

# Research Ethics for Practice-Led Research Methodologies in the Creative Disciplines

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## Abstract

*Research in the creative arts for qualification purposes has developed since the late 1980's to include creative practice as aspects of both methodology and outputs. The nature of the creative process, and what has been deemed as useful to artist/designer academics, has resulted in many research projects driven by a single researcher, addressing problems of practice from a subjective perspective, with the researcher and the researcher's actions becoming both the object and subject of the research. This kind of research does not involve other participants and is therefore seemingly precluded from ethical discussion. When applying for ethical clearance for a research project, it is usually automatically assumed that the research will be conducted with academic integrity and that the knowledge produced will be of value to the research community. In the visual arts, however, these assumptions cannot be made without justification, because the nature of creative research is often in opposition to some of the (still dominant) mores of scientific enquiry. In this paper I am specifically concerned with the ethical categories of academic integrity; responsibility to the discipline as well as the value of knowledge in relation to the communal and general good, pertaining specifically to the ethics of research in the creative disciplines. This paper aims to examine frameworks within which such research could be structured to adhere to specific research-ethical requirements mentioned above. While many other frameworks have been used successfully in creative research projects, I focus on two frameworks (activity theory and the participatory research paradigm) which conceptualize the interrelation of the researcher as subject and object in similar ways. Building on this discussion, I explore postphenomenology as an experimental framework, focusing on the implications of postphenomenology for research concerned with the making of objects, and the ethical implications thereof.*

**Keywords:** Research Ethics, Activity Theory, Practice-Led Research, Postphenomenology, Participatory research paradigm

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## Introduction

Research in the creative arts for qualification purposes has developed since the late 1980's to include creative practice as aspects of both methodology and outputs. This development has given academics who teach creative practice the opportunity to develop research that would contribute to not only the theoretical understanding, but also to practical knowledge and know-how as well as the integration of these. The nature of the creative process, and what has been deemed as useful to artist/designer-academics, has resulted in many research projects driven by a single researcher, addressing problems of practice from a subjective perspective, with the researcher and the researcher's actions becoming both the object and subject of the research. While PLR methodologies are well established and have been for at least a decade, this approach to research is still emerging in South African institutions (Marley 2015, p. 124). As a case in point I write this article from an individual perspective.

The kind of research that I am concerned with here does not involve other participants and is therefore seemingly precluded from ethical discussion. When applying for ethical clearance for a

research project, it is usually automatically assumed that the research will be conducted with academic integrity and that the knowledge produced will be of value to the research community. In the visual arts, however, these assumptions cannot be made without justification, because the nature of creative research is often in opposition to some of the (still dominant) mores of scientific enquiry. In this paper I am specifically concerned with the ethical categories of “academic integrity and responsibility to the discipline” as well as the value of knowledge in relation to the “communal and general good” as described by Darren Newberry (2009), pertaining specifically to the ethics of research in the creative disciplines.

Research Ethics in arts and design domains is still underdeveloped (Munro 2011, p. 154). In an effort to build on Munro’s prolegomenon article published in 2011 (Ibid.), this paper aims to examine frameworks within which such research could be structured to adhere to specific research-ethical requirements mentioned above. While many other frameworks have been used successfully in creative research projects, I discuss three frameworks that seem particularly suitable for practice-led research in the creative disciplines. I initially focus on two frameworks (activity theory and the participatory research paradigm) which conceptualize the interrelation of the researcher as subject and object in similar ways. I subsequently introduce a third framework (postphenomenology) to the discussion in terms of the implications thereof for research concerned with the making of objects, and the resultant implications for academic integrity, responsibility to the discipline and the value of the research as contribution to a community.

## Background

The precise naming of research in the creative disciplines remains problematic, as there are a myriad approaches that can, and have been, employed to incorporate some form of creative practice into the research design, either as method, data, or outputs. Artist-scholar Ian Marley, suggests the use of practice-led research as an over-arching term that would incorporate various approaches, henceforth referred to as PLR. Marley describes PLR with reference to Sullivan (2011, p. 99), Farber (2010, p. 2) and Borgdorff (2011, p. 45-47), as “an exploratory journey during which the artistic production and related creative process are contextualized. This process of contextualization utilizes both the tacit and explicit knowledge modalities. It is the artefact and the contextualization thereof that make a collective contribution to knowledge”. This description acknowledges the three concerns inherent in PLR, namely the idiosyncratic, the processes or methods and the presentation of results and outputs (Munro 2011a, p. 160). Research Integrity in these three aspects will structure the discussion of the frameworks later on in the paper.

PLR is generally characterised by a strong emphasis on the idiosyncrasies of the researcher: The researcher working alone or in collaboration with other artists/participants, immersed in his/her practice and in the relevant theories, dealing with very specific practical problems in specific contexts.

The act of making and the results of this making, form a central part of the research process and the outputs of the research. Due to the interaction of practice and theory, multiple disciplines outside the arts are brought to bear on the specific domain and field. PLR is also characterised by vague objectives that are refined and become more focused as the project develops. The initial problem is also often very vague with the researcher discovering the true problems through engagement with practice and theory. Above-mentioned characteristics make PLR controversial and difficult to write up as convincing research proposals.

In a developmental milieu such as South Africa, it is important that research projects are in line with the National Research Foundation (NRF) mandate to “promote and support research through funding ... and thereby to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of all the people of the Republic” (NRF 2015), with “passion for Excellence; world-class service; people-centered; respect; integrity and ethics; accountability” listed as NRF values (Ibid.). Due to the nature of PLR described

above, it is often difficult to convince funders that such a research project will indeed benefit others and produce research of high integrity and ethical values.

Research in the creative disciplines is furthermore often perceived, and in some cases, consciously conducted, as subjectively self-serving, as Robert Nelson states, “[t]he largest gap in anyone’s conspectus is the personal motivation of the artist—even when altruistic—caught in a jealous economy of ambition: competitive, tense and fraught” (2009:181). The motivation for conducting PLR is often firstly the benefit of the researcher and then possible knowledge contributions that will benefit “people of the Republic” (NRF 2015). Graham Sullivan softens the accusation of selfish motivations somewhat by proposing that the motivation for PLR arises from an ambivalence about identities as artists, teachers and researchers (2009:25), with PLR presenting researchers with the opportunity to develop their artistic careers; practical skills and know-how, while at the same time advancing their field of practice and developing their teaching repertoire.

Within this context, inadequately formulated justifications might lead to perceived clashes with traditional notions of scientific or scholarly enquiry. Of particular relevance to this paper are the following selected characteristics of scientific knowledge:

- “Scientific inquiry is based on the collective experiences of members of the research community as opposed to the observations and experiences of an individual;
- Science is not based on personal authority, the only authority that is accepted is the ‘authority of the evidence’” (Gaede 2004, p. 2).

In conflict with these values, Nelson discusses artistic vision as essential to the creative process. Individual artistic vision in arts production seems unavoidable and even desirable but is arguably problematic in the research context because it is “unique to a person, an artist, and embodies the charm and force of that person’s make-up, desires and education at its most communicative” (2009, p. 182). While the creative process can be contextualized and reflected on as part of a rigorous methodology, the actual production of creative works cannot and should not be done without artistic vision. It stands to reason that favouring objective, impartial knowledge generation (as opposed to individuated, subjective knowledge) will affect discussion in that it alters the perspectives from which art and design are practiced and interpreted, if not the nature of practice itself” (Caseauz 2003, p. 9-10).

In support of subjective enquiry, Sullivan (2009, p. 12) cites Richard Panek’s description of a modernist perspective that, “to the scientist fell the purely objective, the masses and motions that led to universal laws; to the artist, the purely subjective, the individual responses that spoke to universal truths” (1999, p. 1). The modernist position and notions such as universal truths have, however, been challenged by postmodern critique and subsequent developments, resulting in complex and productive research paradigms that allow for reconceptualised subjective and objective enquiry to co-exist. The value and validity of artistic research has been discussed, challenged and defended for more than two decades, with the debate becoming gradually more mature with an ever growing number of research projects to refer to. As part of this debate, philosopher Michael Biggs and Ian Marley respectively propose two frameworks that provide maps for the negotiation of the subjective nature of creative production within a research context. What follows is a brief discussion of both frameworks with the aim of showing how they relate and could be useful in developing PLR projects with ethical integrity and validity. This discussion then leads to an experiment with postphenomenology in the same context.

## Activity Theory

Biggs (2014) proposes activity theory (AT), originally developed in the context of psychology, as a framework for research in the creative disciplines as a holistic system of activities. Within this framework, activities are central to knowledge-production because an activity is a set of actions structured for a specific purpose, that combine together to construct our reality (Biggs 2014, p. 2)

and therefore bridges the gap between the individual subject and the social reality. Biggs explains that, in terms of AT, research methodologies are defined as “value and belief sets that provide an interpretative framework” (Ibid.) for understanding the impact and significance of activities, which Biggs in turn parallels with methods in a research context (Ibid.).

Activity theory therefore functions in the social-constructivist paradigm in that the validation of knowledge production is situated with “interpretive communities” that assess whether the methods and activities of a research project were appropriate and effective in producing outputs and results that effectively address the research question (Ibid.). The effective solving of the research question further implies acceptance of the creative artefacts that form part of the research outputs, as contributing to the specific field of practice, by the same community. Appropriate research questions are necessarily relevant to the specific field of practice that is addressed in the research, meaning that in the field of photographic practice, questions that relate to the practice of photography drive the research.

This notion of community endorsement of research and knowledge production relates to the ethical perspective of social ethical relativism in which the situational differences between research fields and research paradigms produce differing conclusions regarding what constitutes good research. The measure of good research is, however, whether it contributes to a specific knowledge community, and who better to assess this than the members of that community? Even though the research is conducted by a single researcher through individual artistic vision, the contribution to the field is constructed in a social context.

AT therefore provides a way of ensuring research integrity through the logic of the system of activities and the validation of the contribution by a community that forms part of that system. In spite of what Biggs contends, AT seems to go beyond constructivism in that it does acknowledge and value tacit knowledge and what it offers to the understanding of the creative process. AT could therefore be seen to venture into the participatory research paradigm introduced by Heron and Reason (1997).

## Participatory paradigm

Marley contends that visual arts researchers struggle to justify their research projects because they are confused about the research paradigms they believe their projects to fit into and often choose the wrong paradigm for the project. In his doctoral dissertation, Marley provides a refreshingly lucid overview of the four research paradigms namely, positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism, initially listed by Guba and Lincoln (1994). Marley, however, follows Heron and Reason (1997) in adding the participatory paradigm, which he argues is the most suitable paradigm for PLR, rather than the social-constructivist paradigm proposed by Biggs. For each of the paradigms discussed, Marley deals with epistemological, ontological and methodological questions. Of particular interest to this paper is Heron and Reason’s addition of the axiological question that is “concerned with the value of knowledge in the participatory social construct” (Marley 2015, p. 103).

The participatory paradigm offers a holistic inclusion of experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing and explicit knowledge modalities (Marley 2015, p. 133). These inclusive modalities thus allow for reflective practice and creative production to be included as aspects of the knowledge contribution of a research project. Ontologically it is based in experience. We are aware of reality through experience of ourselves, objects and other subjects as well as the relations between these. Importantly, the participatory paradigm allows for the integration of action with knowing, which relates to Biggs’ application of activity theory within the PLR context. Within the participatory paradigm, practical expertise and “knowing how to flourish with balance of autonomy” (ibid.) is an end in itself and is intrinsically valuable.

Heron and Reason (1997), however, extends the notion of participation, beyond the materials and interpretive community, to participation with fellow researchers and research participants. Marley

also advocates for multiple researcher projects in PLR. In the context of single researcher projects, I however contend that the participatory paradigm is equally applicable to managing knowledge creation that is rigorous and transferable, provided that the researcher builds some form of interaction with the interpretive community as well as materials and technologies into the research design.

## Postphenomenology

Postphenomenology offers a framework for this incorporation of interaction with materials and technology into PLR. While material thinking (Bolt 2007) offers similar ideas regarding the role materials<sup>1</sup> in the creative process, Postphenomenology extends these ideas to technology specifically and draws from the rich body of knowledge in the philosophy of science to formulate a non-alienating approach to human-technology interactions. In his writings on the postphenomenological philosophy of technology, Don Ihde argues for the primacy of specific, situated contexts in the analysis of human-technology-world relations (Ihde 2009). Ihde's methodology is to import aspects of American pragmatism into a phenomenological approach, frequently using autobiographic anecdotes based in individual experience, to formulate his analyses. Ihde's focus is however not necessarily on the value of individuated subjectivity, but rather on the importance of situated context specificity. According to Sobchack, Ihde demonstrates that 'the personal' is neither synonymous with nor reducible to 'the individual' and that instead, it provides the very intersubjective basis for further investigation of more general forms and structural variants of lived experience" (Sobchack 2006, p. 14).

Verbeek builds on Ihde's work and emphasises the agency of technological objects, and the role they play in shaping our being and understanding of reality. Verbeek also goes on to draw on the ideas of Bruno Latour, specifically his notion of 'actant-network' interactions. While Verbeek does not fully adopt Latour's (1993, p.95) notion of symmetrical relations between humans and objects, he does concur that objects need to be viewed as possessing agency in shaping experiences, and co-constructing knowledge in the network of interrelations (Verbeek 2010, p. 102). This notion ties in with AT but cannot be seen as social-constructivist, because it acknowledges the agency of objects' relations to each other, independent of the social.

The postphenomenological framework highlights the importance of objects in the knowledge creation economy, and is highly pertinent in the context of PLR which is more often than not engaged in the making of objects and the use of, or rather collaboration with, technological tools to facilitate this making. A deep understanding of the interrelations between conscious subject and the way technology co-shapes our being in the world, as well as the meaning we can gain through our experience of reality, or put differently, the ecology of knowledge creation, becomes an ethical necessity. In this context, knowledge emerges as a product of "interaction between humans and nonhumans in a network involving definitions, problem-setting, experiments, and observations" (Verbeek 2010, p. 103). This inclusion of the making of and collaboration with objects in the knowledge creation system, expands the AT framework and provides a research-ethical motivation for the exploration of creative practice through practice per se.

## Conclusion

In this paper I focus on the problems surrounding the prevalence of individuated, subjective perspectives in PLR, which is necessary for the creative process that forms part of the research methodology. In order to navigate around the apparent lack of validity of such perspectives, I draw on the frameworks proposed by Biggs and Marley respectively. These frameworks, although situated

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<sup>1</sup> Artist-Scholar Louise Hall (2013) has recently completed a PhD in Drawing practice, making use of material thinking (amongst other theories) as framework to structure the theorising of her practice.

in different research paradigms, have similarities and augment each other. They also lead into a discussion of postphenomenology as a possible, as yet experimental framework for PLR that needs further development. Through this discussion I have argued that the subjective idiosyncratic approach of PLR is not only essential to the creation of useful knowledge in the visual arts, but also ethically desirable when one considers the making of objects as part of the ecology of knowledge creation. As Caseauz states: “Any claim to knowledge has an ethical component since, in order for something to be counted as knowledge, there has to be the acknowledgement by members of the relevant community, e.g., physicists in the case of physics, sociologists in the case of sociology, etc., that the new claim can be accepted, where acceptance amounts to compliance with agreed standards and conventions.” (2003, p. 6).

I, as individual, subjective researcher, situated in a specific context, therefore need to acknowledge that my research is a product of a network of human and non-human relations. In my research I need to understand this network (Ecology) in order to produce ‘good’ research.

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