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PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH IN VISUAL ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

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Drawing from Hall's own experience with the first Practice-led Research (PLR) PhD in Visual Art at UKZN, this paper argues for the potential of PLR to generate a very particular kind of knowledge based on the dyadic relationship between the artist and the intelligence of materials.

Introduction

Drawing on specific contextual experience, this paper will explore the potential of Practice-led Research (PLR) within tertiary academic contexts to offer particular ways of knowing that might have value in the process of decolonising knowledge and practice in Africa. The perspectives, including the challenges and limitations of PLR, I reflect on in this paper arise from having been the first student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) to graduate with a PLR PhD in Visual Art in 2013. Subsequent understandings of this research model result from my having supervised Visual Arts Post Graduate Students since 2016 who have used PLR as their research methodology at the Centre for Visual Art (CVA), UKZN.

PLR has the potential to generate a very particular kind of knowledge. This research methodology calls for nuanced agility to explore and combine a variety of ways of knowing: on the one hand, as Barbara Bolt asserts, a methodology shaped by and through the "very process or tissue of making" or "material thinking,"[1] a term she coined with Paul Carter.[2] This methodology presupposes a dyadic relationship between artist and the intelligence of materials to generate new insights, ways of thinking, and, in my case, ways of making art combined with, on the other hand, theoretical, written research. Ideally, the outcome of the imbrication of two languages and two modes of thinking is holistic—and which reflects an integrated rather than parallel relationship.

At the time I registered as a student for a PLR PhD in mid-2007 at UKZN, there were no academic members of staff at the institution who held a PLR PhD in Visual Art, and neither were there precedents of other candidates who had completed such research at other universities in South Africa. I was, therefore, in an unenviable position of pioneering this degree at UKZN.

Perhaps useful to mention here, is that my motivation for embarking on these studies was not driven by an interest in pioneering PLR at UKZN for its own sake, neither was I aspiring for employment promotion since I was not formally working in academia at the time. My primary motivation was to develop and expand my artistic practice in a rigorous way. With the benefit of hindsight, I realise there might be easier ways of achieving this—or not, as the case may be.

An interpretation of PLR

Given the various understandings of art-making as research—"practice-based," "practice-led," "practice as," and "artistic research"—it is important to clarify the interpretation of PLR that I adopt in this paper. Drawing from various authors including Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge,[3] Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt,[4] Julian Klein,[5] and G. James Daichent,[6] my interpretation is thus: as is foundational to all artistic research as scholarship, PLR endorses that artistic practice is seminal in generating knowledge and research,[7] in a variety of media and across disciplines. This factor is central to PLR embracing Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), which is an important factor given the focus of this conference.[7]

As indicated, PLR comprises a dual submission of interrelated artwork and writing.[8] Perhaps obvious, but worth emphasising, is that this dual submission must be submitted for examination as a whole and viewed as such. An essential aspect of PLR is that the research must originate in artistic practice and not in theoretical research.[9] Like any research model, PLR must be driven by research questions that reflect the centrality of practice to provoke enquiry to gain new knowledge.[10]

Research, in this double articulation between practice and theory, is developed in such a way that theory emerges from a reflexive practice while, at the same time, that practice is informed by theory.[11] Again, as mentioned, PLR should reflect simultaneously developed imbrications of visual and verbal research. Some of these imbrications might be regarded as provisional rather than complete or autonomous entities in a modernist sense. Practice and theory, two languages and two ways of creating meaning are thus structured in a deliberate relationship. The defining feature in PLR is the integrated—rather than parallel—nature of visual and verbal research, which fundamentally informs both the art-making and the writing.

Finally, it is important to note that any contribution or knowledge produced through PLR will be subjectively-based. Practice-led research is similar to enactive knowledge in this sense. Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Evan Thompson's interpretation of enactive knowledge confirms the interrelated nature of knowledge-making and subjectivity.[12] Drawing on Varela et al., Patricia Cain argues that,

> the individual plays a role in what comes to be known. What the individual comes to know is created from the inter-subjective relationship between oneself and the world; the self is not sealed off but part of the knowledge-making process. Knowledge is subjective because it is not independent of the knower. Rather, it bears the mark of an individual's structure. In other words, what we come to know is generated by and relative to ourselves.[13]

Further to the subjective role in this knowledge-making process, Sally Adnams Jones in examining transformation in visual art,[14] holds that in the act of doing and making, artistic practice might be considered a performative gerund—half verb, half noun; a process and a product that is both semantic and somatic.[15]

Debates

This interpretation of PLR might seem fairly clear-cut, as many things do, on paper. As you know, there is no absolute consensus in academic contexts regarding the nature of artistic practice as scholarship. Additionally, many scholars and artists question the rationale for introducing a doctoral degree in studio practice in the first place.

At the time of conducting my PhD research, I took into account some of these debates and misgivings, which included:

- the rationale for a studio practice doctoral degree
- the wisdom of rigorously integrating art-making and writing into a research model
- whether art-making creates knowledge, "expression, Yes. Emotion, passion, aesthetic pleasure, meaning. But not usually knowledge…"[16]
- and the extent to which it is possible to define the nature of the knowledge this model may generate.

On the whole, these points seem to suggest that art-making as research holds a conflictual position in academic contexts between bureaucratic imperatives and historical academic mores versus less formulaic processes and thinking associated with artistic practice. I will elaborate on these points in the following discussion.

James Elkins holds that, in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Ireland, an economic rationale drove the development of practice-led research and, in turn, the terms "research" and "new knowledge" with respect to studio practice; tertiary

institutions in these countries allocate "money and allowances to hire more teachers based on the graduation levels of their students."[17] In light of this, the emergence of a doctoral degree in studio practice is hardly surprising.

Like Elkins, Steve Garner interprets these requirements as driven by a defensive motivation for academic respectability and funding:

> Historically it is ... precisely because fine art education has abandoned many of its core traditions and traditional independence in order to come under the university umbrella that it finds itself having to "defend itself" and its tradition in such terms, terms which are not always of its own choosing and finds itself having to squeeze into the often ill-fitting garment of "Research." Such it seems is the price of academic respectability and of course funding (who pays the piper calls the tune). This can turn out to be a high price indeed when those outside the discipline impose their own sometimes inappropriate paradigms.[18]

Regarding the wisdom of integrating writing and art-making into a research model, Edward Taylor argues for its value, holding the phrase often attributed to Immanuel Kant: "theory without practice is empty; practice without theory is blind."[19] Hence, the need to bring theory and practice together in such a way that we can theorise our practice and practise our theories.[20]

In advocating such a relationship between theory and practice, Taylor stresses that the current dominant network culture is radically transforming the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of our context.[21] As artists and academics, we cannot ignore that information technologies responsible for a shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy are likely to bring unpredictable and unavoidable changes to higher education. And, thus, we cannot afford to disregard the changing ways in which we communicate and make sense of the world.

For Elkins, the key conceptual difficulty regarding PLR lies in the foundational requirement of simultaneously and/or alternately making, understanding, and writing about one's own practice: "it is hard enough to find the right words for visual art, but harder still to take the making along with the talk about the making."[22] At the time of my research, I concurred with Elkins and added that, in my experience, it is usually hard enough making art in the first place. In contrast to Elkins' misgivings, Macleod and Holdridge argue that it is precisely the tension between the languages and thinking modes of writing and art-making that helps generate "the depth of thought encountered in the final submissions."[23]

The following discussion will reflect on the ways and the extent to which I and the students I have supervised were able to integrate art-making and writing productively: to eloquently articulate the insights that arose and consider whether these constitute knowledge.

In my own work, I aimed for the research process and written text to assist rather than confuse, hinder, or stand irrelevant to my art-making process. I hoped that the text would not merely explain, describe or contextualise my artistic processes and artwork, but would "play a critical and complementary role" to the practice in revealing, but equally in shifting, my thinking and practice.[24]

Additionally, the following heuristics and theoretical frameworks were useful in tackling the dual nature of PLR. Regarding heuristics, I endeavoured to recognise and manage the inherent multiple and contrasting roles of artist, researcher, and critic, with the attendant subjective, objective, etic, and emic positions required of this dual research. By simply being aware and deliberate, where possible and appropriate, of these various—and at times, mutually exclusive positions—was useful.

The frameworks of "material thinking"[25] and contemporary media theory, following Marshall McLuhan,[26] helped clarify the ways in which the integrated structure of PLR might generate new insights. The terms "material thinking" or "material productivity," coined by Carter and Bolt, respectively,[27] take into account the collaboration of the artist's creative intelligence with artistic processes and materials. Carter asserts that the making of works of art, which includes visual art, architecture, writing, performance, and dance, involves material thinking.[28] The concept of material thinking makes the "handling of materials" essential to the artistic encounter.[29] Barrett and Bolt assert that artistic materials and processes of production are not inconsequential and passive, but play a significant "intelligent" role in interaction with the artist's creative intelligence.[30] Accordingly, material thinking may be considered as the relations and insights that arise during artistic production where the artist's creative intelligence collaborates with artistic processes and materials in a dyadic structure. Thus, all the elements in this dyadic collaboration—in PLR, this includes visual and verbal processes and media—play an indispensable role in the research process. Importantly, the research outcomes are specific to all these elements.

The notion of material thinking correlates with aspects of contemporary media theory. McLuhan contended in 1964 that the "medium is the message,"[31] implying a continuity of "informational meaning and technical expression."[32] The concept is broader than this and includes the idea that our experience and knowledge is brokered by media, as articulated by Friedrich Kittler's claim that "media determine our situation."[33] W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen make the McLuhanesque suggestion that media are the prosthesis of human agency.[34] In this framework, thinking is therefore not neutral: all thinking requires a medium. Moreover, the evolution of thinking and the development of media, as in material thinking, are synchronised. Applying this to PLR, the "prosthetic" medium for thinking and research comprises the deliberate integration of writing and artistic practice. PLR's textual and practice outputs, therefore, cannot be seen in isolation. This research model brokers interrelated thinking, practice, and writing. The relevance of these frameworks is simply to underscore that media in this research model is a hybrid of visual and verbal research, and research outcomes or knowledge generated is specific to this hybridity.

I have to acknowledge that I struggled with achieving fluid hybridity between writing and practice. I found the task of writing clearly and insightfully about my artwork difficult and very time-consuming. In line with the latter part of Elkins' statement,[35] I found that each aspect of the research model—writing and art-making—was very demanding and that it was hard to carry out both simultaneously and adequately.

In examining transformation and the ways in which personal and collective transformation can take place through visual art, Adnams Jones points to the sequential nature of understanding experience, first visually and, then, verbally.[36] She holds that "visual art enables artists to express experience metaphorically, before the artist necessarily has the verbage to do so."[37] Bolt, quoting Martin Heidegger, corroborates.[38] She suggests that theory only occurs once we have somatically understood experience,

> Heidegger's notion of handlability builds on the assumption that our understanding of the world is predicated upon our dealings in the world. According to this perspective, we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling. Through such dealings, our apprehension is neither merely perceptual nor rational. Rather such dealings or handling reveals its own kind of tacit knowledge.[39]

A UKZN student, whom I supervised for a PLR MA, emphasised the sequential and the lengthy periods of time necessary for understanding emergent insights generated by PLR: a process, moreover, that could not be hurried.[40] Caroline Birch reflects,

> I found the element of time to be intrinsic to PLR in a particular way. A core aspect of PLR is that one's research questions issue directly from one's art-making … This takes time. I had to make art until my questions appeared in an initially rudimentary form. Then I had to keep making art, finding relevant research—in the form of literature, theory and artworks—and applying it to my art-making … This was done by spending time developing art-making methods from these sources.
>
> These … methods seemed to bring about insight or understanding either in their particular context or generally in this research. This understanding seemed to emerge sometimes immediately but usually after a period of time. Additionally, this kind of insight could not be rushed in any way … This process refined my research questions as well as my art-making practice. This took further time.[41]

Regarding the extent to which it is possible to define the nature of the knowledge this research model may generate, this student felt that there were moments where the depth of certain experiences drove transformation, yet could not be amply described in academic language. Such moments thus remain unsaid in her dissertation.

The matter of verbal language adequately conveying "tacit" knowledge gained from practice is likely to continue to perplex. In my own research, while I attempted to rigorously and objectively examine and interpret my artwork, I was under no illusion that I might wholly account for and understand the artworks I made, including all aspects of my artistic practice and process.

Especially towards the end of my research, when I understood PLR more fully, the verbal and visual imbrications of this dual research served to complement each other, each highlighting and amplifying different aspects of my central concern, which was the generative nature of drawing. Theory and practice in my research strengthened each other. This could be seen as a case for PLR. However, I would not go as far as to say that I "theorised my practice and practised my theories."[42] The art-making process, in my experience, is more complex and defies a strict application and imposition of theory. My sense is that this endorses Bolt's assertion, that the understanding that arises through the handling of materials is neither merely perceptual nor rational; that these insights are a kind of "tacit" or emergent knowledge.[43]

Distanciation

While artistic practice and writing are necessarily integrated in this research model, my view is that written texts can offer distanciation to artistic practice—and, especially, to the tacit knowledge that might arise through material thinking. Kevin Kelly and Hilde van Vlaenderen are both of the view that reflection and evaluation necessarily involve an etic perspective (view from without) as well an emic perspective (view from within).[44] Paul Ricoeur, as explained by Kelly, succinctly describes the value of distanciation:

> Distanciation adds to meaning not by imposition, but by pointing to the subjective and contextual limits of understanding. No matter how thoroughly we understand a context from

> within, there are certain things about the context that are only going to become evident when we look at it from the outside.[45]

I interpret the art-making process as emic perspective and the written process as etic perspective, and the two perspectives as complementary. I endeavoured to use the writing process to reflect on my work and to write in such a way as to convey the nuanced, complex, and idiosyncratic character of my art-making process. Thus, I sought to harness the reflective and evaluative potential of this dual research and to guard against the text imposing a straitjacket of order, coherence, and meaning onto the artworks,[46] and onto the tacit knowledge generated by the art-making process.

Having completed this research, I do still consider the art-making process as emic perspective and the written process as etic perspective. However, additional factors during this research provided etic perspective, a perspective from the outside. In particular, in November 2011, I was given an interim assessment of my artwork by a panel of experts in the fine art field. The value of this assessment on the development of my work was significant. It is not relevant for this presentation to provide details about the development of my work as a consequence of this assessment. Suffice to say that, in my view, a written text in this research model on its own cannot proffer all the necessary etic perspective an artist may need in this research model, and that discussions with experts in the field should be formalised and regular.

Conclusion

Let me return to Macleod and Holdridge's assertion that, in PLR, it is the tension between the languages and thinking modes of writing and art-making that helps generate "the depth of thought encountered in the final submissions."[47] And, to return to a question I asked myself during my research: was any depth of thought in my final submissions a result of the tension and hybridity of the two languages and thinking modes, or was the depth of thought a consequence of sustained enquiry in each? I experienced aspects of this research as frustrating—in particular, the fact that thorough writing and theoretical research prevented me from sustained art-making for certain periods. Did this frustration in any way contribute to the tension between the languages and modes of thinking that, in addition, generated "depth of thought"? When I submitted my research, I felt unable to answer this question one way or another with any conviction, despite having devoted a great amount of thought and research to answering it.

Some of my work, particularly that towards the end of my research, seemed to fully address in practice and in concept my central research question. Does an artwork create new knowledge? Or will success—even in the most favourable case—lie not in the creation of new knowledge, but in the fact that I produced some powerful artworks as a consequence of sustained, open-ended exploratory art-making, drawing skill, excellent thinking (material thinking), and exploitation of my particular artistic methodology?

I consider that PLR assisted with deepening my artistic practice and facilitated a clearer understanding of my central research concerns. However, if I take the view that these artworks constitute or contain new knowledge, what indicators with respect to my artworks would I use to measure these shifts in understanding? Are these inappropriate paradigms forcing artistic practice into "the ill-fitting garment of 'Research"?[48] And, how might these experiences of artistic practice as scholarship assist with decolonising research and knowledge in Africa? How will we know if PLR

has played a role in dismantling the complex modes of thinking and reference that bind us to historical paradigms? What indicators will we use to measure change?

I have argued that PLR, with its double articulation of theory and art-making, has the potential to generate new ways of knowing. Importantly, this knowledge may be "tacit" or "emergent" knowledge, and that which references individual experience. The core value of PLR in relation to decolonising research and knowledge may, therefore, lie in its potential to generate ways of knowing that are individual, somatic, subtle, complex, and non-formulaic. The central difficulty with PLR, however, seems to lie in verbally articulating such shifts in thinking and art-making that arise from this performative gerund of a methodology.[49]

A further consideration to developing artistic practice as research in our context might involve a revision of the historic academic hierarchy of languages. Adnams Jones proposes that, with transformation, a balanced ecology of capacities takes place where cognitive faculties are partnered, thus, moving away from one dominating the other. She says,

> When individuals express themselves through art, "feeling," "telling," and "making" are partnered—a systems partnership rather than one cognitive faculty dominating another. Transformation can therefore be viewed as a shift in power, a movement away from dominance of mind over body or words over images. Partnership happens internally, with the partnering of the unconscious and the conscious, as we work with the layers of our psyche … transformation is not a form of sublimation of feelings into thought, suggesting mind is "higher" than body, or thoughts are "higher" than feelings, but rather a balanced ecology of our capacities.[50]

In the light of this, PLR is certainly a step in the right direction in relation to the profoundly complex transformation necessary in our context but, perhaps, what is called for is a greater proficiency in all our capacities where reliance on words to ultimately convey meaning will be reviewed.

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Notes

1 Bolt, 'Materializing Pedagogies?', 1.
2 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 31.
3 Macleod and Holdridge, 'The Enactment of Thinking', 197.
4 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 29–30.
5 Klein, 'What Is Artistic Research?', 4–5
6 Daichendt, *Artist Scholar*, 3.
7 Klein, 'What Is Artistic Research?', 4–5.
8 Macleod and Holdridge, 'The Enactment of Thinking', 197.
9 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 30.
10 Daichendt, *Artist Scholar*, 3.
11 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 29.
12 Varela, Rosch, and Thompson, *The Embodied Mind*, 16; 150.
13 Cain, *Drawing*, 54.
14 Adnams Jones, 'Transformation through Visual Art', 47–48.
15 Adnams Jones, 'Transformation through Visual Art', 51.
16 Elkins, *Artists with PhDs*, 116.
17 Elkins, 'Afterword: On Beyond Research and New Knowledge', 241.
18 Garner, *Writing on Drawing Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, 20.
19 Kant's famous remark was "Thoughts without contents are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind," *Critique of Pure Reason*, 45.
20 Taylor, 'An Update of Transformative Learning Theory', 234.
21 Taylor, 'An Update of Transformative Learning Theory', 233-4.
22 Elkins, 'Afterword: On Beyond Research and New Knowledge', 246.
23 Macleod and Holdridge, *Thinking through Art*, 87.
24 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 31.
25 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 30.
26 McLuhan, Fiore, and Agel, *The Medium Is the Massage*, 15.
27 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 30.
28 Carter, *Material Thinking*, xi.
29 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 31.
30 Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 31.
31 McLuhan, Fiore, and Agel, *The Medium Is the Massage*, 15.
32 Hansen, 'Media Theory', 2.
33 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, xxxix.
34 Mitchell and Hansen, *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, 4.
35 Elkins, 'Afterword: On Beyond Research and New Knowledge', 246.
36 Adnams Jones, 'Transformation through Visual Art', 47.
37 Adnams Jones, 'Transformation through Visual Art', 49.
38 Bolt, 'Materializing Pedagogies?', 1.
39 Bolt, 'Materializing Pedagogies?', 1.
40 Birch, 'Poised in Space', 94.
41 In the interests of maintaining the nuanced nature of her insights, I quote Birch at length and have only removed the citations; Birch, 'Poised in Space', 94.
42 Taylor, 'An Update of Transformative Learning Theory', 233–4.
43 Bolt, 'Materializing Pedagogies?', 1.
44 Kelly, 'Hermeneutics in Action: Empathy and Interpretation in Qualitative Research', 399-400; Van Vlaenderen, 'Participatory Research for Rural Development', 379.
45 Kelly, 'Hermeneutics in Action: Empathy and Interpretation in Qualitative Research', 400.
46 Aulich and Lynch, *Critical Kitaj*, 46.
47 Macleod and Holdridge, *Thinking through Art*, 87.
48 Garner, *Writing on Drawing Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, 20.
49 Adnams Jones, 'Transformation through Visual Art', 51.
50 Adnams Jones, 'Transformation through Visual Art', 53.

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