

Journal of Research Practice
Volume 14, Issue 2, Article M3, 2018[Journal Help](#)

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[For Readers](#)[For Authors](#)[For Librarians](#)*Main Article:***To Write or Not to Write? The Contested Nature and Role of Writing in Arts Practice Research****Helen Phelan**

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nunan.mary@gmail.com**Abstract**

One of the most contested areas of arts practice research concerns the nature and role of writing. For many artist-scholars, research predicated on artistic practice does not require written contextualization. For those who engage in writing, questions as to the nature, mode, register, and purpose of writing abound. The growing body of publications addressing this question illustrates two broad responses. On the one hand, the ethnographic tradition attempts to capture phenomenological aspects of the artistic and reflexive experience. On the other, writing itself is approached as an integral part (a generative strand) of an artist's creative process. In this article, the development of arts practice research at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, Ireland is reviewed and it serves as a point of departure to discuss an engagement with writing that invites a dialogue between ethnographic and generative approaches, the balance of which is ultimately decided by the research question, and the approach taken to answer the question.

Index Terms: arts practice research; autoethnography; creative writing; epistemic practice; narrative inquiry; practice-based research; reflexive journaling

Suggested Citation: Phelan, H., & Nunan, M. (2018). To write or not to write? The contested nature and role of writing in arts practice research. *Journal of Research Practice*, 14(2), Article M3. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/592/492>

1. Modes of Inquiry in Arts Practice Research

Arts practice research positions artistic practices at the centre of the research endeavour. It encompasses a spectrum of research approaches known variously as practice-based research, practice-as-research, practice-led research, artistic research, and practice through research (Nimkulrat, 2007). The term *arts practice research* has a broad currency in Ireland and is used increasingly in other parts of the world (e.g., in the title of a [conference series](#) at Texas Tech University, United States). The term eliminates qualifying descriptors such as *based*, *as*, *led*, and *through*, which have been used to prescribe a specific relationship between “practice” and “research,” while maintaining the centrality of practice (which is not present in terms such as *artistic research*). Within this range of approaches, artistic practice may be a key component of the research method, a part of the final thesis, or constitute the whole work.

Nelson (2013) dates the emergence of arts practice research to the mid-1980s. With initial explorations occurring in Finland, parallel developments emerged in the UK in the early 1990s. Nearly three decades later, arts practice research is now an important player in the research landscape of the UK, Australia, and the Nordic countries in particular, with additional development in countries including Ireland, South Africa, New Zealand, and France, as well as significant resistance, particularly in parts of the higher education culture of the United States (Allegue, Jones, Kershaw, & Piccini, 2009). In Ireland, for example, most of the major universities and institutes of higher education incorporate arts practice approaches into some of their programme offerings.

There is growing recognition that the inclusion of artistic practice in academic research has enriched and expanded the terrain (Barrett & Bolt, 2010; Coessens, Douglas, & Crispin, 2009; Freeman, 2010). It has resulted in changes in the registers and modes of academic writing as well as the ways in which research findings are disseminated, evaluated, and taught. These changes, however, are not without their challenges. Smith and Dean note that, “[A]t the basis of the relationship between creative practice and research is the problematic nature of conventional definitions of ‘research’, which are underpinned by the fundamental philosophical quandary as to what constitutes ‘knowledge’” (Smith & Dean, 2009, p. 2). How artistic knowledge is produced, disseminated, and archived is at the heart of this debate.

A key issue within this discourse concerns the role of language and writing. In his review of a number of recent publications on arts practice research, Cazeaux notes this as one of the most ubiquitous questions in the field: “does artistic research require words?” (Cazeaux, 2008, p. 118). Sylvia Plath is often evoked as a champion of the “writability” of life, famously declaring that, “everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it and the imagination to improvise” (Plath in Kukil, 2000, p. 85). Many artists and artistic-researchers, however, would argue exactly the opposite, that there are experiences, emotions, and sensations that exist in a realm inaccessible to language and impossible to capture in writing. The extent to which arts practice research is required to “justify” or “explain” itself through written, contextual information is a point of sensitivity for many artists and scholars, concerned about

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“the hegemony of the word” (Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2005, p. 119). Scholars such as Graeme Sullivan argue that art in and of itself should be recognized as research and as a site of meaning-making and knowledge construction. He is sceptical about the tendency of arts practice researchers to reach for research methods such as ethnography and autoethnography, narrative inquiry, or journaling to bolster the status of art work as research. Art does not need these methods, he argues, being itself an activity capable of reflecting and transforming cultural knowledge (Sullivan, 2005). Similarly, Nicholas Till, Professor of Opera and Music Theatre at the University of Sussex notes the “worrying” trend in UK and European universities towards the justification of art as research through the production of copious supporting portfolios of writing. This tendency towards the “academization” of art often leads to art that meets the requirements of academe but, he claims, may have little or no artistic value (Till, 2009).

Conversely, there is a growing body of artist-scholars who view the contextualization of artistic practice through writing as a *sine qua non* of arts practice research. Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén, for example, suggest that the verbalization of arts practice research through writing is essential to its ability to communicate. Writing, they propose, fulfils six essential functions of the research process: functions which artistic practices are not only ill-equipped to perform but often view as the antithesis of their *raison d'être*. These include the ability to clarify, specify, justify, draw conclusions, adhere to established forms of literary and methodological paradigms, and cultivate the emerging field of arts practice research through reflexive engagement with artistic practice. In a further development of this theme, they argue for the development of an “artistic research methodology” which involves a vocabulary around making art as well as speaking and writing about art (Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2005). Nelson (2013) proposes that writing is a complementary aspect of arts practice research and suggests that most scholars, at least in the UK, accept its inclusion in the arts practice enterprise:

[O]ver the course of three decades of discussion on PaR [practice as research] in the UK (and elsewhere), practitioner-researchers have increasingly accepted that the work itself is just one mode—albeit the most significant aspect—of evidence of a research inquiry in a multi-mode submission.” (2013, p. 86).

While Nelson views artistic practice as central to arts practice research, he insists that other modes of inquiry are useful in almost all cases to articulate, communicate, and record the research process and outcomes.

At the heart of this debate is the following question: Can artistic practice in and of itself be viewed as a form of inquiry or does it require supplementary structures, methods, and specific approaches to writing to configure and communicate its inquiry and insights? Any institution that wishes to engage in arts practice research must grapple with this question. The following section introduces one such institution as a case study on this issue.

2. PhD in Arts Practice at the Irish World Academy

As the first university in Ireland to offer a structured PhD programme in arts practice research for performing artists, the [Irish World Academy of Music and Dance](#) at the University of Limerick has grappled with the question of acceptability of arts practice as a form of inquiry. The university regulations require arts practice doctoral students to write a 40,000 word contextual document (alongside presenting two major performance events). In this article, we

do not set out to prove or disprove the value of writing in arts practice research, but rather review the traditions of writing which have developed at the Academy. In analyzing the multiple roles played by writing in arts practice research, we propose that writing practices should be dictated by research questions and methods of inquiry rather than ideological positioning.

The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance is a unit within the university dedicated since its inception in 1994 to breaking down historical barriers between performance practice and academic scholarship. Our engagement with writing is strongly influenced by the traditions of scholarship and practice in music, dance, and related performance practices, which have developed at the Academy. Two approaches to writing are particularly developed at the Academy: *ethnographic* writing and writing as a *generative* strand of creative practice.

Ethnographic approaches to writing have been central to many programmes since the inception of the Academy. Founded initially as a research centre, the Academy attracted a cohort of doctoral students specializing in Irish music studies working with the founder-director of the Academy—performer, composer, and scholar, [Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin](#). Ó Súilleabháin was influenced by his own doctoral work with John Blacking at Queen’s University Belfast to introduce an anthropological theoretical framework around the study of Irish and other world music traditions. Appointed Professor of Social Anthropology in 1970, Blacking played a key role in the introduction of anthropological and ethnomusicological approaches to the study of performing arts in the UK and Ireland (Phelan, 2017). The Academy established programmes in ethnomusicology (i.e., anthropological study of music), ethnochoreology (i.e., anthropological study of dance), and ritual song studies. Each of these programmes anchored their approach to research methodology in ethnographic writing around the investigation of music, dance, singing, and related performance activities. The Academy has one of the strongest track records of ethnographic research in Irish music and dance nationally and internationally, attracting the largest amount of Irish Research Council funding in this area.

If Ó Súilleabháin’s commitment to an anthropological engagement with world music and dance led to the deployment of ethnography as a key research method at the Academy, his life as a composer and performer resulted in a concomitant commitment to the inclusion of performance at the heart of the Academy’s offerings. The invitation to the [Irish Chamber Orchestra](#), for example, to relocate to the University of Limerick campus within months of the creation of the Academy, paved the way for a 20-year programme of artistic residencies, attracting nationally and internationally recognized classical musicians, contemporary dancers, Irish traditional musicians and dancers, and early music singers. The Irish Chamber Orchestra was a key player in the formation of an MA Classical String Performance programme. [Daghda Dance Company](#) founder-director Mary Nunan became course director of the first MA Dance Performance. [Fidget Feet](#) aerial dance company was a key contributor in the creation of an MA Festive Arts programme. Each of these Master’s programmes at the Irish World Academy, as well as performance programmes in Irish traditional music and dance, developed core research methods modules in writing as creative process.

These two, overlapping research traditions of anthropology/ethnography and creative practice have strongly influenced the approach to writing embraced by the Arts Practice PhD programme. Figure 1 summarises these approaches to writing at the Irish World Academy.

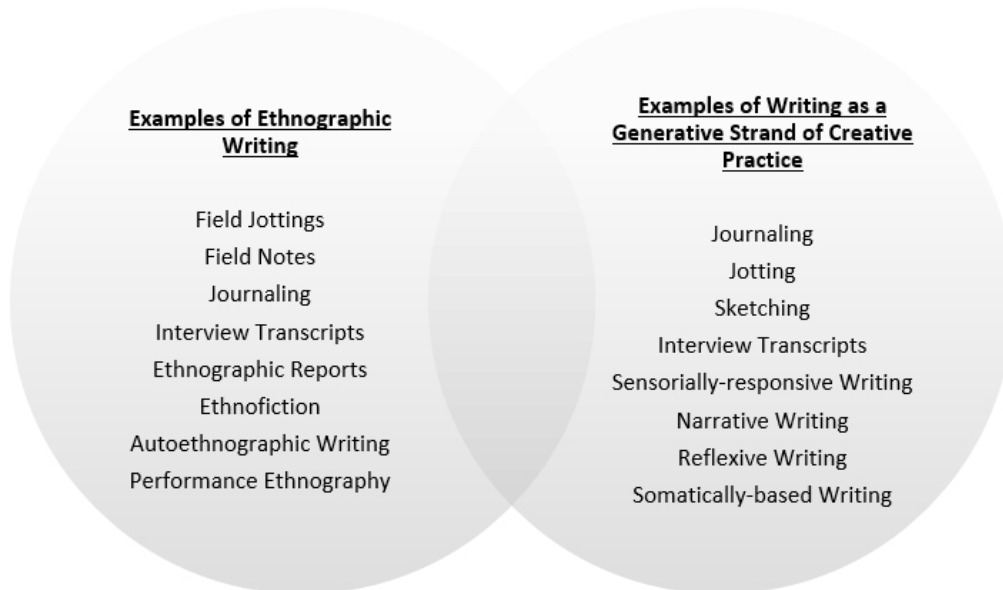


Figure 1. Approaches to writing at the Irish World Academy.

In this context, a distinctive “Irish World Academy” understanding of arts practice research has evolved, with a growing international profile. This is characterized by a mixed-mode (creative and scholarly) and mixed-method (ethnographic and generative) approach to research, with both mode and method dictated by practice specialization and research question. This has resulted in a distinctly inclusive attitude towards writing: not as a necessary evil to explicate artistic practice, but as a useful component of that practice, or, metaphorically speaking, a changeable dance partner moving in and out of stylistic and methodological roles. In this way, writing weaves its way into both the artistic process and the reflexive framework of research. Writing, therefore, within the Academy’s approach to arts practice research, is viewed as a practice in its own right, a potential strand of other artistic practices, as well as a means of articulating aspects of artistic practice. The Latin *articulatus* in some ways hints at all these meanings, whereby writing is a way of “joining the dots” or creating the “joints” between different approaches to artistic practice.

In this article, we provide a short review of these two approaches to writing in the context of arts practice doctoral research. Each has come through a crisis of confidence (discussed below) regarding its relationship to the practice with which it engages. Both approaches continue to evolve as do the artist scholars who adopt these, with the relationship between ethnographic and generative approaches becoming increasingly nuanced. Through a brief exploration of each, we argue that neither is the enemy of artistic practice, nor its solution. Rather, an informed understanding of both allows the researcher to decide how (if at all) writing best serves his or her research. The article includes a number of short samples of writing from recent doctoral graduates at the Irish World Academy, illustrating, if not the “writability” of everything, then at least the rich spectrum of possibilities open to writing within arts practice research.

3. Ethnography and Autoethnography in “Writing” Artistic Practice

While the emergence of autoethnography has been well documented, it is important to briefly review the literature documenting its development before discussing its specific role in the Irish World Academy. Autoethnography emerged in part from a crisis of identity in ethnography.

Ethnography attempts to provide in-depth, detailed descriptions of real life experiences in order to grasp the distinctive characteristics of a culture. The collection of data from practices outside the controlled environment of the laboratory or library is often referred to as “fieldwork” and ethnography typically consists of a combination of fieldwork and the representations (textual, visual, auditory) of this process of data collection, through observation and participation in the field (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography is an important text in the mounting crisis of confidence concerning the integral relationship between practice and writing, so central to the ethnographic enterprise. Published in 1986, it, “grew out of the growing contestation of ethnographer’s claims to a privileged and totalizing gaze” (Atkinson, Delamont, Coffey, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001, p. 3). The ethnographer was no longer viewed as someone with an authoritative perspective and the ability to capture and write complete or definitive accounts of experience. More importantly, the limits of writing itself were exposed. From the earliest images of Malinowski at his writing desk, the ethnographer used to be presented as an authoritative “scribe” of cultural practices. Clifford and Marcus argued that the limits of writing are both political and poetic, both cultural and aesthetic. Writing utilizes a symbol system that emerges out of a culture of practice and is no more neutral than any other cultural practice. Furthermore, the “writer” is himself or herself a cultural actor, dialoguing with, rather than representing definitively, other cultural practices. Given this, they suggest “the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 2) rather than a simple act of documentation.

This crisis of confidence in the role of writing in ethnography has led contemporary scholars to what Lincoln and Denzin call “a messy moment” characterized by, “multiple voices, experimental texts, breaks, ruptures, crisis of legitimation and representation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 581). This questioning of the role and authority of writing has permeated many disciplines for which ethnographic approaches are central. *Shadows in the Field*, for example, edited by Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, is a landmark collection of essays in ethnomusicology, addressing new perspectives on fieldwork in the discipline. In his introduction, Cooley notes that, “the most lively debate among social sciences in recent years, especially in North America, has concerned the adequacy and legitimacy of our means for describing the cultural ‘Other’ in writing” (Barz & Cooley, 1997, p. 3). Faubion and Marcus examine the question of writing from the point of view of form and design, arguing for increased recognition of, “the dramatic import of literary form” (2009, p. 186). The emergence of *autoethnography* in this context has been an important development for arts practice research at the Irish World Academy. Understanding this development is important for artistic research.

The shift of the ethnographic gaze away from a self-image of objective authority has at times encouraged the researcher’s lens to swing around and take an ethnographic “selfie.” The *ethnographic self* (Coffey, 1999), *reflexive ethnography* (Davies, 2008), *autoethnography* (Chang, 2008; Muncey, 2010), *interpretive autoethnography* (Denzin, 2006, 2014), and *performance autoethnography* (Spry, 2001), all point towards a more reflexive understanding of the relationship between self and other. If the register of writing about the other has shifted from authoritative to interpretive, registers of writing about the self include a strong emphasis on autobiography and narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Gray, 2003; Pelias, 2004). Researchers are encouraged to consider the inevitable, symbiotic relationship between the researcher and the researched, made all the more synergistic when the former and the latter

coalesce. As Muncey notes, “the desire to engage in an autoethnography derives from the disjunctions that occur between one’s own experience and the official narratives set out to explain it. Can you really filter out your own experience, even if you wanted to?” (Muncey, 2010, p. 10). Unsurprisingly, when artists desire to tell or research their own stories, they often reach for the artistic medium through which their expertise has developed and found voice. If arts-based methods have opened up the world of the arts as legitimate media for researchers (Leavy, 2009), arts practice research has invited artists to engage in *reflexive dialogue* through and with their practice. Musician, conductor, and researcher, Bridie Bartleet notes that, “Music can expand the creative possibilities of autoethnography. Likewise . . . autoethnography can offer musicians a means to reflect on their creative work in culturally insightful ways” (Bartleet, 2009, p. 713). The ethnographic / autoethnographic approach to writing has emerged as an important vehicle for arts practice researchers to reflect on their creative process.

4. Ethnographic and Autoethnographic Approaches to Writing at the Irish World Academy

At the Academy, many students use ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches to their arts practice research. The Arts Practice PhD programme resists a prescriptive approach to autoethnography, allowing students to develop their own style and register of writing in tandem with their practice as dancers, musicians, or performing artists. For some, ethnographic and autoethnographic writing shines a light on the detail of the creative process. For others, self-narratives, ethnographic scripts, or ethno-dramas (i.e., the adaptation of ethnographic data into a dramatic script for performance) become part of the creative outputs. Some examples of ethnographic and autoethnographic writing from doctoral submissions at the Irish World Academy are presented below.

An important use of autoethnographic writing in arts practice research is its role in “excavating” key formative moments in one’s professional development. Resonant with Foucault’s “archeological” discourse on knowledge, which describes knowledge as both the laying down and exposing of layers of experience (Foucault, 1972), writing allows artists to probe moments of transformation or rupture in their practice. Written evocations of these moments often act as springboards for new insights or creative impulses.

Renowned dance choreographer and former lead dancer in the internationally acclaimed Irish dance show, *Riverdance*, Breandán de Gallaí made use of autoethnographic writing in excavating key formative moments of his artistic development as a doctoral researcher at the Academy. In this excerpt from his journal, he describes a significant moment in his relationship with music. In his performance as an Irish dancer, music provided him with a rhythmic structure to order and control the sequence and speed of delivery of dance steps. In this experience, he realizes the sensation of allowing music to support and free his movement, rather than control it:

One particular performer, an African-American man who played percussion and sang, once remarked on how high I jumped. I told him that once the music inspired me to the right degree, I could stay in the air as long as the musician held the note or phrase . . . he asked if he could play with how long he could “hold me there”—I was only too delighted! It felt like taking flight! . . . That day I felt that I transformed as a dancer. A year later, after I returned home, I was causing no end of frustration in my Irish dance class in Dublin. (Reflexive journal of Breandán de

Gallaí, December 2009)

Another doctoral example from the Academy is the acclaimed Irish harpist, Michelle Mulcahy, who used autoethnographic writing as a technique to excavate her creative journey. She identifies her father and his attitude towards music as one of the key influences in her musical development. In describing this influence, she noted that while he was an important mentor in her technical development as a musician, his emphasis on integrity and passion was the more important influence. Drawing often on the Irish language words for love (*grá*) and heart (*croí*) he described music as:

. . . a powerful and spiritual art where the heart, body, and mind are central to music making. Possessing that *grá* for the music, putting one's very heart and soul into it allows for "feel," a passionate yet delicate musicality expressed through the means of mind and body . . . where you speak and your heart speaks through the means of musical notes. (Reflexive journal of Michelle Mulcahy, 2010)

This attitude towards music also guided Mulcahy's approach to scholarship. Drawing on Pelias' *Methodology of the Heart*, she developed what Pelias calls a "sensuous scholarship . . . mixing head and heart" (Pelias, 2004, p. 10). Her PhD journey emerged from a key formative moment when she was invited to perform with a group of Irish musicians in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border. Here, she encountered the Karen harp tradition for the first time. The Karen people are a minority ethnic group in Burma and the Karen harp is their primary instrument. Mulcahy's musical encounter and exchange with Karen harpers led to her desire to explore aspects of musical empathy in her doctoral work. It also led to questions around representing other cultures. Facing insurmountable obstacles in acquiring visas for musicians to perform with her in her doctoral performance, she decided to create an interactive film using narrative, ethnographic fieldnotes, and video recordings and weave these "voices" into her live performance. Following in the footsteps of Pelias, her research originated:

. . . in the desire to write from the heart, to put on display a researcher who, instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study. (Pelias, 2004, p. 1)

Her writing combined narrative with ethnography, creating a written text which was itself blended with still photography, ethnographic film, and live musical performance to create an interactive, performative experience, which was submitted as a core component of her doctoral thesis.

Another example of autoethnographic writing from a doctoral candidate at the Academy is found in the work of Sharon Lyons, a professional singer trained across a variety of vocal techniques and repertoires ranging from early music to popular, classical, and Irish traditional song. Self-identifying as a ritual singer, she locates her practice at the crossroads between performance and ritual. In describing the event that would ultimately lead her to this vocal identity, she notes the emotive and affective dimensions of singing as pivotal:

While music has always been central to my life, the positioning of my musical life within a ritual context is one which emerged gradually, punctuated by some key formative moments. One of these involved my participation as a singer at the

funeral Mass of my closest friend . . . I think it was the turning point . . . that feeling I got from singing at her funeral. That knowledge that at such a dark and tragic time . . . I could offer something no one else could. (Reflexive journal of Sharon Lyons, 2014)

De Gallaí's writing also provides an interesting example of how ethnographic narrative can become an integral part of studio-based research and its performance output. In his piece *NOCTÚ*, created for the PhD, he uses writing to incorporate monologue and dialogue into the dance piece, allowing individual dancers to represent the "types" of people drawn to Irish dance. One character to perform a monologue in the piece describes the so-called "legger": the kind of dancer who loves dancing but never achieves technical mastery:

Oh yeah a legger is a really crap dancer: two left feet, pigeon-toed, no rhythm or timing. Yup, that's me: Mrs. Bonner's one and only senior legger still here—all the other leggers, they're gone by the age of 12 but not me—hanging around like a bad smell, the same steps as the good ten year olds but ten times worse than them. She even makes me dance with them sometimes—I'm 18 for Christ's sake! It's just that, it's just that I fucking love dancing. So I'm not that good, but when I'm alone, I'm wonderful. I just turn on the music and take flight.

Narrative is not typically associated with Irish dance performance so its inclusion as a key element in a dance show raised some of the questions de Gallaí was considering in his PhD including the limits of what counts as "Irish dance."

In each of these examples, ethnographic and autoethnographic writing is embraced as a research method serving a spectrum of functions. It allows the performer to "language" a reflective engagement with an artistic journey. These written reflections articulate key formative moments which often act as catalysts for new creative insights. They name emotions and sensations emerging from or giving birth to new work. In this sense, this approach to writing overlaps with the "generative" approach discussed in the following section. These examples describe writing, which has emerged out of an engagement with ethnographic approaches and techniques but the line between ethnographic writing and writing as a creative act is not a stable one, with ethnography embracing the performative and creative processes embracing autoethnographic reflexivity. An ethnographic journal often serves a similar function as a creative one. As Richardson and St. Pierre remind us:

As the 20th century unfolded, the relationship between social scientific writing and literary writing grew in complexity. The presumed solid demarcation between "fact" and "fiction" and between "true" and "imagined" were blurred. (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008, p. 960)

Writing as a creative practice within arts practice research emerges from a tradition that privileges the articulation of somatic experience, kinaesthetic awareness, and the nuances of sensation. The emergence of this approach to writing with examples from the Irish World Academy is explored in the following section.

5. Writing as a Generative Strand of Practice

Many of the Irish World Academy's arts practice PhD candidates adopt an approach to writing

that is influenced by ethnographic research (specifically autoethnography). The fact that many members of faculty have an expertise in this method may explain how this has evolved to be the case to date. However, some members of faculty are also of the view that the appropriation of ethnographic methods has the capacity, if not handled very carefully, to “tilt” the written component of the research away from the practitioner’s account of their practice (and, as a result, subtly undermine their research). This keeps the question as to whether other approaches to writing might be more appropriate for this genre of research very much alive amongst faculty and doctoral researchers.

Arguments for the need for an alternative approach to research, one in which the writing “serves the expert practice rather than try to replicate existing conventions of thesis writing” (Melrose, cited in Stock, 2009, p. 8), have many ideological issues tucked inside them which, for scholars, can be debated and discussed on paper. Arts practitioners on the other hand face the slightly more complex task of having to resolve these issues in the design of their research so as to provide for the methods/modes of inquiry underlying their practice and those underlying the text-based component of their research to work productively together.

According to Melrose, artists’ disciplinary expertise and primary modes of inquiry (and outputs) are predicated on their capacity to think and act “geometrically, diagrammatically, schematically and multi-dimensionally, rather than in the linear dominant mode bound-in to writing” (Butcher & Melrose, 2005, p. 182). Because of this, she questions the epistemic value of imposing the linear logic of writing on the modes of inquiry that are foundational to arts practice research. In so doing, she highlights some of the challenges that arts practitioners face when trying to find solutions to the seemingly irreducible problem of resolving these two modes within their research.

This extract of an interview with the twentieth-century visual artist Francis Bacon is intended to give an indication of this challenge from one angle:

Since you talk about recording different levels of feeling in one image . . . you may be expressing at one and the same time a love of the person and a hostility towards them . . . both a caress and an assault? To which Bacon responds, “That’s too logical. I don’t think that’s the way things work. I think it goes to a deeper thing: how do I feel I can make this image more immediately real to myself. That’s all.” (Francis Bacon interviewed by David Sylvester, cited in Deleuze, 1981, p. 39)

Within the Irish World Academy there is a shared view among faculty that the written component of arts practice PhDs should be led by the disciplinary expertise of the artist/researcher and the questions that arise from their practice. It is on the basis of this rationale that artist/researchers are strongly encouraged to evolve approaches to writing that might best serve the emergent nature of their creative practices (Phillips et al., cited by Little, 2011, p. 19).

The knowledge and insight produced by creative practices are often referred to as epistemic. *Epistemic practices* are defined by practice theorist Knorr-Cetina as:

. . . creative and constructive practice undertaken by expert practitioners who have to keep learning and who have the knowledge base to continually reinvent their own practices of acquiring and producing knowledge. (Knorr Cetina, 2001, p. 176)

Artists are very much at home with processes of reinvention not least because each new work they create usually requires them to simultaneously “find” both the idea/question and the method by which it can be made manifest: both emerge and are progressively articulated in each process of invention. This means that the methods and modes of inquiry that they use have to be appropriately sensitive to the task at hand: adaptable, fluid, and certainly not fixed. The experience of finding both simultaneously is perhaps well encapsulated in Picasso’s much quoted declaration, “*Je ne cherche pas, je trouve*” (i.e., I do not search, I find).

Given these circumstances, it is important that artists have the option to strategically suspend, from time to time, some of the conventions that underpin academic writing. According to Chandler (2007), these conventions of writing are based on narrative (sequential or causal) and/or conceptual (exposition or argument) relationship. A more “open” approach to the written text would provide for spatial relationships and patterns (images, sketches, passages of creative writing) to also be included, not as digressions or untidy loose-ends, but to reveal the process (e.g., of devising original dance and/or music compositions) as an integral part of the research.

In addition to serving the needs of the research, the aim of such an approach to writing is to provide for new insights into artists’ “qualitative reasoning” skills (Siegesmund, 2004, p. 80) to be revealed. These skills include their capacity to observe with, and process through, the senses and their ability to produce knowledge and insights, beyond the frame of reference of linguistics—outside of “the matrix of linguistic fixation” (Epstein, 2008, p. 53).

Within the Irish World Academy, we have taken some steps to encourage arts practice PhD students to experiment with modes and registers of writing that they deem to be relevant to specific aspects of their research undertaking. In one such example, dance artist and doctoral researcher Mairead Vaughan discusses how, when moving in a derelict building, her sense of touch released a stream of ideas and concepts which, in turn, informed her creative/movement response to the environment in what she experienced as an interconnected loop:

As I stroke the powdering erosive surfaces of this derelict site with my fingertips a strong feeling of impermanence emerges. I sit on the floor surface, listening, writing, drawing in response.

The building in towering stillness, witnesses me. . . .

A container of memories, mysterious concealed codes, patterns and symbols of interaction. In the process of reclamation, back down into nature—trees growing out of floor foundations, rain flooding through ceilings, becoming forgotten, yet, an energy echoing even louder as it faces its slow death of ground swallowing. (Journal extract, cited in Vaughan, 2016, p. 96f)

Vaughan then further expanded on this experience by referencing research carried out by neuroscientist Domasio (1999) who argues that data transmitted by the senses not only generate deep physiological responses but also trigger a mode of knowing.

Currently most of the writing that emerges from an artist’s studio-based research at the Academy becomes integrated into the text-based component of their research (the latter, for the most part, follows the “traditional” scholarly structure: introduction, certain number of chapters, conclusion). However, some of these explorations into writing may also, over time, provide the

foundation on which some more appropriately innovative (and perhaps even experimental) research structures/heuristic frames might be built: “A story should have a beginning, middle and end but not necessarily in that order” (Film maker Jean Luc Godard, cited in Chandler, 2007, p. 115).

Obviously criteria for assessing the quality and the effectiveness of these more innovative approaches to writing would have to be first agreed. Such criteria would have to take into account the extent to which the written and practice based components of the research function as a coherent whole—rather than as two separate parts.

Ulmer’s pedagogic model “mystory” (Ulmer, 1989, 1994) provides an interesting example (including a rationale) of the potential of this kind of approach for arts practice research. Ulmer created “mystory” in order to explore what he refers to as an “anticipatory consciousness” and to utilize the force of intuition as a way to pursue one’s curiosity about the unknown. His model, which is predicated on what he argues are the crossing of discourses that occur in the process of invention, “does not stop with analysis or comparative scholarship but conducts such scholarship in preparation for the design of a rhetoric/poetics leading to the production of new work” (Ulmer, 1994, p. 4).

This is not to suggest that Ulmer’s model should serve as a blueprint for arts practice PhD researchers: better for each student (and their supervisor) to develop the most appropriate model for their specific research. It may well be that each researcher will always need (in the context of PhD research) to include a range of approaches to writing and also engage with theories drawn from other disciplines. But in order to ensure that the text-based component is not inappropriately determined by the “logic” of the latter, arts practitioners have to be prepared to actively explore what writing can “do” and if, and how, it might function as a generative strand of their practice.

Reflexive journaling is commonly used by arts practice researchers. It involves keeping a diary of experiences, emotions, and thoughts arising over a period of time, giving due recognition to the mutual interplay between the researcher’s subjectivity and the various choices made by the researcher during the period. It provides a space in which an artist can let emerging and apparently unassociated ideas fall as they will, albeit often untidily, onto its pages. The importance of this space is highlighted by Winnicott’s argument that tidying up uncertain situations and unassociated ideas may be indicative of a failure to deal with the complexity of the world and a desire to assert the self, rather than reveal/discover it (Winnicott, cited by Evans, 2007). It is precisely because of this “untidiness” and because they are not constrained by any specific conventions of writing that journals can become, for an artist, and also for a sympathetic and informed reader, a giddy space of serendipitous possibility. Such untidy or disorderly processes are said to be central to researchers’ quest to expand and improve knowledge, as implied in the following remark by Feyerabend:

Reason grants that the ideas which we introduce in order to expand and to improve our knowledge may *arise* in a very disorderly way and that the *origin* of a particular point of view may depend on class prejudice, passion, personal idiosyncrasies, questions of style, and even on error, pure and simple. (Feyerabend, 1993, p. 115f)

At the Academy, we encourage artists to attend to ways in which this apparent disorderliness

(or its construction) might also reveal patterns and thematic strands in their work (in sometimes new and surprising ways). They may then wish to further investigate these patterns and themes through engagement with theoretical perspectives drawn from other disciplines.

What is important, in this context, is not necessarily the material generated through journaling, but the artist's ability to harvest it and integrate it, as appropriate, in the research frame: it does not all, importantly, "make the cut." The aim of the selected extracts when included, alongside other genres and registers of writing, is to reveal aspects of arts practices which may be overlooked, and indeed erased, if the focus of the research is only on ideological interpretations, as such interpretations tend to highlight general issues and eliminate the particular person.

In the passage of writing below, Vaughan (2016) gives an account of her experience of moving in a forest location (as part of the process creating a site-specific film for her PhD research at the Irish World Academy). In it she observes how the sunlight cast reflections from the trees onto her body. And how this in turn gave her a sense of the interconnectedness of her "self" with the environment:

Light blasts
Skin surface
Warmth
I move with my re-configured self,
My undulating self,
My mosey green self,
My watery self,
My leafy self,
My golden reedy slippery self,
Skin of the oak tree self
Feet of the root self
Wind passing through self
Unifying, Merging, Absorbent
Antennae of tree matrix
Modulating energy pulse
Through which life expresses itself
(Vaughan, 2016, p. 86)

She then discusses Lovelock's theory of Gaia and the argument by ecologist and philosopher David Abram that we are not only living "on" this planet but are fully immersed "in" it (Vaughan, 2016, p. 87).

Vaughan was a solo dancer/performer researching some questions that emerged from her choreographic practice. Therefore, she could be perceived as being part of what was being studied. However, it is important to note that she was not studying her "self," per se, but rather using her expertise as a choreographer/performer to conduct her research and to perform her findings. In this instance, the lines between the research object, researcher's "self," and her expertise as an artist were very fine.

Therefore, it was essential that she maintained a critical distance between these various components of the research. Writing in a range of registers was one of the devices she used to do this: passages drawn from her journals were always threaded through her engagement with

theories and concepts drawn from other disciplines. Both were examined and reflected on within the context of her overall research undertaking. She was assessed on quality and depth of her inquiry as was evidenced in both the choreographic/performance outputs and the text-based component of her final submission.

As arts practice research becomes more established, its communities of practice are gaining confidence in exploring the peripheries of writing, its possibilities and limitations. It increasingly recognizes the perspective that contemporary art is moved by a quest for a consciousness purified of “distortions produced by conceiving the world exclusively in conventional verbal (in their debased sense, ‘rational’ or ‘logical’) terms” (Sontag, 2009, p. 22). It strives to support a rationale for giving equal value to other ways of conceiving the world. Writing might take the form of an imaginative script, along the lines of Serafini’s (1981) *Codex Seraphinianus*, should that be what best serves a specific research process. Ultimately, researchers should have a choice as to whether to include a written component in their submission at all: to write or not to write. To have the right to decide if writing serves the research agenda and, if so, which mode(s) of creative, narrative, analytical, or expository writing contributes most effectively to the research.

The Irish World Academy continues to debate the role and function of writing in arts practice research. It continues to ask if, and how, writing can support artists to nudge open the space that Cixous suggests is deep in the body, “somewhere in the depths of my heart, which is deeper than I think” (Cixous, 1994, p. 204). It continues in its commitment to supporting researchers to generate the kind of writing that best expresses what it is they find in, and through, their arts practice.

6. Conclusion

There are many unresolved issues at the heart of arts practice research. Indeed, a central question is whether arts practice research can be incorporated within the traditional paradigms of “quantitative” and “qualitative” research, or whether a distinct “artistic” research paradigm is necessary. We have not tried to prove or disprove the value of writing in arts practice research. Nor have we attempted to identify a singular method of inquiry for arts practice researchers. Our emergent approach at the Irish World Academy, incorporating ethnographic and autoethnographic writing, as well as writing as a generative component of the creative process, argues for an attitude to writing that is neither defensive (i.e., “We don’t need it”) nor hegemonic (i.e., “It is essential”). Rather, it opens an invitation to writing that is creative and reflexive but, most importantly, responsive to the particularities of individual artistic journeys, artistic processes, and research questions.

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Received 30 May 2018 | Accepted 2 September 2018 | Published 1 February 2019

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