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## ***(Re)inventing Artists' Research: Constructing living forms of theory***

### ***Abstract***

*How can we develop understandings about artist-based research that recognise what we do as valid forms of inquiry with relevant sets of criteria, standards, epistemologies and methodologies?*

*Research refers to finding out. It is inquiry in its most rigorous form. Practitioner research is concerned with either identifying or evaluating the theories underlying and shaping our practice. It involves searching systematically and serendipitously for new perspectives and insights into practice. However, the development of understandings about the experience and process of research cannot be situated exclusively as self-expression or instruction. Rather the existing 'discipline' of research is made up of a vast and informative tapestry of categories, terms, processes, protocols and arguments that have been developed, tried and tested by colleagues and antecedents in many disciplines and fields of knowledge.*

*The ideas in this paper are concerned with developing a community of aware and informed practitioners who work within fields of artistic praxis. 'Praxis' in this sense is presented as a self-creative activity through which we make and shape ourselves as well as the wider community of our field. I argue that as practitioners we can become researchers of our own practice and that our visual, performance and textual outcomes importantly serve to demonstrate the kind of knowledge about the field generated by such practice. Whether these are ultimately presented as 'exegesis', 'thesis' or 'dissertation' is a moot point. More critical is how the ingredients and protocols described illuminate the praxis and illustrate a living form of theory.*

*The paper is necessarily brief and will consider three issues contained within the argument. Firstly notions of practitioner research as a living form of theory will be introduced. The central and guiding roles of praxis and reflexivity will be used to add to the debate and the paper will conclude with suggestions about ways existing research protocols and processes can be artistically woven into the process.*

### **Introduction**

As artists, we bring to our practice a complex array of skills, interests, values, talents, habits and perspectives. We know that practice in the arts is a dynamic and complex activity that is socially constructed. Its process can be impulsive, unpredictable, intuitive, not always logical, and is usually difficult to analyse, interpret and describe. As people and artists we know that we need to invest our aesthetic, moral and scientific dimensions totally to cope with the many and varied demands of our field. In so doing our art practice becomes truly autobiographical. To practice is to draw on our creative energies and to respond to situational exigencies with spontaneous acts of mindful and creative expression. So, as Cole and Knowles (Cole and Knowles 2000: 63) observe, it makes sense to seek ways to understand art practice that are also non-linear, multimodal, and multidimensional. Consequently we are challenged to develop more integrated and holistic understandings of art practice through research processes and practices that articulate our conceptualisation and findings in meaningful ways. This means inquiring into and challenging our praxis within the field by encouraging the development of plausible and authentic inquiry that is shaped by the practices and theories of artists. Cole and Knowles suggest that:

Whether it is through poetry, prose, movement, drama, mime, meditation, painting, drawing, sculpture or any other non-traditional linguistic or non-linguistic form the important thing is to find a way or ways that will allow us to follow the natural internal flow of our inquiry. In a sense this is an essential element for researching through artistic expression. (2000: 66)

### **Theorising practice: creating living forms of theory**

Practitioners, who focus on their own practice in the exploration of ideas and experiences, create idiosyncratic theory by presenting a knowledge base that is both complementary but different to the more remote accounts generated by researchers studying artistic practices.

If we wish as artist researchers to challenge the traditional theory practice duality, then we also need to re-think established notions of knowledge and to understand that we become theory builders when we position practice and the acts of production to embody and express theory. This process redefines theory as a reflection of the intricate and many faceted nature of artists' knowledge and arts practice. As such, theory and practice become inextricably linked and mutually dependent.

Artist-based research can be defined as critical reflective investigative praxis which could include practicing theory, practice into theory, practical theory, theory into practice, theorizing practice, theoretical practice. For Griselda Pollock,

There is no practice without an informed theory, even if it is not fully recognised or acknowledged, and theories are only realised in practices. Methodology only becomes apparent, that is different from the normalised procedures of the discipline, when a different set of questions is posed and demands new ways of being answered. (Pollock 1996: 13)

I see artist-based research as hybrid practice, in that although it finds its base in qualitative research, its practices blur the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture and reflect the complex dynamics involved in the processes of artistic practice. The practitioner researcher seeks to uncover, record, interpret and position, from an insider's perspective and experience, the processes they use within the context of professional contemporary practices in the field. The

resulting stories are placed in historical, social and cultural contexts and, when shaped through autobiography, become a form of self-portraiture, the mirroring of experience. In other words, this is about theorising practice. The relationship between studio practice and theory is meaning rich. Its dichotomies resonate within the field as an arena for presentations of credible and compelling stories about processes for exploring the aesthetic, empirical (experienced based) and ethical dimensions of what it is to practice in the studio as artist, musician, writer, performer, dramatist, dancer, etc.

This is a story about border crossing. Through it I focus on exploring and suggesting possibilities and sources for artists' research practices while recognising that practice in the arts, by its very nature, challenges convention and is underpinned by structure and improvisation, order and creativity, experience and intuition. I argue that art is improved by critical exercise as mindful practice. You will see that my approach relies heavily upon qualitative research methods and draws on the perspectives and the discourses of social science inquiry. In considering relevant and appropriate processes, methods and strategies, I am arguing for a blend of artistic resonance, literary principles and scientific rigour.

The purpose of the artist-researcher is to become conscious of our assumptions, processes and perceptions about artistic practice, so that we can talk about them and use this knowledge to further our understandings of the field. This kind of research has the potential, in our field and professional communities, to create a reality base of evolving theory to increase awareness of what we do as practice-based researchers. Dodds and Hart (Dodds and Hart 2001: 173) charge us with the need to be responsible, as practitioners in the field, to be exacting in the articulation of our evolving theory and perspectives on practitioner research. Schon (Schon 1995) believes that practitioners need to study their own practice and generate their own personal theories out of that practice. Or, as McNiff and Whitehead put it,

The process of research becomes the practice, and because we are involved in a research process of thinking, evaluating and acting, the practice is a form of research. The boundaries are dissolved; knowledge, interests and practice are integrated within a life.  
(McNiff and Whitehead 2002: 36)

It is through this process that researchers learn to understand and take responsibility to account for their practice and professionalism. They do this by drawing on their own tacit situations and acting in new ways as new insights emerge. The resulting theoretical outcomes are located in, emerge from and inform the practice. Thus, theory and practice become synonymous, presenting the same experience from different perspectives, like the warp and weft of a tapestry. This kind of self-study gives rise to living theory that positions the artist as knowledge worker, capable of generating valid theory while sharing their practice and learning experiences collaboratively. The outcomes can be seen as new forms of theory grounded in the experienced reality of practitioners' lives. They emerge in practice as personal forms of acting and knowing (2002: 22). These new forms and paradigms of research and practice have the potential, as Anne Marsh says, to become 'the established excellences of tomorrow' where exhibitions and performance outcomes have as their totality 'a sort of magnificence as research comes alive'. Marsh conceptualises the studio as 'an experimental arena for creative interactions, a space for critical analysis and renewal' (Marsh 2002: 15).

This enables a process for creating descriptions and explanations for what we do as artists. We embody the theory and practice in a process of *new scholarship* (Dodds and Hart 2001: 146) that collects and tests data of practice to provide

evidence to support our claims about our practice. The outcomes represent professional narratives of praxis. McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 24) see this as a developmental process that turns observations into descriptions that become explanations that are amalgamated with the life of the storyteller.

Studying our practice and its underpinning assumptions enables us to develop a creative and critical understanding of ourselves, and our processes of learning and growth. We make our thinking different when we do this kind of action. Polanyi observes,

Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different; I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently. I have crossed a gap, a heuristic gap which lies between problem and discovery. (Polanyi 1958: 143)

It is the task of thoughtful researchers to critically consider how knowledge in their field is produced and used. A good place to start is to ask what we know? What we need to know? Who and why do we need to know this for? Or another way to put this is to consider what we know, how we know it and what it means to know it. This kind of reflexive approach enables us to explore the values that frame our practice as artists.

### **Praxis and reflexivity: working as theory-generators**

Ultimately if artists' research is of any value it must make sense to other practitioners. There are two implications of this. First, the ways we report processes and findings need to be accessible to readers and colleagues. This means making our languages clear, the reports well structured and the theoretical concepts believable within a studio context. To do this, according to Kantor (Kantor 1991: 109), we need to become more familiar with research and associated literature relevant to the field, while balancing a critical attitude and an open-minded stance. The outcomes of these inductive research findings create new constructs of meaning that generate insights into our own praxis through an enhanced process of discovery. Mayher and Brause assert that, 'Reflective practitioners, constantly subject to careful scrutiny all that we do as a way to improve our practice' (Brause and Mayher 1991: 115).

Reflective practitioners assume that ideas that underpin their practice should be questioned. To do this they tend to explore and uncover theory embedded in, rather than applied to practice. Their art practice is approached as a personal and professional expression of knowing and knowledge, framed by a complication of personal, cultural, historical, political, societal and local community contexts and circumstances.

Cole and Knowles position *Reflexive* in the 'personal' where, for us, art production expresses who artists are as people. The process of reflexivity is therefore saturated with a lifetime's development of values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences. They see reflective inquiry as an ongoing and sometimes critical practice of examining and refining practise, by thinking back into the practice. In doing this we assume that the ideas that underpin our practice should be questioned. We do this variously by focussing upon personal, technical, conceptual, intellectual, societal and/or ethical contexts associated with professional work.

Cole and Knowles (2000: 3) liken reflexive practice to using a mirror and transparent prism with which to view practice. In contrast to reflective inquiry,

reflexive inquiry takes a critical perspective. It focuses on experience as the scaffold for contextual understanding by considering the roles elements of personal history play in the formulation of practice.

Reflexive practice occurs when we consider particular aspects of general theories in the contexts of our personal theories. So we become theory generators as well as theory users. The essence of reflexive practice is the integration of elements or principles of both kinds of theories. This gap between theory and practice describes inconsistencies between artists' professional actions and their personal theories. The focus and intention of reflexive inquiry is to close these theory-practice gaps.

### **Traditions, territories and translations: (re)shaping the process**

As arts practitioners we have long recognised that innovative work is underpinned and enabled by knowledge of a variety of approaches. In a similar way we can draw on, mould, adapt and appropriate established research traditions as useful resources from which to (re)shape ideas and techniques for new purposes and research questions. I believe that this existing and established knowledge offers us pathways to better create unique, divergent ways forward in our practice as researchers. Dodds and Hart (2001: 168) claim that one cannot break with tradition unless one knows the tradition. While there are arguments that the apparent constraints of 'set' methodologies might inhibit creativity, another approach is to see them as models from which we can learn to map out a methodological territory within which we can ultimately situate and adapt an innovative approach. Our aim here is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness.

We can appeal also to authoritative sources in the traditional literature on methodology to give weight to arguments. The trick is to have the confidence to join together our personal methods with relevant aspects of those clearly defined guidelines and rules of traditional research methodology. By so doing we not only make meaning for the study by fitting what is needed, but we write for the practice through the self, and our narrative comments explain why we do what we do as artists. Such a framework depends on ideas about personal empowerment, the centrality of practice and the significance of personal history and processes of self-directed learning.

Such methods are underpinned by the premise that there are many influences upon artists' ability to come to understand and communicate what they know. We might examine elements of our journals, personal histories and forms of creative expression. Our methods might include empirical inquiries into elements of practice, relationships and contexts. We might engage in collaborations, discourse analysis and the exploration of lifeworld contexts and experiences to give insight into the creative processes we use. This is a process that uses a bricolage of methods to develop detailed accounts that help to cross between the image and thinking (Cole and Knowles 2000: 78). To do this we need to focus closely our inquiry and to represent it in ways that are personally the most meaningful, appropriate and authentic, to portray and describe clearly what it is that we are trying to understand and represent.

In developing alternate ways for researching practice we need to identify and use processes that complement our personal ways of working, valuing and being in the world. This means being aware of the implications and characteristics that drive our individual ways of expression and how they relate to others in the field. Our search for evidence is necessarily open, multidirectional and process-oriented

in allowing the work of researching to find its own creative form. We need to make sense of our identities as researchers who are artists, remembering that the structures we use to organise our lives and the ways we view the world need to mirror our professional processes of inquiry.

We might begin by identifying those issues at the forefront of our mind while realising that the act of locating ourselves within a specific concept has implications for the scope and variations of the task we set our hand, eye and brain. We might consider what we bring to bear on the task of imagining and representing our theme. We might decide to explore and unpack those personal characteristics and knowledge that enable us as artists to make judgements and choices about subject matter, our socio-cultural positioning, our gaze, our process. We might analyse the ways we use to create works that reflect and articulate our personal 'signature'.

When we recognise that in some ways all research involves observation and description, then moving from these to explanation means moving to offering explanations for action. In so doing, we shift the focus of the research from observing and describing what is happening, to considerations about why it is happening. That involves placing the reasons and intentions of the person who performs the behaviour in the spotlight. McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 26-7) see this change of focus presenting research as a form of living practice, supported by a dialogue of equals in the creation of links between theory and practice.

We know that research doesn't just happen. It is planned and designed carefully in an attempt to show how claims for knowledge will be supported through data gathering and presentation; how the claim for credibility is supported; and how the conversation about arts research is located in its historical, cultural and socio-political contexts. Central to the methodology is the identification of a concern, a clear question, a problem to be explored.

Following from Whitehead (2002: 72), this can be approached by asking a number of questions. They might go like this: What is my question? Why am I asking this? What do I think I can do about it? What will I do about it? How will I gather evidence to show that I am influencing the situation? How will I ensure that any judgements I make are reasonably fair and accurate? What will I do then?

In collecting the data we need to consider the constitution of the data, because these are the prime source of information for the study. Clear descriptions of the procedures used in their collection are important as they enable further exploration and identification of various supplement products used in, and resulting from, the activity. We need also to consider the contents and sources (collect, select, reflect); the projection of the data (how it will be shown); and how to present evidence of influences, draw conclusions, identify criteria for judging effectiveness and impact on practice; and the processes used to present judgements accurately and with relevance. These are used to evidence that we have accomplished the purpose of the research. Whitehead tells us that 'The credibility of the findings frequently rests on a researcher's ability to convey sufficient detail for the armchair reader to at least visualise the experience' (2002: 95). Our conclusion should discuss the significance of research for our selves, the field and the discipline. In the process we might consider whether we have provided a new lens or perspective for studying aspects of our field and understanding our practice.

We can use the data to construct our visual, performance and textual descriptions of events and phenomena as they occur in the context of the study. We can enrich our discussion and exemplify patterns and contrasts when we include transcripts from journals, images to document production processes, photocopies, drawings,

examples of models for praxis, poems, selected transcriptions of conversations, etc. Our aim is to present a believable and credible story that melds and weaves our studio production and the storying of it, which the reader can associate as compatible with their own experiences.

The contents of a written report would follow traditional conventions by explaining the background to the project and its present contexts, while considering the purpose, limitations and significance of the study. The study would be situated in the field through a comprehensive literature review that would also establish the research design. The report would show how data is gathered and turned into evidence that is further massaged by criteria for success and credibility. New directions for research would be indicated as conclusions are reached about the presentation of outcomes. The style of the report might follow traditional lines or we might develop a way of speaking that better blends practice and theory. In so doing we would try to enable the individual sections and ingredients of the construct to flow and twine through the texts in ways that give voice to the various parts of the whole as an individualistic and holistic account of reality. Whatever the style, the developmental form of the text will be generative in that it is produced through a bricolage of narrative inquiry, autobiography, ethnography and subjective study approaches. These might draw on methodologies such as feminist sociology, visual methods, personal experience methods and other forms of case study and qualitative inquiry.

### **Conclusions: empowering diversity and inventiveness**

If we are to encourage the development of new methodological approaches to artist researchers, then an essential part of learning is the development of a strong and empowering sense of methodological diversity and inventiveness. Such an approach, importantly would make visible to other practitioners the person behind the research. It would show how individual comments, experiences, storied personal approaches and theories, strengths and weaknesses all affect the individual choices made. As Margaret Sears (Sears 2002: 3) observes, 'The process of getting there will have been significantly different and arguably, closer to the process of inquiry that drives other university disciplines. In other words, it is the creative arts' version of research'.

This paper has argued that the artist researcher can develop ways to combine personal, professional and academic influences to produce an innovative approach that would empower thinking, enhance the quality and presentation of the learning, and consequently the practical outcomes of their research. McNiff and Whitehead observe,

the need for practitioner excellence and accountability goes without saying, as well as the need to produce empirical evidence to support claims that one knows what one is doing and takes responsibility for the ongoing improvement of practice. (2002: 60)

We may call the final outcomes *exegesis*: a critical explanation or interpretation; *thesis*: a stated proposition to be discussed, proved or maintained, something set down; *dissertation*: a written essay or treatise, a formal discourse. However, for me, the important issues here are the content, process and quality of the study. As practitioners who research our own praxis, we can present and describe our visual, performance and textual outcomes to demonstrate the kind of knowledge about the field generated by such practice. In this way we can add to living theory through rich descriptions that illuminate and illustrate praxis in the field.

## Notes and debate

Alyssa Ryan [Connecting Two Research Strategies: a hybrid model](#)

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