What the praxis? (a paper)

Some opening remarks about practice as research and reconciling action and

review – or – what the praxis?

I'm going to begin with the elephant in the room:

And no, that's not "what the hell is this paper," but …

What *actually* is this thing we're calling 'practice as research'?

We have a sense of it ~ it is signified in these very words here **[refers to wall]**.

But it's actually something that's pretty tricky to pin down, put our finger on and to

articulate in precise words, which seems to be at odds with the very idea of

research itself and associated qualities of excellence such as 'rigour'.

So, I'm going to start by traversing and setting out this terrain of PaR; one I think

is a pretty wild and unruly terrain, in particular against the wider landscape of

research and the academe …

I'd like to suggest first of all, that PaR isn't just a thing, entity or even phenomena

that we're grappling with per se – i.e. I'm a practitioner-researcher and I'm

making/creating this 'thing' called PaR – but that it can be understood more

broadly as a discourse.

As constituting a constructed field or topology, with a sense of depth or ground.

Discourse is also underpinned linguistically:

To really get a sense of the ground of this terrain that we're dealing with I think it's

important to acknowledge that PaR as an entity, a concept and discourse

encompasses a multiplicity of terms, that have emerged over the past 15 or so

years, precisely in a drive to try to define, pin down, categorise and understand

what it is.

These terms include but are not limited to:

Practice-led research (AHRC)

Practice-based research (Candy)

Art-based research

Research-led practice

Art practice as research

Practice as research

Performance as research

Research by design

Research into practice

Research in the arts

Research for practice

Research through practice

Research on the arts

Artistic research

Art practice research

And so on.

The fact that linguistically we can't tie down and articulate what exactly it is, points

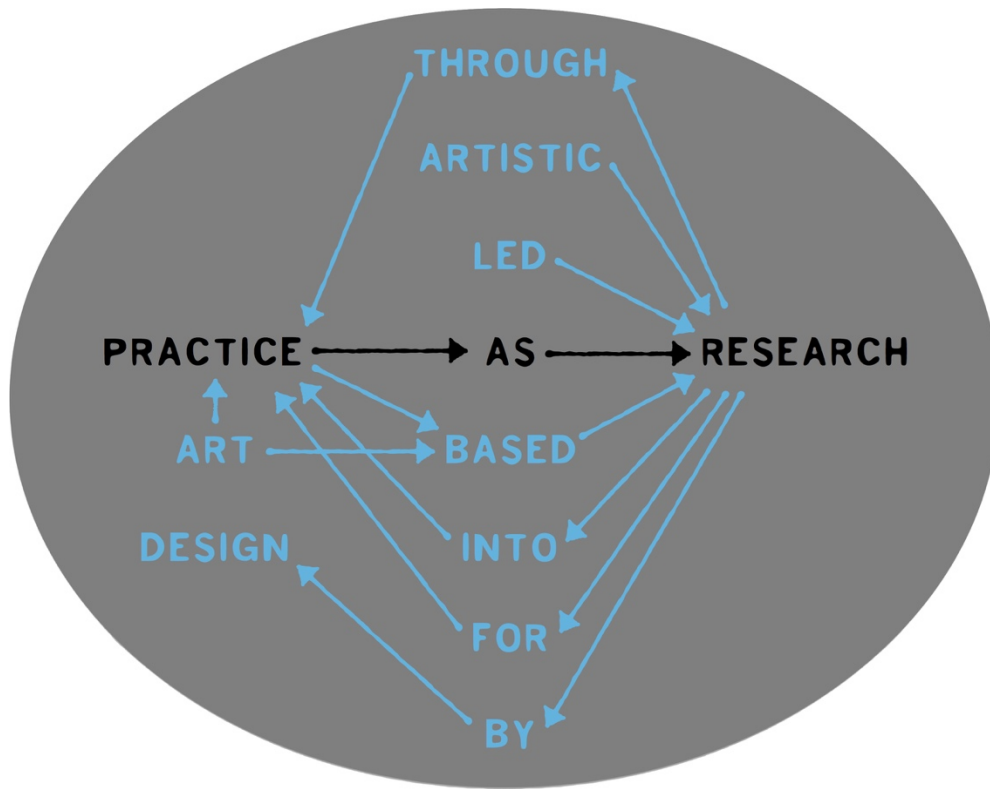to – I would argue – an inherent complexity and multidimensionality.

It is not singular or rigidly definable.

By its very nature it cannot be tied down.

This very much can be seen in this fantastic diagram **[slide 8]** by my colleague

Paul Norman that articulates what we've called the 'typologies of practice as

research' in the arts:

To unpick these terms a little further, they are also underpinned by multiple

different definitions.

I'd just like to share some of these here:

Practice-led research

" ... research in which the professional and/ or creative processes of art, design and architecture play an instrumental part in an enquiry. "

Mottram, J. Rust, C. and Till, J. AHRC Research review, 2007

i

Practice-based research

Creative artifact(s) as the *basis* of a contribution to knowledge, by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice demonstrated through creative outcomes.

Candy. L. Practice Based Research, 2006

ii

Practice-based research

An umbrella term for academic research that incorporates artistic practice as a research methodology.

Rubidge. S. Artists in the Academy: Reflections on Artistic Practice as Research, 2004

Practice-led research

Research that leads primarily to new understandings about practice that include "practice as an integral part of its method"

Candy. L. Practice Based Research, 2006

Research *for* practice

Where research aims are subservient to practice aims

Frayling, C. Research in Art & Design, 1993

v

Research *through* practice

Where the practice serves a research purpose

Frayling, C. Research in Art & Design, 1993

vi

Research *into* practice

For example, in observing the working processes of others.

Frayling, C. Research in Art & Design, 1993

Practice as Research

Research that has art practice as its object, that aims to draw conclusions about art practice from a theoretical distance and incorporates "the direct intertwinement of research and practice" "

Borgdorff. H. Debate on research in the Arts, 2006

Practice as Research

An all-encompassing term where artistic practice is the research. And the method. Maybe.

Nelson, R; Wilson, M. etc

ix

There is arguably no one definition of research incorporating artistic practice.

Not only is this discourse pluralistic and complex, it is also contradictory.

No wonder we have such a hard time reconciling what we do and this slippery

and nebulous entity – that we are for the most part navigating in a highly

embodied and intuitive way – with frameworks to review and measure such work.

It often feels – at least to me – like going up an escalator backwards [has any

ever tried that?]. Risky. Awkward. Exhilarating.

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We've been caught up for too long in striving towards a singular definition, or the

specificity of particular terminology to legitimize PaR.

In many ways, it is completely human nature to try to pin down, label, categorise

and define it:

Linguistics: homosignificans - we try to give language to things.

Neurology: we are neurologically wired to categorise things.

Psychology: Cognitive dissonance theory argues that we strive to

                    harmonise things that do not cohere.

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However, I would propose that …

PaR can instead be defined precisely by its resistance to be defined; as a

heterogeneous, multilayered, highly nuanced and fluid concept.

That doesn't mean that it can't be defined. Just that its very definition is that it

resists definition.[x]

FOOTNOTE

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Perhaps then, we are better off focusing on practice as research-*ness*.

The …

    complexities

    particularities

    peculiarities

possibilities

of this **[refers to wall]** very thing.

The thing which we can't necessarily pin down, but which we're possibly okay

with.

The conditions in which it operates.

I really just want to briefly highlight some of these qualities here,

Because actually I think this day will do exactly that.

Firstly, that there is a non-hierarchal and dialogical relationship between practice

and theory.

For me, practice and theory – and I've published about this quite a lot elsewhere –

function on the same epistemological level. They are imbricated with one another.

In a gloriously messy, and definitely not straightforward or coherent or clear way.

But …

It is both difficult and problematic to generalise on the position of practice because

of its highly individualized nature.

Rather, practice and theory instead adopt – or indeed enact – their own particular

relation.

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PaR is what I would call 'epistemologically ambiguous':

It includes knowledge(s) that are …

material

praxical

tacit

embodied – in process and visual, material and performative art forms[xi]

Hell, we've even got unknowing.[xii]

Which, quite frankly really fucks things up when we're dealing with new

knowledge.

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This all contributes to a lexicon of PaR:

We've already started to establish our own here **[refers to wall]**.

These qualities or conditions relate to things such as:

Reflexivity

Interdisciplinarity

Emergence

Performativity

However, this translates in many cases – in particular when dealing with

frameworks of review and the PhD – to a negative vocabulary:

Frayling: Thorny in that its goal is not primarily communicable knowledge.[xiii]

AHRC: Prompts 'vexatious' epistemological and ontological questions.[xiv]

Fortnum: The unknown as understood as *un*certain, *in*visible and

*in*comprehensible.[xv]

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By necessity it is underpinned by tensions:

One the one hand: robust, valid, systematic, rigorous

Yet at the same time: playful, experimental, a site of possibility

On the one hand: communicable, coherent

On the other: slippery, tacit and embodied

As Nelson argues, PaRa is often perceived as either elusive or incomprehensible

as such research is not easily reconciled with more traditional notions of

academic research.[xvi]

I think the problem with this problem

is precisely

that it's perceived to be a problem.

We've been caught up trying to fix the tensions.

Someone once told me that the moment you put your finger on it, you kill it.

Maybe, it is its tensions and its unruliness are its richness. It's very par-*ness*.

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PaR in the arts – which I mean in the broadest disciplinary sense –

is in many ways essentially the collision of two very different terrains:

academic research

and

artistic practice.

Each which have their own traditions, languages, politics, epistemologies,

paradigms.

What I think we are dealing with is:

para-dox

That is, working in parallel to various doxas that are at play:

academe

research

epistemological hierarchies

communication

If we return to the elephant in the room,

… the thing is …

I *really* like elephants **[slide 9]**

Maybe we've been caught up on the elephant but attention needs to be paid to

the room. The doxa. And our relation to it.

PaR arguably expands the very parameters of what research itself may mean,

the forms it may take and encompasses emergent research paradigms that

more fully articulate the complexities of research incorporating artistic practice.

By definition, it is para to doxa.

To maintain this powerful space of para – and precisely that of praxis – means not

relying on externally prescribed ways to understand PaR

Or

Assume that PaR speaks on its own terms.

If art is a fundamental part of the research process and partly the result of

research, then frameworks for review and PhD can be opportunities to

establish ways for …

Framing

Curate

Articulating

Exposing

Our own PaR-*ness*

And its criticality; how it is research that enacts, performs or embodies "a

process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared"

And it's associated originality, significance, rigour, impact.

It might all look different and enact PaR in its own way, but: **this is research**.

Call me utopian or even glass half-full, but the truth is: I don't believe in the

glass. I would prefer to drink from a pitcher. Possibly with sangria.

Strategically ad otherwise, PaRa has collective power in the para- as a

constant and reflexive space of transformation.

Let's not forget that there are no 'rules', only really broad and-actually-not-that-

bad criteria **[slide]**

The rest are just conventions.

[i] Mottram, Judith, Rust, Chris and Till, Jeremy (2007), *AHRC Research Review: Practice-led Research in Art, Design and Architecture*, London: AHRC.

[ii] Candy, Linda (2006), *Practice Based Research: A Guide,* Sydney: University of Technology.

[iii] Rubidge, Sarah (2004), *Artists in the Academy: Reflections on Artistic Practice as Research,* Australian Arts Council.

[iv] Candy, Linda (2006), *Practice Based Research: A Guide,* Sydney: University of Technology.

[v] Frayling, Christopher (1993), 'Research in art and design', *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1:1, pp. 1–5.

[vi] Ibid

[vii] Ibid

[viii] Borgdorff

[ix] Nelson, Robin (2013), *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances,* London: Palgrave Macmillan; Elkins, James (2013), 'Six cultures of the PhD', in M. Wilson and S. van Ruiten (eds), *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, Amsterdam: ELIA, pp. 10–15.

[x] Taylor, Jacqueline. 'Research-practice-pedagogy: establishing new topologies of doctoral research in the arts' in: Prior R. (Ed) Using Art as Research in Learning and Teaching: Multidisciplinary approaches across the arts (2018) London: Intellect, pp91-108.

[xi] Bolt, Barb (2007), 'The magic is in handling', in E. Barrett and B. Bolt (eds), *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, pp. 27–34; Vincs, Kim

(2007), 'Rhizome/MyZone: A case study in studio-based dance research', in E. Barrett and B. Bolt

(eds), *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd,

pp. 99–112.

[xii] Fisher, Elizabeth and Fortnum, Rebecca (2013), *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, London:

Black Dog Publishing.

[xiii] Frayling, Christopher (1993), 'Research in art and design', *Royal College of Art Research Papers*,

1:1, pp. 1–5.

[xiv] Mottram, Judith, Rust, Chris and Till, Jeremy (2007), *AHRC Research Review: Practice-led*

Research in Art, Design and Architecture, London: AHRC.

[xv] Fisher, Elizabeth and Fortnum, Rebecca (2013), *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, London:

Black Dog Publishing.

[xvi] (Nelson 2013: 4).

FOOTNOTE:

FYI. Luckily for me, this is published in a book. That is an output that can be easily reviewed. And

which is fairly straightforward. And that includes contributions by Carole Gray and Julian Malins.