Strategic directions in practice-led research: rethinking research models in the creative arts

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Biographies

Dr **Svenja Kratz** is a new media artist interested in transdisciplinary creative practice, particularly the intersections between science and art. In 2013 she completed a practice-led PhD across contemporary art and biotechnology in a creative partnership between QUT's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI) and the Creative Industries Visual Art discipline. Her research interests include art-science practice and interdisciplinary research methodologies. Svenja is currently Science Art Lab + theme leader within the Creative Exchange Institute and works as a Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Creative Practice at Tasmanian College of the Arts (TCotA) at the University of Tasmania.

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Abstract

Following the release of the 2015-16 ERA National Report which details a greater recognition of non-traditional research outputs coupled with a growing research cohort in the creative arts and design within Australian universities, there is a great opportunity to strategically rethink practice-led research models to increase the visibility and perceived value of creative practice as research, as well as the potential for ARC grant success.

The proposed paper examines the current state of practice-led research within the academy and suggests ways of strengthening creative arts research by adopting research models and approaches from other disciplinary areas, as well as engaging in multi-disciplinary projects that highlight the unique contribution and significance of art and design research. Using interdisciplinary research models currently in development with the Tasmanian College of that Arts (TCotA) in partnership with the Creative Exchange Institute (CxI) at the University of Tasmania as a starting point for discussion, the authors propose that to become competitive in the current research climate requires a clear identification of research strengths and themes that connect to the University vision and larger social and cultural issues, coupled with industry partnerships and cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary alliances. They further suggest that this rethinking requires a restructure of research training and supervision models and strategic alignment of HDR students to key research areas. The paper will also highlight some of the key issues involved in the restructure process and conclude with a call to consider an Australia-wide standardization of NTRO guidelines that envisage an 'expanded practice' framework for ERA assessment.

Keywords: *practice-led research, HDR frameworks, interdisciplinarity research models, ERA assessment*

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Following the release of the 2015-16 Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA) National Report (Australian Research Council, 2015b) which details a contingent of non-traditional research outputs (NTRO) coupled with a growing research cohort in the creative arts and design within Australian universities, there is an opportunity to strategically rethink practice-led research models to increase the value of creative practice as research, as well as the potential for ARC grant success. To open dialogue, this paper includes a series of proposed approaches that aim to embed creative arts research within the university and increase understanding of practice-led research in the context of research priorities and the national innovation agenda, as well as establish clear guidelines to support NTRO assessment across different institutions.

Background

Since the tertiary education reforms and merger of creative arts institutions into the academy in the 1980s, directed by then Labour Education Minister John Dawkins (Harman, 1991), art and design schools have been grappling with creative arts practice in a research context. Indeed, in the years following the Dawkins reform, there was considerable governmental and institutional investment in the debate of research in the creative arts exemplified by the development of several reports and policy documents including *Arts Education* (Senate Environment Recreation Communications and the Arts References Committee, 1995), *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy* (Department of Communications and the Arts, 1994), *Creative Investigations: Redefining Research in the Arts and Humanities* (Australian Academy of the Humanities and Stoljar, 1996) and *Artistic Practice & Research: Towards a Community of Judgement* (Wissler, 1997). One of the seminal reports completed during this period was *Research in the Creative Arts* (Strand, 1998), outlined a series of recommendations for measuring research equivalencies and quality assurance in the creative arts. This report addressed the marginalisation of the creative arts and laid the foundations for recognising and assessing practice-led research in the creative arts (Wilson, 2011). Over the next decade, the report remained influential in the shift towards recognising creative practice as research at a national level and the eventual inclusion of NTROs in ERA assessments from 2010 onwards (Australian Research Council, 2010). However, many key recommendations outlined in Strand's report related to funding availability and representation were not taken up and with a continued focus on traditional research outputs, creative arts research remains largely ill-understood in the university wide research arena (Wilson, 2011).

Key Issues: Equivalence, Exclusion and Assessment

While the inclusion of NTROs within ERA reporting has numerous positive implications for the growing acceptance of creative practice as research within the academy, there are, as Jenny Wilson (2014, 2011) acknowledges, still issues of equivalency and considerable obstacles facing the creative researcher-practitioner. For example, the definition of NTROs as 'non-traditional' has an othering effect on creative research outputs. The requirement of an additional research statement to support the ERA submission (Australian Research Council, 2015a) reinforces the perception that creative practice requires validation and cannot stand alone (Turcotte and Morris, 2012), contributing further to the delineation between research conducted within the creative arts and other disciplines within the university (Wilson, 2014). Indeed, the creative arts continue to be viewed as inferior to their scientific counterparts and text-based outputs remain the preferred research currency within the university (Wilson, 2011, 2014).

The privileging of traditional research can also be observed in the fact that creative arts outputs are largely outside the domain of The Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) with primary sources of arts funding such as Australia Council for the Arts and public arts commissions excluded from the Australian Competitive Grants Register (ACGR) (Sade, 2012), even in 2016 (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Furthermore, ARC funding guidelines and project evaluation remain skewed, privileging applied, result focused research rather than creative and curiosity driven engagements (Turcotte and Morris, 2012, Wilson, 2011). The current *National Innovation and Science Agenda* (NISA) (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2015) largely ignores the vital role of the creative sector in education (Ewing, 2010) creative thinking, critical inquiry and innovation (Alter, 2010) cultural preservation and economic progress and entrepreneurship (Henry, 2007, Cunningham, 2006). Coupled with this, the Turnbull government's post HERDC environment of research funding initiatives advocates a greater reliance on industry partnerships and block grants with publication data eliminated from funding formulas. Symptoms of these policies can be seen in major funding cuts to the arts (Carter, 2016) and an increased uncertainty of the future of art schools (Winikoff, 2016), demonstrated by the near merger of The Sydney College of Arts with the University of New South Wales' Art and Design School in mid-2016 (FitzGerald, 2016, Taylor, 2016).

Another pressing matter for creative research relates to the difficulties of ERA reporting whereby documentation and storage of non-text based outputs, particularly time-based media, are problematic (Wilson, 2011) and research indicators are highly variable and

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depend largely on guidelines established by individual institutions (Wilson, 2014). These challenges carry with them the greater issue that if the reporting guidelines prove too difficult or are ill-managed, the current separation of creative outputs from traditional research makes it easy to remove NTROs from ERA assessment (Wilson, 2011). It is therefore, important to find ways to integrate the creative arts into university research agendas and consider strategies that will secure the standing of creative practice as research within the academy (Wilson (2014). To open debate regarding research progress in the creative arts, a series of approaches including strategic planning, interdisciplinary collaboration, NTRO standardisation are discussed with the view of integrating creative arts research within the wider university.

Strategic Planning and Research Alignment

The Strategic Plan Framework (2015) developed by the Australia Council for the Arts opens with a quote by Charles Leadbeater from the Arts Council of England (2005) who states:

> The more uncertain and shifting the environment becomes the more important it is for arts organisations to have a clear sense of purpose: to think and act strategically…

> That does not mean detailed and inflexible long-term plans. Nor should it be a license for navel gazing…

> An organisation that lacks an animating sense of purpose risks being pushed and pulled in many directions…

While the report was intended for arts organisations, the sentiment and subsequent recommendations are applicable to creative art schools, as having a clear sense of purpose in the development and implementation of strategic goals. On that note, most universities within Australia have, at leadership and governance level, developed a strategic plan that clearly articulates an overarching mission statement, values, priorities, goals and delivery strategies to guide university objectives over a number of years (e.g. *Focus Monash* (Monash University, 2015), *UTAS Open to Talent Strategic Plan* (Univerity of Tasmania, 2012), *UNSW 2025 Strategy* (University of New South Wales, 2015), *QUT Blueprint* (Queensland University of Technology, 2014). These strategic planning documents also identify research themes that signal the research strengths and focus of the university.

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Strategic planning is also largely evident at the faculty level with mission statements that link to the research priorities of the University, as well as sub-themes that identify faculty contributions to theme areas. In contrast, at a school or discipline level (particularly within the creative arts) strategic planning and research focus has, in many instances, not been implemented with a view to align research priorities to the goals of the faculty and wider university and often centre on discipline areas or type of output (e.g. painting, musicology, performance etc.) without a clear articulation of staff expertise, key research projects and strengths and their wider application. As such, one proposed strategy for enhancing the understanding of creative arts research, is to review and identify research strengths and phrase creative arts research in terms of specific fields of inquiry with clearly articulated links to faculty, institutional themes and government agendas (science, technology, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and education). Not only does the linking of discipline/school to faculty, university and government priorities showcase the strong contributions of creative arts research to wider research areas, it also embeds creative arts research within the university and places the school in a position to argue for the inclusion of additional sub-themes that relate to other research areas and outputs of the school.

Another benefit of articulating research priorities is that it facilitates a clearer perspective of current research gaps and future directions within the school and makes it easier for current staff, future collaborators and postgraduate students from diverse disciplinary areas to identify research synergies and areas of expertise. The process also helps reveal potential or existing research groups and facilitates the alignment of HDR students to research themes in order to build critical mass in key areas. Furthermore, this relatively simple strategy lays the groundwork for future planning and the development of a revised mission statement and associated goals, establishing, in effect, a map to keep on course and reach the desired destination (Youngblade, 2015).

Interdisciplinarity Collaboration

The value and potential of interdisciplinary approaches across Science, Engineering and Technology and the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences for addressing complex problems has been recognised since the 1980s and 90s (Klein, 1984, 1990), with interest growing significantly over the last decade in response to 'wicked problems' (Brown et al., 2010) and key issues related to economic and political volatility, environmental degradation and population growth (Metcalfe et al., 2006). Indeed, at present inter- and trans-disciplinarity is on the agenda for most universities within Australia including QUT, Monash, UNSW and UTAS.

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The recognition that addressing complex issues requires a multitude of perspectives and skills, including contribution from the arts, and institutional support for trans-disciplinary projects provides an additional avenue for creative arts research to contribute to research priorities through interdisciplinary collaboration via individual projects, the establishment of interdisciplinary research groups and clusters, as well as interdisciplinary teaching programs at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In this way, as Jenny Wilson (2014, p.7) points out, interdisciplinary collaboration is another key strategy towards the integration of creative arts research and methodologies across the university, and further "increases understanding of artistic research by those in non-arts disciplines".

An interesting model for thinking about supporting interdisciplinary creative project development is the newly established Creative Exchange Institute (CxI) at the University of Tasmania. Lead by Professor Stephen Loo, and located across The School of Architecture and Design and Tasmanian College of the Arts, CxI seeks to promote the research impact of the creative arts, architecture and design through active development of interdisciplinary research labs and the facilitation of interdisciplinary research projects across all disciplinary areas within the university. At present CxI has six key research groups that operate across art, health, architecture, engineering, marine ecology, social science, philosophy, performance and digital technologies. The institute also actively pursues partnerships with key organisations, research and educational institutes. By developing and supporting projects and exchanges that place creative art and design practice at the core of research and community engagement, CxI acts as an interdisciplinary catalyst and advocate for practice-led research.

Standardisation of NTRO Guidelines: Towards an 'Expanded Practice' model
While some universities have opted to focus on traditional research outputs to increase their research standing and ERA performance, other universities have managed to achieve ERA ranking above world standard based primarily on the submission of NTROs. For example, Monash Art, Architecture and Design (MADA) attained a ranking of 5 in the the 2015-16 ERA National Report (Australian Research Council, 2015b). This achievement was based largely on NTROs and demonstrates that supporting practice-led research is a valuable approach for recognition in research excellence. With this growing recognition of the value that creative arts research can contribute to ERA rankings, it is an appropriate time for the sector to reflect on past ERA recommendations and look towards 'future proofing' submission processes and guidelines. Ideally, this rethinking should involve implementing robust and transparent definitions that are also proactive, forward thinking and strategically aligned with

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government and institutional agendas of interdisciplinarity and theme-based frameworks. The revised structure should also effectively communicate, rather than marginalise the full scope of outputs within the creative practice arena, including impact and engagement.

One of the current limitations with ERA reporting for the creative arts, relates to the classification structure of Field of Research (FoR) codes and the challenges of effectively capturing interdisciplinary initiatives. Four digit codes separate visual arts from performing arts, but group performing arts with creative writing. According to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) FoR codes (Australian Bureau of Statistics et al., 2008), curatorial practice sits separate from practice-based inquiries under the title of 'Other studies in creative arts and writing'. Furthermore, within the 1905 code for visual arts there are more sub-sections to consider at the six digital level. When aligning outputs within an ERA submission further granularity and classification occurs under a range of publication types. These publication types are then defined and redefined by individual institutions with no general consensus of criterion. For example, The University of Tasmania uses terms such as 'major' or 'minor' to differentiate NTROs while Monash University uses the term standard. Other institutions make recommendations based on the length or duration of works.

This ongoing re-defining of requirements echoes a narrow (and limited) band of potential research activity in which, for example, the artist-curator practitioner must prioritise one activity over the other with limited opportunity for integration or porosity. The challenge for creative practice begins with developing a unified approach to all aspects of the ERA process that embraces an expanded practice of research activity and does not marginalise outputs types. While the UK Research Excellence Framework principles of assessment (Research Excellence Frameworks, 2012) offers plenty of opportunity and guidance regarding how to approach such a structure, benchmarking with closer neighbours may help us arrive at a more expansive solution. New Zealand's Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) presents a model that shifts the focus from categories and classification to a research evidence portfolio (EP) submission (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016). Within New Zealand's model the individual researcher drives the section of output however the same principles could be applied at a school level by prioritising research strengths or narratives within portfolios rather than through categories. The potential for this type of framework is that strategic alignment with research themes is more achievable and there are fewer challenges presented from publication types and classification categories. This would also allow the implementation of an evaluation model based on three primary criteria: research quality, public dissemination and peer-review.

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While working towards a unified expanded practice model has potential to streamline the ERA process for practice-led research, it is also important to explore ways of effectively capturing and communicating the wider impact and engagement of creative arts research including "direct, indirect and/or preventative" impacts (University of Tasmania, 2016). Prompted by the ARC Research Engagement and Impact Assessment consultation paper (2016), this is an aspect that is currently high on the agenda of creative arts institutions and organisations including art and design schools and associated boards such as The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative Arts (DDCA)(2016). A review of responses from DDCA (2016), UTAS (2016) and the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) (2016) illustrates a general consensus regarding the need to implement a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches including university metrics as well as case studies that more readily reflect impact within the creative arts and interdisciplinary projects. Indeed, it is important that, during this process of consultation and implementation of assessment frameworks, the creative arts sector not only take a lead but sets the agenda to ensure that their interests are represented and evaluation criteria are not skewed towards commercialization and industry-initiated agendas.

Areas of particular concern include the period reported on within which impact is demonstrated (with some creative arts disciplines suggesting decade-long measures); as well as the importance of non-economic measures of impact. The relative ranking of publication venues is a particular challenge for art disciplines, and also extends to the range of non-refereed, but esteemed journal articles and wider forms of contemporary dissemination such as social media. Finally, collaboration (as measured in terms of co-authored publications and institutional Memorandums of Understanding) is known to be a useful proxy for ERA ranking, however, collaborative NTRO's are still relatively rare in the creative arts. The changes to block grant funding mechanisms, which now place greater emphasis on major grant income, are likely to force the sector towards increased collaboration and in particular, interdisciplinary collaboration, as the largest grants are generally associated with non-art and design disciplines.

Summary of key recommendations

Despite the acceptance of NTROs in ERA reporting, creative arts research remains the institutional outsider and the significances of creative arts research are largely ill-understood by other disciplinary areas. To address this situation, it is important to devise long term goals and consider strategies that better integrate creative arts research into university systems and research programs. During current processes of re-evaluation, particularly with regards

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to the assessment of impact and engagement, there is a unique opportunity for creative art schools to unite and be the voice of the sector to ensure evaluation criteria enable the significance of creative arts research to be effectively captured and represented.

A starting proposition to facilitate greater integration and understanding of creative arts research involves identification of research strengths and the strategic realignment of research priorities to faculty and university themes. Another strategy is to build critical research mass and explore interdisciplinary collaboration through the development of multi-disciplinary research groups and partnerships with relevant interstate and international institutions and industry organisations. Instituting an expanded practice model of NTRO assessment that is consistent across all Australian universities will also help streamline and future-proof NTRO ERA reporting and move towards integration of practice-based research. This action can be further complemented by leading discussion and putting systems in place for data collection and assessment of the broader socio-economic engagement and impact of the creative arts.

Creative arts research still has a long struggle ahead until it gains full recognition within the academy. However, hopefully the strategies outlined in this paper will spark dialogue and further propositions that help move us towards a single definition of research and approach to ERA reporting in which practice-based research is no longer seen as 'non-traditional' and simply accepted as research.

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