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Art as Knowledge – Why research needs a non-aligned revolution

Across disciplines and to varying degrees research traditions are built on different hierarchies of knowledge. These traditions often exclude or relegate artistic ways of knowing to the margins. Drawing on political theories of non-alignment, Annalena Oppel argues universities should take a more plural approach to art as research.

A poster on London Underground platforms asks: ‘**Can art save life?**’ It advertises Ahmet Ögüt’s ‘**Saved by the Whale’s Tail, Saved by Art**’. The piece references how a sculpture in Rotterdam prevented a train from plunging into water below. This literal life-saving moment reveals a deeper paradox: while we witness art’s tangible impact, our research institutions to a large extent exclude artistic ways of knowing from the knowledge systems meant to understand and improve human life. As **funding cuts** squeeze arts programs across universities, research councils double down on ‘evidence-based’ approaches that often cannot capture the nuanced realities art illuminates. We celebrate art saving life, while systematically removing it from the very processes designed to preserve and enhance it.

The great separation

This paradox has deep historical roots. The relegation of art to the margins of “serious” knowledge production emerged from **Enlightenment rationalism** and colonial knowledge systems that privileged Western scientific methods over indigenous, embodied, and creative ways of understanding the world. What we call “evidence” was constructed through exclusions – not just of colonised peoples, but of the **holistic ways of knowing** that refused to separate mind from body, reason from emotion, analysis from experience.



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This epistemic violence continues. Provocatively put, art sits too close to playfulness to be seen as professional and becomes a space researchers believe they must outgrow to arrive at reason. Unless, of course, it can be commodified as ‘the arts’, turning into a profession measured by its outcome – something discrete that we can collect, value, and sell. Through this lens, art also becomes an object of study rather than a method of inquiry, decoration rather than investigation.

Yet as Miranda Fricker’s work on **epistemic injustice** reminds us, these knowledge hierarchies are not neutral. They systematically exclude marginalized voices and ways of knowing. When research methods cannot capture lived experience and quantification strips away context, when ‘objectivity’ masks whose perspectives count, art offers vital alternatives. The use of epistemic resources from the ‘sidelines’ can also constitute a form of what the philosopher José Medina calls **epistemic resistance**: resources to change normative structures and the complacent cognitive-affective functioning that sustain those structures.

The non-aligned model

Interestingly, this challenge mirrors debates in contemporary global politics. As Chatham House recently noted, we’re witnessing ‘**the decline of the West and the rise of ‘the Rest’**’. Central to this shift is the resurgence of non-alignment, specifically Active Non-Alignment (ANA), among Global South nations refusing to choose sides in great power competitions.



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ANA's principles offer a compelling framework for rethinking art's role in research. Just as ANA advocates not accepting a priori the positions of any of the Great Powers, researchers could refuse to accept a priori that Western scientific methods are inherently superior to artistic ways of knowing. ANA's emphasis on strategic flexibility and multi-alignment translates to methodological pluralism, engaging selectively with different knowledge traditions without hierarchical arrangements.

The historical precedent is instructive. During the original Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia developed sophisticated cultural diplomacy that recognised culture as 'linked to sovereignty and a crucial element in understanding and cooperating' internationally. Yet remarkably, as cultural theorist Ljiljana Kolečnik notes, the Movement itself did not have a cultural policy, despite culture being "an integral part of decolonization". This mirrors how contemporary research institutions acknowledge art's social importance while excluding it from knowledge production processes.

Art as research practice

What would non-aligned research look like? It would treat art not as decoration or therapy, but as a rigorous method of inquiry that embraces process and surrenders to multiple outcomes and meaning. It would recognise artistic practice as vernacular expression, closer to context, body, and lived experience than abstracted analysis allows.



These aren't 'soft' alternatives to 'hard' research. They are different technologies of knowledge that can access realities other methods miss



Contemporary artists are already modelling this approach. Jasmina Cibic's film 'Beacons' excavates the cultural diplomacy of the Non-Aligned Movement, revealing how art functioned as a site of political imagination and knowledge production – both in the message of her film, but also the medium of her communication. Her work embodies the kind of research methodology that could free the arts from old trends and make it central to crafting new societies, strongly speaking to the epistemological revolution research institutions need.

Consider **participatory theatre** that reveals community knowledge invisible to surveys, or **murals** that serve as political messenger, or poetry and fiction that captures the embodied **experience of displacement** in ways statistics cannot. These aren't 'soft' alternatives to 'hard' research. They are **different technologies of knowledge** that can access realities other methods miss.

The Stakes

This is not a pledge for anti-rational romanticism. It's epistemic justice: recognising that the systematic exclusion of artistic ways of knowing impoverishes our understanding of complex social realities. When we study inequality, for instance, the gap between the term and its lived meaning often requires artistic methods to bridge.

The implications extend beyond academia. As Global South movements demonstrate through ANA principles, resistance to hegemonic knowledge systems isn't just theoretical; it is also survival. Climate change, displacement, inequality, and social fragmentation require responses that can hold **complexity, ambiguity, and multiple truths** simultaneously. Art specializes in exactly this capacity.

I would argue that given political fractures today, research institutions face a choice: continue defending knowledge hierarchies that systematically exclude marginalised ways of knowing and therefore remain incomplete or embrace a methodological pluralism. This means to be methodologically non-aligned with the status quo, resistant to imposed hierarchies and committed to the kind of corporation that treats artistic knowledge as **essential rather than ornamental**. The whale's tail sculpture didn't save that train through peer review or randomized controlled trials; it saved it by being exactly where it needed to be, holding complexity and contradiction in dynamic tension.

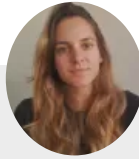
The question is thus perhaps not whether art can save life. It is whether our research institutions are ready to let it.

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*Image Credit: Saved by the Whale's Tail Exhibition, Stratford Station, 27 October 2025, Editor (**CC BY-NC-SA**)*

About the author



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Annalena Oppel is a Research Fellow at the LSE International Inequalities Institute. Her research involves interdisciplinary approaches to inequality, blending creative inquiry and fiction with theory and empirical, mixed-method work. She is also interested in initiatives that rethink development research and practice and holds a DPhil in Development Studies from the University of Sussex.

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