

PART I

# Methodologies of Practice-led research and Research-led practice

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# Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-Led Research

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Graeme Sullivan

## CEZANNE'S NEW VIEW

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Over 100 years ago artists pressed into view images that so shocked common sense the world would never be seen the same again. The creation of images that disturbed the sightlines of a seemingly ordered universe of people, places, events and things should not have been a surprise. After all, artists had long been testing their visual intuitions against the logic of what was seen and known. So when Cézanne nudged aside the single point of view in favor of multiple perspectives, he anticipated what the physicists at the time were scratching their heads about: maybe space and time were not so inviolate after all. Cézanne saw that we lived in a dynamic world where space, time and light could never be isolated or rendered motionless. The way light bends around forms, time varies with position, and space is neither flat nor far, give a sense of a world being understood in all its complex simplicity. Cézanne's still life paintings are anything but still.

Nor was Cézanne satisfied with trusting the eyes and minds of others as a basis for his observations. As he explained to Emile Bernard in 1905,<sup>1</sup> once understood, conventional practice served best as a basis for what *not* to do.

The Louvre is the book in which we learn to read. We must not, however, be satisfied with retaining the beautiful formulas of our illustrious predecessors. Let us go forth to study beautiful nature, let us try to free our minds from them, let us strive to express ourselves according to our personal temperament. Time and reflection, moreover, modify little by little our vision, and at last comprehension comes to us. (Cézanne, in a letter to Emile Bernard, 1905)

The understanding that unfolded for Cézanne through his visual experiments followed a process that was at variance with accepted procedures. He created things that could not be accommodated within the realms of tradition. Although Cézanne's insights came to challenge the very basis of what was believed to be 'true', his visual studies were mostly a well-kept secret at the time. Only a few fellow artists and discerning critics appreciated the radical changes Cézanne was proposing to the way nature could be explained. Interestingly, once his observations became more widely known many interpretations still managed to distort his view. For example, studio art teachers can still be found who claim that Cézanne showed how nature was composed of a stable Euclidean structure of cylinders, spheres and cones. But it was a dynamic world of changing relationships that Cézanne saw. Even theoretical physicists in Cézanne's day were seeking to discover the building blocks of life based on the assumption that simple, elegant structures could be found to explain how the world works. Scientists later realised that a combination of simple and complex solutions was necessary to understand the uncertain relationships surrounding human and physical structures and systems.

Today, as in Cézanne's time, the need to understand how things are related is just as important as the need to explain what they are. There are two important lessons to be learned from Cézanne's era and these frame the arguments presented in this chapter. First, artists themselves have the capacity to explore and explain complex theoretical issues that can have significance across broad areas of knowledge. In most cases, this process is clarified in retrospect as issues and ideas are revealed through the process of reflexive and reflective inquiry. Generally, artists have left the responsibility of assessing the significance of what it is that they do to others, preferring to let critics, historians and cultural theorists do the talking. If artists today pursue their art practice within the academy as well as the artworld, then it is necessary that they take on the roles of the practitioner, researcher and theorist, and in some cases, artwriter and teacher as well. In an age of multiplicity, plurality and networked cultures (Taylor 2001), this is a capacity many artists today share with artists of the past.

A second lesson to be taken from artistic and scientific investigations of a century ago is the realisation of the necessity of communicating across fields of inquiry. Although the knowledge revolution has produced an enormous amount of new information in an equally dizzying array of form and content, a prevailing attitude is to honour expertise and authority, for this is the means by which new knowledge is framed and acclaimed. Yet the wry quip that an 'expert' is someone who knows more and more about less and less suggests that inward thinking may not be the best way to encourage outward looking if the quest for new realms of inquiry is valued. Collaborative research and cross-discipline inquiry has not been a feature of academic life in most institutions, yet there are plenty of examples today of imaginative investigations taking

place beyond discipline boundaries and many of these involve artists working alongside their colleagues in the sciences and humanities (Wilson 2002). Coming to understand the interconnections among visual forms, patterns of inquiry and different perspectives offers the possibility of making intuitive and intellectual leaps towards the creation of new knowledge.

The approach to inquiry characterised by Cézanne and others who pursue artistic ends as a means to discover new ideas and knowledge is that a creative impulse reveals an imaginative insight that challenges what we know. This process describes a key feature of ‘practice-led research’ explored in this chapter. The emergence of practice-led research and other practice-based descriptions of how artists explore, express and communicate their views is evident in the new roles and responsibilities they are taking on within institutional settings. To better assess how artists can contribute in important ways to the culture of research, a brief conceptual critique charts the circumstances surrounding the introduction of practice-led research in the university setting. In particular, some limiting conditions that were imposed and which still persist are discussed. This serves as a prelude to describing a schema for considering practice-led research and the methods that might be developed. Finally, an example is presented that describes how the ideas and approaches that characterise practice-led research were adapted in collaboration with artist-researchers in an art gallery project in New York.

## A NARROW VIEW: DEFINITIONS AND EQUIVALENCE

In the academy it is expected that policies, procedures and programmes are clearly defined in order to be adequately defended. It is assumed that common understandings and shared agreement about ends and means, the design and delivery of programmes and institutional accountability provide an identifiable benchmark for maintaining quality control. It was this climate of rationalist planning that faced artists and educators in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s as they responded to the demands of widespread institutional change. At the time, art schools and teacher training colleges were absorbed within university structures as governments saw education and training as part of micro-economic reform. The view that higher education should contribute more directly to economic development radically altered perceptions about educational expectations and productivity. New arenas of debate and policy development surrounding concepts such as ‘creative industries’<sup>2</sup> opened up. This raised possibilities and problems for artists and art educators. The understanding that academic practice involves research and teaching posed particular challenges for artists entering the university. Although it was apparent that artists teach, a perplexing question arose about whether or not they did ‘research’ in their studios.

For some it was unquestionable that studio activity could be defined as a form of research. For others, the idea that creativity could be reduced to an accountable activity was a travesty. The debates that occurred in Australasia and the UK at the time were provocative, generative and often divisive.

The initial effort in claiming a place within the scholarly community of the university was to adopt a definition of research that was credible yet flexible. The terms of reference used drew on descriptions from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which served as an international standard for defining research and development. In the early 1960s the OECD compiled the *Frascati Manual*, which was an attempt to codify the definitions and language for preparing policies on research and development that linked science and technology to economic development. The purpose was to establish standards that would assist countries to respond to market-driven economies being fuelled by science and new technologies. Defining strategies for moving from basic research to applied research was seen to be important in the development of new processes, products and practices. In later iterations of the *Frascati Manual* the inextricable role of ‘creativity’ was acknowledged as an essential component of systematic inquiry and the OECD definition of research became a popular citation in many arts research policy documents. Research was thus described as

creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humankind, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. (OECD 2002: 30).

Variations of this definition are found in many of the early reports, position papers and university policy statements prepared in support of the argument that creative arts practices can be rationalised as a form of research because of the unique contribution made to the generation of new knowledge. For instance, in accounting for the level of research carried out in Australian universities, the Federal report *Research in the Creative Arts* (Strand 1998) describes how government reporting structures and various funding agencies adopted the OECD definition for research and development. This approach echoed reports from the early 1990s in the UK that sought to establish national frameworks and institutional guidelines for the inclusion of practice-led doctorates in higher education.<sup>3</sup>

Despite confirming the capacity of practice-led research to contribute to knowledge construction and the associated creative industries, the terms and conditions framing such a definition distort the potential of the arts as a fully accredited participant in the research enterprise. The conception of research adopted by the OECD and other institutions and agencies was firmly entrenched

in notions of basic and applied research, whereby new knowledge gave rise to new applications, products and services that had sustainable economic value. The role of creativity was clearly seen to be important within this tradition of research and development, irrespective of whether it was pursued by the inventive scientist or the imaginative artist. What was common was the assumption that new knowledge was built on iterative practices that drew on what was known, even if the outcomes were not. This mode of inquiry had proved successful in the past in building new industrial economies and was assumed to be the way to produce successful enterprises within new information economies. But to bind studio-based and performative practices distinctive to the arts to terms of reference that were guided by descriptions of research based on science and technology severely undervalues the particular ways the arts contribute to the creation of new knowledge in the information age of cultural economies.

Because research activity was defined in the language and methods of science and technology, it was logical to use the sciences as the benchmark when considering how the arts contributed to the research enterprise in the university setting. The argument used was the strategy of defining 'equivalence'. If the creative process involved in practice-led research was accepted as a form of research in its own right then it had to be shown to be equivalent to acknowledged research traditions. If 'research activity' could be readily defined according to the long tradition of institutional practices in place it seemed possible to define 'research equivalent activity' (Strand 1998: 46) to account for those inquiry processes that sought the same ends but pursued different means. Equivalency, it was claimed, was a viable approach for framing research policy statements because it positioned practice-led research relative to criteria used to define conventional research practices. The stance taken in Australia at the time was explained in the Federal report *Research in the Creative Arts* (Strand 1998), which included the following recommendation:

In addition to the conventional definitions of research, individual universities and the major funding bodies . . . should adopt the notion of research equivalence as an appropriate and valid concept for recognition of research-based practice and performance in the creative arts, and incorporate it into their documentation and processes for allocating research funds. Research equivalent activity should be recognised as being equivalent to research and scholarly activities in traditional fields. (p. xvii)

Defining how the processes and products of creative arts inquiry were equivalent to the procedures and outcomes of research in the human and social sciences was a tricky translation. It involved a process of comparison, alignment and no small amount of squeezing square pegs into round holes if, for example,

a solo art exhibition was to be 'equivalent' to a chapter in a research anthology or some similar peer-reviewed scholarly publication. The need to account for the research activity of all faculty in universities was significant because it was used as a direct measure in allocating Federal funding, as well as research support that could be sought from other funding agencies.

The hope that research in the creative arts could be granted parity based on arguments of equivalence offered false hope because the conditions of accepting the arts into the research community were fully controlled by those granting entry. Research is a reified entity within university life and the common perception is to maintain codified practices that determine not only what is endorsed as legitimate inquiry but also the conditions under which research is conducted and sanctioned. In effect, the assumption was the arts could be accepted as a form of creative social science or inventive applied technology and others defined what was acceptable.

The unfortunate legacy of aligning with definitions of basic and applied research extracted from sources such as the OECD and the adoption of equivalence as the strategy for claiming inclusion in the university research community is apparent in the way most art schools within universities currently define their research policies. In many cases there is a curious adherence to a research language that is beholden to a set of methodological conventions that are imported from other fields, mostly the social sciences. This may have helped gain entry to the academy in the 1990s, but the policies bear little resemblance to research and inquiry that is grounded in art practice. What is offered instead is guidance in doing social science research, but using themes and issues that are generated in the arts. Under these conditions the outcomes can be, at best, poor social science and poor art.

## MUTABLE VIEWS: MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES

If arguments that seek to justify research identity from outside the arts cannot be sustained, the challenge for arts educators is to reassess the principles that describe practice-led research undertaken in the university so that the similarities and differences from more traditional modes of inquiry can be cogently argued. Recent theorising about practice-led research has sparked a growing market of texts and online resources.<sup>4</sup> Some reflect a discipline focus on art and design research practices (Mäkelä and Routarinne 2006a; Sullivan 2005), or focus on the theory and practice of practice-led research within institutional settings (Barrett and Bolt 2007; Macleod and Holdridge 2006), while others position arts-based research within educational contexts and qualitative research (Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund 2008; Knowles and Cole, 2008). As scholarly support builds, so too does systemic assistance. For instance, the

Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK<sup>5</sup> is clear in advocating an agenda that endorses research practices that are inherently discipline-centered in the arts and humanities whereby practice-led research in the arts is considered an area of inquiry that is important in its own right.

Practice-led research is a distinctive feature of the research activity in the creative and performing arts. As with other research conducted by arts and humanities researchers, it involves the identification of research questions and problems, but the research methods, contexts and outputs then involve a significant focus on creative practice. This type of research thus aims, through creativity and practice, to illuminate or bring about new knowledge and understanding, and it results in outputs that may not be text-based, but rather a performance (music, dance, drama), design, film, or exhibition. (Arts and Humanities Research Board 2003: 10)

Practice-led research, as it is enacted, has a distinctive trajectory of inquiry that is best seen in the way that conceptions and constructions of new knowledge are framed. The status of knowledge production in the visual arts remains a vexed question for many. A typical distinction asks whether knowledge is found in the art object or whether it is made in the mind of the viewer. This debate is ongoing and insightful accounts seek a more profound philosophical basis for situating practice-led research within institutional settings. Brown (2003), for instance, presents a realist perspective whereby artworks as institutional artefacts are seen to exhibit properties that are primarily objective, theory-dependent and knowable, and this gives access to insights that can be intuitive, mindful and discoverable. When seen in relation to the demands of research, Brown maps a set of 'symptoms of practice' that highlight different areas of shared emphasis between art making and research practice. If taken from the perspective of the artist, both knowledge production and the functions to which knowledge is put are best seen to be a dynamic structure that integrates theory and practice and contributes to personal, social and artefactual systems of understanding. A good example of the interdependent relationship among the artwork, the viewer and the setting can be seen in conceptualising practice-led research within higher education as all these forms interact within an interpretive community. In this instance, knowledge embedded in practice, knowledge argued in a thesis and knowledge constructed as discourse within the institutional setting all contribute to new understanding.

In its broadest sense, practice-led research is circumscribed by an equally important emphasis placed on the artist-practitioner, the creative product and the critical process. The locus of inquiry can begin at any of these three points. What is critical, however, is the interdependence of these domains and

the central role that making plays in the creation of knowledge. Mäkelä and Routarinne explain it this way:

In established fields of research, making is generally regarded as consequent to thinking – at least in theory. Thus a series of experiments, for example, is carried out in order to test a certain assumption, i.e. to solve a problem or answer a question. In the field of practice-led research, praxis has a more essential role: making is conceived to be the driving force behind the research and in certain modes of practice also the creator of ideas. (2006b: 22).

A relatively simple way to consider this distinction is to acknowledge that some approaches to research involve moving from the ‘known to the unknown’ as new knowledge is constructed within the spaces and places opened up by the gaps in existing information systems. These procedures draw on established methods that confirm the probability or plausibility of outcomes and make use of accepted conventions and practices. What is of interest to practice-led researchers, however, is the possibility of new knowledge that may be generated by moving from a stance more accurately seen to move from the ‘unknown to the known’ whereby imaginative leaps are made into what we don’t know as this can lead to critical insights that can change what we do know.

A useful way to think about how knowledge is created is to accept that in many instances it is productive to explore creative possibilities that are informed by, but not captive to, existing frameworks of knowledge. Even if there is ready acceptance that prior knowledge helps to compile knowledge that builds on the ‘shoulders of giants’, this can, in many cases, limit the opportunity for seeing things anew. Serendipity and intuition that direct attention to unanticipated possibilities has long been a valued part of experimental inquiry. Many scientific breakthroughs have occurred as a result of an unpredictable turn of events and in many instances these have opened up entirely new directions for research. Recent studies in cognitive neuroscience offer tantalising evidence that ‘insight’ is a consequence of precisely the opposite approach to the thinking advocated by the clinical model of inquiry that promotes progressive focusing, the elimination of confounding variables and distractions and exercising control. It is this intense attention to detail that is framed by prior knowledge that can limit creative links that may lead to insightful outcomes (Bowden et al. 2005; Kounios et al. 2006). The implication is that creative options and new associations occur in situations where there is intense concentration, but within an open landscape of free-range possibility rather than a closed geography of well-trodden pathways.

Therefore practice-led research that is supported by critical reflection and reflexive action can be seen to invert the research process because it encourages

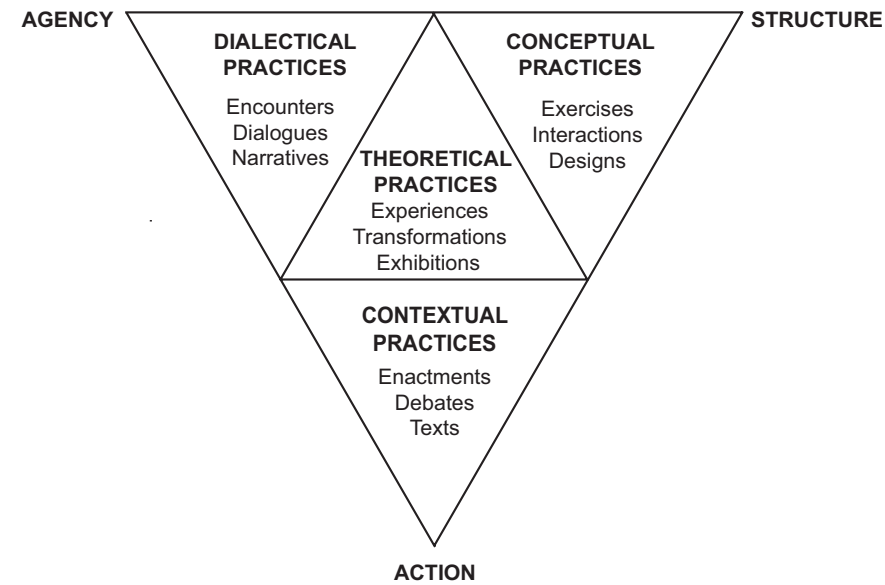


Figure 2.1 Practice-led research: a framework of practices

working from the ‘unknown to the known’ and it is purposeful yet open-ended, clear-sighted yet exploratory. Practice-led research makes good use of this creative and critical process and may provide novel perspectives in reviewing existing knowledge structures. When studio inquiry is undertaken within a research context in an academic setting the imaginative outcomes generated consequently serve as a means to critique existing knowledge. It is evident from past discipline histories that imaginative investigations that breach accepted practices and challenge assumed canons contribute in a profound way to the core of our understanding. This is the legacy of what artist-researchers have to offer.

Figure 2.1 describes the scope of research practices pursued by artist-researchers. It describes the various domains of inquiry that encompass areas typically opened up in artistic research undertaken in studio contexts within university settings. The central strand that binds the four interconnected areas of practice is inherently *theoretical* and is the site where research problems and issues are found and explored – this is the ‘making space’ of the studio experience which is central to theorising practice *as* research (Sullivan 2005). Practice-led researchers subsequently move eclectically across boundaries in their imaginative and intellectual pursuits. When seen in relation to the surrounding areas, different perspectives and practices may emerge as inquiry twists and turns towards various sources in the exploration of forms, purposes and actions. As such, the border areas labelled *conceptual*, *dialectical* and *contextual practices* encompass those features that are part of research activity.

*Conceptual practices* are at the heart of the thinking and making traditions whereby artists give form to thoughts in creating artefacts that become part of the research process. Here the artist-researcher engages in practices that make good use of the capacity to ‘think in a medium’ utilising the distributed cognitive modalities associated with visual knowing. *Dialectical practices* are forms of inquiry whereby the artist-researcher explores the uniquely human process of making meaning through experiences that are felt, lived, reconstructed and reinterpreted. These may be personal or public and may result from experiences of art-making processes or outcomes of encounters with artworks. Consequently meanings are ‘made’ from the transactions and narratives that emerge and these have the power and agency to change on an individual or community level. Here the artist-researcher utilises the cognitive capacity of the arts as socially mediated processes and the process of ‘thinking in a language’ whereby images and objects are texts that carry forms of cultural coding that require analysis and dialogue to create and communicate meaning. *Contextual practices*, on the other hand, reflect the long tradition of the arts as critical forms of inquiry whose purpose is to bring about social change. Contextual art practices make use of cognitive processes that are best described as ‘thinking in a setting’ that is situational and makes use of visual texts, issues, debates and desires that are local in focus but global in reach.

Similarly, the various elements within these research practices sample those features typically associated with studio inquiry. For instance, research practice involves some form of information or image retrieval that serves as the basis for investigation. Traditional research methods label these exploratory processes ‘data collection’. From the perspective of the artist-researcher, notions of data collection are necessarily expanded because there is a creative imperative that demands existing knowledge is less of an a priori condition framing inquiry and more of a stepping off point for imaginative interrogation during artmaking. The outcomes subsequently provide the basis for a critique of existing knowledge after the event and this can be surprising or salutary, for most creative solutions often appear alarmingly obvious and logical in retrospect. Consequently, for the artist-researcher, ‘data creation’ becomes a crucial component in the research process. Artist-researchers respond to these rich theoretical and procedural challenges and make use of multiple ways of giving form to thought that embodies meaning and this is negotiated in many contexts. An important part of practice-led research involves making sense of the information collected so that it can be translated into interpretive forms able to be communicated to others. The reflexive tradition of the arts enables both the artist and the viewer to participate in an exchange that is mediated by an artwork whereby change and transformation often results. This is the nature of aesthetic experience: it is interactive, encourages dialogue and generates debates. These are the kind of critical-analytical processes associated

with practice-led inquiry and reflect forms of engagement and the creation of meaningful artefacts. The means of representation are only limited by the imagination of the practitioner-researcher and can readily be found in exhibitions, designs, narratives and other visual-verbal texts as the artist-researcher takes on the roles of the theorist, designer, storyteller and cultural critic. Some examples bring this chapter to a close.

## A REAR VIEW THAT LOOKS FORWARD

When art practice is theorised as research I argue that human understanding arises from a process of inquiry that involves creative action and critical reflection. There is an inherently transformative quality to the way we engage in art practice and this dynamic aspect is a unique quality of the changing systems of inquiry evident in the studio experience. The artist intuitively adopts the dual roles of the researcher and the researched, and the process changes both perspectives because creative and critical inquiry is a reflexive process. Similarly, a viewer or reader is changed by an encounter with an art object or a research text as prior knowledge is brought into doubt by new possibilities. Many artists and educators acknowledge the reality of reflexive inquiry, which ‘works against’ existing theories and practices and offers the possibility of seeing phenomena in new ways (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000).

To discuss in more detail the approaches used by artist-researchers described in this chapter, an account is presented of a project undertaken in a small New York art gallery where the exhibition space was conceived as a research site.<sup>6</sup> In 2007 I worked with a group of Australian artists on a studio-based project that resituated the artist as social-historical critic. The exhibition, *New Adventures of Mark Twain: Coalopolis to Metropolis*, relocated a body of artwork created by several artist-scholars from the University of Newcastle that was first shown in Australia in May 2007. The purpose was to position the historical interpretations created by the artists within a context that offered a different perspective on mainstream views about the life and times of Mark Twain.

The exhibition was held at the Pearl Street Gallery in Brooklyn, from 28 September to 4 November 2007. The subtitle, *Coalopolis to Metropolis*, referred to an incongruous connection in 1895 between Mark Twain, the urbane American folklorist, and Newcastle, the industrial township north of Sydney, Australia. The exhibition featured creative and critical interpretations of themes inspired by an obscure incident involving Twain that occurred in Newcastle during his Australian lecture tour. Forced to take on a gruelling trip to the southern hemisphere to raise funds to cover his debts, Twain spent three months travelling by train around the southern reaches of Australia. His witty and worldly views were later chronicled in his book, *Following the*

*Equator: A Journey around the World*. At the time, Twain wryly observed, 'Australian history is always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer . . . it does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies' (1897/1899: 169–70).

During a trip to deliver a lecture northwest of Sydney, Mark Twain passed through Newcastle, 'a rushing town, capital of the rich coal regions' (Twain 1897/1899: 343). His visit to Newcastle, however, was not planned; he sought relief for a toothache. The recent discovery of an original letter of gratitude sent by Twain to a Newcastle dentist inspired the creation of a diverse body of work by several artist-scholars and authors from the University of Newcastle. The letter was sent in appreciation for the relief of a toothache suffered by Twain. Each artist and writer used the incidental discovery of Twain's letter as a point of departure that opened up a broader context for creative and critical interpretation. Themes explored included travel, place/time and the landscape, marking, writing and performance, social commentary, gender, sexuality and identity politics.

A pointed stab is made at the effigy of Mark Twain by Anne Graham (Figure 2.2) and Brett Alexander (Figure 2.3). Anne Graham takes on Twain (a.k.a. Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mr Brown) and his many identities with a theoretical and imaginative relish. She calls his bluff, strips him bare and hangs him out to dry. Graham lets us into Twain's world of fleeting finery where his devilish sense of self was always multiple and his identity questionable, yet as Graham shows, this is relatively easy to see through. She uses an ensemble of props in an installation that probes question about his chameleon character. Graham constructs a visual analogy about identity politics using the idea that clothing both covers up and yet reveals a truth. Analogies are a basic form of abstract representation that help viewers *translate* meaning by being exposed to something that is recognised – in this case 'transparency' – which is used as a means to come to understand something that may be obscure – the reinvention of identify and self. In this sense, Graham is using her art practice to bring a new understanding into play using a collection of related forms that are part of the store of Twain's artefactual history, but they may not have been represented in quite this fashion before.

Brett Alexander does a different kind of theorising – he takes aim at some illusions and comfortable complacencies that are part of the nostalgia for a past of much simpler times. It's hard to escape the rapid-fire clutches of his installation because it encloses the wall and floor spaces and enwarps the mindspace as memories of the past are remade from the questions cropping up in front of you. Alexander reminds us that Twain's stories get burnished with affection in their retelling and take on the warmth of old work clothes – like jeans and boots dragged on each day in anticipation of an honest day's work. Here the rhetorical strategy is visual metaphor and the theoretical reference is 'resemblance'



Figure 2.2 Anne Graham. Mark Twain's New Clothes. *The Suit*: 'I prefer to be clean in the matter of raiment – clean in a dirty world.' *The Hat*. *The Photograph*. *The Suitcase*.

as forms serve as evidence of claims made about social crises. For the viewer, visual metaphors help *transform* meanings by illustrating similarities and helping make connections. In this case, woven into the surface of clothing that is both comfortable but conjoined, are embroidered racial epithets and gender slurs that mask uncomfortable truths. By taking aim at these issues in metaphoric form and in literal, if playful, terms using toy guns, Alexander creates an echo of social disquiet that for him remains as woven into the fabric of society today as much as it was in Twain's time.

For Kris Smith (Figure 2.4) and Philip Schofield (Figure 2.5) the encounter with Mark Twain has a conceptual appeal as ideas take on form through media



Figure 2.3 Brett Alexander. *Tomfoolery: Land of the free (to bear arms)* (wall mounted) and *Crime Scene: Hate Crime – Road Kill* (floor mounted).



Figure 2.4 Kris Smith. *The Lighthouse Keeper Sleeps*. 59 cm × 88 cm. Digital photograph.

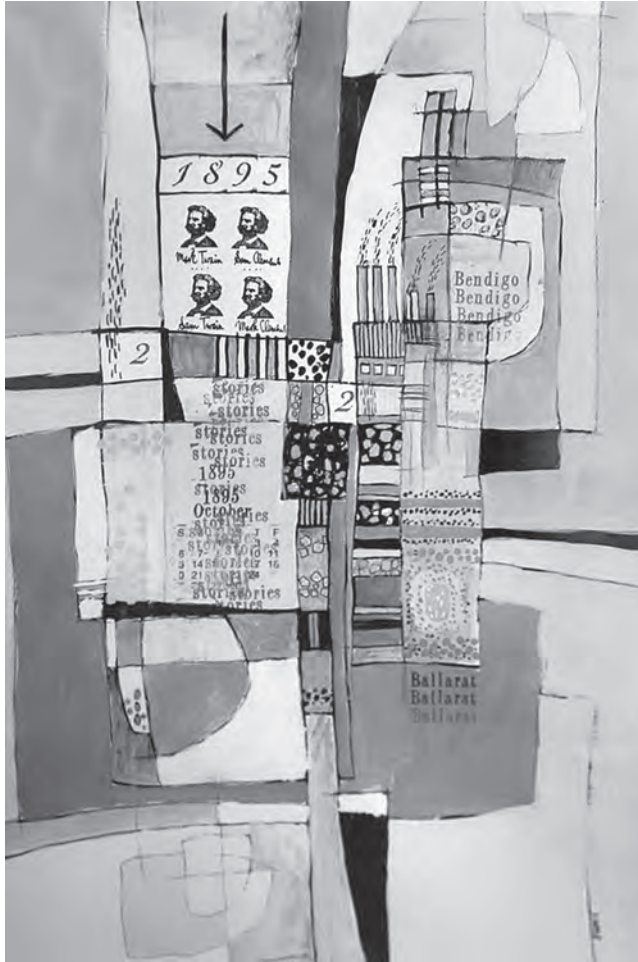


Figure 2.5 Philip Schofield. *Bendigo and Ballarat: 'the great nuggets'*. Mixed media on paper.

explorations that themselves reveal how fragments are often all that is used to give structure to meaning. Kris Smith's digital photographs of the headstone of James Johnson, a survivor of a calamity chronicled by Twain in one of his Australian stories, chart a time of day that also marks a time of life. The incident in history that was retold by Twain is revisited by Smith and unfolds in the most curious of coincidences. What we see is a mere fragment of an image, a visual index that represents much more. The weathered gravestones, fiercely shadowed in the daylight glare, look different in the soft cobwebs of dusk. Much in the manner of story fragments from the past, image bits may smooth over tragedy and triumph in the retelling, but can reveal other tales as well.

The concepts of place, time and travel are tracked in Philip Schofield's

visual essays. His aerial surveys of the landscape echo indigenous views of the land when seen from above and chart Twain's treks across southeast Australia. But there is a sense of distance evident in the images that also echo Twain's tendency to remain the perpetual visitor – the astute observer who also bears witness. The late 1800s was about the time that local artists realised that they could only begin to see what was around them if they shed the vestiges of accumulated knowledge, and this also often meant travelling abroad in order to look back with fresh eyes. Schofield creates local histories that could be readily captioned by excerpts from Twain's travelogue, for they serve as autobiographical traces through a muted landscape of snippets, signposts and snapshots.

The work of Miranda Lawry (Figure 2.6), Trevor Weekes (Figure 2.7) and

## **NERADIA NTITWASACH ARMINGEXCURSIO**



Figure 2.6 Miranda Lawry. *Excursion 2: 'with spacious views of stream and lake'*. Archival digital print.



Figure 2.7 Trevor Weekes. *Twain Spotting*. Panels 1–5 (detail). Pen and ink on Stonehenge paper.

Patricia Wilson-Adams (Figure 2.8) open up a dialogue by connecting viewers with experiences that can be made their own. Anyone who has taken the train trip north from Sydney along the Hawkesbury River will immediately be transported into the textual narrative of Miranda Lawry's image series. This is the view Mark Twain saw:

There was other scenery on the trip. That of the Hawksbury [*sic*] river in the National Park region, fine – extrordinarily fine, with spacious views of stream and lake imposingly framed in woody hills; and every now and then the noblest groupings of mountains, and the most enchanting rearrangements of the water effects. (1897/1899: 343)

The limits of peering out a window, where what is seen is formed by what is known, freeze-frames reality in Lawry's glimpses as the world speeds by. We feel this stretch of images rather than look at them because they are partly blurred and partly in focus, and in the mix we see through the spaces to places



Figure 2.8 Patricia Wilson-Adams. *Grave Markers for the Silent VI*. 2007. Lead, intaglio, silkscreen and emu feathers on Somerset Velvet paper.

we think we know but may have never seen. Miranda Lawry takes delight in a narrative game of compressing clues found in the wake of Mark Twain's journeys into a rhythmic visual language that transports us along the Mississippi as much as it does the Hawkesbury.

For Trevor Weekes subtle meaning making is not found in pushing pigments around, but in the sub-texts of stark pen and ink sequences in his Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer lookalike story. Here the message is the medium as Twain's imagined Newcastle nightmare rolls out in graphic detail. As Gianni Di Gravio (2007) acknowledges in his 'mythological explanation' of Twain's journey through Newcastle, local folklore arises from curious circumstances that often have nothing to do with fact but nevertheless serve to anchor a sense of identity, often through self-deprecating humour. Drawn in the best

Australian black-and-white cartoon tradition where de-fanging authority is a daily sport, the local legend of Mark Twain's legacy of half truths is given similar treatment by Weekes.

For Patricia Wilson-Adams, growing up in isolation amid the sparseness of Australia's interior landscapes meant that detail of particular places and things became silent markers of identity. Sites and settings take on narrative meaning that signal what it means to be part of a place and this can offer transient relief or remain rock solid. Her series, *Grave Markers for the Silent*, refer to those whose history has not been recorded and whose identity is unknown – a legacy faced by many from the past who, for Wilson-Adams, 'had no voice and remain silent' (2007: 32). Transposed into materials as fleeting as feathers or as tough as lead, Wilson-Adams' grave markers are emblematic of putting down roots and claiming a sense of ownership and agency while at the same time keeping on the move – incongruities that Mark Twain never resolved.

The art practice of Elizabeth Ashburn (Figure 2.9) and Pam Sinnott (Figure 2.10) capture contexts that are used to unsettle complacencies and reveal cracks and different tracks in constructions of public and personal histories. Myths masked as fact made by those in the know are also messages that bear false witness. Elizabeth Ashburn invites us into a world where fiction and falsity tease and tempt with disastrous consequences. Embellished with the decorative trim necessary to make a lie seem like the truth, her series of brightly colored miniature myths, rendered with the irony of exacting detail, take on new proportions when seen within a history of political lies. Cutout forms traced from illustrations in Twain's books (some of which he may have even drawn himself) echo the mischievous if ever present tendency of political expediency – a world in which faction and fiction mix with dire consequences and a reminder that, although the past has gone, history continues to repeat itself.

Pam Sinnott's cast of characters is beautifully held in centre frame in photo album black and white. Yet there is a tinge of nervous nostalgia amid the backyard patios, shrubbery and lawns and the visual clip of a Hills hoist. The backyard of the 1950s that was the playground for Aussie adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer and other Saturday afternoon movie machos is a memory with a twinge. Although identity can now be enacted with comfortable ease, for the women who put themselves in Sinnott's scenes there remains an ill fit reminiscent of a past discomfort in who played the goodies or the baddies when growing up. Past times are mostly shown in images made by others, and for young girls this meant photos of them wearing their best party dress rather than snapshots of them as 'tomboys'. Sinnott's critique revisits these times and resituates them in ways that embody new meanings in the best traditions of a critical art practice.



Figure 2.9 Elizabeth Ashburn. *Lie Three: A yellow peril from Asia threatens to overwhelm Australia*. Watercolour and gouache.

Mark Twain's quip that Australian history reads like the most beautiful lies was not a put down. He went on to say that the 'lies' are 'all of a fresh sort, no moldy old stale ones' (1897/1899: 170). This is an especially apt description of the surprises found in the work exhibited in *The New Adventures of Mark Twain*. In his catalogue essay, Peter Hill finds fresh surprises in the way artworks 'rhyme' in time and place. He draws attention to the changing rhythms of influence that shape contemporary art. For many Australian artists in the past, rhymes were mostly heard and seen as echoes of events that happened first on other shores. Those who believed art happened somewhere else were always eager to embrace cultural stylists from afar.



Figure 2.10 Pam Sinnott. *Cowboy*. Digital photograph.

However, this was not the attitude of the ‘new breed of creative academics’ (2007: 35) that Hill writes about who participated in this exhibition. Rather, they opened up ideas to allow us to look in new ways at art, culture, history and research, among other things. For some viewers of this exhibition in New York there was an element of unease as past notions were unsettled and prodded, and the comfortable knowledge of Mark Twain and his stories was jolted by the images on display. Others were able to arrive at a conclusion similar to Mark Twain’s response to his Australian surroundings, where there was a sense of comfort knowing that past truths are ‘full of surprises and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities’ (1897/1899: 170).

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## CONCLUSION

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A central claim made in this chapter is that practice-led researchers share the goal that research involves the quest to create new knowledge, but do so by making use of a series of inquiry practices that are theoretically rich, conceptually robust and provoke individuals and communities into seeing and understanding things in new ways. Figure 2.1 presented earlier in this chapter describes various practices, forms and outcomes encompassed by practice-led researchers. The illustrations from the *New Adventures of Mark Twain* exhibition provide more concrete examples of artist-researchers in action.

But how is new knowledge created in practice-led research? First, there is an unequivocal creative impulse that is a critical starting point in looking beyond what is known. Irrespective of whether the origin of knowledge is stable or shaky, there is a need to move beyond prevailing attitudes, assumptions and assurances. As Benjamin Genocchio reminds us with his reflection on Australian indigenous history, ‘absence of evidence is not evidence of absence’ (2001: 28), therefore there is a continual need to reassess interpretations of past histories. Second, there is acceptance that traditional systems for knowledge that rely on probable outcomes or plausible interpretations cannot fully respond to the challenge of new interpretive possibilities.

This is where artist-researchers take us – to where we’ve never been, to see what we’ve never seen. And then they bring us back and help us look again at what we thought we knew. Facing the unknown and disrupting the known is precisely what artist-researchers achieve as they delve into theoretical, conceptual, dialectical and contextual practices through artmaking. As described in this chapter, practice-led research variously emphasises insights revealed by the artist-practitioner, the creative product or the critical process. To fully consider the impact this quest for new knowledge has on the self, others and communities requires a new responsibility on the part of artist-researchers to take up the challenge of theorising their practice, for ‘in academe, the artist-researcher cannot hide behind the robe of the mute artist’ (Mäkelä and Routarinne 2006b: 25). To meet these demands it is no longer viable for advocates of practice-led research to merely borrow methods from other fields of inquiry for this denies the intellectual maturity of arts practice as a plausible basis for raising significant theoretical questions and as a viable site for undertaking important artistic, cultural and educational inquiries. If a measure of the utility of research is seen to be the capacity to create new knowledge that is individually and culturally transformative then the potential of practice-led research to open up new realms of possibility is now in full view.

## NOTES

1. Cézanne quote in letter to Emile Bernard, 1905 (cited 25 May 2008). Available from: <http://constable.net/arhistory/glo-cezanne.html>.
2. Policies pursued at the time were contained in *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy*: October, 1994 (cited 31 May 2008). Available from: <http://www.nla.gov.au/creative.nation/contents.html>. The enthusiasm for creativity as a central focus of cultural policy continues, as evidenced in the report *Towards a Creative Australia: The Future of the Arts, Film and Design* (cited 31 May 2008). Available from <http://www.australia2020.gov.au/topics/creative.cfm>. This was part of the *Australia 2020 Summit* held on 19 and 20 April 2008 (cited 31 May 2008). Available from <http://www.australia2020.gov.au>.
3. There are several government-sponsored reports and conference papers that track the political changes and legislated frameworks put in place during the 1980s and 1990s as the visual arts came under close scrutiny in higher education. Those undertaken in the UK, such as Frayling and colleagues (Frayling 1997; Green 2001), were reference points that informed the Australasian context.
4. See, for instance, the online journal *Working Papers in Art and Design*, vols 1, 2, 3, and 4 (cited 4 June 2008), available from: [http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes\\_research/papers/wpades/index.html](http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/index.html); and the Conference Proceedings *Speculation and Innovation: Applying Practice Led Research in the Creative Industries*, Queensland University of Technology (cited 3 June 2008), available from: <http://www.speculation2005.net>.
5. The Arts and Humanities Council in the UK was established in April 2003 and replaced the Arts and Humanities Board that was originally set up in 1998. See <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk>.
6. *New Adventures of Mark Twain: From Metropolis to Coalopolis* (cited 1 June 2008), available from: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/archives/marktwain/venues.html>. For images from the Pearl Street Gallery exhibition of *New Adventures of Mark Twain* see <http://picasaweb.google.com/Samuel.Clements.Mark.Twain/TwainPearlStreetGalleryNY> (cited 4 June 2008).

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