Recognising Practice-Led Research ... at Last!

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hatched07
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Participant biographies

Participant biographies
OPENING REMARKS

On behalf of ECU and in acknowledgment of the traditional owners of this land, I extend a welcome to all people of ideas to this Hatched '07 Arts Research Symposium.

Ideas, though totally commonplace and stretching between the metaphorical terrain of heaven and hell, the constructive and the destructive, are the substance of gatherings such as these where discussion and demonstration make visible both the issues and the celebratory arrival of artistic expression in the domains of academic research. The grounds of ideas should be contested, analysed and dissected because interactions between practice and theory inhabit labyrinths of difference. If artists have a byword, motto or 'brand' in the 21st century, it must surely be ambiguity, that uncanny ability to perceive difference and want to find the moment or place of the in-between that enables other possibilities to emerge. They are difficult times and places to achieve or even to imagine - man's lands — but that should not deter our desire for their materialisation. In other words, I would urge you all to participate in and thus create an environment of trust, no matter how small in the overwhelming odds of the larger society, in which incisive debate about the relationships between artistic practices and research can occur.

Ambiguity or a position of thought and value, which is neither this nor that, is a challenging place for human consciousness which seems so tied to binary organisation, to definitions and, in today's world, to evidence-based evaluations. Though I've raised ambiguity as a specific characteristic of our post-structural/post-modern condition, I personally believe that in-between-ness is an ancient imagining, given expression in the world by such institutions as the Japanese/Buddhist concept of rai, the aesthetic space between the placement of stones in a garden as much as in the character of the clown or trickster who balances — and of course falls — between the sacred and the profane. As such, there is a complexity in ambiguous positioning that may be taken as emblematic of the debates that will occur here today.

Even more so, these debates may be dangerous. Imagination and comedy, for example, can be anarchistic weapons, able to persuade people more effectively than any logical arguments, scientific proofs or evidence-based-measurements. Why this is so has yet to be fully explained, but if universities are the stakeholders of knowledge, scholars should accept the challenge of such provocation in whatever form these explanations may appear in order to extend the sum of human knowledge. How the subversive and the immeasurable can be evaluated — if indeed they can — lies behind what speakers raise in their discussions today — though maybe dressed in more conventional costumes.

You will raise issues arising in interactions between practice and theory, debate about which leads which? Other discussions will focus on which research mode best provokes discovery or how the pan and action partnership might be a two-way street? You will also consider the roles of university training and articulation of knowledge and that of the professional environment. How should the two feed each other with or without the reference and use of the new technologies that tend to overwhelm any action, stoke, or beat of another age of art?

I hope that the inspiration of the youthful contributors to Hatched will enable your debates with their visions and provocations, to cross boundaries, tight-rope a trip across edges, even erase divisions completely. Ambiguity is a position that demands courage to face the drivers, parameters and modes of understanding generated by the arts — a position that is never a position because it is always in flux, being or seeming to be in-between.

Dr Maggie Phillips
Lecturer, Dance History and Creative Arts Research, WA Academy of Performing Arts
Edith Cowan University
Friday 20 April, 2007

RECOGNISING PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH... AT LAST!
Leila Green

This is a momentous year, and not solely for the young artists that this Hatched National Graduate Show celebrates. The Hatched '07 exhibitions are entering a re-configured arts research environment characterised — in Australia — by a new acceptance of practice-led research. More than a decade after the second round of the British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, 1998) acknowledged the importance of the non-traditional research outputs of practice-led research, Australia is following suit. No longer will artists find their research dismissed as lacking in appropriate academic outputs; instead there is growing evidence of a clear appreciation that artistic research is not only rigorous in itself, but it has relevance to other (more traditional) research and disciplinary practices (Green & Hasemen, 2006).

Practice-led research is a notoriously difficult concept to define — and this challenge is exacerbated by the tendency of arts practice to celebrate the novel, the unusual and to subvert the expected. No sooner will the boundaries of acceptable arts enquiry have been enlarged to accommodate practice-led research then artists will be challenging these limitations (Peel, 2006).

Nonetheless, some things can be claimed of practice-led research. For example, it is:

• subject to its own standards of rigour and validity;
• assessable according to judgements of 'good' and 'bad';
• experiential and qualitative;
• non-quantifiable;
• the only methodology available through which to pursue some research questions.

The definition and process of research implies a prolonged engagement with a specific research question, or a suite of inter-connected questions. Typically, the question might arise first and then the process of the research project — and the art work — would be dictated thereafter by the refinement and exploration of the question and its related issues through practice. For example, an artist might choose to interrogate the statement that 'practice-led research is non-quantifiable' by exploring a range of indicators of quantity as part of a research project to accommodate practice-led research then artists will be challenging these limitations (Peel, 2006).

Practice-led research is a notoriously difficult concept to define — and this challenge is exacerbated by the tendency of arts practice to celebrate the novel, the unusual and to subvert the expected. No sooner will the boundaries of acceptable arts enquiry have been enlarged to accommodate practice-led research then artists will be challenging these limitations (Peel, 2006).

Instead of the celebration of practice-led research that we would accept the requirement to record the outputs of the project in a way that can be interrogated into the future and built on by the researchers that are to follow. The record of the practice-led research becomes an important element of (some might claim proxy for) the rigour associated with a conventional qualitative research project. One of the arguments here is that research should not only be done, it should be seen to be done and should also be shown to be done. Practice-led researchers — and those that evaluate and celebrate practice-led research — seek ways to justify a dividing line between art-as-itself and art as practice-led research. If all were research, for example, the celebration of practice-led research would become redundant: submerged into appreciation of art; Instead, we need some way to differentiate the researcher who explores research questions through practice-led methodologies and creates new knowledge that might take artistic form and the artist who creates a new work without a conscious engagement with research. If no such distinction is made then every published novelists might claim a Masters in Creative Writing,
and every exhibited painter a Doctorate. The manner in which practice-led researchers typically 'face' their research practice is via documentation and evidentiary trails that chart the trajectory from research question to finished practice-led research artwork output (Stapleton, 2006).

Carefully charted research development, recorded in a way that reflects the progression of practice-led research over the period of investigation, allows the assessor to evaluate rigour:

- Has the project clearly included original effort and endeavour over a significant period of time?
- Is the research progression logical?
- Does it establish clear links between elements of the enquiry and the steps taken to investigate it?
- Is the output justifiable in terms of an artistic or other practice-based relationship with the research question under investigation?
- Are irrelevancies adequately excluded so that enough is said about that which is relevant while that which is superfluous is effectively excised?

While rigour is necessary to meet the full requirements of practice-led research, it is not sufficient. Validity is also required.

Valid research in practice-led terms establishes itself as addressing an issue which is of relevance to the artistic community for which the research is undertaken. This does not preclude new ideas and investigations; but it does mean that a new arena opened up for research has to be justified in terms of what has gone before and why this endeavour is relevant (notwithstanding the fact that it has not previously been pursued). In this way the research follows established protocols from both scientific practice and the humanities that sees research as 'standing on the shoulders of history' — establishing the boundaries of what is known at the start of the project and demonstrating how more has been discovered and communicated by the end. As with all research, the practice-led paradigm creates new knowledge and successfully convinces assessors of this fact (Holbrook et al, 2006).

Given attempts at rigour and validity, what characteristics would indicate 'good' practice-led research as opposed to 'bad'? In the words of the assessors' conundrum: Can bad art be good research, and vice versa? Before explaining the reasons behind an unqualified 'yes', it becomes important to ask — who is judging? A capacity to assess good from bad requires exposure to relativities; it implies that assessors have honed their skills and developing their frames of reference alongside pioneer practice-led researchers. Further, it suggests that the assessor has not only had access to a range of research outputs, but that practice-led researchers have had access to a range of assessors and a community of learning has developed around the various art forms through which practice the research questions are interrogated.

In Australia, there is some evidence that the tradition of assessing practice-led research has yet to reach a confident maturity. One indicator of this is the perception of Holbrook et al (2006) that the 42 degree reports for 15 higher degree by research practice-led theses resonated with the 'newness' of examination in the field, the assessment language showed marked difference between the exegesis and the exhibition, and the relative emphasis in assessment centred on the exegesis’ (p. 86). Such a retreat into convention — through dealing in large part with the written aspects of the work — indicates a hesitancy on the part of the examiners to deal robustly with the artistic element of the practice-led research as with the exegesis: the part which records the claims for rigour, validity and research recognition.

While judges remain uncertain, researchers attempt to second-guess what is required of them. (At the same time they hold fast to the belief that they cannot be expected to create art in the pursuit of a research question and also produce conventional 'research papers'). Even in the UK, where practice-led research outputs have been accepted as part of the research quantum since 1996, researchers require several iterations of assessment and feedback to 'learn' what the assessors are looking for. As the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise expert panel for the Unit of Assessment for Drama, Dance and Performance Arts commented about the Panel 65 submissions: while some submissions offered excellent documentation/supporting evidence for practice as research, overall the level of presentation was not strong, making for some difficulties in assessment (RAE, 2001, p. 3). It can be expected that both parties — assessors and researchers — will have developed their shared vocabulary further in time for the UK's 2008 HEFCE assessment round.

The argument here is more than 'good is in the eye of the beholder' — it accepts that outputs of practice-led research will vary in quality, and that some research projects will be better than others. It also assumes that both judge and judged will be developed by further exposure to the paradigm. Holbrook et al’s investment establishes that there is a way to go yet in Australia; not that the task is an impossible one (2006).

An assertion that practice-led research is qualitative is hardly controversial with Denzin a major theorist of performance ethnography for over 15 years (1991, 2003) and with Lincoln, an authority upon qualitative methodologies (2003, 2005). Haseman, however, argues that any classification of the practice-led methodology as qualitative means that the definition of qualitative research becomes so inclusive and rubbery as to be close to meaningless; instead, says Haseman, it is time to recognise practice-led research as a paradigm in itself, as different, and its methods as topics in their own right. Holbrook et al’s investment establishes that there is a way to go yet in Australia; not that the task is an impossible one (2006).

While numbers can be integrated into an art form (in a manner and in ways analogous to colour), they are neither necessary nor sufficient to establish methodological purity. On the contrary, when it comes to practice-led research the integration of a quantitative dimension is difficult. We seem to have expectations about the integrity of the practice. Given that validity and rigour are embedded in the research process, and in the relation to the field of the research in question, issues of number become a distraction and a reference to other frameworks of meaning and authority.

Many questions can be investigated using either or both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Indeed, for researchers who use value (and rigour, and validity) in investigating a problem with a range of approaches the opportunity for triangulation means that overlapping knowledge produced by both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are stronger than either in isolation. It is also possible that practice-led research can add value to the triangulation approach. In the meantime, however, there are a range of research questions — in design, visual arts, textiles, performance arts, photography and creative writing, among other areas — that have barely begun to be explored. This is not because of lack of inclination, or even lack of skill, but due to lack of opportunity.

Research of any sort — practice-led, quantitative, qualitative — takes time, energy and resources. Up until now it has been comparatively hard for tertiary institutions to justify the allocation of these resources because there has been such limited recognition of practice-led research outputs in the UK and in Australia. The exception to the general rule is in the recognition of practice-led research as a valid methodology for higher degrees by research. However, institutional experience with these degrees (AARE, 2003) suggests that this area of knowledge and expertise is still highly fraught and contested. As the 2007 batch of Hatched graduates take their place in the profession, however, the arts research landscape is all about to change.

While Australia's Research Quality Framework has been beset with problems and challenges for the
majority of disciplines to be assessed using the scheme, its introduction offers an immense opportunity for those who advocate – and those who use – practice-led research. For the first time in Australian research history, practice-led research has been allocated an arena in which its unique approaches and benefits can be appropriately explored. The RQF Assessment Panel 13 (DEST, 2006) focuses on the ‘innovative arts, design and built environment’ and for the first time sets in motion the action research cycle which will enable assessors and assessors to refine their understandings of practice-led research in Australia. For this cohort of new graduates, this is indeed a propitious time to be Hatched.

References


Biography
Leila Green is Professor of Communications and Associate Dean, Research and Higher Degrees in the Faculty of Education and Arts, Edith Cowan University. As a former TV Researcher and Director, Leila has had a career-long commitment to applied research in media and the creative industries, including informal locates such as Fanfiction and LAN/Gaming circles. Lately, her involvement with creative and performing arts research has seen her enrol in a practice-led MA in Creative Writing at UWA and contribute to critiques of practice-led methods that lead to non-traditional research outputs.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS – LIFE OUTSIDE THE STUDIO
Dr Debra Poch and Andrew Forsyth

Introduction
Historically visual art disciplines and practices have been learned through studio-based teaching. As the 21st century emerges, so does the interest and importance of wide parameters of visual learning, experience and achievement. The nature of the 'studio' too has shifted – in many cases it now takes the form of a digital camera, computer or other more portable device to coax creativity through. Once the prominent issue surrounding 'studio' space centred on just that – physical space. Space now can be the office or room that portable multi-media equipment is plopped in, the physical space is temporal. Creativity is not fixed by location or architecture. The infinite amount and availability of creative information services have opened doors that one never imagined possible 30 years ago. The availability and appreciation for industry experimentation has also shifted – visual artists can create and then commission a select or even total of their outcomes to be manufactured by industry. Thus one's expenses are no longer wrapped up in the plasticity of space or equipment, but expanded through other means, including the ever-present internet.

This paper, 'Strength in numbers – life outside the studio', is by the authors' team of Andrew Forsyth, BA Fine Arts Honours candidate and Debra Poch, Senior Lecturer, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane. The paper is presented as a conversation between the two authors to discuss the nature and importance of practice-based learning in visual art. The authors are focusing on the collaborative project Papyrus, completed in September 2006 by seven sculpture/intermedia students from Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.

Studio-based learning vs. practice-based learning – is there a difference?

The beginning of the Papyrus project

Seven final year sculpture/intermedia students were offered the opportunity to 'create an artwork' for the Brisbane Writers Festival – the work was to be outside, temporary, collaborative and of course completed with no real funding. And – somehow to be conceptually linked to the writer's festival – books, poems, text, authors.

The Brisbane Writers Festival has been the premier literary event in Queensland for over ten years that has showcased national and international writers. The annual event invites the general public to meet established and emerging writers who take part in panel discussions, book launches, interviews and more. The festival covers a broad range of topics on writing that includes fiction, history, fantasy, children's literature, poetry and playwriting. In 2006 the festival took place on the Cultural Forecourt at South Bank and ran from 14-17 September.

Note: Information on the Brisbane Writers Festival can be found at www.brisbanewritersfestival.com.au

Thus the first big question was if this project would be of interest to the students – or would the consensus be that each student prefers to continue with their individual studio-based work?

Practice-based learning: a conversation between Debra Poch, lecturer and Andrew Forsyth, Honours candidate.

Debra: As I remember, the discussion with the students and myself canvassing the positive possibilities and negative aspects of this collaborative project lasted over five hours. The key important debates that arose from discussion with the students were:

Note: This paper was a collaborative conversation piece presented at the Biennial of Research in the Visual Arts at the Australian National University, 2007.