

Giving up on practice-as-research

[Slide 1. Blank]

[Slide 2. Giving up on practice-as-research]

This presentation was going to be called **Slide 3. On risk, speaking plainly and dancing with the dead**. Indeed, of these two titles – one about practice-as-research and the other about risk and dancing with the dead – I feel a little disappointed that I'm not going to talk about the latter.

[Slide 4. blank]

But you know how things are; you are asked for a title and topic months in advance. At that stage I wasn't even sure I'd still be alive in March. Who can plan for such things? Why can't Roehampton lower its expectations of academics? This is what Andy Field – director of Forest Fringe Festival – once said:

*When they asked me if I could come and speak
I said I would
And then I made up something to talk about
And as I imagine you have all done at some point in your life
And if you haven't you almost certainly will
I made up a paragraph of text introducing something that hadn't been
invented yet*

— Andy Field (2012)

Actually, maybe this presentation could be about assumptions. I think I might be in the business of questioning assumptions. At least, I'd like to *start* a business that questions assumptions. Here is, for example, a list of questions about artistic projects that are designed to test what we might assume about them. I'd like to call them **[Slide 5.] questumptions**.

How long should they take? Who are they for? How much or little money do they require to get made? Who really pays for them? Who could the owners be? Can the projects be given away? What if creativity is a red herring? What if they are unimportant to everyone? What value do they have? Can it be more ephemeral? How small might they be? How fast can they be made? How many can be made in a day? A week? A year? How big or small can a team be? Whose work can be stolen in order for your own work to get made? How long can it remain unclear? Who is the Other? How ferociously direct can you be in your ambition?

Actually, perhaps this presentation is less about assumptions, and more about diversions. I seem to be easily diverted. That's why I buy distraction free software (**[Slide 6.] Ommwriter** is my particular favourite, you should try it): I use distraction-free software in order to create the blankest of slates from which to launch into sublime distraction.

I hope you are not so easily diverted. Are you? At least not yet. I promise not to speak on your behalf.

But really – cross my heart and hope to die – I’m going to talk about things that are related to what has come to be known as practice-as-research.

In the weeks leading up to this evening I’ve tried to test my own assumptions about what practice-as-research might be, what and who it might be for, and if indeed it has any value. I’ll do my best to avoid diversions.

Slide 7.

The reason we claim that the academic research that is produced by the artist community is not impactful is because it does not conform to their community values, and therefore risks not producing anything that is relevant or important to them.

Michael Biggs and Daniela Büchler (2012, 2)

Biggs and Büchler suggest that practice-as-research is research because it conforms to “to the conventions of academic research” [Slide 8. (talk about **damned with faint praise**)]. But if, as they suggest, it is not producing work that is relevant or important to the artistic community, then, [Slide 9. **Houston**] we have a problem.

When I teach practice-as-research at MA level, I suggest (very early on) that the module is based on the assumption that the quality of the work the students make will be better as a consequence of engaging in a research-driven process. What I do not say is that I would also hope that the art works developed might somehow speak beyond the way they function as artistic products; that they would cease to be self-referential. These are two potentially powerful (and not unrelated) imperatives: [Slide 10. **quality and relevance**].

There is, though, little if any evidence (or few examples) that this happens. Mostly the [Slide 11. “ ”] *important* work is somehow feeding back into the practice-as-research system. My PhD is certainly an example of this kind of feeding back. We are experts in reflexivity. Or cannibalism. Or in finding food to feed ourselves so we can create more food to feed ourselves a little bit more.

In 1987 the astronomer Carl Sagan wrote of the vitality of “an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs”: [Slide 12. “**the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us and at the same time a great openness to new ideas**” Carl Sagan, in (Popova 2012).

I like the tension Sagan expresses, but it’s clear to me that in practice-as-research we are simply not sceptical enough. We seem to just latch onto anything and everything, grabbing ideas willy-nilly. The door is never closed. We don’t know how or when to make a stand, or indeed what it is that we might stand for.

Of course, this lack of scepticism is quite wonderful in many respects, but surely we need doubt? What if the world doesn't at all fit into our vision for it? How might we adjust our vision such that we are able to respond to what is there, rather than stuffing our hopes, desires and projected fantasies into or onto the philosophical *fashionistas*. [Slide 13. (Or perhaps that's vice-versa)].

There is a sense amongst practice-as-researchers that, as Paul Magee at the University of Canberra has said, provided we follow what is described as a valid method, we can say anything we like (Magee 2012, 7).

I find this outrageous, and more than a little true.

Here are five essential (or perhaps basic) questions that practice-as-research is still tossing around. Perhaps they are familiar to you.

[Slide 14.]

1. Is doing practice-as-research different from doing artistic work?
2. What might be known as a consequence of practice-as-research?
3. Should people involved have to write as well as produce art?
4. If so, what is the relationship between the writing and the *arting*?
5. So what?

As things go, it's not the longest of to-do lists. I suspect it's more manageable than most of our email inboxes. Speaking of which – do you use your inbox as a de facto to-do list?

I wonder if these are the right questions though?

[Slide 15. On practice]

[Slide 16. God I'm tired of the word practice]

My father – Ian Graham Ellis [Slide 17. image] – had a veterinary practice. This practice existed in the back part of quite a large house in a tiny town close to the bottom of the North Island of New Zealand. He was the only vet in town; I guess you'd call that a monopoly. The surgery was filled with cages and tables – glistening with antiseptic – and in this space, my father did his job of being a vet. People would turn up – at any hour (you know how people are with sick dogs, sheep, cats) – and he would do what he could to do what vets do, to do the things that make so many young children say, “When I grow up I want to be a vet”. My mother – Gabrielle Anne Eastwood [Slide 18. image] – trained as a nurse (for humans), would assist Dad; that is, when she wasn't busy with her more difficult to substantiate (or get recognition for) *mother(ing) practice*. At other times, people would call Dad on the phone – five short digits [Slide 19. 83560] – and he would drive off to farms further out in the country. This was normally when the animals were too big to fit in the back of a car. Cows are big animals: he had protective plastic gloves that went up to his shoulders.

I have a dance practice [Slide 20. image]. Some of you might know that. I muddle around in the studio pretty much every day, and things get busy as projects take shape. It is, however, fair to say that people don't often call me – or turn up at my door – to ask me if I might dance for them. [Slide 21. But I like the sound of this]. [Slide 22. And you'd be very welcome].

It's absurd to imagine that artists have some kind of dibs on the word practice to the extent that what is increasingly the most common method [Slide 23. if indeed it can be called that] for doing what we hope is research [Slide 24. if indeed it can be called that] is known as practice-as-research (or one of its variants). Indeed, practice is precisely the thing that artists have in common with other forms of scholarship and research. Here's Paul Magee again: [Slide 25. "all science and scholarship is validated in terms of practice" (Magee 2012, 4)].

Even if I relegate my thinking to the verb form of the word practise – as in [I'm going to practise] – it's downright arrogant (or, at the very least self-congratulatory) to imagine that I can distinguish myself from (say) a lowly dance anthropologist, or even the world's finest biochemist, by saying that 'I am a practitioner'. What? And they *aren't*?

The situation is, really, rather bizarre, and we appear to now be stuck with a word – practice – that is so broad and general as to render it powerfully imprecise. [Slide 26. Or useless]. No wonder even the practice Queen [Slide 27. image] herself Deborah Hay has started asking, 'is there a better word?' [Slide 28. (or words to that effect)]. We – as in academics – ripped it from practicing artists in the first place, and have now so overused it that its efficacy has become a little like the overuse of antibiotics in medicine. What might have once been hailed as a remarkable cure-all has started to nurture highly resistant super-bugs.

I can imagine the breeding of powerful zombies – some kind of crazed offspring of the detritus of our infatuation with practice. Call them [Slide 29.] *zombices*, as they roll through town using words (in frightening guttural tones of course) like [Slide 30.] "method" and [Slide 31.] "emergence" and [Slide 32.] "practitioner". They are bound to mutate as well (isn't that always the case?).

[Slide 33. Getting back on track].

The thing is, practice is a word that should hold no currency, and yet it does in the arts world, and it does amongst those of us who are practice-as-researchers, and it does amongst those of us who teach choreography and dance technique.

I think it also harks back to – or smacks of – a rather tired hierarchy in which practitioners believe themselves to be at the top of some imaginary (and fairly unimportant) tree. I feel it in the professional dance world and I feel it in my own University in which the practice staff often seem like the 'cool kids' compared with the theory staff. [Slide 34. Pause for slightly appalled or knowing reaction]. Or maybe that's just me.

Don't get me wrong. I like hierarchies. They make things happen. They allow power to be manifest, wielded, received, absorbed, challenged and disrupted.

I'm shaking off my tendency towards appeasement and equivocation.

As a slight aside, I've started to use the word 'training' more and more as an alternative. I like how sports keep challenging the way things should be done – they are sceptical about tradition – and I like that the word is much more difficult to noun-a-fy. You have to do some slightly gnarly Englishing work, as in “I have a training system”. Or something. But it also captures the ongoing-ness of the work, and the sense that what is at stake is preparation, attentiveness, and readiness. In creating the best possible conditions for what is about to happen (be that choreography, or dancing or whatever). I am in training. It holds discipline, rigour, boredom, consciousness and planning, flexibility/adaptability. Ambition, desire, will ... all the goddam good ones.

Here's an authority, Olympic Champion Michael Johnson

[Slide 35. Michael Johnson audio].

[Slide 36. Aretha Franklin]

Here's Mårten Spångberg to have a last word on this practice thing. I've never met Mårten, but I would imagine he doesn't mind having the last word. Sometimes I swear he looks at my blog and thinks, here's something juicy and large to lob a few grenades at.

Quote:

*But shit we were wrong, we were so wrong, there is one monster left and this creature is goddamn Royal. Yes, it's the one Hollywood doesn't even dare glance at sideways. You, might have guessed, it's the leftover after all other conceptually oriented protocols have been exhausted. Oh yes, practice based choreography. I can write it but I avoid saying it, and every time I'm forced to utter the words I floss – I do, I promise. Practice based choreography – it oozes of dark putrefaction, its stench so foul that “The Walking Dead” smells like a florist. ...
Fuck practice, let's get our hands dirty – let's celebrate conceptually oriented choreography. The body is dead long live the body, let's choreograph. (Spångberg 2013).*

[Slide 37. silence]

2 minute break

[Slide 38. On research]

And what of the word research? It's kind of being appropriated by the professional arts community. What a strange exchange. We'll give you the word *practice*, as long as you let us knock the word *research* into a few residency and arts council applications.

[Slide 39. The word research is nearly as bad as the word practice]

Sure, it might be that the term *research* has in part been appropriated by dance professionals from the world of design – as in *research* and development – but I’ve seen those business cards and websites belonging to practitioners, and they slip the research word in there quite often.

Nevertheless, I suspect that Donald Schön’s comment back in 1992 still stands. There is, he said, [Slide 40.] “a radical separation of the world of the academy from the world of practice, according to which the academy holds a monopoly on research” Schön, cited in (Brook 2012, 4).

Perhaps the theft of research by arts practitioners has simply not gone far enough? What if the terms and conditions of research in the arts became so embedded in the ways artists discuss, plan and execute their work that questions of epistemology became exhausted? Or no longer of value?

In other words, the Academy’s monopoly on the term would be compromised. Talk about idealism.

Mind you, maybe the University is a good place for artists to taste questions about knowledge, and risk, and research. I’m not sure. But Universities cannot, and should not, hold some kind of rights to these experiences. How might we create different kinds of economies so we do not fall into the trap of productivity, and of modes of production that are less about making art, and more about fitting that art into research agendas? How do we resist kowtowing to the madness of the STEM dance?

[Slide 41. video of me doing STEM dance]

It’s telling that not only is most practice-as-research concerned with epistemological questions – the relationship between creative practice and knowledge, but that it also calls into question how Universities quantify knowledge as research (Brook 2012, 1). Remember that first basic practice-as-research question: [Slide 42.] *Is doing practice-as-research different from doing artistic work?* This question lies at the heart of the challenge to epistemological systems. If there were no difference between making works of art in the University and in the professional context, then there are no *ways of knowing* peculiar to works of art generated in the University.

At the same time, there has been what Paul Magee describes as an “epochal shift” in the “fetishization of research products for the supposed sakes of efficiency and distributive justice” (Magee 2012, 2). In other words, to suck at the teat of Academia means labelling whatever we do research – come hell or high water. In 1997, Australian musician Malcolm Gillies gave a keynote address in which he discussed how art might be a form of research. He said, [Slide 43.] “if it were not for our ever-deepening funding crisis I doubt we would be concerned with these, often ridiculous, questions” (Gillies, cited in Magee 2012, 2).

Magee goes further, and suggests that art *got on the books as research* by way of the exegesis that normally accompanies the artwork. He argues that this has compromised the quality of the artwork, and largely withdrawn it from judgement. It is also “why there is so little love for the thing” (Magee 2012, 6) – the thing being the exegesis.

I don’t say these things lightly. There’s a lot at stake here. To question the nature of research is to question the [Slide 44.] “political nature of the definitions and funding of research with institutions” (MacDowall 2012, 5). And this politics of knowledge – and its influence across the academic gamut from funding to graduate career prospects (MacDowall 2012) – is at the heart of the compromises that artists make when we label our work as research.

What are the ways in which I might safely participate in this unethical game? [Slide 45. It is unethical because it is based on the privileging of knowledge production]. Or resist it? Perhaps even to balk the system; to reinvent; to not compromise; to stop playing the game; to bite the hand that feeds me; to not fit. What values might I hold up? What will prevail? Who are these works of art for?

It would appear that out of three words – practice, as, and research – I am now only left with the word *as* – a simple word that expresses “a comparison of equivalence” (OED). Shit.

But what if I were to abandon the term practice as research? Are there viable (or non-viable) alternatives that reflect not only the things I do as an artist, but also my role as a teacher and academic? Or is this simply rearranging deck chairs? [Slide 46. probably]

[Slide 47.] **Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me**

As a victim of bullying as a young teenager, I know this to be utter crap.

I think I most like the term ‘artistic research’. But is the research part needed? Do I deserve to be distinguished from other artists by calling myself an artistic researcher?

She does science therefore she is a scientist. She makes works of art therefore she is an artist. He looks after animals therefore he is a veterinarian.

[Slide 48. Artist] [Slide 49. Anthropologist] [Slide 50. Historian] [Slide 51. Scientist] [Slide 52. Vet] [Slide 53. blank]

Each comes with sets of assumptions about what is produced; there are conversations about what is most current or important; there are arguments about approaches that might best fit; ideas change over time. These discussions are not centred around – or dependent on – the Academy. They are placed in the world, and are in dialogue with the world

[Slide 54.] Questions, experience and mystery

[Slide 55. This is where it all starts to get ridiculous.]

One of the key questions in traditional [Slide 56. Ha!] practice-as-research is what it is that is known as a consequence of doing it; but what if this is the wrong problem? In other words, if artistic research is stripped of the assumption that we ought to be addressing questions, then perhaps we are freed from the container of knowledge-building and can get back to the work of doing what it is that artists do.

[Slide 57. If a concept can be captured clearly in academic writing as a question, what would be the point of making art with it?

– Lachlan MacDowall (2012, 4)

What if, in the context of artists developing and making work within the academy, we were to abandon (research) questions altogether as a flawed idea and inappropriate practice?

I find this hard to fathom or imagine. I've long used processes of questioning as a means not only to bolster my standing, but also as a means of delaying taking a stance on *understanding*. How could research be research if it didn't involve research questions? What kinds of outcomes might be developed if they are not the result of some kind of questioning?

Writing about the art of the exegesis, Danny Butt, describes what he calls *the worst situation of all* as:

[Slide 58.... interesting practices (de)formed into 'research questions' that the works are then supposed to answer. Duchamp did his best to dissuade such thinking, believing that 'there is no solution, because there is no problem.' Now the need to find problems to satisfy a demand for academic rigour seems to be the problem.

– Danny Butt (2012)

What if there were no problems to pursue; and, consequently, no questions? What might that feel like? Could such activities still be called research? Might they be replaced by non-productive doing and thinking? This could represent a radical departure from the imprecise fit of making works of art as research within the Academy.

[Slide 59. "The university should thus also be the place in which nothing is beyond question, not even the current and determined figure of democracy, not even the traditional idea of critique, meaning theoretical critique, and not even the authority of the 'question' form, of thinking as 'questioning'."

– Derrida, cited in Butt 2011

Why can't we simply indicate – with clarity and precision – the aim of an artistic project? This is something that is invariably missing (Kjørup 2010), obfuscated by research questions and wondrously implausible connections between philosophical writing and studio work.

What if making works of art simply isn't research?

[Slide 60... rethink everything until you come up with a research platform where judgement can proceed without compromise. Trade that away and you are no longer engaged in public thinking at all.

– Paul Magee (2012, 11)

I like what Magee suggests is at stake here: If we don't find a way to work without compromise then we are no longer engaged in public thinking.

Perhaps we are looking at issues of epistemology in making works of art in Universities in entirely the wrong way. We are bending over backwards to justify our work as knowledge building, and thereby render it as something that compromises its ontology of mystery and ambiguity.

What if, instead, it were not a question of epistemology?

[Slide 61. What is it that we do?]

Artists make mysterious experiences. We are not communicating knowledge. Scott Brook states simply that “the purpose of art ... is to produce and transform experience” (Brook 2012, 3). These experiences are, in many respects anti-knowledge. It's more closely allied to the mystical, and any attempt to deny the presence of a soul in works of art (even in the coolest of conceptual performances) denatures what it is that we do. This soul is a sense of aliveness; it is ineffable, and I understand my work as a choreographer to be as simple and difficult as to find ways to harness these experiences that cannot be spoken or explained.

[Slide 62. "the market seeks the artist as a producer of mystery, rather than an explainer" (Butt 2012)

This notion of the artist as explainer is, I suspect, practice-as-research's deepest problem. This is what the exegesis – or written component – does (or at best *tends* to do). It turns artists into explainers, and if we are to persist with this practise, then artists in the academy need to get over ourselves and stop calling ourselves artists.

We become people who, according to Danny Butt, “secure the interpretation” (Butt 2012) of our own work, and in so doing justify it's value. We, in effect, become artists who generate value for our own work (Butt 2012) and not only is this ethically dubious, it also totally undermines the open invitation that exists between artists and audiences.

It was Walter Benjamin who referred to that most terrible drug: **[Slide 63. ourselves** (Magee 2012).

Our work as artists must be expelled into the world – not simply shared with it – and I worry that the framework of *questions and research* is no better than an academy-sponsored corset.

[Slide 64. Biting the hand that feeds me]

And so, I am left with a lot of doubt. My position as an artist and as an academic seems untenable. Yes, I understand how the game is played, but the cost seems high. [Slide 65. ffs, talk about a middle-class problem].

I do have to be careful here. I have no desire to be one of those creative arts lecturers who would, according to Scott Brook, prefer to be known as an artist rather than a teacher, and who remain “adept at sustaining vocational identities that are more or less independent of their actual employment” (Brook 2012, 6). [Slide 66. I doth protest too much].

On the contrary, it has been in my role as a teacher that these concerns for the role and value of practice-as-research have become increasingly important. How can these concerns be simplified in such a way that students interested in choreography and performance can get on with making provocative, considered, wild, tasteless, frantic, measured works of art?

By testing the limits of words like *practice* and *research* I’m not so much proposing some kind of island mentality for artists in the academy. At the same time, for too long we have laboured over – and been bribed to comply with – the similarities between making works of art and, say, doing science. Surely, there is something to be celebrated in the distinctiveness of doing choreography. Could we not be the [Slide 67. image] black sheep that bears a remarkable family resemblance to all those other white ones?

I’d like to finish by proposing a set of principles for being an artist in the academy. They assume that as artists – in any context – we make careful choices about what we articulate, what our positions are, why we choose particular ways of presenting our work and ideas, and how open we are to adapting our beliefs. These principles are stolen from the head of MIT’s Media Lab, Joi Ito:

[Slide 68. Encourage rebellion instead of compliance]

[Slide 69. Practice instead of theory]

[Slide 70. Constant learning instead of education]

[Slide 71. Compass over map]

[Slide 72. Resilience over strength]

(Joi Ito, in Rowan 2012)

In other words, what if there really were no differences between being an artist in the professional world, and being an artist in the academic world? Then we could really start to think about who it is all for.

Thanks very much.

[Slide 73. skellis.net]

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