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Practice as research in performance: from epistemology to evaluation

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Abstract

Questions about the values of practice as research have steadily risen up the research agenda of the creative arts in British universities since the early 1990s. As American practitioner-scholar Richard Schechner writes: the relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral (Schechner 2002 1). Yet, where are the differences between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualisation and creativity located? Are there special conceptual spaces for practice as research per se or do we need rather to consider more broadly the terms 'writing' and 'research'? What kind of academy do we wish to create?

This paper focuses on the work of PARIP during the past two years. It introduces the project and contextualises it with a number of observations on the intellectual directions the project is taking, in consultation and collaboration with the range of artist-scholars in the UK and selected EU institutions. Jointly prepared by PARIP Director Baz Kershaw and postdoctoral Research Associate Angela Piccini this paper is characterised by dialectical interventions that we hope point to the range of thinking both within the project itself and beyond to the various PARIP communities in dance, film, television and drama.

Keywords: dance, epistemology, film, television, theatre, valuation

1 Introduction

In the past decade or so, as the papers in this volume make abundantly clear, questions about the values of practice as research (PaR) have steadily risen up the research agenda of the creative arts in British universities. Some measure of the radical potential of this development can be gained by briefly considering how one of the constituent disciplines—performance studies—has typically responded to its promise. In *Performance studies: an introduction*, the American practitioner-scholar Richard Schechner recently wrote:

...artistic practice is a big part of the performance studies project. A number of performance studies scholars are also practising artists working in the avant-garde, in community-based performance, and elsewhere... The relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral.

(Schechner 2002 1)

He also cites Dwight Conquergood, Professor of Performance at Northwestern University, Evanston:

The ongoing challenge of [performance studies] is to refuse and supercede (sic) the deeply entrenched division of labor, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualisation and creativity. The division of labour between theory and practice, abstraction and embodiment, is an arbitrary and rigged choice, and like all binarisms it is booby trapped.

(Conquergood in Schechner 2002 18)

Conquergood's full-frontal assault on the modernist traditions of knowledge-making may be an overstatement, but it does suggest something of what could be at stake through practice as research, and not just in performance studies. In all the disciplines represented here, we may be at a watershed, the negotiation of which might well determine their place and purposes in universities for decades to come.

This paper focuses on the work of PARIP during the past two years. We will describe the project and indicate some of its achievements and problems and introduce a few observations on the intellectual directions the project is taking.

2 PARIP aims and outcomes

PARIP (Practice as Research in Performance) is a five-year project led by Professor Baz Kershaw and the Department of Drama: Theatre, Film, Television at the University of Bristol and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB). Angela Piccini and Caroline Rye are the project's postdoctoral research associates.

PARIP's broad objective has been to investigate issues raised by PaR in the performance media, specifically theatre, dance, film and television. In other words, PARIP explores, consults on and documents a range of practices—devised theatre, experiments in Jacobean stage reconstruction, technological advances in digital choreographies, etc.—that are submitted as research activities and outcomes alongside traditional writing practices. Our working practices are structured as three interwoven strands of activity:

- * identifying the range of PaR processes and activities in UK and some European higher education institutions and producing a database of materials for use by the communities;
- * investigating key questions raised by practice as research and developing a diverse range of

case studies in PaR to produce knowledges surrounding issues of evaluation;

- * consulting on and realising a series of creative projects to advance potential uses of digital technologies for documentation and dissemination.

From this work we are producing a range of outcomes: multi-screen, interactive DVD documentation projects (see Rye 2002); a database; a website; case studies; conferences, symposia and seminars; working papers and communities of artist-scholars.

These outcomes are characterised by significant levels of reflexivity with regard to the epistemological, ontological and procedural dimensions of PaR, consequent upon its potentially radical approach to questions of knowledge production in the universities. Hence, the PARIP conference on 11–14 September 2003 is constructed around six key questions formulated through consultation with the research communities. We offer here preliminary responses to the questions that may indicate some key lines of enquiry for the future.

3 'The time for questions is over'

3.1 'How does 'practice as research' problematise notions of 'professional' and 'academic' practices?'

While a proportion of the PARIP constituencies believe that there is a discernible difference between professional practice and PaR per se, the distinction between 'professional' and 'academic' practitioners has been blurred in a number of significant ways. Are there clear demarcations between the sets of expertises that the 'scholar' and 'artist' may possess? Many with full-time academic posts in the creative arts also have professional practices, i.e. ones that operate outside of the academic jurisdiction. Increasingly, 'professional' practitioners located outside of HE are being invited into universities to use depart-

mental resources in 'down times', usually for the purpose of 'R & D'. With the advent of PaR higher degree programmes in many universities, postgraduate study at all levels is now often undertaken by professional 'artists', sometimes with the explicit aim of creative development of their creative careers. Yet some are critical of what they see as the academy's colonising of performance practices and of the problematics of the economics of PaR in universities, arguing that much of it would simply not 'work' in an industry context where economics govern production (SE PARIP meeting 2003; *Virtuosity and Performance Mastery* symposium 2003).

A more effective approach to this issue may be to address it in terms of 'fit for purpose'; that is to say, is the academic/professional (or scholarly/artistic) experience of the practitioner(s), and the context in which they pursue their research, more or less appropriate to the nature of the particular research project? Does it provide the necessary resources, expertise, 'knowledge-base', and, not least, a framework for reflexive development and evaluation equivalent to that required of research in any discipline?

3.2 What might be the various epistemologies of, and knowledges generated by, practice as research?

The creation of embodied knowledges has been most frequently invoked by practitioners as an 'object' of their projects. This 'knowing how' is often placed in opposition to the conscious cognition of 'knowing that'. The epistemological historiography of this position can be traced from Cartesian dualism through to many later thinkers, including Helmholtz's nineteenth-century work on acoustics (Reber 1995: 15); Heidegger's existential philosophy of *dasein*—or the knowledgeable being in the world; Merleau-Ponty's Gestalt-informed phenomenology; Polanyi's post-critical philosophy (1958/1974); Lashley's work on cerebral

organisation and behaviours (1956); Chomsky's studies of language acquisition and use (1972); Searle's constructions of social reality (1995); and of course Schön's management/marketing work on the reflective practitioner (1993). Similar genealogies can be determined in other fields. Such shopping lists of central figures in the development of the languages of PaR risk accusations of tokenism and runs the danger of transforming specific and complex relationships into a naturalised causal evolutionary model. However, we would suggest that such reminders of the critical-theoretical underpinnings of the 'practice turn' (*pace* Melrose, personal communication) in knowledge production are apposite.

The problem with carving out this special space for PaR in these terms is threefold: we might argue that critical-theoretical research is itself an embodied practice; we might also suggest that there are no necessary 'objective' differentiating marks between critical and creative writing practices; the mind is itself embodied, while our experiences of embodiment are constructed through a range of cognitive processes. Recent relevant works exploring these problems might include Garner (1994) and Lakoff and Johnson (1995).

Neither performance practices—live and mediated—nor writing practices can be adequately formulated as primarily cognition-based texts that require decoding. The knowledges produced and consumed through the cultural practices of the institution can be centred in the embodied practices of the everyday and such repositioning can reproduce and contest social and knowledge relations in ways not reducible to the 'mind versus body' paradigm.

But in questioning distinctions between knowing-how and knowing-that we are not denying the existence of embodied knowledges *per se*; rather, we are denying its exclusive identification with procedural operations that may in the end have little to do with knowledge as such. What is in question is not the

idea that conscious attention is not necessary for the exercise of a given skill, but rather the notion that a performance stands as the proper criterion for possession of the tacit knowledge in any particular domain of practice. And there is no reason to suppose that the knowing—that which would seem to come into play even in expert performance cannot also be tacit.

Hence a focus on the uniqueness of PaR's production of knowledge (as embodied or otherwise) runs counter to the wider critical engagement with knowledge making in the arts and humanities. PaR may significantly contribute alternatives to current ways of knowing in that it crucially calls into question notions of, for example, 'objectivity' and 'originality'. This then raises critical issues regarding the ability to generalise such knowledges. PaR knowledges may—like all good research—be best conceived as context-specific and relational, in the sense of being created at the intersections of existing forms, through response to previous iterations within specific (and identifiable) webs of citation.

3.3 What kinds of resourcing/plant/infrastructures are needed for practice as research?

The RAE and the AHRB have aimed to encourage PaR, and university administrations are now recognising the potential benefit of mixed practices both in attracting students and increasing research outputs. So the future of PaR eventually may not be mainly driven by availability of support, financial or otherwise. What is clear is that different types of PaR require varied levels of resourcing. However, the asymmetry raises the question of national provision of different types of resource for different types of PaR, ranging from the 'heaviest' to the 'lightest' in terms of costs. While the diversity of practices (and interests) may mean that a satisfactory national solution for PaR resource distribution may be ultimately beyond reach, it would seem reasonable that attention be paid to developing better inter-

institutional collaboration in order to best serve research communities. Greater clarity is needed in those communities about (a) specific requirements for different types of project and (b) the advisability of creating more 'generalist' resource facilities for supporting a range of projects.

There is also a need to acknowledge the contested role of documentation vis a vis PaR, arising, for example, in the demand for an archive-friendly artefact from the funders of creative practices, rooted in the politics of accountability and transparency. If researchers wish to create materials that allow others to produce subsequent knowledges from their practices then careful consideration should be paid at the outset to the question of dissemination and how that might involve appropriate forms of recording processes and outcomes. While we would acknowledge that explicit consideration of documentation strategies might alter the nature of the research proposed (Thomson 2003), even the most basic issues of plant available to the performance/screen practices raise similar concerns.

3.4 What makes an instance of practice 'count' as research? Does practice as research involve different methods as a result of its framing as research as distinct from 'pure' practice?

The experience of AHRB and RAE panels, and the examining of PaR higher degrees has led some to argue that it cannot be enough for the researcher-practitioner simply to claim that his/her practice is research: there has to be some other form or channel of 'corroboration'. Whether this comes in the form of 'other outputs' (documentation, reports, critical writings); or of testimony from 'expert witnesses'; or of placement in a network of citations for cognate research; or of some other 'system of validation' yet to be produced, it will be essential that some means is available whereby elements of the research 'content' of a project (its knowledges, perhaps) can be represented

to other researchers. This suggests that PaR methods will in some sense involve activity that is specific to them, as a way of achieving the possibility of corroboration (Trimingham 2003).

Yet it has also been argued that the ‘doing’ of performance and screen practices in an HE context frames these practices as research: the people involved are proven in their fields and were appointed due to their specific skills and knowledges. That operational focus perhaps avoids the more substantive point that practitioners in HE may be researching precisely those understandings that can be produced only through direct experience of live temporal processes. What they are interested in are the very questions of what happens in the temporally and spatially specific moments of performance and reception. This applies equally for live and mediated performance practices. These types of research questions are therefore located in specific contexts that cannot be objectified unproblematically; the material translations of specific practices—in the form of documentation—can never wholly stand in for the research although they can speak alongside those research moments. Both approaches to the question of validation problematise the notion of ‘pure’ practice, but in ways that require further research.

3.5 How might the multiple locations of practice-as-research knowledges be conceptualised and assessed/evaluated/judged? And who decides?

A major theme in PARIP’s work has been the need to respect the diversity of approaches to PaR. This diversity requires nurturing through the development of taxonomies of identification that are precise without being reductive. The terms of reference that PARIP is evolving for its database, case studies and documentation projects—developed in consultation with the research communities—are providing some initial indicators as to how this might be done.

While the demand for codification always may risk narrowing or even closing down some current opportunities, we also have to acknowledge that criteria and contingent systems of judgement are in place already in both HE and in the professional arts sector. Do colleagues wish to empower themselves simply to play the linguistic games upon which much funding rests? Is it a case of who cares what it is called, as long as ways are found to ‘do it’ and have it validated/funded? Or, to what extent do the research communities wish to challenge established systems and power relations? Or might colleagues use PaR precisely to explore the situated social relations of the institution, to expose the subjectivity of assessment?

In the collaborations that characterise performance and screen practices, how do we locate authorship, ownership and ethics? If a mix of academic and professional practitioners together with students, technicians and designers collaboratively devise a performance that is staged on two nights, one in the university theatre, the other in the city’s public art space and it is funded by a mix of AHRB and local arts council money and is eventually submitted as an RAE output how do we deal with these potentially conflicting agendas and systems of value?

3.6 Must practice as research include some form of disseminable ‘reflection’ or is the practice in performance/screening contexts sufficient to stand as research outputs? What might be the role of documentation across media?

Questions of corroboration and systems of evaluation need to be considered as a discursive relationship. For example, a project that, for good reason, wishes to claim that its practice (as performance or screening) is sufficient to stand as an output in itself, implies some dependence on the direct involvement of expert witnesses in any process of evaluation.

Similarly, a project that creates multiple outcomes (in addition to performance or screening) may be less dependent on such direct involvement.

However, it might also be argued that an exclusive or over reliance on outcomes other than the performance/screening/broadcast crucially undermines some of the substantive philosophical underpinnings available to PaR. If only artefact-based outcomes are seen to embody the research as the serious output, we might suggest that that reproduces the systems of commodity exchange critiqued by the likes of Benjamin (1992) and Phelan (1993), and, for some, perhaps implicitly critiqued by the rise of PaR itself. While PaR researchers may also have to acknowledge their own places in the 'scriptural economy' of the institution (Melrose 2003), based on relationships of reproduction that engage with commodity exchange, might there be scope for a wider recognition of the potential of PaR to call into question that economy and hence the identity of the academy? Perhaps there are clear grounds to argue that the range of audiences that engage with these practices and critique them via collective feedback may represent a more effective network of citation than is assumed for the traditional peer review via print media publication.

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