

Tara Winters  
The University of Auckland

## **Art and Designs' developing contribution to the frontiers of Contemporary Research Theory and Practice**

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### **Introduction**

Artistic research returns us to a conceptualisation of research with a little r<sup>1</sup>, referring to the broad acts of searching, investigating, and inquiring into things. The word has its origins in Old French, deriving from the term 'recercher' (re – 'intensive' + cercher 'to seek out'). Cercher comes ultimately from Latin circare 'go about, wander,' from circus 'circle.'<sup>2</sup> These original features of 'seeking out' and 'wandering' nicely reflect the concerns of art practice to seek meaning in the world in a non-constructed, and sometimes hap-hazard way. Artists regularly refer to some of these most fundamental qualities of the act 'to research'. In *Eva Hesse* Lippard (1992, p. 8) cites an anonymous friend of the artist who recalls her describing how being an artist means 'to see, to observe, to investigate'. Artists, along with philosophers, may have indeed been some of the first researchers.

Today, artist-researchers find themselves in an interesting position with regard to the theory and practice of contemporary research, and artistic research remains contested territory in academic circles. It's practices seem difficult to reconcile with many aspects of the well-established structures, methods and processes of traditional scholarly research. This is mainly due to the unique situation that research is conducted through artistic practice. The concept of practice operates as a defining logic, as Borgdorff (2010, p. 46) explains: 'The distinctiveness of artistic research derives from the paramount place that artistic practice occupies as the subject, method, context and outcome of the research'.

As a relative newcomer, artistic research is yet to firmly establish the forms and principals that underpin its activity within an academic research context. As a result of this situation practitioner-researchers consistently find themselves having to articulate a philosophical/theoretical position,

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<sup>1</sup> Frayling first identified the use of research with a little r and research with a big R in relation to art and design research in his seminal paper of 1993, 'Research in Art and Design', Royal College of Art Research Papers, Volume 1, Number 1, 1993/4.

<sup>2</sup> See the Online Etymology Dictionary at: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=research>

and provide extra information on aspects such as research methodology and research process not generally required of others. Scrivener & Chapman (2004, p. 1) capture this idea with regard to the visual arts doctoral student:

the existence of contested territory means that the doing of practice-based research is accompanied by a significant component of methodological development: frameworks and methods are created and tested through the doing of practice-based research. This puts the practice based visual arts and design doctoral student and supervisor in an unusual, if not historically unique position of having to consider both methodology and methodological rigor.

Measurement systems that assess institutional research also call for additional explanation in support of 'non-traditional research outputs' (NTRO's) – artworks, design-works, performances, exhibitions etc. For example, frameworks used in New Zealand (PBRF<sup>3</sup>), Australia (ERA<sup>4</sup>) and the UK (REF<sup>5</sup>) require accompanying written statements that provide background information and supporting statements about the relevance, quality and significance of the creative work as research. These written components are usually prepared by the individual researcher. This is a requirement not routinely expected of 'traditional research outputs', and can be perceived as implying that some kind of deficit exists where creative work alone is not sufficient as evidence of research. As Wilson (2014) notes, this situation can be seen to 'reinforce uncertainty about the 'legitimacy' of artistic work without additional text interpretation' (p. 3).

Though this situation can be present as a frustrating complication in one sense, in another way it can be seen to position artistic research as a critically rich, living context for the advancement of the theory and practice of research at a meta-level. This paper begins from this potentiality. As Borgdorff (2010, p. 44) notes, the expression 'artistic research' connects two domains: art and academia, impacting on both: 'Art transcends its former limits, aiming through the research to contribute to thinking and understanding; academia, for its part, opens up its boundaries to forms of thinking and understanding that are interwoven with artistic practices'.

### **Emergent Methods**

The concept of 'emergent methods' in the social sciences refers to the use of new research techniques to access answers to complex questions and reveal subjugated knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2008). Academic research has observed that as our understanding of the social world progresses the repertoire of social research methods also needs to advance. Providing opportunities for researchers to think outside disciplinary boundaries is central to this task. To

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<sup>3</sup> PBRF is an acronym for 'Performance Based Research Fund'

<sup>4</sup> ERA is an acronym for 'Excellence in Research for Australia'

<sup>5</sup> REF is an acronym for 'Research Excellence Framework'

date it seems that very little uptake of the potentials offered by artistic research has occurred in this regard. The following observations connect the distinctive values and characteristics of artistic research to developments such as 'emergent methodologies' exploring its potential to inform radical shifts in the theory and practice of research.

### **Practice as research**

The question-method-answer context is a working context inseparable from the meaning of the word research in academia. Academic research begins with questions or issues relevant in a particular research context and deploys methods appropriate to that context. In this regard artistic research sits easily within an academic research framing where practice-based research is advanced through artistic inquiry into the questions, issues, and interests that motivate artistic work. What is distinctive, however, is that the research sits within a context that includes both the academic setting and the art/design world. Artistic research is conducted in and through art and design and thus must address the discourses of contemporary art and design as well as justify itself within an academic discourse.

Artistic research has an interest in questions over answers, and creative research outcomes are generally seen as components in a larger overall trajectory known as an artists or designers *practice*. Artistic outcomes routinely raise more questions than they answer for both the practitioner and the audience. Objective explanation is not necessarily the responsibility of artistic research, but instead, as Crispin (2014) notes below, its focus is in other directions:

Artworks are under no obligation to offer solutions or comforting boundaries – indeed, they may be created precisely with a view to exposing intractable problems and proposing them as matters for reflection, rather than resolution (p. 144)

The gradual building of research projects as part of an artistic practice can be seen to echo the cumulative nature of traditional academic research where single studies contribute to a larger body of ongoing, collective knowledge, and where single publications help to raise new questions for further research. However, artistic research goes further, calling into question the dominant structure of academic research as a systematic search for something defined in advance.

Artistic research employs a variety of methods including routine and formal approaches, but also distinctly unsystematic processes. It values the freedom of leaving a fixed path, of wandering, drifting, and dwelling in things. It's influences can be quite random. It emphasises self-conscious reflection and the seeking of unexpected results. Its larger project is generally not pre-conceived in any direct way and is left to develop as work builds. This is not a reason to consider that artistic research is *only* spontaneous, and thus unscholarly; "as many have shown, even

spontaneous production is informed by significant analysis and reflection (Turcotte & Morris 2012). An almost constant state of not knowing and uncertainty is sought after and relied on as an essential and productive driving force. The significance of not-knowing is also apparent in its outcomes. Artistic research is discovery-led rather than hypothesis-led (Rubidge 2005). This sits in contrast to the requirement of most academic studies to identify in advance a clear question/hypothesis for investigation. These characteristics are also present in some of the most contemporary critique of academic research practices outside of the art and design context.

### **Concept-as-method**

The work of Elizabeth St Pierre (Professor in the Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia) stands out as a leading voice in challenges to existing social science research practices. Pierre has questioned the well-established mode of qualitative methodology at its most fundamental level recommending that social science begin with theories and concepts that enable different conceptual practices that may or may not include qualitative methods. In her critique of conventional humanist qualitative methodology, which she regards as monolithic and stifling, St Pierre advocates for the use of post structural analyses (quoting the work of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari) to shift humanities research methods forward, coining the term 'Post Qualitative Research'.

Practices for doing this new work that St Pierre recommends are: (1) leaving qualitative methodology behind, (2) studying theory, (3) beginning research with theories and concepts instead of methodology, and (4) trusting yourself and getting to work. The idea of *concept as method* is a central theme:

Here I used a *concept as method*. But this "method" was not a prescriptive step-by-step procedure (e.g., interview, participant observation) described in advance of my study in some textbook that I could easily implement during 'fieldwork'. Instead, the concept slowed down and reoriented my thinking about everything. That work was my first post qualitative inquiry, and there was no going back (St Pierre 2014, p. 7).

St Pierre argues that method should come at the end of a study, so as not to shut things done before they start, but as a way to think back about what we have done and what we will try next time. It is possible to draw several productive links to artistic research here. As noted above, the distinctive case that artistic research conflates subject, method and outcome simultaneously in research through the operating logic of artistic practice raises an immediate critical moment with regard to the concepts of method and methodology as compared with the traditional academic research model. The notion of methodology in academic research is the concept that links the

theory (definition of the type of research problem) and practice (what methods will be used and why they are appropriate) of research together. It can be understood as the philosophies and principles that guide research practice in a particular discipline or with respect to a particular research question. It also refers to how what counts as knowledge informs research.

In artistic research the type of research problem is distinct and is derived from the logic of artistic practice. The research is a test of the artist's ideas, intuitions, and reflections of the world against the logic of what is presumed to be seen and known about things. The artists' subjectivity/knowledge is foregrounded in the artistic research process. In terms of practice (method) artistic practice *is* method, and concept-as-method can be seen as an already active logic. Method is not pre-determined but emerges through practice (through making) as a practitioner interprets and responds to theoretical, material and conceptual drivers that motivate their practice. Artists regularly begin with concepts and build work in order to find out more about these, trusting themselves and the process, simply 'getting down to work'. This feature is often pursued to its logical end in artworks where artists describe some of the most successful things they have done as the things they don't think or talk much about. Method in art is characterised by a great plurality of approaches and there is no common philosophical-methodological basis but different, 'incommensurable and even contradictory ontological, epistemological and practical starting points and commitments' (Hannula 2005, p. 23).

### **Human meaning-making**

Artistic research also provides a working context for drawing attention to the complexity of human meaning-making processes and idea/concept generation processes. As one distinct dimension of its activity, artistic research is almost always interested in knowledge about the nature of artistic process, especially since one aspect of fulfilment derived from the act of making art/design work is to further your own understanding of artistic working methods, and this can be of great value to other practitioners and to knowledge about creativity more generally. This is part of 'advancing the practice' that artists talk about as a consistent outcome of research (Borgdorff 2012). One of the specialist areas in artistic research is what happens in the studio; the experience that leads to artistic outcomes. The content of the insights about process revealed by practitioners is of the tacit, embodied, and experiential kind. This type of content is regularly articulated through written and verbal means and is made widely available, meeting one of the essential requirements of research. It holds the potential to be of value and influence to a variety of processes significant to qualitative research.

For example, Leavy (2008, p. 347) notes how health care researchers have identified the incubation phase and the interpretation and analysis phase in qualitative research as times where the creative arts can be drawn on for insight, helping researchers into ways of re-looking at content and to make new meanings:

Health care researchers Hunter, Lusardi, Zucker, Jacelon, and Chandler (2002) argue that the creative arts can help qualitative researchers pay closer attention to how the complex process of meaning making and idea percolation shapes research.

In auto-ethnography (social research that connects the autobiographical and the personal to the cultural, social and political) a researcher is required to 'expose him or herself and embark on an unpredictable personal journey' (Leavy 2008, p. 349). Writing about the importance of intuition and creativity as part of qualitative research Valerie Janesick (2001) has noted that the researcher him/herself is the instrument in qualitative research, just as in artistic practice. That the self cannot be independent of the theories, methods, questions and outcomes of research is of great interest to ethnography (a branch of qualitative research) and its pursuit of 'webs of meaning' (Geertz 1973), reflexivity, and making an aesthetic impact on its reader (Leavy, 2008). Similarities to artistic research that are observable in this context include the fact that artistic practices are at once driven by self-discovery and self-awareness, and are highly reflexive in nature. As Wesseling (2012, p. 195) reflects: 'Meaningful artworks are always self-reflexive. They seem to possess self-awareness about their status as artwork, as image'. Art itself is of course deeply invested in the quest for meaning, and the production of 'meaning effects' (aesthetic impact).

## **Knowledge**

The difficulties that arise around knowledge and understanding with regard to artistic research are a result of the contrast of the two domains involved: academic research with its emphasis on the production of knowledge and understanding (typically of the propositional kind) and art practice, with its disinterest in, and sometimes opposition to, formal knowledge. Many a commentator has provided strong argument for accepting that artistic research is not primarily interested in the production of formal academic knowledge including: Frayling 1993; Wesseling 2012; Scrivener 2002; Borgdorff 2010; and Hannula 2005. But perhaps the way forward is to expand our ideas about knowledge rather than a focus on how incommensurable art's ideas about knowledge are as compared to those of the world of science (in the most rigid definition of research and knowledge).

Danvers (2003, p. 56) notes that, since the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'knowledge is viewed as a set of conditional interpretations, descriptions and models, subject to continual change and revision'. In this context of shifting views of knowledge, artistic research stands to make an important contribution in the way it actuates alternative knowledge forms and reflects on these. For example, the role of the body in knowing (embodied knowledge) is enacted in and through artistic practice, stemming from the distinctive situation previously mentioned - that the research

is conducted *through* artistic practice. Practitioners act (practice) and reflect (theorise) within the knowledge structures that are appropriate to the discipline, and, in the context of art and design, this means working with a whole range of knowledge forms and ways of understanding that sit outside of propositional knowledge (the dominant knowledge structure in academic research).

The forms of thinking and modes of knowing exercised in artistic practice can be understood as instances of embodied knowledge articulated in and through the production of art; the combination of making and the studio itself. Borgdorff (2010) refers to this kind of 'unreflective, non-conceptual' (p. 59) content embedded within aesthetic experience as the content that artistic research seeks to articulate. In more recent commentary, Barrett and Bolt (2014) build on this to claim that: 'One of the strengths of artistic research its capacity to uncover or reveal the aesthetic dimension of *all* forms of discovery...' (p. 6), which is often overlooked in more traditional research approaches.

In Elkins edited volume *What do Artists Know*, Janneke Wesseling (2012, p. 195) poses to recast the books title as *How do artists think?* asserting that: 'The verb "to know" does not apply to art or to what artists do'. Wesseling argues that the kind of thinking relevant to artists is *reason*, describing reason as 'the never-ending search for meaning, propelled as it is by constant doubt' (2012, p. 194). In his chapter *Embodied knowing through art*, Mark Johnson (2010, p. 145) offers the observation that arts research focuses 'on knowing as a process of inquiry rather than a final product', emphasising the idea of a process-oriented conception of knowledge. Both these authors are making a similar point in their writing that recognises artistic research as a knowledge-invested activity, but with its own configurations around the idea of knowledge that suit its more primary goal of creating meaning effects. The idea of meaning, value and reason as critical modes of 'knowing' is at the centre of the ways in which artistic research is well placed to challenge conceptions of knowledge that are often overlooked in more traditional research approaches.

## **Conclusion**

In the discussion above, I pointed to a suggested shift from the application of existing qualitative methods to the use of 'concept-as-method' in social science research, put forward by Elizabeth St Pierre. As part of her proposal, St Pierre points to the liberating effect of concepts established by Deleuze and Guattari:

Importantly, Deleuze and Guattari provided new concepts—intensive, *futural concepts* with their own speeds and rhythms that slow us down because they don't fit existing ontologies and so open things up, helping us think new modes of being (Pierre 2014, p. 14).

Perhaps artistic research, with its alternative forms of thinking and understanding, its quest for meaning over certainty, and interest in non-verifiable knowledge (qualities which don't fit within an existing ontology of traditional academic research) can similarly provide new conceptual ground and 'open things up' in the world of academic research? In the case of methodology in particular, maybe each new artistic research project is potentially representative of a new methodological approach for consideration by other researchers. This seems entirely possible given that the 'subject matter' for each project is different (it is driven by an artists own preoccupations and concerns), the researcher is different (and therefore the subjective and situated approach will be different), and the methods are unique (constituted of cycles of making and reflecting experienced by individual artists).

The principles that guide artistic research are as much dependent on intuitive processes unique to an individual, as they are on existing ideas, methods and knowledge. These, and other distinguishing features of artistic research are on offer for integration and application in other fields. As the activity and theory of artistic research progresses, reflecting on the processes of creation in the studio context, and the alternative relationships to understanding and knowledge established by creative practice, artistic research will continue to offer important new ways of thinking and doing for the general field of research.



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