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## Problems & provocations around performance, P-a-R & the PhD

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ARTICLE

## Problems & Provocations around Performance, P-a-R & the PhD

John Freeman

This article contributes to the discussion on the value of creative and arts-based research methods to PhD researchers, supervisors and examiners. As the title states, the article is intended as something of a provocation, and it provokes through asking questions of the ways in which knowledge and understanding are articulated through Practice-as-Research (P-a-R). Mounting this kind of provocation (*any* kind of provocation) is unlikely to win me many new friends within university theatre, and it risks losing a few old ones; nevertheless it is an address that feels worth making. I can only trust that colleagues known and unknown will recognise the concern as being with an increasingly one-size-fits-all mantra rather than with the many methodological values and much of the exemplary work that has stemmed from P-a-R. The article's intention throughout is to develop the debate on P-a-R in general and practice based PhDs in particular. Artistic and creative research is not one form of practice but many, and these can be usefully understood as expositional activities that are considerably more diverse than the umbrella heading of P-a-R (that increasingly one-size-fits-all aspect) might seem to suggest (Sullivan 2015). In this context any provocation for change need to acknowledge the partiality of its target.

This article will negotiate some ethically complex ground, not least because its writing was prompted in part by my involvement in some problematic PhD examinations. Thesis titles, institutional identity and the names of candidates will, naturally enough, not be referenced here; yet that does not automatically guarantee ethical correctitude. In a different climate of research measurement it would be logical to submit this paper under a pseudonym, but to do so would omit my own institutional affiliations; this article's readers will be aware of the ways in which universities are understandably keen to see outputs credited appropriately.

How to write about some of the problems of P-a-R without citing in any identifiable detail any PhD submissions that might add weight, detail and grounding to the argument is a challenge that runs through every line that follows. In some ways the article is as much about plotting a route through



the demands of respectful anonymity and the concurrent need for specificity as it is about addressing some wider and more generic issues around P-a-R.

Until recently those of us employed in academia tended to be cautious about airing the ethical dilemmas we face in our research processes and outputs. That environment has altered to the extent that acknowledging ethical complexity has become something of a given. Performance is always about working with people, whether this is collaboratively at source or sharing practice with spectators when the work is ready for that. As such the ethics of making and of representation sit at a somewhat different angle to an ethics of writing. Within the context of this article I am aware for instance of the murky nature of adopting and potentially misusing multiple roles. When we are invited to examine a PhD candidate's work we are not also tacitly invited to go on and write about it for publication. My intention here is to reveal nothing that hints at anything particular to any student's work and to ensure my comments are generalised enough to maintain anonymity. From my perspective it is axiomatic that my role as examiner has never formed part of an intent to fuel a subsequent article; nevertheless it is worth making that point absolutely clear. I have no desire to engage in anything here that might reasonably impair my professional performance; more importantly, neither do I intend the contents of this article to exploit or harm others. As a principle, many kinds of multiple relationships are not necessarily unethical as long as they are not reasonably expected to have adverse effects on anybody, and I will adhere to this. I hope too that this article does not constitute any abuse of the power differential between me and the unnamed students whose PhD examinations I have been involved in. I am electing not to follow generally accepted informed consent rules precisely because no students are even loosely identified in this article. The consent process ensures that individuals are voluntarily participating in the research with full knowledge of relevant risks and benefits; however, as this article cannot reasonably be expected to cause distress or harm to anyone and because there are no participants *per se* I believe that my respect for people's confidentiality and privacy is sufficient. In this regard I am following advice laid down in Wiles – Crow – Charles – Heath (2007).

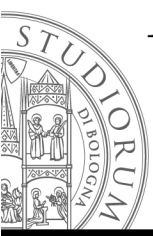
As an experienced PhD examiner and supervisor the ideas herein are grounded in precisely those experiences that cannot be easily disseminated without breaching confidentiality. Where subsequent paragraphs will be guardedly critical of the dominant role of the subjective 'I' within P-



a-R this is a device I will self-consciously employ by locating my own experience at the heart of the critique. The article also makes a claim for truth without always being able to offer evidence in support. If this reads as hypocritical or even evasive my two-fold defence is that a) these experiences are broad and deep, and b) this article makes no claims for standing in any way as a thesis. In this spirit of disclosure and its absence it is worth mentioning that “performance” as it appears in the title refers primarily to theatre, albeit theatre that often aspires to a type of de-disciplinarity, and that the focus is primarily based on UK and Australian submissions.

We are living through and working in a “dynamic and exciting time for research methods” with methodological approaches expanding across all disciplines (Kara 2015: 3). Research has been regarded historically as a neutral activity and researchers were generally seen as having no effect on the research process or its outcome, i.e. they were, in the academic sense of the term, *disinterested*. Not so now, and we well know that the choice to use practice as a means of researching into practice has been accepted by universities and funding bodies alike, to the extent that the field has been characterised in detail, but not yet (and perhaps not ever) in a way that is agreed upon across its disparate applications (Nelson 2013; Kershaw – Nicholson 2010; Freeman 2010).

The term of choice in this paper, *practice-as*, sidesteps some of the discussions that range over definitions which tend to see *practice-based* research as relating to situations/occasions where the event comprises the chief contribution to knowledge and *practice-led*, which occurs when the research is significantly about new developments for practice (Candy 2006). It is generally accepted that when a creative event or product is the basis of the contribution to knowledge the research is considered to be an example of P-a-R; i.e. the overall work constitutes an original investigation undertaken significantly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice are presented as findings. For the purposes of PhD through P-a-R it is reasonable to assume that a complete understanding of the thesis can only be obtained with direct reference to the practice therein. We can go further and develop this assumption into the demand that the practice has some identifiable form of operational significance for other and subsequent practitioners. For the UK’s Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) the principles of P-a-R are that creative work can be produced as an integral part of one’s research process, with the *caveat* that the outcomes of any practice



need to be accompanied by documentation of process, textual analysis, explanation and critical reflection, albeit in differently nuanced measure from project-to-project, or from one PhD submission to another (AHRC 2000). If the crux of this is acknowledgment that knowledge can be advanced by means of practice it is also clear that the practice has to serve a double purpose: it has to be *significant* and it has to be *necessary*.

Ideas of tacit and embodied knowledge, ineffability, private knowing and feelings that take the place of findings are, in my experience, relatively common in P-a-R submissions and yet they often function as denial of the very sharing of knowledge that dissemination through PhD demands. The partiality of my own experience here is added to by a large-scale 2009 study which found that whilst being able to demonstrate that the outcomes of a PhD contribute to new knowledge is a basic requirement of any doctoral assessment more than 50% of students interviewed were unable to say anything specific about the ways that their practice might do this (Creativity and Cognition Studios 2009). I would suggest that in any other field of endeavour or working through any other methodology the fact that “most [PhD by practice students] found it difficult to encapsulate their contributions” would be a matter of major concern.

### *Values & Value*

Within university theatre, drama and performance creative practice forms a large percentage of submitted research output, functioning within a contextual frame that sees knowledge as being capable and often best-served by means of practice. For many academics/practitioners within the university and conservatoire/conservatory sector engagement in research is an integral element of their own practice (and *vice versa*) and we well know that there are certain making processes which cannot be divorced from research; by the same token we can say, as an early provocation, that the processes leading to new knowledge generally need to be transparent, transferable and in key ways *valuable* in order to qualify as measurable university research. “Value” in this sense refers to value to the wider community as well as to the individual practitioner and this is a sticking point with a number of PhD by practice submissions. Identifying where value in a thesis lies and for who are questions that are often overlooked to the extent that it can present as an afterthought rather than a driver.



If research can be regarded as systematic activity undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge, then we can consider it further as beginning with a state of not-knowing. We can refine this to a state of not-knowing wrapped up in the need to know. The term “systematic” is a loaded one within the arts where creative practice does not always do as it is bid, where its manners are often bad and where systems will sometimes be replaced by best guesses. To this extent the activity of creative research shares many features with the process of theatre making, which is not the same thing as settling on the idea that all creative activity is *ipso facto* creative research. The overlaps are apparent, yet to classify all directing, acting, design and dramaturgical work as research would be specious. Just because something *might* be it does not automatically follow that it *is*, and yet many theses are premised on the opposite belief.

Theatre is practice in pursuit of perception, whereas creative research is practice that seeks at once to evidence purpose and point, question and response. This is not a sound bite; it is a problematic distinction, not because the most telling acts of theatre are also acts of investigation but because some examples of P-a-R as thesis adopt little more than the vocabulary of research. The problem is furthered because it is hard to argue that something is not quite research when our sector wills so much of it over the line. Creative practice does not somehow evolve into a formal research project because of the pressure to become so. A quest for understanding is not enough alone to constitute research, and opinions, beliefs and wants do not assume the status of truth without supporting evidence. P-a-R contrasts with most methods of research inasmuch as its findings are not necessarily reproducible and its exponents are rarely if ever disinterested. In this sense the very attributes that make P-a-R important are the ones that render it open to challenge: P-a-R is not so much a square peg in a round hole as a methodology, approach and activity that does not always look like a peg at all.

Creative research is premised in no small part on reflective awareness. There can be no doubt that this immediate form of personal experience provides invaluable knowledge, to the extent that in all forms of activity knowledge gained from experience is a great aid to understanding. Addressing practice *through* practice is itself a by-product of learning-by-doing, kinesthetic and experiential learning; all concerned in differently nuanced ways with discovery resulting from one's own actions rather than with learning from watching or reading others' performances, instructions or



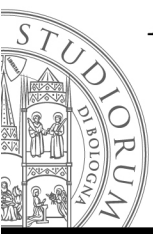
descriptions. This amounts to the idea of proof-upon-practice which is central to P-a-R. Nevertheless, self-reflection does have some limitations as a means of methodically and reliably extending and *disseminating* knowledge and understanding. This is the case because learning from experience has a tendency to be uncontrolled (Hoskin 2012). We need to exercise caution whenever conclusions are based on satisfactory completion rather than exhaustive testing and where our own expertise is evoked as a form of self-justification and self-evidence. We know that creative research is not the same thing as scientific research, and it does not pretend to be; neither is it subject to the same strictures. Nevertheless, if we are to produce research outputs which have value to the wider community we can usefully draw on some of some principles which can be shared.

### *Knowing & Not Knowing*

In almost all cases a research project begins with the identification of a problem, and this will amount to a problem worth solving; it is accepted that the problem needs to be of interest to the researcher, but it also has to be significant enough to warrant the investigation. A PhD through practice will follow a particular programme of work, and because it is creative this programme will by definition be flexible and open to change and opportunity. Diverse and successful projects have as their intent the aim of enhancing understanding and knowledge beyond the researcher's own interests, which is to say that any assertions arrived at by the researcher need to be rigorously tested rather than made prey to confirmation bias; a consequence of this is that any conclusions drawn will be arrived at through reasoned argument and the best available evidence.

Graeme Sullivan has it that in P-a-R "the images and ideas created have the capacity to not only change the artist's conceptions of reality, but also influence the viewer's interpretation of artworks" (Sullivan 2010: 107-108). It would be rare, inconceivable even, to see an example of a P-a-R submission that did not change the artist's nuanced conception of theatre ("reality" feels too loaded a term) but my experience of examination has revealed more than a few that achieved little by way of changing the interpretation of viewers/spectators. Research is about more than the gathering of facts or information; it is more accurately the purposive investigation of materials or events in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions. We can use other words and say that it is an attempt to uncover new ideas through a process of critical exploration; that it is a fact-finding





activity; or that it is the controlled and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions. We can use many words and we can use them in many sequences, but the issue remains that university-measurable research is almost always distinguished and elevated from experience and reasoning into a means of achieving a greater comprehension of our world.

There are many reasons why researchers are drawn towards P-a-R: its methods can yield different perspectives on new and familiar issues; it can be used to ask questions of one's own disciplinary practices and, as Dónal O'Donoghue sees it P-a-R brings to research "very different ways of seeing, imagining, understanding, articulating, and inquiring, which leads to better questioning and more robust inquiry practices" (O'Donoghue 2011: 649). The greatest gift of P-a-R is that it gives researching practitioners the scope to work between borders of the emergent and the traditional and to create new possibilities for knowledge. Aligned to this is the fact (we can say this much) that P-a-R can address questions that cannot be fully answered using more traditional research methods. This is at the stated heart of many PhD by P-a-R submissions. Other aspects are less likely to be stated.

If we can use the word "failing", then making the choice of a research problem an excuse to fill in the gaps in our own knowledge is a failing that is often allowed and even encouraged; early conversations between supervisor and student will at times look to exaggerate a gap in the student's knowledge into a problem for the field. The point of a PhD, whether by P-a-R or not, is not about finding personal enlightenment any more than it should be driven solely by career advancement. We can be welcoming of flexibility without accepting that this is a provocation rather than a prerequisite. There is a *mea culpa* moment here, as this is certainly something I and co-supervisors have done in the past. There are many reasons for this, the first and most significant is that as one rises through the academic ranks there is an expectation, obligation even, to recruit PhD students and to supervise these students through to successful completion. At certain universities in Australia successful supervision earns the supervisor research points, which can be translated into internal funds for subsequent research activity; as an indicator of the value universities ascribe to successful PhDs Curtin University in Western Australia rewards supervisors with 400 research points, the same as for a sole-authored book. A track record of supervision (i.e. taking students on rather than rejecting them) plays a major part in applications for promotion, certainly to

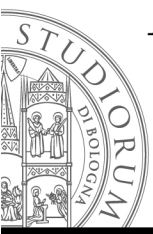


professorial positions. Whilst no university would wish to recruit a research student who had little or no chance of success, a healthy cohort of PhD students is a very visible sign of a department's maturity.

The nature of any given problem will in its turn influence the form of one's research. Under the best circumstances the quest for a problem is not in and of itself arduous for a student; rather, it is the compulsion to address a particular problem that will initiate the entire process. As with this writer, many readers will be familiar with the opposite scenario, one where the search for an area (sometimes *any* area) to build a research project around is a year-long process. This is not to suggest that a research problem that is contrived or one that is tailored to meet the demands of a bursary or a particular supervisory team is less worthy or genuine than one that has forced itself into consideration, but it does suggest that in many cases the real problem is the increasing desire for PhD by P-a-R. To a large extent our default methodology in performance research within universities has become practice-led. Brave are the university job applicants now who do not describe their research as bound up in practice and rare are the university websites that do not prioritise P-a-R over and above other methodologies. This speaks to a shift from students and faculty staff who are practice-informed critics to a fairly recent state where we are encouraged to see ourselves as critically-informed practitioners. This is the case on UK application packs and interview questions. Speaking from experience on both sides of the interview/recruitment divide I know the significance that is placed on research that is *through* practice rather than *about* it. Again, readers will be familiar with this.

As go PhD students so go their supervisors and it is becoming increasingly uncommon to find projects that are not significantly practice-driven. The methodology thus determines the research and in some cases *becomes* the research. It is alarming when students only encounter this as a stumbling block in an examiner's report or *viva voce*.

Research usually means investigation in pursuit of generating and disseminating new knowledge, whilst practice in the context of P-a-R suggests creative processes suitably proficient to render the investigation communicable. It is not a given that practice undertaken by all researchers need be on a par with professional artists, although often it is; neither does it follow that where the practice might be deemed "unprofessional" that the research is in any way unworthy. We cannot tell



ourselves that professional practitioners are distinguished from the amateur because they are engaged in creative and intellectually challenging work, because we know that innovation is not reliant on status and that the professional/amateur binary is constructively disrupted in countless ways. Whereas professional theatre is often measured in monetary terms, other theatre forms exist outside of this financial imperative and it is a feature of theatre that being paid to make it (or making theatre for a living) is no reliable barometer of quality. The flip-side of this is also true and as the *Guardian* theatre critic Lyn Gardner puts it, the nature of *being an artist* does not depend on being paid or trained, but “consists simply in ‘artisting’, in making art” (Gardner 2016).

If P-a-R does not demand the attributes of professional theatre making it does ask of us that we behave like detectives. This is so because investigators are bound by the common concern of wanting to know; but what is it that we want to find out and what value might our discoveries have? Notwithstanding the inevitability of building one’s research on the foundations laid by others we need to guard against functioning less like detectives with a crime to solve than as people who leave half-smudged fingerprints on other people’s thoughts.

We are at a time when no two people in a room seem able to agree on what place the critical accompaniment has in relation to a P-a-R submission; of the place documentation occupies at the table of artistic research; nor what purpose a written thesis serves or on how it achieves it. With this in mind this article’s words might not be adding much more than another voice to the area of debate. In a spirit of healthy skepticism rather than cynicism we might acknowledge – if only to ourselves – that we stumble sometimes, student, supervisor and examiner, at the hurdle of how to recognise moments of significance when they appear in P-a-R projects. We stumble because, notwithstanding the legitimate pride we might take in our critical acumen, we so hope to find significance that we sometimes force its appearance through the strength of our will. We stumble too because that which renders performance significant will often reside in a work’s qualities of never being fully understood; of always holding something back; of exercising resistance to closure; of possessing the capacity for endless interpretation.

### *The Autoethnographic “I”*

Perhaps performance is at its best in when it acknowledges its own instabilities. Approached in this



way, we can suggest that important or significant practice is likely to be that which eludes the neatness of answers. All of that is fine and well when practice serves as its own articulation; but within the context of PhD research it is not quite fine, not quite well, and not always quite enough. It is not enough because it is in the nature of a thesis that outcomes need to be explained, just as processes need to be determined and documented; and it is not enough because the value of research is at its strongest when there is some equanimity in terms of how to read and understand it.

The aim of research is to explain something significant and relevant to a research community, and yet the allure of research-as-reflection where the researcher is also often the researched and where autoethnography is made central, means that the personal pronoun is likely to feature heavily in a candidate's critical writing. Nothing wrong with that, as long as analysis does not become overly diary-like; nevertheless over-reliance on the use of "I" in a thesis can be indicative of a move away from research clarity and consistent and substantial research context. In its place we can get a conflation of the researcher's own subjective experience with the aims of the project. Inasmuch as P-a-R is concerned broadly with the expression and application of human creative skill and imagination it is about producing practice that can be appreciated for its aesthetic, intellectual, investigative and emotional quotient. When anything and everything within P-a-R exists as both *research* and *practice* with each being whatever we decide it to be, theory and practice are likely to exist in an uneasy and unhelpful relation to one another; when PhD by practice submissions are unsuccessful this unacknowledged tension is often part of the problem. This is not to suggest any form of rigid binary: we know that theory can be exercised and articulated through practice and we know that practice can be deeply theoretical. Nevertheless, the PhD submissions that this article is focused on generally require at least two elements: the creative practice and the critical accompaniment.

Significance in university research has come to mean publication and citation, but this is not primarily how significance works. Certainly research within the arts is often difficult to measure in any simple or precise manner; in theatre if we are dealing with ideas then we are also dealing with resonance and the impact of one's work may only emerge over time. In this way, productions we may have seen many years ago and which passed us by at the time can take root to the extent that



they now seem hugely significant. If P-a-R has constructively problematised the role of text it has also problematised issues of quality and significance, not least because the medium of live performance is one that thrives on ephemerality and which tends to be resistant to accurate archival permanence. The notion of live performance is not as clear-cut as once it seemed. As Alice Tuppen-Corps might see it, practice embraces embodied as well as aesthetic notions of intimacy and identity, where actors and spectators engage in the interactive navigation of sites that are often as digitally mediated and dreamlike as they are actual (Tuppen-Corps 2018). In a similar vein, Helenna Ren suggests that we are at a point where “all human activity could be considered as ‘performance’, or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself”. In this sense, being and acting “lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude” (Ren 2016). Certainly it is the case that new technologies have influenced massively the ways in which identity and role is created, received and understood, and these ways are not limited to overtly mediated situations. According to Steve Dixon the human self has always been multiple, however, new virtual environments have allowed for a deeper engagement with these multiple identities (Dixon 2007: 269). Clearly, not all performance is live in the conventional sense and distinctions between the live and the mediated have become increasingly smart and nuanced; nevertheless, live performance remains the mainstay of theatre.

### *Critical Practice/Critical Writing*

A key aspect of research is to demonstrate respect for the complexity of the undertaking through a process of thinking deeply and of communicating these same thoughts as clearly as possible. And for many of us these are the *same* thoughts, albeit ones that are articulated very differently on paper and through a particular creative practice. The most useful critical writing elements therefore are often those which offer insights without eliminating those contradictions that might well be at the core of the practice. By the same token we can say that the most useful critical accompaniment (routinely referred to as an *exegesis* in Australia) deals less in definition than in navigation, guiding readers toward a series of entry points. Whilst the artistic research/creative production will usually deal implicitly with the space between thesis intentionality and research outcomes, critical writing has the potential to make what occurs in these spaces more explicit. Potential does not amount to a



set of rigid demands and how researchers achieve this is open to their own considered negotiations. There is no all-encompassing good practice in critical writing terms anymore than there is good practice in performance: what works best is what works best within the particular circumstances of *this* research, carried out by *this* researcher, working towards *this* end.

We know that some P-a-R comes to us with its contextualising footprints clearly visible, as we know that other examples knowingly obscure the traces left. In this way one submission might have a strong case for referring closely to its creative production elements whilst another might have no need to refer to it at all. Because the critical writing element is about pointing us through the intelligence of the performance towards the intelligence of its making, its *raison d'être* is the construction of ways of thinking, rather than descriptive, diary-like documentation. Another provocation then is to say that whilst there is no guarantee of good practice, there is generally some guarantee of the bad.

In supervision and in *viva voce* it is common for practitioners to see critical writing as a violation of artistic freedom, as an attempt at straitjacketing the creativity of research into something neat and manageable. This is understandable, yet to take this view is to miss the point; just as we also miss the point when we expect the written aspect of a submission to eliminate all that is contradictory, unfixed and elusive. Thinking is not equivalent to knowledge and an artist's willingness to engage in intelligent practice is not automatically the same thing as research. Critical writing is not exclusively critical and neither is the practice of performance exclusively creative. The edges blur precisely because they are created by the same person and because when the brain switches from one mode of address to another it does not hit "Delete" on who we are. Critical writing is one crafted, creative aspect of a P-a-R submission, just as performance is one crafted, critical aspect of the same submission. Approaching writing as the urge to singularise the complexity of performance into a few thousand words of text bypasses the opportunity to articulate and make central those very same dichotomies, ellipses, intentions, deviations and unexpected arrivals that make creative practice what it is. Critical writing then, rather than existing as a statement of false clarity, might be better regarded as a canvas on which one is able to articulate key aspects of doubt.

What we are dealing with is a major shift in terms. There is no easy way of avoiding this. Perhaps there is no way at all. P-a-R is not *just* research with some performance thrown in, anymore than it



is performance wrapped in the vocabulary of research. It constitutes a particular way of thinking, and of thinking about knowledge. Similarly, the critical writing component is not *just* something written after the fact. In many cases it is a way of working towards the old PhD adage of making a contribution to knowledge in the firm belief that art can never arrive at its destination, entering instead into an errancy that draws us towards that which always withdraws, always occupying a point on the distant horizon, there to see and impossible to reach. Approached like this, P-a-R can take us beyond the search for endless knowledge production and towards the more provocative notion of a thesis as a space for thinking.

### *Truth & Lies*

Research by means of practice exemplifies the shift from a modernist emphasis of scientific inquiry to those more recent possibilities of multiplicity and abstract conceptualisation, and with ideas that are endlessly framed in a postmodern vocabulary the lies we tell about ourselves ultimately tell our greatest truths; that it is through the fictions we weave that we disguise the commonplace facts of our ordinary lives. If this is the arch that allows access to our own things that matter then perhaps it also suggests a reconsideration of the relationships between performance, written thesis, time and decay; between present truths and future lies. Notwithstanding the risk of using postmodern and truth in the same sentence without recourse to inverted commas, truths and lies *do* possess a fairly untrammelled currency beyond the seminar room, even within the domains of art and performance. When Picasso said art was a lie that told the truth he was saying that facts and fictions blur so much that a crafted lie can open up its archway into understandings of truthful emotion. Truth in performance is as emotional as it is cerebral: we know it when it is seen and felt, but it is not subject to taxonomical categorisation. The performance element of a PhD by P-a-R is not problematised by its resistance to dissemination (even an audience of 10 might well more than double the number of readers of a thesis through library loans) so much as the diminished chances it has of much of a shelf life beyond the now.

Mika Hannula states that artistic research is an engaged practice, which uses its own internal logic to decide between the valid and the not so useful. Practice is possessed of an “open-ended, undetermined, procedural trajectory [...] that is particular, context-driven, self-reflective and



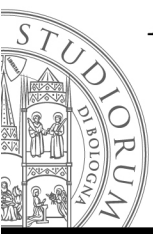
contextualized” (Hannula 2009). As with all of us, and as Peggy Phelan warned when she wrote that representation will always convey more than it intends (Phelan 1992: 302), Hannula’s words say what is hoped to be true rather than what is. Within the university research terms Hannula’s paper is couched in to speak of the trajectory of art is to engage in an act of misdirection. With PhD submissions we are not involved in the judging of practice for any intrinsic qualities of indeterminacy and self-reflection; we are judging the researcher’s ability to make work that serves an end. We are judging too the critical writing component as a no-less-important aspect of the thesis submission.

### *Art & Articulation*

The emergence of P-a-R as a term for many methodologies and outcomes that sit outside text-based research has brought new challenges, forcing many of us in university drama, theatre and performance to question the roles of (academic) practitioners and (practising) academics. It has also forced us to debate more closely than before the relationship between evidence and art. The possibilities of and through P-a-R are having considerable bearing on the ways in which many others of us develop our views and/or change those positions we hold; but as long as critical writing remains a partial requirement we need to be clear as to what it means.

Artworks can only really be regarded as satisfactory within thesis terms when they are accompanied by some form of connected theoretical explanation. And yet the resistance towards critical explanation is such that even using the term runs the risk of labelling the user as an off-the-pace reactionary. For almost as long as P-a-R has been the most opted-for performance research mode in the West, the resistance to any form of attendant explanation has been as strident as it has been articulate. The citing by Kerry Dally of “the fear that judgements about the quality of a student’s art work could impede creative potential and that assessment typically evaluates outcomes or *products* whereas in the creative arts, it is the *process* that is regarded as most important” (Dally 2004: 107) reveals a familiar line, one that sees any attempt at analytical explanation as a slap in the face to art’s innate integrity, and *ipso facto* to the integrity of the researching artist. If saying that research through performance is its own and only thesis puts one on the side of the angels, then it is pretty clear that voicing an oppositional line emphatically does not.





Researching through P-a-R is a choice, and like the majority of adult choices it comes with responsibility. If the responsibility within a particular university, or country is that an artistic research thesis comes in two parts, then in two parts it comes. The value of critical writing is that it can bridge the gap between intention and result, and even for those like Fletcher and Mann who hold that creative research, if it's *really* that, is in no need of further legitimising conceit (Fletcher – Mann 2004: 6), or James Elkins, who describes art-writing as a form of collective hysteria (Elkins 1999: 16), it is not easy to see what harm critical writing might do. It is, after all (and particularly within PhD contexts) an attempt at relating creative processes to the particularised contexts of performance which is primarily an exchange between students, supervisors and examiners. As such critical writing does nothing to burden any other viewer/spectator with interpretation-stifling description.

### *Feelings & Findings*

Yasuo Yuasa makes distinctions between knowledge gained *through* the body and the knowledge one might have *of* the body (Yuasa 1993); Philip Zarrilli suggests body knowledge of this first kind can be contrasted with intellectual knowledge inasmuch as “Intellectual knowledge is a particular mode of cognition which results from objectifying a given object, which propositionally takes a subject-predicate form, and which divorces the somaticity of the knower from ‘the mind’ of the knower” (Zarrilli 2007: 59). A consequence of this is that Yuasa’s notion of intellectual knowledge is always innately secondary, lacking the immediacy and oneness of judgement that is felt, experienced and ultimately inarticulate. Like Artaud’s essays on theatre that needed to be lived through rather than written, this describes a proposition that sees the body as something that creates its own object of knowledge, as something that unashamedly elevates body-feeling over mind-knowing: and this is the root and branch of P-a-R.

Acknowledging that experience is often of and through the body is not quite yet the same thing as accepting the idea, proposed by no less than Marcel Duchamp, that any and all decisions made in the construction and execution of art stem from intuition and cannot therefore be translated into any form of spoken, written or even imagined self-analysis. Duchamp had it that:

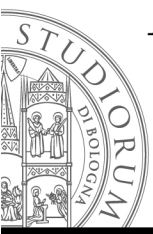


In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realisation is a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious [...]. The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realisation, a difference which the artist is not aware of. Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realise and did realise, is the personal “art-coefficient” contained in the work [...] the relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed (Duchamp 1957).

It is a short hop from Duchamp's personal art co-efficient to Toby Yarwood's contention that if only we learned to re-position “the paradigm of practice and research, emphasizing their similarity and co-dependency” we would realise that “practice IS research (and research IS practice) and the use of simile (AS) only weakens the issue” (Yarwood 2001). This is an idea which is given a further twist by Angela Piccini who asks whether “engagement between audience and performance [might] be enough to testify to the research and to the dissemination of knowledges to the community” (Piccini 2004: 198). The notion that practice *is* research is in many ways a meaningless conceit, for what does it actually mean? It is worth pausing for a moment at the enormity of the idea that any and all practice is research: not research-driven or research-informed; not *sometimes* imbued with research-worthiness; not that research and practice might *sometimes* overlap. These possibilities are sacrificed to the false belief that practice is always already research. When we hear the argument that performance is an innately theorising practice which is able to produce and stand *as* the research thesis rather than functioning as a supportive illustration we are duty bound to ask how this is the case; to ask for some proof in support of the claim. Without that confirmation the claim is little more than an assertion without evidence.

### *Windmill-Tilting*

Even in the midst of our engagement with art theory speak, we might not go so far as to suggest



that performances are cultural phenomena with no meaning outside that of discourse, or outside of *that* discourse; in the same way, we are unlikely to position ourselves in opposition to the idea that research through performance/research as performance are valid and utterly legitimate forms of inquiry. The arguments have been so well-rehearsed as to need no repeating here. And yet, having won the battle of acceptance we seem desperate to find another foe. And where one does not exist, one is created. This may be a suitably romantic ideal, and it is certainly one that positions P-a-R exponents as outsider *scholartists*, but it cannot help but fritter energies on hallucinatory enemies. Just as we fritter energy when we argue that it is unfair for artists to be asked also to explain and that explanation is anathema to performance; when we argue that creative research is such a different animal that it cannot be measured by the crude criteria used for all other approaches. Engineers and architects have no less a stake in the argument that their constructions stand testament to their own concerns, just as racing drivers might argue that their thesis is contained in a lap of the track. Performance is different, and so are its thesis demands, but not so different as to render all similarity redundant. Perhaps we would do better to simply acknowledge that P-a-R PhD projects have the imperative to communicate their questions, methodologies and findings and to accept that the drift towards moments of loaded ambiguity in and through performance are not necessarily conducive to realising all of these needs. In academic qualification terms, a PhD requires more than a performance and an accompanying programme note, which is not to say that the walls of tradition are so watertight as to resist the seepage of creative production as a stand-alone thesis, for it is inevitable that this time will come, as it already has in much of northern Europe.

### *The Wear & Tear of Time*

Maybe what P-a-R could acknowledge has more to do with the tension between the immediacy and ephemerality of performance (made real in the now and lost in the then) and the permanence of written authored work (made in the then and found in the now). In many ways writing for the page and performing are as oppositional as any two forms of expression could be. We write words in the moment for other people to read in other countries and contexts and times, knowing that the paragraphs and line breaks we suggest will be inevitably disrupted by the rhythms that different



readers bring. When we write we have no real control over when a page is turned, a sentence is skipped or a book is returned to its shelf; when we perform in the moment, we know that we are seeking to control time and experience for other people. When we want darkness, the lights go out; when we want collective surprise, we manufacture it; and everybody hears the lines we speak at the exact time we choose. Spectators are free to leave theatres as and when they so desire, but we have more control over them than we can ever exert over readers who can pause mid-line at will. At the same time writing and performing have much in common. It is a characteristic of language that webs of meaning are generated and that any and all texts are necessarily self-contradictory. Performance is the same. Each is, in Wittgenstein's terms, a language game; each is a form of expression which, in seeking to utilise the language of truth, is handicapped because the attempt to do so itself constitutes a further language game.

Research is an investigative process carried out to gain knowledge and understanding. The principle of intentionality is central to this and it comes with the expectation that ideas generated by the project are capable of leading to improved insights in the field. In order to be valuable insights need to be communicated. As a methodological approach P-a-R is bound in explorations of the time and timeliness of practical elements, and it is here that research through live performance differs fundamentally from research in and through other forms. Where the passing of time may well do other creative practice many favours it is a rare act of performance that successfully morphs its own ephemerality into permanence.

And increasingly *this* is the battleground; *this* is the theatre of our war of words and war on words, where practice meets not theory but thesis, in a place caught between the now and the then. It is not that performance does not find its own validity through practical dissemination, but that this validity tends towards relative immediacy. When performance is time-based it is well-nigh inevitable that this same time is the agent that eats away at the very fabric it wears. This is where the need for critical writing comes from: not from illusion and self-delusion but from the simple wear and tear of time.

There are some questions we might usefully ask as we move forward in our engagement with P-a-R, and they are offered here as a means of drawing this article to a close. To locate these questions in more concrete ways as well as providing a return to the stimulus for this article (and putting my



head back through that ethical noose) I should say that they have been extrapolated from draft reports on particularly problematic PhD submissions, ones which fell foul of many of the reasons outlined earlier. The questions were not put directly to any students in the manner they are offered here and they refer to no fewer than five submissions. Taken as a whole the questions would be unlikely to ring bells of recognition even in the students they obliquely refer to. No identifying features of the students, thesis address and institutions are included. As with all PhD submissions, the work in question was appraised by more than one examiner and the following are based on my comments only. Because this article is an attempt at identifying some of the problems with PhD through P-a-R the selected comments are challenging and critical. Elsewhere, and certainly in the versions made available to the students, the reports acknowledge many of each submission's qualities.

Experience is not the same thing as expertise, and whilst I have examined my share of PhDs by and through practice I make no claims here or elsewhere to expertise. The term "experienced" is used here rather than "expert". If in part this reflects a nod towards humility, it is also accurate inasmuch as within the context of theatre education experience is measurable in ways that expertise is not. In this light the following questions are offered by way of continuation rather than conclusion and suggestion rather than assertion. If they have any value it is in their real-world origins and in a desire to see P-a-R as something that is argued for rather than assumed; as an approach and way of thinking where the demands of research are brought into new light in and through practice rather than buried beneath it.

- In what way is your experience and technical accomplishment as a practitioner necessary to the success of your research?
- Is the practice an example of knowing how, or of showing how?
- What makes the practical elements of your thesis necessary; i.e. what has your work revealed that a focus on extant practice would not?
- What does originality demand? Is it enough that your practice is not negatively derivative, or is something more than this required? How is that negotiated in your work?
- How significant is demonstration of the ancestry of ideas; of your own ideas alongside the wider



academic/artistic world in which your project functions?

- Does your practice demonstrate the useful applicability of your solution?
- In a field where explorations are often idiosyncratic, personal, small in scale and impossible to replicate, what evidential weight can we ascribe to the actions and results of *this* particular example of practice?
- How wide a palette of choices need there be in order for your creative decisions to read as informed rather than habitual?
- Is the prioritisation of propositional knowledge such that the experiential part of the project works against effective dissemination?
- In what ways might the practice operate as a site of knowledge production?
- What are the obstacles you encountered when working in the ways that you did as a knowledge creator in P-a-R?
- In what parts of the thesis does research most significantly reside?
- What methodologies and theories relevant to the field of P-a-R are being worked through? Why and how were these chosen?
- How is the premise of the thesis tested?
- How are you distinguishing between feelings and findings?
- In what ways does a focus on your self enhance or detract from knowledge production?
- How are you validating the worth of your own experiences?
- What is the importance of the question (why is it worth asking?) and where is evidence of the significance of the findings?
- Where is substantial evidence of the work's significance, originality and contribution to knowledge?

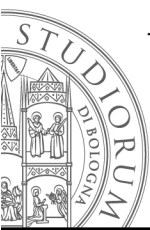
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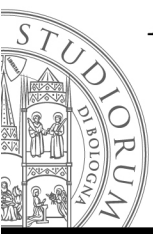
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### Abstract – IT

Questo contributo è deliberatamente inteso come una provocazione e interroga i modi in cui conoscenza e comprensione si articolano nella Performance-as-Research, così come attraverso la performance stessa. L'insidioso statuto della P-a-R, più simile a un mantra che a una metodologia, impone di dar voce ad alcuni interrogativi. Lo sguardo apertamente rivolto al Regno Unito è qui anche influenzato da due esperienze professionali presso atenei australiani; da residenze condotte negli Stati Uniti, in Asia e nell'Europa continentale; da collaborazioni con accademici avvenute in una dozzina di paesi, così come dalla partecipazione a commissioni di valutazione di ricerche dottorali in tre paesi diversi. Benché si concentrino prevalentemente sul contesto britannico e australiano, le problematiche affrontate in questo articolo non sono del tutto circoscritte a livello locale; inoltre, benché non si tratti di un resoconto auto-etnografico, questo contributo si basa su numerose esperienze di valutazione di studenti nell'ambito della P-a-R condotte dal suo autore. Su tali basi vengono qui messe in questione alcune pretese riguardanti la P-a-R, non ultima l'idea che la pratica creativa possa servire senza difficoltà al proprio sviluppo nel quadro della ricerca scientifica formale.

### Abstract – EN

This paper is intended as a provocation; and it asks questions of the ways in which knowledge and understanding are articulated through P-a-R in and through performance. The article argues that P-a-R's creeping status as more of a mantra than a methodology necessitates the asking of some questions. The article's overtly UK perspective is tempered by a positions at two Australian universities; residencies undertaken in the US, Asia and mainland Europe; collaborations with academics in a dozen countries and PhD examination in three countries. Whilst the focus of the article remains predominantly British and Australian the issues addressed are not entirely local; whilst not quite an autoethnography, the article draws on its writer's examination of numerous P-a-R students. It is from this platform of support that the article questions some of the assumptions around P-a-R, not least the idea that creative practice can readily serve as its own articulation within formal research contexts.



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