

Exploring the relationship between theory and practice, thinking and making

FOREWORD BY LEORA FARBER

Since the 1980s, robust debate has developed within international academic institutions and, more recently, in South African universities, about the complex relationships between creative practices and production, and research, or, put differently, between the relationships between theory and practice, thinking and making. In the fields of art and design, the roles of the artist/designer and the so-called ‘traditional’ researcher have come closer to one another and have been shown to have the potential to merge in productive ways. This merged, or ‘integrated approach’ can be considered as a critical component of Practice-Led Research (PLR).

On 15 and 16 October 2009, The University of Johannesburg’s (UJ) Research Centre, *Visual Identities in Art and Design* (VIAD), presented a two-day colloquium on aspects of PLR in creative production, titled *On making: Integrating approaches to practice-led research in art and design*. The colloquium included papers on dramaturgy and composing, but focused specifically on PLR in art and design. The colloquium was complimented by the 2009 Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) Staff Exhibition. Through the exhibition format, the curator, Rory Bester, explored how creative processes can give rise to research questions, and, in turn, marshal research arguments and conclusions. The exhibition was held together by a sustained interest in the way individual creative processes work, as well as how curation and display contribute to the place and role of exhibitions in university research output. This publication represents a collection of selected papers, most of which

have undergone revision, from the *On making* conference, and also includes invited contributions from leading South African artists, practitioners, educators and academics working in the field of PLR.

Within South Africa, criteria for assessment of creative work as research outputs have been set out in the ‘Department of Education: Subsidy for Creative Outputs’ document (2008).ⁱ Other initiatives in this area include ‘Testing criteria for recognising practice as research in the performing arts in South Africa with particular reference to the case of drama and theatre’ (2008) – a report by Veronica Baxter, Mark Fleishman, Temple Hauptfleisch and Alex Sutherland on a National Research Foundation (NRF) project which focuses on practice as research in the performing arts in South Africa. Several universities have followed these leads by instituting their own internal processes for the

evaluation of creative work towards university subsidisation across various fields such as Visual Arts, Drama, Music, and Communication Design. PLR-based Masters and Doctoral degrees are currently being offered at several South African institutions; others are in the process of setting up Doctoral degrees with a PLR emphasis across these different disciplines. Thus, at an institutional level, assessment criteria for various forms of PLR in art and design have emerged, both locally and internationally.

Arising from the international, and, to a lesser extent, local debates around PLR, has been the proliferation of terminology, as well as approaches to this mode of research inquiry. Amongst the various definitions of PLR, for the purposes of the colloquium, it was considered as a ‘self-reflexive’ form of research within which

- the artist/designer/creative practitioner provides a rigorous critical analysis of their work, positioning it within broader contextual/theoretical/ historical / discursive research paradigms
- articulation of the processes involved in making the product of research form an important part of the research findings
- articulation and dissemination of the research findings takes place both through the product of making and established academic means; these are seen as dialogical and interrelated.

As the framing premise of colloquium, we adopted the model used by the University of Art and Design Helsinki, which proposes that PLR is based on, “The product of making – the artefact created during art and design practices – is conceived to have a central position in the academic research process ...” (Mäkelä & Routarinne 2006:12). In keeping with this premise, we consciously adopt/ed the term ‘Practice-Led Research’ both in the colloquium, and throughout this publication, as the notion of practice-led emphasises practice as an active component of the research process. Taking this premise further, if the product of making and the processes of its making lie at the core of PLR, it can be seen to inform and provide the basis or catalyst for other forms of research, which collectively, together with the product of making, can combine to constitute PLR. These forms of research work systemically – they can ‘feed into’ and support each other, as well as feedback directly into the product of making. These research forms include:

- exhibitions/curatorial practices

- undergraduate teaching curricula
- academic textual outputs
- research projects
- collation and dissemination of research
- post-graduate degrees in art and design which place practice at the centre of the research process.

From the above observations, a series of questions emerge, which, in conjunction with the exhibition and the colloquium, this publication seeks to explore:

- The emergent connection between research and creative practices, particularly art and design, in South African universities has prompted much discussion concerning the dialogue between theory and practice, or ‘reflecting’ and ‘making’. How might these be combined in productive ways?
- What kinds of connections currently exist between art/design and research practices?
- How do the above-listed research forms work, individually, collectively, and systemically to inform and constitute PLR?
- How can productive relationships between creative practitioners (‘makers’) and theorists (‘writers’) be formed?
- How is this ‘integrated approach’ applied to/currently operative within South African art and design, within both universities and industry?
- What are the relationships between practitioners of PLR in university and industry contexts, and how can productive interactions/collaborations between them be forged?
- How can we grow and develop exhibition production as a research methodology, and specifically, how can creative processes contribute to methodological innovations in curatorial practice?
- How can PLR generate intellectual capital?

In an attempt to stimulate debate around these questions, this publication has been conceived of and compiled as a *reader* – a collection of papers grouped in four different, yet interconnected, and at times, overlapping sections. In their collective totality, they are intended to mark a consolidation

of thinking around PLR, both locally and globally, at this particular moment in time. Thus, the publication attempts to mark particular approaches, methodologies, positions and frameworks, recorded in relation to the history and current practice of PLR in South Africa, and to situate this history against current and historical global PLR practices.

The introductory overview, written *post facto* the colloquium, ‘Exploring through practice: Connecting global-practice led research approaches with South African production’, provides an introductory framework for the field of PLR by linking selected South African examples discussed at the colloquium to international contexts. It identifies key moments across the programme, strategically situating within the PLR literature and debates. This paper is intended to foreground critical points in the PLR debates and prepare a ‘ground’ – as did the colloquium itself – for the productive sustaining of a field that is, as Maarit Mäkelä and I note, still, globally and in South Africa, an underdeveloped area of ‘research’. Furthering this ‘grounding’, is the critical inclusion of the writing of those such as Donald Schön (the critically reflective practitioner) (1995), Christopher Frayling (research *through* and for art and design) (1993), and Donna Haraway’s situated, “participatory, mobile and embodied ... knowing subject” (1991). These inclusions are intended to demonstrate links to several earlier projects that inform and provide a critical framing for the renewed interest in these areas under the mantle of PLR. Thereafter, more immediate examples from the colloquium provided by writers such as Gerrit Olivier, Mark Fleishmann, Kenneth Hay and Kathryn Smith, are situated in dialogue with this ‘grounding’, allowing for the presentation of an argument for “not quite knowing as productively beneficial rather than prejudicial” (Smith cited by Farber & Mäkelä 2010:7).

This introductory overview is followed by a section in which papers which frame the PLR project are presented. These make an important statement about the *extent* and *limitations* of thinking around this topic. The emphasis on PLR as containing not only *new knowledge* but also *new forms of knowledge* is an important feature of these arguments. Coming from a range of disciplines in which PLR is deployed, these papers point to the multiplicity of contradictions, points of convergence or overlap, diversity of positions and aporias which characterise debates on PLR. Yet, despite these complexities, some do offer speculative paths for the future of this project. The positions span across the three primary modes of PLR namely, 1) the creative discipline-based domain (encompassing the view that art stands on its own, as equivalent to research), 2) the research domain (working within the parameters of ‘traditional’ or ‘university defined’ scholarly research), and

3) the domain of reflexive-practice that follows on from PLR (wherein the conventional university understanding of research is adapted to acknowledge the epistemological gain acquired through art. This entails recognition of differing research strategies that might not be generally accepted in ‘traditional’ universities). The convergent nature of traditional research (converging on an answer) continually surfaces against the emergent nature of PLR (answers emerging from practice).

This third possibility for such a substantial paradigm shift in academic institutional thinking is opened up in two papers namely, ‘Formal recognition for creative work. Is there a point?’ by Olivier and ‘Thinking outside the box appraising art-practice-as-research’ by Hay. Hay presents a compelling argument for studio practice-as research as having the ability to expand knowledge and reanimate cultural life. He argues for the full recognition of artwork as research by asserting that an aesthetic form “is valuable in itself and does not need any further justification” (Hay 2010:51, emphasis in the original). This argument is advanced in his assertion that:

If the cognitive value of artwork *qua* research is to be truly appraised one must above all else recognise that its cognitive component lies in the concrete semantic practices of the artwork itself, and not over-determine the verbal apparatus which accompanies it in the ‘box’ which contains the written component (Hay 2010:51).

Furthermore, Hay (2010:51) notes “the difficulty of identifying and subsequently appreciating new knowledge, precisely because of its newness”. In so doing, the author offers a challenge and directive to those who assess Ph.Ds in art practice that is profoundly important for the PLR project: any appraisal of a Ph.D in art practice has to recognise “that the epistemological contribution lies *with the work itself* rather than in the ‘box’ which contains the thesis or commentary” (Hay 2010:51, emphasis in the original).

Similarly, Olivier reminds the reader of how art occupies a domain that is peculiar to itself. As such, Olivier asserts that creative output is necessarily *different* to research; that this cannot or should not be seen as one and the same. He posits that, “‘Knowledge’ is not an adequate term for the variety of ways in which cultural objects contribute to the world” (Olivier 2010:83). Olivier polemically contests the PLR space, offering a resistance to ‘fitting of framework’ positions. This directly challenges what he considers as the more compliant positions that meekly attempt to emulate habits of the natural and social sciences. Both Hay and Olivier’s papers recall James Elkins’s argument in *Artists with PhDs: On the new doctoral degree in studio art*

(2009), where he opens up the possibility for a substantial paradigm shift in academic institutional thinking.

Many of the other papers make strong arguments for practice-led research in a more implicit fashion, working from within the parameters of ‘university defined, scholarly research’. Of these, Jacob Domain and Anneke Laurie’s paper titled ‘mirror | mirror | on the wall: a methodological framework for structured reflection as practice-based arts research design’ is one that lucidly approaches the challenges faced by the arts practitioner. It provides a persuasive model to address concerns of validity and credibility in relation to “intuitive, tacit and subjective knowledge” (Mathison cited by Domain & Laurie 2010:39), the role of the artefact in a written exegesis and the procedures for this form of research design. This paper is explicit in its conviction that practice-led research can be rigorously articulated and that the systematising of the relationship between creative artefact and exegesis is one that affords the practitioner the means for structured reflection as a research methodology. This systematic recording and reporting of the embodied “flux of perception-cognition-intuition” (Gibson cited by Domain & Laurie 2010:39) is argued to have the potential to benefit the arts practitioner. The authors offer a detailed framework for this recording and reporting to take place without losing the open-ended nature of PLR based arts research.

These are just two of the range of diverse opinions and arguments presented in this volume. This healthy and productive tension between positions within PLR is one that the volume seeks to foster and entertain.

The second section, consisting of a series of PLR case-studies, is designed to enable art and design practitioners to present on their production in relation to the ways in which it aligns with PLR. These papers constitute an important form of writing within PLR practice, as they reference Schön’s reflective practitioner, named Quist, by providing examples of ways in which artists/practitioners can reflect on their practice, and examples of forms of writing that might accompany the production of PLR based artefacts. Schön’s research and writing seems to underpin much of the emergent practice-led research literature. Schön’s writing presages practice-led research, calling for the permanent condition of the “self-reflexive voice” to replace the “command voice” (Kalantzis 2006) of a compliant orthodoxy. The nature of the accounts presented in this section is a reflective practice, or a practice-led research process, often providing a tangible account of ‘how’ and ‘why’ this form of imaginative research might take place.

In certain cases, the papers in this section clearly do not fit the conventional norms and formats of ‘academic writing’, and to search for this in them would be a futile endeavor. Rather, it is the *form* which the author has found to speak about their practice that, in my view, makes these papers a significant inclusion in this PLR project. As Pippa Skotnes cogently puts it in relation to her book project on the |xam language in her paper, ‘A columbarium of words and a mode of locution’, “It is an attempt to find a conceptual space not available in the media of traditional scholarship, nor exclusively in the world of art”.

The third section consists of shorter papers which enable dialogue and debate between professionals involved in the above-listed research forms that constitute PLR. These papers are written in a direct and accessible manner which some might regard as a counter to a more ‘academic’ style. However, it may also be argued that these papers present examples of how ‘academic’ writing need not be a desiccated form, but rather one which aligns itself with practice-led research through its theorising of moments/objects in a particular form of semantic expression. In my imagination for the bringing together of these very diverse contributions, and in the context of the debates circulating around the PLR project, I understand these papers to be a coda of sorts – caveats or playful warnings against the tendency to atomise the process of measuring the worth of creative or practice-led research. The final section, titled ‘Narratives’ places emphasis on the visual, through inclusion of mapping and two photo-essays.

Certain reoccurring threads are discernable throughout the volume. One is the reoccurring use of the archive as source and material, as evidenced in projects by Skotnes, Penelope Siopis and Hentie van der Merwe, presented in the ‘case-study’ section. For, as historian Charles Merewether (2006:10) posits:

One of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered ... The archive is not one and the same as forms of remembrance, or as history. Manifesting itself in the form of traces, it contains the potential to fragment and destabilize either remembrance as recorded, or history as written, as sufficient means of providing the last word in the account of what has come to pass.

Another is first-person accounts, speaking from personal and ‘lived experience’, and autoethnographic approaches to PLR practices. Many of the papers present models for practice-led research as a means of combining research, development work, practice and pedagogy. This combination entails the writer having brought together years of

research, practice and teaching in a “nested and interlocking way” (Raman 2010:99) or constitutes an intensive reflection on a longstanding career.

In putting together this compilation, I hope to continue, provoke and advance existing debates concerning the complex relationship between creative practices – particularly those of art and design – and research, in terms of both content and modes of presentation, and foster further debate around the position of PLR as an important form of research within South African university contexts.

Endnote

- i. This document was conceived of at the Creative outputs workshop, convened by the University of Stellenbosch, 17-19 August 2007. The workshop aimed to achieve a degree of consensus around criteria for practitioners in the field of the visual, performing and literary arts to seek national, Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) recognition for peer-reviewed outputs as research. This would bring the present system of the DoHET, which currently restricts research to ‘textual output’, into accordance with policies and practices in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia where recognition of creative outputs is already in place. The document is reproduced as Appendix 1 on pages 101-102 of this publication.

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