

From 'or' to 'and': L'écriture féminine as a methodological approach for Fine Art research

Abstract

This article asserts that the terms 'practice-led' and 'practice-based' in the context of Art and Design doctoral research are overly simplistic and maintain oppositional thinking by privileging 'practice' in generating knowledge. It argues instead for theory and practice as interrelated discourses and art practice research as complex, dialogical and comprising a heterogeneous spatiality. Building on my own 'writing//painting' methodological approach which utilises l'écriture féminine, this article highlights the importance of the specificity of individual methodological approaches and the need for a more common framework of articulation so that these approaches are accessible throughout the wider sphere of Art and Design.

Keywords

Epistemology, Fine Art, hybridity, l'écriture féminine, methodology, PhD, practice-led research, spatiality

A context of the theory/practice relation

The theory and practice relation has historically been seen as oppositional whereby 'theory' and text have been privileged as more valid and rigorous in articulating and constituting knowledge than 'practice'.

Within Art and Design, theory and practice were initially seen as dual outputs whereby practice illustrated theory and theory justified and explained practice. This simplistic distinction however, has since been seen as more complex (Gaughan, 2005: 123), particularly since the emergence of PhDs incorporating a practice element and the growth of PhD studies since the shift from Polytechnics to Universities in 1992.

In the past twenty years, the theory/practice dichotomy has been renegotiated and many artist-researchers have sought to articulate the complexity of this relationship. It has been challenged through terms such as 'practice-led' and 'practice-based' research as proposed by Christopher Frayling in the 1993 Research Assessment Exercise which have become commonplace terms in asserting practice as valid and rigorous in constituting knowledge. Consequently, within the past decade the examination of art

practice as research and the differing terminology has been increasingly discussed by individuals such as Yve Lomax, Hazel Smith, Roger Dean, Barbara Bolt, Estelle Barrett, Lin Holdridge and Katy Macleod and in conferences and symposia organised by PhD students themselves as art practice research has evolved.

Theory and practice as dialogic and interrelated

Although the use of these terms within Art and Design research has indeed highlighted and emphasised practice as important in generating knowledge, I would argue that they have now become problematic and need to be reconsidered. It seems that 'practice-led' and 'practice-based' are political and institutional terms used to legitimise practice as research for the purposes of assessment and funding. They are often used interchangeably across Art and Design as an umbrella term for art practice research and are thus reductive and generalised, negating the spectrum of research strategies used by different disciplines. Indeed, the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Research Review as recently as 2007, claimed to redefine 'practice-led' research as "research in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design or architecture play an instrumental part in an enquiry" (Mottram, Rust and Till, 2007: 12). This definition however, remains both broad and simplistic. Moreover, the term 'practice-led' implies that art practice research is *led* by artistic practice, running the risk of reversing the theory/practice relation by privileging practice and oppositional ways of thinking.

I propose that we can move beyond theory and practice as hierarchical and separate activities as implied by the historical writing/making distinction by facilitating a dialogic space that allows the interplay between practice and theory to be embraced in order to transform this opposition (May, 2005: 7). We can move beyond these definitions by acknowledging theory and practice as complex, shifting and multilayered concepts that are fundamentally interrelated. Rather than defining and categorising specific methodologies, this allows us to recognise the multifaceted elements of what constitutes art practice research and that this is integral to knowledge production.

L'écriture féminine

The practice and concept of l'écriture féminine can provide ways of thinking beyond theory and practice as oppositional and instead as an intertextual and intermaterial¹ exchange. L'écriture féminine (literally translated as 'feminine writing') was a textual practice developed in France in the late 1960's by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva.² It claimed that language and culture are fundamentally phallogocentric and governed by dualist and hierarchical oppositions based on the 'masculine' and 'feminine' being locked in binary opposition in which the 'masculine' is the privileged position. L'écriture féminine aimed to trouble this binary opposition and rather than one term privileging the other, saw them as equal but different terms.

L'écriture féminine is not a fixed textual strategy, but comprises a layering of multiple voices and narratives that are shifting, fluid, mobile and ambiguous (Irigaray, 1985: 233). It incorporates moments of excess, existing as 'instants' in the between, both inside and outside language and in the peripheries and the margins of signification and representation. It is reflexive, intertextual, unstable and cyclical (Kristeva, 1984: 194); continuously becoming and unbecoming (Cixous, 1976: 882) and privileges notions of poeity, experimentality, performativity and heterogeneity.³

Theory and practice as a complex spatiality

In utilising l'écriture féminine as a framework to explore abstract painting in my own PhD research, elements of l'écriture féminine itself emerged as a methodological approach. In relation to my own art practice research, theory, practice and their interrelation, like l'écriture féminine, could be seen as fluid, shifting, multilayered and circular concepts that encompass collisions, slippages and overlaps. By embracing theory and practice as unstable and shifting, this approach opens up a spatiality comprising of a multiplicity of mobile and heterogeneous spaces within/between the theory/practice relation in which one must continuously negotiate their position in order for meaning to be made. This approach is not a fixed or universal set of prescribed methods, but is performative and reflexive and accounts for the unruliness of practice and the becoming of ideas. Indeed, practice is not linear, but a constant

interweaving of multiple ideas; where ideas are made up of layers of meaning which are constantly changing and transforming.

Drawing on l'écriture féminine as a methodological approach rethinks and opens up what constitutes 'practice'. It can be considered as made up of and manifesting as multiple creative forms, including art-making (itself multi-layered and heterogeneous) and extending to practices of writing, research, thinking, reading and theorisation itself. In recognising theory and practice as interwoven in this way, it can be argued that theory is not oppositional to but inseparable from practice (Cassar, 2009: 230). The historical theory/practice is therefore paradoxically flawed; if theory is bound up with practice by constituting a fundamental element of it, then it cannot be oppositional to it.

I would argue that the theory/practice interrelation is made more complex in the context of Fine Art practice through 'material handling' (Bolt, 2007: 30) in which ideas emerge performatively through material production in ways that are not always fully knowable. Although knowledge can indeed come into being through engagement with creative processes and materials, as the very nature of Fine Art practice is ungraspable, intangible and a philosophical speculation, it is not always possible to quantify the outcomes of studio production (Barrett, 2007: 3). Indeed, the 2007 AHRC Research Review questioned how Fine Artists can "be more explicit about purposes and methods without undermining the tacit qualities of their practices and contributions" (Mottram, Rust and Till, 2007: 68).

A hybrid writing//painting methodological approach

I have termed the methodological approach that emerged in my research a hybrid writing//painting methodology. As Biggs (2006: 196) notes, a hybrid research model can create an alternative reflexivity within art practice research; interweaving creative and scholarly material and creating a space *inbetween* the historical norm. In my research, I utilised notions of experimentality, performativity and intertextuality put forward by l'écriture féminine which allowed textual and material systems of signification and processes to collide. This approach provided parameters, which although themselves were mobile, provided spaces for a fluid and reflexive engagement with artworks. Within these parameters, it is through intertextual and intermaterial relations that sites can be opened up for multiple articulations of knowledges

as emerging through this dialogue. In addition to manifesting methodologically, the overlapping and interrelation of writing and painting manifested textually in my writing practice as well as materially in artworks.

Writing has historically been used to signify theory and to communicate ideas. In a PhD thesis, the processes of writing and making are conventionally separated; writing reflecting on making and/or such making being represented by images. Historically, it is acceptable for the slippages and collisions that occur in practice to manifest as artwork, but not to occur materially as writing. My writing//painting approach incorporated a research diary (figure 1) which textually reflected on the interrelation between theory and practice. In doing so, it emerged as a hybrid artifact by extending at certain points into making. This methodological approach enabled shifts between registers of writing and painting to create multiple spaces amidst the theory and practice interrelation. It enabled slippages and collisions to manifest materially through paint and other media within the diaries. The research diary also informed artworks such as book-paintings and painting-poems (figure 2) in which the painterly became intertwined with the textual and incorporated hybrid moments through the interrelation between my own painting and writing practices and the textual ideas of *l'écriture féminine*. In addition, this methodological approach extended to traditionally academic formats such as 'hybrid' research papers and research posters. The research diary was also a space that acknowledged writing as a performative practice and included reflexive 'art-writing' to create a dialogue with making and research processes to allow further meaning to emerge and formed part of my thesis.

The writing//painting methodology also built on the concept of 'mapping' which I developed as a strategy to connect and interlink different ideas cross-disciplinarily. This evolved beyond the 'map's' two-dimensional surface to become multi-dimensional, forming what I have termed 'textstallations' (see figures 3 and 4). The textstallations interweaved different texts, alphabets, material and painterly elements. They functioned both methodologically by thinking through ideas materially, textually and spatially *and* as artworks. Although as artworks, they were on one level textual installations, they also reflected abstract painting as a complex intermaterial spatiality in relation to my research aims; to open up textual and material spaces for the 'feminine' in abstract painting by reframing elements of *l'écriture*

féminine, in doing so renegotiating the historical conventions of Modernist abstraction perceived as 'masculine' and 'masculinist'. Through the performative unfolding of the work, theorisation emerged out of the making of the work through a symbiotic relation between theory/practice and writing/making rather than being seen as a retrospective conclusion.

Conclusions

L'écriture féminine can be useful for informing methodological approaches in art practice research and creative and arts practitioners across a range of disciplines. It allows a move away from oppositional thinking which privileges theory *or* practice towards a spatiality that embraces theory *and* practice as complex, heterogeneous, shifting and interrelated. It provides a space to enable the shifting and multifaceted nature of practice and knowledge to come into being and for theorisation to be acknowledged as inextricably intertwined with practice. The emergence of such an approach suggests that in the context of some artistic practices such as Fine Art, the notion of methodology can be considered as philosophical, performative and experimental, despite the fact that these concepts refute the very notion of method in traditional academic research. Rather than offering a resolved or fixed methodology, I hope to have opened out new spaces and vocabulary for communicating some forms of art practice research and draw attention to the specificity and multiplicity of individual practices.

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¹ Kristeva developed the term ‘intertextual’ to refer to how one or more systems of signs are transposed into one another and how a text’s meaning is mediated by other texts. I developed the term ‘intermaterial’ in my PhD research as the material potential of this concept.

² The term l’écriture féminine itself, although used briefly in Cixous’s seminal text *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), has been used retrospectively by others as a homogenous label to describe the practices of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva. By using the term l’écriture féminine, I am referring to particular elements in each of their individual practices that refer to the conceptualisation of a ‘feminine’ textual practice.

³ In order to fit in with the scope of this article, I have offered a basic definition of l’écriture féminine. In order to get a fuller understanding, I recommend referring to texts by Kelly Ives, Toril Moi, Morag Shiach, Diana Holmes and Ann Rosalind Jones in addition to writing by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva.