

### ***Constructing a Reflective Site?***

Good morning. Thank you Ólöf and Academy of the Arts Iceland, for inviting me to this conference. It is a real pleasure to be here and be part of the inauguration of practice-based research at the Academy. It is a somewhat daunting experience to find myself speaking after Henk Borgdorff - whose contribution to this field through texts like *The Debate on Research in the Arts*<sup>1</sup> I have found very helpful towards my research, as this publication usefully sets out to clarify the issue of research in the arts by tracing the debate, exploring the terminology and analysing the nature of research in the arts.

#### **Introduction:**

My name is Katrine Hjelde, I am an Norwegian-born artist living and working in London and I am doing a Studentship funded full time Practice based PhD at Chelsea College of Art and Design, which is part of the University of the Arts London, the biggest arts university in Europe. I am not alone in this endeavour, Chelsea alone currently has 36 part time and full time PhD students and the University of Arts has in total 140, most of whom are practice based. This is indicative of the art and design researchers as a steadily growing group in the UK. I am currently entering into my third and supposedly final year, so hopefully I can speak from a position of some experience – but not of total exhaustion. I also teach at Chelsea on the BA Fine Art, as an Associate Lecturer, and I have taught there since 2001 and at other institutions for a total of about 10 years. Underlying my role as a teacher and student is my ongoing art practice, which can largely be defined as site specific grounded in what might be seen as a painterly tradition. I trained as a painter, but my practice has recently opened up to include a more discursive, relational, performative and collaborative strand as a result of the PhD research. I will show you some selected works work as part of this presentation, the first of which predates the PhD. My fine art practice-based PhD research project examines the relationship between art practice and teaching, investigating the ways this relationship can be critical and transparent within the context of teaching and learning at university level fine art education.

This talk I have called *Constructing a Reflective Site?*, in reference to my PhD Project whose working title is *Making Knowledge/Teaching Knowledge: Constructing a Reflective Site*, and with reference to the role of the art institution in terms of framing and determining artistic research in the form of a PhD, and because I will propose that the endeavour of undertaking practice based Research can perhaps usefully be seen as a constructing a particular kind of reflective site. If I sound confused at times – that is because I still am

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<sup>1</sup> Borgdorff, Henk (2006), *The Debate on the Research in the Arts*, Bergen KHiB/ Bergen National Academy of the Arts

with regards to some of the key terms and concept in practice based research, this is a heterogeneous, complex and continually evolving field.

Firstly however I will very briefly outline my PhD to frame up the notion of *practice based* in my project. My PhD is in actual fact undertaken from a *dual position* of practice: *art practice* and *teaching as practice*, the notion of practice-based research in relation to art practice builds on emerging positions within artistic practice/research, and I will get back to what these may be - and I am trying to use this understanding of practice as far as possible in/towards my approach to teaching as practice. The research investigation takes place through the articulation of three *sites* in my Research: a *practice site*, which is my art practice, a *teaching site*, ie, teaching within the frame of the art university, and what I call an *intersection site*, which is the ways that teaching and practice can be critically interconnected. Evoking and using the art-based concept of *site-specific practice* in this manner is an attempt to use site as both an artistic position towards the research as well as a theoretical framework.

As an artist I have in the past (and continue to) largely defined my practice as site specific. Miwon Kwon's book on site specific practice, *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity*<sup>2</sup> is the text that has informed my thinking around sites first and foremost as part of exploring my practice. In this book Kwon sets out to unpack and define site specificity. Not just as an artistic genre, but as a problem idea, as a peculiar cipher of art and spatial politics. Thus she seeks to reframe site specific as the cultural mediation of broader social, economic, and political processes. I was struck by this approach whereby she very carefully made distinctions between different kinds of site specific practice in order to reactivate site specificity as a critical concept. Her paradigms are outlined as *competing definitions* that operate in overlapping ways in past and present site – oriented art, as well as within some artists practice. I am attempting to re-inhabit a dual structure of actual site-specific practice in my art practice and a theorisation of site-specific practice. As an artist/teacher/researcher I am hoping to undertake my research, which spans several areas due to its involvement across practice and pedagogy, rooted within practice. So this is the position that the research project in its totality comes from.

Thus the PhD research project includes both my “ongoing” practice as well as teaching. The final “outcomes” will include artworks, documented as well as submitted, through an “exhibition”, a written thesis, and a website, - the latter will be emerging as a manifestation of the intersection site. The website will be an archive of the entire research project, holding and documenting the final outcomes, including the thesis, as well as the research process, in the form of papers, notes, other text, and images.

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<sup>2</sup> Kwon, Miwon (2004), *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity*, MIT Press

When I was invited to come here - Òlöf asked me some very interesting questions, questions that I have also had to ask myself, directly and indirectly, so far into the process. However I welcome this opportunity to try and grapple with these “purposefully” in the context of this conference. Òlöf asked me this:

- What is the relationship between practice and research and/or is there a distinction between these two activities?
- What role does the institution of the art school play in shaping research processes?
- In what ways can practice and theory be reflective and to what ends?

Given the 20 minute timeframe I will only try and to say something about some of my *experiences* of these issue within my research so far, rather than provide full answers. And although these questions can be seen to be intrinsically linked in some ways I will try and separate them for the purpose of making some sense.

In my triple role as student/artist/teacher I find that perhaps the second question is most pertinent – and one that has thrown up some unexpected issues. But the practice and theory interrelationship and the role of reflection, let alone what we are actually talking about when we talk about reflection, are all issues that inform this project on an ongoing basis.

**i) What is the relationship between practice and research and/or is there a distinction between these two activities?**

Christopher Frayling (Rector of the Royal College of Art, London) made a distinction between Research and research in his “seminal” *Research in Art and Design*<sup>3</sup> paper– based on the definition found in the Oxford English Dictionary. He defines research with a little “r” as an investigation, the act of *searching*, in contrast to Research with a big “R” which indicates some kind of *development*. The little r type research is thus aligned to the kind that artist have always been involved in their practice, whereas the big Research usage only goes back by about 100 years but in this time it has become very closely aligned with scientific research models, which has become a form of paradigmatic research model. Big R research and little r research in different ways underlie the model for PhD Research within the art institution, and the relationship between these is something the individual PhD researcher has to resolve for the duration of their PhD project in relation their art or design practice.

For me - this question also involves the question of which practice? As I have outlined my research involves two practices, - art practice and teaching practice.

Through framing teaching as a practice, be it either as a distinct separate practice or as part of an extended arts practice, I have come to change my

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<sup>3</sup> Frayling, Christopher (1993), *Research in Art and Design*, Royal College of Art Research Papers 1(1), RCA

understanding of Research also. I now consider research as a form of *practice* too, whether understood as the big R or little r variety. So, I will here, in some ways, contribute to an argument towards a practice *of* research, within a totality of practice.

On the way I have found that the process of engaging with research has changed my practice and it has changed my way of thinking about my practice. Of course practice is never a static inert object - but somehow the idea of doing practice based big R research subconsciously made me think that my practice would somehow manifest itself as a compliant object of study. When the opposite happened it was very unsettling at first – as I found myself with a practice that was actually operating reflexively in terms of the research. Then I realised that this was an interesting opportunity – a chance to rethink my practice in a particular and purposeful kind of way. Thus I found myself in a situation where I had to accept that both my understanding of practice and of research was subject to change during this process and that probably the best way to deal with this would be to try and use it generatively.

One result of this reflexive process is that I have started a collaboration with two others students at Chelsea forming *Future Reflections Research Group*, in April 2007. The *Future Reflections Research Group* is a collaboration between currently three fine art practice-led PhD students. The group's current work explores the experience of both individual and collaborative art making in relation to the theories and practice of post-graduate art research; this inquiry is informed by approaches ranging from discourse analysis and dialogic theory to pedagogical and performative practices. We undertake this work in addition to our individual PhD projects and we do this mainly in the form of performative presentations at art and design research conferences, and our outcomes also includes written papers which through text also attempt to perform these issues. We do all however draw on these projects towards our individual research projects and will “use” them directly and indirectly. Art/Research for Future Reflections can here be seen as a discursive site where Future Reflections makes a claim in its work for the possibility of site-specific practice that simultaneously enacts and critiques art R/research.

**ii) What role does the institution of the art school play in shaping research processes?**

The institution of the art school does inevitably play a role in shaping the research process. First of all because the research process particularly in the form of a PhD is defined from the beginning by the institution, and by *institution* this means both the institution that you study at but also institutions like the AHRC, (Arts and Humanities Research Council – UK), which funds some practice based research. I am, for example, funded by CLIP CETL (Creative Learning in Practice - Centre for Excellency in Teaching and Learning) which is based at Chelsea and London College of Fashion. The institution has thus helped form your proposal even before you start your

programme of research. The proposal needs to be written according to a set of criteria – and it has to have aims, objectives, a proposed methodology, relate to very clearly articulated contexts and be short and clear. As you commence your programme of study at University of the Arts London there are also several “institutional hoops” to jump through along the way (some of which prove useful and some which prove less so) and even if we know that the way we have to present our research at these points are part of a process – a form of processing and packaging, - inevitably this also forms the research to some extent, as articulating our tentative projects in response to particular requirements will almost inevitably tether it to the justifications formulated in the process. In my case it is not so much the institution of the art school itself, in my case Chelsea, which shapes the research processes but the institution of University of the Arts, which will award the degree at the end.

University of the Arts only recently became a university, thus there is some institutional anxiety about the research programme – and as students there is an onus on us to validate the research programme through our research – and to undertake research, which thus clearly makes a new knowledge claim in the form of practice supported by a thesis. And to achieve this aim within a stipulated time-frame. This is sometimes problematic to negotiate – but I think it is more productive to think of this situation as neither good nor bad, but as a potentially interesting contextual frame for the research process – of which there would always be one. Just as most artistic practice also has institutional, theoretical, practical, and last but not least financial frames around it.

But to highlight a very specific way that my research has been modified by UAL’s PhD regulations is the way my PhD proposal initially suggested that I would share every aspect of my research as it unfolded on my research website. Thus every draft, every paper, every relevant image of work in progress would be on online and available for ongoing comments and input from other interested parties, like my peers on the PhD programme and others who may be interested, like my students.

However this is not going to be entirely possible as a particular criteria of a submitted PhD at University of the Arts London, is that no more than ca 25-30% of it can have been out and available in the *public domain* before submission. So by the time you have presented a few papers at conferences your 30% is effectively used up. The University of the Arts model of knowledge production is thus seemingly at odds with for instance some emerging models of research – particularly those found within open source technology FLOSS<sup>4</sup> etc. where knowledge production and information dissemination happens increasingly transparently in collaborative ways, particularly online. University of the Arts position can be seen as perhaps unnecessarily anachronistic.

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<sup>4</sup> Free/Libre/Open Source Software, F/OSS' is an inclusive term generally synonymous with both free software and open source software which describe similar development models, but with differing cultures and philosophies. 'Free software' focuses on the philosophical freedoms it gives to users and 'open source' focuses on the perceived strengths of its peer-to-peer development model. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free\\_and\\_open\\_source\\_software](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_and_open_source_software)

The structure of PhD research (at UAL and elsewhere) does in some ways encourage students to be “selfish”. The dominant political line of Research is to support an often, intrinsic ideology of individual achievement. The PhD has to give evidence of the original contribution of one person. Thus, while I and probably most practice based PhD research students, collect research notes, drafts, papers, bookmarks and references, sketches, images, audio, video, we usually do so for ourselves only. I would have liked to undertake this process more publicly, openly – but I am instead using the boundaries placed on this process as a way to constructively think and work around the restrictions as a framework or operational site. For instance in my website I have created a *basement* where I will be archiving this material which can then become public upon the submission of my PhD. And also as part of *Future Reflections Research Group* we try and interrogate the (central to PhD research) idea of the singular knowledge claim, through our collaborative practice.

So by working as part of *Future Reflection Research Group*, undertaking collaborative Art Research on art research, our “meta work” on art research also allows for a sharing of knowledge and skill, so that we each benefit from the others individual as well as our joint research. This kind of sharing is not otherwise facilitated in the PhD programme, beside formal presentations, which we have to undertake in the first and second year. Interestingly pedagogically this is in direct contrast to learning at lower levels (BA MA) where *peer learning* is seen as key, even for part time students.

### iii) In what ways can practice and theory be reflective and to what ends?

For the work of *Future Reflections* - reflection is both an interpretive and communicative act. And this understanding I also apply to all aspects of my practice, with particular reference to my teaching practice. Thus reflection is a key concept in relation to my research as well as key interest within my practices. Quite literally – in my art practice I have in the past, and continue to, use a lot of shiny surfaces, including mirrors, and have as a part of this process thought a lot about how reflection takes place experientially – particularly in relation the meeting point with an audience.

The main model for reflective engagement at the art school seems to be based on the reflective practitioner model as articulated by Schön<sup>5</sup>. This acknowledges the possibility of forms of reflection happening through practice (reflection-in-action) as perhaps a defining aspect of material-based arts practice, but which to qualify as big R research also requires some form of written reflection after the event (reflection-on-action). However this is not the only way talk about reflection. For instance within pedagogy reflection is currently a bit of a catch-word, and there is increasing emphasis on students reflecting on their practice. However the art educational institution then often attempts to instrumentalise the individual student(s) reflection process towards assessment. So the notion of reflection can be seen as problematic also, as it can too easily be tied to justification and control within an institution.

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<sup>5</sup> Schön, Donald A. (1991), *The Reflective Practitioner How Professionals Think in Action*, Ashgate Publishing

## Artistic Research Conference - Island Academy of the Arts

### Student Presentation: Katrine Hjelde - PhD student, UAL - UK

In order to attempt answer this question of how practice and theory be reflective and to what ends - I will split it in two:

#### 1) Ways that theory and practice can be reflective – (for me)

Firstly I should say that I do not see theory and practice as separate activities despite their very different ontological, epistemological and methodological traditions and places. Instead I am working according to my understanding of Henk Borgdoffs model of Research into the arts where there is no full separation of the subject and object, no distance between researcher and the practice of art. And this approach is further more based on the understanding that there is no fundamental separation between theory and practice in the arts. However their separate histories and can be used as a way for them to interrogate each other, and it is in that way that they can operate reflectively and reflexively.

#### 2) To what ends.....

This question is of course at the heart of all these discussion, and I will here just say what again the “ends” have been so far for me and may be for me and others in the future.

*The quintessential mechanism we have for sustained and responsible teaching is reflection. Reflection held in conversation, using our experience like a concave mirror.<sup>6</sup>*

As a practitioner and particularly as a teacher, I hope my (art and art research) practice can function something like Brian Catling's concave mirror, that it can operate as one reflective “site” against which to project a conversation as a *discourse* within another kind of site - the teaching context. For me this comes down to the tricky notion of knowledge in art, in fact the other part of my research title - making knowledge teaching knowledge. The idea that what we do as artists can produce knowledge in some form, whether the knowledge is seen as being held by the art object or emerging dialogically between the art object and an audience etc. or as embodied through a notion of skill and material mastery. For me, however, attempting to work out these issues is something I feel I need to continually question in relation to a teaching context. Why I am I in a position to teach art students – what do I know? Where is the knowledge in what I do? How might it be “transmitted”? What is the institutional position on this issue? So maybe I would not be doing a PhD if I did not teach, or certainly in my case it would have been a very different PhD.

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<sup>6</sup> Catling Brian (2000) “The Invisible Subject (views from the missionary position)” in *The Dynamic of Now*. Ed. Furlong W., Gould P, Hethrington P. London, Tate Gallery Publishing pp. 196

### **Rounding up**

As an attempt to round up I want to end with this (PowerPoint) slide, which highlights some of the practice-based research issues that I hope we will be discussing together in this conference.

- The need to question existing notions of research, particularly those that are based on a science paradigm.
- How to encourage peer learning at PhD level, what kind of structure encourages interaction, discussion and collaboration between peers – to create a dynamic community of art practice-based research practice.
- Considers how art practice based research can be relevant, as a model for other kinds of practice-based research, in other fields.
- How can practice based art R/research form a construction site for reflective practice.

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