

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PERFORMING THE DOCUMENT: NAVIGATING THE TERRAIN OF PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

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Preamble

This essay provides an overview of *practice as research* (PaR), beginning with a discussion on the relationship between PaR and other politically charged terms that seek to validate (or limit) the role of “practice” in research processes and outcomes. The overlapping terrain and boundaries between PaR and other established research paradigms are explored by drawing on concepts within PaR discourse. These include performativity, mixed-mode research, and provisional knowledge. Throughout this discussion several landmark debates are introduced, with specific attention given to questions borne out of the relationship between documents of performance and performance *per se*. The paper ends with a description of two particular instances of PaR by the UK-based performance group theybreakinpieces. The first project was delivered at the 2005 Collision Symposium in the form of a performative lecture. The second, *collision interventions and performed archive*, took place as part of Collision 2006.

The essay will provide a map of the key concepts and current debates that both pervade and circumscribe *practice as research* (PaR). It is important that I start with the well-rehearsed disclaimer that *my map is not the terrain*.¹ I do not claim that this exegetic expedition is an attempt to produce a comprehensive representation of PaR.² Therefore, the map that I present here is provisional in nature, designed to encourage and focus debate rather than arrive at a conclusion.

Terminology

I will now begin my elaboration of PaR by briefly introducing a certain lexical quandary. As well as being a signifier for an emerging research paradigm in a range of creative disciplines, PaR is also a politically charged and often contested term. In many sectors *practice-based research* (PbR) is used both as a synonym for PaR, and as a term denoting an oppositional stance. Certain exponents of PbR state that practice can be a key element in the research, but cannot be the research *per se*, thus problematizing the notion that a piece of practice (e.g. a performance, film, or ceramic pot) is capable of communicating research-worthy knowledge without some form of written commentary. An example of this use of PbR is the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), a periodic event which makes use of peer review "to assess the quality of UK research and to inform the selective distribution of public funds for research."³ The RAE claims to view a wide range of practices (including performance) as valid forms of research output, yet conducts their review based upon written accounts of the research context and (where available) documentation or archival objects relating to individual outcomes.⁴ The distinction between PaR and PbR is further complicated by the following observation on the Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) website: "Practice as research and practice-based research are frequently used interchangeably to suggest a relationship of research between theory and practice."⁵ The confusion does not end with the relationship between PaR and PbR. The UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) provided funding for the PARIP 5-year project (2000-2005)⁶, yet the AHRC state that their preferred term is *practice-led research*, as evidenced by the following extract from their website:

[...] the terminology of research that is practice-based is not universally adopted; practice-led might be a better term, and to avoid a diversity of terminology it is this which we shall use [...]. Nevertheless, there are many common issues that arise in the framing, conduct, dissemination, and assessment of research that incorporates or is embedded in creative activities, performance, and practice.⁷

The list of terms describing such activities does not end here. Related terms employed in different contexts include: research-led practice, mixed-mode meta-practice, epistemic practice, performative research, and sub-varieties that continue to proliferate. The question remains: do these terms signify different activities that should remain distinct; can

they be used interchangeably, or should we decide on one consistent term?⁸

Research Paradigms

To help elucidate the boundaries of PaR⁹, it is useful to make comparisons with other research paradigms. Action research, a qualitative research method often employed in the social sciences, shares significant features with PaR. The following summary of action research begins to elaborate the similarities and differences between PaR and other traditional methods:

Action research shares the following characteristics with other research:

- it leads to knowledge
- it provides evidence to support this knowledge
- it makes explicit the process of enquiry through which knowledge emerges
- it links new knowledge with existing knowledge

Action research is different from other research because:

- it requires action as an integral part of the research process itself
- it is focused by the researcher's professional values rather than methodological considerations
- it is necessarily insider research, in the sense of practitioners researching their own professional actions

(McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead 2001, 14)

As this example illustrates, action research and PaR share requirements with other traditional models of academic inquiry, thus allowing the term “research” to point towards a consistent purpose. Yet, it is also clear that different research paradigms delineate contrastingly different modes of understanding and representing knowledge. One has only to compare the requirements of scientific positivism (knowledge must be quantifiably measurable, repeatable, transcultural, and objective, leading towards generalised theories) with forms of knowledge commonly resulting from PaR (such as embodied, localised, provisional and dialogic) to understand the reality that different approaches to research are not always commensurable.

A common area of misunderstanding within PaR exists when we come to discuss the term theory, often expressed in the binary “theory

and practice.” In 1929 the philosopher Edmund Husserl pointed out that, “The distinction is after all a relative one; because even purely theoretical activity is indeed activity—that is to say, a practice” (1969, 32). However, confusion in this area continues when theory is understood as such only when represented through the practices of discursive or arithmetical writing. This subject has been rehearsed by a range of PaR affiliated academics, including Susan Melrose, who stated the following at the PARIP2003 conference:

We are actually concerned with the pursuit of diverse modes and registers of disciplinary practice, amongst which expert writing figures. From this perspective, in place of "theory and practice" we need the formulation “mixed-mode disciplinary practices,” none of which is necessarily writing-based or mediated, but some of which may call upon discipline-specific metalanguages of production.

A similar assertion has been presented by Robin Nelson and Stuart Andrews in their short report on *The regulations and protocols governing ‘Practice as Research’ (PaR) in the performing arts in the UK leading to the award of PhD*:

[...] research questions in the performing arts can be rigorously worked through in a range of practices (of which writing is only one) to produce new knowledge or substantial new insights equivalent to the requirements of PhDs as traditionally established. (2003)

It is at this stage that PaR becomes distinct from qualitative research methods such as action research, through the acceptance of a wider range of practices (not merely writing-based) as valid methods for both investigating practical research questions and representing research findings. PaR continues to emerge as a radically new research paradigm with the shift from purely observational methods (e.g. what Melrose refers to as “Spectator Studies” [2007]) to an appreciation of “expert-practitioner decision-making processes.” This understanding of PaR is also developed by Brad Haseman in his article *A manifesto for performative research* (2006). Haseman notes that when a quantitative or qualitative researcher is concerned with a practical investigation, they view “[...] practice as the object of study, not as a method of research” (2006, 99). Haseman draws on J.L Austin’s notion of performative speech acts, citing a well-known example: “‘I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’ enacts what it names” (2006, 102). This notion provides Haseman with the term *performative research*, a category which

represents knowledge in forms that are distinct from other research paradigms:

In this third category of research—alongside quantitative (symbolic numbers) and qualitative (symbolic words)—the symbolic data work performatively. They not only express the research, but in that expression become the research itself. (2006, 102)

What is key here is the shift in emphasis from research products to research processes, as it is often the knowledge in PaR processes which is of foremost value to practitioners.

Knowledges

As alluded to above, knowledges resulting from PaR behave in ways that often problematise notions of objectivity, certainty, and generality. Rather than aiming to create generalised theory, PaR attempts to improve practice through practicing the specific (e.g. site-specific, duration-specific, culturally-specific, artist-specific) and the relational (e.g. intermediary improvisation, performed discourse, mediated performance, and other collaborative interarts practices). The locations of knowledges resulting from PaR are diverse. Often knowledge is tacit (embodied within a performer), as in the case of a dancer who is able to perform a precise movement but unable to adequately communicate the movement process through descriptive means.

In the context of PaR, knowledge is often relational; yet this relationship is not always concerned with the mastery of objects (e.g. a musical instrument, or one's own body as it executes a specific form of movement). Knowledge becomes dialogic when it is borne out of reciprocal collaboration, where action moves beyond the execution of a predefined task. The philosopher Martin Buber has elucidated two related ways of knowing in interaction, which he describes as "distance" and "relation:" "Distance provides the human situation; relation provides [a human being's] becoming in that situation" (1998, 54).¹⁰ Through distance, one's knowledge is of objects, of specific traits and learned usages. For Buber, actual relations additionally involve an openness to reciprocity. My prior knowledge is still meaningful, but ultimately becomes inadequate as the other "acts on me as I act on it" (1970, 61). This open dialogue (which can occur not only between human beings, but also with places, texts, trees, cats, sounds, etc.) allows knowledge to meaningfully exist in a contingent state.

The manner in which knowledge is able to fluidly develop within PaR (without the necessity of symbolic representation through words or numbers) can be further understood through the following illustration provided by Melrose:

Hence Wooster Group or Forced Entertainment will revisit (verbally or through mixed-mode practices) “something that worked” in an earlier production process, which they can thematise explicitly (as a means of practical reflection) in the new devising situation as a “way in” to new discoveries. (2003)

In this example knowledge remains provisional. In addition to the context-specific nature of such knowledge, a provisional (or heuristic) approach is also characterised by the ability to explore tangents, chance occurrences, and failures, often leading to discoveries which may have remained inaccessible through a more rigid methodology.

A significant issue in PaR results from the representation of provisional knowledges through ephemeral practices. The documentation (or mediatization) of live performance remains a primary topic of debate. Arguments have been put forward against the academy’s current broad insistence that all research outcomes must be archived to ensure future access, stating that such a requirement may threaten the legitimacy of performance as a knowledge-producing event in its own right. The tendency of the academy to privilege contributions to knowledge that take the form of reproducible documents (i.e. writing, analogue, and digital recordings) may be the motivation behind the following provocative suggestion by arts researcher Caroline Rye: “In terms of advancing our understanding of exactly what practice as research in performance might be, banning the documentation of performance work could be more productive” (2003, 2). However, it may be worth investigating the notion that documentation must always be set in opposition to performance. Elsewhere I have rehearsed the following question: “Can a document, even in the absence of its source, achieve what Rye and many others value in performance and oral exchange; that is, can a document emphasise ‘the authority of what is live and provisional’?” (Stapleton 2006, 78). It is a question that for me remains open, and one that I continue to explore through a variety of methods, including my involvement in the UK-based performance group theybreakinpieces.

theybreakinpieces: Instantiations of PaR

In this section I will describe two particular instances of PaR by theybreakinpieces, beginning with some background information on the group's history and working processes. theybreakinpieces is an ongoing collaboration between artists Mona McCarthy, Nick Williams and myself, in which we set out to explore the relationships between movement and sonic forms of improvisation, often with a particular interest in how our combined practices can respond to specific locations. We have collaborated with a broad range of artists and researchers from diverse disciplines, working in contexts ranging from durational performance in a semi-derelict Victorian swimming pool to the delivery of performance technology, movement and media art workshops in higher education institutions. Generally speaking our work makes use of a collaborative performance strategy that does not limit performers to their predetermined disciplinary roles (i.e. a dancer no longer only dances; a musician does more than make sound). This strategy seeks to contest the need for disciplinary boundaries in performance while simultaneously aiming to avoid a levelling process where discipline-based specialist knowledge is lost. Our current approach has been developed through practical workshops where performers are asked to exchange knowledge with practitioners outside of their own disciplines and apply this knowledge through a range of performative actions.

Our two projects that took place as part of the Collision Symposia focused particularly on our collaborative performance strategy's relationship with mediation technologies, exploring the performative potential of existing documents as well as the act of documenting. The first instance of work took place as part of the 2005 Collision Symposium in the form of a performative lecture. The second, *collision interventions and performed archive*, took place as part of Collision 2006. While it is important to note that the following description of these two projects will not disseminate the knowledge acquired through these research activities (as this was primarily the role of the performance works themselves), what follows will provide an example of PaR questions and processes.

The performance lecture model of dissemination often employed by theybreakinpieces resonates with a broad range of epistemic arts practices that attempt to articulate (or reinterpret) a past body of work performatively through corporeal interaction with audio, visual, and textual documents.¹¹ Our performative lecture at Collision 2005 took place amongst audio-visual documentation of two site-responsive performance projects¹², objects from these events¹³, audio recordings of

discussions on our practice, and fragments from varying drafts of my published and unpublished texts on documentation in PaR and dialogic relations in performance. These relics formed a site in which our performative relationships could be (re)explored through improvised interactions. This reanimated collection of documents was framed by a series of questions which were borne out of, and investigated through, our collaborative practice. Questions included the following: How does improvisation and/or performance technology help bridge disciplinary gaps; if an individual's successful performance is not solely based on traditional modes of virtuosity (e.g. technical skill on an instrument, mastery of a specific dance form), how do we develop successful performance skills and where might virtuosity be relocated? To what extent these questions are fully resolvable was not our primary concern. Art practices more often raise new questions than provide clear answers. However, I feel the work was successfully disseminated in an appropriate context as evidenced by the resulting formation of several ongoing dialogues, which in some cases has led to the production of new work.¹⁴

Our second contribution to Collision also explored the use of an archive as a site for performance. However, where our performance lecture employed documents and questions generated at sites largely dislocated (temporally and geographically) from our presentation's setting, *collision interventions and performed archive* tested a modified methodology and interrogated a different (yet related) set of research questions with a specifically local focus. At selected moments throughout the duration of Collision 2006 we engaged in a series of site-responsive interventions. The term "interventions" here refers to a range of environmental interactions conducted through the media of conversation, improvised performance, and audio-visual recording technologies. These interventions took place on and around the University of Victoria campus, and provided us with an opportunity to explore the collision of "Collision" with its localised academic, social and geographical settings. Perspectives on (and memories of) these interventions contributed towards an evolving archive, which was made available to conference delegates throughout the symposium in the form of an installation. The installation contained recorded images, texts, audio and video which were updated daily. This collection of documents ultimately formed the site of a performance that took place on the final day of the symposium.¹⁵

Several of our interventions during Collision 2006 were filmed by video artist Azin Seraj. In this collaboration we were specifically interested in the performative use of recording technologies, exploring the role of the camera operator as an additional improviser. Often we

were performing in locations in which no other individuals were present during the intervention. In these situations the camera became the primary vehicle for the dissemination of our actions. One such example was our intervention in the Cornett Building, which is home to the psychology department at the University of Victoria. We had been made aware of the peculiar design of the Cornett Building through conversations with different students and faculty members. Rumours were circulating that the building was modelled after the human brain, with many passages and staircases leading to dead ends or small unoccupied rooms with no obvious function. In this instance, after a period of searching Azin found us in one such room, following which she proceeded to make use of her movements to actively shape the lens and microphone-based perspectives on our interactions with this mysterious location.¹⁶

A common concern which both these works attempted to address was the relationship between representations of past interventions (or performances) to notions of liveness.¹⁷ The motivation for exploring this question, in part, stems from what is often described as the oppositional forms of knowledge present within *archives of performance* and *performance per se*, the first often described as static with a focus on preservation and the latter as dynamic and provisional with a preference for disappearance. It may be that this common oppositional view is largely a reaction to economic values that emphasise the need for reproducible products. As alluded to above, such values are evident in forms of academic assessment and validation that privilege lasting and duplicable documents of performance, potentially resulting in a form of DaR (Documentation as Research) in place of PaR.¹⁸ However, it was not the intention of theybreakinpieces (in the two aforementioned Collision works) to explore this relationship as an irreconcilably opposed binary, but rather to consider the intersection of artefacts and performed presence as the site of a tense but productive coexistence.

Epilogue

Currently, I do not think the actual terrain of PaR can be clearly defined, either in relation to PaR as practiced by individual researchers or in the form of institutional policy. In this essay I have not attempted to artificially impose an order where one is lacking. Nor have I attempted the much more ambitious task of suggesting an order or a kind of taxonomy where clearly defined strands of PaR are made visible. With this said, I do not think PaR is an entirely ambiguous mess, but rather an exciting and

(despite its longstanding tacit existence) still emerging research paradigm which is in need of surveying from a variety of vantage points before it can be critically evaluated as a common approach. In this essay I have aimed to provide one of these vantage points.

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Notes

¹ A notion explored by Alfred Korzybski, Jorges Luis Borges, Gregory Bateson and Denis Wood, to name a few.

² If such a thing were possible, it would likely be as useful as Lewis Carroll's story of a map with "the scale of a mile to the mile" (Carroll 1996), where the use of the terrain as a map of itself becomes more practical than any attempt to unfold and examine such a document.

³ <http://www.rae.ac.uk/>

⁴ Admittedly, the issue of how to conduct a large scale review of ephemeral research outcomes is not an easily resolvable problem.

⁵ <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/faq.htm#4>

⁶ PARIP was largely responsible for the popularization of the term PaR through a range of projects and events including a symposium in 2001, and major conferences in 2003 and 2005, all of which are archived on their website hosted by the University of Bristol (<http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/>). This archive does not represent a single picture of PaR; rather it offers many insightful, yet often contradictory, perspectives on the paradigm. For the reader who is interested in understanding the UK research context that surrounds PARIP, please refer to the section at the end of this paper titled Additional PaR Related References.

⁷ http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/images/4_92883.pdf

⁸ I use the word 'we' here to refer beyond the UK context to the global community of researchers, and research stakeholders, for whom creative practice plays a crucial role in the research process and output. It is likely that other solutions exist, including the option to leave this issue unresolved.

⁹ From this point on within this paper I will provisionally make use of PaR as an umbrella term, with the acknowledgement that the terminological border disputes presented above remain largely unresolved on my map.

¹⁰ Elsewhere Buber makes use of the terms 'I-It' and 'I-You' (or 'I-Thou'), terminology which has been drawn on by a range of scholars including M. M. Bakhtin.

¹¹ Comparisons could be drawn with certain lecture-based works by Fiona Wright, Loan Twin and Michael Mayhew, to name a few.

¹² St. Peter's Church in Preston (UK), and Victoria Baths in Manchester (UK)

¹³ Including virtual objects such as specially developed audio performance software by Nick Williams

¹⁴ theybreakinpieces has since collaborated on a new performance lecture with Ben Evans, which was performed at several locations in the UK during April 2007. We first meet Ben following our back to back presentations at Collision 2005, at which stage our perspectives on interdisciplinary performance were significantly at odds. Our subsequent collaboration and continuing dialogues have been invaluable.

¹⁵ Documentation of this project and other past work, as well as information on future projects, can be obtained by emailing theybreakinpieces@gmail.com

¹⁶ To download this recording visit:

<http://files.ahds.ac.uk/pa/courses/summerschool07/theybreakinpieces.mov>

¹⁷ This is also a primary topic of investigation in several other performative research projects conducted by theybreakinpieces and in my own research, including my recently completed research project Dialogic Evidence: Documentation of Ephemeral Events. See <http://www.livearchives.org/dialogic-evidence/>

¹⁸ I first came across the term DaR used in this context in an email by Frac Chamberlain to the SCUDD JISMAIL list on the 16th of Oct 2002. This email is available on the SCUDD list archive at <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/>