

THEOREM 2018 – Cambridge School of Art

Beyond the Dichotomy of 'Theory-' and 'Practice-' in Arts Research

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Final draft

Thanks to Jane for organisation etc.

I'd like to talk to you today, not as a 'theory-' or 'practice-based' researcher, but simply as a researcher. And the reason I'm making this distinction here is because it introduces the subject of the talk, and frames my position very simply. My proposition is that the dichotomy between theory- and practice-based research is misplaced, and that framing them in this way (in an institutional context) wrongfully suggests that they are, or can be, considered separable processes.

It's also worth noting early on that I am speaking as a PhD researcher, so much of what follows is particularly relevant to the theory and practice division in an arts educational context. And I believe THEOREM is the perfect venue for this discussion – especially given this year's theme, of how theory guides practice and practice informs theory.

The scope of this talk doesn't allow me to pose any definitive answers to this problem here. Instead, what I want to do is discuss the necessarily complex interconnectivity of practice and theory. Then, through a discussion of *praxis* as it is conceived by Hannah Arendt (1958), I want to propose we do away with the relatively empty distinction that currently exists between theory-

and practice-based research projects, and instead place emphasis on the notion of research as *action*.

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It seems somewhat anachronistic to distinguish between theory- and practice-based arts research. Partly because it seems to suggest that the conversation hasn't evolved from the time of the first 'practice-based' PhDs in the mid-80s (Candy 2006, 4) and the recasting of polytechnics to universities in the early 90s (Scrivener 2002). And not only that, it continues to call into question whether art practice can make genuine epistemological claims. Questions that have been posed now by many in the last 30-years, such as Henk Borgdorff (2005), Stephen Scrivener (2002), Fiona Candlin (2000), Sarat Maharaj (2009), etc., which, given the profusion of practice-based PhD places available in research institutions across the globe and scholars who have done them, either means the answer to that question is by now a resounding yes, or it seems to have lost its meaning.

Speaking from a personal perspective, I've found the distinction awkward for some time (largely stemming from my time as an MFA student; a 'practice based' master's degree for which, according to their rubric, I submitted 'no practice'). For me, it sits uncomfortably because it seems problematic, or at very least counterintuitive, to define these parameters in their own terms when they are essential to one another. Particularly in relation to the arts. Further to this, as an art practitioner *and* theory-based researcher, I don't observe a cognitive "switching off" of practice when transitioning between art making, and thinking about art. And now, undertaking what would be recognized as a wholly theoretical PhD, I feel as creative as ever. Theorizing has

come to be my 'practice', not artistic per se, but creative no less. Of course, taken in themselves they are different processes, but related to arts research they become deeply entangled.

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Looking to Greek philosophy, both thinking (*theoria*) and making (*poiesis*), following Aristotle, constitute specific types of knowledge, with the respective 'end goals' (*telos*) of "knowledge for its own sake" and the "production of some artefact" (Carr & Kemmis 1986: 32). Though today, in the context of arts research undertaken in some form of educational institution,¹ theory is not applied 'for its own sake', nor is art making interested in simply producing artefacts. Both, in this context, are qualified in as much as they contribute to the activity of scholarly research. Taken to be: "an original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding." (Scrivener 2002, 1) They are both means to some end (the fulfillment of a PhD, in my case).

Not only do both of these 'specific types of knowledge' – the Aristotelian *poiesis* and *theoria* – no longer serve their own ends in the research/university context, they are bound together with such complexity that referring to a 'theory-' or 'practice-based' research project in isolation – whether explicitly or implicitly – threatens to both over simplify and reinforce the wrongful assumption that they are, or can be, considered separate processes at all (see Naccarato 2018, 436). Here lies the crux of my argument. Each term is filled with such ambiguity, that either one could convincingly be argued to constitute the other: //to quote the philosophers of education, *dauids and wahid...*

¹ the majority of which are part of what the philosopher Robin James would call the *neoliberal episteme*, where everything must be quantifiable and have an impact factor: the REF is an example)

when one theorises one does something. In this way, one acts whether it is in the form of thinking, contemplating or (re)constructing meanings. That is, one brings into action what one has considered or thought. This action does not occur independently from what one thinks, or imagines, or contemplates. So, in a way, theory is inherent in practices.

(Davids and Waghid 2017, 2)

Theory and practice are interconnected and unfold as such through *human action*. And just as theorizing itself is described above as a form of practice, the practicality of art making on some level enacts theory – whether unknowingly combining the notes of the phrygian mode, or applying paint in a certain way, though this received notion of practice is somewhat uninteresting.

It is interesting to note, however, that the ‘dictionary style’ definition of practice as merely the practical application of a theory, according to Teoma Naccarato’s recent genealogical account of practice-as-research, is situated in a ‘Cartesian metaphysics with its hierarchic split of mind over body, immaterial over material, and abstract over concrete’ (Naccarato 2018, 439). This is so because Descartes distrusted experiential knowledge because of its reliance on human sensory perception. Embodied practices, so epistemic arts practice more generally (i.e., all ‘practice based’ arts research), would be problematic in this sense.

What I want to highlight at this stage is that theory and practice, whilst I’m not arguing that they are the same or one thing, are inherently bound together. The earlier quotation from the philosophers’ of education, Nuraan Davids and Yusef Waghid, begins to emphasize this point. And the institutional framing of these terms as diametrical opposites in the context of research, in this sense really does reduce their usefulness as concepts.

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As mentioned earlier the processes of *theoria* and *poiesis*, which are considered separately in Aristotle, constitute individual kinds of knowledge: that of contemplative theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge gleaned through making, respectively (Nilsson Hammar 2018, 114). It is clear that this has influenced the demarcation of practice and theory based research in the university today.²

The third concept in Aristotle's epistemic tripartite is *praxis*. Unlike *theoria* and *poiesis*, the *telos* of *praxis* is not easily determinable (determinable in the sense that the 'end goal' of making is the finished object under construction, and theoretical contemplation is an end in itself [Carr and Kemmis 1986, 32]). For Aristotle, the *telos* of *praxis* is concerned with the realisation of ethical action which can only be determined in specific moments throughout a lifetime: 'The end or *telos* of *praxis* is not an end in the usual sense at all, but some morally worthwhile good that cannot be determined in advance, but must be discovered in particular contexts and situations.' (Coulter 2002, 191)

These concepts have notably been revived in the work of Hannah Arendt – where she has also developed and (most importantly) placed emphasis on the concept of *praxis*, or *action*, over *poiesis* and *theoria*. Action, in Arendt's appropriation, I suggest is closer to the 'truth' when

² //Interestingly promoting a strange dichotomy in itself: the university as a whole conforming to neoliberal logic, whilst adopting 'ancient' ideas such as this practice/theory dichotomy.

considering the activity of arts based research, and yet is rarely referred to in this context.³

Moving on from Aristotle's *praxis*, however, Arendt's *action* is concerned with human freedom and plurality (Canovan 1998, xvii).

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt stresses action, 'as the main objective of political action' and argues for the active life (*vita activa*) as opposed to the 'traditionally more respected contemplative life' (*vita contemplativa*) (Nilsson Hammar 2018, 118). Here, she outlines two stages which combine in action to differentiate *praxis* from the categories of *poiesis* (practice/making) and *theoria* (theory/contemplation): they are, as I have just mentioned, freedom and plurality.

To explain them here in brief, 'freedom' does not necessarily describe some liberal notion of 'freedom of choice' between a number of possible options, but describes the human capacity to make new starts, explore new and unspecified ventures, the freedom to introduce something new into the world, undertake new actions. 'Plurality' recognizes that, in acting as 'distinct individuals' who are able to introduce *the new* into the world, it is not done in isolation, or in a vacuum: 'In this respect action needs plurality in the same way that performance artists need an audience; without the presence and acknowledgment of others, action would cease to be a meaningful activity.' (d'Entreves 2018) //Cannot the same be said about academic research?

³ There are, for example, no *praxis*-based research pathways, but nor should there be – rather, it has the potential to describe the PhD in a more open way that recognizes theory and practice as an inseparable unity. This totalization needs to be acknowledged in the arts as a necessary feature of scholarly research – as I believe it to be in the sciences, for example, where it is not common to find studentships or PhD places advertising 'practice-based' courses.

Though the focus of Arendt's study is politics, I believe this notion of praxis/action can be co-opted to describe a more intuitive and open approach to research in the arts today, and negates the need for such a division between projects as being practice or theory based.

Again, this is merely sketched here to be developed further in the publication proceeding the conference, but both freedom and plurality are necessary factors of PhD research (and academia more widely). And as necessary factors, they problematize isolating notions of theoretical and practice-based research, as such. Writing in her introduction to *The Human Condition*, Margaret Canovan (1998, xi) describes poiesis (practice/making) as 'something a craftsman does by forcing raw material to conform to his model'. Considered in relation to practice-based research, this calls to mind an adolescent approach to arts 'research' whereby the researcher shoehorns their art practice to demonstrate, or conform with a theory.

And so theoria (theory), with roots in Aristotle, serves the contemplative life; the life of beholding as opposed to acting which 'rests on the conviction that no work of human hands can equal in beauty and truth the physical *kosmos*, which swings in itself in changeless eternity without any interference or assistance from outside'. (Arendt 1998, 15)

To approach the activity of research with either in isolation ignores the *freedom* and *plurality* of action. That is, pure contemplation reduces possibilities for the new or introducing novelty, or to change direction as a response to an impetus, to take new action, to ultimately rest 'on the conviction that no work of human hands can equal in beauty and truth the physical *kosmos*'; and the maker or practitioner, whilst 'forcing' their materials to serve their ends or ideology, does so

in a vacuum and ignores the academic process of sharing and shaping through interacting with peers; without which, the activity of research loses meaning.

These notions however, as we know, are not how things work in what is currently called ‘theory’ and practice-based’ research – so what do these terms offer if they don’t accurately describe the processes to which they are designated? If we were to stop using these labels, it would be in recognition that the categories of theory and practice in arts research (as well as research more generally) cannot be considered apart.

Arts research as Arendtian action (that is, a sort of ‘praxis-based research’) would embrace freedom and plurality, acknowledging and valuing categories such as these over the means-ends distinction between theory and practice. Research, and quite obviously arts research is as much about generating unspecified newness and the ability to change course in response to new knowledge; as well as understanding one's work should not be shaped in isolation: but rather as part of a network, a community of scholars, and generates meaning because of this, not in spite of it – nor because of its mode of exploration (be it theoretical or practical). And the process continues, over and over. Whilst short term goals are achieved or milestones passed (achieving the PhD, etc.) there is no concrete or absolute end, but opportunities for new beginnings.

Again, these ideas are developing so there are certainly problems to be worked out and through. Certain questions arise, namely in relation to the nature of research (a term that hasn’t been critically examined here); and this leads on to the nature of ‘praxis research’ – which is

more interested in the journey – in the neoliberal university which is driven by measurable results.

These are the sorts of questions I'll be considering moving forward.

Thanks for listening.

Draft 1 (last updated 20/06/18)

I'm talking today, not as a theory- or practice-based researcher, but simply as a researcher. More specifically, a researcher working in the field of 'art' in the broadest sense. And my intention here is not to repeat familiar tropes of 'whether or not art objects can meaningfully generate new knowledge' – or any knowledge, for that matter – but to propose that the distinction between practice and theory within the context of contemporary arts research needs to be thought of differently.

It is also worth noting that I am speaking as a PhD researcher, so my discussion is largely centred around the theory/practice divide in arts PhDs. And I believe this is what THEOREM is about; understanding that theory and practice cannot be considered apart from one another in PG research of the arts.

The scope of this talk doesn't allow me to pose any definitive answers to this problem here. Instead, what I want to do is discuss the necessarily complex interrelatedness of practice and theory; all the while working towards a notion of praxis explicated through the thought of Hannah Arendt, to ultimately propose we do away with the relatively empty distinction between theory- and practice-based research projects, and place emphasis on the notion of research as *action*.

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Within arts education, now, it seems anachronistic to distinguish between theoretical- and practice-based research – it is uncomfortable. In part, it is uncomfortable because it appears to

extend this question of whether art practice can make genuine epistemological claims;<sup>4</sup> questions that have been posed now by many in the last 30-years, such as Henk Borgdorff (2005), Stephen Scrivener (2002), Fiona Candlin (2000) and Sarat Maharaj (2009) etc., to name a few. On the other hand, and a more experiential perspective, is the observation that as an art practitioner *and* theory-based researcher, I've never registered a cognitive switching off of 'practice' when transitioning between art making, and thinking (theorising) about art. Of course, taken in themselves they are different processes, but related to arts research they become deeply entangled.

Looking to Greek philosophy, both thinking (*theoria*) and making (*poiesis*), following Aristotle, constitute specific types of knowledge; with the respective 'end goals' (*telos*) of "knowledge for its own sake" and the "production of some artefact" (Carr & Kemmis 1986: 32). Though today, in the context of arts research undertaken in some form of educational institution (the majority of which are part of what the philosopher Robin James would call the *neoliberal episteme*, where everything must be quantifiable and have an impact factor: the REF is an example), theory is not applied 'for its own sake', nor is art making interested in simply producing artefacts. Both, in this context, are qualified in as much as they contribute to scholarly research. Taken to be: "an original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding." (Scrivener 2002, 1) They are both means to some end (the fulfillment of a PhD, for example).

Not only do both of these 'specific types of knowledge', in the Aristotelian sense, no longer serve their own ends in the research/university context, they are bound together with such

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<sup>4</sup> Which – given the profusion of practice-based PhD places available in research institutions across the globe and scholars who have completed them – either means the answer to that question is by now a resounding yes, or completely meaningless.

complexity that referring to a ‘theory-’ or ‘practice-based’ research project in isolation threatens to both over simplify and reinforce the wrongful assumption that they are, or can be, considered separate processes at all (see Naccarato 2018, 436).

Gayatri Spivak tells us that pitting these categories up against each other – as a sort of simplified thesis and antithesis – is in part symptomatic of how institutions ‘actually reduce the usefulness of a concept by giving it a minimal explanation’ (1990, 2). In this case, Spivak is responding to a question asked by Elizabeth Grosz on the apparent division of theory and practice in the relationship between textuality [writing] and politics. The implication here is that writing, or theory, takes place ‘in the library rather than being on the street’, where the ‘practice’ of politics supposedly exists. And whilst I think Spivak does differentiate between theory and practice as general categories, she says that ‘*theorizing* is a practice.’ (2016, LARB interview) What Spivak emphasises here is that the production of theory, rather than the application of theory, is itself constitutive of practice.

It is worth mentioning that this ‘dictionary’ style definition of practice as the practical application of theory, according to Teoma Naccarato’s recent genealogical account of practice-as-research, is situated in a ‘Cartesian metaphysics with its hierarchic split of mind over body, immaterial over material, and abstract over concrete’ (Naccarato 2018, 439). This is so because Descartes distrusted experiential knowledge because of its reliance on human sensory perception. Embodied practices, so epistemic arts practice more generally (i.e., all practice based arts research), would be problematic in this sense.

As my title suggests, Spivak's is a view that I share. That theorizing, the construction of theory, not least within the context of institutionalized arts research, is a practice. This is where the distinction between theory- and practice-based research breaks down, or at least fails to describe the whole picture sufficiently well, because, as Spivak suggests, it reduces the complexity of either concept and leaves us with a set of oversimplified, diametrical opposites.

To be clear, my argument isn't concerned with an 'art of writing' specifically, but making the observation that everything relates to some notion of 'practice'. (The practice of constructing a text, thinking through a concept; theorizing.) This entanglement is widely referred to as 'praxis'; however 'art praxis' is a phrase seldom heard, which is perhaps why it sounds somewhat awkward. (Certainly no 'praxis-based research' PhDs out there.)

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In philosophy and critical theory, the theme of praxis can be found in writings spanning the Ancient Greeks through Plato and Aristotle, to Kant, Hegel and Marx up through the Frankfurt School and much feminist theory. Hannah Arendt, whose *The Human Condition's* revolutionary status has been attributed to its return to praxis, stresses the importance of praxis (or action) as a fundamental category 'of the human condition' (Stanford Encyclopaedia).

This idea is speculative, or even utopian in some sense, but this notion of praxis as *action* better describes what we do as postgraduate artistic researchers; as well as highlights, rather than differentiates, the necessarily complex relationship between theory and practice in our work.

Arendt's praxis or 'action', and its relevance for art research... for Arendt, action is the primary category (alongside labour and work, which are important but supplementary to action) in the pursuit of the active life, *vita activa* (which is constitutive of *the human condition*). Action is composed of two stages: freedom and plurality. 'Freedom' is not some sort of liberal notion of freedom of choice from a number of available options, etc., but the human capacity to start something new, begin new ventures. Plurality emphasises the fact that the 'action' (of freedom? New starts etc) does not occur in a vacuum: it must be observed and acknowledged by others, in the presence of others to preserve or produce meaning.

The notion of *praxis as action* in the Arendtian sense is particularly relevant to arts research (or any research really) in the context of the PhD. Particularly, opposed to the Aristotelian *theoria* or *poiesis*, which are interested in contemplation-*in-itself* and production-*in-itself*. Praxis, that is the combination of freedom and plurality, describes the act of research (whose telos or goal, in this case, is the PhD): freedom, explains the project and the process, freedom to take new directions etc; plurality describes the academy, or academia, and emphasises the need for things such as conferences (like Theorem), journals, etc. The overall communication of research to a community outside of the self, without which the work would not really matter or have any impact.

From Carr and Kemmis ... 'Praxis is distinguished from *poietike* [knowledge relevant to the acquisition of skills, i.e, craft and making] because it is informed action which, by reflection on its character and consequences, reflexively changes the 'knowledge-base' which informs it.'

(Becoming Critical, 33) So the knowledge/telos of praxis, in undertaking action, transforms (or sets out to transform) the field or 'knowledge-base' with which it is concerned. 'Praxis ... remakes the conditions of informed action and constantly reviews action and the knowledge which informs it.' (33)

'It is by virtue of plurality that each of us is capable of acting and relating to others in ways that are unique and distinctive, and in so doing of contributing to a network of actions and relationships that is infinitely complex and unpredictable.' (The Human Condition, Stanford Encyclopaedia)

'... when one theorises one does something. In this way, one acts whether it is in the form of thinking, contemplating or (re)constructing meanings. That is, one brings into action what one has considered or thought. This action does not occur independently from what one thinks, or imagines, or contemplates. So, in a way, theory is inherent in practices.' Theory and practice are interconnected and unfold as such through human action.

Notes

Workshopping

The first two examples of art research-as-praxis share the theme of workshopping.

PhD workshops at Transmediale

The PhD/research workshops that occur in the run-up to Transmediale, organised in partnership with Aarhus University, are occasions where researchers from any background are welcomed to respond to an open call around a general theme linked to the festival. Before physically gathering, selected participants begin working on the production of small texts of around 2000 words. What follows is a pedagogic exercise where these texts are reduced to around 1000 words, then expanded to 4000. The culmination of this exercise is a publication—often in the form of a newspaper or pamphlet—in APRJA, and a panel presentation within the festival.

Howse and Miyazaki *Detektors* workshops

The second are workshops related to Martin Howse and Shintaro Miyazaki's artistic project, *Detektors*.

Briefly summarised, the project was an open collaborative project “which used sonic strategies and DIY-devices [*Detektors*] to make audible the hidden infoscapes of our time.” (Miyazaki)

These recordings were compiled on their website, generating a cartography of electromagnetic infoscapes from across the planet.

Bogost's carpentry

In this respect I'm interested in the concept of 'carpentry', as outlined by the object-oriented philosopher Ian Bogost in his 2012 book *Alien Phenomenology* (though worth mentioning that I don't fully buy into the OOO project for numerous reasons that aren't particularly relevant to mention here). 'Carpentry', in Bogost's sense, extends the typical notion of woodworking to incorporate the careful and sensitive creation of *anything* (stressing this sense that creation is carried out in earnest) (2012, 93). It is also inspired by Graham Harman's (another advocate of OOO) 'carpentry of things', which refers to the way 'things fashion one another and the world at large':

Blending these two notions, carpentry entails making things that explain how things make their world. Like scientific experiments and engineering prototypes, the stuffs produced by carpentry are not mere accidents, waypoints on the way to something else. Instead, they are themselves earnest entries into philosophical discourse. (2012, 93)

This is where I see the usefulness of a concept such as carpentry for arts research within the context of the university; as an act that incorporates or promotes a conjoined notion of practice and research.

//Research, whether or not art practice is involved, is itself a form of practice, as is writing and theorizing.

//The distinction between theory and practice seems somewhat anachronistic. It appears to hold on to boundaries in a time that when clear boundaries no longer exist – specifically within the arts. Is this a modernist division?

//Projects such as Art&Language have altered the relationship between theory and practice.

//In the context of the PhD, many artists submit the thesis as practice. Creative texts are quite common.

//Theory in the context of art practice becomes something else entirely; art practice used to exemplify or embody some theory is not primarily interested in art? Or at least, art practice in the pursuit of knowledge through scholarly research is not primarily about the art. The outcome or goal of practice based research should be practice, but in the context of the PhD, or other university based research, it is about the creation of knowledge. Surely then this services the field of epistemology and not art?

//This notion of theorizing, following Spivak and in my own situation as an arts PhD student who has no intention to submit art works, is an active practice. Active inasmuch as it is not carried out in passive contemplation, but is done so in the pursuit of new knowledge. It is a form of creation. It is also well known, of course, that those artistic researchers who are submitting art works as forms or embodiments of research do not do so in isolation – they too are required to submit a written component. Both of these modes of enquiry, inline with the theme of Theorem, clearly demonstrate at a fundamental level how both the concepts of theory and practice are interconnected in institutional research. This direct merging of practice and theory is often defined as praxis

I'd like to round off the talk by discussing a concept that embodies this notion of artistic praxis – which also demonstrates the inseparability of theory and practice, and in turn the vacuity of the distinction.

I believe this broadens the scope for, and reflects what could arguably be called the postconceptual condition of contemporary arts PhDs.⁵

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/28b9/dea70d247d149abd934b0b65a5197b403de6.pdf> carr

kemmis

Agamben <https://aphelis.net/agamben-gesture/>

'In a famous passage of the Nicomachean Ethics, he opposes the two terms as follows: "For production [poiesis] has an end other than itself, but action [praxis] does not: good action is itself an end" (VI 1140b).⁵ What is new in Varra is the identification of a third type of action alongside the other two: if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends.' (Agamben, *Notes on Gesture*, 56)

⁵ This is to appropriate Peter Osborne's claim that 'contemporary art is postconceptual art' – to give a very simplified definition, this is a concept that recognizes contemporary art should not or cannot be reduced to notions of medium, aesthetic, conceptual etc, and argues for transcategoriality (Osborne 2013, 2018). If this is true of art being made, why not of categories of arts research?

Gayatri Spivak tells us that pitting these categories up against each other – as a sort of simplified thesis and antithesis – is symptomatic of how institutions ‘actually reduce the usefulness of a concept by giving it a minimal explanation’ (1990, 2). In this case, Spivak is responding to a question asked by Elizabeth Grosz on the apparent division of theory and practice in the relationship between textuality [writing] and politics. The implication here is that writing, or theory, takes place ‘in the library rather than being on the street’, where the ‘practice’ of politics supposedly exists. And whilst I think Spivak does differentiate between theory and practice as general categories, she says that ‘*theorizing* is a practice.’ (2016, LARB interview) What Spivak emphasises here is that the production of theory, rather than the application of theory, is itself constitutive of practice.