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Practice as Research: Foundations for a Community of Knowledge

Ben Spatz

This presentation was originally presented with numerous slides designed in Apple iWork. These visual aids have been converted to text, but the paper retains a somewhat informal tone.

This presentation is part of a larger project to theorize practice as research. As always, I've had to leave out much more than I was able to include. I am eager to discuss these issues further in person or by email, so please get in touch with me if you are interested.

Before I begin, let me point to the change in my paper's subtitle. In the conference program, the subtitle of my presentation is "Towards an Epistemology of Embodied Knowledge." The shift from "epistemology" to "community of knowledge" indicates not only my desire to give a more engaged and less abstractly philosophical paper but also my increasing belief that epistemology is located and grounded in the concrete infrastructure of our fields. I think you will see what I mean as my presentation unfolds.

Now, on to the question of what the word "research" means in the phrase "practice as research."

Here are a few dance and theater organizations that have the word "research" in their titles:

- Movement Research (1978, New York City): "One of the world's leading laboratories for the investigation of dance and movement-based forms." <www.movementresearch.org>
- The Centre for Performance Research (1988, Aberystwyth, Wales): "A pioneering and multi-faceted theatre organisation located and rooted in Wales, working nationally and internationally." <www.thecpr.org.uk>
- Urban Research Theater (2004, Poland and New York City): "Develops original performances out of a continuous, long-term practice of embodied research." <www.urbanresearchtheater.com>
- The Center for Performance Research (2010, New York City): "An artist driven initiative co-founded by Jonah Bokaer/Chez Bushwick, Inc. and John Jasperse/Thin Man Dance, Inc." <www.cprnyc.org>

I mention these simply to show that the word is in circulation also outside academia. The third one listed, Urban Research Theater, is my own company—so that doesn't prove much. But there is also Movement Research, a well-known dance-focused organization founded in 1978 out of the Judson Church movement; the Centre for Performance Research, an excellent theater center in Wales founded in 1988; and a new dance space in Brooklyn by the same name.

In the titles of these organizations, the word “research” does not primarily indicate a relationship with academia. “Movement Research” and “Performance Research” here do not refer to academic research at all. Instead, the word “research” is being used here to distinguish *between different kinds of practice*.

Here, on the other hand, are four recent books on practice or performance as research:

- *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, edited by Ludivine Allegue, Simon Jones, Baz Kershaw and Angela Piccini (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies*, edited by Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).
- Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).

The first three are in theater, dance, and performance studies. They are all collections of essays. The fourth book is a monograph, but its focus is on the visual arts. The first two books listed provide an excellent overview of current discussion and debate on practice as research.

In my review of these two volumes, which just came out in *Theatre Journal*, I point to a division between two different ideas of “practice as research.” In both these books, there are two different epistemological positions in evidence: one weaker and one stronger.

“Practice AND Research”: PRACTICE + RESEARCH (weaker epistemological position)

The weaker epistemological position is what I would prefer to call “practice AND research.” This refers to interdisciplinarity between embodied practice and scholarly research. In all four of the books just mentioned, authors tend to describe practice as research as inherently interdisciplinary: a combination or integration of theory and practice. In this sense, they write about the “artist-scholar” or the “artist-theorist” as one who combines two functions or roles.

In calling this a weaker epistemological position, I do not mean to suggest that it is less productive, valuable, or necessary. I suspect that all of us could agree on the importance of interdisciplinary connections between theory and practice. Such connections go in both directions: theory informs practice, and practice informs theory. Thus, there are two basic questions to ask about “practice AND research”:

- | First: How does artistic practice produce scholarly knowledge?
- | Second: How does scholarly knowledge inform artistic practice?

These questions are solid, and their value is not in doubt. But asking them does not destabilize the binary relationship between practice and research. In calling such work “interdisciplinary,” we continue to assume that practice and research are two distinct areas or modes of work. Each can inform the other, but the two remain distinct.

An argument for “practice AS research,” on the other hand, must make the stronger epistemological claim that embodied practice itself constitutes an area or mode of research.

“Practice AS Research”: PRACTICE = RESEARCH (stronger epistemological position)

This necessarily leads to different kinds of questions:

- | First, instead of asking how embodied practice can produce scholarly knowledge, the question becomes “What kind of knowledge inheres within practice itself?”

Second, instead of asking how scholarly research can inform practice, we can ask, “Under what conditions does practice itself constitute a mode of research?”

This is the position I will argue today, and these are the questions I will attempt to begin to answer.

The first difficulty that arises in answering these questions is that there is a strong tendency within academia to identify live performance and embodied practice with *ephemerality*. Even the vast recent scholarship on the body tends to describe the body as escaping, resisting, or being in “excess” of discursive and symbolic control. There is a sense that embodiment and embodied practice cannot be captured or even described.

In the following quotation, from one of the two volumes I recently reviewed, Simon Jones opposes practice and performance not only to text and research “output” but also to “the known” and to judgment of any kind:

Hence, practice-as-research is that which flees textual practices. Furthermore, and most outrageously, if it does so, ontologically it is also *outside of judgement*. Since the laws, rules and standards by which one judges the discipline’s “outputs” must themselves have been phrased out of some textual practices that attempted to come *to know* performance. So, in fleeing the known, performance will inevitably evade judgement, since any phrasing of judgement, even—as in this writing itself—of performance *as evanescent event*, will fail to recognize those very aspects that make performance worthwhile; that is, those that escape phrasing. (2010, 30; italics original)

This is clearly meant to be a provocative position, but I believe it weakens the case for practice as research. Once we set performance up as “fleeing the known,” it becomes

impossible to make an argument for “practice as research” in any rigorous sense because research is defined in relation to the known. If we cannot establish what is *known* in a given field, we cannot meaningfully speak of research in that field.

The linking of performance and embodiment to the ephemeral is not limited to recent scholarship or to the debate on practice as research. Indeed, this idea played an important role in numerous academic movements of the twentieth century, including feminism.

In this quotation from 1993, Lynda Hart sets up an opposition between theater and text on the one hand and performance and ephemerality on the other:

This project [the book *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*] is in part motivated by the desire to displace the dominance of text-based work in theater studies, to value the ephemerality of performance. (Hart 1993, 4)

Performance, for Hart, is valuable precisely because it is fleeting and transient and, therefore, in some way escapes or resists capture by the written word.

It would not be difficult to come up with countless other examples of this notion.

What we have, then, is a kind of opposition that has been set up between the stable and the ephemeral, in which language and text are linked to stability and the known, while live performance and embodied practice are linked with ephemerality and with an escape from judgment and control.

- STABLE vs. EPHEMERAL
- language vs. practice
- text vs. performance
- stability vs. ephemerality
- the “known” vs. the “live”
- judgment vs. escape from judgment

I am not saying that this is the only view, but it is one that carries a lot of weight in current writing about practice.

Yet I believe this opposition is a kind of romanticization. For the spectator, a given performance may appear ephemeral because it is witnessed only once or twice. And the scholar or historian who tries to write about live performance indeed faces the issue of its ephemerality. One is painfully aware of how much a written script, or even dance notation, fails to capture. As a result, one begins to discuss the “excess” or “remainder” of live performance in almost magical terms: fleeing the known, fleeing judgment, evading capture, constantly disappearing, defining by its disappearance . . .

But from the perspective of the performer or practitioner, “practice” fits equally on the other side of the opposition—that is, on the side of the stable rather than the ephemeral. This is especially true for anyone who has undergone any kind of serious training. Such a practitioner knows that, although every live event is to some extent unique, it is also

an instance of a repeatable structure. This structure may be loose or tight, but it must be stable. Even improvisation is founded on stable structures.

If live performance were completely unknown and unpredictable, it would be unrecognizable. Nor would most performers agree that live performance is free of judgment. In romanticizing embodiment as inherently ephemeral, we unfortunately ignore those aspects of embodiment that are stable. We forget that live performance and embodied practice also involve stability, continuity, and repetition. We lose track of how embodiment can also be “the known.”

Theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have pointed toward this dimension of embodiment through notions of discipline and iterability. Foucault and Butler argue that discipline and iterability are not only restrictive but also produce the conditions of possibility. This again is clearly evident to anyone who has undergone training in performance or embodied practice. Yet for some reason, the “stable” aspect of embodiment remains unacknowledged in much scholarship on live performance and embodied practice. Why is this?

In order to answer this question, I want to set aside practice as research for a moment and look at more established fields of scholarship, such as theater or dance history. What makes us think that scholarly knowledge is in any way stable? In other words, what leads us to believe that scholarly work contains something that we can meaningfully call “knowledge”?

I propose that scholarly knowledge is grounded in the institutional and administrative procedures of academia. The following list is not intended to be comprehensive but only indicative: documentation, assessment, peer review, consensus, specialization, disciplinarity. Far from being merely administrative, these structures of academia are fundamentally linked to the epistemology of our fields. In fact, I propose that these mechanisms and protocols of scholarship constitute the rigor of our fields.

ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH
(language, text, stability, the “known,” judgment)
=
- documentation - assessment - peer review -
- consensus - specialization - disciplinarity -

Let me clarify that I also understand academics and academia to be bound up in social power struggles. I realize how easily the concept of knowledge gives way to that of cultural capital and elite privilege. Precisely because of this easy slippage, we need to ask ourselves how we define the rigor of our fields. To reduce all knowledge to cultural capital is a completely cynical view. How then can we distinguish one from the other? How can we locate knowledge?

In the first place, knowledge in an academic sense is tied to or even founded on the circulation of documents. Here I illustrate the circulation of contemporary documents such as conference papers, journal articles, and books:

Theatre Journal • P*S*i • *Dance Research* • I*F*T*R* • Palgrave Macmillan • *Theatre Topics* • A*A*T*E* • Routledge • *TDR* • J*S*t*o*r • *PAJ* • *Dance Chronicle* •

Each document passes through the processes of peer assessment, disciplinarity, and other mechanisms of institutional epistemology that I just mentioned. In doing so, they generate a productive tension between diversity and community at various levels. The tension is the basis of scholarly knowledge.

The conversations found in current journals and books are part of what I call the “synchronic archive” of academic knowledge. The circulation and assessment of these documents are the foundation for the overlapping communities of knowledge that constitute academic disciplines and fields such as dance, theater, and performance studies, and their borders with anthropology, literature, the sciences, etc.

SYNCHRONIC ARCHIVE
(print and online media)

Through the circulation of documents, geographic and disciplinary diversity come into productive tension with the sense of community and communication that defines these fields. Out of this tension come more documents, which continue to circulate and expand the synchronic archive.

No less essential is the diachronic archive, which ranges from the increasingly vast resources of electronic databases and past journal issues to the physical libraries and archives that hold thousands of published and unpublished manuscripts and records.

DIACHRONIC ARCHIVE
(manuscripts and other historical evidence)

Without its diachronic dimension, academic knowledge would have no historical rigor. The ability to trace an idea or quotation back through a chain of documents is fundamental in giving weight to the idea of knowledge.

Thus, I argue that the circulation of documents is what defines the depth and rigor of a field like “theater studies” or “dance studies.” There is no such thing as academia without the written word. What makes these academic disciplines or fields as opposed to oral traditions is precisely the ability to draw upon a wide range of documents stretching across vast synchronic borders of geography and discipline and across hundreds or even thousands of years of diachronic archive.

CIRCULATION OF DOCUMENTS
(synchronic and diachronic archives)

The depth and breadth of the archive are what makes scholarly knowledge more than just local, even if it cannot claim to be universal.

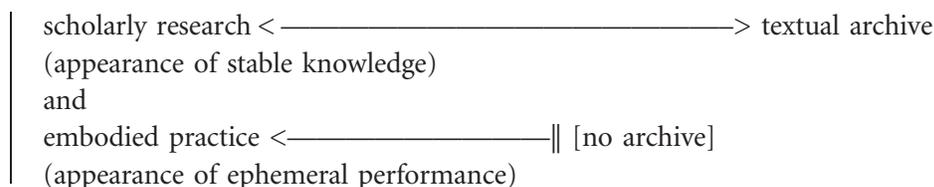
Nevertheless, as academics, we know that this archive is not enough to produce a field or community of knowledge. If documentation were the same as knowledge, there would be no need for pedagogy. We could simply tell our students to read a large list of books, and then they would be scholars.

Pedagogy is the other essential dimension of academic knowledge. It distinguishes an active research community from an archive or library. To possess a document is not to possess knowledge. Yet documents offer a crucial source and trace of knowledge. A community of knowledge, we might therefore say, is a *relationship between institutions of pedagogy and archives of documents*.



Now, having briefly articulated this idea of a “community of knowledge,” I want to return to the question of practice as research. Is it possible to conceive of “practice as research” as a community of knowledge in this sense: that is, as a relationship between pedagogy and archive? The pedagogy part is easy, since teaching and training have always been a central part of all traditions of live performance and embodied practice. But what about the archive?

To combine the arguments I have made so far, I suggest that the relationship between scholarly research and the (largely textual) archive is what gives rise to the appearance of stable knowledge in fields like theater and performance studies. On the other hand, the absence of such an archive for embodied practice and performance gives rise to the appearance that such practice is ephemeral.

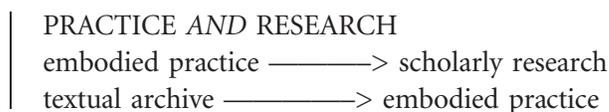


In other words, academia cannot “see” the knowledge content of embodied practice because, until recently, there has been no way to build an archive of circulating documents that would allow us to make meaningful comparisons between embodied practice across historical and geographic distances.

Under these circumstances, the role of embodied practice within academia can only be defined in relation to scholarly knowledge and the textual archive. This is what I earlier called “practice AND research”: interdisciplinary relationships between scholarly knowledge and embodied practice.

In the diagram above, we could draw a vertical arrow on the left side from “embodied practice” up to “scholarly research.” This arrow would indicate how embodied practice can inform scholarship, as, for example, when a scholar participates in a performance practice or works as an artist and then brings that experience into his or her academic writing.

We could also draw a diagonal arrow from the “textual archive” on the right to “embodied practice” on the left. This arrow would indicate how scholarship can inform practice, as when artists draw on theories and ideas from academia in the processes of creating artistic work.



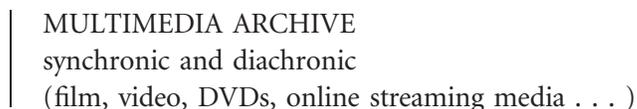
These are exactly the two questions I mentioned at the beginning as defining “practice AND research”: namely, (1) how does practice influence scholarship? and (2) how does scholarship influence practice?

Without an archive of practice, academia can support these two modes of “practice AND research,” but it cannot support “practice AS research.” In order to place practice AS research on this diagram, we have to add a new element.



This arrow indicates something different: not a relation between practice and scholarship but a relation between practice and an archive of practice. In this way it finally becomes possible to compare practices across time and space and to speak meaningfully of embodied knowledge in an academic sense.

“Practice as research” in this sense is *independent of scholarly research and the textual archive*. It neither produces nor relies on the written word. As I have shown, however, this emphatically does *not* mean that it is ephemeral, transient, or immune from assessment. Rather, practice as research requires its own diachronic and synchronic archive of circulating documents. Only then can the stable knowledge inherent to embodied practice become visible within an academic context.



The question of multimedia documentation is, therefore, not merely logistical or administrative but epistemological. The archive substantiates the rigor of knowledge as distinct from tradition, opinion, or cultural capital.

Thus, the alleged “split” between theory and practice is not an ontological difference but rather a result of the history of technology. That scholarly knowledge appears stable is a result of the history of the written and later the printed word. Likewise, embodiment appears ephemeral and lacking in “knowledge” precisely because it has no archive. Only the advent of multimedia technology allows us to conceive of practice as academic research.

Again, this is not to say that live performance can be “captured” in a video any more than a great historian is “captured” in his or her books. As in any other field of knowledge, a

document becomes meaningful in relation to an active community of pedagogy and research. To bring live, embodied practice into academia must mean that we find ways to let such practice circulate through the *processes* that define academic knowledge. This does *not* mean subjecting them to textual requirements. It means that the *archive of practice* must become the foundation for a community of embodied knowledge.

Now, below are five books, published in the past ten years by top academic presses, that come with DVDs documenting various kinds of practice, from performance excerpts to work demonstrations as well as training and workshops.

- Giuliano Campo with Zygmunt Molik, *Zygmunt Molik's Voice and Body Work* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- Philip Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach after Stanislavski* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, edited by Ludivine Allegue, Simon Jones, Baz Kershaw, and Angela Piccini (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- Michael Chekhov Association, *Master Classes in the Michael Chekhov Technique* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- Włodzimierz Staniewski with Alison Hodge, *Hidden Territories: The Theatre of Gardzienice* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

In attending this conference, I have come to realize that the archive of dance practice is far more substantial. In any case, taken together, these kinds of materials can be said to constitute the beginnings of a multimedia archive of practice.

What would it mean to assess the knowledge content of these volumes as distinct from their artistic merit? Consider that the Gardzienice CD-ROM is already diachronic since it includes clips from the late 1970s through to the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, the Kershaw volume from Palgrave is widely synchronic since it includes video from over forty different projects. Thus, even from just these five volumes, it becomes possible to search for connections and continuities, for differences and similarities across time and space, and, therefore, for what can be rigorously called embodied “knowledge.”

As soon as we begin to archive embodied practice in this way, we begin to see that it involves the same balances between tradition and innovation that we find in our own scholarly disciplines. Without question, the relationship between current practice and historical practice is as complex and interwoven as that between current and historical history or theory. Yet this complexity can only become visible through an archive of multimedia documents like these.

To conclude, I hope that in the next few years we will see at least one journal of practice as research in DVD or online database format. Such a journal could involve a written component, but it need not. The important thing is to foreground this kind of multimedia documentation as distinct from creating performances for public showing. The peer reviewers of such a journal would be asked to assess each submission on the basis of knowledge production: Does this practice expand our knowledge of what is possible in a given field of practice? If so, it constitutes research in a rigorous sense.

We should not expect documents of practice as research to contain what we think of as finished products or public-performance events. Nor should we expect the documents of practice as research to be entertaining or to appeal to a general audience. Specialization is a fundamental feature of knowledge. (In fact, I think it might be a good sign if our practice-as-research documents are boring to people outside the field!)

In any case, the performing arts today do not need to be pushed toward mass appeal. We already live in the world of Broadway, Hollywood, and *American Idol*. Instead, the performing arts today are badly in need of a way out of the demand for mass appeal. They badly need a zone of protection analogous to that which, however partially or awkwardly, protects and distinguishes scholars as producers of knowledge. What academia can offer the performing arts is, therefore, much more fundamental than funding: it is epistemology.

The performing arts today are badly in need of an epistemological perspective that only academia can provide. This perspective has played a vital role in the histories of theater and dance, but it has never been foregrounded institutionally, nor can it be without the technology required to develop an archive of practice. I hope that now is the time.

A few conclusions:

- Research is relative to a field of knowledge.
- A field of knowledge is a relation between pedagogy and archive.
- Practice as research is not inherently interdisciplinary.
- The apparent ephemerality of embodied practice in comparison with discursive thought is an artifact of the history of technology.
- Documentation is an epistemological issue.

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