

Research, Scholarly Art Practice

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1) Art Practice is . . . (Introduction)

This paper aims to bring together a range of perspectives relevant to the current debate regarding the problematic division between the contributions of the practising artist and the more recently emerging 'artist scholar' to research in the field of visual art. This is a significant problem for higher education since the drive to increasing the credentials of university staff has laid bare the question of what is meant by 'scholarly research' in visual arts practice. The use of the term Scholarly Art Practice in my title highlights the embedded conceit that art practice can be a scholarly research endeavour. The question then emerges of what is scholarly research in the visual arts?

It is the characteristics of a practice-led scholarly approach to research within visual arts which are examined in this paper. In illustrating a scholarly practice-led model to research, I have structured this paper as a mini thesis following Perry's 'Five Chapter Model, A Structured Approach to Presenting PhD Theses' (Perry, 1995). In examining scholarly characteristics in practice-led research, I present part two of this paper using language in prose form, a method of highlighting a creative production approach to summarising and analysing existing knowledge and presenting it in a form consistent with an art making process. I reference the verse as a small example of creative production and highlight the capacity of creative production to serve multiple functions, including literature review, methodology and to a lesser degree a conclusion. My symbolic metaphoric use of language in verse is interwoven with more traditional use of language for a scholarly context. This method is analogous to the creative production, supporting text exegesis model of higher degrees by research, an approach taken by my employer organisation, the University of Ballarat.

2) Existing Knowledge and Creative Production (Literature Review)

Art practice is

Without need for other

Though with benefit of reciprocity
Between practice and research
The problem may not emerge
Within the constraints of existing methodology
The quantitative qualitative duopoly

Arts practice is located elsewhere
It is practice which stirs the mindless spirit
The symbolic human hunger
Diving blind into dark space
With faith, to be there when knowledge emerges
But is this knowledge?
Smell it, is this not quantifiable?
Demonstrate the knowledge
Iterate it
Separate it, from practice
Anticipate the outcome
'Move from the unknown to the known' (Sullivan cited in Smith & Dean, 2009,
p.48)
Translate to the existing codified language, if you like
In the shadow of the methodological duopoly
As the new kid on the block
The expectation is to fit existing forms
Knowing where you are
Knowing the place you come from
But knowledge of the route
Will not lead to knowledge through practice
This will lead to a journey only
Not to a place of unanticipated possibilities
A place born of practice

Within the eyes of the duopoly
We are frozen at the intersection
Compliant and not fully formed
Not good nor bad

Thought and theory only valid in another's voice
We the untameable peregrine beast
Attempts at contribution
Often falling between two worlds, neither our own
In theory, we are not hindered
Though required to write in the language of others
Finding words, before they can be spoken
Though the concerns are unchanged
Propelled by the wonder of process
Compelled to conform
Impelled to speak the dialect of the Academy
Our challenge to hold to purpose
Grist for the mill I say
After all, challenging perceptions
Always the game
Always will be

So what of specific outcomes
Stated upfront, at the outset
To demonstrate new understanding has been achieved
To present process, in rich symbolic language
The language of the medium
Built upon the medium
As accurate as thinking
Thinking locked in time
Performance time
The end, the outcomes an epitaph
Contrived for death context, but no end really

This may be the moment
When practice-led pierces the realm
Through the common gate
The unknowable player
With one foot comfortable in the shadows
With a self imposed charter to know humankind

To create new knowledge
To use this knowledge
Absorbing imported methodologies
Before inventing its own

The verse, presented as a small example of a practice-led approach to research, may also be considered a form of literature review, with the same intent as a traditional literature review, to 'review the main bodies of existing knowledge and literature that relate to addressing the research problem' (Love, no date). It is here, that the research question presents, in this case, what is scholarly research in the visual arts? The verse may highlight the question, but without further scholarly endeavour, contributions to research results will not be forthcoming. Further, my intent in presenting in language more associated with art practice than scholarly writing is to highlight the use of the symbolic in art production and how this may be used as an approach to investigating existing knowledge and provide opportunity for the emergence of new knowledge.

3) The Question, What is Scholarly Art Practice in Visual Arts? (Methodology)

In the above prose, I have presented some key issues for creative artists engaged with research. My verse has, within the conventions of a creative practice, contributed to the data collection and research question function of a methodology. This practice-led approach provides opportunity to investigate existing knowledge and as a vehicle for identification of new knowledge. The verse has bi-directional capacity as a research tool. The verse can act as a map for determining research direction, or a document for retrospective analysis of existing knowledge. Both function in service of research methodology. What appears to be consistent in artist scholars' experience is the difficulty in conforming to the existing duopoly of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, whilst allocating appropriate focus on the practice component of a creative arts research project. The methodology duopoly has evolved for disciplines other than the creative arts and can present a major conceptual barrier for an artist with scholarly intent.

In Australia this move into research has seldom been easy, for traditional research approaches are made up of protocols and conventions which are hardly congenial to the working practices and methods favoured by artists and practitioners (Haseman & Mafe, 2009, p.211).

For artists to make the transition from practitioner to artist scholar, an understanding of the characteristics of scholarly art practice must continue to be refined. One path to further refinement of the role of the artist scholar is to identify and hold to existing strengths of art practice whilst employing new strategies to functionalise a methodology able to extract subtle nuances of content from a creative arts process. There are numerous examples of artist researcher descriptors of methodology adaptations.

These new strategies are known as creative practice as research, performance as research, research through practice, studio research, practice as research or practice-led research (Haseman, 2006).

Despite many artists unease in adapting to research environments there is potential reciprocal benefit between artists and the academy. By challenging existing protocols of research, and presenting alternatives, artist scholars shift existing understanding within the broader research community of how to access and present knowledge. 'This insistence on reporting research through outcomes and material forms of practice challenges traditional ways of representing knowledge claims' (Haseman, 2006).

4) Between Practice and Research (Results)

The verse commences by stating the obvious that art practice is existing in its own right without requirement to fit any research imperative. To practice art, artists do not have an inherent need to satisfy agendas as set by national research agencies. However, this fact does not negate the principle that scholarly content may be present. The responsibility sits with the artist researcher to present the practice in a scholarly framework.

Art practice is

Without need for other

Though with benefit of reciprocity

Between practice and research

The problem may not emerge
 Within the constraints of existing methodology
 The quantitative qualitative duopoly

There is an important hinge between practice and research in creative art production. At undergraduate level there can be little separation between practice and the research required for art production. It is at Masters and Doctoral research level that a dislocation of understanding of the nature of scholarly content occurs. Artists may argue research has always been integral to art practice with knowledge emerging through the activity of making art. In following this thought, I suggest much current understanding and application of creative processes in use by artists have origins in tertiary undergraduate art education. An artist shifting identity to that of an artist scholar at postgraduate level requires a level of flexibility to bridge the conceptual gap between a learned understanding of creative process applicable to practice and expectations of a different kind from the academy. Referencing my verse, I suggest knowledge acquired through the medium, through practice, is as accurate as thinking and that this knowledge is consistent with knowledge acquired through thinking, in that it is locked in time, and in time will come to an end as all knowledge moves on.

The language of the medium
 Built upon the medium
 As accurate as thinking
 Thinking locked in time
 Performance time
 The end, the outcomes an epitaph
 Contrived for death context, but no end really

I make a bold gesture in stating knowledge acquired through practice is as consistent as knowledge acquired through thinking. I set up an impossible comparative measure between activities with profoundly different foundations. Research through thinking and research through practice are both integral to a scholarly art practice. What is sought, is recognition of the validity of the practice component in visual arts research by the wider research community.

The critical issue for visual arts scholars is to continue to develop methods to capture knowledge within the creative realm, whilst framing it in existing or reformed research paradigms. The critical issue for the academy is to embrace what can often be an idiosyncratic sequence of knowledge generation and presentation. To create a metaphor to describe an artist's manner of dealing with knowledge emerging through practice, I pose that the practice of art is analogous to leaping out an open window without prior knowledge of what sits below. But with confidence derived through practice, the artist accepts the fall and responds spontaneously to whatever benefits can be derived from all parts of the process – the leap, the fall and the landing. 'They tend to dive in, to commence practicing to see what emerges. They acknowledge that what emerges is individualistic and idiosyncratic' (Haseman, 2006).

What is often conflicting for the new creative artist researcher is the expectation to document research outcomes at application stage, an unfamiliar sequential order for many artist practitioners. The academy has a pre-determined expectation in research sequence and an expectation that results can be presented as easily accessible to the reader.

So what of specific outcomes

Stated upfront, at the outset

To demonstrate new understanding has been achieved

To present process, in rich symbolic language

The language of the medium

Built upon the medium

The proposition residing in this paragraph is, in practice-led scholarly research in the visual arts, that the path to research is investigated through creative engagement with the medium. There is power in thought as there is power in practice. Both sources of knowledge have recognition, but in different spheres. Mind capability has recognition in scholarly activity and practice by the art world. In popular understanding, Simon Schama's BBC TV series, the 'Power of Art' describes this as 'not a series about things that hang on walls, it is not

about décor or prettiness. It is a series about the force, the need, the passion of art...the power of art' (Schama, 2006).

To further explore the value of emergent knowledge in a practice-led approach to research in visual arts, I provide an example of two conditions with potential to reflect opposing outcomes for the artist scholar. To present the banal or sentimental, or both, in art practice for the serious artist scholar may be to fall into a dark abyss of producing art where new knowledge is not demonstrated. Or perhaps the even greater sin is producing unengaging or bad art. Conversely the exploration of banality or sentimentality or both may lead to the mountain top, where a new view of the terrain can be observed and presented as engaging art with subsequent contribution to knowledge in the realm of theory. My point here is the shift from art practice to scholarly art practice comes with the imperative of understanding the characteristics of the word 'scholarly'. Scholarly practice inherently comes with cerebral capability, or an imposed requirement for critical function, in addition to other human experiential knowledge. Whereas art practice without a scholarly imperative is not compelled to be represented as a vehicle for knowledge contribution, but can exist totally in other realms of experience. In part, it is the capability of art practice to function on a multitude of levels which creates complexities for both artist scholars and the academy in determining the existence of rigour in a research context. What should be considered, however, is that one reason many artists make art is to contribute to knowledge. To harness the benefits of this contribution, it is incumbent upon the academy to continue to develop sophisticated approaches in recognising potential contribution to knowledge from artist scholars, just as the artist scholar must embrace the rigour of academic tradition.

5) This May Be The Moment (Conclusion)

Creative practice within visual arts has been built on the conventions of a discipline or on a theoretical framework, often with faith to be there when knowledge emerges, not on conventions of research. A challenge for artist researchers and the academy is to come to terms with the documentation and validation of claimed knowledge, especially where the research results are

presented in non-literal form. This may invite, and at the same time in seeming contradiction, deny objectification. Therefore in the eyes of the research establishment, such work risks being deemed to not meet criteria. What I am increasingly coming to understand is the capacity for artist scholars to contribute to understandings of knowledge through the exploration of the nexus between practice and research. By spanning the chasm between what might traditionally be claimed to be objective knowledge and idiosyncratic emergent knowledge, artists are eroding the distinctions between practice and research. By reversing, or scrambling the sequence of data collection, artist scholars open new methods to knowledge acquisition, broadening understandings of knowledge definition. In addition to knowledge inherent in scholarly art production, this process contributes to artists' claim as research scholars. Graeme Sullivan states:

What is of interest to practice-led researchers, however, is the possibility of new knowledge that may be generated by moving from a stance more accurately seen to move from the unknown to the known whereby imaginative leaps are made into what we don't know as this can lead to critical insights that can change what we do know (Sullivan, 2009, p.41).

The last verse of prose states:

This may be the moment
 When practice-led pierces the realm
 Through the common gate
 The unknowable player
 With one foot comfortable in the shadows
 With a self imposed charter to know humankind
 To create new knowledge
 To use this knowledge
 Absorbing imported methodologies
 Before inventing its own

Here I attempt a conclusion suggesting as practice-led approaches to research in the visual arts gain traction in higher education, implications emerge for the broader research community. That is, shifting understandings of the range of practices accepted as scholarly research by the academy.

This prophecy evolves as the number of scholarly researchers in the creative arts continues to expand.

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