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## **TEXT Review**

# **The Uniqueness of Practice**

*review by Jondi Keane*

*Media International Australia: Incorporating Culture and Policy*  
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Editors Lelia Green and Brad Haseman should be applauded for mounting a collection of articles on this crucial topic. The volume is convincing on many levels regarding the research value of the outcomes and activities described. However, like many theme issues of journals, this collection as a whole is caught between offering diverse perspectives and providing a sustained argument. Lelia Green introduces the 'perfect storm' of factors that constitute the terms of the debate and illuminates the implications of these factors, emphasising the need to establish a better sense of what 'innovation' means in regards to creative research (Green 2006: 5). Surprisingly, my lasting impression from reading the collection of papers was that research (evidence of the contribution to knowledge) was never in question. What was much less clear across the papers selected for the 'Practice-led Research' volume was the use of the term 'practice' and how practice-led research might produce knowledge that could not have come about through research methods not considered as practice. Practice, as it emerges from these discussions, risks disappearing into blanket description of the realisation of every form of inquiry, which would render the distinction useless.

This issue of *MIA* is similar to two other collections of essays from QUT. Each collection uses a different organising thematic, such as 'creative industries' or 'innovation', but mine the same vein of issues and controversies as the *MIA* issue. The publication of *Innovation in Australian Arts, Media and Design* (Wissler et al 2004) correlated the views expressed at two national symposia and offered a range of conclusions concerning the impact of interdisciplinary pressures upon epistemology, pedagogy, and the consumption-driven economy. The publication of *Creative Industries* (Hartley 2005) organised similar discussions through QUT's brand of creative industry. The book that John Hartley edited receives a severe critique by James Donald in the 'Practice-led Research' issue of *MIA* under review here. Donald is more critical of Hartley's argument rather than the merits of the QUT approach, commenting that 'the scholarship is too often opportunistic and sloppy in its subservience to selling the CI idea' (Donald 2006: 161). Donald's more general observation of *Creative Industries* provides a stern warning for the editors of collected essays, stating, 'there is no rationale tying together the various perspectives and enthusiasms presented ...' (2006: 161). Despite the strong rationale that Green supplies in the introduction to 'Practice-led

Research', an additional article that ties together the 'perspectives and enthusiasms' would have been useful.

As informative as the articles were, none of them managed to find a way out of the forest of particulars and into a transdisciplinary measure for practice-led research. Perhaps this is an unrealistic expectation, since the volume gives voice to a range of positions focused through vastly different sets of concerns. Confronted with this mix, it is important to notice that in reading the volume, my own predispositions, prejudices and assumptions as a practitioner surfaced. I felt both the pique of disagreement and the uneasy recognition of my own positions. This heuristic aspect is an indirect benefit of the volume that might have been made more explicit.

In each article, there was a concerted effort to establish or re-establish a context for 'practice', and as a result many gaps and overlaps allowed tensions within and across papers to appear. I have used these issues as a way of engaging with the volume as a whole.

*1. The distinction between 'creative' practice-led research and practice as a general term for the innovative production of methods, analytical tools and the realisation of innovative research outcomes.*

I think there is a distinction to be made between a researcher in the sciences, social sciences or humanities who does not consider their research to be practice-led, yet devises creative and inventive analytical tools and modes of information acquisition and presentation, and the creative industries practitioner who appropriates material processes, modes of experience, or sites of reception, distribution and consumption to produce new knowledge. This difference also appears within the arts as a distinction between 'practice-as' and 'practice-led' research, which particularly affects the way PhDs are designed, undertaken and evaluated in the arts.

*2. Who benefits from participatory research?*

In end-user or DIY online and interactive technologies, difficult questions about collaboration and research subjects appear, especially when participants are co-constructing a social field of activity. Documenting and thinking about new social fields *is* important research, but finding where the deliberate, reflexive practitioner/researcher is situated in the crowd, is far from transparent. Concerns such as, who would receive research quantum or funding and right to intellectual property are not entirely evident. Is it the software designer, the creative participant passing leisure time online, or the participant who has a research question and is enrolled in a RHD program? Is the participant who is using a received structure to intervene in another (social structure) doing research, or is only the action researcher, conscious of the research outcomes, performing research operations? The exciting benefits of participatory structure raise new ethical questions.

*3. The relationship of the unrepeatable, emergent process (regarded as one value of creative research) to the need for repeatable, universally applicable standards of evaluation.*

The creative arts and industries are being asked to construct evaluation criteria based upon a system that values repeatability, standardisation and unification. Paul Stapleton's paper on documentation raises the question of unrepeatability in relation to performance and assessment of performance outcomes. The implication is that we are being asked to produce standards

for unrepeatability. Stapleton's argument brings us to the point where all actions are mediated or mediatized (Auslander); a point at which practice becomes an analytical tool that can unpack the situated relationships of media/material processes. Brad Haseman also emphasises this aspect of practice, citing Donald Schon on the 'complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived to be central to the world of professional practice' (Haseman 2006: 99). My reading of the conclusions of Allyson Holbrook (et al), regarding the examination of fine art PhDs, is that there is a great degree of uncertainty regarding the standard of measures applied to the examination of creative work for the PhD, and discomfort regarding the written component, shared by PhD students and the examiners.

For a review in *TEXT*, perhaps it is important to discuss the issue of the 'singularity' of process in creative practice. Donna Lee Brien's case study of her creative writing doctorate supplies the point of reference. Her argument that 'pure research' is necessary and integral to writing is convincing, however most of the research activities she points to are not exclusive to creative writing. She suggests that there are a number of interlinked components in creative writing practice-as-research 'including (but not exclusively) the physical act of writing' (Brien 2006: 54) and briefly discusses writing experiments (2006: 56). In these passages, Brien begins to address what practice-led creative writing might offer, but is quick to emphasise product - the new form 'fictionalised biography' (2006: 57) - rather than process, as the research indicator. Brien seems to have missed the opportunity to distinguish the research processes common to all writing (reading, publishing, theorising) from what is uniquely added to the mix by the creative practice of writing and research that is led by such a practice. The issue of embodied process that I am referring to has, to some extent, already been played out in similar debates within cognitive science, which has attempted to naturalise phenomenological, introspective and contemplative traditions with quantitative findings in neurobiology and the complement of sciences informing studies of cognition (Petitot et al 1999, Dreyfus and Hall 1982). Cognitive science is struggling with the necessity of integrating first-person and third-person science, a process which practice-led research has as one of its central tenets.

Writing that compiles information requires research, but writing that enacts knowledge as it compiles information is another story that still needs to be told. By not taking creative writing to this site of contention, Brien falls short of accounting for the reflexive and singular character of the 'exploratory cycle of reading, writing, testing, reading, rewriting, and retesting' (Brien 2006: 57).

The question of how creative work enters into a shared community of interest is the centre of the 'practice' debate and comes down to how a researcher positions his or her body as the site of the production of meaning, which is the last issue I will consider.

*4. The role of the body in research, the body-in-process that is so evident in most of creative arts practice (which might distinguish it from creative industries practices?).*

Although 'embodied, experiential, and collaboratively produced' knowledge is mentioned (Sharp 2006: 23), the detail of this approach is not picked up again until Brad Haseman's discussion of 'performativity'. Haseman positions practice as a form of method, where 'researchers

construct experiential starting points from which practice follows', without recourse to an initial problem, hypothesis or research question (Haseman 2006: 100). The construction and coordination of social structures, cultural contexts and personal narratives requires a practice that *must constantly be performed*. This suggests that 'practice' is *both* the mode of research (method) and the initial research question (subject). Performativity suggests that in practice we are 'thinking through the body' (Gallop 1990) whereas, too often, modes of research have resulted in a situation where 'thinking "threw" the body'.

Brian Massumi (2002) supplies an approach that might be useful for positioning practice-led research in which his own version of radical empiricism operates, where the 'transitional immediacy of real relation [is] that of a body to its own indeterminacy (its openness to elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)' (Massumi 2002: 5). Many of the problems regarding practice and research are found at the boundaries of the body and the community, of first-person and third-person perspectives, and of the virtual and the actual. The excess of effects over their causes is the paradox of singular contingent processes and universal applications at the heart of debates concerning 'practice'. Massumi observes the creative violence of which artists are accused when 'poaching' concepts from science, and calls the transmission of affects: 'connectibility' (2002: 20). Performativity enacts the connectibility to which Massumi refers and describes the process that persons, who construct a practice, practise differently. He notes: 'When you uproot a concept from its network of systematic connection with other concepts, you still have its connectibility. You have systematic connectibility without the system' (Massumi 2002: 20).

As culture becomes addicted to systematicity, practice-led research is the most rigorous way to reconfigure the singular process to generic inter-subjectivity. Practice-led research places the specificity of embodied activity at the centre of institutional, disciplinary and philosophical debates and offers alternative approaches to pre-emptive disciplinary methodologies. This volume highlights the diversity of practices as well as the intra-mural and inter-mural tensions they create.

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*Jondi Keane is an arts practitioner and Lecturer in Cross-Arts Practice at Griffith University. He has published articles on creative arts practice, embodied cognition and the convergence of art and science. In 2007, he has been invited to work with the international artists-turned-architects, Arakawa and Gins, on their experimental built environments.*

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## TEXT

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**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb**

**[Text@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Text@griffith.edu.au)**