Responses to JAWS questions:
5 December 2016
Sophie Hope

Sophie Hope is a researcher, artist and teacher exploring the multiple sites, methods and and legitimacies of practice-based research. She produces works with pluralised perspectives using diverse methods such as performative interviews, audio installations, flow diagrams and communal dinners. Her work is often developed with others through the format of devised workshops exploring subjects such as art and politics in the year 1984, physical and emotional experiences of immaterial work, stories people tell about socially engaged art commissions and the ethics of employability in the creative industries. Recent projects include: 1984dinners.net, manuallabours.co.uk, socialartmap.org.uk and criticalworkplacements.org.uk.

Sophie is a full-time lecturer in the Film, Media and Cultural Studies Department at Birkbeck, University of London.

How does performance, as a mode of art practice, help you conduct your practice-research in a rigorous and original way?

I tend to refer to my practice as research and my research as being practice-based. These are contested terms, which mean different things to different people. Using the word practice as a noun (practise as the verb) implies naming a thing. My 'practice' becomes a catch-all term for the way I apply the elements, principles and methods of what I do. Performance is one ingredient of my practice and is something I want to understand and explore further. I don't come from a performance background and so I'm not very confident in claiming this is what I do. I became interested in the performative aspects of all our encounters during my PhD when I was trying to find out more about methods of social science research and ways of interviewing people. There are lots of ways to analyse what people are *really* saying, to unravel the layers of performance and presentation of the self (see Irving Goffman) and reveal some hidden meanings to try and get to the truth of the matter. I am often baffled by this quest for truth and align myself more with feminist approaches to research (see Donna Haraway), which acknowledge that there are multiple, contextual truths and the knowledge of the researcher is situated. I affect and am affected by the people/things I am researching.

As I am interested in the performative aspects of everyday life (speech, encounters, presentations), it seems sensible to be interested in the performative nature of research. I wanted to draw attention to these constructed research scenarios where we are all influencing each other. For me, there is no one truth, rather multiple, colliding versions feeding off each other. As a researcher I try out different ways of gaining some critical (albeit subjective) distance from which to gain new understandings of these experiences. This came up in the 'Performative Interviews', which I conducted for my PhD. Before interviewing others, I interviewed myself which involved telling my Mum about a project I did that went wrong. I asked her to then retell the story to camera as if it had happened to her. In the footage she's very

convincing and then half-way through, she looks at me (I'm stood behind the camera) and asks something like, 'sorry, Sophie, I can't remember, what did you do then?' Any belief in what you are watching is tested at that point. You are left questioning the source, the method, the story and the point of the interview.

Similarly, with my '1984 dinners'[i], I have become as interested in the performance of memory as I am in the stories of 1984 themselves. Perhaps a lot of this stems from my school days when the only lessons in which we were really invited to be critical thinkers was in History classes when we had to always question our sources. For me, rigour in research involves a thorough, constant (relentless) questioning of sources, methods and outcomes - this critical thinking in action, through practice, is what I'm interested in honing and perfecting, through trial and error. I'm never quite there.

Can you give a bit of background on your 1984 dinner project and this intersection between performance, lecture & social event (the act of eating, preparing food, the codes of behaviour that comes with that)?

The 1984 dinner project stems from the archival research I was doing during my PhD about the Greater London Council from 1981-86 and the relationship between the left-wing metropolitan council and their support of activist, feminist, anti-racist, overtly political art groups and actions at the time. This was happening at the time of, and in direct opposition to the then Thatcher government. Through a brief exercise in time travel I wanted to explore the tactics and practices of artists/activists working in the margins of institutionalised culture during the Tory government of the 1980s, and consider what we can learn from these approaches in a different era of Conservative politics, 30 years on. On 29 September 2011, I hosted the first 1984 dinner with six invited guests in my studio building on Deptford High Street, London to discuss art and politics in the year 1984. My guests were Loraine Leeson, Sonia Boyce, Stephen Lobb, Flick Allen, Leila Galloway, Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller, all artists actively working in the UK now and in 1984. I then went on to arrange 1984 dinners in Singapore, Australia and South Africa during my sabbatical in Spring 2014 and Uruguay in 2015.

The resulting audio extracts housed on the website cover different topics prompted by a menu of questions I prepared for the guests and which were used to frame the discussions. These included questions about the frictions and conflicts that existed at the time among artists, the institutional support structures and funding they tapped into, how they made a living and what they think of the context now in relation to 1984. Unsurprisingly the conversations took different turns and moved beyond my menu of suggested topics. I am interested in how this audio archive might trigger discussion and further responses about the political and economic context of art and activist practices in the mid 1980s in relation to past, current and future theories and practices or art and politics. As I was seven years old in 1984, I am interested in how I can translate and re-interpret events I didn't experience first hand.

My role in this process has been to invite a select number of guests, facilitate the conversations using a menu of questions as a prompt and witness the discussions unfold. The editing of the conversations into themed audio tracks involves a process of listening and re-arranging to create edited versions of the narratives that emerged from the dinners. There are layers of interpretation and editing through out. I am inviting people to cast their minds back; they select some things and leave others behind. I capture the things they say to each other and edit their words – I listen, listen again, split, drag, delete, rename, save. The process of editing, paraphrasing and reinterpreting of events continues. Flick Allen mentioned during the first dinner how this exercise acted as 'reiterative inspiration' in terms of reflecting where we are now in relation to our previous histories. I am interested in the fallibility of fieldwork and the connections between research methods (the practice) and the content of the research. I want to explore ways of entering the material and history in a way that does not ignore the complexity of experiences, agendas and ideologies of a time and place, but to navigate my own journey through these different territories of memory.

Why did you pick 1984, and why the dinner format?

The spectre of George Orwell's '1984' (published in 1949) is hovering in the background. It acts as a backdrop but is not centre stage. 1984dinners.net is not a project about whether or not people thought they were living in Airstrip One, although relationships between politics, the state and collective and individual identity and self-expression were explored from different angles around the tables. Crucially, this focused look at what was happening in 1984 also requires us to asks ourselves where we are heading.

The method of the dinner format allows the guests at the table to shape the conversation, with the menu of questions acting as a framework of topics to address. Narratives of 1984 are formed from the memories and viewpoints present. Each recall and reflection triggered further reminiscences and ruminations. The type of 'data' that emerges from the dinners I suggest is different to the kind of information I might have garnered from interviews with people individually. I would have been unable to offer any first hand experiences and the interviewees would have been conversing with themselves, with me as eager listener. Rather, the generative effect of the dinner conversation prompted a richer flow of reference points and experiences.

The tables and chairs are arranged before hand, in a square. Guests are invited to sit where they want. I intervene with questions and prompts if need be, bringing things back to the topics on the menu of questions. There is an element of theatricality to the dinner as a performative space. It is formal, with seating arranged so that guests are facing each other, and potentially intimidating with inherent, unspoken rules about table manners that may or may not be shared. There is also a suggestion of informality and conviviality in eating and drinking together suggesting an encounter which is less formal than an interview or meeting.

The artist Lois Weaver developed the idea of The Long Table as a method of encouraging public informal conversations about serious topics. With the Long Table format the conversation at the table is being watched by an audience, any of whom can take a seat at the table. With the 1984 dinners, the guests are invited and there is no immediate audience. The invite-only aspect of the dinner acknowledges the inevitable imperfection of the reminiscence process, allowing the guests up to three hours to exchange memories and reflect on recent histories. The resulting audio recording is a snapshot of 1984 created by those people around the table who have agreed to attend. Another group would have a different set of stories to tell (interlinking perhaps, but also distinct). One dinner could spawn many more.

Are certain kinds of arts practice (i.e. socially engaged art) more suited to function as research, whilst some kinds of practice face bigger challenges to be rendered as research? A possible example of this would be how Installation and Performance practice in the arts are singled out in REF 2014 as being unfocused, without 'clear research parameters' (REF 2015; 85).

Really interesting question - maybe some methodologies are more easily recognised and understood by non-arts-based researchers and therefore can be brought into the research fold. Others might test the boundaries and be less recognisable, so pushed aside. Hopefully it's about pushing the boundaries of what we understand research to be (motive, methods, what it looks like) rather than getting practice to look more like existing research methodologies.

Do you think artist-researchers can potentially relate research more to 'real' experience?

I think this really depends on what is being researched and how. The thing with research is that it is quite niche and highly specific, no matter what discipline you are coming from. It therefore might be that only a few other people have thought about it at that specialised level. The hope is that with any research, these really small but very deep burrows of knowledge are shared with other people who haven't done the burrowing. Are there nuggets or sections that can be handed on and experienced by others? This sharing can take different forms. I don't think the peer-reviewed article is the only way (other specialists might read it but not many others). Other forms, such as exhibitions, performances, illustrations, self-publishing might provide other ways to burrow into the material. Because the peer-review article is not an obvious form for practice-research I am always looking for other forms that are more suitable or relevant to my practice. Using visual/performative/poetic languages might be closer to other people's experiences; academic language can be quite impenetrable and therefore exclude people from sharing in it.

In your practice-based PhD, you describe the method of 'performative interviews' as a way to rethink how controversial information is shared (Hope 2011; 120). Do you think this performative dimension of research methods is under-utilised by other disciplines?

There is a branch of performative social science (see Kip Jones), which explores this. Your research paradigm might depend on how far you are prepared to go in stretching and manipulating the words and actions of other people, places and things you are researching. For some people, this might be a step too far. You're not really supposed to mess with data - it's considered sacrosanct. Your job as a researcher is to analyse it - the more the data is meddled with, the less it can tell us. My approach is to respect the data but to think about ways of using it in order to understand it and the research process better.

Performative dimensions of research methods might take two routes:
1) The methods of data-collection itself as performative. For example, I am interested in how different methods such as time travel or fantastical metaphors can give us license to tackle issues/explore our assumptions/perceptions that might be difficult to tackle head on.
2) The manipulation of the material/data through the process of analysis so that it takes on a new form, inspired by the original sources. For example, I have been using extracts of transcript to make fictional scripts or applying collage/cut and paste to compile new narratives from the material.

These could be used as approaches to research, which might reveal other stories that might not come up through interviews, for example.

I'm really interested in the research you've done on work placements in art degrees ('critical work placements[ii]). What were your findings from this study? Do you think that credited work placements have a place in arts education?

I did this work on credited work placements with my colleague Lorraine Lim at Birkbeck. Based on our review of existing literature, we found that well informed students and courses that explicitly connect the concepts, theories and realities of employability through practical experience and academic, critical reflection are perhaps a way forward for thinking about credited work placements. In this sense I do think there is a place for credited work placements as a way to think through and critically engage with the questions of how your art practice relates to making a living. This investigation follows on from one of the projects I did during my PhD called the 'FUNding FACTORY' when I worked with some art students in Vienna to consider their cultural production and/as making a living. This was also a way of thinking about the overlapping concerns of conceptual practice and paying the rent, forcing us to think about these together. There also needs to be a critical, political way of approaching these questions in an educational context which privileges employability and the unapologetic instrumentalisation of education for the job market. The worlds of critical education and preparing job-ready students does not always sit comfortably for me and this came through in the workshops Lorraine and I did with host organisations, course tutors and students where the ideologies behind what they wanted to get out of the placements were quite different.

In your ongoing project 'Social Art Map', you seem to be making a new system for recording the 'output/outcomes' of social/public collaboration projects; how do you think this could stand to be an artist-led alternative to the dreaded REF?

Measuring the impact of publicly funded research through the REF has parallels with evaluating publicly funded art. Before my PhD I was already concerned with the way in which evaluation was often only ever a form of advocacy for the projects, artists or funders it was supposedly evaluating. It was very hard to be critical and analytical in a way that might go against the aims and objectives of the funders/curators/commissioners/artists. It became a process of reporting how the project had a positive impact. I see impact case studies in the REF as potentially falling into this trap. In justifying public money (an important part of the contract), there is a danger of assuming we need to tell positive narratives of impact, exaggerating the effects of the research and distracting from the qualitative detail that may not be all that positive or impact-full. The Social Art Maps are attempts at keeping the experiences of social art practices complex, nuanced and contradictory. I'm not interested in presenting projects as positive, slick case studies, rather we're capturing partial, messy, mundane timelines of projects from diverse perspectives - including bits that might otherwise get left out of formal narratives. This could be a way of evaluating other pieces of research but requires an openness to listen to sides of the story that may not coincide with the grand narrative you want to present to funders. It might not present you, the researcher, in a good light. This is what is important in critically reflecting on the work (warts and all). But this might not be what we want peers/funders to see as it puts our reputations at risk. Then we are back to presenting polished versions of projects which make us look great, but nothing changes.

What else problematises the assessment of practice-based/-led research? Do you think the structure of assessment needs to change?

Who do we understand peers to be in the peer-review process? E.g. I've been wanting to rethink who gets to be a peer in the context of reviewing socially engaged art practices (the subject and form of my research). I have been trying to do this for years through challenging the evaluation process and rethinking who gets to be the critical eyes and ears of a process. Can there be a way of opening up the peer-review process to those affected by / targeted as participants in the practice/research?

A project I was involved with explored the idea of participation and evaluation: 'Critical Friends' began with an invitation I received in 2008 from Stream, an arts organisation based in North Greenwich, London to evaluate a series of public and collaborative art commissions called Peninsula from 2008-2011. In response to this invitation, myself and Rebecca Maguire developed an alternative proposal and established a small group of participants of past and present Stream art projects to devise the questions they wanted to ask of the role of art in the neighbourhood. Critical Friends became the participant observers and evaluators of the projects themselves.

How can the practice aspect of practice-research best be conveyed through the medium of journal articles?

What form does the practice take and how can people experience these forms directly (film/exhibition/performance)? This means privileging the practice itself and being confident to say this needs to be experienced in order to engage with my practice-research. This is different to writing about the practice-research in a journal format, which may happen too.

How can we use journal articles to explore and discuss methodologies of practice? This is important to understand and interrogate in order to move the practice as research on and not keep re-inventing the wheel. We have a group of practice-based PhD students at Birkbeck called 'Corkscrew' which aims to provide a space to discuss methodologies and foreground practice from different arts disciplines (theatre, creative writing, fine art, film…). We have also connected up with students from other universities and done 'show and tell' style events to critique each other's work in progress. I would like to be more involved in sharing methodologies with other academic staff (as well as students) across different institutions to explore overlaps and distinctions. I think there is scope to explore common approaches and philosophies towards research even if the methods and forms may differ. Obviously writing and reading about these methodologies helps, but seeing the methodology in action, experiencing it first hand and discussing relationships to one's own way of working are also valuable .

In a recent article (*Bursting paradigms: a colour wheel of practice-research*; Hope 2016) you draw attention to the disadvantage practice as research faces due to the favouring of established research paradigms (84); how do you foresee this changing over the next decade?

It seems more and more artists/creative practitioners want to do PhDs (for all sorts of different reasons), but I would be interested to know how many then enter universities as (practice-based) academics. How will this affect teaching? How is new practice-based knowledge distributed, discussed and understood? If I'm positive, the continuation of practice-based research in the academy could be great for students and other staff of the university if it could contribute to the important job of cracking open new ways of doing research. If I'm negative, the gate-keepers of knowledge production and distribution will try and model artists into their own image, creating mini-me's but with a creative slant. There will be a rejection of this from many artists/cultural workers as, surprise surprise, this involves too many compromises and takes artists away from the stuff that makes the practice interesting. Hopefully there can be some areas of fruitful cross-overs, between disciplines and we can keep finding nooks and crannies to nestle and spread in these academic institutions. As many universities are struggling to survive, practice-research will no doubt be instrumentalised to market to customers or make money in some way. How we maintain some artistic/intellectual integrity in this process is the question. But this is a question for all critical thinkers, researchers and teachers.

[i] An account of the ongoing 1984 dinners project is available at: http://1984dinners.net

[ii] Information about 'critical work placements' is available at: http://criticalworkplacements.org.uk/