Practice-based research: *Tracking creative creatures* in a research context

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Abstract

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This article explores the concept of practice-based research as a viable research avenue for academics in creative disciplines with a view to contextualise the importance of research for all academics, including those in creative disciplines; investigate a framework for defining practice-based research; extrapolate existing models and methods of practice-based research from the literature; develop a plausible working strategy for practice-based research; and finally determine the extent to which the "Tracking creative creatures" project complies with the requirements of practice-based research. While practice-based research is fairly well represented in the literature, the peculiar characteristics of creative work require a reconceptualisation of how research imperatives are satisfied in practice-based research. Practical outputs as embodied research, the importance of the creative process and its reflective documentation and collaborative strategies in creative projects emerged as salient issues.

The "Creative creatures" project was found to have complied with most of the requirements of practice-based research and certain proposed amendments to the approach followed with this project will assist future projects in attaining viable research status, but these need to be framed within an institutional and funding environment that fosters creative work as research.

Opsomming

Praktykgebaseerde navorsing: *Op die spoor van kreatiewe kreature* in 'n navorsingskonteks

Hierdie artikel stel homself ten doel om ondersoek in te stel na die konsep van praktykgebaseerde navorsing as werkbare na-vorsingsroete vir akademici in kreatiewe dissiplines. Die doel is dus om die belangrikheid van navorsing te kontekstualiseer vir alle akademici, ook diegene in die kreatiewe dissiplines; 'n raamwerk te ondersoek waarbinne 'n definisie van praktykge-baseerde navorsing kan tuishoort; bestaande modelle en meto-des van praktykgebaseerde navorsing uit die literatuur te ek-straheer; 'n werkbare strategie vir praktykgebaseerde navorsing op die tafel te lê; en om vas te stel in watter mate die "Krea-tiewe kreature"-projek voldoen aan die vereistes van praktyk-gebaseerde navorsing. Die literatuur oor praktykgebaseerde navorsing is redelik uitgebreid, maar die eiesoortige kenmerke van kreatiewe werk vra dat navorsingsvereistes geherkonsep-tualiseer moet word in die lig van praktykgebaseerde navorsing. Praktiese uitsette as beliggaamde navorsing, die belang van die kreatiewe proses tesame met dokumentasie van refleksie daar-oor en samewerkingstrategieë in kreatiewe projekte het geblyk om van sentrale belang te wees in hierdie verband.

Daar is bevind that die "Kreatiewe kreature"-projek aan die meeste vereistes van praktykgebaseerde navorsing voldoen het, en 'n aantal wysigings ten opsigte van die benadering wat gevolg is met hierdie projek sal bydra tot die navorsingstatus van toekomstige projekte. Sodanige projekte moet egter binne institusionele- en befondsingsomgewings wat kreatiewe werk as navorsing ondersteun, plaasvind.

1. Introduction

The *Tracking creative creatures* project which culminated in a large-scale exhibition at the 2007 Aardklop National Arts Festival (held during September) marked a significant moment in the way that creative work was regarded by many of those who participated in the project (and who reflected on the project during its progress) as well as those who afterwards reflected on it (when producing articles such as this one). The project expanded beyond expectation and drew enthusiastic participants from diverse creative fields such as fine art, music, creative writing and graphic design – from profes-sional creatives to nursery school pupils. Clearly this project was a collaborative effort, and its spin-offs can be felt in far-reaching benefits such as the dedication of this special edition of *Literator* to it. What is published in this journal is research, and specifically

research articles: properly based on a clear problem statement, underpinned by well-considered theoretical reflection that is itself based on a survey of scholarly literature, presented in written format according to set conventions of academic practice. It may be asked, nonetheless, what the actual creatives benefit from the project, apart from investing a substantial amount of time, effort and often financial resources in their participatory efforts. The academic benefits of being a practising artist (or any creative, for that matter), are scant: one does not get promoted on the basis of a really good artwork.

This highlights a concern of the current article: how can an academic who is a creative practitioner be accomodated in the sphere of research? Clearly creative work requires some form of research; if the work is of outstanding standard, chances are that a great deal of research went into its production.

Artists' research processes may be somewhat idiosincratic and are often based on wildly intuitive links; the pursuit of ideas that will further the creative process do not necessarily allow for rigorous literature surveys on a scholarly basis, and artists' ideas may seem too playful or too whimsical to withstand scholarly scrutiny. It can be argued that artists find that they express themselves better in the field of nuanced symbolism than in hard and fast scholarly terms (it is worthwhile to consider whether Mozart or Vermeer can be translated into academic phrases; nonetheless, it seems apt to consider his work as very accomplished). However, the artist arrives at his/her creative product, scholarly researchers often find more than enough substance in it to use it as the object of study. Many artists are frustrated by the status quo – especially those employed at universities or other teaching institutions. Most good artists, with the exception of a select few, teach. While colleagues on the theoretical side of the divide research the creative products of artists, and get promoted, receive funding and the like, there does not exist sufficient room for artists to do what they do – produce creative work – and receive institutional acknowledgement, not to mention funding and the other benefits of a good research résumé (cf. in this regard Bowen, 2005; Unwin, 1998; Vermeulen, 2007). This is important in light of the fact that the North-West University explicitly positioned itself as a "balanced teaching and research university" in its vision and mission; research is imperative and teaching only constitutes part of what is expected of academic staff.

Practice-based research is a fairly young concept and seeks to describe ways in which creative outputs can be recognised as research. Once this concept gains sufficient acceptance – as it is

beginning to do nationally and internationally – creative practitioners in a range of creative disciplines may find an avenue for their research efforts to be acknowledged. This is not likely, however, to happen in an unqualified manner: conceptual clarity regarding the term *practice-based research* is necessary, as well as implications regarding accreditation, institutional acknowledgement, research equivalents, funding possibilities, the relationship between creative and written (most probably "theoretical") work, qualifications and others is obviously necessary if the effort to create a research space for the creative disciplines is to be successful. Not all of these can be addressed in the scope of an article – however, a number of issues will be extended here which will hopefully participate in constructive debate on the acceptance and requirements of practice-based research. It can be mentioned at this point that current debates on practice-based research are still negotiating research equivalents (how practical work can be qualified as accredited research outputs; cf. Farber, 2008) as well as higher qualifications, particularly the notion of a practice-based Ph.D. Current practice in South Africa seems to be exploring ways in which peer-reviewed creative work can be accepted for such a degree and international offerings (cf. UK, 1997) are also investigating this. Of concern here is whether practical work alone can stand as research or for higher qualification purposes, or whether a theoretical component should be included, and if so, what the nature of this component should be (for example a formal thesis, or reflective documentation, or catalogue components). These issues, while pertinent concerns, fall outside the scope of the current article.

The focus of this article, then, is to report on perspectives on practice-based research as a viable research option for the creative disciplines. We would like to contribute to the process of claiming part of the territory of research for the creative and performing arts and design and to provide this territory with a clearly defined identity, that of practice-based research (cf. Gray & Malins, 2004:3). This article therefore has the character of a positioning statement.

Specifically, what we wish to address in this article is the following: In the light of the framework within which practice-based research is conceptualised, to what extent can the "Creative creatures" project be said to comply with existing notions of practice-based research? A number of pertinent issues emerge from this question.

• What are the definitions of practice-based research, and how do these relate to imperatives of academic research?

- Emanating from this question, how do existing models of practice-based research describe the modus operandi and requirements of this type of research?

- What would a good model for practice-based research look like?

- Once a framework for practice-based research has been set up, to what extent can the "Creative creatures" project be seen as an example of practice-based research – also with reference to successes and possible shortcomings?

2. Definitions of practice-based research

Defining the notion of practice-based research is an interesting challenge: multiple texts were consulted but little clear agreement emerged – a situation compounded by the fact that the creative fields are by their very nature not based upon certainties, correct answers or objectivity. The very ambiguity of visual language (and by extension, all creative fields) is its strength and fascination (cf. Gray & Malins, 2004:40). Nonetheless, a number of common denominators can be extrapolated from literature that propose a new approach to research.

We tend to regard research as the production of printed material, and the pursuit of developing an alternative space for creative practitioners to do research implies that this idea should be revisited in the light of practice-based output possibilities. *Practice-based* refers to creative work in a number of disciplines (fine arts, design, architecture, performing arts, literature) characterised by their reliance on artistic activity and creative output. *Practice-based research*, by implication, suggests that this artistic activity and creative output be regarded as a type of research.

Early debates (such as the Matrix Conferences of 1988 and 1993) regarding the practice of especially fine arts and research centred around *whether* fine arts (and, by implication, other creative disciplines) should engage with research, while in more recent times the debates have shifted from the ontological question to a methodological one – *how* art should engage with research (Douglas *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, the meanings of *research* and *research outputs* have come under scrutiny and have to be reconceptualised within the framework of creative practice. Also, any formulation and acceptance of practice-based research function within the reality of institutional practice (Brown, 2000).

From the literature, it appears as if a measure of consensus has been reached that there *is* a relationship between research and creative practice, but authors expound this relationship in different ways. Texts that we found useful for our investigation into art practice and research include especially Gray and Malins' pivotal publication (2004), while other publications also proved invaluable: the review report of the AHRC Research Review (Rust *et al.*, 2007), with contributors from the Arts & Humanities Research Council of England, Sheffield Hallam University, Nottingham Trent University and the University of Sheffield; Haseman (2006), the article by Douglas *et al.* (2000); Scrivener's article (2004); and Caroll's article (2006). Various other souces, as indicated in the bibliography, are also relevant in this regard.

Douglas *et al.* (2000) refer to a decision by the Arts and Design panel of the United Kingdom to acknowledge practice-based output as research output "when it can be shown to be firmly located within a research context, to be subject to interrogation and critical review and to impact on or influence the work of peers, policy and practice". This formulation should, however, be clarified further as there are issues peculiar to practice-based research which need fairly specific definition.

2.1 Situating practice-based research in the arena of research

Research as an academic pursuit needs to comply with a number of criteria, such as differentiation from previous work to constitute "new knowledge"; it must be rendered accessible via publication – and open to scrutiny by peers; it must be transparently structured in terms of process and outcomes – these are often said to be exegetical in nature (the exegetory nature of such outputs is debated); and it must be transferable beyond the specific project – the research must thus be adequately theorised, described and contextualised (cf. Mafe & Brown, 2006). Also, research should follow sound methodology emanating from a strong literature review "to ground the research in theory" (Bowen, 2005:635).

Conventionally, research has been divided into the qualitative/ quantitative continuum indicative of the different approaches, types of questions asked and types of results yielded by the research process. Historically, quantitative research has been regarded as the more robust methodology given its pursuit of hard, objective, factual results. Qualitative research with its more nuanced, typically more inductive approach and its general concern with texts is posi-

tioned as "softer", more tentative – even somewhat subservient (Green, 1991). These two paradigms – qualitative and quantitative – constitute vastly different views of the world, and concomitantly, fundamentally different understandings about how knowledge is created (Haseman, 2006).

Practice-based disciplines are confronted with a problem in this regard: both qualitative and quantitative research outputs are inherently text-based, departing from a clearly defined problem and are published in written format. Haseman (2006) argues in his *Manifesto for performative research* that the quantitative and qualitative paradigms, having come to frame what is legitimate and acceptable, are not sufficiently sympathetic to the needs of *practice-led* (Haseman's term) researchers. To this end, he argues that a third paradigm (which he calls *performative research*) is emerging as a platform for positioning practice as an object of study, not a method of research. This shift towards the new paradigm, Haseman argues, was necessitated because of the methodological restrictions of qualitative research (the arena in which the arts typically functioned) and its emphasis on written outcomes. Haseman (2006) constructs a case for practice-based research (or what he calls *performative research*) based on intrinsic differences from existing paradigms: the research is *led* through and based on practice as opposed to the qualitative and quantitative paradigms which report on literature study or practice. This author captures the key differences between these paradigms in a table, which is represented below:

Table 1: Three research paradigms (adapted from Hasemann, 2006)

Quantitative research	Qualitative research	Performative research (or practice-based research)
Something is expressed as quantities by means of graphs or formulas, for example.	Based on social enquiry and expressed in non-numerical data, i.e. words.	Findings are expressed not in numeric data or words, but in symbolic form (such as visual or other creative outputs).
Scientific method.	Multi-method.	Multi-method led by practice.

Haseman (2006) represents an end of the scale on the practice-based research continuum that attempts to set up a paradigm for embodied research, without formal written accompaniments. Argu-

ing that "symbolic data works performatively", Haseman feels that the expression (of creative output) *becomes* the research.

This is perhaps where some of the contention arises for those making the case for practice-based research *as* creative output. Nonetheless, when tested against requirements of research in general, there are arguments that favour aspects of such a case. Conventionally, research is undertaken as original investigation in order to gain knowledge and understanding – and often to break new ground. According to Scrivener (2002) practice-based research (or what he calls visual arts research) should pursue original creation (breaking new ground) in order to generate novel apprehension (this can be aligned to the pursuits of gaining knowledge and understanding). Research should advance the discipline involved – and practice informed by embedded research does this. In art, it is practical artists who break new ground (Scrivener, 2004). There are, then, arguments that favour the *practice* in *practice-based* research.

2.2 Creative practice and the written research element

There are various arguments in terms of the primacy of practice versus the role of written research, which can be summarised as a continuum with practice-as-research on the one side, and formal research (scholarly articles, for example) at the far end from this. In-between these extremes a variety of possibilities are proposed and debated. Many possible solutions to this complex problem include using an artistic audit ("designed to transform the 'literature review' into a more layered and rich analysis of the context of practice within which the performative researcher operates"; cf. Haseman, 2006:8) as well as reflective journals as a means to critical reflection (Gray & Malins, 2004), and the use of autobiography and biography to map the meanings of artistic practice and its cultural as well as experiential embeddedness (Stewart, 2001). Clearly the literature suggests looking for ways to establish a workable model for the practical versus written outputs, but grapples with exactly how this should be formulated, and what especially the written aspect(s) should entail. There is consensus, it seems from the literature, that institutional requirements of some form of written outputs cannot be ignored and that such outputs will add rigour and transferability to the research results[1] (this is extrapolated further in the section

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1   While we acknowledge that there is a thrust towards recognising creative output *sans* written components as research, we rather propose that evidence of re-

below on models and methods of practice-based research). For the most part, each exercise in practice-based research contributes towards refining a workable approach.

3. Models and methods of practice-based research

The creative disciplines, in their pursuit to advance the knowledge base of their disciplines, undertake research where the method is often suggested by the practice; it is therefore not always possible to set out a precise methodology beforehand. Rather, "methodology, as well as being a way of explicitly structuring thinking and action through questioning and evaluation, can be creative and transformative" (Jayaratna quoted in Gray & Malins, 2004:18). It follows that in the creative disciplines, methodologies are invented where no established method exists, and this constitutes part of the unfolding of the research. Methodologies tend to be multiple (as indicated by Haseman's table) and involve a number of strategies, as set below.

Practice-based research models or strategies differ from conventional research approaches. They do not always depart from a problem statement with specific objectives, for example, but the non-specificity of problem formulation at the outset needs to be addressed by taking the following into consideration: a practice-based research project may yield results that were not anticipated at the outset, which makes for a rich range of possibilities. On the other hand, whatever approach one follows should be sufficiently comprehensive and have implicit structural elements and theoretical depth to at least serve as a framework in order to guarantee sufficient rigour. It should be noted that, although the issue of research equivalence is not addressed in the current article, one goal of refining a model for practice-based research is to propose that a creative product "can provide new insights, leading to the principle that an exhibition or other public result of practice may have the same role as a journal article" (AHRC Research Review, 2007:12).

Models for practice-based research entail methods, approaches and structures that are shaped to accommodate the peculiar requirements and characteristics of the creative disciplines. At the same time they are seeking to adhere to research imperatives: a clear explanation of the what, why, and how questions; viable review

search towards creative work should be present as a written component – but the nature of the written element can be negotiated (whether in the form of reflective journals, peer reviews, catalogue essays or scholarly texts).

procedures; making the research results accessible and, where possible, transferable. Refereeing is also important and peer review of creative work is standard practice at many institutions that offer degrees such as Master's level art programmes.

With regard to the role of the researcher, Gray and Malins (2004:20) assert that in practice-based research, the researcher *is* the practitioner, which means that his/her role is multifaceted and may include that the researcher is the generator of research material (works of art, for example) – he/she thus participates in the creative process. Furthermore, he/she is a self-observer through reflection on action and in action, and through discussion with others. In the third place, the practitioner-researcher is also an observer of others for placing the research in context, and with a view to gaining other perspectives. Lastly, he/she may be a co-researcher, facilitator and research manager, especially for a collaborative project (Gray & Malins, 2004:21; Gothe, 2002). This last point serves as an entry into the discussion of existing models, among which collaborative research features the most strongly. Collaboration refers to co-operating with colleagues as well as with full-time practitioners in the field towards realising a practice-based research project (cf. AHRC Research Review, 2007:45).

3.1 Collaborative approaches

Significantly, Gray and Malins (2004:104) argue that it is almost impossible to carry out practice-based research without working with others, to some degree, on aspects of the research. Mafe and Brown (2006:15) propose the collaborative process as a workable model because it "can assist in the stimulation of new insights and in the verification of their significance". They also indicate that they believe that practice-based research "relies on the fact that creative practice is a knowledge-generating activity" (Mafe & Brown, 2006: 15) – and this generated knowledge that enriches the field and/or the individual is the core contribution of collaborative research projects. Scrivener (2004:2) calls this *creative-production*.

Mafe and Brown (2006:16) assert that "collaborative research is, in many ways, a research approach whose time has come". They believe that practice-based research should be initiated in practice, with emphasis on knowledge derived from practice (as opposed to the artefact that results from the practice). This knowledge is based on critical reflection but the authors argue that this should *not* be exegetical in nature; rather, it should be directed towards conscious-

ness-raising so that the "alternative logic" of the process is made accessible.

They describe the collaborative research process as one where artist-researchers work together and the resulting project has joint practical and theoretical outcomes that can feed back into individual artistic and academic work. Collaborative research is also sometimes referred to as co-operative research and may entail an element of mentoring between researchers, or cooperation between institutions. Outcomes of such endeavours include clear creative outputs as well as, typically, written elements to document the project and contextualise its outcomes (Mafe & Brown, 2006).

3.2 Mixing methods

The collaborative approach proposed by these authors call participants to acknowledge that methods will, by virtue of the nature of the creative process, be pluralist, eclectic and negotiated. As a starting point, the main participants in a collaboration should understand each individual member's background and practice, influences and knowledge base. At the early stage of a project the research process may be triggered by an unexpected and often seemingly insignificant impetus, such as small visualisation drawings, which may become the entry point for the collaboration. At this point, tentative discussions make up the first steps, and these exchanges are underpinned by mutual respect for the others' knowledge and work, which leads to sufficient trust to take the process further. From here, shared interests develop into the negotiation of roles and tasks, and frequent discussions may be necessary to develop and explore emergent ideas, from the speculative stage to processes of execution. New possibilities are constantly incorporated. It is of paramount importance that the initial "research questions", which were based on "hunches" or possibilities, are modified under the pressure of shifting developments in the project. Unpredictable and surprising turns are welcomed as these lie at the heart of creative discovery. Theoretical aspects, in the model of Mafe and Brown (2006) develop *from* the first stages of the process, which are based on creative work. From here, further developments of a practical nature follow. Mafe and Brown (2006) assert that the knowledge gained from such a project is embedded in creative practice as embodied knowledge, and this embodied knowledge furthers insight and understanding in those who view the work. They regard the surrendering of autonomy and sharing of responsibility between researchers as a natural spin-off of this process – something that may be tricky for many crea-

tives, but which nonetheless may be a very good learning opportunity.

3.3 Specific methods and models: strategies and characteristics

In their article Douglas *et al.* (2000) set out a recommended method for conducting practice-based research. Four essential aspects are introduced, as these "create a dynamic that characterises the research approach" (Douglas *et al.*, 2000): funding, research context, motives for doing research and whom the research addresses. The authors also distinguish between three research routes in the arts, namely formal research, personal research and research as critical practice.

Formal research, in the authors' opinion, requires a clear statement of aims and objectives, methodological articulation and projected outcomes that will be in writing – it is typically qualitative or quantitative. *Personal research* differs from this. It entails an unpublished investigation aimed at developing a specific project or artwork and the research process is likely to be evidenced in the final product. Professional documentation conventions govern the development of the project (such as Christo's celebrated documentation of his *Surrounded islands* project at Biscayne Bay, Miami in 1980-1983; cf. Kleiner, 2006:791). In personal research, research and practice are fused and the knowledge that is gained, is embodied in the artwork. A written component is not inherently part of personal research, therefore, such a project is perhaps more likely to be regarded as a professional product rather than an academic one. In the third instance, *research as critical practice* is perhaps the most likely route to yield the benefits that creatives as academics can reap from the research process. This type of research is aimed at the development of critical practice itself, and is thus firmly located in the way that successful contemporary art practice functions. Research as critical practice is aimed at working towards a project, but is critical and experimental in nature in order to provoke the professional towards adopting fresh approaches to the creative process. Research outputs include finished work as product, but also extend to artists' talks, discussion platforms and other exchanges. This approach is excellently suited for collaboration, as well as for individual artistic development within such collaboration, and also presents a traceable and accountable process (as such, it mirrors both personal and formal research). The difference between research as critical practice and formal research is the former's location within the

conventions and publication of practice (such as artists' documentation books or catalogues) instead of the purely scholarly publication route that characterises formal research.**2**

Douglas *et al.* (2000) focus their discussion on collaborative case studies, indicating that these help to create new roles for artists, new ways of working and possible new contexts for practice. Their method comprises that the collaborative project itself is *described* (together with aims of the project) and the project is used to generate primary research data through the actual process of artists' collaboration. The nature of collaboration is described through analysis of the research projects, and this is also informed by literature relevant to the project and field of study. Comparative *analyses* of project data give rise to further extrapolation of the collaborative process in terms of its core characteristics, which in turn give rise to *findings* that are supported by referring to individual projects within the collaboration, relevant literature and comparative readings of artists and other collaborations. These authors stress that the creative practice is fully part of the research process, but indicate that some documentation, analysis and literature contextualisation are also necessary in order to complete the project as "research as critical practice". Clearly here is a mix of research methods, involving a range of approaches from action research, research in action, reflective practice (on, during, and after the production of creative work) experimental methodologies and the more traditional literature study.

Scrivener (2004) suggests a similarly pluralistic research model for practice-based research projects. Departing from the notion that "the idea of a coherent body of knowledge that prescribes practice may be problematic in the context of the visual arts" (Scrivener, 2004:7), he insists that the intuitive approach significantly provides motivation for work that proceeds from things seen and experienced, rather than preconceived ideas. Unlike most research projects, where the research is prompted by thinking about theory and knowledge relevant to the subject (which gives rise to a structured problem state-

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2   In this regard, Gray and Malins (2004:22) use the term *reflective practice* which corresponds largely with the notion of "research as critical practice" and indicates that this approach aims to unite research and practice, thought and action in a manner that involves *practice*, and acknowledges the special knowledge of the practitioner. This is significant as the "special knowledge" of the practitioner implies insider knowledge that is likely to lend one's research credibility and trustworthiness; the researcher is not external to the project.

ment and the like), theory and practice in practice-based research form a coherent whole framing the creation and development of the work. This coherent whole is made possible when researchers in the creative disciplines do not disregard the importance of "theory", but rather develop strategies to organise knowledge by mapping out the domains of knowledge relevant to the development of their practice. To this end, Scrivener proposes a number of structured steps in the research process, namely pre-project reflection on practice (identifying issues, concerns and interests); identifying relevant resource domains and formulating acquisition strategies – these are refined in the third step; then follow cycles of work production and reflection with a view to possible revision of issues/concerns/interests; hereafter a postproject reflection of the project as a whole follows in terms of action and practice; and finally, critical reflection on one's reflecting. The process entails much emphasis on real, tangible issues such as acquiring the necessary physical resources for producing creative work. It allows for articulating possible changes that are initiated from intuitive responses, and it emphasises the knowledge contained in the process as well as the final product or artefact that can be extrapolated by means of critical interrogation of the contexts from which the process and product grew. The artefact is important but not overridingly so. Scrivener (2004) emphasises that the theory and artefact exist in a relationship of interdependence.

It therefore appears that research in the creative disciplines is bound to be pluralistic in its methodologies, and some form of action research is usually required along with other approaches. The significance of this is lodged in the fact that while most research is characterised by a detached observer using an external perspective, practice-based research by its fusion of research and practice entails that the creative practitioners create the research while practising: practice as research, with "insider knowledge" that guide the research and gives it credibility (Gray & Malins, 2004:22-23).

3.4 Reflection in the practice-based research process

Reflective practice in some form may answer to the requirement for a written element: artists' journals, concept mapping or other forms of documentation allow the practitioner to reflect *on*, *in*, and *for* as regards the process. Reflection *on* entails taking stock, evaluating and off-loading; reflection *in* refers to the present, where insights and questions are noted; and reflection *for* refers to future needs and hopes that emanate from the process (Gray & Malins, 2004:58).

This takes place with the reflective artist's journal as both evidence of research as well as raw data for further reflection. The main motivation for keeping a reflective journal is therefore that it is a repository of information in a range of media and literally binds all the information that guided the process in one place. Such a journal may contain different types of information – a development log, diary, documentation of work in progress, contextual references, notes on the pace and progress of the work, important aspects of evaluation and analysis, and whatever else is relevant to the process at the time (Gray & Malins, 2004:59; AHRC Research Review, 2007).

The reflective journal is thus one method that the creative practitioner as researcher should probably use. Whatever other methodologies and contextualisation need to be used during the research process (which is bound to entail a plurality of methods) will emerge during the course of the process – "practice-based methodologies are *emergent*, that is the research strategy grows and unfolds from the practitioner's interaction with the research question and context" (Gray & Malins, 2004:72).

It may seem as if the above discussion hinges somewhat on the chaotic: the research question cannot be formulated as a clear problem (and hence objectives remain fairly vague at the onset of the process). Too much rigorous theoretical contextualisation may prove fruitless before the process actually gets under way – since much of the required context emerges *out of* the process. For the same reason, methodologies remain relatively uncertain until well into the process. Problems dealt with are also unpredictable and may even resist description (cf. also AHRC Research Review, 2007:13). This is the type of environment in which many creatives flourish: a measure of uncertainty, ample space for intuitive and lateral problem-solving, and allowance for the unexpected suit many creatives who often prefer more unstructured working methods.

To this end, Gray and Malins (2004:4) insist that if one acknowledges that practice-based research will be pluralist in practice and research approach, it follows that this type of research can explore new risks and embrace promising developments. Nonetheless, like any other type of research, practice-based work should contain the following relevant aspects: it should be intentional (the intention to do a research project must be there); it should be disciplined (rigorous); it should acknowledge practice as an often *messy* initiator of the research questions which also provides the context for the research; it should see practice as a way of making research find-

ings visible or tangible in an imaginative way; it should contribute to new insights and the whole process should be made public for scrutiny or possible future use by others.

En resumé

The methods and models highlighted above all stress process as the backbone of practice-based research. Emphasis cannot be on the product alone: the process is central in the generation of appropriate methodologies, the augmentation of the research questions, and allowance for new insights to shape the direction of the process.

Using the approaches as set out above as guidance, our own experiences and recommendations added towards proposing a practice-based research model specifically for the academic in a tertiary education environment. This model addresses both practical and written outputs, the latter in different levels of scholarly systematisation.

4. A possible approach towards a model for a creative project as practice-based research

This integrated research model can be tailored to each individual project, but should guide the practice-based researcher in articulating, executing and presenting research based in practice. Our model entails a collaborative approach and involves a plurality of methods. It consists of three broad steps, namely pre-production, production and post-production.

4.1 Pre-production

During this stage the project is conceptualised and it is acknowledged that the first stirrings of a project may be intuitive, playful, seemingly insignificant and even random. The seed of the project grows out of discussions between practitioners (from one or more disciplines) and may also involve theorists (such as art historians). Those involved at this stage are likely to become the main participants in the project, and eventually the likely project leaders. As soon as a more workable idea crystallises, it is formulated into a possible project with a working title. From here, the idea is situated in the relevant contexts so that it is linked to other pertinent, current issues and possible theoretical frameworks. A literature survey will embolden the application for funding, which is likely to be necessary. Here the art historian or similar theoretically inclined participant will play a significant role.

The second stage of the pre-production exercise entails a plan of action, which is clear but tentative enough to allow for changes later on. Here the participants decide whom to involve, and possible outcomes or results are noted. Anticipated results are in the form of artistic outputs (visual, auditory, in the form of creative writing or other outputs), theoretical or written research publications emanating from the project, possible involvement of postgraduate students and also, very importantly, reflective artistic documentation (such as reflective journals, interviews and even creative blogs that can be run for the duration of the project). It should be clear that the results of the project will not focus only on the final product (which may take the form of an exhibition or performance), but also on the theoretical contexts in which the work is situated and the process that informs the creative practitioners during their involvement in the project. With regard to quality aspects that will likely affect the stature of the project, reviewers must be selected and appointed and decisions regarding whether work by participants will be selected (or whether all contributions will be shown) for the final exhibition or performance can tentatively be made.

The third stage of pre-production involves confirming participation from those practitioners and theoretical participants who have been identified. Participants, especially creative practitioners, will probably need to receive training (most likely in the form of workshops) on the nature of the project; its contexts and tangential current themes, the envisioned outcomes and the nature of practice-based research, so that they will understand their roles in the project. The workshops should thus cover both the theoretical underpinnings of the project as well as methods that practitioners can use to validate their work more profoundly, with emphasis on reflective journals, documentation of the creative and thinking processes, and other possible avenues of setting down their creative development. It is, nonetheless, important that participants are encouraged to apply their intuitive and possibly unplanned insights. Unexpected turns will most likely enrich the entire project. These should be integrated into the reflective journal.

Some practical issues need to be addressed during this stage: contribution and attribution of specific aspects of work need to be clarified, and roles and tasks must be set out. Possible venues and dates for the exhibition or performance will have to be identified and coordination with events such as arts festivals can be considered. Another more practical issue is that the project leaders need to decide on a publication strategy, together with an advertising cam-

paign suitable to the project to raise public awareness (designing invitations and other modes of advertising such as streetpole posters, press releases to appropriate media and the like). It may not be possible to finalise all these publication elements, but a plan and timeframe must be drawn up so that the promotional material can be produced relatively quickly under the pressure of the upcoming public event. Practical arrangements regarding deadlines for submission of work and modes of collection need to be clarified. There should be a clear administrative function that documents each aspect of the process, and communicates the necessary information to relevant parties.

During the pre-production stage the project leaders should be identified, and they should have a clear idea of where, how and with whose involvement, the project is likely to proceed, and whether funding is likely. Funding applications should be formalised and submitted as soon as possible to the relevant funding bodies or institutional offices, preferably together with the cooperation of the research directorate of the faculty or section.

4.2 Production

This step is the most intense, as the actual creative production takes place here together with research-in-practice in the form of reflective journals and the like. The project leaders will, apart from their own creative work, also have to manage the project. Weekly discussions between project leaders and liaising with participating creatives are crucial at this stage to keep the project's momentum and to determine whether it is necessary to reflect on emergent possibilities, and augment aspects of the initial plan, if necessary. Participants who collaborate in their creative process are very likely to develop a series of usable new insights and fresh approaches, especially if they come from different disciplines. These should be recorded in the reflective journals and applied where relevant, and should ideally take place in collaboration with theoretically inclined colleagues to enhance scholarly depth. Reflection is likely to take place both individually and collaboratively.

The project leaders may have to report to the institution or funding body on the progress of the project, and dedicated funding needs to be in place for setting up the exhibition or performance. Referees should be confirmed to validate the quality of creative work and scholars in the field should be tentatively identified for refereeing the written research outputs (those that take place after the creative process has run its course).

The production step culminates in the presentation of the final re-search outcomes which may be in the form of an exhibition. Curating decisions, coordinating the work that is coming in from participants and other practical aspects such as venue management dominate here. Pertinent is also the production of a catalogue to comply with certain textual requirements of research – many options are available: printed catalogues can be substituted or supplemented by DVDs, websites or other forms of documentation. It is very important that the exhibition (or performance) is properly documented, as this will inform an entire range of post-production activities. During this stage the project's exposure is key and the public as well as peers in the field should have ample access to the work – for this reason, either setting up the project as part of an arts festival or planning for the project to tour at least parts of the country is advisable. Arranged visits by school groups and other forms of guided tours will broaden the exposure and impact of the project.

4.3 Post-production

The first logical action during post-production is a post-project meeting, attended by project leaders and those creative participants who will be involved in this stage, as well as the more theoretically inclined participants whose role is likely to become more significant at this point. The project should be discussed in as much detail as possible, noting successes and failures and identifying new and emerging issues.

Three types of activities each with its own set of decisions characterise post-production. In the first instance, the catalogue, DVD or other form of documentation may have to be revised and gaps filled in so that it is as comprehensive and representative of the project as possible. Secondly, decisions should be made as to whether, and how, to make artists' reflections on their work and process public, and how to transform these into possible research outputs that fall within the accepted research norms of the institution or funding body – this may entail that the creative practitioner works with a colleague to prepare the work for dissemination, either to be reproduced as artist's journal or to extract from the journal a number of aspects that can form a guide to creative development, or whatever other possibilities emerge from reflecting on the content of the journal.

The third type of research activity relevant to this stage is the more formal route, where the scholarly results are written and submitted for publication. It is a good idea to workshop topics as those anticipated at the outset of the project may have lost their relevance

or may have been enriched by new insights. Workshops or informal colloquia during the article writing phase will assist newcomers to research in that findings are shared and common concerns as well as individual problems can be addressed. Writers of scholarly research articles who participate at this point should be encouraged to work with the creative practitioners in the writing of articles. Collaboration is therefore encouraged throughout the project for a number of reasons. Firstly, all participants benefit by expanding their knowledge base, reassessing their methodological preferences, gaining insight into the modes of operation in different disciplines, and by encouraging one another. Secondly, scholarly articles may be based on comparative discussions informed by work produced, the reflective journals and their relationship with the creative outputs, or any other emergent issues. Although many in the creative disciplines argue for practical work as "embedded knowledge", it does not seem as if institutions are ready to accept practical output alone as research, and at this point those who produce written research need to involve the practitioners as far as possible to enrich the research outputs and also to provide for a type of research mentoring.

To conclude, this model aims to provide a workable framework for the conceptualisation, planning and execution of a practice-based research project, with provision for textual and more conventional scholarly outputs. In terms of the tone of the framework, it can be said that the beginning stages are characterised by playfulness, tentativeness and a measure of intuitive guesswork, after which more structure is needed while still accommodating augmentations and new insights. Towards the end of the project, the more formal outputs are increasingly characterised by scholarly rigour. This approach will allow for the organic development of research insights to be acknowledged throughout. Too often creatives find that the process of making is indeed what guides them and this feature of practice-based research needs ample provision in the course of such a project.

5. *Tracking creative creatures* as practice-based research

This part of the article reviews the *Creative creatures* project in the light of the model of good practice formulated in the previous section, and aims to indicate the extent to which it constitutes practice-based research, and also to identify shortcomings in order to indicate where future projects can improve upon the processes

and strategies followed in this project. It should be noted that this is by no means a comprehensive description of the project, but rather an indication of certain signposts in its development that can be addressed in terms of practice-based research.

The project is described below in terms of pre-production, production and post-production steps, although it was not necessarily conceptualised in these terms. It should be noted that the project did not explicitly set out to be a practice-based research project,[3] as the project leaders at the time were not aware of the formalisation of such a term and instead intuited that the practical work they were doing needed some form of institutional recognition, perhaps as research.

5.1 Pre-production

Tracking creative creatures emerged from fairly vague, exploratory beginnings. As indicated above in the section on models of practice-based research, this tends to be the case. During 2006, Ian Marley, one of the project leaders, discussed his practical work with the research director – like many creatively inclined academics, he felt unsure about how to contribute to the research output of the university, given that his field of expertise is in visual arts. The research director arranged for a meeting with other creatives from different disciplines and Marley showed some of his work as a starting point for discussion. During this stage he and Dr. Franci Greyling (a colleague from the Creative Writing section) began to conceptualise the project, and decided to base it on the creatures that would serve as creative stimulus for participating artists. These two colleagues became the project leaders.

The initial impetus for running the project was the need to find a way of doing "what creatives do best" while, also finding a way to frame this work as research. The first discussions gave rise to a formalisation of the idea in scholarly terms, and approval as well as funding was granted by the Faculty Research Directorate. The project was located within an existing research focus area sub-programme entitled "literature, space and identity in local and global context". Marley notes that such incentive was crucial as the concept document could not promise hard research outputs. A

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3   The objective of contribution to the dialogue regarding practice-based research was added during the course of the project – see the list of project objectives below.

measure of trust and goodwill was shown in the form of institutional support. A unique opportunity was therefore created to produce art and coordinate the production of creative work as a formal project.

Implicit during this stage was the setting of the tone for the re-mainder of the project. Participants would be prompted by drawings of the creatures towards the production of their creative output, but they would not be prescribed; ownership of the project was distri-buted among all participants; and collaboration and exploration would be encouraged above what could be experienced as scholarly constrictions and requirements. Overall, playfulness and enjoyment were emphasised.

The aims of the project were set out as follows in the funding application:

- To stimulate creative outputs from a wide range of participants (children, students, established artists)

- To investigate and describe the creative process within indivi-duals, groups and also in the overall project

- To investigate and describe the creative process in terms of dif-ferent approaches and within various disciplines

- To analyse and compare products by means of a conceptual framework (identity, hybridity, boundaries)

- To add to the dialogue regarding practice-based research[4]

Planned outputs for 2007 were:

- An exhibition at the Aardklop National Arts Festival as flagship project

- A catalogue and interactive DVD of the project as publication outputs

For 2008, the following outputs were anticipated:

- Two conference papers

- Three articles (two national and one international)

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4   This aim was added while the project was under way, indicative of the organic and open-ended nature of practice-based research which allows for aug-mentation of aims.

- A possible Master's degree in Graphic Design

A fairly detailed schedule was also set out in the funding application.

For 2006:

- November: conceptualising, planning, research submission, application for participation in the Aardklop National Arts Festival

For 2007:

- January: literature survey, theoretical framework

- February to April: implementing sub-projects (creative writing, graphic design; autumn writing workshop, schools project, writing competition on a literary website)

- May: selection of student work

- June: invited artists to submit artworks and feedback on artists' creative processes; analyses of texts and products

- July: design and prepare the exhibition, prepare the catalogue, and continue with analyses of texts and products

- August: print catalogue and marketing material, prepare the exhibition

- September: exhibition

- October: interactive DVD of project and description of research process

- November: describe research process and research results

For 2008:

- January to April: write up research findings

- June to August: conference paper

The application document also included a budget of expenditures.

In line with the nature of practice-based research, the project yielded unexpected new opportunities, such as the involvement of a crafts group. Most of the anticipated events on the schedule were realised in slightly altered time schedules. The project was to a large degree approached intuitively and without a literature-grounded under-standing of the nature of practice-based research – which, inte-restingly enough, did not prove to be a significant hurdle. Many of

the imperatives of practice-based research featured in some or the other way, and the project itself was a learning opportunity, confirming the modus operandi of much practice-based research where the process itself constitutes the acquisition of knowledge. Nonetheless, the determination, enthusiasm and dedication of the project leaders were crucial to retain momentum.

An aspect that did not receive a great deal of attention and which might have guided the process with a clearer sense of direction is the literature survey. Stronger institutional support and access to funds will in future be enhanced by a more extensive theoretical framework. This aspect impacts on the responsibilities of role-players as well as whom to include in the project team, as theoretically inclined colleagues should ideally be involved earlier on with a view to inform the practitioners of possible theoretical frameworks that could enrich or guide their work. A greater measure of clarity on roles and responsibilities should also have been negotiated early on to provide those involved with a stronger sense of where the project was heading and where specific responsibilities were lodged.

The participating artists attended briefing sessions where they were informed of the nature of the project and the drawings of the creatures were provided as creative stimulus. As could be expected, not all participants delivered on what had been planned – but the project yielded unforeseen results which more than compensated for this.

A significant aspect that will need attention for future projects is documentation. The development of the project was not always explicitly documented, and it is almost impossible to recall the sequence of some events and the dates on which decisions were made, and so forth. Documentation from another perspective is that of artists' journals, particularly reflective journals where the creative process could be traced more substantively. Artists were requested to set down how they arrived at their artworks, but in some cases this documentation (where it was submitted – not all participants fulfilled this requirement) did not prove very useful. This shortcoming can be addressed by means of workshops where artists are informed about possible approaches to reflective journals, and made aware of the importance of such a document. The artists' documentation still needs to be explored, analysed and compared in terms of creative processes with reference to the last two aims of the project set out above. The notion of the reflective journal emerged during the course of the project when the project leaders

began investigating literature on practice as research, but this was not communicated extensively or implemented consciously. Also, a blog was set up, but was not properly made use of. This should prove to be a useful tool for future projects.

Data collection and administrative issues were dealt with "quite rigorously", according to the project leaders, but focused more on the final products than on the processes. The creative results of the entire project, together with artists' statements, video clips or artists' process documentation where available, and other relevant information on the project were put together into a user-friendly DVD catalogue. This is one of the strong points of the project, as a great deal of information is available for future use. Peer review, public access after the project and general referencing are all possible by means of this catalogue. For future projects, referees can be appointed at the pre-production stage (whether for practical outputs as well as for anticipated written research).

For promotion and awareness raising, items such as posters and other promotional items were designed by graphic design students at the North-West University under the guidance of Marley and Greyling.

5.2 Production

The flagship exhibition at the Aardklop National Arts Festival can be regarded as the main element of the production phase. This exhibition focused the project and gave it a sense of culmination. Apart from work on display, the project was framed as a research project with a narrative, where possible, that focused on the creative process of artistic work. As can be anticipated, the exhibition entailed complex curatorial issues that were negotiated before and during the actual setting up of the exhibition. Written contributions such as poetry were enhanced by layouts designed by graphic design students of the North-West University, adding thus another unforeseen dimension to the project. Viewers of the exhibition had an opportunity to participate by means of filling in postcards with feedback and their own impressions, together with creative elements if they wished, and posting these in a box provided.

The project received good press, with articles appearing in the local festival newspaper as well as in *Beeld*, a national Afrikaans newspaper (in particular a longish article in *Plus*, a supplement to *Beeld*; Myburg, 2007).

5.3 Post-production

During this phase discussions were held on the outcomes of the project as well as possible further outputs that can be generated. Due to the fact that the journal *Literator* was to dedicate a special edition to the project, a plan of action had to take shape. Colleagues across creative and theoretical disciplines were invited to attend an information session where the project leaders presented the development of the process, its outcomes and the range of data available (the project brief, funding documents, cursory information that artists provided on their creative process, the DVD catalogue and the like). The DVD catalogue was updated after the exhibition and also sent to other interested parties. It will also be used extensively in future for reference purposes and as an example of a well-documented, accessible research aid. During the information session, possible research areas were identified and ideas for articles were exchanged. The actual writing of articles, as formal research, was assisted by means of a colloquium where colleagues presented work in progress for feedback in the context of a small group that allowed colleagues to "soundboard" their ideas. The culmination of formal research outputs is the special edition of *Literator* where some colleagues produced single author articles, while others worked collaboratively.

En résumé: evaluating the project in terms of research

The first aim of the *Creative creatures* project, namely to stimulate creative outputs from a wide range of participants was obviously attained – more than 500 creatives from various fields were involved in the project – in fact, the project expanded beyond expectation.

The second and third aims, to investigate and describe the creative process within individuals, groups and also in the overall project, and to investigate and describe the creative process in terms of different approaches and within various disciplines are addressed in articles in this publication of *Literator* (e.g. by Roela Hattingh, Franci Greyling & Hein Viljoen). A significant part of production is, of course, the artists' creative process as set out in the reflective journal which guides and documents the growth of individual artists' work as well as collaborative efforts. Not all artists' reflective journals were sufficiently comprehensive. This should be addressed in future by means of workshops to train creative practitioners in the practice of keeping a reflective journal, its benefits to the creative process as well as its research potential.

The fourth aim, to analyse and compare products by means of a conceptual framework (identity, hybridity, boundaries) can be said to crystallise in articles produced in this edition of *Literator*, and was thus attained. Here the aim of research stimulation was also realised in that to date, nine articles were produced, four of which by un-published authors. In the fifth place, the final aim – added during the course of the project – set out to add to the dialogue regarding practice-based research, and the current article obviously wishes to answer to this aim.

Regarding the planned outputs, the plans for 2007 (exhibition and catalogue/interactive DVD) were obviously met. The 2008 outputs were envisaged to be mostly scholarly. To date, quite a number of articles have been produced, and three conference papers have been delivered. The Master's student which was a very tentative possibility did not materialise. Future projects may yield more postgraduate contributions, and should perhaps also involve fourth-year students as creative and theoretical participants, and not only for design work as was the case with the *Creative creatures* project.

Many of the requirements of practice-based research were complied with in this project, although some gaps emerged once the project is scrutinised from a more informed perspective. However, the general perception of the *Creative creatures* project is that despite whatever shortcomings there may have been, it has grown beyond what was imagined at the outset and was, in most aspects, successful. It is hoped that a subsequent project, envisioned for 2009-2011, will draw on the successes of this project and augment the process where necessary, to be a further and increasingly successful elucidation of practice-based research.

6. Conclusion

This article provided an exploratory overview of literature concerned with practice-based research and it has been shown that there is a strong impetus towards recognising this type of research as proper and valued output, given that certain criteria are met. Some of the important points raised during the course of the literature overview are that academics in the creative disciplines need a platform for putting forward their research results, which will in all likelihood be creative results and thus require a reconceptualisation of the nature of the research activity. Literature on practice-based research has demonstrated that there are specific strategies that can be followed in order to render creative work acceptable as research. In the first instance, there must be a record and a mode of dissemination at the

time of the display of the work as well as for future reference. Refereeing is imperative and this will determine to a large extent whether the work constitutes embodied knowledge of a sufficiently extensive, profound nature. Regarding the written component, various options have been discussed – artist's reflective journals, websites and blogs, interactive DVDs or catalogues, scholarly articles (ideally, a theorist/artist collaboration), discussion platforms and others. Of importance in this regard is that the creative output as research process needs to be made explicit by means of documentation, typically in the form of reflective journals, followed by publishable textual material. The requirements set for research in general can be met by means of practice-based research, as indicated during the course of the article. What remains is for institutions to fully acknowledge creative work as research and to enter into discussion with interest groups in order to develop structures that allow creative practitioners access to funding, promotion, conference attendance and especially access to higher degrees based on practice (already a reality at some universities in Britian, for example). This means that the matter of research equivalence as an appropriate and valid concept for recognition of practice-based research in the arts needs to be addressed and clarified with a view to fully situate the creative as a researcher.

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Key concepts:

collaborative research
creative disciplines: research in
creative practitioner
practice as research
practice-based research
reflective practitioner

Kernbegrippe:

kreatiewe dissiplines: navorsing in
kreatiewe praktisyn
praktyk as navorsing
praktykgebaseerde navorsing
reflektiewe praktisyn
samewerkingsnavorsing