

## Recognising practice-led research ... at last!

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### **Abstract**

*Practice-led research is a notoriously difficult concept to define – and this challenge is exacerbated by the tendency of arts practice to celebrate the novel, the original, the unusual and to subvert the expected. No sooner will the boundaries of acceptable arts enquiry have been enlarged to accommodate practice-led research than artists will be challenging these limitations (Petelin, 2006). Nonetheless, some things can be claimed of practice-led research. For example, it is:*

- *Subject to its own standards of rigour and validity;*
- *Assessable according to judgements of 'good' and 'bad';*
- *Experiential and qualitative;*
- *Non-quantifiable;*
- *The only methodology available through which to pursue some research questions.*

*The definition and process of research implies a prolonged engagement with a specific research question, or a suite of inter-connected questions. This paper begins that process with respect to the recognition of practice-led research, re-introduced to the Australian research environment as a part of the proposed Research Quality Framework (and following on from decade-long recognition by the British Research Assessment Exercise).*

This is a momentous year, and not solely for the young artists that this National Graduate Show celebrates. The Hatched '07 exhibitors are entering a re-configured arts research environment characterised – in Australia – by a new acceptance of practice-led research. More than a decade after the second round of the British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, 1995) acknowledged the importance of the non-traditional research outputs of Practice-led research, Australia is following suit. No longer will artists find their research dismissed as lacking in appropriate academic outputs: instead there is growing evidence of a clear appreciation that artistic research is not only rigorous in itself, but it has relevance to other (more traditional) research and disciplinary practices (Green & Haseman, 2006).

Practice-led research is a notoriously difficult concept to define – and this challenge is exacerbated by the tendency of arts practice to celebrate the novel, the original, the unusual and to subvert the expected. No sooner will the boundaries of acceptable arts enquiry have been enlarged to accommodate practice-led research than artists will be challenging these limitations (Petelin, 2006). Nonetheless, some things can be claimed of practice-led research. For example, it is:

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The definition and process of research implies a prolonged engagement with a specific research question, or a suite of inter-connected questions. Typically, the question might arise first and then the progress of the research project – and the art work – would be dictated thereafter by the refinement and exploration of the question and its related issues through practice. For example, an artist might choose to interrogate the statement that ‘Practice-led research is non-quantifiable’ by exploring a range of indicators of quantity as part of a research project to establish whether and how it is possible to communicate both a quantitative perspective and an artistic one through the refinement of an arts research practice.

While much art is created for reasons other than a conscious research process (in response to an emotional imperative, or a commission, for example), this is not the case for a practice-led researcher keen to establish bona fides in terms of the rigour and validity of their work. Indeed, partly because of a certain tentativeness in assessing practice-led research, examiners and reviewers seek out the hallmarks of academic, artistic and practitioner antecedents (Holbrook et al, 2006). For many researchers such demands threaten the purity of the research endeavour since most acceptable evidence of practice-led research includes a requirement to record the outputs of the project in a way that can be interrogated into the future and built on by the researchers that are to follow.

The record of the practice-led research becomes an important element of (some might claim proxy for) the rigour associated with a conventional qualitative research project. One of the arguments here is that research should not only be done, it should be seen to be done: and should also be shown to be done. Practice-led researchers – and those that evaluate and celebrate practice-led research – seek ways to justify a dividing line between art-as-itself and art as practice-led research. If all art were research, for example, the celebration of practice-led research would become redundant: subsumed into appreciation of art. Instead, we need some way to differentiate the researcher who explores research questions through practice-led methodologies and creates new knowledge that might take artistic form and the artist who creates a new work without a conscious engagement with research. If no such distinction is made then every published novelist might claim a Masters in Creative Writing, and every exhibited painter a Doctorate. The manner in which practice-led researchers typically ‘code’ their research practice is via documentation and evidentiary trails that chart the trajectory from research question to finished practice-led research artwork output (Stapleton, 2006).

Carefully-charted research development, recorded in a way that reflects the progression of practice-led research over the period of investigation, allows the assessor to evaluate rigour:

- Has the project clearly included original effort and endeavour over a significant period of time?
- Is the research progression logical?
- Does it establish clear links between elements of the enquiry and the steps taken to investigate it?
- Is the output justifiable in terms of an artistic or other practice-based relationship with the research question under investigation?
- Are irrelevancies adequately excluded so that enough is said about that which is relevant while that which is superfluous is effectively excised?

While rigour is necessary to meet the full requirements of practice-led research, it is not sufficient. Validity is also required.

Valid research in practice-led terms establishes itself as addressing an issue which is of relevance to the artistic community for which the research is undertaken. This does not preclude new ideas and investigations: but it does mean that a new arena opened up for research has to be justified in terms of what has gone before and why this endeavour is relevant (notwithstanding the fact that it has not previously been pursued). In this way the research follows established protocols from both scientific practice and the humanities that sees research as 'standing on the shoulders of history' – establishing the boundaries of what is known at the start of the project and demonstrating how more has been discovered and communicated by the end. As with all research, the practice-led paradigm creates new knowledge and successfully convinces assessors of this fact (Holbrook et al, 2006).

Given attempts at rigour and validity, what characteristics would indicate 'good' practice-led research as opposed to 'bad'? In the words of the assessors' conundrum: Can bad art be good research, and vice versa? Before explaining the reasons behind an unqualified 'Yes', it becomes important to ask – Who is judging? A capacity to assess good from bad requires exposure to relativities; it implies that assessors have been honing their skills and developing their frames of reference alongside pioneer practice-led researchers. Further, it suggests that the assessor has not only had access to a range of research outputs, but that practice-led researchers have had access to a range of assessors and a community of learning has developed around the various art forms through which practice the research questions are interrogated.

In Australia, there is some evidence that the tradition of assessing practice-led research has yet to reach a confident maturity. One indicator of this is the perception of Holbrook et al that the 42 degree reports (on 15 higher degree by research practice-led theses) 'resonated with

the 'newness' of examination in the field, the assessment language showed marked difference between the exegesis and the exhibition, and the relative emphasis in assessment centred on the exegesis' (2006, p. 86). Such a retreat into convention – through dealing in large part with the written aspects of the work – indicates a hesitancy on the part of the examiners to deal robustly with the artistic element of the practice-led research as with the exegesis: the part which records the claims for rigour, validity and research recognition.

While judges remain uncertain, researchers attempt to second-guess what is required of them. (At the same time they hold fast to the belief that they cannot be expected to create art in the pursuit of a research question and also produce conventional 'research papers'.) Even in the UK, where practice-led research outputs have been accepted as part of the research quantum since 1996, researchers require several iterations of assessment and feedback to 'learn' what the assessors are looking for. As the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise expert panel for the Unit of Assessment for Drama, Dance and Performance Arts commented about the Panel 66 submissions: 'while some submissions offered excellent documentation/supporting evidence for practice as research, overall the level of presentation was not strong, making for some difficulties in assessment' (RAE, 2001, p. 3). It can be expected that both parties – assessed and assessors – will have developed their shared vocabulary further in time for the UK's 2008 RAE assessment round.

The argument here is more than 'good is in the eye of the beholder' – it accepts that outputs of practice-led research will vary in quality, and that some research projects will be better than others. It also assumes that both judge and judged will be developed by further exposure to the paradigm. Holbrook et al's investigation establishes that there is a way to go yet in Australia: not that the task is an impossible one (2006).

An assertion that practice-led research is qualitative is hardly controversial with Denzin a major theorist of performance ethnography for over 15 years (1991, 2003) and, with Lincoln, an authority upon qualitative methodologies (2003, 2005). Haseman, however, argues that any classification of the practice-led methodology as qualitative means that the definition of qualitative research becomes so inclusive and rubbery as to be close to breaking. Instead, says Haseman, it is time to recognise practice-led research as a research paradigm that is *additional to* quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Haseman suggests a methodological triumvirate: quantitative, qualitative and performative (2006). An argument for difference – such as this one – allows the acknowledgement of specific features for performative research. One of these features is the experiential nature of practice, and the relevance of the experience of the art work – or other practice-led outputs – to the evaluation of the practice-led elements of the research endeavour.

While numbers can be integrated into an art form (in a manner and in ways analogous to colour), they are neither necessary nor sufficient to establish methodological purity. On the contrary, when it comes to practice-led research the integration of a quantitative dimension would seem to raise questions about the integrity of the practice. Given that validity and rigour are embedded in the research process, and in the relation to the field of the research in question, issues of number become a distraction and a reference to other frameworks of meaning and authority.

Many questions can be investigated using either or both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Indeed, for researchers who see value (and rigour, and validity) in investigating a problem with a range of approaches the opportunity for 'triangulation' means that overlapping knowledge(s) produced by both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are stronger than either in isolation. It is also possible that practice-led research can add value to the triangulation approach. In the meantime, however, there are a range of research questions – in design, visual arts, textiles, performing arts, photomedia and creative writing, amongst other areas – that have barely begun to be explored. This is not because of lack of inclination, or even lack of skill, but due to lack of opportunity.

Research of any sort – practice-led, quantitative, qualitative – takes time, energy and resources. Up until now it has been comparatively hard for tertiary institutions to justify the allocation of these resources because there has been such limited recognition of practice-led research outputs. The exception to this general rule is in the recognition of practice-led research as a valid methodology for higher degrees by research. However, institutional experience with these degrees (AARE, 2003) indicates that this area of knowledge and expertise is still highly fraught and contested. As the 2007 batch of Hatched graduates takes its place in the profession, however, the arts research landscape is all about to change.

While Australia's Research Quality Framework has been beset with problems and challenges for the majority of disciplines to be assessed using the scheme, its introduction offers an immense opportunity for those who advocate – and those who use – practice-led research. For the first time in Australian research history, practice-led research has been allocated an arena in which its unique approaches and advantages can be appropriately explored. The RQF Assessment Panel 13 (DEST, 2006) focuses on the 'Creative arts, design and built environment' and for the first time sets in motion the action research cycle which will enable assessors and assessed to refine their understandings of practice-led research in Australia. For this cohort of new graduates, this is indeed a propitious time to be Hatched.

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## Biography

Lelia Green is Professor of Communications and Associate Dean, Research and Higher Degrees in the Faculty of Education and Arts, Edith Cowan University. As a former TV Researcher and Director, Lelia has had a career-long commitment to applied research in media and the creative industries; including informal locales such as FanFiction and LAN/Gaming circles. Lately, her involvement with creative and performing arts research has

seen her enrol in a practice-led MA in Creative Writing (at UWA) and contribute to critiques of practice-led methods that lead to non-traditional research outputs.