

## IT'S RESEARCH, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT!

George Petelin

Although art practice as research is increasingly recognised in universities, what distinguishes its methodology remains a vexed question. Publications such as Laurie Schneider-Adams's *The Methodologies of Art*<sup>1</sup> and, more recently, *What is Research in the Visual Arts?*<sup>2</sup> edited by Michael Ann Holly, misleadingly deal with the methods of art history and theory rather than of art itself. Writers such as Graeme Sullivan have argued, by recourse to the history and analysis of art, that art is indeed research.<sup>3</sup> But if art can be research (and surely it is not *all* research just as all chemistry, or all of any other discipline, is not necessarily research), the principles of art practice itself should have a role in determining this status. And, if methodological rigour rather than assertions is what characterises research, surely procedures rather than artifacts should be the key consideration.

My own research into the perceptions of RHD candidates in visual art found that "the role of methodology was fairly well understood for conventional research, but tended to remain transparent for studio practice," in the sense that it was left invisible and unexamined.<sup>4</sup> Although 'contextualising' their own artworks has become commonplace for artist researchers, critical examination of the studio method itself is still largely avoided, perhaps in the romantic belief that understanding this mysterious process might somehow rob it of its effectiveness. Many candidates in studio-based postgraduate research degrees informally confessed to just 'scanning for images and knowledge' in the hope of finding something that attracted them. What I concluded to be urgently needed is a re-theorisation of art from a point of view that can elevate practice rather than just critique its consumption and use or misuse, as does cultural studies, or interpret its products and chart its biographies in relation to social change, as does art history. In short, the art product has been overly theorised while its process remains relatively neglected. A study of the methodologies of artmaking; the significance of strategic decisions within them; the psychological, aesthetic, political and semiotic strategies available to artists for their own motivation and effective functioning, as contrasted with those for analysis of the reception of their works, need to be updated from the days of Romanticism and Formalism. What is significantly absent from the debates is a *pragmatics* of art based on reflective practice.

So what I set out to do is to explore the problem through practice and through direct reflection on that practice. The strategy I adopted was informed by phenomenology to the extent that phenomenological method requires one to examine experience as directly as possible, and by the social sciences in terms of my relation as a researcher to my object of study. Although the methodology employed in the present case study is centred on practice, it could be argued that it also has roots in the ethnographic tradition. It tries to overcome a major pitfall identified by ethnography – that of observing and describing its subjects entirely in terms of the researcher's own perspective and values, i.e. (in most cases to do with art as research), that of the art historian.

My empirical study of research training at university art colleges borrowed from ethnomethodology to describe how my subjects described themselves, and from symbolic interactionism in collecting data informally in order to interpret more accurately its value to the participants in my study.<sup>5</sup> The current strategy, however, is somewhat like participant observation – acting as an artist, in order to convey as closely as possible how it feels to make art. And its goal, like that of emancipatory ethnography, is to assist the class of subjects under study to interpret themselves as equals within the research culture. My aim in this project is thus to assist artists to explain their methodology on their own terms instead of pretending to entirely conform to conventional expectations of research drawn from other disciplines.

These references to social science traditions clearly imply that, while I want to emancipate art practice from marginalisation, I do not assume artmaking to be self-sufficient as research – but neither, I would contend, is any other discipline. In fact, an amalgam of disciplinary traditions invariably brings about the richest insights. What I am arguing is that studio practice should at least have a role in the definition of its own status as research. Allied with these strategies is the aim to, as far as possible, develop a grounded theory – letting the research experience determine the outcome rather than impose a predetermined theoretical perspective onto the data. In other words: let artmaking experience provide the fundamental information, and only then relate it to theories derived from other disciplines.

In the present study I therefore resolved to adopt a dual role, not unlike that required of students engaged in a studio-based doctorate, operating both as a practitioner and an observer. This process is being conducted routinely on several continents, but nowhere to my knowledge is it meta-analysed. Typically, candidates adopt a theoretical rationale regarding the object of their practice or of their end product, rather than the practice itself. Where the present research would differ from these is that the observation would be focused on understanding the artistic process rather than its outcome.

Certain complications in this strategy have to be considered. As a descriptive case study, the present project provides an account of a specific experience and may therefore be limited in its generalisability. It may be said, for example, that my methodological tactics, as well as my interpretation of their significance, are to a large extent determined by a specific personal disposition, cultural origins, educational background, and choice of medium. However, this may be the very reason for repeating such studies. So, at least, the form of this investigation may provide a basis for insights in further observation by others, in the spirit of empathic understanding referred to within the social sciences as *verstehen*.

In contrast with Merleau Ponty's famous account of the phenomenology of Cézanne's working process based on second-hand accounts of Cézanne's life and on the analysis of Cézanne's completed pictures, I set out to examine the creative experience directly. Phenomenologists hold that what we principally 'know' is not the external world, but our own experience of that world. Therefore, to confront that knowledge and to examine it rigorously, we need to stand back from the experience – 'bracket' out prejudices and preconceptions for what phenomenology calls eidetic reflection. However, I wish to emphasise that, to do this, I adopted a radically different stance from analysing everyday subjective experience. If artmaking itself was to be used as a phenomenological enquiry, my *noema*, the entity whose essence I am trying to grasp, was also to be my *noesis*, or the means by which it is investigated. I inevitably *constructed* the conditions for my artistic experience according to preconceptions and hypotheses formed from my recent research, as well as out of years of involvement in various roles related to the discipline. Would this still allow for new insights? To triangulate this research path as much as possible away from a tautology, I consciously adopted two different mindsets – modelled on the one hand on an artist whose starting goal is to simply manipulate images for pleasure, and on the other the 'scientific' researcher:

I resolved that the first mindset or intention would be directed towards just making pictures; the second intention would be to examine not the pictures or the decisions, but my rationale for any tactical decisions that emerged *during their making* and their subsequent sequential development. A third analytical phase would adopt a stance closer to the tradition of *erklären*, or explanation, in an attempt to identify some pattern that might typify a form of artistic research and relate the artistic success or otherwise of tactical decisions to existing theories. Michael Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention* traces such tactical decision-making in Picasso's *Portrait of Kahnweiler* and in other artifacts such as the Forth Firth Bridge.<sup>6</sup> However, Baxandall, like Merleau-Ponty, rather than directly observe bodily experience, extrapolates his conclusions from a finished product.

My basic premise regarding the studio practice component of the present project, supported by logic and the observation and comments of studio researchers previously interviewed, was that if practice were to merely 'perform' to a theoretical plan, it would not itself contribute any new knowledge. Therefore, the relation of art

practice to theory, for at least the beginning of the process, had to be ad hoc rather than systematic. I would not preconceive an image, but allow the ideas to develop through play with images that attracted me. I would be systematic only with regard to a general theme that emerged from the process – not from a pre-existing intention. Note that this is contrary to the normal stance of many exegeses, in at least Australian studio-based higher degrees, which usually adopt the conceit that the artist has pursued a theoretically coherent plan from the outset. As I have observed elsewhere, in most universities in Australia “the written component need be neither the vehicle nor evidence of reflective engagement, but simply a clarifier of what is already in the practice. This is still typically accomplished by contextualising the images using art historical and cultural studies methods.”<sup>7</sup>

However, although adopted here solely to test a contribution of pure practice to studio-based research rather than as a preconception of how art *has* to operate, the resolve to start with unplanned visual ‘experimentation’ coincidentally corresponds with the way that, in my experience, many visual art studio researchers report they actually do operate.

These ad hoc explorations evolved in the following sequence:

1. ‘Playing’ with images appropriated from the Web using Photoshop.
2. ‘Playing’ with analogue snapshots I had taken in the past and scanned into my computer.
3. Taking new digital photographs to augment ideas derived from the previous play.
4. Manipulating and combining both self-photographed and appropriated images.
5. Producing new meanings that occurred to me during practice by imagining narrative connections among the visual components being combined.
6. Generating single, more physically autonomous, images referring to the whole narrative.

After each stage I reflected on the process by which ideas occurred and the relation of the works to theory.

Finally, I prepared an overview suggesting possible theoretical explanations for the way that the process unfolded. This is the phase that, in social science terms, moves away from *verstehen* towards the tradition of *erklären*.

I will describe here samples of each mode of visual experimentation from 1 to 6, with the reflection upon each, and then conclude with a discussion of theoretical explanations that might support the experiential evidence.

Playing with the capabilities of Photoshop as a medium, without conscious decision, I found myself constantly referring to existing art. My first experiment started from the simple discovery that Photoshop could run and drip images. Practicing to control this technique, it seemed amusing to reverse Jackson Pollock’s effect on his medium. Appropriating one of Hans Namuth’s *Life* magazine photographs of Pollock in his studio, I made the artist’s body melt and drip onto his canvas. It became apparent that what an effect counted on was not its technical difficulty, but the judiciousness of its application and its resonance with a context. This then suggested the title ‘Pollock’s Last Painting’ and led to further ideas for imaginary last paintings by notable artists. Thus Australian artist John Nixon’s obsessive use of a constructivist cross could be made to reach the *ad absurdum* limits of minimalist avant-gardism through the capability of Photoshop to leach out all colour from one of his images and supplant it with an embossed ‘white on white’ effect. The opportunity to ‘take the piss’ out of Serrano by producing a row of lime, orange and lemonade ‘Christs’ became irresistible. And framing Broodthaers’ candid diary entry about wanting to make a profit out of artmaking in one of his home museum frames completed the ‘last painting’ series. These, however, struck me as merely visual jokes, one-liners rather than art. My next set of experiments used images I had photographed myself.



Figure 1. George Petelin,  
*Centrepoint 1.*



Figure 2. George Petelin,  
*Centrepoint 2.*

Figure 3. George Petelin,  
*Centrepoint 3.*



*Centrepoint 1* and *2* were analogue photographs I had taken of Sydney shrouded in fog or smog. Arguably already somewhat artistic, they offered an opportunity to further explore whatever had prompted me to take them. I scanned them into digital form and experimented further. Apocalyptic visions emerged in *Centrepoint 3* as I played with tone manipulation, inserted the faintest tints of complementary colour into the centre of each sunburst, and smudged clouds into vague suggestions of hideous faces. This was no longer motivated by humour, but by the power to magnify the aesthetic and emotive potential of captured reality by digitally 'painting' with it. I must also report that, although drawing on a screen with a mouse seems at first remote from the directness of applying paint with a brush, there emerged a curious sense of tactility, like a phantom limb, whose haptic feedback, however virtual, seemed to guide my response as much as visual feedback. I felt a powerful urge to smudge and blur the precise ordering of digital pixels. This bears out Merleau-Ponty's contention that perception is a whole body experience.<sup>8</sup> Whatever coherent meaning these images gained clearly either emerged through this haptic intuition (and here I use the term in its phenomenological sense as direct apprehension rather than as mystical premonition), or by chance, or as a product of my unconscious.

Conscious reflection on the above experience, however, led to a more deliberate experiment. This time I thrust an image associated with international terror onto a familiar local context, the Brisbane City Hall, and overlaid it with artificial smoke or clouds. The scale and obscurity of the jetliner made it to my mind more a metaphor for contemporary anxieties than a reality. This somehow seemed closer to being art.

However, the explicit theme of global terror and its attendant social issues still seemed too obvious, and, for no conscious reason, seemed to me to need tempering with satire. I thus set out in my subsequent experiments

to merge my local context with the premonitions of disaster that global anxiety generates. I photographed the idyllic, crassly hedonistic and sometimes bizarre culture of Surfers Paradise on the Queensland Gold Coast and inflicted it with digitally generated catastrophes – the rising tides of climate change, nuclear devastation, aerial bombardment, toxic pollution. And into each scenario I placed that iconic media image of refugees: the overcrowded Tampa lifeboat. Each image then suggested an unfolding narrative, a continuing adventure of boatpeople looking for Paradise; but maybe a futile quest as the paradise crumbles before their eyes. To emphasise the narrative quality and evoke the cinematic tradition of disasters, I arranged the images into triptychs.



Figure 4. George Petelin, *Fear of Flying*.



Figure 5. George Petelin, *Looking for Paradise 1*.



Figure 6. George Petelin, *Looking for Paradise 2*.

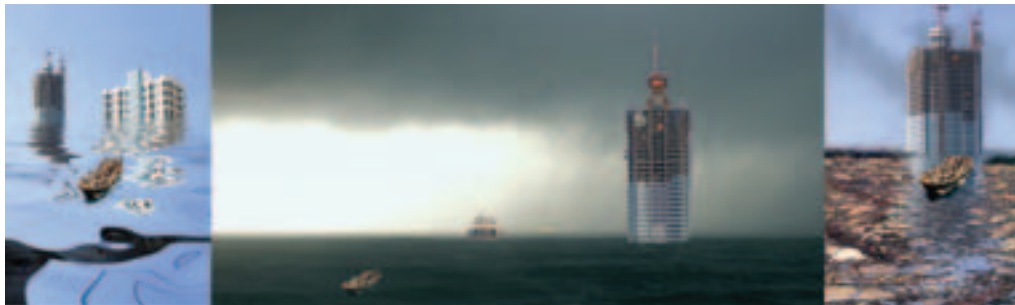


Figure 7. George Petelin, *Looking for Paradise 3*.



Figure 8. George Petelin, *Looking for Paradise 4*.



Figure 9. George Petelin, *Looking for Paradise 5*.

Through largely unplanned association the images came to combine commentary on globalisation, the shallowness of tourist culture, and the dangers of ecological neglect. In hindsight this is somewhat frightening, as these prophetic images occurred to me long before the spate of 'natural' disasters we experienced in 2011.

I was pleased enough with the results to print them and submit one to the Gold Coast Regional Art Gallery for the annual Schubert and Ulrik Award. Experiencing the physicality of large prints on various grades of paper impelled me to return to single, more iconic, symmetrical, 'metaphysical' statements (figures 10 and 11) that seemed now to gain coherence by referring back to the narratives that the earlier triptychs had constructed.



Figure 10. George Petelin, *Dark Paradise*.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

How does my experience compare with that attributed to Cézanne by Merleau-Ponty and with that attributed to Picasso by Baxandall? Merleau-Ponty has little to say about Cézanne's imaginative process. Instead he explains his painting in terms of a perceptual process that appears to be equally shared by all of us, but obscured by our expectations of a 'photographic' realism and geometric perspective. Cézanne, according to Merleau-Ponty, paints as we all *actually* see.

If one outlines the shape of an apple with a continuous line, one makes an object of the shape, whereas the contour is rather the ideal limit toward which the sides of the apple recede in depth. Not to indicate any shape would be to deprive the objects of their identity. To trace just a single outline sacrifices depth – that is, the dimension in which the thing is presented not as spread out before us but as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves. That is why Cézanne follows the swell of the object in modulated colors and indicates several outlines in blue. Rebounding among these, one's glance captures a shape that emerges from among them all, just as it does in perception. captures a shape that emerges from among them all, just as it does in perception.

For Baxandall, Picasso similarly paints what he perceives, and not only in his subject but also on his canvas. Like Cézanne, Baxandall notes, Picasso is concerned with how each new brushstroke sets up a new problem for him to solve. Artmaking is concluded by Baxandall to be a series of problem-setting and problem-solving actions. What my own experience suggests is that it may be more a series of *opportunities* prompted by preconscious and conscious associations rather than problems. And it is curious that Baxandall, while acknowledging Picasso's claim that an artist's role is not to 'search' but to 'find,' still chooses to privilege Kahnweiler's problem-solving explanation of the process.

## REFLECTION ON THE PRODUCTS

My third set of experiments clearly begins to approach the status of art in a way of which the earlier ones arguably fall somewhat short. This judgement is supported by the fact that one of the triptychs, *The Boatpeople Look for Paradise*, was accepted for the annual Schubert and Ulrik Award exhibition at the Gold Coast Regional Art Gallery in 2006 and that the whole set was exhibited within a solo exhibition at the Queensland Centre for Photography in 2008. What then are the components that make it so, and what processes enabled them to come about?

Four qualities seemed to me to characterise the triptychs: humour; tragedy; occasional beauty of form, but above all else an ambiguity of these. Whereas the one-liners of Experiment 1 were clearly jokes, and the terriblisms of Experiment 2 tended to rely on cheap thrills, the triptychs could be read numerous ways: Are the boatpeople arriving or escaping? Are they behaving as refugees or tourists? Why are buildings still being constructed as the waters rise? Which is slime and which is fresh water? And which of the former looks the more pictorially attractive?

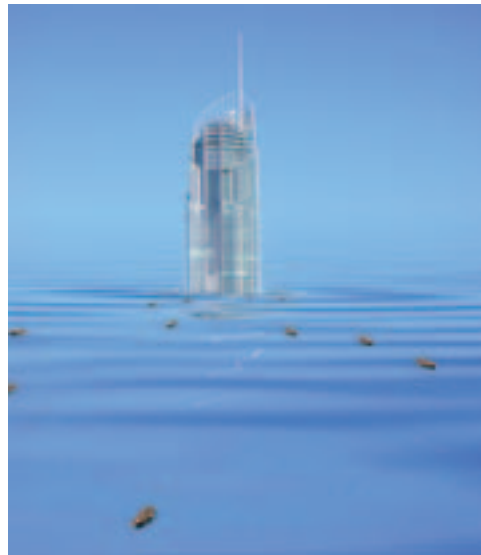


Figure 11. George Petelin, *Expulsion from Paradise*.

In conventional research, a conclusion gains strength when one form of evidence confirms another: This is the process of 'triangulation' – similar to identifying a location in surveying. In art, however, there is a tradition of deferring certainty. Edmund Burke, for example, argues that the highest form of beauty, 'the Sublime that dazzles and overwhelms us,' in fact has to remain somewhat 'obscure.'<sup>10</sup> And William Empson refers to the tropes that characterise the poetic creation of meaning as 'seven types of ambiguity.'<sup>11</sup> As Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky argues, the job of art is to prolong perception.<sup>12</sup> This means making the familiar strange, setting puzzles and mysteries in place – in other words, enabling multiple interpretations.

But while art seems to thrive on ambiguity, to constitute *knowledge* it must not do so at the cost of overall coherence. There must still be a promise to make sense although each of its 'triangulations' involves some slippage, so that an exact meaning remains uncertain and a level of mystery is never lost. Thus art could be considered to employ an approximate triangulation of more than two vectors resulting in an *area* of knowledge rather than in one precise point. Because mathematically an area contains an infinite number of points, the same artistic problem can be said to have an infinite number of equally valid solutions. And a picture can thus have an infinite number of meanings – but *within circumscribed limits*. Although ambiguity is desirable in art, it needs to remain within a coherent ideological and ontological boundary. Maybe it is this that can qualify works as both research and art.

## FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

What does this imply for the procedures of making art as research? First, as I initially hypothesised, if the product is not entirely pre-planned, it can potentially generate new knowledge that is intrinsically artistic – i.e., rich with a coherent ambiguity. Second, to produce artistic knowledge, the process must both allow that ambiguity and restrict it.

Consequently, the practitioner is constantly torn between being too clear and being too directionless.

The literature on creative 'thinking,' deriving from HP Guilford's 'Structure of Intellect' model, makes the distinction between convergent and divergent operations.<sup>13</sup> Guilford theorises that generating diverse alternatives, a 'divergent' operation constitutes a qualitatively different process from that of selecting and thus reducing alternatives in a 'convergent' way.

Guilford's contention that creativity is highly dependent on divergent operations has led these to be popularly identified with creativity. However, this is a dangerously reductive notion, for it could suggest that any novelty at all equates with creativity. Undervaluing convergent thinking neglects the critical faculty by which creative persons finally arrive at the most satisfying of alternative solutions, or at least reduce the alternatives to a circumscribed area. But what research indicates is that the convergent processes should ideally not occur simultaneously with divergent processes. As psychologist Alex Osborn first made clear, a premature application of convergent or critical thinking necessarily inhibits the generation of alternative ideas – in effect becoming a censoring mechanism that prevents new ideas from forming.<sup>14</sup> And being able to generate a greater range of ideas from which to choose – even unconsciously – increases the likelihood of subsequently selecting particularly apt ones. For this reason, the ability to 'defer judgement' has been identified as both a key learnable skill and a personality trait conducive to creativity.

Incidentally, deferral of judgement is also a precept of the *epoché* – another term used by phenomenologists to describe the process of bracketing or *eidetic reduction*. But would it be a mistake to assume thus an equivalence between phenomenology's goal of focussed apprehension and the divergent demands of artistic imagination? No doubt some forms of art or stages of artmaking demand a similar kind of concentrated meditation and, by a disciplined exclusion of the clichés, arrive at the most authentic insights. However, that may be something to investigate in future research.

My current experience suggests that free experimentation plays a significant but ambivalent role in permitting creativity at all stages. What artists term free experimentation can sometimes be an almost random process of



trial and error; without any clear definition beforehand of what constitutes error or success. My first stage of play with the medium was like this, but as a set of random discoveries of the capabilities of Photoshop they would have ultimately provided no sense of purpose or coherence. Putting these discoveries to use made them creative *but not necessarily artistic*, for they soon evolved into a theoretically determined cliché. Originating out of practice, the works of the 'Last Paintings' series had the potential to generate knowledge that was *essentially* artistic, but focusing them narrowly made them too predictable. As one-line jokes they relied on an intersection of two vectors only. The air disaster and the bomb-lit cityscape on the other hand reached for broader, less specific, resonances, but without sufficient coherence. What proved most successful was the continued use of playful association together with increasing, but nonetheless partial, constraints of deductive logic and theory as the project developed.

What I have labelled 'artistic tactics' are not necessarily irrational. Charles Sanders Peirce theorised what he called 'abductive reasoning': the process of forming a hypothesis in circumstances that are too complex or where there are insufficient proven premises to form a conclusion or insufficient instances to form an inductive principle.<sup>15</sup> The 'experimental guessing' and association-forming that I began with can be explained in these terms. To me, they seem to act as a deduction in reverse – reasoning from observable 'effects' in order to find unanticipated associations, rather than reasoning from known premises in order to make a predicted effect. Thus an artist might often work backwards – first finding 'a solution to which there is not yet a problem,' or forming an image, or making a mark, and then looking for ways it can be made more meaningful. And while critical processes and deductive problem-solving are at some stage necessary for the creation of greater coherence, opportunistic abduction appears to remain always indispensable.

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- 4 George Petelin, *ACUADS Research Training Benchmarking Project 2002-2003* (Perth: Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools, 2005).
- 5 Ibid.
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