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Aesthetic tensions: evaluating outcomes for practice-led research and industry

Abstract:

This paper explores principles of contemporary aesthetics to suggest a basis for determining qualitative outcomes of artistic works in two contexts: the arts industry and the academy setting of practice-led research. Commonly articulated measures of quality—creativity and innovation—are questioned as mere rhetoric if not framed in specific ways in the two discrete settings. The paper also interrogates generally held assumptions that a longer time to develop work and greater periods of self-reflexivity will produce higher calibre artistic outcomes. The unease produced by apparent differences in qualitative outcomes between art works created in an industry setting and those created through practice-led research is analysed through three interconnected framing devices: intention, contextual parameters and criteria for evaluation, in conjunction with the relationships between the art work, the artist and the audience/viewer/listener. Common and differentiated criteria in the two contexts are explored, leading to the conclusion that innovation is more likely to be revealed in the end product in an industry context whereas in practice-led research it may be in the methodological processes of creating the work. While identifying and acknowledging that the two contexts encourage and produce distinctive qualitative artistic outcomes, both of value to the arts and the academy, the paper recommends ways in which closer formal liaison between industry artists and practice-led artists and supervisors might occur in order to ensure ongoing mutual influence and relevance.

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A changing cultural and research landscape

It is now almost two decades since practice-led research (encompassed in various changing terminologies¹) has formed part of the Australian research landscape in universities with a strong creative arts presence. Nationally and internationally, a growing and sophisticated understanding and articulation of specific methods to frame artistic practice has emerged, validating creative work as a bona fide research output, albeit accompanied by textual interpretation / contextualisation / illumination of the practice in an exegesis (Barrett 2004, Bolt 2004, Haseman & Mafe 2009, Krauth 2002, Lycouris 2000, Marshall & Newton 2000).

Over this same period there has been a remarkable shift in the arts industry, to a large extent through the rapid uptake of technology in every area of our lives resulting in the rise of the producer/consumer or DIY artist, prevalent on social sites such as YouTube. In addition, there is more generally a greater choice of arts-based activities beyond what might be referred to as the publicly funded arts sector² sometimes simply called the ‘arts industry’ (somewhat erroneously as this term represents a more expansive cultural environment). The socio-cultural climate has shifted as well, with ‘creativity’ being a general catch-cry, along with ‘innovation’, supposedly as a means to produce economic as well as cultural value in both the arts and research.

The dilemma of aesthetic quality as an evaluative measure

With these shifts comes a renewed interrogation of what constitutes value or quality. In the arts industry quality is often viewed in terms of its aesthetic value, whereas research in the arts is arguably assessed more in terms of its contribution to knowledge, even when a major outcome is the art work itself. Aesthetics, as a measure of quality, despite or perhaps because of the hugely diverse amount of material published on the subject, remains an elusive and highly subjective tool of evaluation. If an artist produces events / artefacts / materials that result in our seeing the world in new ways, is that in itself a contribution to new knowledge and how does it relate to aesthetic quality? Each of us receives art works in relation to our own perceptions and world view; although ‘tastes’ are to a certain extent formed collectively over time or through a community of peers or connoisseurs. Even if we have a common agreement that a particular art work is transformative or enriching or provides new insights and is thus of value, it is likely that the nature of our reception to, and pleasure of, the art work (our aesthetic ‘knowing’) manifests itself differently from one individual to another.

The term aesthetics is believed to derive from the Greek word *aisthetikos* meaning ‘sensory perception’, placing it in the realm of feeling and experiencing rather than cognition and rational thought. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to debate the nature of aesthetics, it is helpful to revisit some general principles. Aesthetic theories are generally understood to be based around an integrative relationship between the art work, the artist, the viewer / audience / listener who ‘receives’ the work, and the circumstances under which the work is experienced, or the context (Eaton 1988). If aesthetics is to be used as a tool of qualitative evaluation, value (according to Eaton 1988: 77) resides not only in what the artwork presents but

in the way in which it is presented. This ‘context’ theory is closely allied to what is often called the ‘institutional theory of aesthetics’ which claims that aesthetic objects only have value if they are ‘worthy of attention’ (Dickie 1997: 94) or what ‘our culture considers worth talking about’ (Eaton 1988: 143). And what is considered worth talking about can vary hugely within cultural sectors as well as across cultures.

What also appears central to aesthetics is the idea that an artwork is a result of creativity and invention, or as philosopher Plato (qtd. in Eaton 1988: 16) expressed it as far back as the 5th century BC, artists ‘imagine new worlds and present them to others for scrutiny’. So while the link between aesthetics and creativity is by no means new, it has been given a new emphasis through 21st century values. Creativity is invariably linked with imagination and new possibilities. Scruton (1989: 32) therefore argues ‘the ability to participate imaginatively in future experiences’ is a crucial tenet of aesthetics.

In relation to the premise of this paper, I argue that there are two distinctive but overlapping cultural sectors that are grappling with how to measure qualitative outcomes of artistic endeavours, both of which encompass aesthetic judgements around creativity, relevance and contributing to our stock of knowledge. Where do aesthetic criteria for the value of the work reside—with the artist, the viewer/listener/reader and/or with a community of ‘informed’ peers? Despite the fact that all creative arts deal with re-imagin(in)g the human experience in some way there remain unique aesthetic parameters at play for different art forms due to discipline specificities and historical precedent. Aesthetic perception by the artist /viewer / listener / reader / critic also differs across genres within a discipline and even within a genre, in addition to which socio-cultural differences colour our judgement. However, as Sparshott (1993: 234) points out:

The task of aesthetics is not necessarily to establish rules or principles of interpretation... it is rather to show what ways of interpreting and evaluating are possible and how they fit together.

In examining how ways of interpreting and evaluating may fit together in a discipline, genre or even in a singular work, form and content and other specific material and processual issues come into play; but I would argue that it is context that becomes the significant and differentiating gauge in assisting us to meaningfully evaluate aesthetic quality. If that context is to move beyond personal preference then we must learn to look through other eyes to understand how we filter our interpretation and judgement of artistic work in our own setting: be it in industry or the academy. In other words we need to find strategies to adjust our aesthetics to the framework in which the creative work is placed.

This paper argues that the artist’s context of art-making—specifically the two contexts of working in a professional setting (referred to hereafter as the ‘industry’) and in an academic/research setting—fundamentally alters the aesthetic quality and/or reception of the work. This situation, moreover, creates tensions between what is valued in each setting, despite the increased blurring and cross-over of the methods and activities of the professional artist and the practice-led artist over the last decade.

Making art versus research and development of practice

Two paradoxical views on this issue recently struck me. At an Industry Forum in late 2007, as part of the research project *Dancing between Diversity and Consistency*, which set out to investigate assessment practices in research higher degrees,³ a senior experienced artist voiced a strong opinion which was met by a chorus of agreement by those artists present. He remarked that despite the value he placed on gaining a practice-led higher degree several years previously, it never appeared on his artistic CV because it would be viewed negatively by industry (funding agencies, marketing personnel, agents, audience). Furthermore he spoke of ‘unlearning’ the language he had acquired during his research phase since it was unhelpful to his current practice. This belies the assumption that investing in the time and reflective space that practice-led higher degrees afford necessarily improves or enriches one’s practice when returning to a competitive industry environment.

On the other hand, there is an equally strongly held view—borne out by other interviewees and forum participants in the research project above—that practice-led degrees are valuable to both artists and the industry in general for the formal recognition they acquire in contributing to the research environment. Dawn Bennett (2009) refers to this trend as ‘legitimised creativity’. Pragmatically, in a climate of reduced professional arts funding, Australia is facing the situation whereby universities are increasingly ‘relied upon to provide a refuge for arts practice’ (Gye 2009). Indeed, this has largely been the impetus for the development and growth of practice-led research degrees over the last two decades in the UK and Australia.

Conversely, there are some moves afoot to encourage arts organisations to develop research and development arms to their professional artistic activities. This is argued by Bakhshi, Desai & Freeman (2009) who propose that research ‘should become part of the core mission of arts and cultural organisations’ and that it should be publicly funded and disseminated to produce a ‘common pool of arts and cultural R & D’. This thinking presumes that the major benefit of the arts lies in its potential ability to further human knowledge through innovation and invention, while wary of what they call the ‘radical uncertainty’ of its methods and outcomes. The authors argue that arts and cultural research will expand the sources of cultural, commercial and public value to society generally. Predictably, they do not broach the idea of using such research to investigate or improve aesthetic quality.

Such related but differing agendas exploring the nexus between the arts industry and arts research concentrate on building specific methodologies to support an outcome which, to use research terminology, adds to the stock of human knowledge. But what are the qualitative outcomes in these different scenarios? Is the artwork created in a research environment of a similar calibre to the one created in an industry setting? Or not?



Accented Body: a multi-site performance installation for 2006 Brisbane Festival through a partnership between the arts industry, universities and philanthropic organisations
Director: Cheryl Stock. Photo: Hyojung Seo

Qualitative divergence

As a professional practitioner who moved into academia on gaining a doctorate in what was then known as practice-based research after a twenty-five year long career as a full-time dancer, choreographer and later artistic director, I have been a staunch supporter of practice-led degrees. However, having examined and supervised many postgraduate degrees with practice as their basis over the last decade, some niggling doubts as to the 'quality' of the 'product' or examinable creative outcome is beginning to re-surface (as it first did when noticing how my own practice changed once I began making work in an academic context). I am finding increasingly that the artwork in this environment often does not seem to be of as high a calibre as artworks created in a purely industry context. This is despite the extended time given to the practice and the ongoing support of supervisors and peers. So, is the creeping credentialism of this growing movement towards practice-led research of benefit to our artists or is it of greater benefit to the research industry in illuminating the processes that artists use in their work? This is a question that has begun to trouble me as I struggle to write examiner reports of what I consider to be mediocre creative outcomes, given gravitas because of the accompanying exegetical component.

What lies behind this apparent qualitative difference? This is a vexed question, especially when practice-led research methodologies have painstakingly adopted the processes and idiosyncrasies of an artist's practice as their basis and have argued successfully for emergent rather than prescribed research approaches as well as the articulation of the practice through the particular, symbolic and metaphoric languages

that arise from the materials of that practice. This is a major shift from a decade ago when artist researchers ‘translated’ their professional understandings and languages into versions of traditional methodological vocabulary deemed sympathetic to their study (such as action research, contemporary auto ethnography and case studies, framed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminist or postmodern paradigms).

On the surface, both industry and practice-led artists adopt similar reflective practice methods through journaling and the collection of ephemera during their creative process with the initial conceptualising of early ideas transforming and transmuting continually in the studio (or digitally) until they finally emerge into something more substantial or concrete. Or, in ‘research speak’ as a more defined research question/problem or explicit content. Similarly, both employ intuition, metaphor, allusion and the embedded (and in performance, embodied) skills and techniques of their discipline to produce artistic outcomes. In addition, the industry artist and the practice-led artist engage in some form of research as a background or stimulus to the creation of their art work. If we accept that the processes of creating the work are alike in both settings, what makes the outcome appear to be of a different order and provoke qualitative unease? The answer would seem to lie somewhere between intention, contextual parameters and criteria for evaluation.

Who does the creative work serve?

Research around ideas germane to the evolving work, and researching the processes which take place in creating the work, are not the same; although approaches to making the work appear similar or at times identical in both settings. The difference is primarily to do with the ‘market’ for the work. Putting aside arguments about extending and enriching practice as a personal goal of the artist, practice-led researchers may argue that, like their industry colleagues, their intention is to create work to communicate with or for an ‘audience’ (thus completing the aesthetic circle of relationships). The reality is, however, that they are making work (the creative practice plus the exegesis) for themselves, their examiners and academic approval. Does this mean that industry artists tend to be more outcome driven and practice-led artists more process driven, although both are immersed in their creative process and produce tangible artworks?

Given the emphasis on reflexivity in creative arts academic institutions, this would appear to be the case. Barrett (2004) in her analysis of the exegesis as ‘valorisation and validation of creative arts research’ speaks of the exegesis as ‘a re-enactment of the artefact as process.’ Reinforcing this point, she contrasts the idea of ‘artistic products as commodities’ where value is focussed on the finished product (presumably in an industry setting) rather than the ‘material, intellectual and cognitive processes that produced it’. The focus of the practice-led researcher, she argues, results in the ‘elucidation of creative arts practices as alternative modes of understanding the world and revealing new knowledge’ (ibid.).

This intentional difference impacts on, and is impacted by, a set of external conditions and imperatives imposed by the context in which industry and academia operate. It is instructive to look at some of these conditions, particularly in terms of time allocated

to studio practice, preparation, reflection and observation, and in terms of human and material resources. Since more seems to have been written about practice-led research in Australia drawing on the visual arts and creative writing, I have chosen to focus on the performing arts. The other reason for this choice is the added complexity that the collaborative nature of the performing arts adds to the two contexts. The following opinions and observations are based on my own and other colleagues' and candidates/artists' experiences as well as findings from the two year qualitative research project *Dancing between Diversity and Consistency*. For reasons of comparative clarity the binary division of 'industry' and 'academic' artist have been employed, although I acknowledge that there is ongoing cross-over between these two sites of artistic endeavour.

Industry conditions and imperatives

For the purposes of this comparison I envisage the 'industry' artist as working for the majority of their time on their practice resulting in professional outcomes that may be publicly funded, commissioned or on a commercial basis. In this scenario tangible outcomes are required to be delivered in a shorter period of time than work being produced for a higher degree, partly because full-time artists are reliant on making a living from their art and partly due to financial constraints in terms of rehearsal space, performers' time and fees, and venue / festival / touring requirements. Since most creative and interpretive artists will need to plan for back-to-back projects, an artist's technical and creative skills are being continually honed and evaluated. This arguably results in greater regularity in maintaining their disciplinary skills base where it is likely intense periods of practice occur more often than in the extended time-frame of a research higher degree, which allows for greater periods of reflection and academic study. While artists in the publicly funded sector are more and more likely to undertake a creative development phase followed by a break of varying duration to another phase of final rehearsals, these periods are likely to be relatively short. An advantage, however, depending on the circumstances of the artist, is the potential for re-visiting the work through another season or through touring or re-working it in another context, thus testing the revised work in the market place and subjecting it to further rounds of critical and audience feedback. This not only maximises creative and financial investment but allows the work to metamorphose and grow, ensuring relevance to the sector in which it operates.

Thus quality is not only judged by critics and peers but by market forces in the guise of audiences, festival and gallery directors, entrepreneurs, venue managers and the like. There is an expectation of higher production values and arguably more highly trained performers and collaborators than in the laboratory-like and relatively sequestered environment of an academic research setting; and quality judgements are overtly comparative. These judgements are also driven by the competitive nature of outputs in the industry in which the 'best' or most 'successful' work may be the most critically acclaimed, but may also be judged on box office, length of season, number of works sold, or cities toured. And while more does not equal better in terms of quality, in a climate which increasingly demands the new, the different, the highly

skilled and the innovative, artists often need to find ways of re-inventing themselves and their work to stay relevant in a rapidly changing cultural milieu. At the same time, professional artists are increasingly expected to articulate and write about their work and place it in context for the media, their audiences and their stakeholders. And while their works acclaimed or otherwise, contribute to cultural knowledge, this contribution is of a different order than research-based creative work. Quality in this context tends to be based on aesthetic criteria that are both discipline specific and market driven⁴, where the outcome and not the process is what is judged (even if the artists are philosophically process driven). And just as in academia, there are fluctuating fashions, trends and institutional approbation (or not) which dictate evaluative criteria.



Ko-Pei Lin in 'then', choreography Vanessa Mafe
from *here/there/then/now*, director Cheryl Stock
Partnership between Brisbane Powerhouse and QUT. Photo: Ian Hutson

Academic conditions and imperatives

Currently practice-led research tropes, though still fluid and emergent, favour an individuated approach even when the work is collaborative. A scan of practice-led research degrees in Australia shows that the field comprises mainly single practitioner/researchers investigating their personal practice, albeit situating it within a broader field. This has led to concerns about 'self-referentiality'⁵, identified through our research at industry forums and through interviews with academics (Phillips, Stock & Vincs, 2009).

While one cannot deny the power and value of reflexivity, it may well be that reflexivity inside the making of an artwork has a different inflection to reflecting about the processes inherent in that activity. Does too much time reflecting and theorising about the work lessen the communicative drive of an artist through the artwork itself? This is a question that is either not asked or is being avoided. The pre-eminence of reflective process over practice is reinforced by the weight and importance given to the exegetical (predominantly textual) component of a practice-led degree. Even when 'led' by the practice with the major findings embedded in the practice, most examiners interviewed in the *Dancing between Diversity and Consistency* project agreed that considerably more time was spent on examining the exegesis than the accompanying practice or its visual/digital documentation.

Conceptual considerations are paramount in both industry and academic art works, but it appears more likely that the conceptual will predominate over practitioner mastery⁶ in a practice-led environment, partly because the time span of the latter lends itself to spending longer on the ideas behind the work than working with the materialities of the practice itself in the studio. The outcome therefore has a different focus and it is arguably counterproductive to evaluate one with the criteria of the other. And yet there is an inherent danger in not having some commonly agreed disciplinary qualitative criteria.

Even though the art work in practice-led research has a public outcome, it is largely protected from the kind of scrutiny of industry-based projects. With some exceptions, the work is invariably shown in a university venue with a large part of the audience from academia. The work is most often accompanied by a 'framing document' which elucidates what one is about to see or hear. This framing document sets out the conditions or context in which the work is to be experienced or 'framed'. This is not the same as a performance program or exhibition catalogue which contains content and sometimes conceptual information but rarely detailed processual information.

The conditions under which the artwork is created can also be quite distinctive. In the case of the practice-led performing arts, it is usually very difficult to work with professional collaborators over such an extended period and there is little capacity to pay professional rates. Two concerns arise from these conditions. Firstly, students or under employed graduates are often recruited, who may not have the experience or commitment to contribute to the creation of doctoral or master level work. Secondly, rehearsals tend to be more sporadic, with the subsequent risk of losing momentum and a continuity of collaborators and in not maintaining a high level of what Melrose (2003, np) refers to as 'performance mastery' or 'practitioner-specific expertise', which necessitates intensive daily practice.

In terms of context and intention, academic artists tend to focus on what the art work reveals about the practice than the art practice per se, as they become enmeshed in their creative research journey. And because the criteria for evaluating quality is underpinned by what the art work and its exegesis contributes to knowledge, the art work may indeed 'fail' artistically (according to industry standards) but still be considered valuable because of what it reveals about its process and the art form. Although, like its counterpart in industry, there is an element of competitiveness

which forms part of evaluative criteria, the competitive nature of a practice-led output is more at the level of an individual or 'original' contribution to knowledge, rather than critical acclaim or 'success' in terms of numbers attending or industry reviews via the impact of the art work.

Innovation as a measure of aesthetic quality

Haseman and Mafe (2009: 216) acknowledge that the practice-led researcher must identify and engage with these 'professional frames within which practice is pursued', but suggest that in evaluative terms, 'often these arbiters of the professional are conservative in nature, and research must find ways of influencing those professional dictates'. Limiting myself to the performing arts as the area with which I am most familiar, my concern is that the opposite may in fact be happening. With the emphasis on validating creative works as a research vehicle, methodologies of practice-led research have created a feverish industry of artists and academics in which over-theorising about creative practice has in my view a tendency to constrain some of the intuitive and serendipitous processes of the artist as they attempt to illuminate or translate them for an academic context.

Certainly in dance, the most innovative and ground-breaking work appears to be occurring in industry, not the academy. Is artwork losing its stand alone identity in the obsession with legitimising practice in the academy? In the academy, is innovation occurring primarily in the methodologies to support the practice rather than the practice itself? In voicing these concerns, I am not advocating a return to 'those that do' and 'those that write about it' as I believe that privileging the artist's voice as well as her/his practice is of inestimable value to both academia and industry in articulating the ways artists think about themselves and their processes. But I am questioning unexamined assumptions that reflecting more and doing less will in itself lead to improved artistic outcomes or more valid or innovative contributions to knowledge in the wider context. And so, in a practice-led environment it is quite conceivable that a work might 'fail' according to industry aesthetic criteria but in a research paradigm may be judged both innovative and original and therefore a valuable contribution to knowledge.

Concluding remarks: different inflections in qualitative criteria

From this analysis it is clear that industry and academia inhabit a similar but nevertheless discrete cultural landscape and that the principles of aesthetic quality framed by intention, contextual parameters and criteria for evaluation are differently inflected. However, for both to remain relevant to the other, some common qualitative measures need to be agreed upon. In terms of shared art-form criteria in the artistic output of a practice-led award, this paper recommends the use of more industry examiners who are briefed on the parameters of the work and are provided with some training in the requirements of practice-led degrees (through seminars and symposia); but still examine the work from a predominantly industry viewpoint. Consideration could also be given to industry-based external co/associate supervisors of works

produced in the academy. Conversely, arts academics who are not versed in practice and are supervising these degrees need to ensure they are immersed as much as possible in the studio work of the practice-led student and also attend industry programs on a regular basis. Despite the rhetoric around the interdependence of the art work and its exegesis in practice-led degrees, in some disciplines and/or universities students have two separate supervisors; one with a creative practice background and one who only deals with theoretical concerns.

Finally, for these proposed measures to be effective there needs to be more honest critical debate around the fact that distinct qualitative criteria apply when an artist is making an art work for the public alone and when he/she is making the work in a research framework. The current emphasis on the realised artwork (output) being the major examinable outcome may need some re-visiting with more consideration given to what amounts to research-based practice, where the art work investigates creative processes and problems that emerge from the practice. In other words, the innovation in the findings may turn out to be primarily methodological rather than artistic. This does not make the practice any less valuable, less creative, or less innovative, but it is of a different order than an industry-based artwork. If this differentiation is acknowledged, current tensions around qualitative judgements in work created for industry versus for a research context can be minimised.

Endnotes

¹ For discussion on the range of terminologies see, Phillips, Maggi, Cheryl Stock & K Vincs 2009 *Dancing between diversity and consistency: refining assessment in postgraduate degrees in dance*, Perth: WA Academy of Performing Arts, ECU. Available electronically at www.dancingbetweendiversity.com; and Haseman, Bradley 2009 'Performance as research in Australia: legitimating epistemologies' in Riley, S R & L Hunter (eds) *Mapping landscapes for performance as research: scholarly acts and creative cartographies*, Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 58

² This is the sector to which this paper predominantly refers.

³ This research was funded by the Australian Learning & Teaching Council's Priority Projects Program. In addition to 72 interviews with examiner/supervisors, research deans and candidates across Australia and across the creative arts, the study also gained the industry perspectives of dance professionals in a series of national forums, based around the value of higher degrees in dance.

⁴ By market driven, I am not necessarily foregrounding economic factors but am referring mainly to what the arts industry deems to be of a high calibre, of current relevance and in demand by the particular sector within which the artist identifies and works.

⁵ The comment about self-referentiality occurred several times in interviews with research higher degree supervisors in the project, *Dancing between diversity and consistency*, pointing to the fact that this is a concern within the academy and not merely an 'outside' industry perception.

⁶ By practitioner mastery, I am referring to the daily-practiced and finely honed technical skills of a discipline to do with form, content and structure, which also encompass 'hands-on' highly developed spatial and temporal perception and visual/aural/kinetic acuity, as well as the intuitive and imaginative qualities with which an artist uses these skills.

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