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**Models of knowledge**

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The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Scene, 11 (1&2), pp. 77-86:

[https://doi.org/10.1386/scene\\_00053\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/scene_00053_1)

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## Articles

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Received 31 May 2023; Accepted 30 September 2023

### Abstract

Art practice has an unusual history inside the university sector. Often originating from specialized academies, as disciplines they usually began life through a focus on practical work. This gave rise to small institutions that have been subsumed into larger ones, becoming colleges or schools within universities rather than continuing their independent lives. The advantages of this are clear: structural, financial and cultural opportunities that come with the status of university subjects. What this essay argues is that there has been a considerable price to pay in being so accommodated. Creative practice subjects in a qualifications framework, and to some extent in exercises like the Research Excellence Framework, have been required to adopt intellectual enquiry processes in order to burnish their claims to knowledge. Mostly, these come from the humanities. This essay examines the impact of this on creative practice, on acceptance of the research elements of it and on distinguishing the difference between arts-based enquiry and humanities models of interpretation and analysis. That these are increasingly incompatible requires rethinking of the relationship between arts and humanities that is so taken for granted.

**Keywords:** arts research, creative practice, methodology, arts education, research methodology, critical practice

## University, arts practice and the division of labour

One of the first shocks I had as a young lecturer joining the higher education sector was the immediate division of labour required by it. I did not understand it in this way at the time as I had not the language for it, but I would come to experience this division all through my work in universities, and that has lasted more than 30 years.

I had come from a professional performing career and was not in any doubt about what I knew. I knew my job was to show up on time, contribute to the making process, respect the self-care requirements of professional dance, commit to performing and focus on developing my technique and artistry. There were plenty of other requirements as well, in an occupation often thought of as a vocation rather than a job, and I respected them. But, by the age I was, I

no longer had the singularity of purpose to suffer the consequences of my profession. Dancing for a job is tough. I was happy to teach what I knew and see where this would take me.

The naiveté of this approach strikes me very clearly now, more than 30 years later. I enjoyed my dancing but could not make it work for me any longer in practical ways (like paying my rent or living in society). As a second-tier performer, a recession had killed off the jobs I ordinarily would have had, so institutional life seemed a reasonable compromise whilst I worked out what I would do next. Whilst in work dancing is demanding, it is utterly miserable in long periods without it. In making such a choice, I was clear that the most vivid, creative experiences of my life were now past, that higher education was a compromise and that I would have to live with it. I assumed that young people wanted to learn about dance as a means to unlocking the sort of experiences I had had, to revel in the development of their physicality and extend themselves through it into the world.

Life as a performer, as a dancer, is pretty simple. You are there to contribute what you are, especially in the development of new work. This is not always easy or painless, but it is simple. It is not an intellectual exercise (more on this below), but most often a collaborative one, requiring compromise, listening, contributing, copying, agreeing. Dance is an interesting example of this, given the extent to which much-heralded choreographers are in the hands of the seldom-credited dancers who work with them through their creative processes, not merely embodying their intentions but initiating them too. Sometimes, when it works well, the relationship, however strained it can become over rehearsal periods, creates new ground for all involved. Choreographers have, no doubt, helped me find new aspects of myself, see new artistic and technical horizons, change my sense of possibility. The reverse has also been true. Most dancers in a career of any length experience the situations where we all mumble to each other up the back of the studio. We understand we need to help a choreographer resolve a problem they have created for themselves but cannot face, or quietly and tactfully guide the

work to a conclusion the maker is avoiding. Rehearsals are insurance against public mistakes, though, as with all insurance, it does not always pay out. In my career there appeared to be very few choreographers with the humility to confront their own limitations, but the dancers are the ones who are in front of the public and rarely want to be seen to be the cause of failure. So, there are often subtle understandings and compromises or suggestions of how and what that will move the process on. It is not collaborative in the sense of an encounter between equals, but it is a method of resolving how people work together to make a dance. The overwhelming focus of all is in drawing out from the material, the situation, the idea, whatever the manifestations of an artwork.

My own higher education experience was different from the start. Whilst I had studied at an enlightened dance school that took a broader education seriously, the values it pursued were very clear: you are there to learn to dance professionally. This takes a lot of energy and the full commitment of the student. About half the students in my cohort did not finish and even some who did complete did not work. The tensions within the school were palpable and resonated for myself and my colleagues for a long time, for some a whole lifetime of engagement with dance at professional level, for others a life-long struggle with their identity. In a then-radical move that respected the body of knowledge we were developing, we were awarded full BA degrees for learning to dance. There were ingenious inventions of what we thought of as 'academic' work interpolated into this, usually unsuccessfully. It was rare to find a direct correlation between an 'academic' activity and an insight into your own dancing. If this happened, it was lighted on as if a minor miracle by the 'academics' who were brought in to teach us dance history and the like. It was secondary stuff, and we treated it that way. If there were not a direct connection of any activity to our professional futures, we were unlikely to treat it seriously given how much was demanded by the rest of our timetable and aspirations. Indeed, a regular feature of our 'academic' classes (sometimes foolishly timetabled for directly

after lunch) was just how often someone fell asleep during them. To confuse matters further, we had practical teachers that defined some of the work they were asking us to do as ‘academic’, in that they were teaching a syllabus that fixed certain positions, movements and rhythmic connections. We worked quite hard to absorb these into our bodies, understanding the mixture of experience, intensity and feedback that would enable a plié or to construct a parallel position that no longer needed thinking about. In this we were following the grand tradition of artist training in the academy. The word ‘academic’ has a number of applications from labels for people to practical work to anything requiring a pen.

## The place of academies, universities and the academic

The academic tradition of creative practice or artistic development varies from discipline to discipline. Areas like music have long held a place in the academy and are thought of as uncontentious contributors to university portfolios, at least as subject domains (the issues around costs present other challenges nowadays). Fine art, with its history of official support and institutional arrangements going back 250 years to the Royal Academy, likewise seems accepted. These arrangements have often allowed subdisciplines or emerging genres a route into respectable, funded courses for music technology or photography, for example. Performing arts came later to the party, and possibly dance or circus came latest of all, though I doubt they will be the last noting the incremental formalization of social media content creation. What we define as the arts, worthy of study and as contribution to culture, is forever on the march. But what we learn from the history of all these disciplines in the university environment is a shift, sometimes described as a balance, towards theoretical constructs alongside the artistic, practical and technical demands of the subject. For arts education, this was the price for inclusion into the formal qualifications framework of degree study. This has been the difference between an ‘academic’ training in the arts and a university education in the same.

When I started my second career as a university lecturer, teaching on what was believed to be an uncompromisingly practical course with a vocational qualification, I was amazed to discover the contempt in which the practical work was held. It was not that my colleagues did not approve of it, more that they were entirely ignorant of it, having never worked in the field. As a consequence, whatever the priority given by the students to their practical work, it was the contextual studies work that determined how they were perceived as learners. If a student expressed appreciation for particular styles or approaches, it was expected that their practical marks would reflect this understanding, it being the lesser aspect of their studies. It was an entire inversion of my own training, and I thought it undersold the achievements of students and overplayed the importance of the politics with which they were being inculcated. The students wised up to this soon enough; like all students everywhere they understood where the grades were to be had and exploited the situation accordingly. This did not inhibit the best of them quietly complaining that no one cared about all the physical learning they were doing. My colleagues spent their time patronizing me: your lovely international dance career means nothing to us, just teach the prac so we do not have to. And do not try to make the argument that taking their dancing seriously will help them. And you will have no influence at all on what we do: as a former professional you are not qualified to speak to the educational agenda.

The lesson I drew from this as my career progressed was to focus always on what was being assessed in divining the values of any given curriculum. It was this that was the key to understanding the priorities and assumptions being made in its construction. I tried to be true to this when planning curricula in other institutions. It was quite noticeable that, in reworking the graduate school for a very illustrious institution, I was faced with some difficult choices that could not be ducked. Dispensing with a very popular master's programme because it reflected the division of labour I encountered in my first lecturing job made me few friends. When I proposed a master's degree in dance performance, it was considered entirely reckless

(though choreography at the same level was not). I did it anyway, knowing there was a market for the learning and an opportunity for dignifying the practice with postgraduate credentials. I had no idea just how radical this was, reframing the hierarchy of knowledge as explored in my subject, and I note in similar institutions today, more than twenty years on, this is entirely uncontroversial though it remains qualified by intellectual pretensions. The dancing itself still needs justification.

The vocational and practical aspects of an education in the arts must certainly have been a disruption to the organizing principles of universities as they were introduced. There are ironies in this as, especially in the United Kingdom, given a large number of new (or post-92) universities trace their origins back to the establishment of civic art schools in the nineteenth century. These were inaugurated as a means of providing training to the manufacturing industries of the Industrial Revolution, seeking a competitive edge in design and aesthetics. They were places of practical instruction and provided a vocational foundation for local workers. Later, through complex mergers, government policy and changes to funding arrangements, they would find themselves inside larger organizations (in the United Kingdom mostly polytechnics). In 1992 the then Conservative government converted all of these into universities, where they quickly sought to emulate their fellows in established universities by the extension of their mission into research or hitherto uncharted territory in subject domains previously only present in older institutions. Their former mission was further blurred in their aspirations to make professions like nursing and teaching into degree subjects. The outcome of this was not to extend and improve practice, but to focus on improving the status of a subject or institution by burnishing its intellectual credentials. The critical and analytical found new subjects to study. This had the benefit of both expanding the reach of a subject domain and remaining cheap to teach: any extension of the practical work would come at substantial cost. It was also easy to measure. Universities of all sorts had long had mechanisms to do so that had



the appearance of rigor and fairness. Conventions were easy to formulate, methods of assessment were already **con**ventions and lecturers easy to train as a result, noting Bourdieu's observation that academic appointments tend to require a shift downwards in institutional status.

## The superior life of the mind

Central to this whole shift was an assumption of the superiority of intellectual enquiry. The aspiration to be part of the grand tradition of theorizing as coterminous to being a university has been complacently accepted as the standard to which all universities should aspire, regardless of the context of their mission, their heritage or their community. That this should have national (and especially international) attractiveness has been a shorthand way for universities to express their relevance. Their organizing principles are, for the most part, interchangeable as a result ([Parod-Guerra 2022](#): 10). There might be differences in the pedagogical approaches of individual subjects, but the combination of national aspiration, regulation, measurement and culture leaves us with universities that are expensive and increasingly indistinguishable, all the while drifting upwards to afford a view from an ivory tower. This happens at the same time as a concerted effort to claim relevance, relationships with industry and a justification for impact. This may work in many subject domains in many universities.

For the arts, their cultural imperatives have been eclipsed by the instinct to standardize. Institutional behaviours, prizing the intellect above all else, require qualification and justification to survive given their absence of utility otherwise. This is a long-standing critique of the university. However, this becomes especially important for art-making where it survives in the sector. In a change to its academic tradition, the impact of its accommodation alongside a full complement of subjects has been to seek to replicate or absorb the traditions of others, especially the humanities to which it is all too often tethered. In older universities established

as entities in their own right, creative practice was always limited to being an object of study rather than study itself. Enquiry into the arts was privileged over practising them and drew to itself the kind of institutional approval that still sees art history, say, as a discipline that dominates over art practice in exercises like the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF). This is not a trivial matter, noting the enduring difference in social status between those making the work and those commenting on it. It is a reflection of the organizing processes of society, and the status of universities in particular, that enquiry into the arts, whilst keenly competitive and energetic, always trumps the practice. It is somehow required for the practice to validate its claims, as Boris Groys has pointed out, in an inversion of the story that is often told. In keeping with the notion of universities as repositories of intellect and generator of quantifiable knowledge, the life of the mind trumps the sensualities and multimodal experiences of creativity. As Groys says, 'art has often played the role of performer of knowledge, showing what it means to live with and through a certain knowledge' (2018: 30–31). That is not to say there is no room in the REF, for instance, for practical work. On the contrary, some of this is easily accepted as knowledge in its own right as cultural contributions expected from the university sector. There are qualifications and ways in which evidence is used to enhance its claims as research outcomes, reflecting the bias of humanities models as justification. The term 'practice-based research' has meaning in this context and forms the compromise that we currently live under. Rather than the practice speaking for itself, that it might be open to interpretation as part of the learning to take from it, the qualifications framework makes clear the demand on students to make the link between the manifestations of the work and the artist's intention of it. This is most frequently through documents that contextualize and justify, underpinned with heavy-duty theoretical concepts. The deadening application of critical power seeking authorial truth (often referred to as the Intentionalist Fallacy and not particularly approved of in aesthetics circles) brings with it extra baggage,

acting as it does as a hostage to fortune for a maker whose energies and capacities may not be so evenly balanced. The type of contextualizing documents presented in this way ignores the serious arguments summarized by [Shusterman \(1988\)](#) but more egregiously, as the critic seeking an interpretation that is consistent with the intention of the author is replaced by the author themselves. Of course, creative intentions are one thing, but an artist judging their own creative success in achieving them is literally marking their own homework. The requirement to convert their creative energies into research-standard critical and contextual text is a big ask. Why not accept the interpretation of the non-textual as relatively open (using the work as evidence), given we use this as criteria for text in and of itself? But few artists would judge their own work in this way, usually preferring the myriad of interpretations that come with engagement with a public. Why do we do so in academic practice?

## Breaking up the ampersand

Part of the reason is the relationship of the arts to the humanities. The arts are tolerated in the university by means of an extension of the mission of the humanities. They remain there and operate by their permission, as if the exercise of critical power as engaged with in humanities subjects can be, *mutatis mutandis*, directly transferred to creative practice. This exposes two serious problems. The first is that such a treatment pretends creative practice is intellectual process by other means. The second is the weakness and redundancy of critical theory itself, increasingly redundant in the world as a life skill, replaced by data analysis and metrics (and eventually AI).

The presumed categorization of art with the humanities itself provides clues about how its shape must be one of mutual engagement. The *ampersand* of arts and humanities suggests both a compound partnership and a bifurcation of knowledge domains at once. Sequestering the arts with the humanities must come as some relief to scientists and moves the whole lot out of the way into a world of approximation. It is also rather obviously an inadequate method of

accounting for them as attendees of faculty meetings of arts and humanities schools must surely know. The relationship between the apparent partners as broad concepts is often antithetical, and the fact they represent different bodies of knowledge indicates that the regularity of their juxtaposition elides the distinction between them far too often. This might work as convenient shorthand in the macro scale of academia but is misleading in workaday contexts. More accurately, they present as paradox: a humanities-driven account of knowledge draws on entirely different skills, concepts, techniques and presumptions of arts practice that are only employable in the service of the arts as afterthoughts, justifications or rationalizations. Artists rightly object to these for their ability to kill off the impact of the creative. It is not for nothing are the relations between artists and critics testy. They are working from entirely different perspectives.

Despite this evident problem, methods of enquiry in the humanities are assumed to present a close fit to the exploration of artists, as the role of critic demonstrates. Without being limited to this (analysis and interpretation learned from critical struggles with all kinds of subjects are key players as well), the humanities draw on a tradition and practice that carries authority. The working assumption is always that theoretical perspectives matter and contribute to the present moments that make art. This is partly because of the division of labour noted above: that intellectual enquiry into the work for creatives has always been privileged in universities. The Ph.D. guidelines in the United Kingdom generously allow ‘the “thesis” may take the form of an artefact and a commentary, as is appropriate for the field of study’ ([Quality Assurance Agency 2020](#): 15), but there is no escaping the commentary, the exercise of critical power in regard to the work produced, regardless of the dissonances this produces for artistic work and philosophical tradition. It has been the obvious extension of this notion to expect artists to confirm this where they seek validation through the qualifications framework regardless of the legitimacy of the fit with the propositions formed. Artists generally understand

the need to conform to the environment around them, even when they are apparently defying it or subverting it. The demands of the intellectual process are irresistible.

The theory project as propelled into the art space has served another purpose as well. The dismal necessity of the compulsion to theorize has breathed life into the failing efforts of the humanities to demonstrate their relevance. Artists working through practice-based methods requiring theoretical underpinning are perfectly capable of making a virtue of it. With the enthusiasm of converts encountering new ways of seeing, they adopt critical postures as a means of compliance. The obligation to theorize is exalted as inspiration. Most often this is with an amateur's understanding of the theoretical propositions being called upon to provide the ballast. This regularly produces a false genealogy of knowledge that is entirely inverted from the intellectual systematizing in disciplines like philosophy, science or cultural studies. In those areas, original work derives from interpretation and application of method. In the arts, a desperate search for a corollary happens as a post-creative justification or worse; a misunderstood theoretical perspective or scientific principle is explored through a creative form ill-suited to its articulation. The **work** is intuitive, as a number of accounts in this journal volume attest. The method is then assessed for its efficacy in bringing the artwork to fruition. Only at the end is a theoretical rationalization laid over the work, a mantle of false legitimacy that looks crude to those more used to the finessed and attenuated ambitions of philosophical thought. Methods of enquiry themselves become adapted beyond recognition or credibility in the arts space: semi-structured interviews become no more disciplined than dinner-party conversations as artists instinctively shift their enquiry from critical spaces into social ones. As artists they gift validity to all responses rather than making the singular critique of them that is expected and find themselves criticized for lacking a rigorous methodology as a result. Given this is the expectation they have of appreciation of their made work outside of the university, it is hardly surprising that many struggle to formulate a workable, viable interpretation of the

theoretical underpinning of their work so necessary for qualification and so redundant in art-making.

## Art as research

This also explains the popularity of certain schools of thought in practice-based research. The attempts of intellectuals to engage with areas beyond their understanding through their imperfect tools creates the false impression that somehow such theorizing has cracked open complex problems. This is reasonable enough to attempt within their own disciplines, but it is quite outrageous to expect those who, for example, make creative work through their bodies to accept the propositions of intellectuals without much of a relationship with their physicality. This long-standing inability to see the wholeness of the entity or the oneness of existence, which art at its best demonstrates so beautifully, is reduced either to the Cartesian demand that intellectual conceptualizing is the only guarantee of a truthful assertion ([Sporton 2017](#)) or that physical manifestations are really social constructions, especially interesting on an intellectual plane if they allow us to speculate about sex and even better about subversive or deviant sex ([Foucault 1986](#)). Embodiment becomes a preoccupation for an academic account of the creative process because of the suspected inadequacy of these intellectual traditions to do more than reinforce either of these defective ideas or their modern variants. This is also why phenomenology enjoys such favour with artists proposing to explain research processes in their work. It appears to have common cause, starting with a promising acknowledgement of the multiplicity of influences on our experiences that feels akin to the ambiguity sought in art but ultimately ending in a vague abstruseness that declares the inexpressible in text as fundamentally unknowable. Whilst artists will often enjoy the creative dynamic thus supplied, it pushes their work to the periphery of the enquiry, to operate as background or evidence to prove the theory.

Neither of these theoretical gambits offers much respect to the artwork that precedes it. A model of knowledge through art might propose the unknowable as precisely the point, not an error or a mystery but an inherent quality. At its best, rather than offer a conclusion, it begins a discussion based around the sense-making of viewers and artist as they combine in the gallery, the theatre or on-screen. This is quite different to claims of knowing through application of a specific lens, and one of the reasons such speculations find only modest traction with artists if they cannot be exploited to prompt interest in the work. It is notable in Ph.D. seminars how scholars of a humanities bent are often bursting with insistent certainty about what is represented and strongly critical of the aesthetic ambiguities that accompany the presentation. Can a film about abandoned buildings from colonial times be critical and beautiful at the same time? Reaching for explanation and expressing alarm that, say, a repressive regime may produce brilliant art or generous artists, are didactic statements by humanities scholars the right means to tame the unruly and uncomfortable truths expressed by art? <sup>2</sup> Groys's contention that 'theory functions as propaganda – or rather as advertising: the theorist comes after the artwork is produced, and explains this artwork to a surprised and sceptical audience' (2018: 23) was never more in evidence than in these types of academic seminars. Artists are rightly ambivalent about such interventions and interpretations. They may satisfy the theorist's need to be public and right about the artwork (whatever that is worth), but the narrowing of interpretation surely performs a function the artist would not care for. As well as decreasing the availability of a wider audience, it reduces the work's potential and autonomy. The explanation diminishes the possibility of art fulfilling us in ways not considered. It is framed and complete and thus historicized and often sanitized as a result.

The logical extension of this is the decoupling of art from the humanities, the removal of the ampersand that apparently <sup>3</sup> ties them together in the interest of artistic autonomy and cultural effectiveness. This requires the reinvention of former aspects of creative practice that

represent evidence not taken into consideration in the humanities framework. This includes an understanding of technique as an assessable, critical factor in the creation of art. This manifests in divergent models, sometimes through iterative practices, sometimes through execution, sometimes through structure. Accumulating evidence of process is a reasonable means of demonstrating the creation of knowledge, even where the explanation through language can be deficient. What is necessary is to look at the work and its inherent logic or lack thereof and to allow its manifestation a creative life rather than the theoretical stasis in which research students are currently required to mummify their work for the benefit of the examiners. This shift in values, which is the compromise required to participate knowledge-building, is one from which the arts as an educational practice have yet to recover from. The longstanding routes into art-making, whether institutional, atelier-based or self-taught, had never considered the work itself as an intellectual pursuit. Rather, it was more complex than that, and hardly so one-dimensional.

Artistic research, rather than remaining confined to the dubious compromises of practice-based work, needs acknowledging as research in its own right. When initiated for artistic purposes, it reaches out to us to support an understanding of the world. That is what research in all subject domains seeks to do. There are organizations like the Society for Artistic Research that exactly identify the complacency of the ampersand with the humanities and seek independence for the creative output that contributes, often very directly, to our understanding of the world we have. Their work at seeking change through institutional and transnational structures offers a chance for the specialness of art as research to be appreciated. It can present outcomes and repercussions like all other research that will only be enhanced once it no longer requires parsing by a set of intellectual traditions that are antithetical in nature to artistic practice. What art requires is the space to encounter its public unmediated by the filter of alternative disciplines. It is only when artists are freed of the requirements to justify their



research through secondary enquiry, rather than for us to appreciate what is evident at first encounter, that its true essence can be judged and its meaning can flourish.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Sporton, Gregory (2024), 'Models of knowledge', *Scene*, 11:1, pp. 00–00, <https://doi.org/10.1386/scene>.

## Notes

[1] Given the overwhelming shift from persuasive argument to data analytics in such meetings, all parties may find themselves in the hands of technical specialists in this (if they have not already).

2. I am thinking here of a showing of films by Uriel Orlow and Hweyeon Nam at the University of Westminster in December 2023, where the audience was invited to view four subtle and quiet films through the gauze of genocide. It made no sense and did little to encourage the sharing of understanding of what we had just watched, with alarm and denial being registered at the capacity of light, shape, character and action to present a ruined landscape as beautiful or the benefits to an artist's work of defecting to a totalitarian state. This proposition was made rather more absurd by Hweyeon Nam's own methods around the corpus of work related to the film, as discussed in [Jihoon Kim \(2022\)](#).

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