

Smart Art: The mindful practitioner–researcher as knowledge worker.

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Abstract:

This paper contends that the arts and design are improved by critical exercise as mindful practice. The creative practitioner, as methodological inventor, spawns new forms and patterns of research and practice. Their research mixes artistic, cultural, scholarly and industrial concerns in the experimental arena of the studio. These practices can become the established excellences of tomorrow as research comes alive.

In this paper I am contending that the arts and design are improved by critical exercise as mindful practice. Mindful practice positions the creative artist or designer as an aware and reflective practitioner within a paradigm of methodological inventiveness where new forms and patterns of research and practice are spawned. I see practice-led research as a mix of artistic, cultural, scholarly and industrial concerns, where the studio becomes an experimental arena for creative interactions and a space for critical analysis and renewal that enables a deeper understanding of artists' work processes. I will argue that these practices can become the established excellences of tomorrow as research comes alive.

In briefly exploring the possibilities of research for the studio-based art and design practitioner I recognise that the nature of art and design practice, as well as the influences that may shape any activity, are disparate and wide ranging. This poses a need to focus research on the experience and concomitant knowledge of the practitioner as a significant source of information. By focusing on the experiential knowledge of the practitioner the complexity of pertinent issues that may make up practice-led research in any situation are included as integral and essential aspects of the argument.

Notions of research in the arts and design are not new. However, until recently methods were situated mainly within the fields of arts or design history, and used historical or

semiotic methods in the exploration of the practice of others. Studio practitioners have long claimed that their practice is research, yet have not generally articulated or mapped the investigative processes they use to allow their practice to be seen as research. For, as Jeanette Winterson (1996:59) claims, ‘Our lives are elsewhere. Art finds them’. Yet sculptor Alex de Cosson observes: ‘Except of course when you are the artist. Then art *is* your real life. So is research’ (2001:np).

Similarly, when speaking of theatre studies Peter Eckersall argues for a deeper understanding of the work processes of artists, presenting performance as research

via creative development and live performance events and/in combination with traditional research in the form of discourse and publication. With participants working to establish relationships between disciplines and fields of practice we ... developed research outcomes of benefit to each field. This ensures the integrity of research within fields of praxis as well as working strategically between them.

(Campus Review June 26–July 2, 14)

This approach supports practitioners who seek to know about and apply research to their daily professional work in ways that differ from, but can be underpinned by, mainstream approaches such as ethnography, autobiography, narratology, etc. Their processes involve the employment and exploration of methodologies with engaging qualities that ‘foster the development of professional thinking and practice’ (Dodds and Hart 2001:2). This reflects a new scholarship located within practice that reveals the reality of practical theorising (McNiff and Whitehead 2002:145). In this new scholarship, theories are generated about the practice from inside the practice.

Concepts about practice-led research present us with ways of working, investigating and theorising what it is to practice in the studio as researcher. Practitioner research can be defined as critical reflective investigative praxis which could include practicing theory, practice into theory, practical theory, theory into practice, theorizing practice, theoretical practice.

As Griselda Pollock sees it

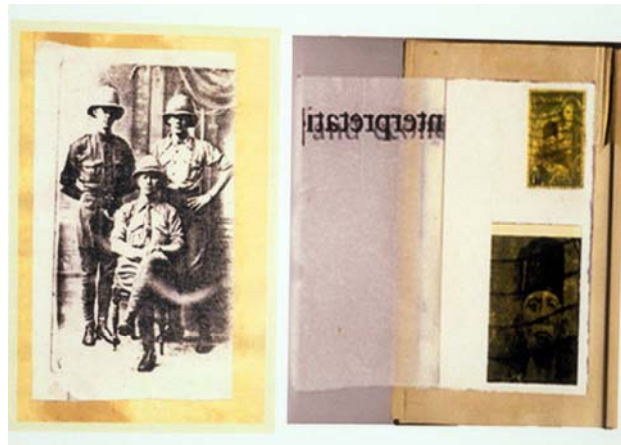
There is no practice without an informed theory, even if it is not fully recognised or acknowledged, and theories are only realised in practices. Methodology only becomes apparent, that is different from the normalised

procedures of the discipline, when a different set of questions is posed and demands new ways of being answered (1996:13).

For me, practitioner research is hybrid practice. It finds its base mainly in qualitative research, although its practices blur the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture and reflect the complex dynamics involved in the processes of artistic practice. This is a process that metamorphoses experience into practice, where the practitioner researcher seeks to uncover, record, interpret and position, from an insider's perspective and experience, the processes they use within the context of professional contemporary practices in the field. The resulting stories become portraits of life, placed in historical, social and cultural contexts and shaped through processes such as autobiography as self-portraiture, to mirror experience. In other words, this is about theorising practice.

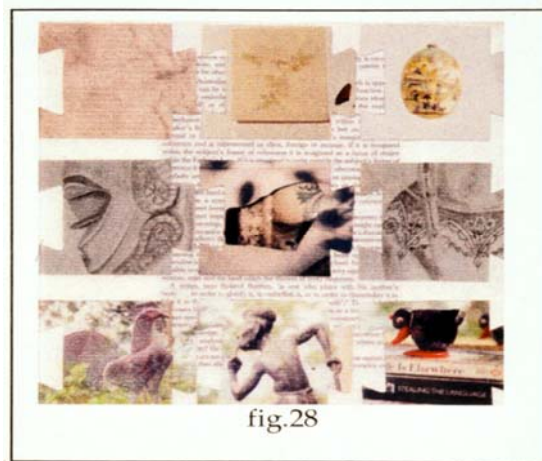
Artist Shelagh Morgan (2000) writes:

The conceptual background to the project was based on my childhood memories ... my history locates me as the product of a colonial ideology. Throughout the work I look at my cultural identity in a series of visual autobiographical works. My intention was to produce a visual account of the process of negotiation between self and place that is phrased within the context of post-coloniality. (2000:5)



Interpretation of culture.

The research approach I have taken is based on the idea of utilising personal visual material as if it were primary research material. Through an interdisciplinary approach I have explored the potential of the artistic process as a form of autobiographical extension.



Memory Objects: Telling Ground.

The work I have produced over the last twelve years has moved from a reasonably objective position to one of conscious subjectivity. This could be described as a shift from approaching the subject from a supposedly universal reference point to one of using self to approach the determining forces of such referencing points (p.36)



Home was an island.

For Shelagh Morgan, the relationship between studio practice and theory is meaning rich. Its dichotomies resonate within the field as an arena for presentations of credible and compelling stories about processes for exploring the aesthetic, empirical (experienced based) and ethical dimensions of what it is to practice in the studio as artist, musician, writer, performer, dramatist, dancer, etc. For such people:

The art is the content, the stance, the delivery and the performance while the research operates in the preparation and discoveries of the 'findings', whether intended or serendipitous. Both tend to lie beneath the surface or hover behind the scenes but at times, fortunately, scramble to the

foreground. Art and research... can be said to contain parts of each other, and in praxis, form a kind of synthesis (de Cosson ,2002:12).

Thus for the practitioner research becomes a process of border crossing that recognises that practice in the arts and design, by its very nature, challenges convention and is underpinned by structure and improvisation, order and creativity, experience and intuition. I contend that practice is improved by critical exercise as mindful practice, and my approach draws upon qualitative research methods and the perspectives and the discourses of social science inquiry.

Contemporary conditions surrounding the notion of research and the disciplines of arts and design in Australia provide background for my exploration of this issue. While not claiming universality, it is possible that these conditions can be juxtaposed to meet the needs of researchers in the arts and design across many cultural and institutional contexts. The resulting pathways can recognise and conceptualise the autobiographical nature of studio-based research in our fields and suggest a multi-faceted research approach that is eclectic and in-keeping with the reality and purposefulness of our diverse practices and experiences. Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997:21) tells us that this process ‘represents the breaking of many boundaries, including the perceptual boundaries between experience and representation, the temporal boundaries between past and present, and the cultural boundaries between individual and humankind’.

Public artist and textiles designer Jill Kinnear (2000) makes the point that (visual) research deals with and intensifies elements of research and language that have always been part of the practice of an artist. It is to do with creating intentional meaning through a process of rigorous planning, documentation, interpretation, analysing and storying. So, by using a process of re-search, we look again, in a new way, with an insider’s gaze, in an effort to create new knowledge or fresh ways to view the world. Regardless of the methods used, research, according to Alex de Cosson (2002), ‘is the discovery, developmental, restorative, evaluative function of praxis’. It is a process that involves a blend of artistic resonance, literary principles and scientific rigour.

The use of bricolage as an approach places the researcher’s discourse and practices within another space, between practitioner and product, producer and audience, theory and practice, so that it becomes the space for reflection, contemplation, revelation. As a

practice-led researcher, the bricoleur is positioned within the borderlands, crossing between time and place, personal practice and the practice of others, exploring the history of the discipline and its changing cultural contexts. Bricolage enables the collaging of experience, involving issues of knowledge and understanding, technology, concept, percept, skill, and cultural and discipline experience. In the process, the bricoleur appropriates aspects of research methodologies that best suit the task at hand, travelling between various research disciplines in an attempt to build the most appropriate bridge between aesthetics and experience, through processes of production, documentation and interpretation. The bricoleur is seeking to explore, reveal, inform and, perhaps, inspire by illuminating aspects of insider praxis within their field.

The processes of practice-led research are underpinned by a constant emphasis on the ongoing and critical dialogues between studio and theory, and process and product, which are crucial for the practitioner researcher. The rigour and discipline of creating art or design is emphasised together with the imagination, skill and foresight that enriches the research of the bricoleur. This, perhaps, reflects a contemporary postmodern impulse to reconnect with the historical antecedents of today and re-embodiment them. However, as Abbs notes (1994:223), an individual needs also to have a sense of themselves as part of a wider community as well as some mastery of the techniques involved in the execution of an art (or design) form if the discipline is to be fully apprehended or experienced. So our practitioner-researcher-bricoleur may develop a process of looking more closely at the practices of other practitioners in their field while identifying avenues of appropriation from a variety of qualitative research methods.

Like Peter Abbs (1994:223) I recognise that experience lies:

neither exclusively with the individual (it is not self-expression) nor with the culture (it is not indoctrination) but in the vast, conscious and unconscious web of categories, metaphors, narratives, arguments, icons, interpretations, that draw them all together creating ever new possibilities of thinking, imagining, speculating, apprehending and judging.

By sharing our practice, critiquing and learning from one another, I believe we are developing new forms of theory that are firmly grounded in the experienced reality of people's lives (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002:147). As well, Dodds and Hart (2001:168) recognise the necessary and enabling role that knowledge of a variety of research approaches has played in the development of innovative work. This knowledge is

needed as a basis from which to create unique and divergent ways forward, because we cannot break with tradition unless we know the tradition. The task, therefore, is to show how we can draw upon established traditions, adapting and moulding them to suit new purposes and research questions. In this way techniques and ideas can be appropriated and fashioned from traditional methodologies.

Some of my colleagues and students have argued that 'set' or traditional methodologies are constraining. However, I argue that knowledge of their processes enables us to identify and trace the methodological territories as points of departure from which our innovative approaches can be developed.

There are many established research methods that we can appropriate, adapt and (re)invent. So, in my view, the introduction of a diversity of ways to conceptualise and construct research methods is a central aspect of learning that underpins the development of new methodological approaches in the light of the individual's questions, learning and representational styles. This is predicated on the belief that when the person behind the research is made visible other practitioner researchers can see how an individual's purposes, personal theories, experience, strengths, uncertainties and commitment play a part in the methodological choices that they make. As mindful practitioners we are challenged to recognise our roles as knowledge workers by sharing our praxis. If in so doing we can build a resource kit of emerging and relevant methodologies from which researchers can select, adapt and modify, the processes of our research outcomes are more likely to serve a creative and liberating function. If they are also offered as examples of approaches that have been developed and used for other purposes, times and contexts, then we can study established methodologies from their situated value, so that lessons can be learned for our own research (Dodds and Hart 2001:168).

My research resource kit might draw upon some of the following:

Processes of ethnography are relevant because they are underpinned by notions that abstract discourse is of little use without an understanding of immediate experience directly related to us. The purpose of ethnographic fieldwork is to uncover social, cultural and normative patterns of aspects of the world in which we practice. It is situational and is thus mostly inductive in nature. The language of the ethnographer

refers to actors and actions, it questions how something is done and what cultural resources, stocks of knowledge, routines and strategies are brought to bear, and how the actors collectively negotiate and achieve social order, understanding and working relations.

Autobiography is also useful as a qualitative application that enables us to ‘address the important aspects of influence and meaning and use these to effectively collect the sort of data needed to investigate and exhibit personal knowledge’ (Hawke, 1996:33), or as Smith puts it: a special case of life-writing... It gives voice to people (1994:288). Autobiography is *self-research*, *self-portrait*, *self-narrative*. It links art and life (Stewart 1996:38). Its methods lead us to address aspects about the artist by the artist, as a personal investigation of the self. Its processes enable us to apprehend artistic practice by revealing personal experience as the basis of research. Depicting artistic practice in the context of life stories recognises how influential the context may be as an important element of describing the complexity of recording lived experiences. Autobiographical method positions the practice-led researcher as the principal researcher of their own artistic endeavours by attending to issues which give meaning to their thoughts and actions as artists (Smith 1994:289).

Feminist sociology can be used to sustain the analysis of epistemological assumptions that underlie differing ways of knowing the social and understanding women’s experience (includes self-reflective process). Its methods and ways of seeing hold consciousness-raising as a central concept and include the need to constantly and reflexively attend to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life. The process is used to challenge the norm of objectivity by positioning personal or grounded experience as an opportune context within which to examine women’s worlds. Its research is designed to provide a vision of the future as well as a structural picture of the present.

As a science of cultural description (Burns in Stewart 1994:141), the adaption of narratological methods offers another useful and naturalistic research strategy. These stories of experience can be used to build a dynamic picture of our life experiences that influence what we do in the studio as researchers. Narrative methods, with a focus upon how people know, provide a way to understand actions in the art world. The resulting

neonarratives construct new stories of praxis that differ from those that have gone before.

Many of these methods can come under the banner of Personal Experience Methods, where the researcher's experience is intermingled with the narrative and material is selected as a constructive act dependent on the intentions of researcher. Using personal experience methods involves the creation of a research setting in which text is generated, or a story is situated, within the context of a larger personal life story. Processes of narrative and storytelling are used to bring together experience through the epistemological values of formalism and reductionism. This assumes that experience is both temporal and storied. Personal Experience Methods assume that the study of experience is the study of life, looking at epiphanies, rituals, everyday actions, metaphors and routines.

As artist-educator Rita Irwin (2002: 6) notes:

Through attention to memory, identity, reflection, meditation, story telling, interpretation and representation practitioners who share their lived experiences are searching for new ways to understand their practice as artists who research. They are ... topographers representing their questions, practices, emergent understandings, and creative analytical texts... Their work is both science and art but it is closer to art and as such, they seek to enhance meaning rather than certainty. They visualize, create, imagine, represent, picture, install and collage their reflections, interpretations and actions in ways that complement and/or disrupt their written texts.

I argue that the arts are improved by critical exercise as mindful practice. I have suggested that as creative practitioners we develop paradigms of methodological inventiveness using our studios as laboratories of praxis where critical analysis enables a deeper understanding of our work processes. In short, I think our disparate and wide-ranging practices offer us a rich resource from which to develop living forms of theory.

Research is concerned with ideas, and sharing them is fundamental to the advancement of our fields. Yet many of us avoid writing our practice. However, writing is fundamental to creative research and is an intricate part of any practice of research. Its process enables us to reflect and share outcomes through a partnership between practice and writing by offering an alternative dimension to nourish and expand practice while communicating with and positioning colleagues as readers. Indeed Page (1999:116-7)

likens the process of writing to a ‘choreographer working with language in physical space.’

Writing by artists and designers can become part of a parallel art practice that confers our praxis as a thinking process intrinsically involved in methods of inquiry. We can be smart by adding to and building on the knowledge bases of our fields, but we need to recognise that writing through practice is an important and mindful way to increase our stock of critical explanations and theoretical discourses.

The artist Lisa Anderson’s (2003) description of aspects of the topography of her practice-led research serves to model her praxis.

I began informal research several years ago on the intentional and unintentional effects of what I term as mega-events on the design of public space; its perception and understanding. Beginning with a stray thought that occurred after looking closely at some of the reactions to my own public art works. I was interested in the ways that people remembered these specific art events, long after the lights had gone, the sound disappeared and the installation was taken down.



Writing the City 1: Fictional Cities.

For *Writing the City 4*, during 2000 and 2001, as a part of the *Festival of Ideas*, I wrote in fluorescent paint the word MINE in block style outline font across the façade of the Brisbane Powerhouse Centre for the Live Arts. The final project lasted over the four days of the festival. I invited approximately 30 people to join me on the wall to write their story of place onto the façade within the glowing outline. This artwork was highly

performative as the writers abseiled across the façade in front of crowds of people. It was also on the evening news and was the subject of live radio broadcasts. This gigantic and dynamic drawing was about place and story.



Writing the City 4.

The creation of artwork as both method and outcome for research is often difficult and requires much more time than I seem ever to have ... positions me as the artist scoping the creative involvement within the political structures and the physical building surfaces that are the breathing skin of the public places of the City. This type of public project leads to the creation of its own myths and stories ... a desire to create artworks that explore the rub of public space against public politic through walking those spaces.



Writing the City

The smart artist and designer who continues to work in the studio, informed by theory and reflection, will hopefully become the super practitioner of the future who

contributes value added, informed and powerful models for praxis in their fields. At the end of the day they will emerge from the studio to create and model best practice by consciously constructing praxis in their fields to a new level as mindful practitioners who are different, better and more articulate than those who have gone before.

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Biographical statement

Robyn Stewart is Associate Professor in Visual Arts and Director of Research for the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. She co-ordinates the Visual Arts Honours and Masters programs and teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses in aesthetics, art theory and practitioner research. Robyn's research explores issues of creative research praxis; the role of the arts in cultural brokerage and the construct of neo-narratives.