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Engaging Arts, Impacting PaR

At the risk of biting a generous hand, I offer this provocation as a way to surface what appears to me a newly troubling dynamic in the relationship between practice and research. More specifically, this irritation is to be located in the context of interdisciplinary research collaborations and what most of us in the academy now recognise as the 'Knowledge Exchange and Impact Turn'.

The discussion about what Practice as Research (PaR) *is* has a relatively long history in theatre, drama, performance and the performing arts. 'Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP)', the first research project in the UK to explore in depth practice as a research methodology, was established by Baz Kershaw at the University of Bristol in 2001.¹ *Studies in Theatre and Performance* has since been the site for numerous articles engaging with the subject of PaR, its histories, methodologies, epistemological challenges and opportunities. Essays published range from Melissa Trimingham's 'A Methodology for Practice as Research' (22.1, 2002), to Peter Thomson's compilation of a range of views on the subject (22.3, 2003) and Robin Nelson's 'Practice-as-research and the Problem of Knowledge' (11.4, 2006), to name just a few. The enduring interest in PaR, as both method and output, is apparent across the interval of more than a decade, and a degree of maturity, or at least a coming of age, is signalled by *STP's* recent announcement of a new section of the journal 'Curating Practice-as-Research'.

STP's enduring commitment to documenting practice as research supplements the appearance of other published studies, including *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, London: I.B.Tauris, 2007), *Practice-as-research in performance and screen* (eds. Ludivine Allegue et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances* (ed. Robin Nelson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Arguably, these recent texts testify to the extent to which practice as research is part of our landscape. However, another perspective on the prevalence of such publications would offer it as evidence that what is meant by PaR, or practice-based research, or practice-led research, or research-through-practice continues to be a subject of discussion and even confusion. My intention here is not to re-open that debate; I refer the interested reader to these excellent publications. Nevertheless, continuing complexities circulating PaR do provide the necessary context for my irritation.

Practice AS Research

In the last Research Excellence Framework exercise (REF 2014), Unit of Assessment 35 (UOA35), which covered Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts, reported 1,347 non-text-based outputs; that is, 33% of the work submitted to UOA35 was deemed by its submitters to be Practice as Research (PaR). Performances accounted for 7.7% of the total output types. Given the volume of PaR, it is not surprising that the summary offered by UoA35 had a specific section dedicated to reflecting on PaR submissions:

The Sub-panel saw an extensive amount of work in PaR across all the sub-disciplinary areas. World-leading and internationally excellent outputs made

original, significant and rigorous research-based artistic interventions in areas of musical and theatrical performance, choreography, filmmaking, and composition. [...] The international reputation of this research, and its impact within the creative industries and beyond, are testament to the ongoing commitment of the higher education (HE) sector and to the effectiveness of the investment that PaR has received to date – a level of investment that must be maintained [...].²

The summary continues:

As in 2008 the best outputs in PaR were distinguished by clearly articulated research objectives. [...] Rigorous PaR work [...] explicitly articulated a research imperative, methods by which it was explored, and how these related to previous work on this topic by others. This approach often helped in making the case for the originality and significance of the findings [...].

UoA35's feedback takes a more critical turn in paragraph 37:

A small proportion of PaR was considered not to have met either the REF definition of research [...]. In some cases the supporting portfolios were carelessly presented. In other cases, a rationalisation, evidently after the event, or the submission of a conspicuous amount of documented practice did not allow for the identification of a research dimension. More generally, the 300 word statements too often displayed a misunderstanding of what was being asked for and provided evidence of impact from the research, or a descriptive account akin to a programme note, rather than making the case for practice as research. [...]

In spite of sustained discussion about, and indeed available evidence of PaR projects (the increase in submissions of PaR to UoA35 is testimony to the latter), UoA35's overview of PaR demonstrates a degree of continuing confusion over what counts as research within the domain of practice. The mainstream media of Higher Education's articulation of practice as a research methodology arguably feeds such confusion not only for those working within the creative arts, but also those with whom we collaborate.

Practice makes perfect

In September 2014, a news article published in the *Research Professional's* daily alert, captioned 'Practice makes perfect' caught my attention. I reproduce this here almost in its entirety as its content gives me much cause – and pause – for concern:

The Arts and Humanities Research Council wants to lift the status of practice-based research. Adam Smith asks how this can be done.

The AHRC is celebrating its 10th birthday next year, and has decided to do so by attempting something radical. Rick Rylance, the council's chief executive, said in July that he wanted arts research to become more flexible, with practice-based research given the same status as other research areas.

Practice-based research involves producing creative and academic outputs at the same time. The process is well established among researchers – from printmakers, who advance techniques by producing their own works, to choreographer Wayne McGregor, who immerses himself in literature and ideas to create dances that stand as metaphors for the process of research itself.

But there is no standard definition of this mixed practice, and the AHRC will have to convince cynics that it is not merely bailing out arts organisations wounded by funding cuts. It will also have to address the fact that practice-based research is not afforded the same respect as conventional academic work – a perception that was cemented when art and design performed poorly in the Research Assessment Exercise in 1996.

For the researchers who asked themselves how they could fix this, one answer was provided unexpectedly by the inclusion of impact in the later exercise. Proving impact may be burdensome for scientists working with more conventional means, but it helps artists and arts researchers to earn points for reaching audiences – an activity that is, unlike for researchers in most other fields, essential to their work. [...]

Research institutions have grasped the opportunity presented by impact, by creating space for artists in residence. Artists have been included in major science projects, as a friendly face to show a cautious public. ‘They get the artist to make the work palatable’, grumbles one grant reviewer.³

The first cause – or pause – for concern raised by this short news item revolves around the presumption that, in 2014, practice-based research was *not* given the same status as other research areas.⁴ This is reinforced in the report by the explicit assertion that practice-based research is not afforded the same respect as conventional academic work – though one might question the relevance of the journalist’s ‘insights’ in this instance, given his out-dated reference point (RAE 1996).

The second cause/pause is to note the confusion between practice-based research and creative practises *per se*. The presumption about the research process attached to creative practice is one that our discipline has worked hard to challenge, in order to make the case precisely *for* practice as research. Most creative practitioners undertake some form of research in the development of their work, but most are not pursuing a research question or problem, or seeking to make an original contribution to knowledge.

The third cause/pause relates to the relationship between showing something to an audience and achieving impact. (If only it were that simple!) Impact in REF terms means demonstrating change through knowledge accrual, whether that be in the professional, social or cultural realms.⁵ That the REF defines impact differently to the AHRC does not help militate against such confusion – but this different interpretation also, I would argue, has implications when it comes to submitting applications to the AHRC for funding and for placing arts *within* those applications. Which leads me to the final cause/pause that’s really a segue. Though I am not the grant reviewer quoted above, I might well have been.

Where is the arts research?

Having been a member of the AHRC's Peer Review College (PRC) since 2009, I am alert to the code of practice which (rightly) prohibits me from divulging any specific details of individual grant applications that I have reviewed. However, I do not think I risk breaching confidentiality by offering some general impressions drawn from across my reviewing experience and bolstered by other examples gleaned from other funding initiatives. My perception – and it is a personal one – is that as the AHRC and other research councils have moved towards large, interdisciplinary grants, comprised of a team of researchers tackling 'big world' problems, the placement of arts within these grants has tended to towards creative practice, rather than practice-based research. The function of arts in proposed projects is often as a tool to engage, communicate, mediate, translate, and/or to enhance. Put bluntly, in this competitive interdisciplinary environment, the arts are the (very useful) catalysts to knowledge exchange, public engagement and impact. One clear example of this can be deduced from an email received by me in August 2015, sent by the AHRC. This announced details of a new interdisciplinary funding partnership, the 'Antimicrobial Resistance in the Real World' programme. As the email outlined, 'This programme aims to address the need for a greater understanding of the role of the outdoor environment and host microbiome in influencing the evolution, acquisition and spread of antibacterial resistance, and as a reservoir for resistance.' The email went on to advise that 'Proposals that consider cultural factors around different practices (including professional practices) and community contexts, for example exploring participatory approaches to co-design interventions with diverse communities or using visualisation, narrative and/or creative arts approaches to engage diverse communities, are eligible to apply'.⁶

Positioning arts in research grants in this way seems to lead to collaboration with artists rather than trained academic researchers skilled in using creative practice as a research method.⁷ In those instances where research questions relating to arts are embedded in the project they are often framed in explicitly instrumental terms: 'what' and 'how' arts practices do certain things. The art is the object of research and not itself an active part of a research process contributing to the development of new knowledge. In light of these impressions, I admit that I am not only like the grumbling grant reviewer cited in Smith's news item, I am also the cynic. The AHRC's support of artists included in grant applications extends its operations into an informal arts council, but one arguably not nearly as rigorous as the Arts Council of England or Creative Scotland in its review of the art being proposed.]

I recognise that my cynicism will sound especially mean spirited in the context of gruelling economic conditions. Artists desperately need more financial support and access to additional sources of funding will be welcomed by many. The risk, though – and it's not one conjured by artists – is that employing artists to undertake the knowledge exchange activity of a research project, or to translate research into something that can deliver impact, seems to fulfil the criteria for interdisciplinarity. As long as arts practices are named in the funding application, the application appears to fit the category of an arts and humanities research project.

When is PaR not PaR?

Having referred to abstract examples, it is perhaps useful to draw on something more concrete – an interdisciplinary project I have been involved in. It is important to be clear, at the outset, that this project has been hugely interesting and vastly rewarding. Generous and productive relationships have been forged between a new team of interdisciplinary researchers and important research findings have emerged as a result of our collaboration. The project has been generative in another and unexpected way too though, prompting me to reflect on my role, and my practice, as a practice-based researcher contributing to an interdisciplinary research project.

From 2013 – 2014, I was the co-investigator on a small research project, funded through the ongoing Connected Communities scheme, a cross-research council initiative led by the AHRC. A key impetus behind Connected Communities is ‘not only to connect research on communities, but to connect communities with research’.⁸ One method of connecting communities *with* researchers and research is to engage community members as co-researchers rather than as objects of research. The use of community-based participatory research (CBPR), which includes Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods, is promoted as a key methodology within Connected Communities.⁹

The project I was involved in, *Walking Interconnections: Researching the Lived Experience of Disabled People for a Sustainable Society*, responded to the fact that disabled people’s voices are largely absent from sustainability debates.¹⁰ The project’s aim was to identify, make visible and give value to the everyday, embodied knowledges of disabled people, repositioning them from being only ever ‘vulnerable’ to being holders and contributors of wisdom.

Walking Interconnections sought to identify and make visible the everyday, embodied knowledges of disabled people – their habitual experiences of their environments and their persistent enactments of resilience within these. So how did we identify these knowledges? Through Participatory Action Research which in turn used *arts-based methods*. Working with 19 co-researchers drawn from across two typically disconnected communities – disabled people and environmental activists – we asked each co-researcher to invite another co-researcher to accompany them on a walk of their choice, exchanging experiences of the environment by walking together. They each sketched a map of their proposed journey before and after the walk and they all selected and engaged with creative prompts from a Walking Guide, created by co-researcher Suze Adams (and influenced by Wrights & Sites Mis-Guides).¹¹ Each walking pair or trio also had a camera and a digital voice recorder. After the walk, our co-researchers selected and discussed with the group photographs that captured significant aspects of the walking-together experience, reflecting on what these images represented.

Arts-based methods – fun and accessible – are extremely useful for developing community-based participatory research. However, does the use of such arts-based methods make this an arts and humanities research project? In this project, practice-based researchers developed methods which both engaged participants as co-researchers and generated research data. I could also suggest that I used my

performance expertise, and most particularly my knowledge of walking as a cultural and embodied practice, to analyse this data as a way of understanding how disabled people *perform* resilience on a daily basis. A social scientist co-researchers, meanwhile, ran the audio-recordings through nvivo.

Though unplanned as either method or output, upon hearing the audio-recordings I decided to transcribe them – 25 hours of talking – and to create a 30 minute script, *Going for a Walk*. This in turn was re-recorded in studio conditions, with co-researchers reading their own lines and paid actors reading the lines of anyone who didn't want to be recorded. In advance of the recording, I led rehearsals with the co-researchers, aiming to build confidence in their performance skills. In effect, then, using my disciplinary expertise, I created a 30-minute audio-verbatim play which was responsible to the ethical considerations attached to the verbatim process and form (e.g., every co-researcher's voice was in the play and everyone was given a copy of the script to review before consenting to it being made publically available).¹² My intention for the recorded play was that it should be downloaded and listened to whilst walking.¹³

Going for a Walk achieves certain aims of the research project: it makes visible (or at least audible) the embodied knowledges of disabled people, while the performative property of performance presents our co-researchers as demonstrably contributing wisdom and gives value to that wisdom through the very act of creating the performance. Nevertheless, *Going for a Walk* is not PaR but rather is a mediation of research data collected during walks (and not even 'aestheticized walks'). Creating a play out of the data transforms it into a more palatable and engaging form than, say, presenting it on paper in tabulated form according to recurring words. *Going for a Walk* arguably shows (or tells), rather than discovers. The audio recording is proving to have very good impact potential, allowing people to walk as if in the shoes of our co-researchers, and to witness their resilience, creativity, problem-solving and determination in the face of continuous barriers in public space.

I am confident that I am disseminating new knowledge through my practice, but have I created it too? This is slippery terrain. Arguably the process of creating a verbatim play – condensing 25 hours of talking down to 30 minutes – involves knowledge creation to some degree. The process itself – listening, transcribing, connecting, threading, deciphering, patterning, in effect the dramaturgical process in action – revealed information not detected by nvivo (including temporal, spatial and affective dimensions), allowing me to present particular insights. In the now well-worn discourse of PaR, *Going for a Walk* is simultaneously research *and* output. But where my claim for *Going for a Walk* as an example of research is less confident is when I ask: what question was I seeking to explore *through* practice, if the practice in question was verbatim drama (or, equally, audio walks)?¹⁴

If arts practice in research becomes understood primarily as a means of gathering and/or showing data, or the illustration and dissemination of others research, rather than credible exploration on and in its own terms, framed by its own appropriate set of research questions, then where is the place for performance as research?

Artists or Researchers?

As UoA35's summary of PaR testifies, most people submitting PaR to REF recognise that most arts practice is not research. It is also probably fair to propose that most artists are not academic researchers, just as most academic researchers are not artists. Yet the public engagement and impact agendas seem to require that all researchers, irrespective to their discipline, become quasi-artists or that they hire artists to stand in for them.

The Connected Communities Festivals provide another example of this public engagement and impact imperative. The extract below, taken from the 2014 Expression of Interest guide, makes clear the relationships being forged between research, arts and engagement.

As part of the Connected Communities Programme's wider engagement activities, we are planning to hold a Festival in Cardiff. [...] This] is expected to include a mixture of exhibitions/ stands/ installations, posters, break-outs, debates, performances, film showings, and related participatory activities. ¹⁵

Information on eligible costs makes even more transparent the expectations of public engagement activity:

Performances – costs of preparing and delivering a performance with the aims of communicating Connected Communities research to a wide audience in an engaging and accessible way. Performances at the main event should normally be for up to 1 hour although sessions of up to one and a half hours may exceptionally be considered, particularly where this provides enhanced opportunity to provide the research context for the performance and/or discuss the research issues highlighted by the performance [...] Total costs up to a maximum of £12,000 may be requested for on-site activities [...] or up to £20,000 for offsite activities [...]. The funds requested should include the costs of transporting performers, research team leads and materials, performance fees (e.g. for actors, musicians, etc.), the hire of suitable rehearsal spaces and [...] performance spaces in Cardiff, and appropriate marketing/ dissemination/ publicity costs to attract strong audience attendance. Where appropriate, costs may also be included for recording performances for wider dissemination [...]. Where new performance activities are being developed, applicants are encouraged to consider the possibility of repeating the performance in other venues / community locations. Reasonable travel, subsistence and accommodation costs for performers/teams should also be included as appropriate.

That the AHRC's budget for the production of a new performance is £20,000, to include fees, venue, travel, accommodation and marketing, raises other questions than those I am focusing on here. My key concern is that one effect of this ubiquitous narrative of the hiring of artists to showcase research findings is that it seems to be displacing genuine, interdisciplinary *research* collaborations, where researchers with expertise in practice as research in the arts contribute to the development of new knowledge – and in ways that extend beyond simply generating or showcasing data. It is little wonder that interdisciplinary collaborators from outside the domains of creative arts research do not understand what it is that practice-based researchers in the arts are able to do, by way of collaboration, when the AHRC repeatedly and most

explicitly place 'arts' in their funded activity not as research method, but as public engagement tool.

About half of the doctoral researchers I supervise at present are using practice as a research methodology. Irrespective of the methodologies they use, what they are primarily training to be, in signing up to a three year doctoral programme, are *researchers*. Their primary methodology is performance-based because the questions they are pursuing are best explored through performance practice. In the context described above, I worry for these doctoral researchers in particular. The pressure to engage in 'KE' and to demonstrate the impact of research has, I propose, introduced new risks for the place of *arts practice as research*, and perhaps, more specifically yet, the place of the artist researcher engaging *in* research as a skilled researcher. As I note this emerging shift in the placing of arts in research, I worry that the doctoral students I have the privilege to work with and learn from will no longer find a place to practice and perform as researchers. That is likely to be a very real loss to knowing.

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¹ See <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/index.html> PARIP ran from 2001 to 2006.

² <http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/pages/131/UCML%20HEFCE-REF%20Main%20Panel%20D%20overview%20report.pdf>

³ 3 September 2015. <https://www.researchprofessional.com/0/rr/news/uk/research-councils/2014/9/Practice-makes-perfect.html>

⁴ One might differentiate PaR from practice-based research, but that differentiation is not important to the argument of this piece, so I allow the slippage between them here.

⁵ Thanks to Professor Mike Pearson for sharing his thoughts about this during an email exchange in September 2014.

⁶ Email communication from the AHRC, 10 August 2015.

⁷ This is not to suggest that academic researchers are not also artists, and sometimes they undertake arts practice that is not research. I recognise that I am in danger of reinstating a false binary or unhelpful division. However, my focus is on academic researchers using practice as a methodology in their research – irrespective of what other roles and practices they might carry out.

⁸ <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/crosscouncilprogrammes/connectedcommunities/>

⁹ See <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/connected-communities/community-based-participatory-research-ethical-challenges/>

¹⁰ See <http://walkinginterconnections.com/>

¹¹ For the Walking Guide, see http://walkinginterconnections.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/A-Guide_for-walks.pdf For Wrights & Sites Mis-Guides, see <http://www.mis-guide.com/mg.html>

¹² I have written about the ethics of verbatim drama in *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). I also teach courses on documentary drama and work with students to create verbatim scripts.

¹³ The play can be downloaded from <http://walkinginterconnections.com/audio-play-going-for-a-walk/> It has also been published in *Studies in Theatre and Performance*.

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that I could not, in the future, approach *Going for a Walk* as a researcher, undertaking analysis of the play and audio-walking experiences. But this is to apply a different methodology than PaR.

¹⁵ <https://connected-communities.org/index.php/news/connected-communities-festival-2014-expressions-of-interest-to-contribute/>