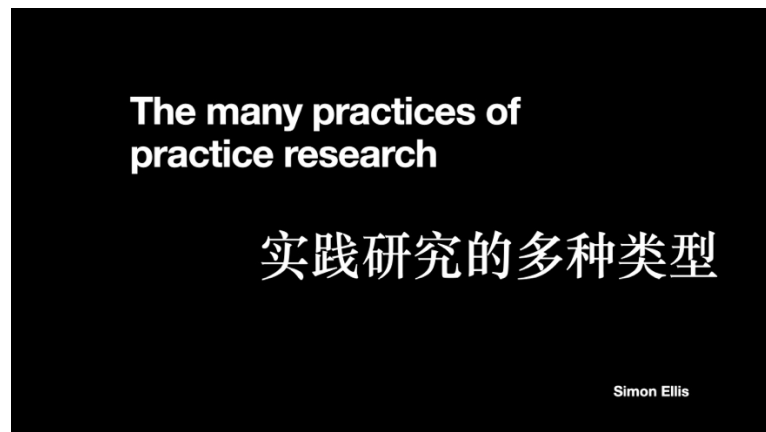


The many practices of practice research



Introduction: a life-changing moment

It is late 1999 and I am standing in a night club in Melbourne watching a contemporary dance performance. A former university teacher of mine comes over and says, "Simon, the University of Melbourne now allows PhD students to create artistic work as part of PhDs". That moment changed my life and it is why I am here with you now.

Good evening everyone and thank you for this tremendous honour to talk with you today. I bring you greetings, respect and kindness here from the Centre for Dance Research at the University of Coventry in England.

My expertise is in dance and choreography, but also in the various research methods collectively known as practice research.

There are good things and bad things about practice research. Like any research method it has limitations and possibilities, positive and negative aspects. It is also – again like all research methods – partial; partial in the claims that can be made based on its use; partial in how it helps us understand different phenomena.

This evening I want to argue for the value of practice research, but I want to argue in good faith. By that I mean I want to directly address what practice research makes possible, and where it fails.

I am also aware that my talk is the third of three presentations about practice research. Perhaps with these three different perspectives – from my colleagues Vida Midgelow and Rosemary Kate Martin, and me here today – your understanding of practice research will be developing and clarifying.

Or perhaps you will see another side of practice research, as if holding a crystal – an object with many surfaces that looks different depending on which surface you observe.



Constructing the methods of an unknown research process

I begin at *my* beginning in practice research.

In 1999 the University of Melbourne in Australia changed its submission policy for PhDs so that creative work could contribute up to 50% of an entire PhD submission. I was 31 years old at the time.

Up until then artists working in the academy – or academics interested in the nature of arts practices – tended to append their work onto other disciplines: psychology, sociology, education. PhDs in these circumstances made arts practice the *object* of the research, and applied discipline-specific methods to analyse and understand those phenomena.

And so there I was in late 1999, working as a freelance dancer and choreographer with a Master's degree in biomechanics, and the University of Melbourne appeared to be gifting me an opportunity: I could develop PhD research that included my artistic practice, and practice outputs could be up to 50% of the PhD.

I started in March 2000; I was the first such student at the University of Melbourne. Being first in any institutional process is both a blessing and a curse. There were, more or less, no rules to follow and help guide me and ... well ... there were no rules to follow.

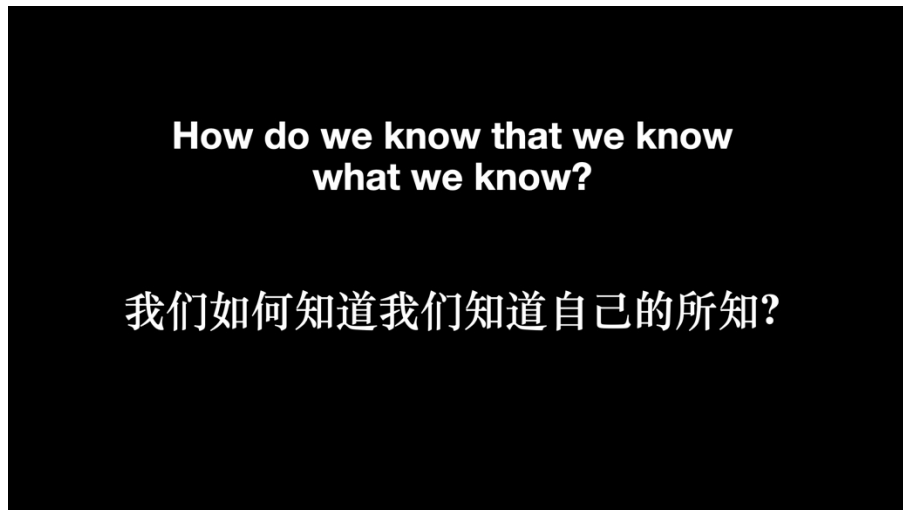
I was free to do something but no one knew what, perhaps other than making an art work. My supervisors and the academic team did not know how the artistic research process was meant to happen except that we understood that I needed to find a path.

The University's PhD regulations had existed for a long time and were built on a particular world of epistemic assumptions that had language like: research design and protocols, subjects and participants, data collection, and data analysis.

That was my PhD life for those few years – coming to grips with an unknown research process as I was constructing the methods around me. It was discombobulating yet it laid the foundations for me to think deeply about what it

means to come to know through artistic practice, how we come to know and perhaps even *what* we might come to know.

I remember a professor of mine in the early 1990s in New Zealand. He used to ask us that most elegant of epistemic questions: "*How* do we know *that* we know *what* we know?"



Invisible metaphors

I mentioned briefly just a moment ago how before the advent of practice research people interested in researching the arts worked quietly in education, psychology and sociology departments ... and sometimes even in science laboratories.

The Dutch scholar Henk Borgdorff calls such research **research *on* the arts**, which is when the art practice is the *object* of the research, and that object is "untouched" by the researcher (Borgdorff 2006: 6). ^{e0141f}

Borgdorff's idea reveals an important epistemic assumption that usually we take for granted when we do research in the university: that there is an object out there, able to be seen and able to be grasped and manipulated by we human subjects.

This is an epistemic stance to the world of objects. It is no coincidence that in the English language we speak of research *findings*.

But 'findings' is a metaphor designed to concretise research processes and outcomes: that there is something out there to be found. Indeed, 'findings' is a strongly Western idea reinforced during the period of time now known as the European enlightenment.

Think too of the metaphorical implications of that word: enlightenment. To enlighten. We shine lights on objects 'out there' – we illuminate them so that human-kind might become enlightened. These are big metaphors; God-like even: lightness and darkness ... not so far from good and evil.

These metaphors shape the methods we use and the technologies we develop to deploy those methods. Our methods and their metaphors become the air we breathe in universities and academies. The technologies are the knives we wield to dissect the objects of our curiosity, our attention.

Yet what is most powerful about metaphors is that we forget where they came from and what messages they convey about how we see the world and what it means to know and understand. They become invisible.

The butcher's dance

I am sure you are familiar with the story of the very good butcher Pao Ding as told in the Zhuangzi (莊子).



Please forgive my hubris for bringing a story that has emerged from Chinese culture back to you in China.

The story is useful because I think contained in it is the essence of why practice research matters in higher education and advanced research, and this essence has to do with phenomenology and how ineffable experiences might be shared.

Here is one small part of the story:

Butcher Ding laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Way (the Dao), which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now — now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and following things as they are. (Able 2020 n.pag.)

There are, as you know better than I, many ways to interpret this story:

as aesthetic mode of being in the world; as a method of cultivation that realizes the unity of subject and object; as a transformation of the self from a 'human

mechanism' to a 'natural mechanism'; and as caring for life (yangsheng 養生) (Turner 2023).

There is also the distinction between the Dao and Qi in the story.



There is the knife as Qi: the technical object wielded to carve the ox-as-object. And there is the Dao (or 'the way' as it is translated into English) as expressed or practiced by the butcher (Hui 2017 n.pag.).

Perhaps in Western psychology Master Zhuang's story most closely aligns with Csikszentmihályi's concept of flow (Csikszentmihályi 2009).



The human experience of flow is common. If you have played sport to a high level you will have had experiences of flow. If you have designed software you will have had experiences of flow. Almost any human endeavour which requires skill and attention affords the possibility of experiencing flow states.

The philosopher Jay Garfield describes flow states like this:

... one experiences one's action as spontaneous; one's own body, cognitive states, and the objects around one are not objects of reflective awareness. There is no experience of subject-object duality, and no awareness of self. (Garfield 2022, chap. 6 Immersion, n.pag.)

But what of our understanding of the very good butcher Pao Ding?

We could do scientific research into his work and methods. We might focus on the physics of his actions, the physical structure of the ox, the forces that hold the ox together and the forces required to overcome the ox's anatomy.

We might learn about torque, pressure, and potential and kinetic energy specific to that system. These might all be useful things to understand.

They might help us prevent butchers from overwork, or how to improve the quality of knives or the environments that butchers work in.

However, the philosopher Keith Frankish warns that physics does not tell us anything about what something is like in itself.

What is more, he writes that it never could because "its conceptual resources – mathematical concepts, together with the concepts of causation and spatiotemporal position – are suitable only for describing structures and processes, not intrinsic qualities" (Frankish 2016 n.pag).

In other words, physics would tell us nothing about the experience of the butcher as he came to understand the Dao through his practice.

And what about a psychological study? In this case the butcher's psychology – his emotions, motivations, perceptions or even the state of flow – would become the *object* of the psychological investigation.

But such a psychological account would also tell us little about the phenomenal experience of the butcher as he came to understand the Dao through practice.

What then of the butcher's experience as experienced by the butcher? The first-person experience. The "I". The subjective.

What if the butcher were a researcher as well, with the object of his research being his *emergent experience through practice*?

Are there things to be understood differently about human endeavour and human experience based on the work he does (or makes)?

Here is the heart of practice research, a heart that shares much (but not everything) with phenomenology. Practice research enables artist-researchers to develop understanding through practice and then to seek ways to share that understanding.

The bifurcated product

I think the fundamentals of practice research are more or less the same as other research fields, except for one obvious difference. It is a difference that has been with us since the early years of practice research in the UK. It is about the writing that accompanies artistic practice research.

Here is Angela Piccini writing online in 2002:

Must [practice research] include some form of disseminable reflection?
or is the practice in performance sufficient to stand as research output?
(Piccini in Thomson 2003: 161)

The disseminable reflection that Piccini refers to is called “complementary writing” (Nelson 2013: 11) or the “research narrative” (Bulley and Sahin 2021: 27).

Although the written component of practice research started out as a means to distinguish ‘art’ from ‘artistic research’ (Magee 2012), such writing is now hegemonic in providing something akin to “a single unified answer” (Biggs and Büchler 2011: 91) to a research problem or inquiry.

In other words, the “provisional” (Schwab 2019: 166) practice artifact or outcome of practice research embodies a “plurality of experiences” (Biggs and Büchler 2011: 91) and “unfinished thinking” (Borgdorff 2012: 194), while the written narrative hints at a singular answer.

The contrasting language of “unfinished thinking” and “unified answer” reflects the divergent epistemic affordances of art practices and *writing about* art practices (Ellis 2018). Nevertheless, the written research narrative is as consistent and concrete a component of practice research as one can imagine.

The debate in practice research around the nature of the written research narrative that accompanies the artworks underpins what the Australian artist-scholar Paul Magee calls the “bifurcated product” (Magee 2012: 3).

The bifurcated product is the artwork and the writing about the artwork, and this bifurcation maps on to the idea that practice research has two different audiences.

Henk Borgdorff states that “[practice] research addresses itself both to the academic forum and to the forum of the arts” (Borgdorff 2012: 167).

What does he mean by this? Put simply, Borgdorff is saying there are two different audiences for practice research and that the written component is designed with an academic audience in mind (Borgdorff 2012: 167), while the art work keeps in mind the artistic community.

The possibility that when we do practice research we must keep two distinct audiences in mind makes the method unique among research methods. It would be akin to a medical researcher presenting their experiments (or practice) to one community, and their research narrative (or writing) to a different community.

Strange indeed.

Practice research is not the same as phenomenology (but they are good friends)

When I talked about Pao Ding, I asked how best to understand the phenomenal/subjective experience of Ding as he came to understand and embody the Dao of his practice.

Phenomenology is the study of experience and consciousness. The word stems from the Greek which means *that which appears*. Ding's phenomenal experience (or rather "experience of phenomena") is also embodied and embedded.

That is, through the practice, he has come to deeply embody actions, and his physical understandings are embedded in the world beyond the limits of his person.

This is a complex system of practice including at the very least the ox, the knife and Pao Ding's body. Perhaps there is even something particular to what it feels like *to be* Ding as a butcher-practitioner? This is the realm of qualia: the subjective, qualitative properties of experiences.

Yet practice research is not the same as phenomenology, and the difference is important.

One key difference is that in practice research we seek to share the practice – or elements of the practice – using means that do not simply describe and interpret the practice through writing (the way a phenomenologist would).

If Pao Ding were an artist-scholar then part of his work would somehow be to give insight into his practice through the practice itself. Perhaps this would be a performance of him working with an ox. Perhaps it would be a series of photographs that help the viewer to understand what the practice is and what it says about human experience and understanding.

The experience of witnessing Ding's practice (through whatever means) would afford particular understandings in the witness. We might not know what those understandings will be until we try.

Principles and limitations of practice research

Up to now in this presentation I have introduced five key ideas.

The first is about epistemology, and *how we know that we know what we know* is critical to understanding all research methods.

The second is the invisible metaphors of research, and how our understanding is shaped by the language we use. These metaphors help us test our own assumptions about how we see the world, and how the world fits to (or confirms) the kind of eyes we use.

The third is the well-known story of the butcher Pao Ding and how we might study his craft and practice, including the possibility that Ding's embodied subjective experience is a vital part of the understanding.

The fourth is the split between art making and writing in practice research and how this split mirrors the idea that practice research has two audiences: the art world and the academic world.

Finally, the fifth is how practice research builds on phenomenological practices but then diverges because of how it is shared.

Now, I turn my attention to a more overarching view of practice research by describing what I think of as nine key principles. These principles include some of the limitations of practice research.

1. The principle of mess

We normally associate research processes with words like methodical and rigorous, and most certainly we do not think of research as *ad hoc*.

The sociologist and historian of science Andrew Pickering describes the practice of science as an unpredictable “dance of agency” (Pickering 1995: 21).

Pickering’s goal was to make a case that scientific practice represents a “dialectic of resistance and accommodation” (Pickering 1995: 22–23) and that it is overwhelmingly *ad hoc*.

Something *ad hoc* is makeshift; an emergency; it is improvised, impromptu and expedient, It is to “practise or create by using *ad hoc* measures, [...] to assemble or organize chaotically”.(noauthor 2021)

To work in an *ad hoc* way in artistic practice – as it is in science – is a strength, not a weakness. This is the principle of mess. The principle of mess does not discount the importance of methods and rigour. Rather, it brings mess (or practicing in an *ad hoc* way) into a dialectic with rigour.

2. The principle of many practices

When artists (and artist-scholars) talk about having *a* practice, the indefinite article “a” is misleading. No practice is singular.

I can say that my practice is dance but underneath that broad or unspecific term are many types of training, desires, curiosities, histories and traditions. Practice research brings these many practices into focus because it asks us how our understanding and experience is changed because of them.

The principle of many practices acknowledges that underlying any singular practice are many practices, and it is partly why principle 1, *the principle of (ad-hoc) mess*, exists.

3. The principle of strange tools

The American philosopher Alva Noë makes a compelling case for how the function of art is to “expose the concealed ways we are organized by the things we do” (Noë 2015, chap. 2 n.pag).

The role of art is to drag the tools of human endeavour out of their normal context, and to make them strange. By making them strange it helps make these tools more

and differently visible; we stop taking them for granted (even if briefly). Noë writes: “We make strange tools to investigate ourselves” (Noë 2015, chap. 4 n.pag.).

Art helps us see differently and isn't that what all research does?

Now, Noë is not talking about practice research here so I need to be careful. He's just talking about regular art that has existed outside of universities for as long as we have been homo sapiens.

But I propose that practice research makes this wish for strangeness an explicit function of the methods: to make visible that which is invisible.

4. The principle of two (interweaving) formats

I've discussed this earlier without calling it a principle.

In practice research there is the unfinished and open thinking of the artistic outputs and the apparently more tangible and finished discursive (written) elements. At their best, these two formats interweave to increase understanding in the research community. Yet they are often in tension and there is real danger that the written narrative closes or locks down the epistemic potential of the artistic outputs.

This principle is a reminder to the artist-scholar to respect and work with (and/or against) the ways in which understanding is able to be communicated.

5. The principle of truth and limited claims

Even given the principle of mess and the epistemic openness of how art functions, the truth matters.

It is the search for truth that underpins research. Search and search again. Research is continually conducted in the dark (Ingold 2018 n.pag.).

Yet in my experience the danger of epistemic openness without rigorous and humble searching and re-searching means that practice researchers are liable to fall into the trap of saying anything they want about their artistic practices.

In practice research what claims or new insights can be made and on what basis? What are the limits of such claims? An academic claim “is considered debatable or up for inquiry” (Nordquist 2020 n.pag.). But I do not see such debates happening in practice research.

There is a vicious circle of epistemology in which there are no limits to the claims made on behalf of practice research, which means there are no grounds to debate such claims, which means there are no limits to the claims, etc.



Perhaps this principle demands epistemic humility on the part of artist-scholars; reaching for the truth while avoiding the hubris of unwarranted claims.

6. The principle of futurity

The principle of futurity recognises that one of practice research's strengths rests on the newness afforded by the many possible futures of artistic practice (Ellis 2021). The principle of futurity is close to what is called speculative or blue-sky research.

This principle is in direct and productive tension with the principle of truth and limited claims.

7. The principle of availability

Many artist-scholars develop research that is difficult to share or that resists documentation. The principles of futurity, strange tools and mess assist the artistic-scholar in finding themselves in such strong places. Yet the principle of availability states that making our work available to others is more important than artistic principles.

Once again, there is productive tension here.

8. The principle of the possibility of failure

The principle of the possibility of failure is a close friend to the principle of truth and limited claims. It acknowledges how rare failure seems to be in practice research, as if practice research always achieves what the artist-researchers said it would. This is absurd.

Put simply, failure in practice research must be possible.

9. The principle of wonder

This principle is new for me so I am not sure about it. It is taken directly from the American poet Mary Ruefle:

I would rather wonder than know. [...] I think wondering is a way of inhabiting and lingering. [...] as human beings, our impulse is, once we know, once we have the answer, we move on. (Ruefle, in Naimon 2015 n.pag.)

The principle of wonder resists knowing. It asks us to immerse ourselves in uncertainty and not-knowing, and to hold off from producing. It is where human beings make new things possible, and my suspicion is that practice research is uniquely suited to wondering as opposed to knowing.

The questions that shaped this presentation

When I was first approached to talk with you this evening, I was given three questions to help shape my thinking. I'm going to finish my presentation by directly addressing these questions.

Why should artists require or need a PhD?

My first response is for you to consider your own – or imagine another – discipline (let's call it discipline x) and then ask yourselves, "Why should people in discipline x require or need a PhD?"

I imagine there are many different answers: as a stepping stone to a career in research; to learn the fundamentals of research methods; to develop an imaginative programme of research that makes a contribution to the field.

Or perhaps the question reflects the idea that there are particular jobs that require or need applicants to have a PhD. What are these jobs and where are they? In universities? In research laboratories?

If I were starting a university programme or a research laboratory in Beijing that focused on the arts I would want the most qualified, the most experienced – the experts – to be working there. And a PhD is a traditional and trusted way of indicating or qualifying experience and expertise.

But if I just wanted more qualified artists, then no I don't think PhDs in the arts are necessary although I would like to believe that by doing a PhD an artist will become a better artist.

Perhaps though the question is the wrong way around. What if the question were: How might we contribute to human understanding through practice research PhD projects?

With the question framed this way we start to see openness and possibility.

We see the ways in which practice research PhDs build our understanding of artistic processes, of questions to do with how art is documented and shared, with the interpretive experiences of audiences, with the ways in which art contributes to societal norms, differences and cultural change, with how experiences of artistic

practice change in time and how those changes might help us understand other processes outside the arts.

In this way we can see practice research as another method to broaden and deepen human understanding – an expansion of what it is we come to know, and how we come to know it. After all, any research method is effectively a technology – a tool – and the tools we use determine what is possible, what we see, and the nature of the things we make and do.

If Pao Ding were to use a different tool or technology to work with oxen, the results would be very different.

What are the requirements to gain this PhD and how should it be evaluated

What are the requirements to gain a PhD in any discipline and how are all PhDs evaluated? In other words, what if practice research PhDs were not special?

The answer is that we would have experts in the field evaluate the quality of the contribution that the PhD makes to that field.

That's it.

But this first answer of mine is a little sneaky on my part. Because I think implicit in the question is the idea that art is subjective and therefore can not or should not be evaluated. Is that right?

How does one evaluate such intangible things like beauty, aesthetics, taste, and culture, or even the qualia of human experience? These are complex ideas that are fundamental to how we value the arts in our cultures.

But I also do not want us to forget that a PhD of any kind is about contributing to human understanding. The means by which that contribution is made should not be important.

What kinds of artistic practices might best suit doctoral research?

I have a hunch that some kinds of artistic practices are indeed better suited to research (doctoral or otherwise). I am increasingly of the opinion – but it is only an opinion – that the university should not simply be another place where art is made.

Rather, practice research in the university is when artist researchers work through iterative creative practices to contribute to understanding in the field and beyond.

Any PhD student who enters the university to do practice research is there to excavate a problem or phenomenon through practice with commitment, rigour and attention to detail. It might be that part of that research process results in an artistic work of some kind, but wanting to make an art work should not be the reason to start a PhD.

Therefore, the kinds of artistic practices that might best suit doctoral research are those developed by artist-researchers who are committed to process, to noticing

change, to building understanding (including those aspects of human understanding that are ineffable), and to being open to how that understanding is best communicated.

Thank you everyone for your presence and attention. It has been a tremendous honour for me to be here with you online today.

谢谢



References

- Able, V. (2020) *The Dexterous Butcher – Zhuangzi* [online] available from <<https://thedewdrop.org/2020/05/18/the-dexterous-butcher-zhuangzi/>> [11 May 2023]
- Biggs, M. and Büchler, D. (2011) 'Communities, Values, Conventions and Actions'. in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*. ed. by Biggs, M. and Karlsson, H. London: Routledge, 82–98
- Borgdorff, H. (2012) *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. Leiden: Leiden University Press : Amsterdam
- Borgdorff, H. (2006) *The Debate on Research in the Arts*. in 'Sensuous Knowledge 02' [online] held 2006 at Bergen National Academy of the Arts, Bergen. KHiB. available from <<http://www.khib.no/norsk/kunstnerisk-utviklingsarbeid/publikasjoner/sensuous-knowledge-series/henk-borgdorff-the-debate-on-research-in-the-arts/>>
- Bulley, J. and Sahin, O. (2021) *Report 1: What Is Practice Research?* [online] British Library. available from <<https://bl.iro.bl.uk/concern/reports/b51c0f52-9801-49d9-9f00-cca89741091b>> [6 August 2021]
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009) *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Chicago: HarperCollins
- Ellis, S. (2021) *Many Possible Futures* [online] available from <<https://practiceasresearchblog.wordpress.com/2021/04/16/many-possible-futures/>> [13 January 2023]
- Ellis, S. (2018) 'That Thing Produced'. in *A World of Muscle, Bone & Organs* [online] ed. by Ellis, S., Blades, H., and Waelde, C. Coventry: C-DaRE, Coventry University, 480–498. available from <<https://www.coventry.ac.uk/PageFiles/276435/AWofMBandO.pdf>>
- Frankish, K. (2016) *Why Panpsychism Fails to Solve the Mystery of Consciousness* [online] available from <<https://aeon.co/ideas/why-panpsychism-fails-to-solve-the-mystery-of-consciousness>> [20 April 2023]
- Garfield, J.L. (2022) *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live Without a Self*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Hui, Y. (2017) 'Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics'. *E-Flux* [online] 86. available from <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/161887/cosmotechnics-as-cosmopolitics/>> [15 March 2021]
- Ingold, T. (2018) *Search and Search Again: On the Meaning of Research in Art*. [online] available from <<https://soundcloud.com/caa-glasgow/tim-ingold-search-and-search-again-on-the-meaning-of-research-in-art>> [17 March 2018]
- Magee, P. (2012) *Introduction. Part 1: Beyond Accountability?* [online] available from

<[http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue14/Magee%20\(Intro%201\).pdf](http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue14/Magee%20(Intro%201).pdf)> [23 June 2014]

Naimon, D. (2015) *Mary Ruefle : An Incarnation of the Now* [online] available from <<https://tinhouse.com/podcast/mary-ruefle-incarnation-of-the-now/>> [16 May 2023]

Nelson, R. (2013) *Practice as Research in the Arts*. Principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

noauthor (2021) 'Ad Hoc, v.' in *OED Online* [online] Oxford University Press. available from <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/289448>> [14 December 2022]

Noë, A. (2015) *Strange Tools, Art and Human Nature*. New York: Hill and Wang

Nordquist, R. (2020) *What Does It Mean to Make a Claim During an Argument?* [online] available from <<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-claim-argument-1689845>> [1 May 2023]

Pickering, A. (1995) *The Mangle of Practice*. Time, Agency, and Science. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Schwab, M. (2019) 'Experimental Systems: Contemporaneity, Untimeliness, and Artistic Research'. in *Futures of the Contemporary* [online] ed. by de Assis, P. and Schwab, M. Leuven: Belgium: Leuven University Press, 159–177. available from <<https://lup.be/products/125492>> [1 October 2020]

Thomson, P. (2003) 'Practice as Research'. *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 22 (3), 159–180

Turner, K.J. (2023) 'Yangsheng 養生 as "Making a Living" in the *Zhuangzi*'. *Asian Philosophy* [online] 33 (1), 50–63. available from <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09552367.2022.2155350>> [11 May 2023]