

# **AHRC/CHEAD-requested response to the 'state of play' in Practice-led research in Architecture, Art and Design (AAD)**

This brief report sets out to identify key debates and issues that surround the answering and asking of the following questions:

- Where is this research taking place?
- What activities does this research cover?
- Who is doing this research and why? –
- Who takes responsibility for this research? Who supports this research and why?
- How is this research recognised, understood and acknowledged? In what ways is this research valued and assessed, and to what ends?
- How is this research developed, sustained, fostered, challenged, or impeded? How is it added to?
- What counts as evidence of this research activity? How is it used, by whom and for what purpose?
- How is this research documented, stored, and made accessible and sustained?
- How do practitioners access this research base?

Research has entailed a distillation of published material from the principal commentators on practice-led research, and Art, Design and Architecture. Sources include conference papers, authored books and edited books. The report also includes recent correspondence directly to the author by many of these commentators, much of which are embodied in the tenor of the report rather than cited directly. Use is also made of current electronic resources, web blogs, repositories, and websites. Much of the work is a revisiting of the large body of research contained in the 'Rust Report' [Rust, C., Mottram, J., Till, J., 'Practice Led Research in Art, Design and Architecture,' Version 2, 2007]. Examples of individual projects are not cited here, as selection would bias the picture of PLR towards its more successful examples.

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## Executive Summary

Practice is a thriving and confident contributory tool for research in Art, Design and Architecture. However, commentators show concern at attempts to confine it to an easy set of descriptors, partly due to the many fields of practice it might encompass. There is also concern that any examination which tries to extricate the practice-led from its wider ADD research context is likely to distort the overall picture. Not only the variety of practice but also the multi-disciplinary opportunities offered to eclectic practitioners make an overarching definition difficult to frame. The point at which practice may be valid as 'research' is generally thought to be evidence of its being systematic, rigorous, critical and reflexive and communicable.<sup>1</sup>

Institutional systems support practice as a research tool in HE, and also encourage current practice to be channelled towards research aims. While a great deal of work enjoys peer acclaim, there is still concern regarding the research qualifications of staff in some disciplines and the validity of some practice behaviour as research. The increased undertaking and completion of doctoral programmes is gradually changing this, although some disciplines are stronger than others in the introduction of an academic research flavour to taught courses.

The activities in practice-led AAD research are numerous and interdisciplinary. Many projects are also collaborative. Much has been written on where practice can fit into a research enquiry, largely following the Frayling paradigm of through/into /for research and there is evidence of activity in all these. It is the HE institution that presses towards work being termed research, although professional and independent practice are not excluded from being viewed in the same light when sufficient rigour is shown. The thrust of research work through traditional, crafts practice is thought to come from individuals. However this research is facilitated by far-reaching contact networks and the support of HE institutions. Funding bodies play an important role, although private sector financing, exhibiting and the parallel freelance careers of many practitioners help with its support.

AAD research feeds many disciplines institutionally and extends into the wider community often through interdisciplinary projects or providing a communicative complement to other research areas. Again, some disciplines are more ready than others to integrate a research framework into its full range of teaching.

There is still some concern as to how research with a transient output or an output that is overtly context-dependent can be documented, stored and accessed for long-term use. Indeed, many commentators see the research knowledge as embedded in the practice activity itself and the consequent tacit knowledge as incommunicable by written word.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Newbury, D., 'Research Perspectives in Art & Design', 1996.

## Introduction

As a term and a concept 'Practice-led research' has stabilised and gained authority. Indeed, in the opinion of Chris Rust and others, the term has outstripped its usefulness and is due for a re-phrasing. It is however still problematic to talk of AAD Practice-led Research as a single, quantifiable entity.

The defining guidelines which the AHRB suggested for funding procedure in 2003 were the subject of criticism, notably from Michael Biggs.<sup>2</sup> Five years later, the most recent of the AHRC's documents has revised their clear distinction between research and practice and now recognises, 'that a precise definition of practice-led research is problematic and a focus of continuing debate.'<sup>3</sup>

Biggs own definition of 'practice-led research' is tight and informs an ideal of enquiry through practice.<sup>4</sup> Kristina Niedderer notes that, as a term, it is 'mostly rhetorical to demarcate research in art and design that is not entirely theoretically or philosophically based but includes empirical study.'<sup>5</sup> It is applied to work that is far-reaching and multidisciplinary, that uses practice in a number of ways, and which varies considerably in the balance of research aims and practice aims. Because of this, it is difficult to ascertain clear boundaries when asking questions. Practically, there are criticisms of the field of PLR, and especially so when the focus moves away from the more experienced practitioners/researchers. Rust is clear: 'I am not convinced that the majority of art doctors are making a contribution to the shared base of research or that they see their doctoral studies as anything more than personal development.'<sup>6</sup>

Any review must take into account not only the variety of work and its multi-disciplinary nature, but would also allow for context, identity and on-going evolution of the notion of PLR: each piece of research contributes to an ongoing process of challenge and definition.

On top of the problems of demarcation, it is also important to recognise the context of Practice-led research within AAD as a whole. Judith Mottram warns that any attempt to discuss practice-led research as a discrete field is likely to distort the general picture of research in these disciplines.'<sup>7</sup>

## Where is this research taking place?

The central issue here is how tightly the word research is defined and whether or not it is an institutional term. On one hand, as Kenneth Hay has suggested, the number of people researching through art practice could extend to a large number of people who research privately and produce rigorous and original work based on motivations and intentions that are outside the field of HE. Research for commerce is also be considered as producing valuable work outside the scope of HE assessment in some disciplines.

Within HE and 'Research' institutions, work is classified as 'research' for a number of purposes, not all of which are helpful to a disinterested examination of the 'state of play'. Rachel Cooper notes the number of applications to the AHRC that are essentially 'practice

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2 Biggs, M.A.R., 'The rôle of "the work" in research,' PARIP 2003, p.2 of 9.

3 'AHRC Research Funding Guide' Version 1.5, July 2008, p.29.

4 Biggs, M.A.R., 'Learning from Experience: approaches to the experiential component of practice-based research' p.2.

5 Niedderer, K. comment on blog PhD or not to PhD ?

<http://www.media.uoa.gr/yasmin/viewtopic.php?t=4031>

6 Rust comment on blog PhD or not to PhD ? at 13.03.2008 10:47

<http://www.media.uoa.gr/yasmin/viewtopic.php?t=4031>

7 Judith Mottram, email to author, 27 August 2008

dressed-up as research'<sup>8</sup> and this is reinforced by the speculations in the Rust Report that 'the proportion of academics with the experience to undertake independent research in terms of the AHRC's remit is probably much lower [than 47%] at around 20%.'<sup>9</sup>

Structured enquiry is being undertaken throughout ADD departments in British Universities. Katy Macleod notes that Research will be taking place in all the 44 institutions mentioned in Colin Painter's survey of PG provision published in 'POINT', 1998. The 2001 RAE Art and Design panel had submissions from 71 institutions, and, judging from institutional statements, there will potentially be more institutions submitting and a greater quality of submission for RAE2008. The 'Rust Report', gained the following broad information 'the average number of academic staff in a department was 32 of whom 24 were described as research active (we took this to be in RAE terms). 18 were engaged in practice-led research, 6 had a PhD, 3 were working towards a PhD and 9 were supervising PhDs.'<sup>10</sup>

Rust notes that 'there are no clear boundaries to practice-led research and we do not think it would be possible to arrive at an uncontested measure of the amount of practice-led research activity in the different disciplines.'<sup>11</sup> Some idea of the extent of PLR is given from data from the AHRB/RC. The Rust Report notes 666 projects in areas that include ADD funded between 1998 and 2006; 105 were positively identified as being practice-led, with the possibility of a greater number being the case.<sup>12</sup> To add to this information, from 2005 to 2008 the AHRC received 730 applications for funding, many of which show an engagement with the practice of ADD, however issues of cross-disciplinary activity and the definition of 'practice-led' makes a clear figure difficult to ascertain as to numbers of Practice-led projects.

It is now the principal strategy for AAD departments in HE to encourage staff to think of their work in terms of research and to aim to structure it as such. The burgeoning number of PhD completions has had its effects on HE employment in practice areas, and departments continue to show a rising number of staff members undertaking PhDs and new staff joining with a research training base. Evidence from institutional websites suggests that practice-led research is being taken up as an academic tool UK-wide. Some institutions, moreover, actively engage with debates on practice-led research, some having specialist centres with an online presence, for example, the Centre for Research Practice, Hertfordshire, BIAD, Birmingham City University and The Centre for Practice-led Research in the Arts, Northampton.

### **What activities does this research cover?**

Judith Mottram, who is doing quantitative analysis of the research patterns in AAD for future publication, notes that, 'There is no really no other useful dataset available on the activities that have taken place, as the types of dissemination strategies are so varied.'<sup>13</sup>

A prevalent attitude throughout the community is that the multifariousness of art and design makes it difficult to assess or to categorise. Many projects are interdisciplinary. The 'Rust report' lists a 'small sample' of 50 or so areas in which respondents to a questionnaire recognised interdisciplinary collaboration, stating that 'a majority agreed... that practice-led research is highly valued by collaborators.'<sup>14</sup>

Given that artists, designers and architects are in a constant search for new ways to practice, it is a fact of PLR that practice-elements will be freshly reconsidered with each project. It is also common that such elements are also be exposed to change by context and by the exigencies of audience, recordability and other factors.

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8 Cooper, R., 'Research Involving Practice: Writing a Proposal'

[http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/images/4\\_97670.ppt](http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/images/4_97670.ppt)

9 Rust, Mottram, Till, 2007, p.30.

10 Rust, Mottram, Till, 2007, p.49.

11 Rust, Mottram, Till, 2007, p.31.

12 See Rust, Mottram, Till, 2007, p.32.

13 Judith Mottram, email to author 27 August 2008

14 Rust, Mottram, Till, 2007, p.52.

The Frayling (Archer) model of Practice being through/into/for research, suggests the range of approaches in AAD PLR and the roles that practice can play. This range challenges the expectation that practice-led research has as its aim a completed work. There is a large body of work on the nature of knowledge and its communicability through artefact. Importantly, many commentators speak of PLR as a process rather than a physical outcome. Kristina Niedderer states, 'the research outcome currently only distils what can (and is intended to) be made explicit by the researcher while much of the tacit knowledge inherent in the research remains unacknowledged.'<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, the activity of 'practice-led research' is rigorous scholarly inquiry and this is reiterated by all principal commentators.

### **Who is doing this research and why?**

Practice-led research is a feature of the majority of HE establishments where staff are involved with artistic, design or architectural practice. Who exactly is included in the lists is a matter again for the definitions of research. Those who were not submitted to the RAE 2008 may not have shown sufficient recourse to a structure of enquiry, or sufficient rigour, originality or significance, but this does not discount them as being considered researchers in other contexts or for other projects.

Mottram comments: 'In terms of who is doing, why and who is supporting it, again there are no useful information sources apart from material held by universities, HEFCE or the AHRC. The impact of the work is largely un-recorded, with no indices in place because of limited consensus on important journals or other output means.'<sup>16</sup>

Motivations are difficult to assess. Mafe and Brown state that, 'From an important perspective practice-led research can be typified as a bottom-up approach to research where the areas of interest and approach are derived from individual interest, skill and context.'<sup>17</sup> John Zimmerman recognises four motivations for design research practice: the work can be motivated by a specific philosophical stance, by grounded problems in the world, by opening up a space for the application of design thinking and 'research in pursuit of practice', where 'the goal is a commercial product'.<sup>18</sup> Michael Biggs points to motivations in a notion of usefulness: 'we have an implicit notion of research as useful. Good research generates answers/solutions/responses that are useful to use. [Please note I have not claimed that it generates answers that are true!] They make connections with other ideas, and perhaps make other problems and questions disappear.'<sup>19</sup>

Katy Macleod offers the following on the motivations for the uptake of Fine Art PhDs, a useful view of where practitioners choose to become researchers:

- artists who've been employed teaching and wish to re-animate their practice
- artists who seek employment or advancement in HE
- students who wish to consolidate their CV, ie MA, then PhD
- artists who wish to develop a specific research project and/or publish texts
- rarely, people who wish to cross disciplines, ie from Arabic studies at BA level
- artists who wish to deepen their knowledge and understanding of their art practice<sup>20</sup>

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15 *ibid*

16 Judith Mottram, email to author 27 August 2008

17 Daniel Mafe and Andrew R. Brown 2006 'Emergent Matters: Reflections on Collaborative Practice-led Research' *Speculation and Innovation: applying practice led research in the Creative Industries*

18 John Zimmerman comment on blog PhD or not to PhD at 04.Mar.2008, at 00:08

<http://www.media.uoa.gr/yasmin/viewtopic.php?t=4031> This was accidentally truncated and John supplied the fourth stage to the author personally.

<sup>19</sup> Biggs, M. 'Learning from Experience: approaches to the experiential component of practice-based research' pp8,9 (Biggs' parenthetic comment)

<sup>20</sup> Mcleod, Katy, email to author 4 August 2008

## **Who takes responsibility for this research? Who supports this research and why?**

Chris Rust notes a strong support in the UK for this research, based on the economic shift in the 1980s from the hard industries to the creative sector. Hence the support from funding bodies: 'Not only is there direct funding for research by artists, but the Science and Engineering Research Council, a very big spender, is very pleased to see creative people working alongside scientists and technologists in its research programmes.'<sup>21</sup>

Despite the often highly personal motivations behind research projects in AAD there is a highly supportive infrastructure. This is partly the institutional nature of such research as we are observing it here. (Independent studio practice may well be seen as more wholly in the hands of the individual and the independent gallery structure.) There is a strong collaborative spine in AAD PLR and this provides its own support platform, one that is constantly evolving and offering new opportunities.

There is support from industry and the commercial world fuelling some research areas, notably the brief-led practices, and many projects highlighted on institutional websites are pleased to note collaborations with the private sector. Fierce competition for public funding has resulted in a wealth of interesting projects throughout AAD, some of which have a practice element and many of which allow opportunities for those involved in practice to profit from the research undertaken.

## **How is this research recognised, understood and acknowledged? In what ways is this research valued and assessed, and to what ends?**

Vital to practice-led research is the HEI and its willingness to foster and promote practice within a wider research culture. Research is primarily understood in the context of the relevant discipline, ie design research is for the promotion and understanding of new design knowledge. Jeremy Till states for example, 'architecture is a form of knowledge that can and should be developed through research.'

However, while Faculties are keen to advertise their RAE scores, it should be emphasised that the RAE and AHRC are not benchmarks for an institution's value of its researchers. Anglia Ruskin's comments on selection procedure are typical: 'A decision not to select a member of staff for submission in RAE 2008 should not be seen as a reflection of the value the University places on that person. It is not a requirement of the RAE 2008 Regulations that all staff undertaking research should be submitted.'<sup>22</sup>

PLR's value, for example, as an educational stimulus or as a collaborative focus is regularly suggested by HEI websites and literature. It also has a value to AAD in that it establishes an academic parity with colleagues in other disciplines, a value which in turn promotes opportunities for cooperation between research fields.

There are still problems associated with AAD PLR having to conform to ideas of research set up for other subjects, Fine Art being the most vocally resistant discipline. Kenneth Hay is concerned: 'how is this research recognised, understood and acknowledged? With difficulty, by the institutions, who generally prefer verbal theory over theoretical practice... The rather 'lumpen' demands of RAE and the like to specify "Research questions", "Aims/objectives" and "methodologies" risk being too deterministic to be of use to a truly experimental practice, which as I say, may be as yet unquantified.'

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21 Rust, Chris comment on blog 'PhD or not to PhD' at 03.03.2008 22:32  
<http://www.media.uoa.gr/yasmin/viewtopic.php?t=4031>

22 'Anglia Ruskin University Code of Practice Governing the Selection of Staff for Inclusion in Submissions to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise' Paragraph 11

## **How is this research developed, sustained, fostered, challenged, or impeded? How is it added to?**

One important principal thrust in AAD and research development lies in the number of doctoral completions. Research training and individual consciousness of being a researcher have had effects on the work of staff in HE. This fuels a wider structure of research development: 'A lot of people are undertaking Doctoral research and seeking research funding because both provide artists with resources and peer support that would be hard to find in any other way. This may mean that some of the work is still too self-serving to stand up in a wider research arena and I have observed some cases of cynical or inward-looking doctoral research. Some of the new doctors may not be able to articulate the wider consequences of their research.'<sup>23</sup>

At the opposite end of the scale a number of significant projects have received funding and peer acclaim, helping to raise the profile of research through practice. International networks of research foster enquiries and support the activity and output of PLR. Conference activity is international and significant, providing the oral culture through which much of the work is disseminated.

Industry and the private sector supplies a further significant impetus for research, especially in architecture and design, where professional practice is encouraged to experiment and be innovative. Some HE institutions have a structure for fruitful cooperation while many individuals balance private practice and HE roles. Conversely, innovation occurring in professional practice may not be shared with a wider public.

## **What counts as evidence of this research activity? How is it used, by whom and for what purpose?**

'It may be appropriate to consider the objects that constitute the conclusions of the project as equivalent to or in lieu of a thesis rather than as a thesis in themselves. Alternatively, it might be possible to argue that an object, particularly in Fine Art does have such an active capacity, but such a case has yet to be argued and won.' Timothy Jones

It is now accepted that outputs for Practice-led Research may take any number of forms, may be ephemeral and may depend heavily on unpredictable audience interaction (Outputs types for the RAE 2008 were lettered 'A' to 'T', 'T' providing for 'other form assessable output' beyond patent, performance, artefact exhibition etc.) The 5th Research into Practice conference in October 2008 will explore the problem of interpretation in research theory and will consider the nature of what counts as evidence and how the artefact is to be assessed.

Debates over research output type, its storage and access, are many and include those on 'the written component' for research degrees and the need for explanatory written work to complement other outputs. It is continually argued that much tacit knowledge is more easily transferred non-linguistically, yet archiving without the written world is impracticable. Objects can for example be evidence, but due to context of place, time and intentionality, even durable forms are not a permanent source of evidence. Nor, in some opinions, are they reliable communicators of the nature of an enquiry or its position within a discipline.

Judith Mottram notes that 'The impact of the work is largely un-recorded, with no indices in place because of limited consensus on important journals or other output means... There is little consensus on what counts as evidence of research. Much of the activity that has taken place is recorded in the journal and conference publications in the field, but there is no useful tool for incorporation of other modes of output.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rust, email to author

<sup>24</sup> Judith Mottram, email to author 27 August 2008

'How research is used' is not necessarily a question for the researchers themselves, but it is noted by several commentators that there is no clear system of scholarly reference for much of the output in PLR.

### **How is this research documented, stored, and made accessible and sustained?**

This question may be better answered following the work of the AHRC project *Beyond Text*, whose mission statement is ambitious: 'in bringing together those who create works and those who preserve, display and study them, the programme will break down traditional boundaries between practice-led or practice-based research and other forms of investigation.'<sup>25</sup>

The long-standing debate on whether the written word is a necessary part of practice-led research fails to reach any conclusions on this. Auditing bodies require documentation to explain and position the work, and debates around practice-led research degrees suggest that paradigms of traditional research are unlikely to be sidestepped. Neidderer notes: '...it seems perfectly adequate to include practice in research as form of evidence in support of theoretical, linguistically communicated outcomes. However, current research practice shows that many practitioner-researchers feel dissatisfied with this prioritisation.' p8

Importantly some researchers talk about research as a process, and it is not always easy to give a dependable communicative product. The nature of knowledge transfer is one requiring engagement and, while this is the gap that practice-led research seeks to exploit, it also encounters problems when it comes to getting a consensus on what is communicated, in a way which text largely aims not to do.

Repository databases are largely text dependent and have not yet developed a system for the successful dissemination of Practice-led research outputs. There are only a small number of artefacts in repository systems, and textual descriptions and methodologies are the principal means of recording object or process. Difficulties that are highlighted by commentators include the ephemeral nature of many artefacts and the impossibility of communicating context.

Biggs considers the role of the work, using paradigms of the museum artefact, and concludes, 'We have seen that the artefact cannot be relied upon to communicate in isolation... contextualising is most likely to be expressed in words although I am open to persuasion that it can be done in another medium. Words are simply an efficient means of establishing a context. What is essential is not a particular *medium* but a particular *content*.'<sup>26</sup>

Success at transmitting content depends not only on storage but also on accessibility of artefacts as well as future technology developments. Doctoral projects are generally housed in boxes in libraries and are offered a framework of permanent record. Other research projects do not always have this guarantee. Internet sites are popular ways for individuals, project groups and institutions to display and disseminate representations of their work. The level of success this achieves depends on the type of project and output, but some establish new contexts and reach new audiences through this means. Text is searchable, other forms are not. How to index and provide access to the research remains an important question.

### **How do practitioners access this research base?**

Despite a number of articles which frame the importance of the artefact in the communication of tacit knowledge, there is still little to suggest a scholarly framework of reference is in place outside conventional publications. Commentators note successful oral dissemination networks and the accessibility of colleagues worldwide and in real time. In

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25 <http://www.beyondtext.ac.uk/about.shtml>

26 Biggs, Michael A R, 'The Role of the Work in Research', *PARIP*, 2003,p.8 of 9

Fine Art, where exhibitions are the dominant mode of dissemination, as the 'Rust Report' notes, 'it is uncertain to what extent these [exhibited outputs] are then entering into the cycle of reference and citation that forms the bedrock of scholarly activity.' Nor is there a clear means to make the work public, Rust adds: (AAD) 'Academics lack a coherent publishing infrastructure but interdisciplnarity sets a limit on the degree to which such an infrastructure might develop.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rust, Mottram, Till, 2007, p.27.

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