

# Aesthetic Experience and Innovation in Practice-led Research

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## Performativity As Production

Evaluation of creative arts-based PhD and artistic research continues to be dominated by assumptions about research and research training derived from science and the idea that distanced impersonal observation is the only reliable method for the production of 'truths' or knowledge about the world. Canonical social science and humanities research has tended to privilege this mode. However, more recently there has been a general shift in the arts and humanities towards a second mode of discovery and learning, which Iain Biggs (2009) describes as a mode of knowledge production that emphasises a context of application, heterogeneity, a reduced reliance on hierarchy and an acknowledgement that the production of new knowledge is potentially a transformative act; that is to say, that the production of knowledge is experiential and performative. I suggest that in such an approach, distanced observation is replaced with aesthetic awareness and there is a movement from views of knowledge as static to an appreciation of knowledge as interaction and action. In the final section of this paper, I will draw on two successfully completed PhD projects to illustrate this mode of production and its potential for interdisciplinary application and innovation. First, however, there is a need to elaborate what is meant by 'performativity' and how this concept is fundamental to revealing the limits of the scientific method.

The notion of performativity first gained currency through J.L. Austin's work, *How To Do things With Words* (1962). In it, Austin identifies a class of utterances, which he terms 'performative'; these go beyond describing or reporting actions and events in that they actually perform the actions to which they refer. One example of such utterances used by Austin to illustrate this, are the words 'I do' spoken in marriage ceremonies. Hence his claim that in certain contexts, making a statement of an action is equivalent to carrying it out. Alternatively, 'constative' utterances are statements that describe phenomena. Austin's ideas would suggest that there is no gap between language and the reality it represents. However, it does not capture the idea of inventive production that is implied in Julia Kristeva's theory of creative textual practice. The user of language in Austin's account does not generate

something new, but is a conscious ego who employs words that have socially agreed meanings. Judith Butler recognises that this notion of performativity is related to performance as a deliberate act of a knowing subject. Whilst she argues for a more generative 'performativity', Butler nevertheless privileges discourse and the symbolic law in her definition of performativity as a practice 'by which *discourse* produces the effects that it names' (Butler, 1993, p.2 my emphasis). Thus 'performativity' as practice and materialisation, is for Butler, an outcome of the symbolic law, an already constituted language. Transgression in Butler's framework is always in opposition to and determined by established categories.

Kristeva's thought however, highlights material processes as *pre-linguistic and intra-linguistic* processes. In her account, aesthetic processes occur in relation to both what is known and an as yet, unsymbolised other (Kristeva, 1984, p.203). This permits us to conceive of a more radically transgressive performativity: performativity as the bringing into view of the as yet unimaginable. It is only through the productive material alteration of language itself, through the forging of the aesthetic image, that this 'unimaginable' may be accessed.

Brad Haseman makes the following observation on creative practice as research: 'When research findings are presented as performative utterances, there is a double articulation with practice that brings into being what, for want of another word, it names' (Haseman, 2007, p.150).

Despite putting forward the idea that practice as research indicates a radically new and different approach, Haseman's comment would seem to be drawing a correspondence between artistic research and science in presupposing or implying an unproblematic relationship between ready-made language and the complex processes of production that occur in practice. His comment glosses over the issue of 'naming', an issue which is at the heart of Kristeva's thought on creative production because it recognises that there is a gap between what language can describe or signify and reality. Art operates within this gap and this is what underscores Kristeva's critique of science.

A brief excursion into etymology is useful here. Amongst other definitions, *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary On Historical Principles* (1978) outlines the following derivations of 'perform/performativity': from Latin origins, 'To carry through to completion, an action, process work etc.' and in the sixteenth century, 'to complete

by adding what is wanting' and 'to do, make', 'to do one's part', 'to discharge one's function', 'to go through'. The two meanings that are of interest here, 'to complete by adding what is wanting' and 'to make', imply modes of productivity that involve actions and processes that are generative and yield something in excess of what existed previously. We can now assert that performativity in creative production involves an interaction between the subject (artist) as material process, as *being and feeling*, and the subject as *signifying process*, as *sense-making*. This results in a renewal and alteration of both the subject and language. In both the making and viewing of art, experience-in-practice materialises or makes available to consciousness, a new object of knowledge. Knowledge then, is not a static entity, but is what Ian Sutherland and Sophia Krzys Acord describe as an interactive *in situ* encounter. This shifts our understanding of knowledge from a passive to an active ingredient of social life (Sutherland and Krys Acord, 2007, p.126). In what way does this imply a critique of traditional accounts of the scientific mode of research?

### **A Critique of Science**

Central to Kristeva's critique of science is the idea that it is founded on methods that were used to capture the truth about nature by classifying and encoding phenomena through a system of formal language that 'represses the process pervading the body and the subject' (Kristeva, 1984, p.13). Kristeva has shown that the notion of objective, empirical observation as a possibility - and truth as universal - cannot hold if we are to take account of subjective processes: the interaction between embodied experience, language, and thought operating in social contexts. The complexity and abstraction of social existence throws up much more than the scientific method can address or contain. The logic of science is a logic that supposes a direct correspondence between naming and describing and the phenomena to which it refers. This logic presumes that the signifier designates the fullness of referent and is flush with the referent. Kristeva exposes this logic in her account of proper names, which she describes as abbreviations of descriptions that describe not particulars, but systems of particulars. Science not only abbreviates, but by collecting all the possible descriptions of phenomena into its formulae, symbolic representations, concepts and laws, it erases indeterminacy (Kristeva, 1986b, p.234). Aesthetic experience or art, on the other hand, operates through the particulars *and* indeterminacies of embodied experience-in-practice bringing into play an alternative logic that the logic of the *discourse* of science forecloses (Kristeva, 1986b). My emphasis on "discourse" in the previous sentence is deliberate since many scientists

have acknowledged that all 'real' discoveries in science have come about through processes that are ultimately aesthetic and subjective. This is made evident in philosopher and scientist Michael Polanyi's observation that 'Complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and in fact a false ideal' (Polanyi, 1958, p.18).

What becomes clear in Kristeva's account is that because scientific knowledge is predicated on description or naming, it can only constitute a *partial* truth about reality. The artwork or aesthetic image transgresses the rules and codes upon which naming or the fixing of meaning relies. Its structure is polyvalent and by short-circuiting established codes and ways of looking, art opens up new horizons of meaning. This mode of knowledge-production is dependent on interactive experience – a fluid movement between the viewer's feelings, thoughts and the art object within a given social context. Sutherland and Acord describe this as 'thinking with art'; they suggest rather than resulting in situated knowledge, this gives rise to 'experiential knowing' (Sutherland and Acord, 2007, p.125).

### **Interpretation as Practice**

Kristeva highlights the importance of testing the objects of knowledge produced in creative arts practice through her emphasis on the need for interpretation. The difference between experience-in-practice and other fleeting, or everyday experiences, is precisely this. The moment of practice implies testing to what degree experiential knowing that emerges from material processes corresponds to, or deviates from established knowledge. In the phase of "working hot", the workings of material process orchestrate what is laid down as an unconscious mark in a painting or a movement in dance. For this reason artists and audiences are often bewildered by work that is 'revolutionary'. The space of interpretation can be configured in terms of the space of psychoanalysis where there is a potential for a transfer of 'knowledge' between the artist as analysand and the work itself as the 'site' or figure of the analyst. A similar relationship is set up between viewer or interpreter of the artwork where the work of interpretation or "testing" proceeds as a creative practice in its own right. Through this process, the heterogeneous language of the artwork becomes the site of inter-subjective exchange predominantly controlled by the *structure* of the artwork or aesthetic image. This allows transfer of knowledge to be extended through

reflection and application in future practices that extend beyond the original site of making as will be illustrated in my discussion of specific case studies.

Interpretation in creative practice produces a metalanguage through which the 'knowing' engendered by the work can be accessed and made more readily available in relation to established discourses and practices. In creative arts research, the task is achieved through the exegesis or research paper that describes the processes of making and testing as well as the significance of the outcomes in terms of how they have expanded discourse and practice within in the field of and beyond. What we also see in Kristeva's extension of the notion of revolution is the need to shift critical attention from textual practice as renewal of language, to a focus on the social and political impact of this renewal for further practices. This also implies that there is need for new pedagogies that place greater emphasis on creative art research's capacity for knowledge transfer. This is pertinent to practitioner-researchers seeking to articulate how their modes of enquiry constitute forms of "revolt" that make a difference. The case studies discussed below will illustrate, in more concrete terms, the ideas presented here.

### **Lucas Ihlein: Blogging as Art**

Lucas Ihlein's recently completed PhD research entitled, *Framing Everyday Experience: Blogging as Art* (2009) investigates the way in which the practice of blogging can be conceived as an art form, and as such is capable of deepening engagement and attention to everyday experience. Ihlein's research is influenced by the work of Kaprow who pioneered the participatory art form known as Happenings that explored the relationship between art and every day life. Though recognised as artistically innovative and politically significant, the interactive and participatory works of Kaprow and others such as the Situationists of the 1950s and 1960s were nevertheless ephemeral staged events that are largely frozen within the time and place of their occurrence. One of the objectives of Ihlein's project, *Bilateral Petersham*, is to extend on the practices of his antecedents by devising a method of recording and reflecting on participatory art, including his own art as everyday practice whilst at the same time maintaining the integrity and spontaneity of the process. Ihlein frames his research with the following questions: 'If life and art can be successfully integrated what new knowledge might emerge in the process? How does the method of bilateral blogging work to produce aesthetic experience and new insights within the flow of everyday life?' (Ihlein, 2009, p.5 -6).

A requirement of the site-specific project was that the artist should remain within the boundaries of Petersham, a suburb of Sydney for two months and maintain a blog to record his everyday activities and interactions over that period. By devising a new way of making relational artworks and producing an experiential document of the particular environment in which the artwork is situated, Ihlein's project uncovers a new approach to understanding the functioning of aesthetic experience as an integral aspect of the research process.

His method involves the application of a spatial frame – the constraints of the specific site of the investigation, a temporal frame, the duration of the investigation and the synchronous unfolding of the blog, and a material/ technological frame – the hardware and apparatus required to maintain the blog. These framing devices are used as a method to draw attention to the minutiae of daily life and to provide a record for further reflection, analysis and practice. What emerged subsequently included an interactive gallery installation, a number of visual articulations of the research process, and a book of the blog narratives. Crucial to the project was the interactivity afforded by the resulting artefacts and the blogging, since each engendered a performative and co-emergent production by the artist and other participants from the community. By generating an impressionistic 'portrait' revealing aspects of Petersham that are not contained in institutional archives, maps and other institutional records, Ihlein's project demonstrates the aesthetic dimension of blogging: blogging as an art of the everyday. His research also uncovered the way in which blogging can be used as a finely honed instrument for social research.

Beyond articulating a form of practice that blurs the distinction between art and life, Ihlein's reflections within the blog and the meta-reflection afforded by the exegesis produce insights and outcomes that have broader application and significance. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on one component of the project. A series of walks, which involved the artist's attempt to trace the boundaries of Petersham by walking its borders. What emerges is an *experiential* and embodied map of the suburb disclosing the arbitrary nature of the lines on the official map. Ihlein observes that over the years, local council allocations of land and property development have carved up the terrain in ways that are alienating to human activity. He discovers that the boundaries indicated on the official map pass through fenced off properties and tenements, cross railway lines and cut through inhospitable highways. At times this necessitates transgressing the imperative to remain strictly within the locale and

these deviations reveal uncharted boundaries, interstices and connections. A recording of the experiences of the border walks and chance encounters along the way results in a 'remapping' of Petersham along *experiential* lines. Significantly, the spatial narratives produced from the walks reveal a different relationship to place: one of belonging rather than ownership of it. This insight is sharpened in an encounter with Aboriginal Elder Uncle Lester who recounts an alternative history of the occupation of Petersham. In Ihlein's own words, the resultant blog 'creates a body of evidence that reclaims suburban space as having inherent value' (Ihlein, 2009, p.109). Institutional rules and static entities such as lines on a map are constantly being written-over and re-written by actual behaviour and activities of everyday life. In this way, experiential knowing transcends institutional knowledge. It is this polymorphous and unruly knowing born of experience, that art, rather than science, is able to reveal.

### **Valerie Ingham, 'Multimodal Research on the Fireground'**

The second case study to be discussed examines the broader application and significance of how images function and how aesthetic awareness informs human behaviour and the capacity to innovate. Valerie Ingham lectures in Emergency Management at Charles Sturt University and is also a practising artist who presented reflections on her recently completed PhD research in a paper entitled 'Multimodal Research on the Fireground' at the Deakin University *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Research Conference* in December 2009.

Ingham's research investigates the role of aesthetic awareness in time-pressured decision making of emergency workers such as fire fighters. Her work indicates that this form of awareness is crucial to decision-making and is the source of transgression from which innovative practice emerges. Her experience as an artist led her to connect two previously disparate fields in developing her research question: 'What is the relationship between risk perception, decision making and aesthetic and somatic forms of awareness in Incident Controllers on the fireground?'

The research involves interviewing fire fighters to examine their responses and decision-making during critical incidents. On the basis of collected data from incidents, Ingham develops the theory of multimodal decision-making, which suggests somatic awareness is simultaneous, holistic and inseparable, from the ability to think rationally and make decisions. Those interviewed observed that their actions and decisions are often made intuitively and without consciously thinking.

Ingham suggests that there are some parallels between the experience of fire fighting and art practice:

In the practice of an artist, spatial awareness may take the form of encompassing multiple images with one sweeping glance, or a concerted 'look'; there is a sorting and comparison between patterns, objects and movement, some of which will appear in the image under construction and some which will not. This capacity to compare and sort elements of images in parallel, resulting in a selection and an understanding of contrast, I argue is comparable to the process of sizing-up for an Incident Controller. In size-up not only are visual pieces of information placed side by side and meanings ascertained, but conflicting verbal reports are also visualised and reviewed in instants of a second (Ingham, 2009).

Because incident controllers recount their experiences after the event, there is a tendency to use rational and chronological narrative to recount their experiences and actions. An objective of Ingham's research was to capture the multimodal and holistic essence of the scene in its entirety. Understandings of arts-based practice emphasising the artist as both practitioner *and* researcher led to the development of her multimodal research method. By placing the Incident Controllers in the position of artist-practitioner, she was able to come closest to their firsthand view of the scene. Ingham argues that there are aspects of the recognition process which are non-verbal and aesthetic in nature and which cannot be isolated or easily articulated. This underpins her views that aesthetics are vital to risk perception and decision making processes. Her research demonstrates that amongst incident controllers she interviewed, those with a greater level of aesthetic awareness were most successful in making decisions and arriving at unexpected and innovative responses. Ingham clearly articulates one incident involving a fire at a glass factory:

I suggest that what the Glass Factory Inspector sees is comparable to what Matisse saw when he looked at the seventeenth century Dutch still life painting by Jan Davidsz de Heem. Matisse did not see the photo-perfectionism, he was not sidetracked by the realism and he disregarded the traditional values and rules of representational painting. Instead he cut to the core, went straight to the stark outline of the incident and exposed the composition's true structure. In a kind of selective vision that focuses in on the lines and the raw elements of the image, undeterred by the awesome splendour of two hundred tonnes of molten glass, the Glass Factory Inspector sees through to the structural elements and wants to go into action with a plan that nobody feels very motivated by – he wants the pump driver to forsake his safe post and get into the action where his skills will be put to greater use; in essence, the Inspector wants to break the 'rules' (Ingham, 2009).

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