

Practice as Research: Interpreting the Un-interpretable?

“... the work of art, the literary work – is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively this: that it is – and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing. Whoever wants to make it express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing.”¹

In this paper I wish to question how an arts practice can be regarded as a form of research.

Displacement and Aftermath: 60 Years since the Lynmouth Flood²

In the making of this work I discovered that all tragedies involving loss and disappearance leave a sense of absence. My own ‘place’ concerns a more specific form of loss that is displacement – the removal of a person from their home. But rather than absence from a place, my practice drew me toward the tangible material that remains in the form of scars on the landscape, documents giving varying accounts of an event, photographs of the aftermath of the flood. My practice told me what I did not know rather than explain something that I did. This unexpected, transient quality that I find essential to my practice disrupted all my efforts to construct a piece of research leading me to question: in what sense does this constitute research? In what sense can an arts practice be research?

¹Quoted in Peter Gisbourne’s online paper, ‘Peter Welz, Plangent Space – Echoes in Solitude’, August 2005 from: Maurice Blanchot, ‘The Essential Solitude’, in, Blanchot: The Space of Literature, Eng. trans., Ann Smock, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p 22.

² In 1952 thirty-five people died as a consequence of the Lynmouth Flood in North Devon. The causes of this ‘natural’ disaster have been mainly attributed to the excessive amounts of rainfall in the week preceding the flood, the nature of the geological structure of the area and the re-routing of the river at Lynmouth. One of the deceased, a woman, has never been identified.

Controversy over the cause of the tragedy arose in 2001 when the BBC Radio Four’s ‘Document’ programme investigated an alleged environmental contrivance caused by a process known as ‘cloud-seeding’, involving experimental infusions of dry ice into clouds to encourage precipitation. No conclusive evidence has been found to prove that this may have caused the 1952 flood, in spite of a call for an inquiry on the part of survivors.

This inconclusive outcome as to the known cause of the flood is highly regrettable for the surviving relatives and families of the deceased and to others affected by the devastation that this flood caused. I have been a regular visitor to this area since the early 1970’s and have developed a strong attachment to it. This box contains my own thoughts for those affected by the flood and the aftermath of loss that lingers for those left behind 60 years later.

All of the paper used to make this work has been soaked in the East Lyn River at a point very close to the centre of Lynmouth where the majority of lives were lost. The paper contains residues of micro-organisms found in the river and molds that have grown and dried out. Some of the photogravure prints have been taken from secondary images from newspaper cuttings of the event.

It is my belief that any arts practice might be regarded as a form of research, insofar as it may lead to some form of discovery which then helps to inform subsequent practice and so on. Within current literature on the subject in order for an arts practice-led research to appear valid certain conditions are deemed pre-requisite. In November 2007 the Arts and Humanities Research Council published a review of Practice-Led Research in Art, Design and Architecture. This report identified specific debates and issues that prevailed in this field. For example, it asked the question: “How is this research recognized, understood and acknowledged?”

At the time of its publication I was far from convinced that my own arts practice could become the primary framework in which a research inquiry would be located. In a more recent publication, edited by Bolt and Barrett’s entitled ‘Practice as Research’, Barrett proposes a highly adaptable taxonomy for the artist researcher that provides a framework for practice-led research. She makes continuous reference to standard research methodological concepts. In posing a research question for example, she refers to the importance of a background of stated research aims, a hypothesis, thesis statement and an explanation of the approach to be taken during the course of the research. It is emphasized how important it is that the course taken by the research should employ arts practice at a number of levels:

“The discussion should focus not only on the researcher’s own processes and revelations, but should also evaluate these within the context of relevant theoretical ideas and in relation to the stated aims and objectives as well as the ideas and practices of other practitioners in the field.

The discussion should always relate back to your thesis statement and hypothesis and will involve comparison of your work with the work of others as well as your own earlier work” (E. Barrett, p 199)

Prior to my examination of the East Lyn Flood, in my role as a postgraduate researcher whose practice-led thesis ‘failed’ to meet these requirements, I could not see how my practice could be relied upon to sit neatly within such a wide remit of concepts and broader research objectives. At the very least my attempts at interpreting the un-interpretable (my practice) was seen as a methodological challenge; does it have any place within the context of a research model? Can the practicing of art be a conduit for research and if not, does it matter? Likewise, just because aspects of an artist’s practice may produce ‘findings’, can such findings be suitably matched

according to a research proposal that can have relevance to the wider context of an academic body of knowledge?

According to Barrett, practice has to prove its significance by focusing on the question: “What has the studio enquiry revealed that could not have been revealed through other modes of research? ” (Barrett, p 199)

I consider this to render the whole question of the validity of practice as a research tool open to question. This question seems a very unsatisfactory way to approach any form of research. I would argue that a much more satisfactory way to tackle the indeterminate efficacy of knowledge that is gained through an arts practice and the application of that practice as a methodological tool would be to confront the limitations of an arts practice at the outset as with any qualitative research enquiry. Interpretative research methodologies have no claim to significance beyond the terms in which they appear and which the research is defined and it is at this level that one could scrutinize ones practice but if an arts practice has no frame of reference other than its own, this may prove extremely contrived and create an unnecessary distortion of a practice that it is – and nothing more. Conversely, for an arts practice that is contorted by its ‘research role’ to acquire definitional terms that are required within the research frame, does this practice remain within the domain of the individual artist? If it does not, how can a practice be defined as such? Rather than to tell us what we do not already know, there is a risk that all that we discover can only become known within the terms of the research and therefore at what cost to our practice?

Diana Pilcher, June 2012

References:

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