

## RESEARCH ESSAY

# Exposing the “Voice” of Self-Comprehension to the “Noise” of Materiality

Arnas Anskaitis

Vilnius Academy of Arts, LT  
arnas.anskaitis@vda.lt

---

In this brief article, the author reflects on the academic requirements of doctoral studies in art and indicates that it is split between what he calls the “voice” of self-comprehension and the “noise” of materiality. To overcome this inherent dichotomy, the suggestion is being made to use critically artistic arguments which are complex assemblages of semantics and non-semantics rather than logical, linear, and summarisable formal arguments. The role of noise in artistic arguments—and by extension in artistic research—is exposed as destabilising but necessary. Towards the end of the article, the reader/viewer is invited to revisit photographically, a diagrammatic story titled “Spaces and Surfaces” which introduces and exposes research through diagrams and image atlases rather than through conventional written text alone. The author believes that the artistic contribution may reflect on the raised issues.

---

## Introduction

This brief text will touch on some issues that concern me in my thesis *Artist's Systems of Knowing, Mapping and Exposition*. During a four-year Fine Arts Doctoral Studies program at Vilnius Academy of Arts, I have to develop an individual art project. It has to be composed of two equal but different parts: art work and research work. Because of this initial division, I have two supervisors from different backgrounds—artist and researcher with a Ph.D.—whom each observe and assess their part of my project. On the one hand, I have to present my project as artwork, on the other, as research. I was not fully aware when I entered the program, but now I realize that the institution's chosen dichotomous model influences the study process and the outcome. Nevertheless, artistic thinking goes beyond the boundaries and tries to overturn the imposed expectations. Towards the end of this article, I will revisit my artistic contribution “Spaces and Surfaces” in the collective monograph *Atlas of Diagrammatic Imagination: Maps in Research, Art and Education* (2019), edited by Lina Michelkevičė & Vytautas Michelkevičius, designed by Laura Grigaliūnaitė, and published by Vilnius Academy of Arts Press. For the book, I have created “a diagrammatic story” that reflects on my work and my creative instrumentary—from photography to mapping.

## The “Voice” of Self-Comprehension

I want to ask a question that may sound naïve to some: why, in order to be “dissertable”, does an artist's research have to take the form of a written text? The usually required amount of written text in a context of doctoral education brings—in advance and by default—the artist's research closer to theses in humanities or social sciences, where discipline-appropriate articulacy demonstrates the “completeness” of research. It is the humanities—*Geisteswissenschaften*—which, like psychoanalysts, listen to an individual, to their speech and at the same time give an individual researcher a phenomenological “voice” of self-comprehension, an opportunity to speak, a symbolic space to express oneself. After all, to write is to discover one's “voice”. To write academically is to discover *episteme* in that “voice”—a certain transparent self-comprehension. By the “voice” I mean not only the sound produced in a person's larynx and uttered through the mouth, as speech, but also an agency by which a point of view is expressed or represented. It is an oral language, transcribed in phonetic writing, aligned according to the rules of grammar and spelling. It is the way I call rationality and the logical justification necessary to legitimize any new knowledge. The “voice” of self-comprehension is the *epistēmē* linguistically embodied. As such, it is always implicated in the written text as its *telos*. In this

case, I mean that in the humanities, research usually develops discursively, through language in general and written text in particular. Therefore, I believe that the not-so-small required number of words “transplanted” from humanities into the doctoral thesis requirements shows that artists are expected to present not just drawings, objects, photographs, diagrams, maps—no matter how they all attract the eye. The wordage required by the academic institution seems to persuade the artist to write an accompanying narrative about the research accumulated and the new knowledge gained. An institution of higher education in the third cycle studies gives the artist the space to expose and the stage to express—to transcribe their inner voice, the intimate speech of self-comprehension (usually heard only by inner hearing). Of course, only by the order of discourse and the self-restraint of disciplined thinking in the form of academic writing. And that written narrative may be shared at conferences, symposia, seminars, workshops, kitchens, bars, and anywhere else.

### The “Noise” of Materiality

However, as an artist, I am also interested in a certain acoustic, technical, material and epistemic noise (Malaspina 2018), which exists always alongside the transparent “voice” of self-comprehension implied in the written text.

Theorist Henk Borgdorff, while writing about Research Catalogue (*RC*), notes on several occasions that through an exposition of practice as research an aesthetic project can be transformed into an artistic argument. “The work exposed in the Research Catalogue ‘transforms’ (Latour) from an artistic product to an artistic argument, to a potential bearer of knowledge and understanding.” (Borgdorff 2012: 232) However, he does not develop the notion of the “artistic argument” any further. Artistic arguments are being mentioned and theorized about—only in a different context and from a different perspective—by literary theorist Anne M. Royston. In her book *Material Noise* (2019), she offers an intriguing prospect—to look at unconventional theoretical and critical works as artist’s books. If Borgdorff views the whole artistic research project as an artistic argument, then Royston’s media-specific lens focuses on the specificity of theoretical works and tends to crop the overall picture to inconspicuous details. Royston closely reads *Encyclopaedia Da Costa* (1947) by Georges Bataille et al., *Glas* (1974) by Jacques Derrida, *The Telephone Book* (1991) by Avital Ronell, *Hiding* (1997) by Mark C. Taylor, and other works. Although most of these authors probably do not consider themselves artists, Royston believes they use not only formal or informal but also artistic arguments in their works. Royston draws attention to the signification of these works that exceeds the semantics of traditional printed text. She argues that theoretical works signify through their materiality, non-semantic elements such as typography and color, as well as through their semantic content. And it is not just the design of the publication (although in all cases the author works together with the designer), but the author’s own desire to include non-semantic elements to create a more complex argumentation. Royston states that “Through critiquing philosophers who have historically shaped thought, artistic arguments critique the shape of thought produced by these thinkers as reductive, simplified, inadequate to the complex networks required to describe increasingly diverse subjects”. (Royston 2019: 14) It should be noted that she does not say “artistic propositions”. Artistic arguments cannot be reduced to a series of linear, logical statements (e.g. propositional knowledge). On the contrary, these are complex material assemblages of semantics and non-semantics, characterized by the coordination of elements without subordination.

Although very different from each other, the source of all these artistic arguments is common—the role of *noise*, Royston insists. She states: “The critical point here is that what is usually seen as nonproductive can nonetheless produce meaning, if we only pay attention to it. So the unconventional shape of artistic arguments includes what is *prima facie* meaningless or incidental to make an argument about its potential for meaning in a very different way. Meaning, artistic arguments indicate, can indeed be found in noise.” (Royston 2019: 16) In communication models, as is well known, noise is anything that is added to the signal between its transmission and reception that is not intended by the source. An uncomfortable chair can be a source of noise—we do not receive messages through our eyes and ears only. Royston writes that “rather than seeking to exclude the noise that obscures the signal, artistic arguments take forms in which noise is a deliberate presence—and a necessary one for reading”. (Royston 2019: 5) Therefore, it is important to mention reading itself, which should be deliberately directed at the materiality of artistic arguments. It is reading that is not blind and deaf to what surrounds the traditional printed text. However, such a reading method, which takes into account the materiality of the work, is not convenient because it requires additional labour from the reader. It can be said that material noise in artistic arguments disturbs the flow of a transparent “voice” of self-comprehension. Some components of the artistic argument would fail to be read aloud. For example, colour, paperweight, or texture are unpronounceable but materially sound. I think the arguments of artistic research could speak both through the more or less transparent “voice” of self-comprehension and the “noise” of materiality. Both the epistemic “voice”—as transposed into

a sprawling typographical sequence—and the material noise in the background takes part in the exposition of artistic practice as research. Thus, artistic research has the potential to emancipate the epistemic role of noise, using not only conventional instruments of thinking but also artistic arguments (in a broader sense).

## The Atlas

The collective monograph *Atlas of Diagrammatic Imagination: Maps in Research, Art and Education* unfolds the practices of diagramming and mapping. Here one can find maps created by artists Nikolaus Gansterer, Arnas Anskaitis, Christoph Fink, Sandra Kazlauskaitė and geographer Giedrė Godienė in response to an invitation “to use the very same tools of mapping and diagramming in order to reflect on the *diagrammatic* aspects of their own work. This constitutes an attempt at using an experimental format to introduce research through diagrams and maps rather than through text (e.g., an essay)”. (Michelkevičė & Michelkevičius: 2019: 11) While working on my 264 × 34 cm format bilingual fold-out atlas “Spaces and Surfaces”, I was reflecting upon the initial proposition of the editors and my years of experience photographically documenting contemporary art exhibitions. In this contribution, I aim to create links between photography and cartography and claim that both representational methods are snapshots of time and space. Both of them employ virtual lines that frame, link and direct the stories that may be told through them.

However, navigating, reading and looking at this ten-pages atlas is not too straight-forward a process. The short, epigrammatic descriptions of five of my previous artistic projects—*One Square Meter of Gallery Space* (2009), *Simple Words* (2012), *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (2013), *The Traveller* (2015), *Workspace* (2017)—are arranged along curved paths that could resemble a topographic map with contour lines. Therefore, the texts in the layouts can be read starting from the outer lines, or the inner ones—a potentially different reading could be found. Some keywords are highlighted and outlined, as if they were reference points or landmarks. Another hint at the diagrammatic representation are fine lines making up a regular grid—location coordinates. Photographic documentation and other visual material are arranged on one side of the paper and their mirrored captions on the other. The paper is thin, even diaphanous—one can rise it against the light and read all brief explanations accompanying images. I wanted to create a situation where the hierarchy of text and image would be overturned. In this case, looking at images is easier than reading words. Here, I have tried to play with the cultural conventions of maps, to “transplant” stories into diagrammatic representations, and to create five different diagrams, or, more precisely, “diagrammatic stories”.

Each of five of my artistic projects is introduced and exposed in textual and visual fragments. How can those fragments be read and made sense of? To paraphrase Georges Didi-Huberman, one needs to assemble montages of images as specific forms of knowledge of the artworks and of their history. (Didi-Huberman 2012: 121) Of course, this requires added labour—sometimes rewarding, sometimes frustrating—from the reader and/or viewer. Interestingly, the English word “noise” comes from the Latin word “seasickness, *nausea*,” which itself may be traced back to the Greek word for “ship” (*naus*). At least etymologically, the root of the word “noise” relates to nausea, seasickness. Reading this material could be like sailing a boat through a severe storm. Indeed, the fold-out project “Spaces and Surfaces” may cause nausea to the reader-viewer, as one needs to turn the pages in a circular manner, look against the light, and otherwise have difficulties engaging with it. Some degree of disruption of the normative reading process was important to me here—the unusual form of the text immediately negates the text, but at the same time is materially necessary for it to generate differences and different readings.

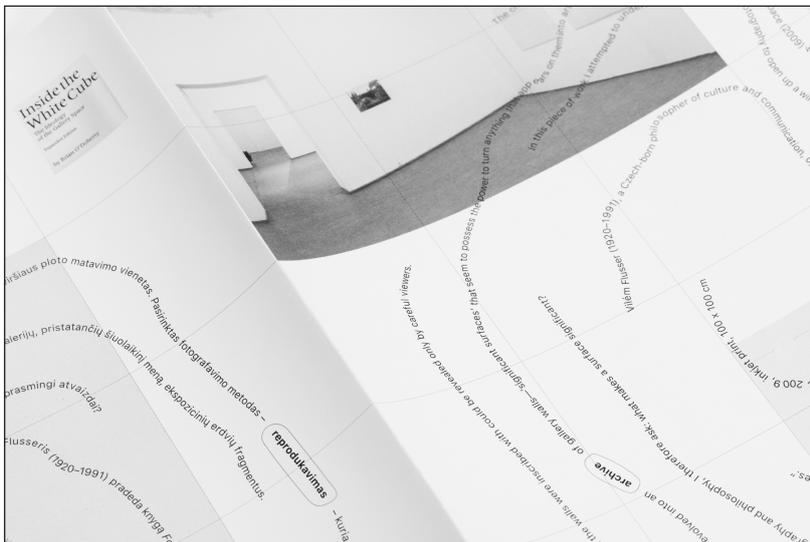
## Revisiting “Spaces and Surfaces”

While making our way from the “voice” of self-comprehension to the “noise” of materiality via the notion of “artistic arguments”, let’s revisit the diagrams of “Spaces and Surfaces”. One may observe how the brief opening text I have written for the *Atlas* folds around its photographic documentation (**Figures 1–7**).

Photography is often likened to hunting, but I prefer to see it like cast-net fishing. Photography, at least the kind I am interested in, requires both decision-making regarding where to leave the camera (‘cast the net’) and patience while waiting for the catch. Divided by the imaginary vertical, horizontal, diagonal and curved lines, a photographic frame becomes a net bound to catch the incoming images. To me, the photo camera is an analytic instrument that enables navigation through the specific—physical, sensible, phenomenological, social, political, and other—spaces. However, the photo camera is far from being objective—if anything, it is deceptive—because it provides access to these spaces only from singular points of view. Despite that limitation, photography is able to completely capture our attention as we allow our gazes to slide along the photographic surfaces, following the virtual lines of thought.



**Figure 1:** Editors Vytautas Michelkevičius and Lina Michelkevičė holding the collective monograph *Atlas of Diagrammatic Imagination: Maps in Research, Art and Education* (2019). Photo: Arnas Anskaitis.



**Figure 2:** Fragment of "Spaces and Surfaces". Photo: Arnas Anskaitis.



**Figure 3:** Fragment of "Spaces and Surfaces". Photo: Arnas Anskaitis.



Figure 4: Fragment of "Spaces and Surfaces". Photo: Arnas Anskaitis.

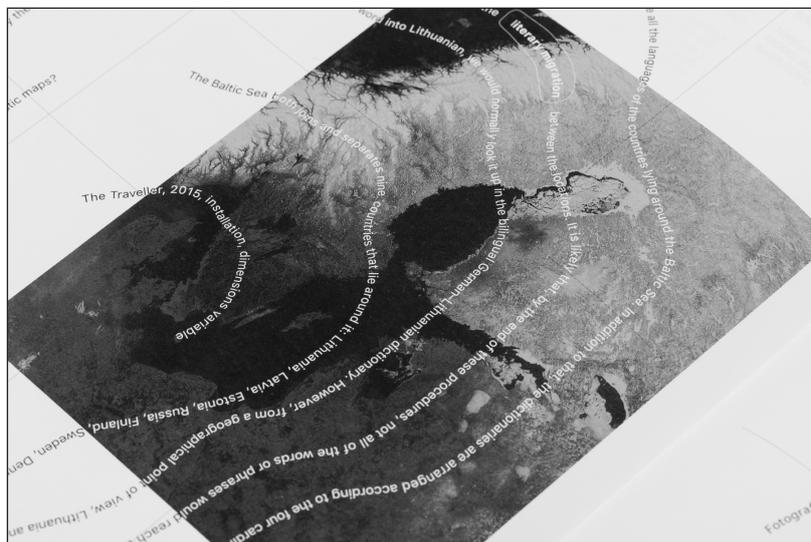
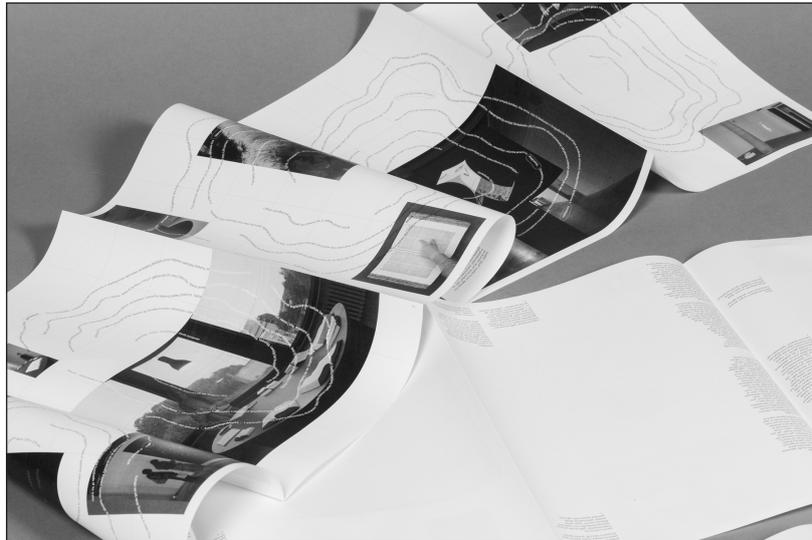


Figure 5: Fragment of "Spaces and Surfaces". Photo: Arnas Anskaitis.



Figure 6: Fragment of "Spaces and Surfaces". Photo: Arnas Anskaitis.



**Figure 7:** Fragment of "Spaces and Surfaces". Photo: Arnas Anskaitis.

The photographic lens produces a circle-shaped image, however, unlike in the case of a pupil of an eye, this image is then cropped down to a rectangle by a pair of vertical and horizontal lines that also act as a reference to a coordinate system. In this sense, photography is akin to cartography and charting.

In my creative practice, I am looking for the compositional structures that would enable the conceptual relationships between the different elements of images I choose to frame. Whether I use photography, cartography, or charts, my goal is to take the thought for a walk by employing both visible and virtual lines that frame, narrate, link, divide, strike through, surround, intersect, trace, or curve around the images I make.

What follows is a set of five double-page spreads summarizing five of my works. The highlighted keywords act as references to the conceptual origins and creative strategies used in each of these works.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Anskaitis, A.** 2019. Spaces and Surfaces. In: Michelkevičė, L and Michelkevičius, V (eds.), *Atlas of Diagrammatic Imagination: Maps in Research, Art and Education*. Vilnius Academy of Arts Press.
- Borgdorff, H.** 2012. *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. Amsterdam: Leiden University Press. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN\\_595042](https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_595042)
- Didi-Huberman, G.** 2012. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Malaspina, C.** 2018. *An Epistemology of Noise*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350011816>
- Michelkevičė, L** and **Michelkevičius, V.** 2019. *Atlas of Diagrammatic Imagination: Maps in Research, Art and Education*. Vilnius Academy of Arts Press.
- Royston, AM.** 2019. *Material Noise: Reading Theory as Artist's Book*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12079.001.0001>

**How to cite this article:** Anskaitis, A. 2020. Exposing the "Voice" of Self-Comprehension to the "Noise" of Materiality. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 4(1): 2, pp. 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.77>

**Published:** 21 October 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research** is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

**OPEN ACCESS** 