❖ Smith, Hazel and Roger T. Dean (Editors) - Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts, Edinburgh University Press 2010 (pp. 288) ISBN 9780748636297

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The timeliness of this collection of edited essays on the creative arts as research is indicative of the rapid growth of this form of research over a relatively short period. There is a sense that we are in the middle of two countervailing tendencies with respect to academic research. First, there is an inexorable rise in the government-led metrification of research output to assure value for research investment within a rigorous outcomes regime, and second an expansion of the kinds of research practices that emphasise trans-disciplinary engagements in the production of new knowledge.

These trends are by no means compatible. With its focus on practice-led research and research-led practice, Smith and Dean have tapped into the leading thinkers who have taken an early but definitive step towards validating and theorising the use of the creative arts in research practices. Smith and Dean, based at the University of Western Sydney, have marshalled a strong Australian presence in this volume that suggests Australian academies are a hotbed of creative arts-led research practices. Indeed some of the contributors can claim original influence in formulating institutional programs such as the Doctor of Creative Arts in particular universities in Australia. Smith and Dean offer a comprehensive introduction to the volume that is divided into three sections: Methodologies, Case Histories and a Contextualisation in Education and Politics.

The Methodologies section is led off by Graeme Sullivan, one of the earlier contributors to this field with two books published on the visual arts as research-led practice. His argument begins with a reference to Cézanne as a visual studies 'researcher' and this is appropriate as he is frequently linked as a transition figure in the move to cubism and similar 20th century art.1 Sullivan tracks the early policy statements that connect the creative arts to knowledge increase – the gold standard of research – through the value of 'creativity.' Binding the creative arts to all research practices, however, limits the arts to other concomitant demands such as the development of new applications particularly in the service of sustaining economic value. The resulting exercise in making the creative arts 'equivalent' to other forms of scholarship resulted in what Stellarc has referred to as "bad research practice and bad art"2.

Against this negative trend, Sullivan tracks a series of relatively recent contributions that develop criteria for practice-based research on its own terms building to policy statements that give recognition to both the research practice and outcomes in a creative arts practice. Sullivan makes a strong case for re-conceptualising the epistemological dynamic in practice-led

research where the move from the known to the unknown reverses an accepted pattern of knowledge building but which, in the context of creative arts research, permits new insights into older knowledge formations. The chapter goes on to illustrate this thesis in a visual art work dedicated to 're-situating' the character of Mark Twain that was exhibited in both the US and Australia in 2007. Other contributors to this section include Simon Biggs, Shirly McKechnie and Catherine Stevens, Baz Kershaw and Anne Brewster.

Space does not permit a review of these other contributions though it is significant that Sullivan leads this volume given his prominence in setting the agenda about this inquiry into the field of practice-led research. Part two is titled Case Histories and presents four chapters with examples that draw respectively on contemporary media arts projects and writing practice as research. The chapter by Keith Armstrong is noteworthy for the contributions he has made to the field of interactive media arts with an emphasis on embodiment, experience and computer-based technologies. Armstrong's works are grounded in a philosophical approach termed 'ecosophy' with an interest in sustainability, interdependency and new subjectivities.

This approach is marked by an "anti-productivist" ethos (drawn from Tony Fry) in which the created works are inclusive and transformative – "dialogic and conversational". The approach is illustrated by a case study titled, *Knowmore* (House of Commons) destined for the State Library, Brisbane, Queensland. For Armstrong, the choice of the library as a venue connects to the knowledge resource implications of how libraries are transformed by technology and new forms of collaborative learning. Armstrong goes on to describe the project's provenance as a process of ideas and conversations in which reflection in action (Schön) provides the model for the emergence of this work.

The two contributions relating to literary practices in the Case Histories section are both marked by an autobiographical framing and this may offer a clue that in many respects, it is practitioner-led research as much as practice-led research that is the subject of this book. Jane Goodall's chapter, *Nightmares in the Engine Room* does well to emulate Sullivan's earlier point about new knowledge – what Goodall refers to as "new angles on existing knowledge". The marriage of research and creativity here goes by way of needing " a convincing vignette". By this, I believe Goodall means that the value of an authentic feeling in novel writing can be created if the scenario has the 'real-world' sensibility drawn from research. For Goodall, it is both "viable options" and "convincing vignettes" that become the staples of the novelist seeking to make the story's sources taper to the logic and shape of the invented world. Goodall's chapter then takes a sharp turn towards the dilemma of story writing when research cannot do the work required in breaking down certain blockages. Instead, she tracks back in a counter-mapping exercise and shows how new strategies (e.g. improvisation) can lead to rethinking the contours of the project and the way forward in the writing process.

The book ends with a chapter by Sharon Bell – one of three contributions to the section, *Contextualisation in Education and Politics*. Traversing those aspects of her academic experience as filmmaker, lecturer and administrator, Bell is keen to surface the tensions that issue from the demands these roles place on what she calls the *Academic Mode of Production* (also the title of this chapter). This contribution traces the challenges set by the demands of the academy and those who make up the community of practice (in this case documentary filmmaking) such that it becomes difficult to satisfy either. Bell echoes the earlier comments by Stellarc and Sullivan regarding the potential for these research practices to lead to bad art and bad research. By unpicking the detail in the way her film-works were made and received, Bell argues a strong case for opening the idea of contextualisation to include the use and interpretation/understanding of creative works beyond their initial formulation. This is specific to the case of Bell's four films made in Sri Lanka in the context of the shifting political conditions that rendered the films and their preferred meanings important to the political actors

of the day. Bell makes the case for seeing creative arts as a kind of 'underbelly' of the academic mode of production and one therefore that can disturb and in this way contribute to questioning the boundaries in the knowledge formations that prevail.

In returning to the current 'accounting' approach to research so favoured by contemporary governments, Bell echoes the earlier observations in this review that the final word on practice-based research as a viable research strategy in the academy is yet to be given and is very much in a process of argument and debate. In this regard, this volume makes a valuable contribution to this conversation at a critical time.

Notes

1 See Berger, J., *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, NY: Pantheon, 1980.

2 Stellarc was speaking to a seminar was held on May 22 2009, School of Communication Arts, University of Western Sydney

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