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MAKING AND DOING

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Edward Hanfling

What I am going to write about here might seem stupidly obvious, but sometimes, in our wisdom, we lose sight of the stupidly obvious. Everything published in this journal is research. In particular, the various texts each represent (to use the simplest term) practice research. I use 'practice research' to describe a form of research that primarily involves making or doing, including, as is sometimes the case, making or doing (seemingly) nothing. I say 'primarily' because it is the making or doing that drives a practice research project.

In some instances, without the benefit of reading this journal, say, we might see the results of practice research but not 'see' the research itself. An artwork or design, exhibition or event may be said to embody knowledge, in the sense that it would not exist without knowledge having been put into it. But whether the work communicates that knowledge is a different matter. It does not have to do so. An artwork, for example, is not expected to be simply a vehicle for a specific content; in fact, the indefinable or uncertain nature of the content is often what is considered to give it value.

The difficulty in seeing the research in practice has been a significant obstacle to widespread acceptance of practice as research. Gaining such acceptance has taken a good deal of time and effort – not least, the effort that has gone into research about practice research. The attempt to demonstrate how and why making and doing stuff can produce a research contribution or new knowledge has produced a copious literature, much of which is tedious – ironically, a drily theoretical defence of practical inquiry. There is a case for suggesting that the attempt was misguided – that it would have been more honest to assert that making and doing stuff has value in itself, rather than bending over backwards to fit it into existing (and largely Eurocentric) definitions of 'research' – playing someone else's game. But the attempt was worthy and ultimately worthwhile – for a while (more on that soon).

We got there. (Or you did. After all, I am an art historian, so I have never had to agitate for my research to be recognised as such.) For many years, artists and designers have been happily logging their works and exhibitions as 'research outputs' and showing how they make a 'contribution to the research environment' – certainly since 2003, when, on the recommendation of the Tertiary Education Advisory Committee, the Labour-led government introduced the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF).

'Happily'? There were admittedly grumblings and rumblings along the way. Preparing a portfolio of outputs and contributions could consume time that might otherwise have been devoted to actually doing research. It was not always a happy experience to have the quality of one's research judged by others. The emphasis on 'international' recognition caused some to wonder how New Zealand-based activities could fail to be international (unless New Zealand is on a different planet). Polytech-based researchers typically have a smaller proportion of their positions allocated for research and thus always seemed at a disadvantage compared to those in the universities. And, in the early years, practice research did not seem to get the same credit as research in other (more venerable) fields.

Still, during a period when enrolments in tertiary arts and humanities programmes declined (as, commensurately, student fees and debt increased), it was sheer good luck that the survival of these allegedly useless disciplines was not entirely dependent on bums on seats. The PBRF also supported the principle that degree-level courses depend on research-informed teaching; without the always-changing knowledge generated by researchers engaging in and

with research and other researchers, the content of those courses would calcify, become static, intransigent and dangerously repressive. Moreover, there were well-meaning and intelligent academics involved in running the PBRF; they responded to, rather than reacted against, the various criticisms of the system and increasingly made room for the peculiarities of practice research. The research and the research-based funding system shaped each other to their mutual benefit.

This journal is a legacy of what now seem like heady times. Since 2006, it has helped staff and (mainly but not exclusively postgraduate) students at Otago Polytechnic, as well as artists and art-writers from further afield (sometimes those who have been artists-in-residence at Dunedin School of Art, sometimes researchers with no affiliation to this institution finding in *Scope* a conducive, peer-reviewed forum), demonstrate that what they do is research.

It would be easy to diminish what goes on in these pages as a kind of Baudrillardian hyper-real representation of a representation of research – a façade, erected not to pass off as research something that is not research, but to satisfy a bureaucratic demand for documentary evidence of research where it is not able to be seen in things made or done (that recurrent difficulty for practice research referred to earlier). The journal, in these terms, is merely a means to an end: it helps to fill the coffers and perpetuate the programmes offered by the institution and the jobs of those who teach them.

Perhaps there was a pragmatic reason for establishing the journal. Perhaps, also, we should celebrate such pragmatism, given that the so-called ‘creative industries’ are typically regarded as the most airy-fairy and economically deficient of all the industries. But it would be stupid – or dishonest – to dismiss the content of the journal, which, even a cursory reading of two decades of circulation reveals to be variously substantial, deep, informed, complex, incisive, questioning, far-reaching and keenly felt.

In the very first (2006) issue, Leoni Schmidt wrote in her editorial of the importance of multiple methods of communicating the embodied knowledge of making and doing: “It is in the productive tension between the word and the image, making and writing, practice and theory, theory and history, where new understandings can happen.” I find in this a parallel with my own suggestion, in *Scope: Art & Design* 24 (2023), that the ‘research contribution’ of practice research be defined by “what happens when an artist registers and reflects on dissonances or collisions between self, subject, materials, field, discipline and world.” Both these attempts to support the value of practice research identify a certain friction between the making or doing and whatever else that activity rubs up against (“tension,” “dissonances,” “collisions”). I would further suggest that the ‘research outputs’ and ‘contributions to research’ of practice research are not useful or functional in the way that many other forms of making and doing in the world are – that is, they produce friction for precisely the reason that they are not productive in the usual ways of manufacturing and selling, exploiting and despoiling and generally having catastrophic consequences for the planet and its inhabitants, human and non-human.

Of course, there are those who defend the arts and humanities against the charge of economic uselessness by contradicting it: study in these disciplines, they say, may not lead directly to a specific job, but it produces people (or ‘people people,’ if that is the plural of a ‘people person’) with the ‘soft skills,’ the critical thinking and clear communication to be assets to any industry. But why should anyone aspire to be an asset to any productive, and therefore destructive, industry? It is better, surely, to make and do in the aimless manner of practice research, not to answer a question but to raise questions, not to follow an established methodology but to make it up as one goes along, not to produce something with a predetermined effect, meaning or result but to observe “what happens” when one brings about unexpected or unstable relationships.

“We got there,” I wrote earlier; practice research earned its keep in a performance-based research environment. At Otago Polytechnic, as I suspect at other institutions, art and design research has more than earned its keep; it has propped up other, less research-active disciplines. Now, though, research – of any kind, in any discipline – is no longer valuable currency. The PBRF has gone. With the rise of stupid, or dishonest (or both), rich, white men

pursuing power through right-ring populism, there is little demand for new knowledge. Quite the contrary: to reimpose the old non-inclusive social order on a populace who have been persuaded to believe they are finally being included – to go back to the old ways of oppression and exploitation – requires not encouraging (as I described earlier as the goal of the PBRF) “research-informed teaching” and “the always-changing knowledge generated by researchers engaging in and with research and researchers,” but an anti-research culture in which tertiary education programmes are forced to “calcify, become static, intransigent and dangerously repressive” or, better still, are closed down altogether. Research into climate change is merely an impediment to continuing the old ways of wreaking havoc on the world; research in the arts and humanities only distracts the masses from their proper purpose, doing the labour of making money for wealthy individuals and corporations.

It took a while – and a little tinkering with the ‘rules’ – for practice research to be recognised as research. Just as we were making the most of our meagre winnings, the rules changed. It is possible that it is no longer worth playing the research game. But we have no stake in the new game. What to do? Just keep on making and doing, I suppose (and I should emphasise again that making and doing what appears to be nothing has value in the current climate). When the currently dominant ideologies and the systems they uphold come to naught and survival becomes the name of the game, I hazard a guess that those who have been making and doing without producing more and more destruction will be those whose knowledge is immensely useful. *Then*, we can talk about the value of ‘soft skills.’ Then, practice (or, as one might put it, existing) will be the only form of research worth doing. And I doubt anyone will bother doing as I am stupidly doing now, writing an academic plea for the obvious value of practice research.

Edward Hanfling teaches art history and theory and supervises postgraduate research at Dunedin School of Art. He writes regularly as a critic for *Art New Zealand*, and has published articles in journals such as the *Burlington Magazine*, the *Journal of Australian and New Zealand Art*, the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* and *Third Text*, with a particular focus on art historical issues of judgement and value. Published books include *250 Years of New Zealand Painting* (Bateman 2021), as co-author and co-editor. He currently serves as editor for *Scope (Art & Design)* and as co-editor of *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*.