Artistic Research is a provocative collection about visual arts artistic research. Its genesis was two-fold—a 2004 workshop that canvassed the territory and key concepts followed by an ‘international two-day symposium …organized in co-operation with the European Cultural Institutes in the Netherlands’—comprising bodies from Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK. Some of the most significant administrators, artists, curators, educators and critics from key schools, universities and museums were involved—stakeholders in the future of European visual art. (And, as I found out at the end of the collection, one unnamed participant from Australia.) Here readers will find some of the first debates about the wisdom and necessity of doctoral programs in visual arts in Europe (Will we? Won’t we? Should we?), set within the context of the EU and the Bologna Process, including a brief history (Woodfield 103-108) of UK Fine Art and Art and Design Higher Degree Programs.

What made this collection so lively was its robustness—full and frank discussion obviously took place and that spice has been translated into the text. It was refreshing to find participants forgetting their academic manners on paper and writing about how they felt being attacked or dismissed for their opinions. The debates and negotiations embodied in these essays replicate what occurred in the field of Australian creative arts in the mid-nineties, and readers will find many of the contributors’ positions familiar. In fact, comments during the Discussion phase from the Australian
participant provoked Sarat Maharaj to say about the PhD in art that ‘this is now a bit of an old hat as you have noticed in Australia’ (168). In general, the essays proffer arguments ranging from ‘we all know what good work is and how to evaluate it, so why do we need to explain it,’ through ‘let’s play the game and manipulate research definitions for our own purposes’ to ‘visual art has its own methodologies and values but research into, about and through it is a valid and indeed critical part of being (and educating) a contemporary artist, whether that artist is studying or simply practicing. In other words, this collection does not offer anything radically new to creative writing researchers who have kept up in the field and have tracked the development of their peers’ theorising of it in tandem with the push for higher degrees, which in the case of visual art has also been both student and teacher-driven.

That said, the shift in perspective this collection offers, through the lens of another art form, can be fruitful, leading to new insights about creative writing and its various genres. Some contributors discuss cutting-edge conceptual visual art at length as well as hybridity and that might stimulate those writers who want to produce more experimental and/or cross-disciplinary artefacts. Immersing oneself in another aesthetic vocabulary can facilitate a clearer articulation of one’s own work. Visual artists, perhaps more than creative writers, seem engaged in continually interrogating what ‘art’ is and what it might be in each project. Collaborative projects discussed here, especially those across media and with stakeholders in the community (such as local government entities), will give readers insight into how cerebral as well as interdisciplinary much contemporary European art is.

*Artistic Practice* is divided into four sections: ‘Prologue;’ ‘Preliminary Workshop, Art and Method’ (followed by ‘Elements of Discussion’ picked out by the editors to summarise the workshop); ‘Symposium, Artistic Research;’ and ‘Discussion.’ The latter section offers the editors’ distillation of key talks with comments by significant respondents. Initially the editors and contributors are concerned with defining the field of visual art research, expanding research definitions or re-conceiving them. The ‘Prologue’ asks a seminal question: ‘How is artistic research connected with… scientific research, taking into account that the artistic domain so far has tended to continually exceed the parameters of knowledge management?’ (9). This is a debate that every art form has to engage in when situating itself within the context of institutions of higher education and government funding paradigms.

A second fruitful focus area is one that Creative Writing as a discipline perhaps should explore more, since it concerns the interface between the private artist and the various publics they might address as well as the relationship between those who are highly skilled practitioners and researchers in their art form. The editors explain: ‘Another major topic concerns not only the specificity of the object of artistic research but above all whether and how artistic research and its institutional programs will influence topical visual art, its artworks and exhibitions’ (9). This statement points to the belief by contributors that universities, art schools and museums might (perhaps should?) have a direct connection with the shape of contemporary art and its dissemination.
In the ‘Preliminary Workshop and Method’ section contributors are primarily concerned with defining the field and expanding research definitions. ‘Methododicy,’ by ‘philosopher, editor, curator, [and] coordinator’ of artistic research (182), Henk Slager (12-14), is a key essay. He defines his neologism in this way: ‘I would rather embrace a methododicy, i.e., a firm and rationally justified belief in a methodological result, whose existence ultimately cannot be legitimized apriori’ (14). This can be understood as a conceptualisation of practice-led research that allows the investigation to follow where the practice leads, gathering ‘data’ from artistic experience, the a posteriori facts or ‘effects’ that the project discovers. Essays in this collection play with this idea again and again to varying degrees. The fine tuning of research questions and directions happens as needed. Even ‘the presentation of novel questions and a tentative, yet courageous, unravelling of failures’ (72), as Mika Hannula asserts, can be embodied in this process.

Visual artists might work primarily with images (although more and more incorporate a range of media), but they are not, Balkema suggests, ‘wordless creatures’ (31). Although artists do not superimpose outcomes or theoretical propositions in the course of their practice, they should always keep control by manipulating a methodological and theoretical framework that allows them to engage in a discourse with peers and the public, arguing for valid results at project’s end. These arguments for the oversight of methodology are useful correctives to those artists who feel that research might hinder creativity. They also dovetail with the precepts of action research and rhizomatic research—it is worth noting that a number of contributors talk about Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* and *What is Philosophy?*, using excerpts to stimulate postgraduates to encourage them to see research as a form of ‘mapping.’

Another insight I gained from this collection is the sense that, whether artists were practicing within the safety net of an Art School, subsidised by a fellowship, working towards an MFA or undertaking a university PhD, self-reflexivity and engagement with current debate in their art form was widespread. Contributors generally agreed that visual art was ‘past modernism’ and ‘the modernist project.’ The necessity of being aware of the latest trends and theories seemed to be accepted by all; there was, therefore, no effective demarcation between those inside or outside the academy, as sometimes is the case in creative writing. For instance, writing academics are familiar with students who want to write their novel, but baulk at the exegesis, which they see as either irrelevant or burdensome, taking them away from their primary purpose. They might have welcomed being subsidised by an arts’ grant rather than a postgraduate award. Slager’s formulation of the visual art context neatly summarises the shift in practitioners’ orientation to the theoretical: ‘…practice has turned into a dynamic point of reference for theory-driven experimentation in general. While the traditional academic, artistic model could be described as one where experimentation is embedded in experience, the topical model is one in which experience is embedded in experimentation’ (12).

This is where higher degree study has taken the lead in making more explicit the results of artistic experiments and disseminating them more widely than might be possible through isolated exhibitions, for example. It also helps to articulate to those
inside as well as outside the art form the type of knowledge gained: ‘...artistic research is directed towards unique, particular, local knowledge’ (13). This contention seems to be held by a majority of contributors, especially those who realise, like Hermann Pitz, that the art world comprises cliques and coteries, and being part of a particular gallery or curator’s stable can help a career but hinder experimentation. Institutional support for art, therefore, in the form of fellowships and degrees, can be ‘a new tool … for fostering ideas that could not survive otherwise in the tribal structure of the art world’ (27).

Another strong motif throughout the collection is the comparison between scientific and artistic research’s goals, methodologies, validation procedures and demand for aesthetic shape. This debate involves the networks of stakeholders that hold disciplines together, and supports an understanding of artistic knowledge as grounded in the particular. James McAllister’s ‘Seven Claims’ argues for a historical conceptualisation of knowledge; even in the sciences, he affirms, it is not absolute ‘but … a rather contingent succession of events for which it is very difficult to find a pattern’ (19). The necessity, therefore, of a ‘differentiating description’ of results argues for ‘a unique, particular, local knowledge’ (19), a point that Slager makes in his essay. Annette Balkema (14-16) in her turn talks about ‘Liquid Knowledge.’

Centralised as well as decentralised networks of experts must validate research results therefore. McAllister, a Professor of Philosophy of Science, develops this argument in a way that bears on governmental audits of research excellence, where impact in one form or another winds up being interwoven in claims for research significance. Context always has to be taken into account in order to comprehend an artwork’s quality: ‘So, the extent of, for example, communication of an artwork would also count as empirical success’ (22). McAllister even suggests that experts might pre-validate a project’s success before it ‘can be exported to the outside world’ (29). It is worth debating whether the award of a higher degree might offer this type of validation. Gerard de Vries in ‘Beware of Research’ notes the significance of peer approval of results as well, so that research can be understood as ‘a collective system of selection. In other words, emerging ideas only become good ideas when colleagues or peers select them, i.e. cite them in articles or employ them in their research. That is how scientific ideas circulate and are legitimised’ (17).

The main body of Artistic Practice comprises essays from the Symposium where initial questions and propositions about research, method and theory raised in the ‘Workshop’ section are extrapolated, taking account now of the aesthetic, social, political, and institutional implications. Among various subjects explored, which would again be familiar to those cognizant of past and current debates in creative writing, are: the multiplicities inherent in artistic research (Deleuze and Guattari again, by way of Henri Bergson and George Bernhard Riemann 59-60); the difficulties of knowing the unknowable; the myth of scientific research as hard and unchanging; the romantic notion of the artist as isolate genius (‘Arteleku [In the Crisis of the Modernist Project]’ Eraso 109-113); the solipsistic nature of traditional art education; the cultural assumptions and responsibilities of the academy, the gallery and the museum (Anke Bangma ‘Observations and Considerations’126-134 and Gioni and Kuzma, ‘Manifesta 5: Curatorial Research,’ 151-155); the role of art education in
not only fostering but also anticipating new directions and preparing artists for professional life (Multipoint 89-102); the need for periodic re-examination and re-evaluation of artistic discourse and standards; and the challenge of government regulation (EU, the uber-manager, looms large in some essays).

One of the delights of the collection for me was discovering every so often an example that illuminates a familiar text through another art form’s practice. Sarat Maharaj, located at the Malmö School of Art in Sweden, discusses reading as a ‘mapping’ process in classes where students/participants were asked to undertake ‘a two-track-reading of the Rhizome section of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari 1980)’ (47). One participant ‘chased up Footnote 21—excavating Joëlle de La Casinière’s *Absolument Nécessaire* (Minuit.Paris.1973) and its “nomadic logic”’ (47) … He unearthed this somewhat overlooked inspiration of “Rhizome,” hunting down the artist to her boathouse lair on the Belgium river-networks. She would eventually contribute to a Test Site event’ (47). This is literalising the metaphor of embodiment—here the idea of networks and links as well as concept and human source—and incorporating it into the research process.

This is a provocative, uneven and yet exciting collection, as one might expect when the informed opinions of a range of practitioners, administrators, educators and curators come together to debate the concept of artistic research, which, everyone here at least seems to agree, is vital for the future of the arts. Like contemporary writers, artists are called upon ‘to display expanded authorship—the ability to verbalize, analyze and interpret their own and other artists’ works, and other aspects of the art world’ (69), as Jan Kaila of the Helsinki School of Art claims. The book is certainly worthwhile reading for creative writing researchers who wish to expand their conception of artistic research as well as to gain some understanding of what has been driving European visual art research in the past decade.

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