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Artist Academics: Performing the Australian Research Agenda

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Abstract

Despite the recent focus on creativity and innovation as the backbone of Western knowledge economies, the presence of the creative arts within universities remains problematic. Australian artist academics who seek a balance between their artistic and academic lives work within a government-directed research environment that is unable to quantify; therefore, to recognize the value of creative research, yet which accepts the funded outcomes of post-graduate practice-based students. This study sought to unravel how artist academics from a variety of non-written creative disciplines perceive the relationships between their roles as artists, researchers and tertiary educators. Three themes were generated from interviews with the artist-academics: (a) creative research and the academy, (b) practice, research, and teaching nexus, and (c) identity. Central to the discussions was the question of whether and how creative work constitutes legitimate research.

Creative Research and the Academy

Overwhelming and continual change within the education organization is one of the reasons the presence of the arts within the university sector is problematic. Australia's recent history is an excellent example. In 1982 each Australian state was required by the federal government to combine together smaller Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs), reducing the total number by 60% from 79 to 47. Many of the Colleges ran crucial courses in the arts and in arts education. Six years later, Australian Higher Education Policy known as the Dawkins Reform (Dawkins, 1998) mandated institutions with less than 2,000 students to merge with a university. As a result, CAEs and universities were combined in 1991 to create a single sector known as the unified national system (UNS). Over the course of these changes almost all of Australia's arts schools amalgamated with universities and became a university department, often devolving leadership to the non-discipline leader of a larger faculty. Ironically, the devolution does not seem to have lessened the administrative burden. As an Australian music academic commented, "The universities are so tied up in administration these days that they barely have enough time to put together the courses" (Bennett, 2008, p. 66).

Further cuts to higher education in the late 1990s led to additional amalgamation and far less budgetary control at the departmental level. The results of the UNS have been more complex than expected and, in the context of arts education have particularly impacted funding for individual tuition and small group teaching, studios, artist residencies, and financial capital for physical resources. According to the National Council of Heads of Tertiary Music Schools (NACHTMUS), Australian conservatories are under-funded when compared to their overseas counterparts. In short, "many other resource-hungry fields such as science, medicine and engineering do not see why they should be subsidizing a music school" (Hannan, 2001, p. 1). Arts schools vie for a share of limited funding within a government-directed research environment heavily biased towards traditional scientific research and a bureaucracy that does not understand (or wish to understand) research within and through the creative arts.

Australia has three tiers of government. The Australian Government (also known as the Commonwealth Government) governs the Australian Commonwealth of eight States and Territories and is elected for a three-year period of office, with an average parliamentary life of about two-and-a-half years. Each Australian State and Territory has its own government, which holds office for up to four years, and local governments are elected for a fixed four-year term with half of the seats becoming vacant every two years. The Australian Government has the primary responsibility for higher education policy and for funding, which is based on research output and the number of full-time student places. Decision making, regulation and governance for higher education are shared between the Australian Government, the State and Territory Governments, and the institutions themselves. In 2007,

Australia's higher education sector consisted of 37 self-accrediting public universities, two private universities, one other self-accrediting institution, and approximately 150 non-self-accrediting institutions which are accredited by the State and Territory Governments. There are also a number of private higher education providers (DEEWR, 2008a).

Diminishing funding during recent years has meant that many universities are in reality privatised institutions which generate much of their revenue from full fee-paying overseas students and from other activities such as commercialisation and industry based research and development. In February 2008 the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (the Honorary Senator Kim Carr) announced a research quality and evaluation system called Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). At the time of writing there are few details on the types of research to be recognised under the new system, and an exercise to rank Australian and international journals has been undertaken. What is certain is that research will remain a core business within academia and that it will continue to have considerable bearing upon career success within the university system. Promotion is largely dependent upon traditional research output, the acquisition of academic qualifications, and the supervision of postgraduate students. In contrast, within the arts sector there is no formal system of qualifications and accreditation to differentiate between professional and hobbyist. Careers in the arts are seldom linear, employed positions are rare, and reputation, which is built over time, rests with those who receive and critique the artwork.

The marked differences between these two environments are exacerbated by the expectation that the creative practice of artist academics should continue at a level that will add to the prestige of the university and draw in students. This research indicates that the lack of recognition for creative practice either condemns the artist academic to the lower ranks of the university system or condemns creative practice to the realms of an extra-time activity or, at worst, to inactivity. Despite the systemic changes within higher education, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations data (DEEWR, 2008b) illustrate the increasing popularity of university level creative arts study: in 2007 a total of 63 institutions offered courses to 68,178 students, which represents a 7.4% rise on 2006 student numbers. Creative arts enrolments currently constitute 7.1% of Australian university enrollments and students in these programs require appropriately trained academics to teach the skills and knowledge that comprise the discipline. These academics more often than not bring with them an established arts practice, and it is the relationship between that arts practice, teaching, and the research practices and processes of the university, that formed the subject matter of this study.

Process

This paper reports findings from a larger study of the artist as academic. Respondents were identified from within professional networks, and purposeful sampling was employed to locate successive informants likely to give a wealth of information (Patton, 1990). Eight arts practitioners (identified with pseudonyms): an actor (Ava), an electro-acoustic composer and performer (Brian), a composer (Clare), a dance artist (Ellen), a dramatist (Fiona), a ceramicist (Gina), an organist and harpsichordist (Henry), and a songwriter and popular musician (Damon), were interviewed by the researchers. All have an active professional practice, all are employed as academics at Australian universities, and none are working in a creative practice area that is primarily concerned with the written word.

Participants were asked to consider their work as artists and as academics through a series of questions. This paper focuses on responses to the question posed to participants about the relationship between the roles of artist, researcher and tertiary educator. Each interview began by building a short profile of the participant including qualification, academic position, years spent in academia, and a description of the arts practice. Interviewing commenced with the question: Do you view your arts practice as a site of knowledge (that is, as research) and, if so, how is it so? Question two followed, and the third and final question was: What is your perception of, and attitude towards, these roles?

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analysis focused initially on answering the research questions and then, using Glaser's constant comparative method of analysis, codings were compared "over and over again with codings and classifications that have already been made" (Flick, 2002, p. 231). Seeking new responses to the topic, aspects of grounded theory were adopted to develop exploratory interpretations of data which would focus future data collection.

Findings and Discussion

Architect Walter Gropius insisted, "There is no such thing as professional art (1919, no page)." Gropius's attempt to eliminate the hierarchical distinction between the artist and the craftsman displaced the academy and all that it stood for. Similarly, Saarnivaara (2003, p. 582) drew on the work of Varto to define the artist as 'unthinkingly creative': "a person who confronts her [sic] experiential world by means of a craft and without exerting any conscious conceptual influence and who draws on it to create something new." In contrast, artists working as academics within the university sector need to function effectively as artists, teachers, researchers and administrators. Artist academics seek a 'goodness of fit' between their artistic and academic lives, and this is by no means a simple task.

In our interviews with artist academics from a variety of disciplines, we sought to unravel how they perceive the relationship/s between the roles of artist, researcher and tertiary educator. Responses, discussed in the following section, are grouped according to three emergent themes: creative research and the academy, practice-research-teaching nexus, and identity.

Creative Research and the Academy

Artist academics encounter many of the same frustrations felt by other academics; for example, the annoyance expressed by the organist (Henry) with the “banal admin, hampering my ability to do more performances and get on with research, including that which I should do with my job as an academic,” was a common grievance. However, the difficulty of ensuring that creative practice can be appropriately positioned within academic work creates quite specific difficulties. Lack of time was a common theme for artist academics who reported employing a variety of strategies to find committed time for their artistic practice. These included the refusal of full-time positions, rising at 4:30 a.m. to work as an artist before going to work as an academic, and trying to work intensively during semester breaks. The issue of flexibility is a key factor in the decision made by many non-academic artists to work in low-paid, low-skilled jobs that can be ‘switched on and off’ according to the demands of their practice. Academic schedules are rarely that flexible. Flexibility of an additional kind concerns those whose creative practice requires an elite level of physical fitness or physical skill. Maintaining gross- and fine motor skills at the level required for professional-level performance is almost impossible when practice is intermittent.

Particularly problematic is that creative work requires a specific state of mind, and this can rarely be found between staff meetings or lectures. Unfortunately, the lack of flexibility in working time makes it almost impossible for artists to work on intensive projects. The ceramicist (Gina) commented, “At this stage I’m an academic. When I retire I’ll return to the clay.” For others, however, deferring creative practice was not an option they would consider. Other constraints include institutional philosophies focused on scientific research and university rankings, educational agendas, industry trends, and over-crowded curricula, all of which can result in artist academics “driven by the external art world and educational agendas that rarely reflect their own artistic motives and practice” (Carroll, 2006, p. 4). Creative practice often forms the subject of traditional research output, and its absence can be particularly problematic. As the organist (Henry) explained, the requirements of academia inhibit the creative practice from which research is derived. Finding a balance is extremely hard.

Although most artist academics struggle to some extent for the formal recognition of their creative work, the artist academics who contributed to this study fell into two distinct groups. The first group focused almost entirely on the difficulties of gaining university recognition for their creative work, whilst those in the second group acknowledged the difficulties but reported that were engaging with the existing research paradigm by facilitating both the creation of artistic output and the related academic discourse. Both groups of artist academics bemoaned the fact that writing about art is more valued than the art itself; the organist described how “the process of interpreting a work gets more recognition than the performance that results from that process.” Speaking as an artist academic, the organist said that he both values his creative practice and recognizes the importance of presenting or interpreting the work in a way that will gain recognition; in a sense, ‘playing the research game’: “If you think about it, you can actually get points [research recognition] if you present the material correctly. What you’re doing is bona fide research and is a contribution to knowledge.”

Artist academics in the second group tended to share the actor’s (Ava’s) view that creative practice is often seen as “a kind of knowledge that generates feelings rather than knowledge in the broadest sense of the word.” This can result in a loss of agency as artists and their work become the subject of traditional research rather than taking control of that commentary. Ava explains, “There has been a big assumption in the university that *we* are involved in the real knowledge business, and *we* will describe and research *you* artists. ... Quite often those documentations only occur through reviewers or people writing about us rather than us writing about ourselves.” Eckersall (in Stewart, 2006, p. 2) suggests that creativity in combination with traditional research develops “research outcomes of benefit to each field. This ensures the integrity of research within fields of praxis as well as working strategically between them.” As Stewart goes on to explain, articulating or mapping the creative process is essential to the validity of creative research. However, the process behind a visual artwork or performance is often invisible to the untrained (and sometimes even to the trained) viewer or listener, and exegetical writing can play both an analytical and complementary role in the creative work as well as providing a framework and description. It is, according to Bolt (2004), the specificity of artist experience, the tacit knowledge, which is crucial to the communication of emergent knowledge “beyond the peculiarity of a practice to contribute to the broader knowledge economy” (p. 14). Accordingly, performances are “remarkably appropriate laboratories for research into the relationship between bodies, minds, communication, and learning” (Wright, 2008, p. 7).

The specificity of artist experience also equips artists with investigative skills that many don’t recognize and which, as described by artist academic Sierra (2005, p. 2), have direct application to traditional research: “engaging with aspects of cultural theory that recognized interpretive analysis, where the interpretation of images and their context is a manifestation

of grounded research, I found a link between the skills I had as an artist, and a methodology I required as a researcher.”

The perception that creative work is not legitimate research within a university environment has fuelled the writing of creative practice by ‘others’. The dramatist (Fiona) described this as “deferred embodiment ... like charity work.” As the ceramicist (Gina) pointed out, one solution is for artists to “articulate that framework themselves.” Commenting on her teaching role in fine arts, she noted that “for many students the written word is their second or third language.” The same difficulty is described by artist academics—particularly those whose creative work is not primarily concerned with the written word—who have had to learn to communicate their research in traditional forms such as academic papers. Looking to future generations of artist academics, the dance artist (Ellen) has tackled this issue by attempting to demystify the process at the undergraduate level: “I spend a lot of time trying to bridge research and practice. I fight for time ... for the undergraduate body to turn their performance into written work.”

By successfully negotiating the creative practice-research-teaching nexus, the participants in the second group had reclaimed their artistic and intellectual agency, taking control of commentary that accompanies and complements their work and meeting, at least in part, the traditional research expectations imposed by their universities. It is to the creative practice-research-teaching nexus that we turn next.

The Creative Practice-Research-Teaching Nexus

The debate about qualitative versus quantitative research has raged since the work of the Chicago school in the 1920s. Quantitative research, described as emphasizing “the discovery and verification of theories,” and qualitative research, described as ‘soft research’ representing “many things to many people” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 8) are increasingly integrated within research to enable researchers to use different methods for different aspects of a study. This provides increased opportunities for analysis and, as a result, a richer detail of data; however, the acceptance of qualitative and mixed method research has not been straightforward (Rossman and Wilson, 1984). In the same way, creative research takes many forms, uses many research strategies, and is fluid and interchangeable according to its purpose. Writing about the lack of stable terminology with respect to the methodological approaches within creative research, dance academic Rubidge (2005) defines three fundamental creative research strategies (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Creative Research Strategies*

Strategy	Description
Practice-based research	Research that tests pre-formulated questions and/or hypotheses derived from artistic practice.
Practice-led research	Research using practice to research practice. Often without an initial clearly defined question or hypothesis, the research may lead to a formal question or hypothesis.
Practice as research	Research in which artistic practice is the primary research methodology.

Much of the debate about the legitimacy of creative research is driven by a perceived lack of “systematic theoretical reflection” (Rubidge, 2005, p. 7). Although the creative process can be intuitive and not predetermined, which is different to much traditional research, the findings of this study suggest that the often-used term ‘reflective practice’ is problematic because it implies that the documentation of process or creative act occurs retrospectively, whereas this is often not the case. For example, when we asked the ceramicist (Gina) whether she first creates and then critiques, she described a “chicken and the egg theory” and explained that creativity may come from a visual prompt or, equally, from the initial formative analysis and critique of the subject matter. She gave the example of a work derived from the detailed research of a sixteenth-century Mogul manuscript. Similarly, the composer (Clare) described the extensive research she would do before writing for a new combination of instruments. Rather, we encourage the use of the term ‘mindful practitioner’, which Stewart (2006, p. 2) describes as “critical reflective investigative praxis which could include practicing theory, practice into theory, practical theory, theory into practice, theorizing practice, theoretical practice.”

Partly, we suggest, the paradox lies in the creative, lateral way in which many artist academics approach research methods. The dramatist (Fiona) described “trying to fit scientific/research paradigms” by labeling creative research as action research, grounded theory research or a phenomenological study; but she implied that these terms are often applied to the research retrospectively in an attempt to legitimize the work. The

methodology becomes, in this case, a retrospective form of justification. The actor (Ava) described her doctoral experience as unsettling for her research supervisors:

I got feedback from various supervisors and readers that the kind of logic I was using wasn't as linear as they were used to ... they thought my way of thinking was quite lateral ... and that was a gentle way of saying 'it's illogical in my terms' ... I did a lot of correcting and mapping out of things that didn't necessarily look connected in an academic framework. Now I consider that [to have been] quite an artistic process because at some level ... you are banking on a kind of unconscious percolation as patterns and ideas and arguments emerge from all that.

In arguing that his compositional practice aligns with the general requirements of traditional research, Hannan (2006a, p. 10) draws upon Cage's suggestion that the unforeseen nature of experimental action "ruptures our interpretive framework."¹ In fact, he writes, "The method, then, is in the subversion of accepted methods" (p. 10). Particularly important to several interviewees was the assumption that the insights brought to the research process by the artist academic have the potential to challenge and extend current understandings of what research is and how it is undertaken. These interactions helped the artist academics to persist in imagining and articulating relationships between process and discourse. To that extent these artists, and research of this kind, can be seen as contributing to an emerging discourse.

For some artist academics, the process of their artistic work is something not to be thought of too analytically in case the process itself is put at risk. The songwriter (Damon) explained, "Everything that I learn about song writing; for example, is going to have an impact on the actual research that I do... I'm happy to draw on that [my arts practice] for lectures and I do reflect in an analytical way after the fact in terms of my teaching, but not in terms of an academic outcome such as a published paper. ... I need to refrain from thinking through it too analytically". For this artist academic, traditional research output is drawn from other aspects of his academic and creative practice.

Participants disclosed that the creation of artistic output and the accompanying academic discourse both inform and are informed by their teaching. In making this link, they are successfully negotiating the creative practice-research-teaching nexus. Similarly, Rubidge (2005) describes the interaction of creative practice and research as having had a significant positive impact on her work as both an artist and an academic. Both of the composers who participated in our study (Brian and Clare) suggested that creative practice and research

¹ John Cage's 1961 essay *Silence* is available at http://www.zakros.com/mica/soundart/s04/cage_text.html

cannot be separated. Clare went on to describe the constant stimulation of teaching and, as a result of teaching, thinking about music, its contexts and its meanings. Similarly, situating creative practice as both research and a site of knowledge, and emphasizing that scholarship is both formally and informally gained, the songwriter (Damon) described his practice as “where I come from as a music lecturer. That’s the core of my understanding.”

Describing his life as an artist academic to fellow artist academic Hannan (2006b, p. 2), Reiner commented that teaching and research are “integral to his creative practice.” Hannan also interviewed Robert Davidson, composer academic, who observed that teaching had resulted in his work becoming more “grounded in a clear aesthetic outlook” (2006b, p. 1). The dramatist (Fiona) who participated in our study lends support to this argument with her comment that research “has helped me to articulate my practice.”

The benefits of academic life, which include a source of skilled employment within a position that is associated with arts practice, the presence of colleagues and potential collaborators, and working with students who bring with them fresh perspectives and a variety of experiences, were a common theme within both the literature and the interviews conducted for this study. The cognitive processes involved in teaching appear to be beneficial to research and creative practice; but alongside this and equally important is the interaction with students, as described by the dramatist: “When first-year students come in I see this amazing wide-eyed response. ... I feel very privileged to have met wonderfully creative people.” The ceramicist (Gina) spoke about the impact of the nexus on the practice of creative arts students: “Academic work has heightened my artistic practice because it has empowered me to analyze it, critique it, [and] reflect on it. As postgraduate coordinator I’ve noticed students struggle whilst they’re in the research process, but in the end they all say it was one of the most important things they had every done as an artist.”

Identity

There is another underlying aspect of creative production, that in which creative practice is embedded within professional, social, and personal identity. Both groups of artist academics were caught by issues of practice and identity: Am I an artist or an academic? What do I have to do to be one or the other? Is it possible for me to be both? It is important to understand that the professional status of an artist is derived “largely from the construction and maintenance of an artistic identity and its effective communication to others” (Bain, 2005, p. 25). Something similar could be said of the academic. ‘Professional’ artist status can be variously applied according to the amount of time spent on arts work, reputation, income derived from professional practice, or status within the arts community. This is problematic to the artist population who derive at least part of their income from fields unrelated to their artistic practice, and who often work in isolation from artist communities. It is also problematic for artist academics, many of whom are employed by universities in

part because of their creative expertise and reputation. Creative works affirm one's identity as an artist; therefore, over and above university expectations there is a self-imposed need to remain 'creative' in order to retain the artist identity. Remaining 'creative' becomes a university issue when artists, appointed to universities on the basis of their distinguished arts practice, are expected to continue their practice within a system that fails to recognize it.

Self-identity is crucial to finding intrinsic satisfaction in the arts, and intrinsic satisfaction is a crucial measure for most arts practitioners. Self-identity does not necessarily correspond with the commitment of time or to earning an income from arts activity; indeed many arts practitioners hold skilled or unskilled roles which are unrelated to their arts practice. For many people, though, professional identity is the same as job title. For an artist, the situation is much more complicated; self-definition could relate to careers which include numerous roles.

Career identity in the arts stems from aspirations and goals, which in turn are driven by a passion for creative practice. In terms of intrinsic success, this is achieved when there is concurrence between objective work and aspirations; a creative artist working as an educator whilst aspiring to a performance career is likely to have a subjective career as an artist rather than as an academic. Conversely, someone who proactively takes on an academic role and considers academic life to be a positive, ongoing professional activity is likely to have a subjective career identity that concurs with the objective one. For artist academics, the relationships between the roles of artist, researcher, and tertiary educator are complicated. These complications are not solely a consequence of the mixed agenda of the artist academic; they are complicated in part because they are far more complex than the university system within which the artist academics works. For the successful negotiation of this paradigm, both artist and academic identities—and activities—need to be supported.

Akin to the artists outside of academia who take on multiple roles both within and outside of their art, artist academics adopt multiple identities. We asked participants to mark on a continuum where they perceived themselves as artist and then as academic. The composer (Clare) explained that if she was writing a scholarly article she would be at the academic end of the spectrum, whereas when she was composing she would be at the artist end; the two identities were interchangeable according to her tasks. It could be that these dual, or multiple, identities, are a way of safeguarding and 'partitioning' the activities of artist academics. Carroll (2006, p. 4) suggests that "the identity of the artist is what is constructed in and through the discipline." Moving between environments where the artistic is valued and revered, or (in the university environment) undervalued and misunderstood, it is not surprising that many artist academics demonstrate Giroux's "shifting, multiple and often contracting nature of identity". On a positive note, exposure to other academic disciplines and influences within the university environment has the potential to broaden professional

identities. As the dramatist (Fiona) explained, “In the past I would have seen myself as part of the performative tradition, but what I’m finding out is that there are creative minds that have been at work in other traditions such as psychology and philosophy ... and I can see myself in a broader tradition now.”

Concluding Comments

Artist academics bring innovative approaches to both traditional and creative research, and the results are beginning to be seen in new forms of knowledge. These approaches are particularly beneficial to the developments in qualitative inquiry which can be seen increasingly as an interpretive art form, and they could be of great benefit to the academy in the future. The role of academia in creating an environment for this way of thinking (and writing) is very important. Whether fair or unfair, the emphasis on the written word as research encourages artist academics to write about their work (and that of others), which feeds their own practice and, in turn, their teaching. Although we recognize that many of the dilemmas faced by artist academics are not media specific, particular difficulties were identified in relation to traditional written research for academics whose arts practice is not primarily in the written word, and for artists whose arts practice is ‘real-time’ or performative. These areas need further investigation.

The lack of recognition for creative research output appears to stem from a lack of understanding about the processes involved. Our findings suggest that the process of engaging in creative arts practice, analysis, writing, and feeding back into one’s own arts practice and into teaching, could be organized as a model of ‘artistic action research’. This sort of work will almost inevitably come to greater functionality within the academy because the emphasis on process requires a tacit appreciation of the technologies of creative practice. As a result, artist academics will become further distinguished by their capacity to ‘know’ their practice. Concomitantly, expanding the body of knowledge associated with creative practice and process will lead to increased understanding of and, hopefully, recognition for, many forms of creative research.

Although many artist academics are finding ways to manage the complex relationships between their artistic practice and their academic lives, the fundamental problem remains the limited extent of university research funding. In Australia there were until recently twenty different categories of legitimate research output recognized for funding purposes by the Australian Government. When an independent audit identified an error rate of 45% in the submissions made by universities, all but four categories were excluded: namely peer reviewed journal articles, fully refereed conference papers, books, and book chapters. Although many universities continue to reward academic staff internally for other categories of research, the absence of Governmental recognition and funding for these activities is certain to make this a short-lived arrangement. It is an unfortunate situation: as Marshall and

Newton suggest (2000, no page), “More could and should have been done to devise effective protocols and procedures for reporting and documenting research outcomes from the other forms of research practice.” Until these protocols and procedures are established, artist academics will continue to see the marginalization of their creative practice and will have little option other than to favor traditional forms of research.

Rather than viewing creative research as a square peg in the round hole of the university sector, perhaps universities could look to the experimental research disciplines of the arts for the innovative thinking that employs tacit and explicit knowledge to link artistic, scholarly, industrial and cultural paradigms. In the meantime, the research performance will continue on tenuous ground.

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