

Ecosystemic Practice-Research (for the Benefit of Others)

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Keywords: practice research, ontology, process, writing, framing

Abstract

This writing is about the relationships between artistic processes, artistic works, and how we might frame these as practice research. It has two aims: 1) to describe *when* artistic processes are framed as practice research through written forms, and the implications of this timing; and ii) to propose that our responsibility as practice researchers is to draw our work deeply into dialogue with other artistic work that exists in tangible *ecosystems* of artistic practice. The alternative is the status quo in which we rely on arguments made by the authority of totemic theoreticians who exist beyond our communities of practice.

These ideas are not specific to dance practice research, but rather are about practice research more broadly. As part of the writing I use as an example an artwork of mine that emerged through body-based practices – *Children of the Soil* – to explore the messiness of how we might reliably produce practice research while respecting the unfinished thinking of the artwork itself.¹

We cannot afford to dispense with the most basic (and moral) of research intentions: put simply, it must be for the benefit of others apart from the researchers themselves.

– Melissa Trimmingham (2002)²

Introduction: retrofitted practice research

Practice research is defined by practice being a significant research method that is also conveyed in a research output.³ In the UK practice research began in the early 1990s when art colleges and polytechnics were absorbed by universities – changes that were validated by the Bologna Process in 1999. Practice research is growing across the world including in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong, Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Singapore.⁴ This growth is seen in the number of practice research PhD programmes, and how practice research is an accepted part of research evaluation processes in the UK, Australia and New Zealand.

The quality of all academic research in the United Kingdom is publicly evaluated about every five years through REF: the Research Excellence Framework.⁵ The REF has 34 units of assessment divided into four broad disciplinary panels. After REF2021 the Overview Report from the panel for Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies (Panel D, unit of assessment 33) stated that:

A small proportion of practice research outputs appeared to retrofit research questions and a research-based process to work that was created with other agendas or purposes in mind.⁶

This statement implies that to retrofit research questions or a research-based process is a *negative* thing, yet what does retrofitting mean?

As a provocation to consider the nature of practice research as it is practiced, I propose that the REF2021 Overview Report inadvertently opens an old wound in practice research by implicitly distinguishing making art as research from *merely* making art. This distinction is not new.

In 2003, Peter Thomson⁷ presented an edited account of conversations on the SCUDD list-serv⁸ debating practice-research. The text includes a list of fifteen questions developed by Angela Piccini for the 2003 Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP)⁹ conference in Bristol. The sixth of Piccini's questions directly addresses the tension between art made as art and art made as research:

What makes an instance of practice 'count' as research? Does [practice research] involve different methods as a result of its framing as research (as distinct from 'pure' practice)?¹⁰

Hovering over Piccini's question is the potential that not all art can be positioned as research. In 1993 Christopher Frayling expressed the concern that if all art is research then we might end up "in a position where the entire history of art is eligible for a postgraduate research degree".¹¹

Presupposing that the REF Overview Report was indeed referring to art made as art that was retrofitted as practice research, implies that either a) not all art can be positioned as research; or b) some retrofitting processes were not adequately hidden or disguised for the purposes of the REF. Both possibilities have strong implications for understanding practice research. If (a) is accurate then it follows that there are two categories of art vis-à-vis the academy: art that can not be positioned as research, and art that can. If (b) is accurate, then there must be better and worse ways to retrofit art as practice research. Putting aside what retrofitting might mean, it is self-evident that there are better and worse ways to do it, just as there are better and worse ways to hit a tennis ball, bake bread or articulate a scholarly argument – even if those ways are not obvious, demand time and practice, and are not necessarily or easily falsifiable.¹²

What if retrofitting is a necessary part of practice research methods?

This writing is built on two ideas.

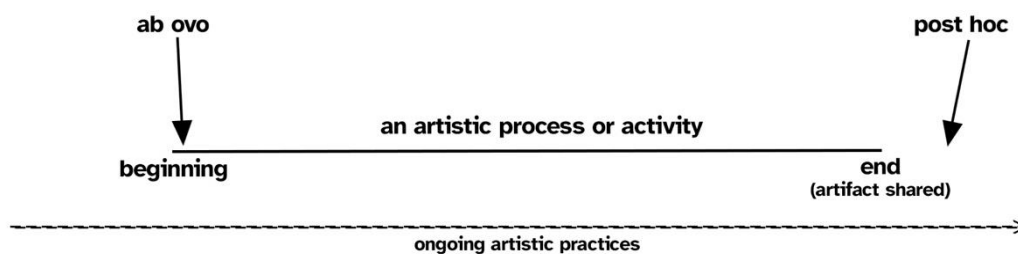
The first is axiomatic (and likely unpopular): all art can be framed as practice research. If this were not the case, we would need to establish specific conditions, types, methods, processes, practices, outcomes, etc that prevent any art from being framed as such. This is implausible to say the least. Note that this axiom is different

from saying that all art *is* practice research. Rather, all art *is able to be* framed or positioned as practice research.

The second is the proposition that artistic activity in the academy is nearly always framed as practice research *post hoc*, and that this is retrofitting as described in the REF report. In a sense this second proposition is concerned with *when* arts practices are framed as practice research, and my interest is in the causes and implications of this timing. I will focus on providing evidence why post hoc framing of practice research is important and viable, and that to suggest otherwise is to denature the complex inter-relationships between art-making and art rendered as research.

The *when* of practice research: ab ovo and post hoc

Here is a continuum for *when* an artistic process or activity somehow connected to the academy is framed, described and/or disseminated as practice research.



At one end of the continuum are artistic projects that start and finish as practice research. I call these *ab ovo*: literally meaning “from the egg” or from the beginning.¹³ At the other end are artistic projects that are not framed as practice research until or after they are presented or finished. These are *post hoc* “occurring after the event [or] done with hindsight”.¹⁴

The continuum reveals nothing of the quantity or quality of the researchfulness of an artistic process or activity. There are many examples of deeply researchful artistic projects (inside and outside of the academy) that are either never framed as practice research, or only framed post hoc when required. Likewise, but perhaps less commonly, there can be ab ovo practice research that is devoid of researchful practice. The continuum above refers only to *when* the framing as practice research occurs.

Anecdotally, ab ovo practice research is rare, and even projects initiated as practice research are complicated by the profoundly ad hoc nature of artistic practices and art making (which I discuss in the next section on p.xx). Practice research PhDs are likely the most common form of ab ovo practice research, in which a PhD candidate claims the method or approach from the start of their doctoral studies, even if they are not experienced in working with and through the approach. The process of doing a practice research PhD usually involves the artist-student coming to understand what a practice research PhD entails, and how it is distinct from simply making a work of art. Through first-hand experience they come to understand

practice research's pitfalls, contexts, possibilities, framings, principles and even codes.¹⁵

As a brief aside, both *ab ovo* and *post hoc* processes afford what I have previously described as many possible futures.¹⁶ That is, whether we are in process or framing creative practice as research *post hoc*, the research has countless emergent possibilities. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten describe research's "orientation to the future" in which "the as yet un-thought may become thought; and that new modes and styles of sense, perception, expression and subject construction might yet emerge and re-shape our worlds."¹⁷ I propose that Wilson and van Ruiten's statement remains as true for *post hoc* framing as it is for *ab ovo* processes.

Artistic work that is framed *post hoc* as practice research is as common as *ab ovo* is rare. For example, I have submitted 12 research outputs across three UK research assessment processes in 2008, 2014 and 2021. Of these, 11 were practice research, and of these eleven, 10 were framed as practice research *post hoc*. The exception was *Indelible*¹⁸ for RAE2008 – an adaptation of my PhD research that was as *ab ovo* as it could be (despite not having heard of the term practice-led research when I started the process).

It is my strong suspicion that most practice research outputs submitted to REF in the UK will have been framed as practice research *post hoc*. The artists involved will have had varying degrees of experience and understanding of practice research, and the ideal scenario is that the artist understood practice research firsthand but held off framing their work as practice research until after it was presented, exhibited and/or shared. Holding off this framing would have prevented their artistic processes and activities from being encumbered with the labels and structures of practice research *ab ovo*. Why encumbered? To understand that we must enter the mangle of ad hoc practices.

The mangle of ad hoc practices

In *The Mangle of Practice* (1995)¹⁹ the sociologist and historian of science Andrew Pickering describes the practice and culture of science as "performative"²⁰; an unpredictable "dance of agency"²¹ in which the mangle of scientific practice represents a "dialectic of resistance and accommodation".²²

Pickering's analysis is important in science as it draws together divergent understandings of objectivity; between Pickering's "emergent and posthumanist"²³ mangle of practice, and more traditional "humanist rules of mental hygiene"²⁴ in which scientists avoid ad hoc modifications and create only falsifiable theories. But in artistic practices is not the mangle of practice a given?

When I mentioned the messiness of artistic practice during an informal C-DaRE team conversation late in 2022, my colleague Jonathan Burrows simply asked, "Isn't that self-evident?"²⁵ In Burrows' book *Writing Dance*²⁶ his poetic description of the development of the performance work *Rewriting*²⁷ conveys the essentially

unforeseeable fragments, missteps, accidents and practices of the making of the project. The writing gives the sense that it remains fortuitous that the work was ever ready to present. From the outside, the making of *Rewriting* seems only vaguely planned if at all. Pickering quotes the anthropologist of science Lucy Suchman:

Plans are best viewed as a weak resource for what is primarily ad hoc activity ... Stated in advance, plans are necessarily vague, insofar as they must accommodate the unforeseeable contingencies of particular situations.²⁸

Something *ad hoc* is makeshift; an emergency; it is improvised, impromptu and expedient. As a transitive verb it is to “practise or create by using ad hoc measures, typically without recourse to method, policy, etc.; to assemble or organize chaotically”.²⁹

To work in an ad hoc manner in artistic practice – as it is in science – is a feature not a bug. Ad hocness in artistic practice is elemental regardless of *when* (or if) we decide to frame artistic activity as practice research. The fusion of uncertainty, contingency and intuition that we call creative practice makes it startlingly pragmatic to delay and delay the post hoc labour of framing the artistic activity as practice research. Perhaps even in what is ostensibly an ab ovo practice research project, the unforeseeable nature of ad hoc practices – the “unsystematic drifting, serendipity, chance inspirations”³⁰, the adaptations and missteps – ought to encourage or even force the artist to hold off as long as possible from making research-oriented claims about their artistic activity. Burrows describes “an alternative picture of research that is a reality for many of us”:³¹

in which intuition is the heart of creative practice and requires us to set off without a map into an unknown territory, intelligently, our eyes open, scouring the horizon for clues, with not a written proposal in sight and no assessment procedure possible.³²

That moment though – of *when* – is important: that moment when an artist-scholar decides how to make claims about the research-ful nature of their artistic practice. It is a moment in which the *practice* of practice research bifurcates between the work that the artistic activity does as art, and the work that it does as research through its framing as such.

Bifurcation: the artistic work and its framing as research

In *The Conflict of the Faculties* (2012) Henk Borgdorff states that “[practice] research addresses itself both to the academic forum and to the forum of the arts”,³³ and that it is “directed first of all to the art world.”³⁴

The responsibility to these two forums or audiences that Borgdorff describes is complex, although how an artist presents their work to the artistic community has a longer history and is likely more familiar. Our artist selves understand the

expectations, economies, currencies, processes, codes and needs of the artistic world to which we belong. The artwork will exist somewhere along various continuums: seen or not seen; sold or not sold; reviewed kindly or not reviewed at all; it will be fashionable or not fashionable; liked or not liked; talked about or not talked about; remembered or forgotten. How the work was made – including even the nature of its underlying practices – is mostly if not completely irrelevant, and how the work functions epistemically might be *felt* as its potential *understandings* circulate in the aether, but it is never discussed directly.

The contrast is clear for artistic practice in the academic community. Although it is axiomatic that *artistic practice* is fundamental to practice research in the arts,³⁵ the artistic practice and the emergent artwork are not the same thing.

Borgdorff writes that, “art practice is paramount as the subject matter, the method, the context, and the outcome of artistic research”.³⁶ There’s a seductive sleight of hand in Borgdorff’s statement, and he makes it too easy to infer that an art practice ends up as an artwork which is synonymous with the outcome of practice research. But what does Borgdorff mean by art practice? Previously, he has described it as “both the art object and the creative process”³⁷, yet Jonathan Burrows makes a clear distinction:

I write a note on my phone saying ‘practice is a ghost-like activity’, by which I think I mean that this doing which is not yet art is inhabited always by the ghost of other work, which points insistently towards what might slip over into art.³⁸

Given how fluid, ghost-inhabited, unpredictable and unknowable is artistic practice, the emergent outcome called an artwork is not necessarily indicative of the researchful nature of the artistic practice. It is entirely plausible that a complex, rigorous and insightful artistic practice does not ever slip over into art. Or what happens in the case of ab ovo practice research PhD projects in which the postgraduate researcher might be expected to engage with open-ended practice research methods rather than have the much clearer (or perhaps cleaner) choice to make an artwork and then frame it as research?

Perhaps these two not so dissimilar situations – a practice that does not become art or open-ended research methods that do not necessarily produce an artistic artifact – are why it is easiest for a practice researcher to simply put on their artist hat and go about the complex and contingent process of making an artwork. Once the artwork is done *then* they can start discussing how it is best framed as research or, often more appropriately, deciding which aspects of the process and/or artwork are researchful. But this will not do. It is too limited to suggest – as Borgdorff does – that the point of practice research is art making, even if most practice research is just that: art making rendered post hoc as practice research. So much of practice research depends on the questions being asked, the questions that change as they emerge, the ad hoc processes that wax and wane, the deliberate activities that stop

being deliberate, and the diverse and mostly non-traditional modes of sharing understanding or insight which are not necessarily conceivable as artworks.

What to do? The answer is neither 'make all practice research correspond to making a work of art and then describe its researchfulness post hoc' (which would prevent the development of experimental practices that do not result in artworks) nor 'force practice researchers into some kind of pure *ab ovo* processes' (which are often troubled by the experience of radical *ad hoc*-ness and do not coincide with how most practice research is conducted).

The answer is to develop the capacity and sensitivity to recognise the seemingly distinct methods – what I have called *ab ovo* and *post hoc* practice research – and how they might rather curiously slip over and into each other and even begin to undo the semantic meanings of the terms. Such sensitivity demands tremendous flexibility on the part of the practice researcher; flexibility which also affords them the chance to *stay with the practice* even while noticing the desire or pressure to narrow the practice's epistemic and ontologic boundaries. The complexity of being caught in distinct experiences of process is also a reminder of just how vital is the process of framing practice research.

But before I turn to an *in process* example of the nature and messiness of framing practice research, I need to talk about the words that are written as part of practice research. These words are another less obvious part of the split between the academic forum and the forum of the arts. Borgdorff writes plainly that "a discursive justification of the research will be necessary with the academic discourse in mind."³⁹ Such discursive justification is what artist-scholar Paul Magee calls the "bifurcated product":⁴⁰ the artwork and the writing about the artwork.

The written component of practice research started out as "getting art on the books"⁴¹ of the academy by attempting to distinguish 'art' from 'artistic research'. But the practice research field struggled with it. Here's Angela Piccini again (see *Introduction*, p.xx), writing online in the northern autumn of 2002:

Must [practice research] include some form of disseminable reflection?
or is the practice in performance sufficient to stand as research output?⁴²

The disseminable reflection that Piccini refers to is called "complementary writing"⁴³ by Robin Nelson, and is described as a "research narrative"⁴⁴ in PRAG's *Practice Research Report*. Regardless of what it is called, the written component of practice research is now hegemonic in providing something akin to "a single unified answer"⁴⁵ in contrast to the "plurality of experiences"⁴⁶ and "unfinished thinking"⁴⁷ of the "provisional"⁴⁸ practice artifact or outcome. The contrasting language of "unified answer" and "unfinished thinking" reflects the divergent epistemic affordances of art practices and writing-about art practices.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the research narrative is as consistent and concrete a component of practice research as one can imagine, even if the terms and conditions of its form-content are wildly variable. For instance, it is common practice in dance practice research PhDs in the

UK to require research narratives to be no less than 40000 words. Yet for the Research Excellence Framework outputs are restricted to a 300-word companion text known as the *summary statement*. There are ways around this word limit, for example adding traditional published articles about the practice in the portfolio for the output. But I for one have grown to like the ways in which the limitation of the 300 words is enough to point to the research *within* the practice, while enabling the practice to continue to do its own unfinished and polysemous epistemic work.

The nature of the post hoc framing: a case study

In this section I use an artwork as a case study to help understand the written framing – or research narrative – of practice research. The artwork is a video of mine called *Children of the Soil*,⁵⁰ and I use one of my own works because it helps reveal the process of framing more openly, including my half-formed thoughts, assumptions, confabulations, academic game-playing and personal desires. I am less interested in drawing attention to the artwork itself – it is what it is. This section does not assume a particular form for the eventual written framing⁵¹ or how to decide on the written form. Rather, it makes it clear that a decision is being made what to write about and that the written element *happens* post hoc – what I claim above is the most common (but not necessarily ideal) form of practice research.

Children of the Soil was made during an artistic residency in Italy⁵² in June 2022 where, even though the residency was grounded in the term *research*, the expectation was that I would create art.⁵³ Although there was some freedom and license to play in the residency, the role of the individual artists involved was to produce an artifact for the organisation.

The first time I described *Children of the Soil* as practice research was on Friday 9 December 2022, nearly four months after it was published online on Vimeo. I described it as such as part of the University's early review of research outputs plausibly submittable to the next yet-to-be-announced Research Excellence Framework in the UK. This is not to say I hadn't thought of the work as practice research previously, but only loosely and lightly. You might say that in the back of my mind I was aware that at some stage I would need to articulate its practice research-ness and a university evaluation process precipitated that I cross that line.⁵⁴

Overview of the art making process

The process for making *Children of the Soil* was quintessentially ad hoc. I was interested in working with several photographic and post-production practices that were not familiar to me. My lack of familiarity required that I do a lot of testing of technology and production and post-production processes before the residency began. That preparation was deliberate.

I could divide the progress of the art making into clear components: pre pre-production (testing), pre-production (planning), production (making), post-production (making), post post-production (further reading and writing, perhaps including this article). I say “could” but the danger in doing so is that I make the process appear much more organised and orderly than it was. What happened *in practice* was that I was still testing processes, methods, materials and technology on site in Italy. As I was testing, I was collecting, and then also working directly in production and post-production. The editing (in Premiere, LRTimelapse, Lightroom Classic, and After Effects) would inform other modes of collecting, and other types of physical practice. This is entirely common or usual in next-to-no-budget art making and reflects the above section re ad hoc art making. It is somewhat distinct from low or high budget film processes which require storyboarding, location scouting, timetabling, etc., even though they too will be variably ad hoc.

What were the specific practices I was working with? Rather paradoxically, these practices might not be evident in the output or outcome of the practices themselves. This paradox is a key point of weakness in the post hoc framing of an artwork as practice research. The weakness is due to the temptation to hold on tightly to what the practice was, as opposed to drawing attention to what is revealed as research through the artwork.

The practices were varied. These were the ones specifically set up during the course of the residency that I imagined or knew would inform the art making: 1) physical or body-based practices akin to stop motion animation in which the camera would capture a frame, say, every 20 seconds, and I would move a small amount between each capture; 2) falling slowly to the ground as a simple mirror of Rosemary Lee’s *Meltdown* (2011);⁵⁵ 3) reading and reflecting on more-than-human philosophy (a term coined by David Abram⁵⁶); particularly *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*,⁵⁷ and philosophy of time, e.g. *Time: a vocabulary of the present*;⁵⁸ 4) timelapse photography including post-production using LRTimelapse; 5) simple animation techniques in After Effects, e.g. animating still images, methods of transitioning between frames (formal properties of the film); 6) daily walking in and around the mountains of the Taleggio Valley; 7) conversations with participating artists, sharing of practices; 8) video and photography while walking; 9) sound recording (which I would later compose in post-production after completion of the residency); 10) writing and collecting: “this body” and script writing – working through possible text options and trialing; 11) video post-production; 12) prototyping in general – particularly re the film’s formal structure – and more than would be usual if I had been working with more familiar practices and forms. Prototyping also included testing and recording physically being buried – a specific visual idea that came to mind during the process.

Many of these practices were not directly pointed towards the art-making but were more like background hum that, with hindsight, informed the art-making or even ended up in it. For example, while walking each day to observe and listen outside, I

would take photos of things that caught my eye: a collection of human bones in a small crypt, men cutting grass outside, a man shearing grass in the town in tremendous heat, and dogs barking. These were everyday things that all ended up in the final cut of *Children of the Soil*.

Other practices were even more in the background. These are the daily practices that have been with me for years (or decades even) that are impossible to separate from the working methods of my art-making: yoga, meditation, reading, writing, editing writing, conversations with students about their practices, and movement improvising.

Then there were aspects of the project that I ripped from other projects or works. The text "This body" – perhaps the key conceptual property (at least for me) of the film – was taken from another large (unfinished) project. The moving filmstrip of the men cutting grass was a post-production practice I was developing for another project (also unfinished).

Wider out still are personal history, influences, training, taste and my background in choreography, performance, screendance and academia. Each of these represent hard to fathom frames that I would imagine play a key role in how the artwork ends up looking and sounding the way it does.

Given this broad range and categorisation of *practices* it is inconceivable or perhaps futile to plausibly comprehend how past and ongoing practices interact with context- or project-specific practices. This is akin to Jonathan Burrows' "doing which is not yet art is inhabited always by the ghost of other work."⁵⁹

Furthermore, to even call these things methods seems grandiose. Making *Children of the Soil* was certainly a process: a process of collecting, organising, storing, observing, recording, feeling, and sensing and making sense. Was the process rigorous or even rigorously ad hoc? While I was in it it felt like a mess; planned to some extent, but when the rubber met the road it was predictably chaotic.

Principles of framing an artwork as research

I cannot say if the above process is more or less ad hoc than other art making processes, but even if it were less so there would remain many ways in which I could frame the resulting artwork as research. *Children of the Soil* is precisely what it is because of the chaos and rigour described above; the ad hoc conditions under which it was made are visibly and invisibly present in what is perceptible. As an artwork it has many and varied ontologic and epistemic surfaces, each of which might host or welcome research claims made through post hoc framing.

On what basis then am I able to do the scholarly work of that framing? I propose three principles for framing artworks as research via the research narrative:

1. *Sustain the nature of the artwork*

The artwork is a phenomenon designed to be experienced as art, and the narrative is not designed to somehow explain the artwork through framing it as research. It is axiomatic that the artwork and the research are not equivalent. The principle also acknowledges that what the artwork is *about* – its themes – may not be relevant to its researchfulness.

2. *Direct attention to research components that are able to be perceived in the artwork*

The claims one makes about the researchful aspects of an artwork must be able to be perceived in the artwork (or the materials presented that represent the artwork), and be available for “sustained and verifiable peer review”.⁶⁰ We cannot make claims based on things that require other people to imagine or guess they are present, or expect others (our peers) to simply agree with us, else there are no limits to the claims we can and will make. This principle is not to diminish the vitality and importance of the unfinished thinking and open-ended poetic possibilities of the artwork or indeed the possibility and value of using experimental written forms to frame the research.

3. *Serve dialogues in the community of practice*

The practice research exists in a community of practice (or field) that is identified carefully. The research’s role is to be directly engaged in dialogues that are nascent, important or debatable in that community. The framing helps communicate the practice research’s contribution; that is, how it serves the needs, interests and work of the community of practice. The research might serve different communities differently. It is possible – but highly unusual in my experience – that the practice research might be in true dialogue with theoretical and/or philosophical discourses. By “true dialogue” I mean to distinguish practice research that merely cites or uses philosophical discourses principally as a strategy of validation. I discuss this further in *Research bubbles* on p.xx.

Deploying principles for the case-study (how to decide)

What do these principles mean for *Children of the Soil* as an artifact of research and as a case-study for this writing?

Following principle 2, what strands of research exist in *Children of the Soil* that are able to be perceived? There are at least five potential areas that readily come to mind: 1) use of graphic novel tropes in an unconventional theme; 2) representations of the other-than-human⁶¹ in art practices, and the difficult role of the body in such representations; 3) experimental forms of screendance; 4) the field of ecology-minded somatics or eco-somatics;⁶² 5) explorations of temporality (and perhaps form) in experimental film.

There are already problems here. For instance, the film is only nominally screendance (3) and yet its value to that community of practice might be in participating in ongoing conversations about the role of the body on screen. I could

also concatenate representations of the other-than-human in art practices (2) with both experimental screendance (3) and/or eco-somatics (4). Of the five, screendance (3) is the community of practice I most strongly identify with (and am perhaps best known), yet I might be guilty of drawing tenuous or unhelpful lines between the research practices visible in *Children of the Soil* and that field. Another option would be to try and speak to each of these areas in a framing document. This would depend on how much space I have to write and would run the risk of breaking principle 1 by neutering the unfinished thinking of the artwork itself.

There are other options. For instance, my colleague Rosemary Lee responded to the use of humour in a work *about* death and the body.⁶³ Could I examine other practices working with subtle (or obvious) forms of humour? This is not a field I am at all familiar with (likewise practices to do with using tropes of graphic novels (1)) so would require a large investment of time to get at least partly up to speed on that body of artistic work (let alone the scholarly work surrounding it).

Principle 3 starts to become useful here if I think of the community of practice to which this artwork might be most valuable when it is framed post hoc as research. This is to foreground the idea of research *servicing* a community – a point to which I will return below. But I sense a curious moment as I write here now (12:04, 13 January 2023). I am recognising that my longest artistic practice – that of being a choreographer – is hanging over this hypothetical framing process. My 30+ years as a choreographer cannot not infect the work I make. I could therefore frame the researchful aspects of the artwork broadly as *expanded choreographic thinking across disciplines* and that certainly would open the artwork up to a broad and lively community or communities of practice. Although that too might run the risk of breaking principle 1.

There's a tricky decision to be made here. But it is important that whatever the decision it will involve my doing the difficult work of seeking other artistic work with which *Children of the Soil* can be in researchful dialogue with. It would certainly be easier to find written scholarly work to start a monologue with. That work is just *there* waiting for me in Research Rabbit or Google Scholar, or even in an explicitly AI system like Elicit. The risk here though is that I end up breaking all three principles by creating a scholarly bubble for the artwork.

Research bubbles: what I write about when I write about my research

In the original invitation to submit this writing to Dance Research, C-DaRE's director (i.e. my boss) – Sarah Whatley – wrote that the idea is to invite people "to contribute some writing that focuses on their practice".⁶⁴

This invitation is a trap even if it was not intended as such. It is a trap because the tautological expectation when we write about artistic practices is that we will focus on our practices. We rarely if ever write about how our work is part of a community of artistic practice. We are more likely to write about it as part of non-adjacent

communities that seem to validate the quality of our work. Perhaps it is not surprising that in such a nascent methodological form in the academy we would choose to frame our artistic practices in relation to cultural and philosophical authorities. We lean on them to prop up the status of our work.

Here is some evidence. In Volume 26 of JAR⁶⁵ – the Journal for Artistic Research – there are six expositions of practice. None mention any other practitioner or artwork except for Szanto and Sicotte who only refer to each other’s artistic practices.⁶⁶ The list of people mentioned in the six expositions is predictable: Ricoeur, Foucault, Baudelaire, Deleuze and Guattari, Benjamin, Bergson, Debord, Butler, etc.

I did not cherry pick Volume 26 of JAR.⁶⁷ The phenomenon is endemic to journals that focus on or include practice: *Choreographic Practices* (a journal I co-edit), *Journal for Embodied Research* and the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* are more or less the same. Any exceptions will likely prove the rule.

We now have a near endless supply of *sui generis* practices, each in an isolated enemy-less battle for newness and the status of original research with the names of well-known theoreticians used as “talismans”.⁶⁸ What does this decision to write almost exclusively in relation to authority figures outside our communities of practice say about the interests, confidence and responsibilities of practice researchers? And what does it do to the integrity of the field as a whole?

When we argue from authority⁶⁹ to establish the bona fides of our practice research we choose to frame our work by drawing extractive lines from those authorities to our artworks. Such framing only serves the needs, desires and ambitions of the practice researcher, and the one-way lines render our artistic work inert and untouched. Our practice research exists in isolated bubbles, with no exchange, no history and no development of understanding through time.

Ecosystems and the most basic (and moral) of research intentions

In 2002 the theatre scholar Melissa Trimmingham was expressing frustration at the lack of a clearly articulated methodology in practice research when, in just the third paragraph of the article, she wrote:

We cannot afford to dispense with the most basic (and moral) of research intentions: put simply, it must be for the benefit of others apart from the researchers themselves.⁷⁰

Trimingham’s words are strong. It is our responsibility as practice researchers to work for the benefit of others apart from ourselves. These responsibilities are no different for researchers in other disciplines, even if the epistemic and ontologic conditions of the work we do are starkly different.

I am going to adopt what is a fashionable metaphor to help think through the implications of Trimmingham's assertion for present-day practice-researchers: the ecosystem.

In academic writing in dance and performance⁷¹ the word *ecosystem* gets used loosely and broadly, including as an unspecified place human beings live in or inhabit,⁷² as a place akin to nature or the natural,⁷³ as an entity that needs saving,⁷⁴ as a thing to be aware of,⁷⁵ as a way to understand the body,⁷⁶ as places to encounter,⁷⁷ and as a metaphor.⁷⁸

An ecosystem is a "biological system composed of all the organisms found in a particular physical environment, interacting with it and with each other".⁷⁹ The familiar example is a pond with its insects, algae, bacteria, etc.⁸⁰ What is curious is that how one delineates a pond from the rest of its environment is, in effect, a choice: any system has boundaries.⁸¹ Should the stones around the outside be included? What about the ground on the outside of those stones? I could describe such a choice as biological gerrymandering. When we use the word ecosystem – in its literal or metaphorical sense – we are describing a particular environment that needs to be specified.⁸² An ecosystem as boundary becomes a way to mark the limits of our attention, perspective and understanding.

In any given ecosystem, what we then find (and the interactions we notice) depends on the eyes and technologies we deploy, what we are hoping to see, what we are willing to see, and what kinds of attention we are willing to pay. In general, we humans grasp what we can and compare it to something we already know.⁸³ In this sense, perhaps an ecosystem as a metaphor for a collection of practices and practitioners that comprise an area of practice research can more appropriately be described as an ecosystem.⁸⁴

Understanding why we grasp *something* – and not something else – is at heart of this article about why we frame practice research as we do. As my eyes, senses and desires have adjusted to the artwork *Children of the Soil*, I start to find (with the fundamental help of colleagues) new materials and interactions peculiar to a particular ecosystem – what I would describe in a less metaphorical and less hifalutin way as a *community of practice*.⁸⁵ The work of those already working in a community of practice is not simply a resource to extract warrant or validation. When we acknowledge being-in-relation we recognise reciprocity. In other words, the collective understanding of the research that is held gently by the community is modified by reciprocity as re-understanding. The organisms in a practice research ecosystem are instances of practice; these organisms are in relationship to each other: their interactions and movements modify and adapt each other. They move and are moved. This is new knowledge.

Collective behavior begins [...] in the midst of encounter. "When one ant touches another with its antennae, it decides whether the other ant is a nestmate," she explains. From tiny interactions such as these, colonies

develop foraging strategies and reproductive trajectories, not as “individuals,” but as encounters in motion.⁸⁶

In Anna Tsing’s words – as she introduces the writing of Deborah M. Gordon⁸⁷ – lie a blueprint for interacting communities of practice research that generate re-understanding through encounters in motion.

The alternative is the status quo: individuals creating solitary and solipsistic maps seemingly founded on arguments from authority and divorced from the epistemic and ontologic foundations of artistic practices. After all, whether the practice research is *ab ovo* or *post hoc*, “we have never been individuals”.⁸⁸ The moral imperative of our work ought then to reflect what German biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber describes as the “desire to connect through touch and body in order to create fertile communities of mutual flourishing”.⁸⁹ Weber uses the term *commons* to describe “protecting aliveness through participation and reciprocity”,⁹⁰ and I hope Weber does not mind that in this moment I choose to extract his thinking for another purpose: to help those of us in practice research imagine how our work might enliven our ecosystems of artistic practice.

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¹ Every edit and iteration of this article are available to view on Github at <https://github.com/skellis46/slipbox/blame/master/artistic%20research%20and%20ecosystems.md>

² "A Methodology for Practice as Research," 54.

³ Bulley and Sahin, "Practice Research - Report 1."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ref.ac.uk. In Australia this evaluation process is called *Excellence in Research in Australia* and in New Zealand it is the *Performance-Based Research Fund*.

⁶ Noauthor, "Overview Report by Main Panel D and Sub-panels 25to34," 193.

⁷ Now Emeritus Professor of Drama at Exeter University.

⁸ *The Standing Conference of University Drama Departments*: <https://scudd.org.uk/members/scudd-mailing-list/>

⁹ bristol.ac.uk/parip/

¹⁰ Piccini, in Thomson, "Practice as Research," 161.

¹¹ Frayling, "Research in Art and Design," 5.

¹² The premise of the public assessment of research is for a panel of peers to do its best to assess the quality of research; by which I am encouraged to infer that some artistic practices (or at least how they are presented for REF in this case) must be more researchful than others. In many respects, it is inevitable that a process like REF will change the behaviours of those it involves: "The trouble is that when we start quantifying and measuring everything, we soon begin to change the world to fit the way we measure it." (Harford, *Messy* n.pag) This article is not about the nature of quantification and measurement and how they shape practices and processes; rather my hunch is that the nature of artistic practice has been more powerfully shaped by the shift from professional to academic contexts. Art does not need practice research but practice research is dependent on art. Is 'better art' made because of practice research? If the answer is 'no' then what are we doing other than greasing the machinery of the academy?

¹³ Noauthor, "Ab Ovo, Adv."

¹⁴ Noauthor, "Post Hoc, n., Adv., And Adj."

¹⁵ I don't think this necessarily holds for PhDs by publication. These processes often bypass the messy, complex and emergent nature of practice research methods.

¹⁶ Ellis, "Many Possible Futures."

¹⁷ Wilson and van Ruiten, *SHARE*, 265.

¹⁸ Ellis, *Indelible*.

¹⁹ Thanks to [Alys Longley](#) for first introducing me to Pickering's book.

²⁰ Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, 7.

²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² Ibid., 22–23.

²³ Ibid., 198.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Burrows, "Self-Evident."

²⁶ Burrows, *Writing Dance*.

²⁷ Burrows, *Rewriting*.

²⁸ Suchman, *Plans and Situated Actions* 1987 p.ix, in Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, 21 (footnote 34).

²⁹ Noauthor, "Ad Hoc, v."

³⁰ Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 165.

³¹ Burrows, *Writing Dance*, 29.

³² Ibid.

³³ Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 167.

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- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Bulley and Sahin, "Practice Research - Report 1."
- ³⁶ Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 146.
- ³⁷ Borgdorff, "The Debate on Research in the Arts," 18.
- ³⁸ Burrows, *Writing Dance*, 25.
- ³⁹ Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 167.
- ⁴⁰ Magee, "Introduction. Part 1," 3.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 2.
- ⁴² Piccini in Thomson, "Practice as Research," 161.
- ⁴³ Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts*, 11.
- ⁴⁴ Bulley and Sahin, "Practice Research - Report 1," 27.
- ⁴⁵ Biggs and Büchler, "Communities, Values, Conventions and Actions," 91.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 194.
- ⁴⁸ Schwab, "Experimental Systems," 166.
- ⁴⁹ I have previously discussed epistemic affordances and unfinished thinking in *That Thing Produced* (Ellis, "That Thing Produced") and *Corporeal Epistemics* (Ellis, *Corporeal Epistemics*).
- ⁵⁰ Ellis, "Children of the Soil."
- ⁵¹ The PRAG report gives a useful overview of writing approaches in practice research (Bulley and Sahin, "Practice Research - Report 1," 27–30); see also Borgdorff re experimental written forms outside of academic conventions (Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 167–68) and Nelson's overview of the role of more conventional complementary writing. (Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts*)
- ⁵² Nature, Art, Habitat Residency (theme: soil): <https://nahr.it/2022-Theme>
- ⁵³ The organisers used the word *research* in the call for proposals, and I note here the currency of the term in the professional arts world. My experience is that in that context the word usually implies 'not making a work'.
- ⁵⁴ I was required to write a 300 word summary and I quickly wrote the following (in about 20 minutes): Children of the Soil is a short film that explores the slow work of growth, gravity and decay. It was created through several practices: 1) falling slowly to the ground; 2) timelapse photography; 3) post-production explorations of spatialising time (using graphic novel 'panels'); 4) texts exploring the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). I was relatively new to all of these practices before pre-production, although the body-based work is a natural extension of my ongoing corporeal practice. The four practices coalesce around two artistic contexts that I have worked in for 20-30 years: choreography and screendance. I don't yet know how to write about it as research and for which community of practice. I am clarifying these issues in a journal article but am tending to think of it as research in and for the screendance community (albeit in an experimental way) that aims to question the role and presence of the human body without simply rendering it invisible. (Ellis, 13 December 2022)
- ⁵⁵ Lee, *Meltdown*.
- ⁵⁶ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.
- ⁵⁷ Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*.
- ⁵⁸ Burges and Elias, *Time*.
- ⁵⁹ Burrows, *Writing Dance*, 25.
- ⁶⁰ Haseman, "Tightrope Writing," 7.
- ⁶¹ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.
- ⁶² See for example Fortin, "Looking for Blind Spots in Somatics' Evolving Pathways"; Nuding, "Approaching Eco-Somatics."
- ⁶³ Lee, "REF Reviews."
- ⁶⁴ Whatley, "An Invitation!"
- ⁶⁵ <https://www.jar-online.net/en/issues/26>
- ⁶⁶ David Szanto and Geneviève Sicotte, "Research-Creation about and with Food."
- ⁶⁷ My desire here is not to be overly critical of any one publication or individual, and nor do I stand innocent of similar preoccupations (my PhD was more or less an homage to Bergson).
- ⁶⁸ Chamberlain, in Thomson, "Practice as Research," 176.
- ⁶⁹ Thanks to Anna Pakes for introducing me to this term.
- ⁷⁰ Trimmingham, "A Methodology for Practice as Research," 54.

⁷¹ I did global searches of every issue of four journals: Dance Research (in which the word *ecosystem* is mentioned in only 1 article); Performance Research (mentioned in 82 articles); Choreographic Practices (7 articles including one of my own editorials); and the Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices (14 articles).

⁷² E.g. Moradian, "Human Ecologies and Conscious Evolution"; Vicente, "Turning the World Back to Earth (and Back Again) Through Alessandro Sciarroni's Spinning Practice."

⁷³ E.g. Sebiane Serrano, "*Mestizo* Corporalities."

⁷⁴ E.g. Laidlaw, "The Ecological Imperative and Function of Dance."

⁷⁵ E.g. Weig, "Novel Ecosystemic Awareness."

⁷⁶ E.g. Nuding, "Approaching Eco-Somatics."

⁷⁷ E.g. McHugh, "Embodying Nature."

⁷⁸ E.g. Parkinson, "Art Practice as Ecosystem Questionnaire."

⁷⁹ Dictionary, "*Ecosystem*, n.". n.pag.

⁸⁰ Somma, "The Ecosystem of a Freshwater Pond."

⁸¹ Close, "A Brief Note on Systems Theory."

⁸² Noting here Hannah Close's thinking on systems theory and her ambivalence towards the metaphor of the system that the word 'ecosystem' inherits. (ibid)

⁸³ Roberts, "Notes on Dogen's 'Being'."

⁸⁴ Scharmer, "Vertical Literacy."

⁸⁵ For the sake of simplicity my language re communities of practice implies borders and boundaries that are easily delineated. This is unlikely to be the case, particularly as many or most practice researchers will be working across and between the porous boundaries of artistic disciplines. Those borderline epistemic cases which challenge our researchful contributions are fecund zones of understanding and change. The nature of borders is richly theorised; for instance Richard Sennett in sociology (Sennett, *Together*), Andreas Weber (in Close, "The Poetics of Ecology") or Jamie Hekcert (in Sleigh, "Relationships Between the Cracks") in ecology, Saarnivaara in philosophy of art (Saarnivaara, "Art as Inquiry"), and Paolo Garbolino in practice research (Garbolino, "What the Scientist's Eye Tells the Artist's Brain").

⁸⁶ Tsing et al., "Beyond Individuals," M72.

⁸⁷ Gordon, "Without Planning."

⁸⁸ Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber, "A Symbiotic View of Life," 325.

⁸⁹ Weber, *Enlivenment*, 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 5.