Representing creativeness: practice-based approaches to research in creative arts

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ABSTRACT

The investigation of creativeness in the creative arts requires some theoretical originality to enable the development of an effective research method capable of subtly reporting upon original artistic activity. The research endeavour requires something of the tactfulness of the work it seeks to understand. Considered introspection, in the form of practice-based research, into creative arts practice offers the opportunity to try to understand the way an artist engages in an original way with their physical, cultural and psychic raw materials.

KEYWORDS

practice-based research, creative arts practice, contemporary arts, creativeness, artist-researcher, practitioner-researcher

Opening/s

Art is, in a sense by definition, like philosophy, difficult to pin down, definitionally and conceptually. If it was not, it would no longer be art, or philosophy, respectively. However deconstructive or reconstructive the artist's intent, the recognizable face of a contemporary artistic work still functions, much as Martin Heidegger suggested - like a 'shimmering veil', a 'revealing' which 'conceals in a way that opens to light' (1977, p. 25). As cultural theorist Henri Lefebvre puts it, art is based upon 'an appearance incapable of appearing' (1991, p395). It is about producing something new (unknown) within culture (what is established).

One way art can usefully be thought of is as an indeterminate *condition*, a threshold between conscious thought and unconscious feeling, an opening onto a liminal space where rationality (theory) and irrationality (experience, emotion, art) mix in the individual creative *act* (practice). It appears to offer a doorway beyond mere perception, an opening onto the imperceptible. The difficulty is, as Heidegger suggested, that in trying to reveal something of the qualities of 'the veil' which we apprehend as the recognizable face of an art work, we only reveal this 'veil' as that which 'veils'. That is, we cannot find an isolatable *essential* quality behind it.

To investigate and report upon creativeness in the creative arts requires us to think about artistic originality with some theoretical originality. Art, as

Shklovsky observed of the chess knight, does not progress in a straight line (cited in Bordwell, 1991, p. 274). It gets deflected because it aims to be unpredictable in relation to reigning norms. Art, then, might also be thought of as constituting a mode of investigating human understanding, as much as it is of producing something new.

Investigating how something new is produced therefore requires us to try to examine not merely the workings of creative practice in the arts, but our very concept of what creative practice represents. This is certainly not without some methodological difficulties. Tracking the movements of the 'ribbons stirred by the wind' as Gilles Deleuze described the endeavour of artistic practice (1987, p. 75), as with the investigation of all culture, requires what Michel de Certeau called a *savoir faire* (1984, p65). Simply put, it requires finding a new way (or rediscovering an older way) of considering the relation between knowing and doing. The task of investigating the conditions under which something new is produced, creativeness, calls for a processual approach. It requires an 'art of thought', a certain *tact*, by which artists might track their movements into the unknown, as they pursue the 'lines of flight' of their music, writing, painting or performance. In so doing, they may manage to represent something of the thought at the root of their art. This gives rise to the 'image' of the artist as a 'practical intellectual', as one actively engaged in critical reflection about the creative process whilst making work.

Practice, research and creativity

Investigating art practice requires charting something of the 'doing' involved in the return movement from the unknown of the imagination, to the relative known of the artefacts or productions of artistic practice. The undertaking of creative practice usually means having to advance without a theory, or to go beyond theory, initially at least, to work beyond established practices and 'outside' of the disciplinary protocols, outside 'the true', as Foucault terms it (1976, p. 224). This appears to hold true, regardless of whether the specific instance of creative arts practice being investigated sits within or across the visual or fine arts, the performing arts and music, creative writing and media arts, and to a certain extent within the branches of communications and design. The challenge for the contemporary artist also operating as a researcher is to attempt to represent or chart this activity, whilst remaining open to the possibilities present in their art practice.

By employing the overarching descriptor 'creative arts', I am not seeking to neutralize the many formal and operational differences and divergences within and between these different areas of creative practice. Nor am I intending to overstate any of the overlays and resonances across and between them. The particular art *forms*, as the name suggests, are taken to

be cultural formations, determined by the specific trajectories and flows evidenced by particular instances of practice, and from which new work emerges to redefine or hybridize these (force) fields. The academic discipline or subject areas which correspond to some extent with the different art forms, and with the meshworks which exist in creative arts practice, represent even more provisional cultural spaces. They are taken to be 'problematic fields', governed by the 'production of solutions', to use De Landa's terms (1999, p. 132). No definitive general agreement, then, is implied here about either the nature of the fields of activity, or how they might be represented. It is all taken to be contestable, in practice, as well as in theory and criticism.

There have been, though, a number of attempts to formulate and extend research approaches to the creative arts over the past ten years which are specifically focused upon creative *practice* (Frayling, 1993, 1997; Strand, 1998; Margolin, 1998). These have generally viewed creative arts research as qualitative research which 'does not, typically, begin with a predetermined set of questions or assumptions but arises from the particular situations or contexts' being investigated (Frayling, 1997, p. 22). There have been more recent debates about research in the various creative arts in e-mail discussion lists, none the least those archived online at the *PhD-Design* e-mail list forum. Contributors there, like the prior publications, have variously wrestled with setting creative arts research into a typology organized around the prepositions 'into', 'about', 'in', 'by', 'through' and 'for' *practice*, without, it has to be said, a great deal of general agreement about which is the most relevant preposition/approach, or even about how these prepositions should be applied to describing what is done. The approaches are most commonly framed as:

- research *into* arts practice;
- research *through* arts practice;
- research *for* arts practice.

Research *into* the creative arts would include the traditional history, theory and criticism triumvirate. It would also include aesthetic and perceptual research, social, cultural and psychological research, and research into the technical, material and structural perspectives of/on the creative arts. Research *through* creative arts practice centres on a 'studio/creative project' which results in the production and presentation of a body of 'finished' creative work, where, additionally, the documentation of what is done in the process of creating these works is taken as a significant component of the research. Research *for* the creative arts, might include research into the behaviour of materials and processes, the customizing of software and hardware, and extending what can be creatively accomplished. Although it need not necessarily result in 'finished' creative works,

this approach may however point the way towards possible new fields of practice.

Those who engage in more conventional forms of arts research are predominantly undertaking research *into* the arts, which leads to historical, theoretical and/or critical writing published in scholarly books, articles in established refereed journals and conference papers. They may also result in extended comparative reviews and formal professional, critical and cultural debates, as well as for educational purposes. However, the majority of those professionally engaged in the creative arts of visual and performing arts, media and literary arts and design, and perhaps more pointedly those who teach in the arts training/vocational academies in these disciplines, are generally actively creating new images and sounds, movements and language, as part of their professional practice. It is this approach to research *through* creative practice, where the specifics of the creative practice set the parameters and define the methods required for the associated research project. The emphasis is in part upon the creative *processes* of art production, and, by extension, also located upon the contemporary cultural context within which the artist operates.

Margolin describes the approach of research *through* art and design, centred as it is upon the 'studio project', as representing a new 'practice-led' approach to research which is not bound by traditional methodologies, but seeks to 'facilitate the relation of reflection to practice' (1998, p. 98). But here again the terminology used to describe the relationship between practice and research more broadly also has been as disputatious as the prepositional formula previously alluded to. The options are couched here though in terms of the hyphenated, compound phrases:

- practice-*led* research;
- practice-*based* research;
- practice-*oriented* research.

The most apt overall descriptor is probably the practice-*oriented* one. However, given the breadth of approaches to inquiry encompassed by this phrase, as it seems to embrace all of the 'prepositional' research categories already alluded to - 'into', 'by', 'about', 'in', 'through' and 'for' practice - I have elected to use the somewhat narrower, but perhaps more widely employed term 'practice-based research' here, as a subset of the broader and more general orientation towards arts practice. I will be dealing with the aspects of contemporary arts research which are not merely *oriented* towards practice, but those approaches which are quite literally *based* upon or located *in* the specifics of the 'problem' posed, explored or presented by a particular body of original creative work.

Practice makes research

The practice-based approach to contemporary arts research usually involves the practitioner engaging with their own creative work, investigating the 'enframing' practice/s of their area of the creative arts, so as to bring into the open some of the qualities which distinguish and illuminate the general and specific processes at work. It offers a unique way of conceptually modelling art disciplines at the workface, so to speak, and a method for framing an enquiry into 'creativeness'. This practice-based approach to research augments and complements the more established or conventional research approaches *into* or *about* the creative arts, which focus upon the finished 'forms' of art works, their historical and theoretical contexts, and/or their broader social and cultural situation and consumption.

For many practising artists, research is integrally bound up with their art practice/s. Strand indicates, 'Their research methodologies are *in* the arts, their investigations are *in* the practice of their art form' (original emphasis) (1998, p. 42). Substantial parts of art practice *are* research, because it is investigative. It is about enquiry. So the application of the research skills of 'reflection', of 'theorizing', according to Blauvelt, is 'not something that is done either before or after work has been made, but is crucial to the process of making' (1998, pp. 74-75). Art practice thus is generally based upon an 'active' process of enquiry. The 'emergent' qualities of this process are bound up with the specificities of the art form adopted, as well as the final mode of presentation, exhibition or performance, which includes how it will be seen, heard or otherwise experienced or consumed, and perhaps by whom, where, under what conditions, and for how long. These are all potentially part of the nature of the enquiry, not merely an end point.

But how do we distinguish between the kind/s of routine research undertaken in the course of everyday professional artistic practice, and that of a practice-based approach to research? One way to approach this problem, as Strand suggests, is by considering *intent*. On the face of it, those doing routine professional practice as a creative practitioner with no major challenges in terms of 'originality, risk-taking or boundary-pushing', as Parr (1996) points out, or in terms of a significant broader cultural engagement, cannot readily make a valid claim for their art practice to be recognized as research. Undertaking work which is not considered innovative, especially where it is only incremental in terms of developing professional skills through practice, or is habitual or highly conventional, is not sufficient. Even where professional artistic practice *is* innovative, 'speculative' and leads to breakthroughs in the field of practice, its *intent* is primarily about product. Unfortunately, within most current research regimes, especially those administered within universities, contemporary forms of art

practice are not necessarily likely to receive formal peer recognition as research, as such, as Strand (1998, p. 51) asserts, without an *explicit* case being made for it to be considered as a contribution to knowledge.

In practice-based research, investigation through practice *is* the methodology. The logic of the particular implementation of the method resides somewhere within the specifics of the creative practice under investigation. Extending creative arts practice into the territory of research involves some rendering as *explicit* something of the specifics of the situation in which the work has been undertaken, and exploring some of the complex of relations within the work, and the relations of the work to the outside context.

In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the practitioner employs an 'economy of logic', so that 'no more logic is mobilized than is required by the needs of practice'. The assumptions about, and in, the work remain implicit, defined by the 'practical relation to the situation' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 110). Practice-based research on the other hand has investigation as the 'primary objective'. This may be a very fine line to draw, literally and metaphorically, and only discernible by an assessment of the methodology of explication, and an analysis of the related processual and contextual documentation. The distinction between a purely professional practice role in producing art works, and an academic research perspective being brought to bear in creating art works, is that the practice-based creative arts researcher is 'obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which they arrived at' their product/s (Frayling, 1997, p. 13). Strand observes: 'It involves research *in* the art form, provided there is a substantial accompanying document evidencing research *about* the art form' (original emphasis) (1998, p. 40).

The account of the process *and* the creative outcomes should each demonstrate some of the ways in which the work has developed and/or the extended knowledge of and in the field. If the function of developing and extending knowledge is based 'essentially on investigatory, exploratory, speculative or analytical processes', then the outcome of the process of that practice/enquiry is 'a result of synthesizing the problematics of the discipline' (Strand, 1998, p. 34). This is quite consistent with 'the classic method' of research in the physical sciences, social sciences and humanities. To that extent it should really require no more than to assert how the particular field of knowledge/practice has been developed or extended.

The practice-based research methodology quite specifically puts the case for how the creative work develops and extends knowledge *of* and *about* the particular discipline/field of creative practice. It can evidence how the work extends practice *in* the field, in some sense invigorating it, by outlin-

ing the ways it asks new questions of the discursive formation of the field of engagement, of the materials and forms, and developing new sources of inspiration for ongoing creative activity. It can also capture something of the transverse 'structures of thought' at work in creative arts practice, revealing the artist as an 'accidental' intellectual, to use Muecke's term (1997, pp. 31-32). The artist-researcher is like a 'tangential tourist' who travels the world impulsively following the threads, connections and revelations they encounter, and may refuse to do 'disciplined' research, working instead across the boundaries of art forms and usually discrete disciplinary spaces, in an interdisciplinary mode of enquiry.

This approach requires that there be an extended *commentary*, which 'maps the route'. The commentary has a pivotal role in distinguishing professional practice from practice-based research. It provides evidence of the originality of the art work, demonstrates mastery of professional creative skills, signals that a significant contribution has been made to the field, and sets out the degree of 'conceptual rigour' applied. Many innovative artists will baulk at the prospect of this seemingly self-justifying step; however, the commentary need not necessarily be dispassionate, as may be required in other more overtly empirical discipline areas. It can be self-reflexive, being based upon the art work created by the commentator. The art work itself here can be considered *as* research, or at least as an integral aspect of the research, because it is an indispensable part *of* the research. Unlike the standard research report in other discipline areas, the extended commentary here need not be unambiguous. It is generally a more open-ended statement, produced in support of the primary research 'data' - the original art work/s. As Frayling puts it, 'the artist isn't in the business of unambiguous communication' (1993, p. 2), and hence the communication of the 'results' equally cannot be expected to be unambiguously communicable.

The 'grammars of practice'

Research by creative practitioners through their own arts practice, then, is where the process of making, producing or creating cultural presentations, and the exploration and transformation which occurs in the process, is taken as an *act* of research itself, where knowledge is gained in the creative act, and can be directly attributable to the creative process. This 'emergent' knowledge may be abstract or cognitive (theoretical) knowledge, as well as practical knowledge gained in and from the 'doing', from the application of a developed *creative methodology*. The consequence of this creative methodology is primarily demonstrated by the art work/s themselves, but also can emerge further into public view through the development of a practice-based *research methodology*.

But, if we take creating new works of art as being somehow outside conventional forms of rationality, how can a logical method (research) be seen

to be applied to the creative arts through practice? As with hypothesis formation in the sciences, originality in art comes from 'outside' rationality, initially. According to Medewar: 'The process by which we come to form a hypothesis is not only illogical but non-logical; i.e. outside logic' (1969, p. 46). Further, logic cannot be objective, however much experimental evidence is subsequently produced to support a given concept. Even physics can only muster operational definitions of many of its conceptual models - the 22 compacted dimensions of String Theory, for example, remain essentially unverifiable mathematical abstractions.

Seago argues that the process of discovery in much successful research work, like creative work itself, is based upon 'a combination of rigorous methodology and the following up of intuitive, imaginative ''hunches'' '(1994, p. 5). He argues that it is erroneous to consider creative work as 'somehow beyond reason and analysis'. Strand asserts:

> Much of the activity that leads to these new creations is based in research, and that generally there is often a strong conceptual link between the creative output of people doing their professional practice and what is widely accepted as genuine research in other fields. (1998, p. 19)

How then might we go about tracking the movement from this logic of discovery to the discovery of some of the qualities of that logic?

It has already been suggested that art is based upon producing something new (unknown) within culture (what is established). This gives us a clue about one kind of method. It is hardly surprising to suggest that the art practitioner-researcher might go initially to the more established bodies of research, both within the creative arts, and in other disciplines - history, literature and so on, in developing, situating and contextualizing something of the originality and unoriginality (if you will pardon the awkwardness of the term) of their creative practice. This may reveal some of the departure points from the known, and some of the qualities of the art of thought at work in that movement *beyond* the known, in their area of music, writing, painting or performance. They might then be better equipped for the task of examining closely the relation between knowing and doing through reflection and analysis, and for tracking their movements into the unknown of creativeness.

Adopting the notion of process as central to a creative arts method of research through creative practice should help in unravelling something of what Bourdieu calls the 'semi-learned grammars of practice', by which these hunches are tested and accepted or rejected, as they are '*put into practice*'(added emphasis) (1977, p. 20).

Arguably much twentieth-century arts practice, kept volatile by a succession of transitory avant-gardes, was driven by this imperative to unpack the

'grammars' of the older binary oppositions of the preceding century's romanticisms, between art as a convention-bound activity, administered by the academies, and art as free expression. The Surrealists, for example, established a 'research office' in Paris in the mid-1920s to explore the notion of 'psychic automatism' by experimenting with, as Breton described it, 'the disinterested play of thought' through the 'dictation of thought' in new art practices (cited in Curtis, 1971, p. 22). Similarly, the engagement with the workings of cognition by the Bauhaus, where the concept of modern design was revealed as a research methodology within the arts, as well as a creative and functional field in its own right; the consideration of tonality on the horizon of expectation of modern music; or the exploration of theatre practices by way of the self-conscious fictive nature of character; or through the anti-dramatic distantiation of the audience; and so on, cemented the self-conscious role of research in and through arts practice.

Although they were not the first artists to adopt the research through practice approach, the Modernists certainly set the ground for the representation of research *as* (self-)consciousness, which later became figural in so much postmodernist art work. Think of the late work of John Cage, or the films of Jean-Luc Godard, the collages of Barbara Kruger, amongst very many. One of many examples of this kind of research-based practice and practice-based research, from within the visual arts, can be seen in Phillip George's recent work with old and new visual technologies in exploring links between diasporic identity, place and memory, combining fictional landscapes and histories with the symbolic manipulation of representational photographic imagery (see George, 2002). The post-avant-garde pastiche of postmodernism, which self-consciously approached artistic practice as a means of theorizing art, served to confirm the continuing (gravitational) 'pull' of this tendency towards an approach to creative arts research through practice, and practice through research.

The past and the present (in)tense

With the problematizing of the forms, fields and media of the creative arts which accompanied the postmodernist shift, practice, according to Rosalind Krauss, was 'not defined in relation to a given medium - sculpture - but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms' (1983, p. 41). Rather than being defined by historical precedent and established forms, the contemporary arts might be better understood by examining how individual artists 'found themselves occupying, successively, different places within the expanded field' of the arts (Krauss, 1983, p. 41).

In this view, the logic at work in the shifting trajectories of art practice is not primarily bounded by the previously established creative field, and the

critical work which accompanied that formation, but is driven more by the energy and imperatives of the prevailing broader cultural conditions. The contemporary 'conditions of possibility' in postmodern, and subsequently by what is being termed 'post-human' conditions, may be revealed in the logical structure deployed by the artist in the permutations embedded in the work, or implied through the response of the viewer/spectator/consumer, interacting with the work.

To that extent, the teaching of contemporary approaches to the creative arts has generally ceased to be primarily driven by the inculcation of precedent (historicism), however valuable that may be intrinsically or extrinsically to the development of the arts practitioner, and has tended to include a good deal more of the explorations of the contemporary cultural conditions (of possibility) within which emerging practitioners find themselves. To some extent this seems to apply regardless of discipline, form or function. In a sense it can be seen that the contemporary multidisciplinary character of much teaching of arts practice can be located in transdisciplinary concerns with, say, gender, race, ethnicity and cultural identity, and with history, art, technology and science, as well as within discourses embedded in the tensions between local, national and global positions and influences. Arguably this has both mirrored the concerns and developments already evident within some areas of practice in the contemporary arts, and also helped to drive those tendencies in a broader cultural interventionist sense.

There is no simple pattern to be found around teaching and research in the arts academies and institutes though. There are competing tendencies evident between those teachers who insist upon students being inculcated with the disciplines and attitudes of (high) modernism, and those who insist that students should be 'thrown in at the deep end' of contemporary circumstances. Those subscribing to one tendency fear that the 'others' will merely produce cultural monsters - by either merely imitatively perpetuating the past (known), or blindly wallowing in the incoherence of the present (unknown). Rather than students simply being made familiar with 'the new' as having evolved almost organically from the forms of the past, as Krauss asserted, what does seem to be observable in contemporary approaches to teaching arts practice, as already indicated, is a shift towards a multidisciplinary approach, and to a preoccupation with transdisciplinary concerns. In this way, new practitioners are encouraged to find their own relation to everyday life in the present, and to the culture of the past, which is not exclusively dictated by the established forms and structures evident *within* the discipline area. In the best academic arts programmes, arguably, the developing practitioner is encouraged to grapple both with the discontinuities of contemporary life, and to ponder the similarities within it to the discursive conditions of 'the' past, and *their* past in particular.

The circle of theory and practice

Lorraine Wild writes of contemporary practice as a space where 'individuals improvise and make do' with what is to hand, and 'create their own reality' (1998, p. 51). This kind of everyday life 'creation' involves a 'performance', which is for creative arts professionals 'tactical and not strategic', rather like the difference between knowing a language, and using it expressively. This performative view places *activity* at the centre of the knowledge generated or employed in art practice, and illustrates the ways in which practice not merely directly shapes the contemporary field but also supplements theory in understanding the arts. The activity-centred view helps to establish some of the ways in which art practice decodes everyday life, disrupts disciplinary conventions, and, according to Blauvelt, 'transgresses the professional boundaries and limitations' (1998, p. 75). It allows the research activity of the creative practitioner not only to ask questions *about* work, like a theoretician, but also provides the basis to ask questions *through* work. Blauvelt asserts:

A critical, theoretical disposition helps frame and limit the answers found in research by making them contingent - specific to the historical moment and the particular context from which they emerge; in effect, situated knowledge and timeliness replace objectivity and timelessness. (1998, p. 75)

Practice-based research activity in the creative disciplines can be understood then as being located within a 'third' space, situated between the limits of theory and the limitations of practice. This is where research is bound up with the creative 'act', in a kind of exploratory and transformative encounter, akin to travel. It involves a process of negotiation and exchange, as Salen suggests, where 'the process of making work becomes a notation on connections across, among and between' the artist's experiences (1998, p. 93).

These exploratory, and even transformative views of research in and through practice (and vice versa) reinforce a view of research into creativeness as *processual* or *action*-oriented. Frayling indicates that the nexus between the doing and thinking of research in and through creative practice, of action following reflection, and of reflection which follows action, represents an approach 'where the action is calculated to generate and validate new knowledge or understanding' (1993, p. 4). This project-based approach can be seen as an action-research methodology to the extent that it is engaged upon problem setting and/or problem solving and knowledge generation, as well as with communicating that knowledge. In doing this, it informs the knowledge base of the profession, and through its communication has the possibility of demonstrating a broader cultural contribution. It also has the potential in turn to generate further basic research in/about/through the creative arts.

Creative agency does not occur in a vacuum though. An individual creative 'practice' is itself as much a product of the broader social and cultural, generative (transdisciplinary) schemes it emerges from, as it is (in)formed by the *field* of practice and academic discipline it is dependent upon. But, however susceptible it may be to being critically contextualized as being produced from within the 'culture machine', creative arts practice, like all human agency, cannot be seen as mechanical, 'regulated merely by cause-and-effect forces', as Bogue (1999, p. 88) suggests. That is, it cannot be reduced to a purely machinic causal logic. Mattelart and Mattelart put it: 'The ''mechanical'' and the ''fluid'' are two opposite modes of thought' (1992, p. 48). The 'flows' of creative practice, like all living, are also in some qualitative way products of the individual, conditional, subjective, although not necessarily 'unitary', lived experience. It is part of the aggregate of *being* in the provisional world of meaning, as much as in the unstable material world. Investigating the flows of creative practice therefore calls for flexibility and openness in developing a 'cross-analysis' of both the activity and its outcomes.

Understanding something of the particular qualities of 'action' involved in this kind of research methodology further requires some consideration of the highly individualized qualities of the activity being reported upon.

Turning inside out - subject or object?

Tracking and considering the 'becoming' of creative practice requires an approach susceptible to the differential rhythms of emergent activity. The 'emergent' qualities of practice are based in turn upon the particular decisions and directions taken by the artist within the project, and are determined by the development of the project. In developing something new and unexpected, the 'inner' coherence is not immediately apparent. It is transparent, or better still 'veiled', as Heidegger (1977) put it. Further, this emergent symbolic activity blurs the boundaries between what is professional and what is personal for the artist-researcher. Frayling suggests, creative work is 'as much about autobiography and personal development' as it is about 'communicable knowledge' (1993, p. 5). Hence we need not be afraid of the adoption of a subjective methodology for this task. Media artist Trinh T. Minh-ha has observed that traditional Western science-based academic methodologies prefer the seemingly empirical approach of externalizing all phenomena so that they might be objectified. Such methodologies cause us 'to relate to a situation or to an object as if it is only outside of oneself', rather than trying to also understand a structure 'from within ourselves out'. Trinh speaks of her own art work, and critical work, as inscribing the 'constant flow from the inside out and outside in' (1994, p. 435).

The riskiness of a subjective methodology is knowing where 'to draw that fine line between what is merely individualistic and what may be relevant to

a wider number of people' (Trinh 1994, p. 435), and perhaps explains why it is so infrequently utilized in Western academic contexts. But is such 'groping' about, as Mattelart and Mattelart ask, 'not a virtue when the problem at hand is to open the field of expressivity' (1992, p. 46)? The risk of teetering over the edge of that 'fine line', between purely individual experience and 'communicable knowledge', does not diminish the validity nor the freshness of the approach. In a 'dialogical' approach, one is neither exclusively subjectifyingly inside one's own creative experience, nor objectifyingly looking in from outside the field or territory of work. The art practitioner-researcher is somewhere 'on the boundary, wrestling relationally with the various conditions, inner and outer, practical and theoretical, creative and imitative, biographical and analytical' (Dallow 1998, pp. 42-43).

For the traditionalist researcher, the issue of objectivity may still pose a barrier to validating such a research approach. However, the position of the 'impartial spectator', as the phenomenologist Husserl termed it, of traditional critical, theoretical and/or historical research approaches can be seen much along the lines outlined by Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), as rather like mapping. But this is where an *outsider*, in a foreign landscape, 'compensates for his lack of practical mastery' by the 'use of a model of all possible routes' through this (cultural) landscape. In this way, all practice is seen by the 'impartial spectator' as *spectacle* (Bourdieu 1977, p. 2). So whereas the outsider view reports upon an abstract (historical/theoretical) space, the artist-researcher undertakes a specific route through their 'practised' cultural space/s, reflecting upon the practical particularities of the space in which the creative 'journey' was *actually* made. Both vantage points are valuable in gaining a 'truer' understanding of what is at stake.

The insider's view, in *re*-searching the creative journey, might be seen as akin to Zizek's notion of being 'objectively subjective' (1997, p. 119). The objectively subjective observational position can convey something of the (subjectivity of) creative experience in relation to the specifics of a particular (objective) body of work. Although this may seem somewhat 'socially abstracted', to use Watney's term (1982, p. 156), it would be erroneous to think of a practice-based creative arts research methodology as being wholly predicated upon Romanticism's notions of 'free-spirited' originality emanating always from somewhere *outside* of 'conventionalized' culture.

This kind of action approach to research through practice may draw in part upon a cultural studies perspective in framing its context. This broader perspective might take the artist-researcher beyond their immediate specific disciplinary field of activity, and their concerns with the aesthetic or formal properties *of* the work, or with content or motif. The approach would enable the practitioner to take in something of the contemporary

existential conditions which she or he inhabits. It can also facilitate constructing a report upon the contemporary conditions which made the creative 'journey' possible at all, and how the social, cultural themes in these conditions have helped shape the work.

Performing art

It can be said that engaging with the kinds of symbolic activity involved in the sensory and conceptual experiences and expressions of the arts through a programme of study via the focalizing point of where the objects of such activity are generated involves both looking outwards and inwards. It entails the recording and analysis of the movement from outside to inside, and in turn inside to outside. It would include reporting upon the development of the sensory and conceptual elements of/in the work. This may help locate creative work within its own 'structures of thought'. It might also attempt to situate the 'ensemble of practical steps' involved in doing the work within the broader context of contemporary cultural and social relations. This kind of consideration decentres the art object/performance and emphasizes the creative process, the *performative* quality of all art and culture.

Focusing upon creative practice then does not represent a return to a version of pure 'aestheticism'. The approach allows for the artist-researcher to explore the borders between their art work and the various relations to the broader social, historical, technological and cultural spectrum within which the work arises. It allows for reporting upon the processes by which they take something of the irreducible complexity of reality, and transform it into particular forms, by the application of knowing-doing (*savoir-faire*). We might think of this as trying to locate a specific instance of creativity in the arts within a loosely conceived, notional three-dimensional matrix, comprised of the conceptual (*x*), the material (*y*) and the social (*z*) planes, or spaces, which the work occupies. It is the prerogative of others to attempt to extrapolate this instance of contemporary practice into broader critical and or interpretative frameworks. This in turn may become part of the theoretical or critical ground from which further creative work might emerge.

Although this approach brings 'reflection' closer to practice, it is not intended to subsume practice within theory, or research. The aim is not to demystify creativity to the extent of trying to 'think it away', so much as to illuminate a particular view of it. Practice-based research offers an intermediary intellectual space which facilitates the exchange of ideas between theory, analysis and practice. It does not offer a fixed methodology or set of procedures, any more than some well-established fields of research do. Anthropology (the study of 'otherness', 'elsewhere'), for instance, has had to reinvent itself as a contemporary discipline to some extent to take

account of the postcolonial conditions it finds itself in. And whereas in many traditional forms of research the aim seems to be collecting or noting *identical* characteristics between situations and contexts, often at the expense of the consideration of *differences*, in the creative arts we are critically inclined to seek out divergences more than similarities. We are interested in originality, or at least points of departure into the previously unknown or uncharted, rather than in patterns or congruence. As Tzvetan Todorov asserts of the new approaches to research in the human sciences which take account of postmodern theory - the 'very idea of differences among society and individuals implies qualities in common' (2001, p. ix).

The study of the expanding and changing fields of the creative arts can only benefit from the kinds of mapping and analysing of new trajectories which retraverse the old, and venture off into new territories of practice. Considered introspection, in relation to creativeness in art practice, offers the opportunity to try to understand the artist's way of engaging in an original way with their physical, cultural and psychic raw materials in the present.

Closing/s

There is nothing definitive in the description of a practice-based research approach outlined here, any more than there can be a definitive view of what research is in any case. What does appear to be clear is that examining contemporary art practice in this way is based upon observational descriptions and operational analyses by the artist which are subjective in nature, although the objects of those observations which they produced are empirical. It does not aim at logical proof of a hypothesis, as such, but rests upon the symbolic, evocative and at times intuitive thinking of art practice, by tracking the conceptual movements as well as the material processes of the given form. The anthropologist and narratologist Tzvetan Todorov says of literary thought, much as might be said of the contribution of the arts more generally to the field of knowledge: 'What is expressed through stories or poetic forms escapes the stereotypes that dominate the thought of our time and the vigilance of our own moral censure, which operates above all on assertions we manage to make explicit' (2001, p. xi).

Although art may be seen as being about repetition (of past forms) as much as it is about difference (novelty/newness), the way that contemporary art practice relates to prior activity, and indeed to the notion of the past itself, is not via the historian's methodology of clarifying *meaning*. The examination of 'how an individual develops his or her representations' offers not merely an opportunity for empirical observation, according to French anthropologist Augé, it is 'a methodological necessity' (1999, p. 94). This is as true in the creative arts as it is in anthropology. 'The past', much

as the relation to 'the real', in contemporary arts practice, serves not so much a referential purpose, but in a sense an illustrative one, operating as a conceptual category to help us understand *contemporaneity*. It offers a space within which we may confront our (self-)conscious existence, temporally.

As the established forms of culture hybridize, or are nostalgically brutally reasserted, and older social categories break down, the examination of an individual approach to arts practice offers a micro-observational opportunity to examine a specific response to contemporary conditions. Augé (1999, p. 94) asserts that 'ours is an age where intermediary rhetorics are becoming disorganized or collapsing altogether'. Practice-based approaches to creative arts research attempt to 'capture' or *represent* something of the creative responses to those transformations, and how they help to reshape the fields of human enterprise. The focus upon the individual art practitioner as a researcher in the kinds of practice-based approaches outlined, or at least alluded to, here, reflects a shift which itself represents the transformations which have been occurring elsewhere.

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