

## **Determining Creative Practice**

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University of Bedfordshire

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A report on the Determining Creative Practice symposium held in December 2009 at the University of Bedfordshire. The event focused on notions of determinism and creative practice, and featured presentations of practice led research artefacts including music, performance, creative writing and video. A few of the highlights will be discussed in this report.

Keynote and first panel (Written by Joanna Callaghan)

The day opened with a presentation from Dr Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, Reader in Theory and Philosophy of Art, University of Reading. Responding to the call for papers, Dronsfield discussed two related aspects of the problem of “forming explicit relations between practice and outcome and reflexively exploring the role of the researcher in producing the creative output” (CfP). At the heart of this paper was an exploration of the problematics of the theory/practice divide through a philosophically, distinctly Derridian questioning of the binary notions of theory and practice. For Dronsfield, the theorisation of the art practice is itself part of the practice, making them not separate or at odds, but in fact co-joined and interdependent. Understanding and evolving this concept has implications for the writing that surrounds practice led research whether it be proposals for or reflection upon. As he states: “...sense has to be made of how the theory/practice distinction is given not in advance but in practice, and how art practice is always a break with determinism and causality rather than an outcome of these, and how intention is as much an outcome as the outcome intended.” (Dronsfield, 2009) It signaled a desire to move beyond the perpetual dialogue, often experienced at these kind of events, concerning theory-practice. I found it an inspiring start to the day, though not everyone agreed. One member of the audience criticised the obtuseness of Dronsfield’s language, complaining of the over theorisation of practice within academia.

The first panel, *Beyond the Self* reflected upon processes in creative practice that instead of placing the researcher at the centre of the creative act, create a set of circumstances or parameters that allow a level of randomness and organic development in the research process. In this way, emphasis on the individual researcher as the source of creativity is somewhat destabilised. Beginning with *Invocation*, a performance by artist Robin Bale, that took place outside the university, on the pavement opposite a busy bus stop. Bale recited what appeared to be a collection of random words and sentences, loosely referring to the gathering of people, the temporality of this gathering and “we who will not be the same again”. Bearded and holding a can of Special Brew, Bale resembled some of the people passing in the background and was certainly convincing as the bus stop wino, perhaps

less so as the lay preacher. An invocation to Hermes ended the performance with the Special Brew poured on the ground in four directions. In the reflective discussion, Bale spoke about ritual, improvisation and performance as fragmentary, impressionistic and in a living process of composition and revision. Following was Dr David Bessell, Senior Lecturer in Music Technology at the University of Bedfordshire who presented *Labyrinth by Fire*, original music composed and performed. Concerned with the role of fractal procedures in music and mathematics, Bessell's research concerned how chaotic excess can be compatible with traditional concepts of musical structure. Playing back the musical track, Bessell isolated elements, replaying them and explaining his process, reflecting upon the relation between intuition, 'determining' factors and the outcome. The link to Bale was a teasing out of the creative process as possessing a 'livingness' that may be difficult to explain or repeat and which to some extent, exists beyond embodied notions of the self.

Second keynote and third panel (Written by Joanne Lee)

The second keynote came from Mike Stubbs, Director of FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) and Professor of Art Media and Curating at Liverpool John Moores University. Stubbs' engaging presentation of his practice as an artist and curator provided a welcome sense of ambition in which research was not curtailed (as so often) at the walls of institutions/disciplines. As an exemplar he offered the work of artist/activist Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose *War Veteran Vehicle* project for FACT involved an extensive collaboration with veterans of recent conflicts. For Stubbs, such a project demonstrates the potential of creative practice in developing understanding and effecting critical change; in the context of this symposium it served to remind us that there is more at stake than inward-looking attempts to define practice-led research within the university.

The third panel focused upon how such institutional determinants affect and construct the research undertaken through contemporary creative practice. Jeremy Bubb, Senior Lecturer in Film and Video Production at Roehampton University, explored the constraints and opportunities of the university context, suggesting that our reflection upon and negotiation of these parameters is a crucial part of the researcher's role. He addressed anticipated changes in UK research assessment, attending directly to the idea of 'impact': Bubb's address carried with it the message that practice-led research needs to develop and articulate more effectively an understanding of what creative approaches really offer. That critical work can also exist outside the institutional context was demonstrated by Egle Obcarskaite, a scholar working independently as a philosopher, art journalist and researcher. Her presentation revealed something of a guerrilla approach: working as part of an editorial collective to produce an unfunded newspaper during the 2009 *ImPulsTanz* dance festival in Vienna, she explored how practitioner-researchers can create their own critical agenda.

### Conclusion

In his opening presentation, Dronsfield suggested practice-led research has the radical potential to fundamentally change *both* theory and practice, but beyond rethinking such entrenched and embattled positions, the symposium also enabled researchers from a diverse variety of creative media and disciplines to share insights. Whilst 'interdisciplinarity' remains a fashionable ideal, the departmental structures of

universities, units of research assessment and the academic subject centres and associations in UK higher education often mitigate against opportunities to work with other creative researchers; so this was a rare opportunity to survey the wider cultural/critical landscape and discern whether the nuances of different media might shift our understanding of how new knowledge is produced through practice. My sense is that this particular discussion has only just begun and that we ought to further explore our commonalities and discuss our differences: we might thus offer a more compelling advocacy for the potential of practice both inside and outside the university.

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