

# Artists in the University

Jenny Wilson

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Positioning Artistic Research in Higher  
Education



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# Foreword

## Reasoning Through Art

Let me take up a key theme that is addressed in this book and that is highly relevant for understanding the position of artistic research and artistic researchers in academia: the idea that artistic research—though incongruent with academia at first sight—is nevertheless *equivalent* to other forms of academic research. My point, in agreement with the position expressed in this book, is that it is not equivalent. Let me explain.

The notion of ‘equivalence’ was first introduced in 1997 in a report by the working group on practice-based doctorates in the creative and performing arts, commissioned by the UK Council for Graduate Education and chaired by Sir Christopher Frayling. A year later, the notion was more extensively introduced and championed in Australia in the Strand Report.<sup>1</sup> This is how it was formulated in the Frayling report:

[The] inclusive model would involve either demonstrating/accepting that the activities and outcomes [of practice-based research in the arts] could reasonably be seen as consistent with a traditional scientific model, or broadening the model so as to encompass the entire continuum from scientific to practice-based research.... It would follow from this approach that the creative process involved in practice-based doctorates can be seen as a form of research in its own right and, as such, as *equivalent* to scientific research (p. 15, my italics).

The diffusion of disciplinary boundaries within academia and the rise of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research programmes testify to a ‘unity of reason in the diversity of its voices’ (Habermas)<sup>2</sup> and provide good grounds to defend the

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<sup>1</sup>Frayling, C. (1997). *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*. Warwick: UK Council for Graduate Education; Strand, D. (1998). *Research in the Creative Arts*. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

<sup>2</sup>Habermas, J. (2009). Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielheit ihrer Stimmen. In *Kritik der Vernunft*, Philosophische Texte, 5 (pp. 117–155). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

so-called inclusive model. This is the idea that there is room in academia for a wide variety of research approaches, programmes and methodologies. The edifice of higher education and research provides a home for such divergent research fields as medical engineering, international law, social geography and theology. It is in line with this 'inclusive model' that the highest degree in academia, the Ph.D., is now regarded not so much as a qualification in or for a particular field, but as a testimony that the holder has reached the highest level of competence, irrespective of the field of study involved. The 'proliferation of titles' one can witness alongside the Ph.D. in the field of artistic research—the doctorate in fine art(s) (DFA) in the USA, artistic doctorates in Sweden and Austria, and other titles for artists with even more fancy names in other countries—is at odds with the idea of academia as an 'inclusive' sphere of endeavour. We need to broaden our understanding of what academia is in order to include and accommodate new research fields and approaches. The history of higher education and research provides many examples of how our understanding of what research and science is has altered with the introduction of new fields, approaches and knowledge claims. From that perspective, there is no reason to exclude artistic research—research in and through the creative and performing arts—from academia.

So let there be no misunderstanding: talk about 'equivalence' was very important for the recognition of practice-based (artistic) research, and, as is also acknowledged in this volume, it helped to establish the field. But the problem with 'equivalence' is that, by putting things on a parallel, it presupposes or creates an opposition at the same time. As many of the examples in this book demonstrate, maintaining that 'artistic research is equivalent to academic research' is also saying it is not really academic research. Why would you need to say it in the first place if artistic research is at home in academia? I shall return to this question below.

But let me first spend a few words on the phenomenon of artistic research which is the central tenet of this book. I do not have to rehearse here the 'first principles' of the research domain, though opinions still differ somewhat about the theoretical rationale supporting it—the status of its objects, the kinds of knowledge and insights it claims to offer, and the methods it proposes. There is, however, one thing I want to highlight in this context: in artistic research, *practice* is central. One might say it is practice-infused research. That is, practice permeates the research on all levels.

That is true first of all with regard to the object of the research. Artistic research concerns knowledge and understanding that are embodied in art works and practices—in compositions, performances, installations, artefacts. Second, practice permeates the methods of research. The research takes place in and through artistic practice, in and through playing and making (that is why some refer to it as studio-based research). And third, the result of the research is also practice: the research delivers concrete art works and practices which figure in the world of art. Any added discursive outcome is there to support, not replace, the artistic contribution the research claims to make. Art practice is therefore also the relevant context for the research. As we know, artistic research operates in two contexts:

academia and the art world. The value of the research is assessed partly in terms of the relevance of its outcomes for and in art practice.

There is another way to describe this: the research aims at *non-propositional* forms of knowledge and understanding, at knowledge and understanding that cannot readily be put into verbal assertions; it may use *unconventional* research methods in doing so, and the results of the research are '*non-traditional* research outcomes' that have significance in practice. It follows that opinions from the art world (from *non-academic* stakeholders) also play a role in assessing the value of the research and the contribution it makes to art.

The problem with these formulations is that all of them are negative expressions: *non-propositional*, *unconventional*, *non-traditional*, *non-academic*. As if there is traditional—established, recognised, accepted, founded—research in opposition to non-traditional, and by implication, unfounded research. That is the problem with the notion of equivalence. It suggests an implicit hierarchy between real, serious research and less valuable, second-rate 'research'. Can someone tell me what it would mean to say that 'research in biochemistry is equivalent to academic research'?

As this book and the voices of its artistic researchers attest, it is time to develop, advocate and possibly export a *positive* understanding of artistic research, of reasoning in and through art, within academia. This extensive study of the position of artists and artistic research in the university is an important contribution to that understanding. By focusing in particular on university and research management, it advocates a status for artistic research within academia that will not compromise its relevance for art practice or dilute its content. Let me reinforce its practical explication, by touching on how such a positive understanding of artistic research can be developed in dialogue in academia on a conceptual level.

Here again, one can distinguish three interrelated themes. The first concerns the epistemology of artistic research. The focus of artistic research is, as mentioned, on embodied and enacted forms of knowledge and understanding—forms of knowing and understanding that cannot easily be translated into or transmitted by language. The idea of non-conceptual, non-propositional knowledge—as we now call it—has been a subject of philosophical thought since ancient Greece, starting famously with Aristotle's distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. During the history of philosophy, we encounter the idea of non-conceptual knowledge in art under different names: from Baumgarten's 'sensory knowledge' via Kant's 'aesthetic idea', Adorno's 'epistemic character', Ryle's distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', the constitutive role of tacit and personal knowledge in Polanyi, and Merleau Ponty's focus on bodily knowledge, up to the emphasis in poststructuralism and postanalytic pragmatic philosophy on that which escapes our cognitive access to the world. The point is that—viewed from a historical perspective—we, with our artistic research programme, are connected to strands of thought in tradition by people who have already done work in formulating the epistemic relevance of art. The challenge is now to combine the

insight that ‘our relation to the world as a whole ... is not one of knowing’ (Cavell) with the truism that ‘we know more than we can tell’ (Polanyi).<sup>3</sup>

In our times, non-conceptual knowledge is studied as embodied and enacted cognition in the philosophy of mind, in phenomenology and in post-Heideggerian cognitive science. Artistic researchers are advised to connect to these research domains in order to find insights and perspectives that might help them to better understand what place their research occupies within the whole of academic research. Artistic researchers connect art and understanding, and in so doing, they enrich academia with embodied and enacted perspectives on who we are and what our relationship is to the world and to other people. In the words of the philosopher and cognitive scientist Alva Noë, ‘The work of art, like that of philosophy, is the reorganization of ourselves. And this reorganization, this work, aims also at understanding’.<sup>4</sup>

The second point I want to make concerns methodology. As said, artistic research takes place in and through practice, in and through playing and making. Artistic researchers thereby additionally make use of a wide variety of research methods and techniques whose provenance lies in social science, humanities, natural science or technological research. Depending on the art form and discipline, research topic, medium and envisaged outcomes, these methods and techniques may include ethnographic research (fieldwork or participant observation, for example), survey research, interview techniques or other social science approaches, as well as historical, hermeneutic or culture-critical modes of investigation. Other artist researchers may use laboratory-like experiments and subject their inquiries to the empirical cycle of hypothesis testing. Without saying that anything goes, one might observe and defend a ‘methodological pluralism’ in artistic research.

That said, a distinctive mark of the work of artistic researchers is the constitutive role of material practices and things in their way of working. In this quality, artistic research aligns itself with what is known as the ‘practice turn’ in the sciences and humanities. The practice turn is manifest in, and is studied in, contemporary philosophy of science, for instance in the historical epistemology of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger; in science and technology studies (STS), as in the actor–network theory (Latour and others); in cultural and performance studies; and in what is now called ‘new materialism’. The point of saying this is, again, to show that we are not alone, and that we have not only historical but also contemporary allies in academia—allies in research fields and programmes which, like artistic research, foreground the importance and agency of practice in a methodological sense. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the programme track that attracted the most interest (and papers) during the last joint conference of the Society for Social Studies of Science

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<sup>3</sup>Cavell, S. (1979). *The Claim of Reason* (p. 45). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Polanyi, M. (1983). *The Tacit Dimension* (p. 83). Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith.

<sup>4</sup>Noë, A. (2016). *Art and Human Nature* (p. 138). New York: Hill and Wang.

(4S) and the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST), in Barcelona in 2016, was the one entitled STS and Artistic Research.<sup>5</sup>

Another distinctive feature of artistic research is that the primary outcome of the investigation is *art*. In the context of degree programmes and in response to the demands of funding schemes, one may expect such outcomes to be contextualised and framed by a discursive—that is, a verbal—account of the research, addressing research questions, methods, processes and a discussion of its findings. The core of the research outcome, however, is the concrete material practices it delivers—new artefacts, compositions, performances, installations, interventions—however abstract those material practices in contemporary art may be. Now one should not forget that the outcome of the research is not the research itself. Even the documentation of the research outcome, varying from audio or video registrations of performances to exhibition catalogues and so-called artist-books, does not suffice as an account of the research. Additional work has to be done to articulate and communicate the research, to show that it involves ‘a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared’.<sup>6</sup>

Well, here is an issue that is central to the current debate about artistic research. How can we understand, and how should we approach, in this context the relationship between art practice and writing? Often that relationship is felt to be one of friction, opposition or paradox. Writing gives an explicit verbal account of the implicit knowledge and understanding embodied and enacted in artistic practices and products; at the same time, art may escape or go beyond what can be expressed by words, and it may resist academic conventions of accountability. As noted above, a ‘written element’ is almost always required in the context of higher arts education, as well as by funding agencies. As a consequence, the artist-researcher in that context may feel cornered, having to simultaneously meet opposing demands. It is reassuring to note the comfort with the relationship between writing and practice expressed by the artistic researchers contributing to this book.

A fact often bypassed in the debate on art practice and writing is that *writing itself is a practice*. Giving linguistic expression to one’s research is work that demands as much dedication and commitment as creative work does. Moreover, writing is not just practice, but is creative work itself, a constructive process that enables the emergence of the new and the unforeseen. Every writer has that experience of accessing new ground while trying to formulate conjectures.

Furthermore—and even more important, I would say—while writing can be seen as a form of practice, the same is true in reverse: in the context of artistic research,

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<sup>5</sup>Together with my colleagues Peter Peters and Trevor Pinch, I intend to publish an edited volume about that meeting of research domains in the spring of 2018.

<sup>6</sup>Higher Education Funding Council for England, Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (2011), *Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014: Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions* (Bristol: HEFCE), p. 48.



*practice is a form of writing*. It is a non-propositional form of writing, to be sure, yet material practices and products in artistic research not only embody knowledge and understanding, but—as agents in a methodological sense—they are also the vehicles by which that knowledge and understanding is produced and conveyed. Here, practice is making a case, a claim; this makes it a discursive practice that comprises (paradoxically?) non-discursive, that is, non-propositional, material.

I must credit my colleague Michael Schwab from the Royal College of Art in London for coining the term ‘exposition’ for this form of writing. Exposing practice as research amounts to assembling material—images, sounds, texts, artefacts—which together make a case, a claim, whereby the balance between words and other articulations may vary. Once we have accepted that material practices and ‘products’ of our field of inquiry are not only constitutive in a methodological sense, but that they also count as valid outcomes of the inquiry,<sup>7</sup> one of the tasks we now have to set ourselves is to rethink what ‘discursivity’ means, and what reasoning is.

Let me conclude by observing that reasoning through art is a cutting-edge form of academic research. Artistic research is not equivalent to academic research; it is one of its front lines. In another way, however, there is still a discrepancy between artistic research and academia, or better: a deficiency of artistic research within academia. This involves an imbalance between what research methods and theories we take on or appropriate from other disciplines and research programmes, and what we have to offer to the rest of higher education and research. One often sees artistic research projects and Ph.D. submissions in which methods and techniques are used that derive from other areas, such as the social sciences or the humanities. There is nothing wrong with that if it is done appropriately. But since the focus of artistic research is on practice, in the epistemological and methodological sense as sketched above, and since the knowledge and understanding it provides is ‘exposed’ through practice, it is now time to also highlight our distinctiveness in and to the rest of academia. It is time to offer and advocate our understanding of ‘discursivity’, of reasoning through art. It is time to advertise the methodological relevance of material practices and things. It is time to show to our colleagues in academia that there are innovative rich-media ways to document, publish, disseminate and evaluate research outcomes.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it is important to realise that we are not alone in academia. The times when we had to profile artistic research in opposition to disciplines such as art history have passed. It is now time not just to affirm our place in the university but also to join forces with others to rethink academia.

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<sup>7</sup>Schwab, M., & Borgdorff, H. (Eds.) (2014)., *The Exposition of Artistic Research: Publishing Art in Academia*. Leiden: Leiden University Press; ‘Writing’, International Conference on Artistic Research, The Hague, 28–29 April 2016. <http://www.sarconference2016.net>.

<sup>8</sup>This is what we have tried to do in establishing the *Journal for Artistic Research* and its associated *Research Catalogue*. <http://jar-online.net>; <http://researchcatalogue.net>.

This book highlights practical discrepancies to be addressed and provides pointers to how we, as artists, artistic researchers, government policy makers and university managers collectively, can successfully achieve this goal and create a truly inclusive model of academia.

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# Acronyms and Terms Used in This Book

AAH	Australian Academy of Humanities
AAWP	Australasian Association of Writing Program
ACUADS	Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools
ACUPA	Association of College and University Policy Administrators
ADSA	Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (formerly Australasian Drama Studies Association)
AGCR	Australian Competitive Grants Register
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AOU	Academic Organisational Unit
APA	Australian Postgraduate Award
APRA	Australasian Performing Rights Association
ARC	Australian Research Council
ARWU	Academic Ranking of World Universities
ASPERA	Australian Screen Production, Education and Research Association
ATN	Australian Technology Network
AVCC	Australian Vice Chancellors Committee
BAA	Backing Australia's Ability
CAE	College of Advanced Education
CHASS	Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
DAASH	Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities
DDCA	Australian Council of the Deans and Directors of Creative Arts Incorporated
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DETYA	Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
DIISR	Department of Industry, Innovation, Science and Research
DIISRTE	Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
DMA	Doctor of Musical Arts
DVA	Doctor of Visual Arts



DVCR	Deputy Vice Chancellor Research
ECR	Early Career Researcher
EFTSU	Equivalent Full Time Student Unit
ERA	Excellence In Research for Australia
FOR	Field of Research
Go8	Group of Eight
HASS	Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
HCA	Humanities and Creative Arts
HERDC	Higher Education Research Data Collection
IRU	Innovative Research Universities
MCR	Mid-Career Researcher
NACHTMUS	National Council of Heads of Tertiary Music Schools
NACTMUS	National Council of Tertiary Music Schools
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety
PVCR	Pro Vice Chancellor Research
RFCD	Research Fields, Courses and Disciplines
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University
RQF	Research Quality Framework
SCR	Senior Career Researcher
SJTU	Shanghai Jiao Tong University
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (Council of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences terminology)
TAFE	Training and Further Education
TDCA	Tertiary Dance Council of Australia
THES	Times Higher Education Supplement
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNS	Unified National System (of Education)
VISCOPY	Visual Arts Copyright Collecting Agency
VPA	Visual and Performing Arts