

"ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH, DEAR FRIENDS" REFLECTIONS ON ARTISTIC PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

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"DOUBLE DIALOGUES" has been a really heartening experience. I feel energized by fresh insights into the perspectives and actions of some impressive colleagues engaging imaginatively and rigorously with the notion of artistic practice as research.

There is no longer any doubt in my mind that collectively we have managed to get our wooden horse inside the Trojan walls of academia. We have also achieved a considerable degree of infiltration into the population; and, what's more, the presence of quite a number of academic participants from non-arts disciplines at this Conference indicates a degree of interest in what we stand for amongst those inhabitants of the citadel who are finding its established attitudes towards research stultifying. We have, in short, attracted prospective allies on the inside.

It has been suggested by some delegates that by adopting the habits and peculiar patois of academic discourse we can soon become indistinguishable from the long-term inhabitants and eligible for the benefits that flow from full citizenship. The concern with this ploy is that it risks the dilution of our own artistic principles and the neglect of our own language.

There is something to be said, instead, for assertions of parity for certain kinds of artistic work with conventional means of academic expression like the journal article. Artistic practice could well be seen as a form of publication, open to peer scrutiny, but in a mode more in tune with the culture it relates to than an article would be. It would not be an impossible matter either to find contexts of artistic statement and evaluation that could match the claims of the national or international refereed journal. The degree of effort, expertise and insight involved in some artistic work could readily measure up to that required to produce an article. And there is an advantage to most artistic presentation that is seldom realised by traditional academic publication, that is its accessibility to a wider public.

Geoff Parr has argued something in this vein in relation to visual arts practice observing that its commitment to experimentation, innovation, theoretical debate, and accumulated record "shares certain characteristics

with research as it is generally understood in the university sector" (1996, p.2). Before this conference, I was inclined towards the notion that we could readily devise criteria and standards to apply to art works which would enable us to justify them as research presentations. Parr (p.8) was persuasive in pointing to "strong support in art schools for exhibition of artworks as a vehicle to publish" and stating that "the best and arguably the only satisfactory way to assess the worth of another's art practice, is to be shown a body of their art works".

There were some nagging doubts however about a whole-hearted acceptance of quality arts practice in itself as research. One was the realisation that in the performing arts in Australia, whilst there might be plenty of arts practice there have been only limited opportunities for research and the body of knowledge is consequently not very rich. The looming danger was that artistic practice with narrow research claims being undertaken inside the universities might well swallow up the limited allocation at the expense of more widely applicable standard research. There are, after all, existing means for the support of arts practice. Another concern was that university accreditation should mean something other than that one was an artist with paper qualifications - otherwise all artists of standing in the community should be awarded higher degrees as a matter of course.

Considering the procedures and frameworks suggested by Alison Richards' discussion paper (1995) for the Australasian Drama Studies Association as a conference preparation, hearing Judy Pippen talk about "models of validation", noting the emerging belief among delegates that examining in this area be seen as peer review dialogue and mutual learning, but particularly feeling that for all one's experience in reading art works there were quite a few artistic presentations during this conference whose research intent was not apparent without explication, I now believe that some caution is due as we seek to have artistic practice recognised as research.

We need to articulate at the outset of a project just what is the research aim of the intended practice and assess its likely value to the field, we need to weigh up relative resource implications, we need to develop appropriate procedural guidelines, we need to consider the nature and degree of exegesis that is necessary to make the research comprehensible, we need to set up effective mechanisms of dialogue and evaluation, and we need to consider in what form the work can be made usefully available to the community of "scholars" as a resource after its initial presentation. Otherwise, we should dismantle our wooden horse and retreat to Greece.

Parr, G. (1996) "Hatching a Research Culture: issues associated with research and research training in university art schools." Paper delivered at PICA.

Richards, A. (1995) "Performance as Research - Research by Means of Performance." Discussion paper prepared for the ADSA Performance as Research Subcommittee.