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Introduction. Part 2: The critiques of practice-led research

This special issue of *TEXT* was motivated by a concern that the notion of practice-led research had achieved something like a 'practical consensus' within university creative arts programs, and that this consensus was increasingly counter-productive for the field. Although discussions have routinely noted problems with the conception and application of practice-led research, it seemed to Paul and me, and the creative arts academics we spoke to, that such discussions occurred within a space which was pre-eminently advocatory and declamatory, with the result that any movement towards critique was already spoken for. The purposes of this issue were hence broad; we were open to contributions that problematised practice-led research in the spirit of critical clarification and renewal, as well as authors willing to forgo the concept altogether. If a certain group of authoritative references have indeed become 'run-of-the-mill' in discussions, as Søren Kjørup suggests (2011: 39), then the purpose of this special issue was to invite authors to move beyond this run.

Such concerns are hardly surprising. While boom-to-bust cycles of published methodological debate are themselves run-of-the-mill within the low consensus disciplines of the arts faculty, practice-led research is perhaps distinct in so far as it represents a *practical* critique; that is, it is pitched at both epistemological questions on the relation of creative practice to knowledge *and* the institutional processes by which knowledge is quantified as 'research'. Such a combination of objectives is ambitious to say the least: while the goals of the former are sufficiently heady for discussion to be circumscribed with a certain level of polite deferment, the latter steers discussion towards the field of institutional *realpolitik* where it is perhaps naive to ask whether the relay of such claims are made in good faith.

As a practical critique, practice-led research draws together an unusually diverse field of readers (no less than authors) whose interests are located at various spaces of institutional discourse; from the rituals of philological gift-exchange in the departmental seminar, through the art school lecturer's annual Professional Development Review, to the no-nonsense accounting of the University Research Office. Even the most cursory reading of these spaces reveals that the term does not function as a coherent concept that elegantly possesses its meanings independently of their application, but rather as an evolving shorthand for a range of discursive interventions, not all of which seek or even require intellectual engagement. The term exists alongside a range of others, such as 'practice-based research', 'artistic research', 'performative research' and 'creative research', all of which produce a

shared space of discussion between stakeholders within which rhetorical and conceptual distinctions harbour the potential for disagreement (Biggs & Büchler 2011: 82). Although 'practice-led research' is often used interchangeably with 'practice-based research', the former has become the dominant term in Australia since 2005 when it was promoted as part of the creative industries policy agenda. At this time it could be confidently assumed that readers would understand the term as meaning 'not research into, or about, creative practice, but research *through* creative practice', with the corollary that outcomes of creative practice might be regarded as research outputs (Green 2006: 5. Original emphasis). What was perhaps distinctive about this application was that the push for recognitive justice for creative arts lecturers that had been underway since the mid-1990s was now conjoined with policy rhetoric on the importance of creativity for an innovation economy. Although such an approach promised to circumvent the attempt of research funding bodies like the Australian Research Council (ARC) to maintain a clear line between government sources of funding for the arts sector and university research (Strand 1998: 33), it also offered fuel to the emergent critique of creative industries policy thinking as artist-centric in contrast to the earlier cultural industries policy moment, and ultimately representing a 'supply side defence of state cultural subsidies' (Garnham 2005: 15).

As several papers in this issue attest, the notion of practice-led research is subject to a significant level of practical revision in Australia. At a recent staff development session on practice-led research that I attended as a non-participating observer, a clear distinction was established between discussions aimed at establishing the legitimacy of creative works as research, and discussions on how artists in the university can establish a 'research practice'. The seminar convener, a digital media artist, lecturer and Associate Dean of Research, stated in his opening comments:

> I'd prefer this [seminar] not to turn into a conversation about 'how do I make my creative works count as research products in the various assessment systems', because that's fairly easy to answer and I don't think actually very interesting. More interesting, for me, is 'how do I develop a research practice which is generating knowledge and ... in which creative practice plays a really vital role'.

While there was a 'really vital role' for creative practice in research, creative practice could not be confused with research as practice or outcome. And indeed, the specificity of the term proved helpful for this distinction. One presenter, an award-winning and prolific author of young adult novels and a writing lecturer, stated:

> The word I think that gets missed when we talk about practice-led research is actually the small word; it's the 'led'. You've got to think of the practice as the foundation upon which you build your research, but nothing more. Obviously it's crucial. If you are not engaged in your creative practice constantly then your research isn't getting fed. But the research has to be different.[1]

So it is clear that the interventions licensed by this term are capable of shifting emphases. Given this, it is perhaps useful to situate positions on practice-led research in relation to specific institutional sites of meaningfulness and plausibility that give rise to applications of practice-led research that might challenge the established consensus. These are the spaces in which the critiques 'of' practice-led research

emerge; where the articulation of specific grounds for approval always threaten a move 'beyond'.

We might hence schematise the field in terms of four broad *grounds of critique*, each of which harbours a range of discrete positions that correspond to particular zones of the academic field. By 'grounds' I mean both the justified reasons, beliefs and motives that animate interlocutors, as well as the institutional spaces of which such reasons, beliefs and motives are a practical expression. While individual positions and interventions combine elements of each critique and no critique appears in its 'pure form', the hypothesis of their existence allows us to schematise well-established and recognisable styles of intervention. At the risk of simplification, we can hypothesise four critiques.

There is the **aesthetic critique**. This critique, which has been central to the promotion of practice-led research, is also always capable of problematising the offer of institutional translation, and tends to lead to two specific types of refusal. Either it is held that creative practice is unrelated to knowledge (that it is a category error to discuss creative practices in terms of knowledge) *or* that the knowledge-status of creative work is specific and cannot be translated into the protocols of scholarly dissertation. This critique emphasises the relation of art to the subject of experience; the purpose of art is not to produce or communicate knowledge, but to produce and transform experience. Accordingly, practice-led research may be institutionally useful for clearing a space in which the research-*equivalence* of creative practice might be established, but simultaneously threatens the integrity of art qua art.

Although such a critique might seem radical, such a position is in fact in line with normative twentieth century thought on creativity, where it inherits the Romantic account of aesthetics as a critique of knowledge. We can in fact hear an early form of two key claims for practice-led research in John Dewey's philosophy of art. For Dewey, the process of making art was very much a process of thought: 'The artist has his problems and [...] does his thinking in the very qualitative media he works in'; 'That knowledge enters deeply and intimately into the production of a work is proved by the works themselves' (Dewey [1934] 1958: 16, 289). Nevertheless, the artist's relation was to experience, not knowledge, and as such was an exemplar of human development superior to the scientist:

> If knowledge is truly contemplative, and is on that account superior to mere practice, then all arts, that of the painter no less than that of the carpenter, are inferior to science, and the painter stands in rank below the dilettante who looks at paintings. If, however, not knowledge but *art* is the final flowering of experience, the crown and consummation of nature, and *knowledge is only the means by which art, which includes all practice, is enabled to attain its richest development*, then it is the artist who represents nature and life at their best. (Dewey 1929: 3. My emphasis)

That is, the traditional hierarchy of scientist and artist can be reversed once experience is returned to its proper place. In Dewey we can see the links between Romantic aesthetics, with their radical elevation of the status of the artist, and the antecedents of postwar practice theory that would translate the cosmic dualities of Romantic thought into a thoroughgoing critique of scholastic knowledge (more below).

The aesthetic critique of course comes up against the **academic critique**. This insists on the domain specificity of university research and its protocols, and requests that these be respected by artists working in the academy. This position endorses the view that the university system is not a de facto form of arts patronage, and that art-making and art objects are not research methods or outcomes, even if they can be informed by the research of those artists who are also scholars ('research-led practice'). In its generous form, this critique might accept that art constitutes research if and when it is accompanied by legitimating practices that are accepted by a group of peers. Rather than regard artistic practice as a specific type of knowledge that must be recognised as equal to but different from established research methodologies, such practices must be subjected to established protocols for establishing methodological 'rigor'; i.e. an explicit argument that justifies the form of an inquiry and which is accepted by peers (Biggs & Büchler 2007). In its less generous form, this position would look perhaps nostalgically to the definition of academic disciplines as fields of knowledge-production maintained by a narrow range of accepted objects of inquiry and methodologies, and which have long contended with the presence of ancillary spaces for the *teaching* of professional practice.

However, no sooner has 'professional practice' entered discussion than the academic critique finds itself outflanked by appeals to postwar practice theory, as popularised by writers like Donald Schön. Accordingly, art-making evinces 'know-how' rather than 'know-that', and the denigrated category of *savoire-faire* can be recovered by the Reflective Practitioner. While this approach aligns the situation of the artist in the academy with a broader problem of professional training (e.g. medicine, nursing, teacher education, design), it must be recalled that the subtleties of post-war practice theory are here assimilated to the cosmic dualities of Romantic critique where the function of the first term is reduced to that of a critique of the second; tacit versus propositional knowledge (Polanyi); the Reflective Practitioner versus Technical Rationality (Schön); the logic of things versus the things of logic (Bourdieu). When this happens, it is clear that we are dealing with a specific application of practice theory within the **aesthetic critique**, one which deploys a very limited account of 'practice'.

Again, Dewey is useful here. As the above quotation suggests, for Dewey the artist was nothing less than a model for *all* practice, where 'practice' was simply the field of everyday action in which experience is 'artfully' transformed. As such, it provides a model for overcoming the alienating effects of labour no less than the chasm between knowledge and experience: 'The intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork ... is artistically engaged' (Dewey [1934] 1958: 5). For Schön, who wrote his PhD thesis on Dewey's theory of inquiry, the term 'professional artistry' captured the processes of inquiry and problem resolution conducted *in situ*; and the neglect of this category was evidence of a crisis produced by 'a radical separation of the world of the academy from the world of practice, according to which the academy holds a monopoly on research[.]' (Schön 1992: 119). Schön recast Dewey's theory of inquiry as the 'conversation with the situation', one that proceeds from a moment of radical doubt and arrested knowledge that is reminiscent of Kant's account of the sublime:

> [A]s Dewey would have it, "*We* are doubtful because the *situation* is inherently doubtful". Inquiry begins, Dewey believed, with an indeterminate (i.e. confusing, obscure, or conflictual) situation[. ...] The inquirer does not stand outside the problematic situation like a spectator; he is *in* it and *in transaction with* it. (Schön 1992: 122. Original emphasis)

The reflective practitioner internalises this radical doubtfulness of the world around them and discovers it within themselves as a failure of a priori concepts, thus overcoming the alienation of self from world produced by the presumption of knowledge and cultivating a self that is prepared for what the materials will reveal. The echoes of the Kantian sublime should be enough to remind us of what is at stake: the artist's capacity to suspend foreknowledge and remain open to contingency has become an ethically exemplary performance of the proper relation between self and world. Schön cites the example of an Inuit sculptor discovering the artwork in the object through the process of 'scraping away at a reindeer antler with his knife, examining the bone now from one angle, now from another, until he cries out, "Ah, seal!"' (Schön 1992: 125).

Both critiques are destabilised however by the **bureaucratic critique**. Although this critique is widely acknowledged, arguably it remains underdeveloped as its grounds are controversial. This critique would state that the purpose of practice-led research is to develop a new administrative lexicon and political settlement. Although discussions of practice-led research may involve claims about the status of art and knowledge, such claims are instrumental to a reformist project whose success does not wait on the final outcome of any intellectual debates concerning whether such claims are true. General claims concerning the knowledge status of creative practice (whether advocatory or sceptical) are significant in so far as they are capable of connecting with particular institutional sites that are governed by more mundane considerations: the training and examination of higher research degree (HDR) candidates; the assessment of staff research outputs on annual PDR forms; the allocation of competitive research funding within the university sector. In each instance, intellectual principle needs to be tempered by institutional pragmatics.

While the promotion *or* negation of practice-led research can be readily dismissed as 'bureaucratic' according to both the aesthetic and academic critiques, a more nuanced application of practice theory would allow us to consider how such a limited and instrumental account of the value of the term practice-led research might be thought affirmatively. For bureaucracy is itself a zone of practice, or rather *practices*, that are crucial to the field of creative production. However, these spaces of practice (which can refer to the studio no less than the bureau) don't represent a general 'other' of theoretical knowledge (i.e. 'praxis', this being the dominant notion of practice used in discussions of practice-led research), but a form of what Andreas Reckwitz describes as 'Praktik':

> A 'practice' (*Praktik*) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other [sic]: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. [...] The

single individual – as a bodily or mental agent – then acts as the 'carrier' (*Träger*) of a practice[.] (Reckwitz 2002: 249-50)

The question of how creative practices form part of a material assemblage that *includes* bureau-based and commercial forms of action is a viable topic for practice-led research, but one that will be ignored so long as our definition of practice is locked-down in an aesthetic critique of knowledge (Brook 2010).

Adjacent to the bureaucratic critique is an **educational critique**. This critique would suggest that the rise of practice-led research is a symptom of the unequal value allocated teaching and research functions in measures of university productivity, a situation that is acute in the creative arts due to the proclivity of artist lecturers to denegate their role as teachers. To put this critique crudely: art in the academy is not a problem of knoweldge, but of skewed measures of esteem and mistaken professional identities. The source for this misunderstanding would be both the increasingly research-centric nature of rankings which penalise teaching and reward research (i.e. redistribute resources to a very narrow caste within the education system), as well as the professional aspirations of artists as (what Max Weber would call) a 'status group'. That is, creative arts lecturers would prefer to be known as artists rather than teachers, and artists as a status group are in fact adept at sustaining vocational identities that are more or less independent of their actual employment. The antidote to this would be better recognition of teaching in opportunities for institutional recognition and reward, and (less generously) more opportunities for staff training and development.

Such status aspirations become especially problematic in relation to the use of practice-led research in the training of HDR students. As I've suggested above, although the notion of practice holds potential for the field, in the context of research it has functioned with an impoverished account of practice that has led to a revival of formalist criticism that risks deskilling graduates for work in the cultural sector (Brook 2010). The irony is that discussions of practice in practice-led research sublimate their object into a highly aestheticised mode of self-presentation that, although morally exemplary in the seminar room or PhD dissertation (this is its pedagogic function, as Ian Hunter has argued),[2] risks obscuring what creative artists actually do (i.e. 'in practice'). As such, the education critique asks whether practice-led research is sufficient for the vocational training needs of those who are seeking careers in the cultural sector.

These sketches of 'the critiques of practice-led research' are offered as a schema for the various normative grounds that underpin individual positions and the communities of arts practice who, perhaps reluctantly, are called to a discussion of practice-led research. As such, it overemphasises the theoretical unity of these positions to the exclusion of the varied combinations and shadings between critiques, as well as outliers (especially in relation to the aesthetic critique, which is located in a field that has made prolific use of the manifesto).

It is this pragmatic approach to rethinking the field of practice-led research that informs many of the articles gathered here. In his essay 'Six guidelines for PLR', Andrew McNamara offers a reformist set of guidelines for the application of practice-

led research at the coalface of research training. It is written from the point of view of the 'other' supervisor – the one who is not a practice-led researcher but who must nevertheless assist PhD candidates develop a plausible account of their research. McNamara offers a sympathetic if candid account of the weakest applications of practice-led research by students, and a set of rules that might steer the PhD thesis clear of these common fallacies. Although seemingly addressed to postgraduates, one suspects that the most useful audience for this text will be PhD supervisors and examiners who will both instantly recognise and be challenged by his examples. McNamara's guidelines usefully gesture towards the possibility of establishing standards of good practice, while his concluding appeal to practice-led researchers to emphasise (rather than negate) the tension between practice and research *as a strength* is worthy of serious consideration.

That discussions of practice-led research have failed to enter into dialogue with other major and well-established practical critiques of knowledge within the academy – e.g. ethnography, cultural studies, action research – has been a significant source of intellectual embarrassment for the field. In 'Practicing interdisciplinarity' Jane Messer directly redresses this failing, arguing that given art-making and creative research are 'inherently interdisciplinary', practice-led researchers might learn from the long established field of interdisciplinary studies. This area of methodological inquiry that dates back as far as the 1920s has interrogated the objects, limits and means of organising knowledge in an attempt to move beyond the constraints of disciplinary formations. As such, it has been a key resource for innumerable intellectual projects that have sought to cross the intellectual divisions between the humanities and social sciences. While such a move would open up a broad vista of intellectual projects for creative arts research, and add rigor to methodological discussion, to make this move would require practice-led researchers to renounce any claims to a unique 'practice-based' methodology, one that might be 'different-but-equal to' others.

The need for the kind of intellectual realignment called for by Messer is amply demonstrated by Lachlan MacDowell's account of developing a research training unit for postgraduate students in Community Cultural Development (CCD). So far as we are aware this is the first published discussion of practice-led research in the context of community arts training, and it is sobering to discover that the notion of practice-led research finds itself significantly eclipsed by a range of alternative discourses that meet the practical requirements of community artists; action research, postcolonial critiques of knowledge and Most Significant Change (MSC) approaches to arts evaluation are but a few of the methodologies cited. Nevertheless, while MacDowell suggests that the artist's practice has been somewhat fetishised in practice-led research (as others have noted), it's intriguing to discover that the genealogy and self-image of the community artist that emerges in this discussion shares much of the heroics of the aesthetic critique. Perhaps this is a symptom of recent changes to the field in CCD in Australia that have sought to lift the profile of the sector through inviting professional artists to take centre stage (Brook 2008).

In reading K de Kline's 'Parks, squats, four star hotels' the reader is shocked into realizing the intellectual power of artistic research taking as its object something *other* than the practice of art-making. De Kline's fictocritical record of conducting

commissioned fieldwork on homelessness in Australia excavates the everyday sites and practices of knowledge-making, demonstrating how the researcher's knowledge *as a researcher* exceeds the available forms in which such knowledge can be carried. While artists involved in practice-led research are often tempted to append hyperbolic claims of methodological 'reflexivity' to their work, as McNamara notes in his guidelines, de Kline's exemplary use of fictocriticism shows how aesthetic genres can demonstrate this reflexivity through recovering the embodied practices and personae of the researcher as a particular type of 'subject of knowledge'. In Australia the genre of fictocriticism predates practice-led research and continues to provide a viable discipline-specific solution not only to the the problem of how literary writers might communicate their research via peer-refereed scholarly journals, but more importantly, how they might engage in a critical dialogue with established methodologies and research objects. The effect of this is that aesthetic considerations, such as those relating to voice or word-choice, have an immediate and practical connection with other discursive spaces, such as the government research report. Whether discussions in practice-led research have anything to offer this sort of work is yet to be seen.

Paul Magee's poem draws a line through four meditations on suicide and war. The 'inquiry' of the poem's title takes place in the selection and reporting of events that bear on some common questions: how does the fact of death assemble a public who are asked to 'acknowledge' this event, whether at the level of personal therapy or national memorial? While it is common to assign suicide to the place of private tragedy, the poem asks us to rethink this collective response: is the act of suicide really so private given that it routinely takes place in public? Furthermore, does it really express an act of personal decision-making, or rather, and as the author's translation from Virgil might suggest, are we dealing with acts that need to be understood as part of larger processes of mass human destruction of human life? While such questions were raised in a powerful form by Durkheim in a founding work of twentieth century sociology, Magee's classical philological approach suggests that that historical archive asks us to consider the role of suicide as public statement.

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But do artworks constitute research? As unavoidable as this question is, perhaps we need to read it as a demand rather than a real question. Whether-and-how the terms of this statement are capable of prompting a credible reply is an important issue in relation to the administration of the tertiary creative arts sector – we learn as much from the bureaucratic critique. But what we learn from a range of other critiques is that this question is of limited value in relation to the requirements of teaching, understanding and appreciating creative practice. If the notion of practice-led research does seem capable of meeting the terms of this question, then we might reconsider whether this always counts in its favour.

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Endnotes

1. 'Practice-led Research', seminar convened by the Associate Dean of Research, Faculty of Art and Design, University of Canberra, 24 August 2012. The two quoted statements were made by Mitchell Whitelaw and Tony Eaton, and are reproduced here with their permission.

2. Indeed, my account of all four 'critiques' is very much indebted to Ian Hunter's underappreciated studies on the history of modern aesthetics, literary education and bureaucracy. See Hunter (1988; 1991; 1992).

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