

**Gaylene Perry**

**The non-verbal and the verbal: expanding awareness of practice-led research in creative writing**

Abstract:

This paper takes up the concept of *practice-led research*: research (or the production and performance of knowledge) that is implicit within practice – in this case creative arts practice and more specifically, creative writing practice. Does practice-led research offer new possibilities for recognition of contributions to research by writers? This exploration of creative practice and research stretches out tendrils between creative writing and other art forms. What may the predominantly non-verbal creative arts disciplines offer creative writing in terms of exploring modes of knowledge production and performance?

Biographical note:

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This paper takes up the concept of *practice-led research*: research (or the production and performance of knowledge) that is implicit within practice – in this case creative arts practice and more specifically, creative writing practice. In the creative arts, the theory of practice-led research, sometimes also called *practice as research*, acknowledges that creative arts practice is *a mode of knowledge production* (Barrett 2007, p. 2).

To quote creative arts academic Brad Haseman (2007, p. 145): ‘in recent years, “practice-led research” has become a prominent term for effectively describing the research approach that enables practitioners to initiate and then pursue their research through practice’.

The practice-led research movement is most rapidly developing from within the disciplines of the tactile and performing arts, and also in disciplines such as new media and communication that are involved in the emergent field known as creative enterprises. However, the discipline of creative writing – at least in Australia – has not been swift in linking in with such developments.

All commentators on the issue of practice-led research in the creative arts emphasise the need to facilitate and promote understanding of this kind of research. It is necessary to establish the legitimacy of the research and to provide and demonstrate ways of measuring the research. Numerous books, articles and websites about practice-led research have begun to appear, but they are mostly about the tactile and performing arts, and media and communication disciplines. These resources rarely pertain in explicit or extensive ways to creative writing.

There are exceptions: to cite just three recent examples; Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt’s book, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2007), includes creative writing in its categories of disciplines that use practice as research, and indeed I was asked, as a creative writer who had completed a PhD under the creative-work-plus-exegesis model, to provide a chapter on this mode of research relating to my discipline (Perry, 2007); likewise, *Media International Australia* journal published an issue dedicated to practice-led research, incorporating a chapter by creative writing academic Donna Lee Brien (2007); and creative writing academic Josie Arnold published a monograph titled *Practice-Led Research: A Dynamic Way to Knowledge*, also in 2007. My intention here is to respond to those promising signs and extend the discussion.

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In relation to practice-led research, UK group project PARIP (Practice as Research in Performance) uses the similar term *practice as research*, and couches it as follows, embedding a quote from Colin Painter (Piccini, 2002, np):

Practice as research acknowledges fundamental epistemological issues that can only be addressed in and through practice – that practice “can be both a form of research and a legitimate way of making the findings of such research publicly available. No necessary connection is assumed between the apparatus of research and the written word”.

Individual practitioner-researchers may consider themselves to use one, some, or all of a number of approaches to research. One may work with a creative-work-plus-exegesis model, and if so, then one may write the kind of exegesis that eases into existing, widely accepted research paradigms. PARIP (Piccini, 2002, np) suggests that some creative arts practitioners do carry out practice that provides ‘material for research within established modes’, and if that is the case then ‘the concept of practice as research allies itself with science practices whereby the practice base, while important, cannot stand on its own as a valid mode of enquiry’. Perhaps that issue needs further discussion and debate elsewhere, but here my main interest is in the kinds of research that occur exclusively *in* practice itself: the kinds that *cannot* be exegetised – because that kind of research does not yet appear to have been extensively considered in relation to the discipline of creative writing.

Notoriously, the Strand Report, *Research in the Creative Arts*, published in 1998 by the then-named DEETYA (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs), excluded creative writing in its categories of creative arts disciplines and therefore in its recommendations on improving recognition of creative artworks in research benchmarking and measurement. In fact, in literature about the creative arts, creative writing is rarely mentioned in lists of categories: the emphasis is nearly always on the performing and tactile arts – and creative writing is generally not considered to be one of those.

Perhaps a reason for why creative writing often finds itself left out of discourses on practice-led research emerging from the creative arts is that creative writing is considered a *text-based* or *verbal* art-form, and is perceived to have stronger links with more traditional academic disciplines such as English and Literary Studies than with the disciplines of the tactile and performing arts.

Even amongst other creative arts disciplines, then, there appears to be a lack of understanding about what we do in practice, research and teaching. Our work is seen as being predominantly *about* words; therefore we are part of the problem, if you like: the dominance of text-based disciplines in the academy.

This is not necessarily an accurate or complete view of the discipline. And when it comes to having our work recognised as practice-led research, it’s also not especially helpful. Just like painters, sculptors, film-makers, performers, et cetera, we know that creative writers experience problems in having creative practice recognised by our institutions and certainly by funding bodies such as the ARC. Novels may be text-based, but are of course no more recognised as research, under current institutional and governmental research measurement practices, than art installations and improvised dance performances.

A creative artwork such as a performance, painting or installation; a photograph; an animation; can certainly be described, contextualised and theorised in text, but the crux of the

work – perhaps its meaning but more likely its *essence* or *beingness* – is usually non-verbal or at least partially non-verbal, and it is not translatable to a verbal mode. No amount of exegesis, regardless of how interesting, lucid and complex, can hope to communicate the non-verbal element of the work. And why would anyone wish to do that in exegesis? If an essay, for instance, could replace a painting or a musical composition, what would be the point of painting or composing? If everything that the painting or composition is, can be exchangeable for the essay, then effectively there is no such thing as the ‘is’ of the painting or composition.

Interestingly, in discourse about research in the performing and tactile arts, there is frequent reference to the binary of verbal and non-verbal communication. Mostly, this is probably an oversight, in regards to creative writing, because really what these theorists are referring to by the terms *verbal or text-based communication* is not what we think of when we say *creative writing*. Rather, they are referring to traditional kinds of text-based research. But the oversight goes beyond that.

Once when I approached a dancer-academic about possible collaborative work, I was told that I would find many dancers resistant to working with writers because they did not wish to have the meaning of their work pinned down by text. Especially, they didn’t want their (contemporary) dance *narrativised* when it may have little to do with concepts or structures of narrative. A similar perception of the function and *limitability* of words is seen in a recent media commentary on the Chunky Moves dance company’s production, *Two-Faced Bastard*, in which performing arts journalist and reviewer Raymond Gill (2008, np) expressed dismay at a worldwide trend in text and particularly the spoken word turning up in contemporary dance productions. He went to see dance, he said, to escape from words:

And who isn't sick of words? Who hasn't had it with the "well-made" play, the "poetic" opera libretto? Aren't we over traditional, conformist "language" that fails to challenge the predominant cultural model and is accessible only to the "traditional" read "bourgeois" purveyor of social norms? They're so old-hat, so last millennium and so, like, mindlessly summoned in contemporary intercourse. We need more word-free art forms that form direct links with subjective, contrapuntal emotional resonance without those elitest nouns, verbs and so on that are grammatical prisons for free-thinkers outside the establishment square. Words, who needs 'em?

These viewpoints demonstrate misunderstanding of the breadth of the ways writers use text and also how text functions and how it is processed by readers/audiences. Firstly, for instance, there are the creative and limitless ways that words can be used in collaboration with other art-forms.

When I worked, recently, in collaborative improvisation performances with dancers<sup>1</sup>, I was intrigued by the way the text I was creating operated differently, in each performance (and also in practise sessions). I was working on a keyboard and my text was projected onto the walls, visible to audience and performers, as I wrote/typed. All the writing was improvised on the spot. Sometimes, a fragment of *narrative* emerged, but it did not seem to have a *narrativising* effect and may or may not have had anything much to do with the dancers’

movements at that moment. Other moments of my writing during the performances and practise sessions were responsive to sound, movement, mood, ambience, colour, performance, thought, sensation. There were typos. There were times when parts or all of the projected text were occluded by the dancers, or, when we also worked with an improvisational film and animation artist, by light, shadow and projected images. Dancers frequently interfered with the text in bodily ways, forcing errors by touching my keyboard, or obscuring words with hands placed over the projector's beam, and so on.

In another instance, I worked collaboratively with painter Annette Iggulden. We created two separate but connected works: I wrote a short story and Iggulden created a painting<sup>ii</sup>. Both pieces were developed over a time frame of several months, during which period we met several times and emailed and spoke on the phone. We also viewed each other's past work, and discussed our creative practices. I see the resulting short story as having fragments of the collaborative process imbued in it. Iggulden's painting has the text of a late draft of my short story literally imbued in it, reproduced on the canvas. Yet Iggulden's approach to the painting included a process of encoding, whereby she handwrote text in extremely small size and used other methods of encoding such as leaving out spaces between words and introducing some invented modes of inscription. The text of the short story, then, or at least a version of it, appears in the painting, along with other texts on related themes, but they are not readable. They function instead as an image of text, on one level – but numerous other ways of the functioning of this text could be articulated, including the material effects of the artist's process in physically creating the work, and even the effects of my own processes in physically writing drafts of the story. The functions of the text in this collaboration are clearly complex and it is difficult to see how the text could be perceived as being in any way constrictive of interpretation of Iggulden's art-work.

However, these are quite obvious examples of how the function of writing may be misconstrued or limited by perception of it as something that pins down meaning and structure. It's a stymied understanding of text itself: not only of creative writing text.

Artist and writer John Grech presents some fascinating and challenging theory relating to ways that knowledge manifests in creative (or indeed other kinds of) practice. Grech (2007, p. 36) writes:

A practice-led researcher – like the scientific researcher – wishes both to observe/discover and communicate new things about the world. This is why the shapes, appearances and sensations of experiences produced by a work of practice-led research may subsequently be structured into an academic or scientific discourse to facilitate others' understanding. Where the structures of conventional discourse are inadequate for communicating the researcher's findings, however, a work of practice-led research may invent new structures within that particular discourse. In practice-led research, experiences and findings may become amorphous (or, more correctly, polymorphous) when they are structured through language. Such polymorphic “resonances” reverberate and harmonise with observable experience rather than trying to describe how (and argue why) relations between such findings and observable events are empirically connected.

I'm reminded here of some of the philosophies of Rudolph Steiner, and in turn the later work of sculptor Joseph Beuys.

Ian George (2007, p. 9) writes:

Beuys' theory of sculpture proposed that art and life are actively balanced between the polarities of chaos and form and that it is the heart that mediates these polarities. Thinking with the heart creates the new consciousness that Beuys was working with and that Steiner called "Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition". Through *heart thinking* we can experience the truth in a moment of intuition, for it is in this moment that truth stands within the human being as a reality, as an objective human experience as not as some abstract theory.

Grech (2007, p. 35) takes a similarly wholistic approach to the potential use of practice-led research across the academy, stating: 'The incorporation of creative and practice-led research within conventional academic institutions as an authorised form of scientific knowledge would benefit not only an identified scholarly community, but society as a whole'. Further, Grech (2007, p. 38) focuses on the *unfixedness* and continuing dialogue that takes place in the research implicit in practice:

...this discourse differs from academic discourses because creative research produces a living conversation that takes place between individuals over and above, through and under, the work. By this I mean that practice-led research encourages the individual to retain, reflect on and express their own perspectives and position in relation to the work. Because creative and practice-led work engages others' responses, the discourse that envelops such a piece is by nature constantly evolving and remains dependent upon the individuals who interact with the work.

A comparable idea is found in the way that Joseph Beuys carried out his *Aktionen*, or actions (Holland 2007, p. 15):

In these performances Beuys incorporated ready-mades and accumulations of various materials, including felt, fat and copper. As remnants, or traces, of his performance these sculptures and installations have become important works of art for this generation, embodying Beuys' ideas. He used his art to express the interrelationships he perceived between environment, economics, politics and the individual.

Beuys' approach is described by scholar Shelley Sacks (2007, p. 37) as a 'participatory approach to knowing', in which 'the observer becomes united with the observed':

As an observer, I enter the phenomenon through a process of careful, attentive observation and take its image into the darkness, into the inner space of perception and imagination. I inhabit it. I participate in its gesture. I live its activity in myself. I live its interconnections. I perceive the wholeness that manifests as diversity. And in this process of engaging with the dynamic being, of making an inner image of what has been observed, I too am

transformed. The process of perception involves the shaping of myself as well. One could say, with Goethe, Steiner and Beuys, that each new act of connective seeing develops in oneself a new organ of perception (ibid).

Sacks (2007, p. 42) goes on to discuss ways that Beuys' approach can be seen as opening up new modes of knowledge production:

I have learned over the years what an astonishing process it is to enter a proposal imaginatively, in a participatory way, instead of arguing, analysing or trying to persuade. Not only do we get a deeper sense of the proposal, but it also helps us to make choices, stops us from being caught in the yes/no binary oppositions that appear whenever there is a major decision to be made... This process of entering deeply into the proposals, which is also a process of co-operative enquiry, of negotiation and exchange, is what Beuys describes as the "permanent conference".

In terms of practice-led research and its being viewed as a new category or mode of research, note that John Grech, too, focuses on the interactive, dialogic nature of creative practice. Grech (2007, p. 38) mentions the importance of considering this in setting benchmarks and outlining forms of measurement for practice-led research: 'The way that creative work and practice-led research become verifiable is to measure their effect within and through discourse'.

It is also crucial to understand the notion of *materiality* in creative arts practice. The 'permanent conference', and the 'effect within and through discourse', do not exist only between artist and audience; artist and art-work; art-work and audience. All of these are implicated in the dialogue that takes place and continues to take place. The practice of the artist is a site of discovery and of communication within itself. As visual artist and theorist Barbara Bolt (2004, p. 8) observes:

...art is a performative, rather than merely a representational practice. In contrast to prevailing understandings of art as a representational or a signifying practice, this book argues that, through creative practice, a dynamic material exchange can occur between objects, bodies and images. In the dynamic productivity of material practice, reality can get into images. Imaging, in turn, can produce real material effects in the world. The potential of a mutual reflection between objects, images and bodies, forms the basis of my argument for the deformational and transformative potential of images. This performative potential constitutes the power of imaging.

Writers often speak about processes of discovery; of learning; of the thrill of creating writing that feels fresh, new, vital. Then, though, the writer is usually asked – or feels compelled – to describe that knowledge in other terms: to verbalise it. To say: *this is what happened at this moment of writing. I discovered this. And this is what my piece of writing is about.* Maybe it's because we *do* work with words: we're compelled to express what we've come to know – through our art-form in which we use words – in more words. Other kinds of makers do this, too, of course. Sculptors and theatre performers can and do try to articulate verbally what

they've discovered in their art practices. But, perhaps because their art-forms are predominantly non-verbal, they are also frequently not shy about speaking out against the exegetical process, especially when it comes to recognition for the quality of their work and its impact. If your art involves ways of revealing knowledge that are, for example, visual, and you are always being asked to explain/verify/justify it verbally, then it figures that you will get frustrated and begin to fight against this, and demand that your non-verbal work be recognised for its very *non-verbalness*.

My contention is that in creative writing, we haven't thus far had as strong an impetus as our counterparts – in the performing and tactile arts and in newer, technology-based disciplines such as new media and communication – to fight for recognition of our creative work in and of itself. After all, to recap, we're writers, and even if it's sometimes deflating or tiresome to be asked to describe, say, what our work is about, it can also be enjoyable and challenging to answer that question, and we're used to and good at expressing ourselves verbally. So, we may tend to acquiesce, and do as we're asked, or at least try to do so. Also, those links with English and Literary Studies may influence us: literature is demonstrably something to be talked and written about; theorised and discoursed.

Yet just as there are elements of knowledge that can only exist, say, in painting, and cannot be translated or otherwise articulated verbally, there are non-verbal elements of such in creative writing. And they are not translatable, not enunciable, in any language except that non-verbal or at least partially non-verbal mode in which they exist.

The non-verbal, in writing, is *what's between the lines; between the words*. It's partly about sub-text. It's partly about the meaning that is signified by the signifiers: the words, punctuation, and so on. But it's not only about those aspects. It's also about the *practice* of writing: what happened when the writer (the maker) was doing the material work of writing.

Writing is a verbal mode of communication, but it's also non-verbal. It can be seen as visual, performative, aural and tactile, and perhaps other – perhaps modes that have not yet been named. One of the principles underlying theories of practice-led research is that practice reveals *new* modes of knowledge production and performance.

Explaining concepts of non-verbal modes of knowledge production and performance is not easy. Nor is measurement and benchmarking of them. John Grech (2007, p. 38), for example, points out:

...while a work of practice-led research can lead an individual to produce new, creative and revealing insights into (their) life, some academics complain the subjective, impressionistic (and sometimes contradictory) rhetorics and logics created by such a work are too tentative to be useful in a rigorous scientific or academic environment.

Importantly, though, Grech (ibid, p. 41) goes on to emphasise the need to challenge such complaints because they are underpinned by a prejudice for text-based methodologies and for traditional notions of *repeatability*. The rigour and the significance of what practice-led research offers is partly because of its *difference*:



Practice-led research does not stand or fall through its ability to be corroborated by the reproduction of a constant effect in others, but rather by the ability the work has to reverberate authentically with the subjectivity of each recipient.

Estelle Barrett (2007, p. 3), too, emphasises the difference offered by practice-led research:

It can be argued that the generative capacity of creative arts research is derived from the alternative approaches it employs – those *subjective*, *emergent* and *interdisciplinary* approaches – that continue to be viewed less favourably by research funding assessors and others still be convinced of the innovative and critical potential of artistic research. That studio production as research is predicated on an alternative logic of practice often resulting in the generation of new ways of modelling meaning, knowledge and social relations is still a relatively foreign idea within the wider university research community.

Crucially, Barrett (*ibid*) goes on to suggest that the scenario for creative arts practitioner-researchers is unlikely to change through continued efforts to reshape their work to fit existing research paradigms:

Rather than attempting to contort aims, objectives and outcomes to satisfy criteria set for more established models of research, I believe there is a need to generate appropriate discourses to convince assessors and policy-makers that within the context of studio-based research, innovation is derived from methods that cannot always be pre-determined, and “outcomes” of artistic research are *necessarily* unpredictable.

Brad Haseman (2007, p. 148) makes a similar point in stating:

Central to the argument for an alternative methodology for the Creative Arts is an insistence by practice-led researchers, that research outputs and claims to knowledge be reported through symbolic language and forms specific to their practice. Such a move challenges traditional ways of representing research findings. Practice-led researchers believe it is folly to seek to only “translate” the findings and understandings of practice into the numbers (quantitative) and words (qualitative) modes preferred by traditional research paradigms. They argue that a continued insistence that practice-led research be reported primarily in the traditional forms of research (words or numbers) can only result in the dilution and ultimately the impoverishment of the epistemological content embedded and embodied in practice. Thus the researcher-composer asserts the primacy of the music; for the poet it is the sonnet, for the choreographer it is the dance, for the designer it is the material forms and for the 3-D interaction designer it is the computer code and the experience of playing the game which stands as the research outcome.

Haseman (2007, p. 151) suggests, then, that a new category of research needs to be introduced to sit alongside quantitative and qualitative research categories, and he calls this performative research, and describes it thus:

Expressed in non-numeric data, but in forms of symbolic data other than words in discursive text. These include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code.

In terms of methodologies, Haseman (ibid) cites *scientific method* for quantitative research; *multi-method* for qualitative research, and poses *multi-method led by practice* as being appropriate to performative research.

This would appear to offer promise as a possible way forward. Of course, such an approach will demand that all of us who consider ourselves to participate in practice-led research have much work to do in suggesting manners in which our research can be effectively benchmarked and measured. And, perhaps more-so than some of the other disciplines I've mentioned above, creative writing practitioners and researchers also have work to do in facilitating understanding of our particular modes of practice-led research.

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<sup>1</sup> July 2008, collaborative improvisation performance between myself and seven improvisational dancers from the collective The Little Con; Cecil Street Studio, Fitzroy, Melbourne.

October 2008, collaborative improvisation performance between myself, four improvisational dancers (Shaun McLeod; Dianne Reid; Ann-Maree Ellis; Joey Lehrer), and film and animation artist Dirk De Bruyn; Deakin University performance space; Burwood, Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> The finished short story; details of Iggulden's painted work; and written reflections on the collaborative process are published in *Etchings*, vol. 3, 2007, pp. 64-75.