

# OUTSIDE 'THE TRUE'?: RESEARCH AND COMPLEXITY IN CONTEMPORARY ARTS PRACTICE

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Note: This is a slightly expanded version of the paper given at the ELIA *Cohar* Conference in Dublin, October 2002. It was presented with the assistance of a research/travel grant from the Research Committee of the College of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, University of Western Sydney, and with conference and accommodation support from ELIA, both of which are gratefully acknowledged by the author.

## ABSTRACT

This paper considers approaches to research into the formations of the contemporary creative arts from the perspective of artistic practice. It proceeds from the view that research *into* and *through* creative practice by means of a subjective examination of the paradoxical nature of the materiality and immateriality of the creative process will assist in the larger project of investigating the limits of what might be termed the 'explicability of creativity'. If art is best viewed as an active cultural *process* for intellectually and technically organising and deploying certain knowledge and skill into new conceptual and affective *forms*, this paper argues, then practice oriented approaches to research in/to the creative arts are well suited to the task of investigating creativeness because they examine how the aesthetic knowledge behind practical knowledge is deployed in arts practice. The paper also, tangentially, ponders what contemporary art practice itself represents.

It is the business of the future to be dangerous.

A. N. Whitehead

### **THE VIRTUALLY NEW**

Uniqueness and cultural authenticity in art withered in the Modern Era, according to Walter Benjamin, and subsequently the cultural conditions of *postmodernity* in turn were supposed to have made the possibility of doing anything new in art *impossible*. None the less, it remains true that the contemporary creative arts still continue to coalesce around the formative notions of ‘novelty’, ‘newness’, and ‘difference’, even if the notion of *originality* appears to have become redundant as a defining element. Indeed, as will be asserted later, novelty itself serves as a broader cultural metaphor for contemporary existence. But how, though, might we go about investigating the way something new is done (creativity), in the creative arts?

Art, in all its various manifestations, is an ‘appearance incapable of appearing’, as Lefebvre terms it (1991: p.395). It appears to offer a doorway beyond mere perception. It certainly represents a plane of activity that cannot be strictly empirically understood, assessed or validated by traditional research methods. That is, its products, material and seemingly immaterial, cannot be reproduced or tested under controlled conditions. That work would itself stand to be considered art, in Postmodern terms. Instead, like other social and cultural phenomena, art, taken quite broadly, might be best approached as a *formation*, which is to say, it is discursively constructed. All knowledge is now thought of as culturally constructed, and in particular to be socially situated. That is, a specific set of knowledges, such as are embodied or perhaps more pertinently dis-embodied in an art project, are understood to operate within specific social, cultural and historical circumstances. Notwithstanding research emphases upon its affective properties, and its consumption, art is perhaps still best viewed as an active cultural *process* for

intellectually and technically organising and deploying certain knowledge and skill into new conceptual and affective *forms* — the sensuous presentation of truth, as Nancy terms it (1997: p.134).

The practices of some disciplines which sit under the broad category of ‘the creative arts’ (not a universally liked term by any means), such as much of design and media practice for instance, clearly (and uncomfortably) straddle the functional/symbolic divide. Architecture, for example, in a certain way is emblematic of this, being perennially caught between satisfying the functional and symbolic needs of the end user on the one hand, and also driven by the imperative of difference, of newness within architectural *form*, in fulfilling those needs. This appears true both in the broader cultural (aesthetic) sense, of its continuing development as a discipline/profession, and in terms of the individually expressive (creative) sense, for the individual practitioner, or indeed collaborators. No form of practice can be seen to be exempt from the tendencies represented by this duality. The fine and performing arts cannot be thought of as being devoid of any social or economic purpose. Of course grappling with these formal/functional, form and content distinctions were broadly emblematic of much of the work of Modernism, again especially in the most ‘user focussed’ forms of practice. In turn they were to come to be thought of as redundant with the advent of Postmodernism.

One way of investigating the possibility of still doing something new in the creative arts is to approach it by trying to locate something of the complexity of its *practice*, and practices. The examination by the contemporary arts practitioner/researcher of their ‘being-as-performance’, as Mikhail Bakhtin termed it, in their creative working, may help us understand something of what is involved in making the leap from established practice/s, to doing something new. Henri Lefebvre suggests that the creative practitioner ‘is fated to live out the conflicts that arise as he/she desperately seeks to close the ever-widening gulf between knowledge and creativity’ (1991: p.396). We might think of this as the increasingly wide gap which must be traversed by the individual practitioner between the space of the known, and that of the unknown. This ‘gulf’, Lefebvre argues, arises because art is based upon a paradox:

Art in general and the artistic sensibility bank on maximum difference, at first merely virtual, sensed, anticipated, and then, finally produced. Art puts its faith in difference: this is what is known as ‘inspiration’, or as a ‘project’; this is the motive of a new work — the thing that makes it *new*; only subsequently does the poet, musician or painter seek out means, procedures, techniques — in short, the wherewithal to realise the project by dint of repetition (1991: p.395).

The task of investigating the flows backwards and forwards between reflection and activity, involves tracking the ‘lines of flight’, as Deleuze and Guattari term it, as has been asserted elsewhere (Dallow 2003), tracking the movements from the repetition of the known/familiar, to the unknown/difference. This is a useful position to begin a consideration of how we might investigate the elusive conditions under which something new is produced (creativity), however illusory the ‘newness’ of the outcomes may prove to be.

Building models of intelligibility in the creative arts, like that within the sanctioned scientific research methodologies, calls for ‘identifying something invariant in the midst of difference’ (Hausman 1984: p.147). As Spinoza suggested, *method* is understanding what a ‘true’ idea is by distinguishing it from ‘the rest’ of perception (1992: p.241). However, in approaching art there is an inherent contradiction, or at least contradistinction, in the perception of originality at work. Newness is predicated upon difference. But, tactically, contemporary work can only be achieved through repetition—‘a repetitiveness which foregrounds not sameness but difference’, as ironically Broadhurst (1999: p.1) termed it. In this sense, the seeming ‘newness’ of art is achieved by way of *form*, or a formal structure, however open or outside of established material forms it may initially appear. As Lefebvre suggests, novelty is ‘a mere impression or conceit’. That is, in a sense, the novelty ‘effect’ issues from mistaking the seeming infinity or polysemy of the *conceptual* aspect of the project for the infinity of *meaning*. The very formal attributes of postmodern approaches to artistic practice bear this out, as Solomon-Godeau has indicated, in that the very devices employed by artists working in the postmodern era have been those of ‘seriality and repetition, appropriation, intertextuality, simulation or pastiche’ (1991: p.115), much as they are in the so-called ‘mass’ media, and so often emulated. Artists were the first to acknowledge and act upon this cultural ‘implosion’, between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’, the ‘fine’ and the ‘popular’, the sublime and the everyday. Unfortunately, with this came the impression that it heralded the end of the possibility of anything new being done. That ‘it had all been done before’, already.

## **THE IMAGE OF THOUGHT**

One way of approaching an investigation of the conditions under which something new might still be done, and indeed of considering whether creativity might still be possible at all, is to view contemporary artistic practice as *performative*. Certainly, in a broader

philosophical sense, the act or performance of *being* cannot be seen as separable from its product or effect. Mikhail Bakhtin described this as ‘action-performing thinking’, where *being* is seen *as* a performance, or what he called ‘Being-as-event’. The entire aesthetic world as a whole, he says, is ‘but a moment of Being-as-event’, brought about ‘through an answerable consciousness — through an answerable deed by a participant (1993: p.18). Thus ‘Aesthetic reason’, Bakhtin proposes, is similarly a moment in ‘*practical reason*’.

In a seemingly contradictory sense then, the temporality of the artist’s practice can be seen to represent the space of creativeness. The unfolding of art practice can be seen as a zone where ‘aesthetic reason’ is *applied* in some practical way. This suggests that the (practical) enactment of creative activity is a potentially rich field for investigating the revealing of aesthetic reason at work. Of course, part of the force of the practical application of aesthetic reason, as we have known since Aristotle, is that art throws up, so to speak, *illusions* ‘that represent the “absent” as being “totally present” ’ (Broadhurst 1999: p.2). The very concept of creativity, Boden asserts, is intrinsically evaluative— ‘In general, randomness (and serendipity) can contribute to creativity, but only if it can be intelligibly related to the relevant cognitive background’ (1997: p.2).

A consideration of the unique circumstances under which ‘the revealing’ of art takes place, then, may be tackled through the investigation of the ‘act of discovery’ of creative practice. A *practice-based approach* to arts research, the attempt to represent something of the creative method involved in creating or developing a specific piece or body of creative work offers a research method for investigating the specific creative method at work. That is, it employs, as Macleod terms it, ‘practice as a research tool’ (2001: p. 9), to reveal something of the ‘systematised thinking’ or logic of art practice to bear upon researching art practice itself. This involves a kind of conceptual doubling, or reflexivity, where one kind of research activity examines what is involved in another kind of research (creative) act. As Spinoza proposed— ‘method is nothing but reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea’ (1992: p.241-2). The ‘subjectively objective’ act of discovery, as Slavoj Žižek terms it, in practice-based arts research attempts to represent the act of discovery in creative arts practice.

So, practice oriented approaches to research in/to the creative arts, especially where they might be applied in a problem setting or problem solving context (professional practice), are potentially well suited to the investigation of creativeness because they examine how the aesthetic knowledge behind practical knowledge is deployed in arts practice. Practical knowledge, in turn, like most cultural knowledge, as Hodder (2002: p.272) asserts, ‘is nonlinear and purpose dedicated, formed through the practice of closely related

activities'. By considering the activity of creative practice from the 'inside', as an arts practitioner-researcher, it is possible to gain insight into how broader cultural systems and precedents are evoked or invoked *through* practice. [Some of the research issues and problematics raised by this 'subjectively objective' way of operating are set out in Dallow 2003.]

Research (discovery) is about learning something we did not know. But art also is about learning something we did not know, or at least did not *know we knew*. It causes us to be shocked by the familiar. In this way, the everyday can become uncanny (*unheimlich*, to use Freud's term), and hence monstrous. As Hegel asserted: 'What is "familiarily known" is not properly known, just for the reason that it is "familiarily" '(1967: p.92). Art practice frequently uncovers and confronts us with the known that was *not* really and truly known. Art works can offer us a liminal space in which we confront our 'selves', and where we might gain a glimpse of the 'return' of those aspects of us which have been repressed.

Jean-Luc Nancy describes art as being a 'double topology of presence coming into sense and sense coming into presence' (1997: p. 134). In this view, through the arts an attempt is made to represent *existence* to the *senses*, and thoughts mirrored in their sensory framing. The artist plays with the possibility of making sense of, and to, the senses. Creative practice then offers a vantage point below the usual horizon line of the 'already known' of established critical, theoretical and historically based arts research, for investigating first hand the possibility and impossibility of doing something new, and of moving in and out of established practices.

Creative work is not merely based in skills, and their application, but requires the ability to experiment and play, however conventionalised the idioms, genres or forms employed. All new works and forms are monstrous in that they in some way deform, or attempt to destroy established practices (that make sense to our senses). That is, they attempt to break with constituted normality, 'bearing a monster in a monstrous age', as Poster termed it (1990: p.105). New work though demands judgement of the creative practitioner, however radical, based upon a developed sense of discrimination. The investigation of that 'sense' of discrimination, of the 'grammars of practice', as Bourdieu termed them, that inform the choices made, or that set up the 'leaping off' points and directions followed, provides an opportunity for *sense to sense itself*. This is potentially one of the richest veins for practice-based research to pursue.

## SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

A difficulty with participant observation in research in general, according to Berger (2000: p. 166), is in discerning or identifying unrecognised aspects of the research. This can impair the quality of the kinds of observations reported. Hegel put it that the sensible is ‘synonymous with what is self-external’ (cited Nancy 1997: p.129). With practice-based research, that is, research by the practitioners themselves, this difficulty is doubled, with the potential for not discerning or identifying certain aspects of, and in, the creative work, as well as in the reporting of it. But, equally, it can be said that approaching practice as an external observer does not provide access to the kinds of thinking invested in certain ways of doing, of *acting*, or in assessing the roles performed and the kinds of tactical judgements made in ‘the doing’. How can creative subjectivity be objectively accounted for from the outside?

Arguably, an external observer could gauge little of the kinds of internal reflection and logical complexities which the artist confronts at almost every turn, even if sophisticated extended interview techniques were employed. Baxandall (1998) argues that the participant understands and knows ‘with an immediacy and spontaneity’ what the external observer, who ‘lacks the participant’s pure tact and fluid sense of the complexities’, does not share (p.342). And Nettle (1998) suggests that— ‘If you are musical, you have the capacity of musical thinking; to think *about* music does not necessarily require musicality’ (p.345).

All research positions, then, have limitations of viewpoint and method. What validates the research ‘viewpoint’ is its contextualisation, not its elimination. It is very useful for the creative subjectivity of the participant-observer, on reflection, to be contextualised relative to the internal and external position/perspective. This does not, it has to be said, require the assertion of a generalised theory. This approach of course does not nullify the more comparative view of the (seeming) detached observer, who strives for an analytical, critical and/or theoretical account. However what is sensible, what makes *sense* in art practice, can best be assessed, initially at least, from the inside.

We should not fear abandoning the passive, authoritative position of the scientific observer either. If research is traditionally about generating a ‘discourse oriented toward facts’, as Luhman asserts (2000: p.3), and there is little opportunity for temporal or spatial distance in generating this discourse, then the ‘facts’ to be reported upon are entirely provisional and subjective, in their original arising. Reflexivity, selfconscious judgement, and systematising its representation are important to/in this method— bearing out Spinoza’s proposition that reflexivity *is* method. Any research practice which is

divided from itself, removed from its own conditions, as well as those it intends to account for, as Bourdieu has observed, is reduced to seeing practice as mere spectacle (1977: p.1). The issue then is not objectivity *per se*.

## RESEARCHING CONTEMPORANEITY

Practice oriented research attempts to map something of the chaotic patterns of the conceptual and sensory space of contemporary practice by following specific journeys across the topography of that space. As Niklas Luhman observed, there is no theory independent of the continual reactualization of that theory (2000: p.4). So too there is no practice independent of its own continual reactualization.

Whilst it appears there may be some loss in critical distance in this practice-based method, there is equally the potential for it to generate new perspectives, to participate in the development of new discursive forms, to help open the field to new modes of symbolization and performativity. Indeed, it could be argued that the timeliness of practice oriented research approaches are indicative of a more general shift towards what Mattelart terms a 'search for contemporariness' (2000: p.107). That is, to look along the edges of what is exposed of the contemporary cultural landscape, and to open to view something of the conceptual and sensual contours of the contemporary world. What I might term the 'already unknown'. Interestingly, such movements within 'the contemporary' already imply some small conceptual distance, as Nancy suggests, in that to try to make sense of the world requires that one must 'sense oneself making sense' (1997: p.162).

Studies of the modes of evaluation at work in creative arts practice, both from the inside, *and* the outside, can yield valuable insights into the kinds of distinctions informing the cognition and recognition involved in creativity, as well as conveying something of the contemporary nature of the conceptual space of creative arts practice. The existing (stable) conditions of the chaotic space of a specific branch of the creative arts can be seen in terms of both *unpredictability* on the one hand, and social, cultural (including technological) and historical *determinism* on the other. So, the complexity of contemporary creative practice is continuously determined and altered through processes of recursion and iteration. That is, through repetition and difference, seen variously as *stability* and *chaos*. Slethaug (2000: p.x) puts it: 'Despite their tension, randomness, and

pattern, chaos and order exist in co-dependency, and the artistic imagination activates, engages, and enhances them’.

The very subjectivity of the art practitioner-researcher position allows for patterns to be delineated which may be disallowed as random, inconsistent and/or indeterminate through other research methodologies, and by other disciplines. In doing so it provides a glimpse of not only the imaginative transformation of the psychic and physical, social and cultural raw materials into (potentially) monstrous works, but conveys some sense of the ways the various fields of practice in the creative arts are themselves exceeded, changed and/or re-energised in response to the new conditions produced, or reflected upon.

### **THE MODALITY OF NEWNESS, or ART AS MUTATION**

Finally, it is worth briefly reflecting here upon the notion of art which sees art as representing a fragmenting of life, in the way that a particular work is generated within, then detaches itself from the everyday world, to become ‘art’. In that sense, art can be seen as being (re)produced through mutation. As art splinters some aspect *from* life, it also, simultaneously, offers an opening onto (the consciousness *of*) life. It represents a fragmentation of sense, a separation by sensory means of some cultural aspect from the everyday. It can thus, Nancy (1997) says, be seen as ‘the sensuous presentation of truth’ (p.134). These kinds of sensory distinctions and cultural presumptions of course became a key aspect of the content as well as methodology of many art forms in the Twentieth Century, particularly through approaches to ‘the popular’. Similarly, as has already been alluded to, a practice-based approach to research in the arts can take the investigation of the contemporary work of creativeness as an opportunity to plumb the exposed edges of the splintering of the sensorium of the world. In this way, it is possible to gain insight into the illusion of the exteriorisation of consciousness. As Francis Bacon put it— “the nature of things betrays itself more readily under the vexations of art than in its natural form” (cited Weinberg 2002: p.3).

Baudelaire, as early as 1863, said of ‘the modern’ in art, that it is manifest in the ‘ephemeral, fugitive, the contingent’ (cited Smith 1996: p.251). This gave rise to the heroic Modernist figure of ‘the new’, where novelty and innovation are set against the (back)ground of established (Romantic) traditions. This reflected upon the agency of change in industrialised culture, which in turn shifted to a culture of constant change, a

postindustrial ‘economy of endlessly variable presentations, a culture of incessant transformation’, according to Smith (1996: p.251). Thus, in the postmodern era, it is/was ‘the old’, the recycling of sights and sounds of the past, which came to stand out, giving rise to an ecology of culture— a (relatively) closed economy of cultural signification.

In this kind of view, and embedded in these postmodern kinds of practices, art ceases to be a modality for perfecting the human condition (Enlightenment), and of liberating itself. Art comes to be seen not as something *perfectible*, but as an outcome of a limited range of practice/s, which are invariably and differentially constructed and interpreted (and preyed upon) in a given cultural ‘moment’. Creativity is not seen so much as producing *something* new, but as a *modality*, of and for ‘newness’.

Novelty, then, itself operates as not a method of social and cultural advancement, as such, but as a contemporary *metaphor* for the dynamic aspect of what we experience as living. As with all metaphors, this paradigmatic displacement/comparison carries with it both the similarities *to* that which it represents, and the differences *from* it. And whereas consciousness arises most acutely in the face of the threat of oblivion, so creativity stands also in relation to its own extinction. In the moments when innovation seems least probable, the generation of a new vantage point stands all the more in relief to all around it.

Tracing something of the seemingly informal intelligibility at play in creative work, offers a valuable research window onto the formal space of the creative arts, where form stands in relation to formlessness, and matter to anti-matter. Notwithstanding the institutional formations for producing and distributing new work in the arts, what we now call the ‘creative industries’, the creative *arts* also remain inextricably bound up with unpredictable, unstable, and, in the contemporary terminology, ‘chaotic’ activities. The creative arts still manage to generate work from outside of the strategic parameters of the industrial model on the one hand, and from that of the academically authorised sets of protocols for initiating (teaching), or reporting upon (researching) creative work in the arts on the other.

## CONCLUSION

The aim here is not to devise a stable or even coherent set of methodological rules for investigating creative practice, any more than it is to diminish the chaotic and monstrous

qualities of what may present, or come into presence, as ‘new’. The aim is to develop a relatively logical method of considering the task of investigating creative practice. This requires that one remain open to the playful aspects of practice, adopting an operational, or what Hodder (2002) terms a ‘connectionist’ approach to investigating the ‘networking, interconnection, and mutual implication of material and nonmaterial’ qualities to be found in cultural practices (p.272), rather than developing a ‘rule-based’ system for theorising what is done.

Practice-based research aims to trace some of the departure points of creative practice, and to map, in a subjective way, something of the trajectories taken across the material and nonmaterial aspects of contemporary arts practice. Michel Foucault (1976: p.224) asserted that perhaps there are no errors in the strict sense once one moves outside the conventional disciplinary and methodological territories — ‘outside the true’ — when evaluating whether findings are true or false. To that extent, practice-based research in the creative arts remains a risky and radically innovative mode of research activity. As such, it may help guard against some of the risks in the (over) institutionalisation of training programs in creative arts practice, especially those operating within the large, increasingly corporatised universities and other ‘education as commodity’ higher education sites. But, on the contrary, might studying the results of these emergent (per)mutations of arts practice merely contribute to producing professional arts monsters?

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