to the more conventional research perspective, wherein the researcher attempts to remain in an apparently objective outsiders position at all the times. While I do understand that I cannot conduct the entire research project from the subjective practitioner's perspective, the very attempt to do so serves as the foundation of my study.

Academic practice is the backbone of the research project, even if artistic elements are included and even featured. It provides the tools for understanding the history and the concepts of art and sport. An understanding of the systems and frameworks that guide the practical pursuits of art and sport can be found in the cultural histories and sociology of these fields. Otherwise vague aesthetic sensations about art and sport can be articulated more clearly and thoroughly through the traditions of philosophical aesthetics. The academic research tradition also provides the primary technique for articulating the research and its results – the written language in formal academic style.

I can therefore say that academic practice is the core practice of my study. I have spent more working hours learning how to pursue academic research than with artistic practice; sports I practice on my own time. The most tangible result of my doctoral studies will be an academic publication – with an artistic twist. Indeed, even though the academic element of my work may be central, it does not mean that my work will be traditional

academic research in every sense – the other two practices will every now and then rock the boat. For instance, during my studies the observations made through the lenses of art and sport prompted me to consider the direction and basis of the academic work. And again, when the results of academic and artistic work are set alongside each other in the finished dissertation, their different but parallel workings will hopefully create a new kind of combination.

Art has a distinctive role in my research. Exploring my studio practices themselves does not further my objectives – I am more interested in the effects my artistic work has on my thinking processes. Art is used for creating alternative views on sport and formulating nonverbal questions and claims about both sport and art. Somehow the finished artworks are not really relevant to this objective, but rather the path taken in making them. The finished works can reveal some aspects of sport (or art) I have not realized before, but when the process of making the artworks is finished, they lose their importance to me and to my study. Art's role here seems to be somewhat paradoxical: the artistic work is for me, while my research and the artworks themselves are for the audience. The most significant part of the artistic work is the process of thinking, planning and executing the artworks. This process provides me with a different angle of thinking about the subjects of my research. I am not confined by the boundaries of academic thinking, which can limit theoretical associations and leaps of thought. If the academic work resembles steady climbing towards the summit, the artistic work is a daring leap in the direction of the next grip or footing. The theoretical work gives the first footing and points out some possible directions to explore, but when the artistic process is started, it takes quite an independent path. Regardless of the independence of the artistic work, however, it cannot take an entirely random direction as the goals of the artistic and academic work are the same.

Unlike in the academic work, I do not have a fixed set of tools for my art. I usually choose the methods that interest me at the moment and provide the most possibilities to help the work of art reach its goal: that is, to create an experience that allows the perceiver to follow my path of thinking around the work's subject. I do have some methods I regularly work with however the set I am using seems to change over time. There are some recurrent features in my work, but they are not linked to the media used. The works are often somewhat autobiographical – not in a narrative sense but the work frequently relies on my personal experiences and remarks. Much of my work is performative in nature; I set myself a task and the final work is a documentary of this action. The combination of the task and the documentation generates the artistic element in the work. Often I tend to have an inclination towards a somewhat satirical view in my art. The basic reason for this is not that I am trying to be funny, but rather that I do not want to make my treatment of the subject overly serious. I find this approach successful especially when I want to be provocative, but not irritate my audience too much. I have found this useful particularly when working with sport, where my view on sport diverges considerably from the view of many sport fanatics.

Sport has another function in the research. It represents my personal commitment, not mentioned in the research plan or required by the university, but nevertheless an important element of the research. Sport – my running habit and other more occasional practices – is more in the background than the two other practices. Its main role in this project is to provide personal experiences, and thus understanding of other athletes' experiences. I run hundreds of kilometers every year – not enough to make me a top

runner, but enough to give me an understanding of the nature of distance running today. Most of this understanding thus comes from my bodily experiences – i.e. just running. Experiences from repeating local routes, running the year round and in all different types of weather are all important for my understanding. In addition to the running i do myself, I follow running and related events in the media as well as advertising about running equipment. I visit shops to see new running equipment and follow different internet sites and discussion forums that feature these topics. All these activities – that perhaps belong more to my hobby than my study – provide me insight on recent trends in distance running. While I follow the running scene mainly because of my own interest, and the information I gather from these diversions is usually not valid in the strictest research sense, it does provide clues to finding new research directions. For even though the information is not always academically valid, the knowledge about the informal running community in Finland, and trends in training and equipment, gives me a good background for making claims about the nature of sport today. The results of this general comprehension can be readily seen both in the academic part of my research and in my artistic work.

Like the other elements in my research, sport does not only influence the two other practices – it is also influenced by them. During the years i have pursued this project, I have become more sensitive about the running experience. It has partly happened because I have tried to be aware of my bodily experiences while running, and partly because I understand the historical particularity of running as sport and I can see it developing towards something new – not a sport as it has been understood since the late 19th century, but still a proper sport. My running has also developed in a more professional sense, because I have used running as an artistic tool. Nowadays, I have to be fit enough to run much longer distances than I used run to before I began this research. My running has on the other hand become more work-like, which is not always a good thing but cannot be denied.

## The Results of Artistic Work

I have now completed all three artistic projects as exhibitions. I have tried to find three artistic views on sport that would, taken together, give a diverse and alternative outlook on the landscape of contemporary sport. The idea of using three different views had been in my mind from the start, but I intentionally left the specific themes of the individual projects open. I just had vague thoughts about their general ambience. I did not want to be completely pro-sport or anti-sport, but rather to show the possibilities of sport without the constant quest for winning or hunt for records. My plan was to exhibit how sport would look if it were used for something else. I had not completely defined the idea of presenting sport without the quest for winning or records when I started my work, I was simply trying to find new ways to look at sport and present them in a manner that was artistically justified. I wanted to find ways to present sport that would do justice to the good and interesting aspects of sport, at least as I thought about them, but it is only looking at the project that the idea as a whole was revealed.

Some would say that sport stripped from competition and records is not sport at all. I agree that original sport distinguished themselves from earlier body cultures mainly

through these two aspects. However, I would claim that today sport has permeated our culture completely and this process has broadened the notion of sport compared to its original concept. Nowadays sport can be called sport even though competition and records are not constantly stressed as the most important features. Much of today's sport is done for experiences and well-being and these aspects are the ones I have been most interested in.



**Image 2. View from the exhibition “On the Run” (Gallery Pirkko-Liisa Topelius 2008).**

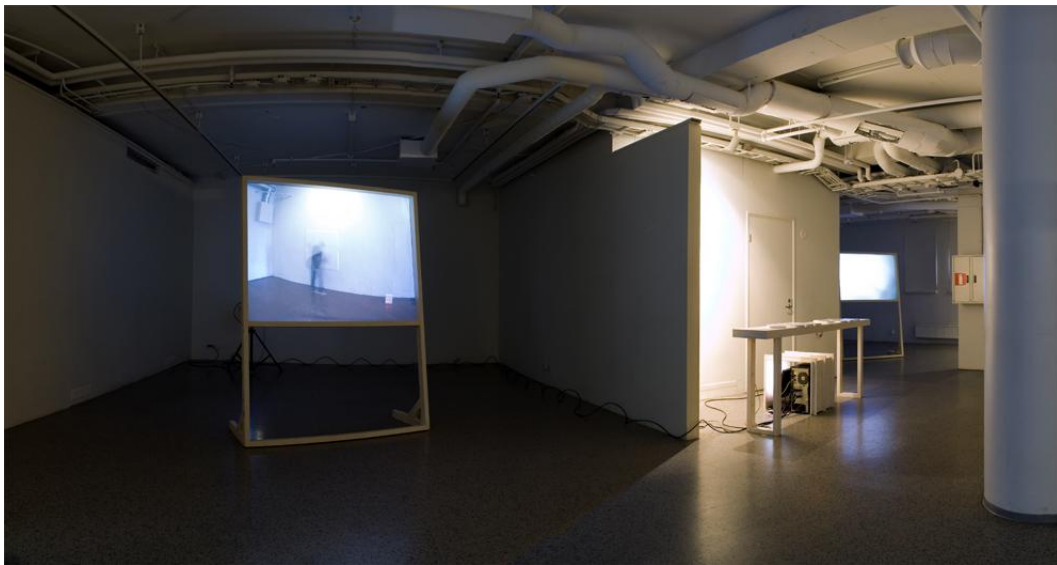
The first of my artistic project (On the Run, 2008) simply dealt with the contemporary practice of distance running and hobbyist distance runners. It was an experiment in exploring the aspects of one sport through artistic work, looking at how the artist's experience of running could be merged with the more general understanding about running and runners. The project was presented as an exhibition in a gallery.



**Image 3. Stills from video Cooper test (2010), one of the videos in the installation Art-Sport-Play.**

The second exhibition (Kaksi – Två, 2010) was a construction of an imaginary art-sport narrative. The idea developed from my understanding about art and sport as historically

developed practices. Both visual art and sport emerged as independent practices during the 18th and 19th centuries, in a similar manner to many other cultural practices, including other arts and sciences. As a result, the modern world understood cultural practices as belonging to separate and clearly defined spheres of activity. This notion of cultural practices was maintained for most of the 20th century and just like other practices art and sport had no real contact with each other. It was only during the last few decades that it has been possible to detect some kind of crossing of the borders as new forms of art and sport appear, as well as in attitudes of a new kind within the practitioners of these new forms. In this project, I created an experimental field between art and sport by personally testing different actions (typical deeds) belonging either to art or sport or something in between them. I documented these actions on video from both the perceivers and the participant's point of view. The result was presented as an installation where the resulting fourteen videos from both angles were presented in a synchronized fashion on two screens. The exhibition audience also had the ability to influence the order in which the videos were seen, by using a custom made interface.



**Image 4. Installation Art-Sport-Play in the exhibition Kaksi – Två (Gallery Sinne, 2010).**

In the third project, I returned to running. This time the project concentrated on the meanings of distance running. Success in elite sports and especially in distance running has been very important to Finnish national identity. Today there is constant anxiety over the feeble state of the traditional elite sports in Finland. It seems that sport organizations suffer from a sort of tunnel vision that distorts their perception of what sport is today. I approached the question of the success and significance of distance running from the opposite of the common view – voluntary hobbyist sports instead of competitive elite running. My objective was to highlight the average hobbyist runners, the people who spend much of their free time running without special measurable targets. In doing so I attempted to highlight the meaningful reasons for running that inspire hobbyist runners, but have very little to do with the success of elite athletes. The results of this last project were exhibited in the Sports Museum of Finland (What I Think About When I Think



About Running, 2012). Like the previous projects, this consisted of just a few artworks. The central work was a four screen video installation presenting arbitrary runners from different parts of Finland. They were detached from their original backgrounds and set against a monochrome gray background. In the installation, the runners were set to compete against another arbitrary runner. After some laps through the four screens the competitors were changed. This absurd and unfair pursuit continued endlessly throughout the exhibition.

More examples of my artistic activities can be found on my internet-site ([www.mattitainio.net](http://www.mattitainio.net)).



**Image 5. Finnish Runners (2012).**

## The Role of Artistic in My Research

The presented projects illustrate my approach to artistic research quite well – I am making art for research. The themes of the projects that are part of my doctoral studies have a clear relationship to the key aspects of my study. In that way, it is not independent art, but somewhat subordinate to the subject of the research. Still, my objective was to maintain high artistic quality and integrity, and to make the projects interesting even without a connection to the research. The choice of approach originates with the objectives of the research; when my purpose was to investigate the relationship between art and sport in general, obtaining detailed knowledge about the routines of my artistic work was irrelevant. I believe that using artistic projects as tools for thinking and experimenting with ideas was the right choice. The resulting exhibitions were able to illustrate some of these elements, but there was much I had to process into the written text. Part of this material can be used in the manuscript of my thesis.

I now see that the most important aspect of the artistic part of the research is how the different way of thinking modifies my total understanding of the subject – and as a consequence affects the process of my academic work. Academic thinking has to be meticulous about the interpretation of the material. One has to be sure that the research is based on verified sources and facts. In artistic work it is much more acceptable to follow



instinctive paths of thought, to make lighthearted tests with new but tenuous ideas. Those processes do not always produce a finished artwork or the artwork may turn out to be unusable in the context of the research. However, in most cases the finished process produces artwork that clearly addresses some aspects of the research or at least dispels some uncertainties.

## Consequences of Integrating the Artistic in Research

The two main components of my research work function in constant association, but in my opinion they do not really converge into one body of artistic research. I can always tell which part of my study belongs to the domain of the artistic and which to the domain of the academic. Sport has played a mediator's role, depending on the point of view at the moment it can belong to either domain. Some of my running produces ideas for artistic work, while some advances the research.

I see these artistic and academic processes as parallel but not totally separate. They never intertwine into one entity, but are constantly pushing and pulling at each other. They are even forced to cross every now and then. When the work on either the artistic or academic part alters its direction, it has an influence on the other one. The newly altered direction of one practice then steers the course of the other one and in consequence changes my conception of it. Both practices thus generate insights about the direction of my research. For instance, reading about the cultural history of modern running had an effect on my comprehension of the changing nature of distance running in different historical periods. This new knowledge altered the starting points of the artistic work of my third project. Analogously, the first artistic project led to me picking running as a central example of modern sport. Having one key sport to focus on in the research dissipated most of the difficulties that resulted from the impossibility of defining sport as a whole clearly enough. Both academic and artistic practices produce knowledge about the practices and relations of art and sport. Thus there is always a need to be attentive and carefully explore the results of both the academic and the artistic work.



**Image 6. Exhibition view from Titanik-gallery. The Scribbler (2009-2011), a real-time video installation that draws arbitrary scribbles. The audience can save meaningful images by pressing the red button.**

Even though my understanding of the artistic in the context of research might feel instrumental, it is not the whole truth. I do have artistic projects that are parallel to those connected with my research, but not officially part of it. They develop from my own interests alone and serve my other artistic needs, however they are still not totally independent of the art that is a part of the research. Somehow, the artworks I have made when not actively thinking about my doctoral studies, seem to deal with themes that share a common foundations with the subject of my research. For instance, I had an exhibition in the spring of 2011 with theme uncreativity in artistic (Do Not Blame Me!, Titanik-gallery, 2011). The four works in the exhibition were planned and made during several years independently from my research work. When installing them in the gallery, I started to realize that their common theme was the limits of the artistic domain, which is an implicit question in my research. When I am thinking about the artistic aspects in sport, I constantly have to think about how art is understood today. This separate exhibition did not (obviously) answer the question, but at least it revealed something about the contemporary freedom of artistic practices.

## Possible Problems in Combining Art and Academic Research

Combining traditional research with its long academic heritage with artistic practice is at least somewhat problematic. The central problem is finding a personal solution to combining the academic and the artistic. Various aspects of this problem have already been dealt with in this text, but further questions exist. In the context of research the

artistic elements can become overwhelmed by academic routines and rules. There is a risk that the artistic work is used merely to illustrate the ideas and theories pursued and explored through the academic research. There is really no easy cure for this problem. In my opinion, an artist-researcher can only attempt to be as honest with her/himself as possible and try to keep her/his art at least somewhat unconstrained even if it is art for research, as in my case.

Another risk is the possibility that the artistic portion of the research will be disregarded by the external examiners of the doctoral dissertation. It is an entirely possible prospect, because by the end of one's PhD studies concrete research report has been newly produced, but the artistic projects are usually present only as documentaries of past activities. The idea of artistic research vanishes if the assessment of the outcome emphasizes traditional academic standards and gives the artistic element little weight. The university thus has to take care that all the reviewers understand the significance of the artistic parts of the overall work when assessing an artistic doctoral dissertation.

## Conclusions

I have attempted to illustrate how the three elements of my research – academic research, artistic practice and sport – affect the pursuit of research as a whole. I do not see them merging into one body of artistic research, they do interact and have an influence on each other, but it is always possible to tell the difference between the individual practices. The balance between the elements of my research varies, but it seems that understanding sport through both art and traditional research has in the end become more significant than obtaining new comprehension about art itself.

When I started my doctoral studies, I thought that combining existing artistic practice with research would be straightforward. Now, at the end of the journey, I have learned that it is not. With the last project completed, I admit that I am mainly relieved that I do not have to make more art for this research. The combination of art and research is not impossible, but there are many more aspects to consider than I had first thought. One can become a proper researcher who combines art with academic research, or one can become an artist who is able to do proper research, but a complete merging of the two paths seems, to me, quite impossible.