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# Artistic Research: A Vibrant and Ever-Changing Field

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Article abstract

This article looks at artistic research from an Australian perspective, with an emphasis on the role professional doctorates have played in developing this field. In 2017, I co-wrote "Two Decades of Artistic Research: The Antipodal Experience," which examined the state of artistic research in Australia at that time. Six years later, revisiting this body of work, I am reminded of how important the training of doctoral candidates is to the expansion and maturation of artistic research. In this writing, I share some best practice theses from the discipline of music, and share some of the tensions and successes in how universities measure creative research output.

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## Artistic Research: A Vibrant and Ever-Changing Field

Vanessa Tomlinson

The line between artistic research and artistic practice can be difficult to delineate, even while we agree that in artistic research “knowledge is produced in the doing” (Stover 2022, 42). If I were to ask if the projects mentioned below would have happened with or without the term *artistic research* (or *creative research*, *practice-led research*, etc.), I would probably say *yes*. If I were to ask if the projects benefited from being called artistic research, I would probably say, *yes-ish*. But if I were to ask if the researcher benefited from framing them as artistic research, I would say, *definitely*.

Does using the term *artistic research* change the way in which we design the result, change the terms by which we engage with the art, or change who has access to the work? This article will look at artistic research from an Australian perspective, with an emphasis on the role professional doctorates have played in developing this field. Following are three examples of artistic research from the discipline of music, the artistic area with which I am most intimately connected.

1. Cat Hope’s *Speechless* (2019) is a massive coming together of research threads—an arrival point for multiple layers of experimentation from digital graphic notation, networked performance, use of text and voice, theatricality, bass sound, collaboration, interdisciplinary practice, gender and music. She describes it as “a 70-minute opera for 4 soloists, community choir and bass orchestra. It is a wordless, animated notation opera intended as a personal response to the 2014 Human Rights Commission report *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention*” (Hope 2019).
2. My work *Beacons* (2022) with Lawrence English draws upon research into site-specific performance, choreo-spatial sound and performance, non-notated composition, co-compositional practice, free improvisation, and sonic stratification. It is “a new 45-minute site-specific work for acoustic instruments, electronics and ocean, with the musicians . . . offering a sensorial experience of little Burleigh Heads” (Tomlinson and English 2022).
3. Neal Peres Da Costa is reinvigorating nineteenth-century performance practice through an investigation into “new and alternative ways of interpreting the repertoire” (Sydney Conservatorium of Music, n.d.). Focused within a large Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant, keyboard player Da Costa uses his work with the Ironwood String Quartet and the Australia Romantic and Classical Orchestra (ARCO) as well as his own solo projects to think through interpretive scope.

As I consider these works from a university perspective, I am tempted to ask, Does framing these works as research improve the artistic outcome of these projects? I have never really thought this through in considering my colleagues’ work, but in the cases above, I would err on the positive. Each of these works represents the culmination of a body of research, incorporating new tools, ways of knowing, technologies, and theories, all contributing to the larger-scale final project. Each project represents a notable shift in the field, a clear contribution to knowledge, which is the result of many years of investigation. The projects represent “the quest for

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knowledge [that] extends beyond the making of music as a creative act toward a sharing of experience: deep transformative understandings that while based on sometimes singular activities, are in reality, culminations of engaged artistic lives” (Tomlinson and Wren 2017, 6). The building blocks of these projects have been articulated through a combination of journal articles, conference presentations and performances. Each project is addressing and/or revealing larger research questions: How do these projects organize sound? How do the researchers make decisions? What is negotiable in the way musicians, audiences, and collaborators relate to the underlying concerns? How is the knowledge transferred?

These questions will be familiar to anyone engaging in a creative doctoral thesis where there is provision for the researcher to mount a creative project and to reflect on this work through exegetical writing. I have called this process “twice constructed” in the past—of obtaining two views of the same body of work (Tomlinson and Wren 2017, 8). The slowed-down, focused exegetical writing provides context for the creative output, information about process, and extracts of particular findings for the reader. The creative work, like all art, provides a doorway through which those in attendance can be immersed in a multisensorial relationship to the artwork. In this form, the expression is not bounded by the exegetical writing or the research question, but instead is led by an artistic provocation.

Some recent doctoral projects that I have found particularly exciting in this regard include Charulatha Mani’s dissertation “Hybridising Karnatik Music and Early Opera” (2019), which was her entry point into artistic research, unleashing a whole new area of research on the cultural well-being of migrant mothers. Nathan Thomson’s dissertation, “Resonance: Re(forming) the Artistic Identity through Intercultural Dialogue and Collaboration” (2022), unpacks the role of listening and performers when interconnected between different musical practices. Some use the doctorate as a way to understand their practice (Green 2018; Wren 2015), while others use it to change directions and take a deep dive down a new path (Knight 2011; Penny 2009).

In 2017, I co-wrote “Two Decades of Artistic Research: The Antipodal Experience” (Schipper, Tomlinson, and Draper) examining the state of artistic research in Australia at that time. Six years later, revisiting this body of work, I am reminded of how difficult forward steps in this field are. It is like being in a rip current—your feet seem firmly planted, yet suddenly you find yourself moving sideways. This is how I often feel about artistic research. How many articles do we read *about* the field of research, that propose new processes, tools, ways of thinking and reflecting on our practice? How rarely do we experience artistic research in action? Are we aiming for artistic research to speak for itself, without the translation of text? Does the methodology guide the practice, or vice versa? What evidence is required for artistic practice to be viewed as artistic research?

In the Australian context, creative research outputs have been standardized for some time through a national benchmarking exercise called Excellence in Research Australia (ERA). Using a peer review evaluation system and ordered by Fields of Reference codes (i.e., music performance, visual art, screen media, etc.), universities submit their nontraditional research outputs (NTROs) as media files, accompanied by an explanatory research statement. The 250-word statement incorporates research background, research contribution and research excellence. This format of assessing creative research over the past fifteen years has begun to guide the way we think about doing creative research.

At my university, researchers submit their completed research—inclusive of supporting documentation that provides evidence of new knowledge, public distribution, and peer review—into a database called [Creative Works](#), for review by an internal discipline expert. If it meets the

internally agreed-upon criteria for research, it is then published with a digital object identifier (DOI) for tracking impact. Endless questions around excellence, peer review and parity arise as each researcher grapples with the benchmark of creative research. What is the threshold for a work or a body of work to be accepted as a creative research output? Who is qualified to endorse this decision? And how do we deal with parity across artistic disciplines with very different working methods and timelines (for example, a feature film may take longer than a poem, an exhibition of works is different to an improvised music performance)? Other resistances lie around the uncomfortable interface between the research output and the research statement. Can a good research statement elevate a mediocre artwork? Or can a great contribution to artistic knowledge be let down by a substandard research statement?

Within my context as director of the Creative Arts Research Institute at Griffith University, and as deputy chair of the Deans and Directors of Creative Arts (DDCA), a peak body for creative arts in the Australian tertiary sector, we have made some inroads in how we work with creative research outputs and how we approach parity and equity in research outputs. The aforementioned ERA national benchmarking exercise is currently on hold, giving us space to work out if there are other ways to report our research contributions. But there is no doubt the visibility gained through clearly articulating our work as research means that, at least in my context, it is now valued as research.

A recent edition of *NiTRO* (2019), an Australian publication that focuses on creative arts matters in the tertiary sector, asks of artistic research, “Are we there yet?” We are certainly in a position to join the dots between academic creative research and doctoral level research. When I started in the Australian university system in 2003, having a creative doctorate was extremely rare. After completing a doctorate of musical arts in the United States and returning to Australia, I had to work out doctoral expectations, methodological norms, and terminology in what was then an emerging field. Having now taken fifteen doctorates through to completion with another six on the way, I can see how a strong research question guides the creative process—even if the question retrospectively changes. I understand the need for articulating *how* the project will be done, the process, or methodology. Clarity on process moves the conversation away from the artist as originator of knowledge, to the artist as *contributor to* knowledge. It forces each individual to look deeply into context, literature, theories, and myths; actively researching new applications and relationships.

The world is changing and so too is artistic research. It is both reactivate and proactive, always opening up new territory to consider. In 2023, one hopes it is the norm for all academic practitioners to have a doctorate and to understand how artistic research can help drive practice. As one doctoral graduate stated, “You suddenly realise that you have all these things going on, that you have *always* had all these things going on, and that you finally have all these wonderful ways to unpack them!” (*NiTRO* 2019).

In answering the question, “What is the most exciting direction in practice-based research today?” it is that in my university context, artists *are* researchers, and our ways of knowing and doing are understood as contributing to new knowledge. I am also excited that more arts-based academics have completed practice-based doctorates and are able to articulate their contribution to the field and construct projects with intent. Academics are making creative work that acknowledges historical context, while generating new ideas, and revealing how these ideas interact in the world. These intersections always remind me of what Kathleen Coessens (2014) calls the *web of practice*—a practice that is always in flux but distilled into a particular form, from a particular perspective in each research output. Intergenerational knowledge transfer through supervision of creative doctoral students becomes vital to renewal in the field, with each bespoke

and curious project reinvigorating the field. As the percentage of creative research knowledge bearers within each institution expands, so too does the number of advocates for this way of knowing, and we continue to move the conversation from *how* to do artistic research to *what* amazing research we are doing.

To finish, there are many research outputs being produced in the field of music and sound that I find inspiring: Erik Griswold (2017) writing about twenty years of prepared piano process; John Ferguson et al. (2019) making a new sound installation that exhibits new knowledge within its interactivity; and Leah Barclay, Lyndon Davis, and Tricia King (2022) working on sharing knowledge of the red-tailed black cockatoo in *Beeyali*. The nonlinear messiness of artistic research is part and parcel of our process, and I am indebted to many colleagues internationally who continue to make this a vibrant and ever-changing field.

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