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Editorial:

On Reflecting and Making in Artistic Research

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Abstract

Following the integration of artistic disciplines within the university, artists have been challenged to review their practice in academic terms. This has become a vigorous epicentre of debates concerning the nature of research in the artistic disciplines. The special issue “On Reflecting and Making in Artistic Research Practice” captures some of this debate. This editorial article presents a broad-brush outline of the debates raging in the artistic disciplines and presents three discernible trends in those debates. The trends highlight different core questions: (1) Art as research: Can artistic practice represent forms of inquiry acceptable within academic settings? (2) Academically-attuned practice-led research: Can art practice and research practice cooperate as equal partners within the university context? (3) Artistic research: Can the academic notion of research be extended to include the unique results possible through artistic research? The articles in the special issue offer a discussable overview of the current stage in the development of artistic research, demonstrating how creative practice and research practice can come together.

Keywords: art & design; artistic research; art practice; reflective practice; research contexts; university system

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1. Introduction

Lively debate with regard to complex relationships between creative practice and academic research has arisen internationally for nearly 30 years. In the field of art and some subfields of design, makers (i.e., artists or designers) have challenged themselves by entertaining the notion of research to explore their practices within academia. This has brought artistic practice closer to research practice, so that they often merge in ways that are expected to benefit both practices reciprocally. The dialogue between creative work and research is the key element of the discourse presented in this special issue, entitled “On Reflecting and Making in Artistic Research Practice.”

The idea of this publication emerged from “The Art of Research: Processes, Results, and Contributions” conference in Helsinki, Finland, during November 24-25, 2009. This was part of a conference series organised annually since 2005 at two alternate locations: Aalto University School of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland and Chelsea College of Art and Design, London. Its focus has been placed on the development of practice-led research in art and studio-based design. The specific purpose of the 2009 conference was to continue and enhance discussions concerning the relationship between art and design practices and research, in terms of both content and mode of presentation. Following the event, the call for contributions to this special issue was announced. It was framed so as to focus on artistic research practice, drawing attention to the interaction between reflecting and making in this practice.

The special issue is meant to target artists who are exposing some form of inquiry in their art practice with a view to discussing their work in the academic context. It is also meant to offer insights to a wider audience of researchers in other fields particularly on how their respective research practice can be enhanced with elements of artistic research.

The editorial will first launch the new discourse of research in the field of art and design. Second, it will examine various expectations from research in art and design introduced by artist-researchers, agencies, and universities. Third, it will present the new overlapping trends concerning art and design research, in order to structure the current discussion in the field. Finally, the editorial will introduce the articles selected for this special issue.

2. Foundation of the New Discourse

Contemporary art practices are saturated with theoretical knowledge as artists attempt to integrate the notion of research with their creative processes in diverse ways. In this situation, the sphere of academic research seems to offer theoretical ideas that find their way into creative productions. The art philosopher Busch (2009, pp. 1-2) points out that the initial attempt to anchor a theory-derived and practice-based concept of art within an academic curriculum was a response to a changed notion of art—one in which art and theory have become interwoven in multiple ways. According to Busch (2009), theory-derived art or research based on practice can be seen as a response to a significant trend in contemporary art making that focuses on the production of values other than those inherent in the artworks. The artworld appears to have evolved into a field of possibilities, of exchange of ideas and comparison of outcomes, in which different modes of perception, thinking, and making have a chance to be recognised for their unique potential.

This evolution has changed the concept of art traditionally taught in art academies to emphasise more on the development of processes and capabilities. Busch (2009) suggests that artistic appropriation of inquiry evokes different, independent forms of value that might be seen as complementing, or standing as an equivalent, to scientific results. However, the spectrum of that which can be manifested under the term *artistic research* is broad and certainly not homogeneous. Not only the content of the term artistic research but also the terminology used when discussing related issues is still under development. Entailing certain differences in emphasis, the terms *practice-based*, *art-led*, *practice-led*, and artistic research have been used more or less interchangeably (see Elo, 2009, p. 19; Mäkelä, 2009, p. 29; Nimkulrat, 2009, pp. 35-39). Nimkulrat (2011, p. 60) points out that although various terms reflect the different modes of combination of artistic practice and research, their meanings and usages vary among countries, subject areas, or even scholars working within institutional contexts. For example, practice-led research is the current term used in most universities in the UK and in the design discipline, whereas artistic research is used more extensively in other European countries and in the field of fine arts.

The emergence of practice-led research within art and design can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s. The reformation of doctoral degrees in Australia, UK, and Finland in the early 1980s allowed university faculties and departments offering art degrees to conduct their own research practices (Candy, 2006, p. 4; Gray, 1998, p. 83; Mäkelä & Routarinne, 2006, p. 17; Scrivener, 2006, p. 158). Different institutions have adopted different strategies towards the implementation of doctoral degrees that are based on different art and design related professional practices. In each case, the offering of the doctoral degree has generated discussions about the nature of the qualification as well as the use of related terminology.

Candy (2006, p. 1), a researcher who has been interested in using practice-led methods in Australia, makes a distinction between practice-based and practice-led research. According to her, practice-led research is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to results which have operational significance for that practice. However, in a doctoral

thesis, the results of practice-led research may be fully described in text without the inclusion of a creative work. On the other hand, she defines practice-based research as an original investigation undertaken partly by means of practice. When pursuing a doctoral thesis, claims of originality and “contribution to knowledge” may be demonstrated through creative outcomes in the form of designs, music, digital products, performances, and exhibitions. She suggests that although the context and significance of claims are described in words, a richer experience can be obtained through the practical outcomes (i.e., artefacts) created.

In the UK, the terms practice-based and practice-led have been incorporated with different and even contradictory meanings. The educationist Frayling emphasises the inclusion of the original art or design pieces in the submission for examination within the framework of practice-based doctorates in the creative and performance arts and design (Frayling et al., 1997, pp. 14-17). The philosopher Biggs (2000), one of the early contributors to this form of research, also adds that practice-based research generates vast interest in practising artists and designers due to the fact that research projects following this approach can include the production of a creative exemplar in addition to, or possibly in preference to, a written thesis. However, he highlights that this approach is not limited to the creative and performance arts and design disciplines, but is applicable to any discipline where the outcome can be an artefact produced in the workshop or laboratory (e.g., engineering and software design).

In the Finnish account, the term practice-led research has been adopted to highlight the active role of professional practice in the research process. Academic research utilising this approach is conducted in dialogue with the researcher’s creative production, the emphasis of which is equally placed on theory and practice as well as the reflection and documentation of practice (Mäkelä & Nimkulrat, 2011; Nimkulrat, 2009, p. 37). The earlier term used to call this form of research was practice-based. The shift in terminology was seen in early 2000s, as reflected in the first conference in The Art of Research series (Mäkelä & Routarinne, 2006). The development of terminology used in the Finnish context seems to follow the discussion in the UK (e.g., Rust, Mottam, & Till, 2007).

Since 2007, the term practice-led has been used by some authors in preference to the term practice-based in order to acknowledge the change in emphasis from the production of original artefacts to the integration of artistic practice into the research process (Lycouris, 2011, pp. 62-63). In many ways, the principles of practice-based research mentioned above are still considered relevant in the current practice-led research context. The difference between the former practice-based approach and the current practice-led one lies in the documentation of the research process and textual explanation demonstrating the researcher’s critical reflection. These are highlighted as crucial aspects of practice-led research (Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2011a, p. 42; Rust, Mottam, & Till, 2007, p. 11).

In the context of this debate, it is worth noting that the suitability of using practice-rooted terms, such as practice-based, practice-led, and art-led, has not been beyond doubt. For

example, the social scientist and design researcher Koskinen (2009, p. 11) argues that the idea of research through practice as being a “new initiative” is naïve. He states that research in social sciences and so-called hard sciences has demonstrated for more than four decades that practice is its foundation. The photographer-researcher Elo (2007, p. 14) also affirms that just as in natural sciences, a reflective relationship with tradition has been part of art practice since the Romanticism of the late eighteenth-century Europe and the production of “epistemic things” has been intimately connected to experimental praxis throughout the modern era. In this respect, the notion of inquiry being practice-led is not new--the new element is rather the connection between art practice and the university institution. To include artistic practice in academic research, Koskinen (2009, p. 16) suggests that practice needs to be taken seriously as well as structured and understood as experimental work, which is observable and reportable.

There appears to be a lively discussion about research approaches which are considered closely related to art and design practice. This discussion seems geographically clustered around Europe (Smith & Dean, 2009), Australasia, USA (e.g., Elkins, 2009), and South Africa (e.g., Farber, 2010). The Middle European contributors are using the term artistic research, under which the overall discussion has acquired a new impetus. With the establishment of the Society for Artistic Research (at Berne, Switzerland, in March 2010) and their online publication [Journal for Artistic Research](#) (JAR), the term artistic research has gained prominence.

3. Expectations From Research in Art and Design

Various artist-researchers, agencies, and universities have introduced their own expectations from research in art and design. In the UK, for example, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)--a central funding body to support research in art and design--aims to support research that makes a difference not only in the research community, but also in a wider context. Its Research Grants Scheme includes the following aim:

to support well-defined research projects of the highest quality and standards that will lead to significant advances in creativity, insights, knowledge and understanding, of interest and value both in the research community and in wider contexts where they can make a difference. (Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC], 2011b, p. 7)

Here, “well-defined” is to be understood as projects which pursue clear research questions arising from a research context, follow well-specified research methods, and specify aspects of project management and dissemination of results (AHRC, 2011b, p. 47, Section “Case for Support Guidance”; Scrivener, 2002, p. 19).

Biggs and Mäkelä expect the resulting artefacts of artistic research to have a voice of their own. For Biggs (2002, pp. 20-23), the artefacts are to be presented as part of the answer to research questions. In other words, the artefact is expected to embody answers

to a research question. Mäkelä puts it another way: “The crucial task for each practice-led research project is, therefore, to give a voice to the artefact” (Mäkelä, 2007, p. 163).

Although academia demands artists to contextualise their work in both form and content, “the contingency-riddled space of practice does not lend itself easily to formulating research questions . . . The limitations of language in the initial stages of an art project’s development is certain . . . [For this reason, it is useful] to embrace the not-quite-knowing as productively troublesome rather than prejudicial” (K. Smith, cited in Farber & Mäkelä, 2010, p. 14). As the “not-quite-knowing” stage in art-making is usually disorderly, the artist does not have a clear direction and thus is unable to articulate the process clearly. Contemporary notions of artistic research require the artist to make artefacts with sensitivity and awareness, so that when this initial stage is over, the thought and process can be recapitulated and communicated. A similar process is followed in scientific research. When working at the interface between the known and the unknown, a researcher may not be guided by predetermined procedures and preconceived notions alone: “Being prepared to notice the unexpected often is the key” (Grinnell, 2009, p. 28).

There are commentators who expect art and design researchers to be far more definite and clearer than the above ideas imply. For example, Rust (2007, p. 75) asserts that artists or designers who also wish to be researchers must “own” their research in particular ways. According to Rust (2007), this means that these authors must clarify the basis of their individual research project as follows: (a) declare the subject of their inquiry and their motivation for investigating it, (b) demonstrate that they have a good understanding of the context for the work and what has gone before, (c) have both methods and a methodology, and (d) must be able to articulate all of the abovementioned premises clearly. These expectations compare well with the ideas of others:

[Artistic research is] about the self-reflective and self-critical processes of a person taking part in the production of meaning within contemporary art, and in such a fashion that it communicates where it is coming from, where it stands at this precise moment, and where it wants to go (Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2005, p. 10).

Another expectation from an artist-researcher is captured in the idea of “creative discovery” (M. Fleishman, cited in Farber & Mäkelä, 2010, p. 13). This idea underlines the importance of the two-fold process of making and reflecting, and the potential of this process to reveal the maker’s insights, knowledge, or understanding.

Yet another expectation shared by some artist-researchers is expressed in the now-popular term, *reflective practitioner* (Schön, 1995, p. iii). Schön proposes that research in professional fields (such as engineering, architecture, management, psychotherapy, and town planning) ought to be geared towards an understanding of the nature and origin of knowledge that is tied to practice.

Different expectations from agencies and universities can also be linked to different genres of research, if one can recognise them as such. One of the early attempts to

identify research genres in art and design was by Frayling (1993). He categorised art and design related research into three broad genres based on the focus and method of the research task. In his scheme, “research into art and design” stands for traditional theoretical research in which art and design become the subject of inquiry, a phenomenon to be studied from the outside; “research through art and design” involves creative production as a research method; “research for art and design” is the practical kind of exploration where the end product is an artefact which embodies the formative thoughts that led to its making (see also Scrivener, 2009, p. 71).

At this stage of development of artistic research, the expectations from it are far from being settled. While funding bodies may justifiably look for impact of any research they support, the field of art and design research seems rather uneasy about the level specification and planning expected in an otherwise personal and creative process. The search is on for finding more appropriate notions of inquiry to guide art and design research, which would enable assessment of impact without taking away the personal, practical, and creative elements so characteristic of art and design.

4. Overlapping Trends

Although the discourse concerning artistic research or practice-led research in art and design is at an evolving stage, still some clear trends can be recognised in the emerging discourse. Three trends are presented below based on the recent work of artist-researchers Farber and Mäkelä (2010).

The first trend suggests that art can stand on its own in a university context. This means that, in this context, an artistic process can be understood as a parallel to scientific research. Epistemological advancement is conceived to be in the reception of the artwork. Therefore, further explanation and validation of the practice are not as important as the practice and the artefacts created. This is the model that Frayling (1993, p. 5) calls “research for art and design.” Its ambiguous definition has created the interpretation of “art as research” (e.g., Barrett & Bolt, 2007). This interpretation supports the idea that further explanation and validation of the practice are as important as the practice and artefact created (Durling, Friedman, & Gutherson, 2002, p. 10; Nimkulrat, 2011, p. 60). Although the artwork plays a central role in doctoral research studies that fall into this category, it seldom appears without textual outputs. Nevertheless, the focus is on the artwork and the written part of the study plays usually a minor role in the overall contribution.

Another trend suggests that a textual exegesis is required and is to be presented alongside the artwork or artefact. The textual exegesis usually follows the basic structure of traditional research by encompassing a central research question, a defined methodology, a particular context, and a substantive list of references. Even though the term practice-led research encompasses various kinds of approach, it requires: (a) equal partnership between artistic practice and research practice (Nimkulrat, 2009, p. 39), (b) the role of an artist as a researcher investigating a research question (Mäkelä, 2007), and (c) thorough documentation of the creative production and the overall research process (Nimkulrat,

2007). This trend privileges the researcher's artistic practice which gets involved in tackling a research problem. Therefore, this trend can be termed academically-attuned practice-led research.

A third trend, which is quite widespread in European countries other than the UK, suggests that practitioners or academics working within the academy need to prevail upon the university to change the understanding of research and to acknowledge the unique types of result that may be possible through artistic research. This requires the development of alternative notions of research within traditional universities. Currently, such developments seem to be arising from different quarters, examining the relationship between artistic research and scientific research (e.g., Borgdorff, 2006, 2009).

This change of the rules includes a discussion related to the mode of writing. In the third trend, writing is seen as an important component of a research report (or doctoral dissertation), but the conventions of academic writing may become a hindrance. Therefore, less conventional styles have been proposed to be more suitable for these research projects. The issues and concerns related to this trend have been articulated in the recent literature (e.g., Borgdorff, 2006, 2009; Busch, 2009; Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2005; Slager, 2012).

In summary, the three trends appear to pursue different core questions: (1) Art as research: Can artistic practice represent forms of inquiry acceptable within academic settings? (2) Academically-attuned practice-led research: Can art practice and research practice cooperate as equal partners within the university context? (3) Artistic research: Can the academic notion of research be extended to include the unique results possible through artistic research?

In the title of this special issue, the term artistic research has been used on purpose. It signifies that the *Journal of Research Practice* (JRP), focused as it is on understanding and enhancing research practice, offers a platform for all these trends to be discussed, challenged, and developed systematically.

5. Contributions to the Special Issue

A total of 28 proposals were received in response to the call for contributions to this special issue. These came from different corners of the world. Only eight proposals were selected for their direct link with the focus of this special issue. These selected proposals came from Canada, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, South Africa, Turkey, and UK. Only four of those finally made it to the special issue. The authors of these four articles are professional artists (representing the fields of media art, painting, and visual art), who have acquired doctoral degrees in their artistic fields. Their articles delve into the issues which encapsulate the dialogical approach between creative and research practices within the academic context. This merged or integrated account forms a ground for this special issue.

The special issue starts with “A Nomos for Art and Design” by **Tom McGuirk**. While celebrating the new institutional connection between research and art/design, the article highlights the importance of ensuring that the artistic domain retains a level of autonomy within academia. The article cautions against “scholastic disposition,” which can undermine the embodied, situated, and practical aspects of art and design production. He argues that equal respect for reflecting and making is vital not only for the sake of stability of the fields of art and design, but also for the ongoing development of the broader university.

Next, “A Discrete Continuity: On the Relation Between Research and Art Practice” by **Tim O’Riley** discusses the nature of research and art practice and suggests the necessary intermingling of these activities. The author maintains that the processes of thinking, making, and reflecting are not discipline-specific. These can be found in many disciplines and fields. The author singles out “provisionality” as the key insight that art can offer other disciplines.

In “Art Portraying Medicine,” **Kaisu Koski** demonstrates how art may tackle some ethical questions in a scientific domain, such as medicine. The article explores the notion of body in medicine, seeking to problematise the view that takes patients as objects of a doctor’s manipulation. The article demonstrates how art practice can open up a discursive space that can critique uncritically held views.

The final article, “Critical Practical Analogy: A Research Tool for Reflecting and Making” by **Dino Alfier** presents a heuristic tool for artistic research, called “critical practical analogy” (CPA). It demonstrates how aesthetic objects can serve the purpose of critical investigation, even in areas other than art.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue offer a discussable overview of the development of artistic research. These articles show multiple pathways for creative practice and research practice to come together. While artistic research occupies the attention of art and design researchers around the world, we anticipate this JRP special issue will encourage researchers in other fields to think of artistic research as a space of possibilities to enhance their own research thinking and research practice.

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