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“Context is half the work”: developing doctoral research through arts practice in culture

Anne Douglas

In 2001-4, a small research team of post doctoral and doctoral artist researchers, working with five cultural partners drew together two apparently incommensurable issues: remote rural culture and contemporary art. The thrust of their questions was speculative: What might the role of the contemporary artist be in remote rural contexts? At the time, the turn of the millennium, the dominant context of contemporary visual art was urban and metropolitan. Any ambition to develop art in alternative contexts needed to be negotiated against this dominance - its assumptions and aesthetics. “Context is half the work” was developed by the artist Barbara Steveni as a central axiom underpinning the work of Artist Placement Group (APG) (1966-1989) and O+I (Organisation and Imagination 1989-present) (APG/Tate 2015). It expresses aptly the opening up of art practice to context that our research question had provoked.

In parallel, practice-led research through the arts was emerging as a new research area. Practice-led research may be defined as research that emerges out of particular questions and expertise of (in this case) arts practice. It is frequently framed by interplay between the histories and traditions of practice and current social and cultural change. This area of research is underpinned by a methodological approach that might combine qualitative and quantitative approaches but nonetheless, its overall purpose is discursive and critical rather than propositional or problem solving.

*On the Edge*¹ research responded to these parallel developments in arts practice and in research practice. On the one hand the particular context of remote rural Northeast Scotland prompted a rethinking of the role of the contemporary visual artist beyond the dominant urban metropolitan conventions of gallery and museum practice. Remote rural culture significantly shaped the programme’s approach, producing forms of art in which temporal, developmental and immersive qualities of engagement through the arts overshadowed the importance of the artifact as a single mode of address. Situating the challenge as a research inquiry helped to open up process over production. It enabled the team to position the artist in relation to social, cultural and economic issues, aesthetics, and communities of interest, drawing in other disciplines that could inform the unfolding research.

In aligning art with formal academic research, doctoral and postdoctoral, we not only confronted the dominance of established modes of production and reception, but also established research approaches. At the time, the arts sector tended to draw on the social sciences in particular, to explain the social role of art. Appropriating existing research language and concepts sought to legitimise the arts’ relationship with research. These efforts restricted the kinds of questions that could originate in the arts. In foregrounding questions specific to practice, such as the role of the contemporary artist in a specific

cultural context, the team needed to think through step by step what we believed could be known, and identify knowledge traditions that would appropriately inform practice in the world.

A remote rural context suggested some clear ground rules. Heather Delday, the doctoral researcher in this phase of work (2001-5), contributed her 30-plus years of experience of living and working in the Orkneys and Western Isles of Scotland. She investigated a 'close' relationship between artist and community as an alternative construction to the conventions of a more anonymised artist and audience relationship. This study, as part of a much larger research project, was formative in how the research developed (Delday 2006).

Firstly, vernacular culture, in fact all human culture, is rich in creativity and meaning. The arts bring these meanings to the foreground at different times and through different media. In this sense the arts and culture are not synonymous but work in relation to each other to exploit the immense diversity of ways of being in relation to environment, culture and values. Raymond Williams defines three categories of culture. The 'ideal' is concerned with the absolute or universal, "the discovery and description, in lives and works, of those values which can be seen to compose a timeless order... a permanent reference to the universal human condition" (Williams 1973, p. 56). The second is 'the documentary'. This is a critical activity taking form through a body of intellectual and imaginative work in which human experience and thought is recorded in diverse ways. The documentary ranges close to the ideal but may also focus on a particular work and its analysis or undertake an historical criticism that, through analysis, makes connections between particular traditions. The third is the 'social' definition of culture - a description of a particular way of life, which draws on expressions of culture through the arts and also in institutions and everyday practices.

This third category is possibly the closest to *On the Edge* research. Art projects emerged in response to a particular way of life, working with institutions and organisations responsible for sustaining and reflecting upon the production of culture in relation to the past, present and future of a particular region. The function of each art project or intervention was to make connections and invigorate participants, organisations and artists. The function of research was to reflect on, and inform emergent arts practice from a wider context of ideas and practices, testing the significance of the approach beyond the rural, to trace change as a means to create a better understanding of social and cultural development as a whole (Williams 1973, pp. 56-57).

Secondly, co-operation between individuals in remote rural cultures to sustain a way of life is a greater priority than working from a particular identity or professionalised 'role'. By being open to learning, to hearing and seeing what remote rural culture could offer the research, new forms of art started to emerge that rediscovered the profound relational and interdependent nature of artistic endeavour. Artistic practice may produce a new experience, event or activity, but the work of art requires the input of others to gain traction and meaning. In this sense 'the reader creates the text' (Wolff 1981). Jacques Rancière, a philosopher of culture, suggests the way that we learn is through acts of

translation. By connecting signs to other signs we come to understand what another human being is trying to communicate. As a consequence “every spectator is already an actor in her story, every actor every man of action, is the spectator in the same story” (Rancière 2011, p. 17). The active spectator responds to a given narrative by creating another story true to his/her world of experience. It is this principle of iterative cycles of translation that emancipate rather than stultify community.

Thirdly, in remote rural contexts there is minimal infrastructure that institutionalises, and therefore secures, the roles of artist and audience. Instead there are diverse communities of interest through which activity may stand or fall. The research team worked with individuals across arts practice, policy development and curatorial practice, exploring issues with cultural leaders, residents and academics from disciplines including anthropology and philosophy. The research process created a safe space to formally acknowledge these differences as the starting point to managing their implications through appropriate forms of action.

This chapter consists of two interrelated sections. The first half of the chapter explores the emergence and development of *On the Edge* research from 2001 onwards through two projects, *Inthrow* (Douglas et al. 2006) and *Celestial Ceiling* (Douglas et al. 2005). Both projects developed between 2001-4. It traces how the experience of living in Northeast Scotland has shaped the form of the work and its underpinning values, as well as subsequent developments from 2005 onwards. As new thematics emerge, such as artistic leadership, improvisation and ecology, the research approach sustains an ethos of collaboration and participation as a mode of inquiry in and through arts practice. The programme also frequently encounters expectations of both research and arts practice that prompt critical reflection and, at times, conflict.

The second section mines a particular example of doctoral study, that of Reiko Goto Collins who completed her PhD in 2012, entitled *Ecology and Environmental Art in Public Place. Talking Tree: Won't you take a minute and listen to the plight of nature?*. This study is situated between art and ecology. It draws on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and confounds many of the conventional ways of thinking about an arts-led doctorate as a consequence of its interdisciplinarity.

This part draws on an analytical lens developed by Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, 1994. They challenge a received view of research as predominantly propositional, by subjecting a number of research paradigms to analysis. They expose fundamental beliefs or first principles on which four different research paradigms have been built, including positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism. Their analysis is used as a critical base to position Goto's research in relation to existing paradigms, other discipline perspectives and research expectations to draw out the unique qualities of the work as practice-led research through the arts.

The chapter concludes by exploring arts-based research as knowledge producing i.e. not just the subject or method of research but formative of a whole approach that acts as a lens through which the world is perceived and understood. Doctoral research programmes

such as *On the Edge*, have the potential to prepare individuals to challenge and critique existing forms of inquiry that are tied into particular knowledge economies. In developing sound research skills, in constructing argument that is well informed and critically adept, artists interested in exploring issues of contemporary practice in a changing world, become equipped to develop alternative ways of knowing and, importantly, to act through practical engagement in the world. The generative aspects of arts-based research point to a new research paradigm. If supported and developed, this paradigm should enable artists to influence forms of inquiry alongside other disciplines and expert practices. At the very least they establish an important principle of research that it is not possible to speak the truth in the wrong paradigm (Coessens et al. 2009).

On the Edge: emergent arts-based research

***Inthrow*, Lumsden, 2001-4, artist Gavin Renwick**

At the heart of the project *Inthrow* was a field at the corner of a village in Aberdeenshire. Nearer the city, many of the fields were steadily being covered with suburban housing. The village had been laid out by the estate as part of a programme of agricultural improvements nearly one and three quarter centuries before. Now agriculture was changing. What would happen to the field? What would happen to the village? Pat Dunn, the farmer who owned the field, would retire as the last farmer living in the village to tenant land from the estate.

What happens when no-one wants to farm the land?

Chris Fremantle, then director of the Scottish Sculpture Workshop within the village of Lumsden, posed these questions in part through his experience of living in the village and in part prompted by working with Gavin Renwick, a practice-led researcher and architect. Renwick had been exploring similar themes in the Northwest Territories of Canada. The team worked with Fremantle to develop a brief – to explore the ideas, the depth and shape of the questions. They then approached Renwick to work on the project. For him it was an opportunity to deepen his understanding of the issues he had been developing in Canada.

Renwick worked with elders and young people in the village, architecture students and graduates, and other artists. He developed a number of threads in the work around the idea of home and hearth. In the local dialect, the doric, *inthrow* means hearth.

Gavin Renwick said, “My practice is about continuity - you can only go forward if you know where you come from”. Ian Hunter evaluated the project as an artist and researcher of public art. He said, “This project is about revealing change”. Pat Dunn, the farmer who owned the field, said “If they dinnae (Doric for ‘do not’) know about things, there’s nothing to be said”². Willie Petrie, Dunn’s neighbour and also a farmer, quoted Robert Burns:

“I’m truly sorry man’s dominion,
Has broken nature’s social union,”
(Robert Burns, 1789, *To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough*)

A discussion about the future of a field thus became a way for each contributor to position themselves. This was captured in a book of reflective texts, drawings and commissioned photography. The book tells the story of Renwick's original concept and the different forms of action that flowed from it, forming acts of translation in Rancière's sense. The artists' interventions create the conditions to open up eyes and ears to different experiences of village life undergoing change. In rural cultures these may be otherwise unmarked moments that go unnoticed but nonetheless transform lives. Art interventions allow for encounters that are more conscious and sensory, shared as a community (Douglas et al. 2006).

Celestial Ceiling, 2001-4, artists Robert Orchardson and John McGeogh

The *Celestial Ceiling* project addressed the loss of important Scottish heritage, a 16th century painted ceiling in an ancient house dating from the 11th century, on the northern coast of Aberdeenshire. The ceiling was destroyed by fire in the 1990s. In responding to the challenge, the team gathered together art historians, painters and curators including the custodians of the original heritage. They reflected on the loss. It became apparent that we could do one of a number of things: Nothing, reproduce the lost work, or commission a new work.

We asked the historian of the Scottish Renaissance, who had specialised in painted ceilings. He responded by describing how the original ceiling had come about. We asked the contemporary art curator. She contrasted the artist in the 16th century carrying out the desires of the patron with the expectations of autonomy and the freedom that artists look for now. She suggested names of artists of quality who make paintings. We asked a painter of heraldry who has painted many ceilings. He responded, "You might consider something like this. It is quite similar to what was there." We asked a contemporary artist and he replied "Think about how the original was made. Think about what new materials are available to artists. Think about how we can now throw light as a medium, not trap light in pigment. There are now ways that were not possible in the 16th century". We asked the artist who trains other artists and he said, "It must be a genuine response - to what was there and to what we believe now". He suggested young artists whom he had taught. We asked the architect and he said, "I will keep an open mind but keep me informed. Work with me and work with my clients. They are the new patrons. They must always be informed and they must be allowed to inform what happens."³

The discussion generated not one, but two commissions developed with quite distinctive artists. The one completed a new ceiling for the 21st century (Figure 1). The other reconstructed the original ceiling through digital media as an interactive work situated between the arts and heritage. The project drew additional resourcing to complete both works.

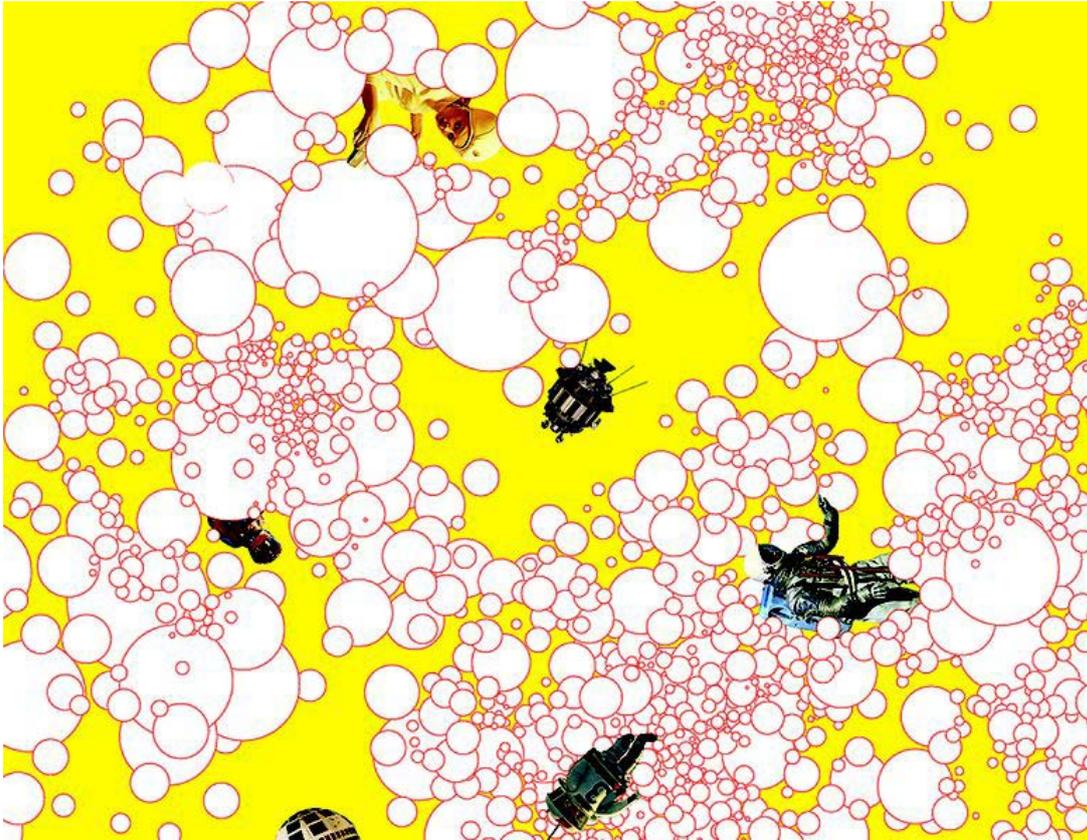


Figure 1: New Cullen Ceiling, Robert Orchardson, 2004 courtesy of On the Edge research

What is the significance of the work to remote and rural cultures and communities? A large number of Scottish Renaissance painted ceilings are found in Northeast Scotland. Cullen House and Duff House are neighbours and both represent built heritage of considerable architectural interest nationally and internationally. Both had suffered disrepair and undergone restoration. Working with the research team, the director of Duff House, an outpost of the National Galleries for Scotland, was keen to frame his institution as a public resource of knowledge in architectural restoration. A request from his neighbours, the private owners of the original ceiling at Cullen House, provided the opportunity for him to draw on his organisation's considerable knowledge of restoration techniques and skilled networks. In fact he supported a process of exploring, rather than resolving, the problem of heritage loss.

Many of the skilled craftsmen of the region would have worked on the restoration of both Duff House and Cullen House. The loss through disrepair or fire to either property constituted a loss to the whole community, economically as well as culturally. In some respects, the story of *Cullen Ceiling* draws attention to the relationship between the public and private in remote rural contexts. It is not the same relationship as in urban contexts. Where the National Gallery in Edinburgh functions as a visitor attraction within an urban, metropolitan setting i.e. as a form of provision of service *to* the public, its

counterpart in Duff House constructed a reciprocal relationship between the public and the private. This took the form of an exchange of shared experience and responsibility for care of the built environment, of expertise, interdependence and of mutual learning in the light of the loss of culture. Such a project and relationship might not have been possible within an urban environment or indeed outside of a research inquiry.

The story of process forms a second book, *Cullen Ceiling: Contemporary Art, Built Heritage and Patronage*, a narrative tracing the different perspectives and contributions of the participants (Douglas 2005).

Re-framing research and practice

These kinds of questions and approaches drew five project partners, responsible in some way for culture in remote and rural contexts of NE Scotland, to work with the *On the Edge* research team.

Through emergent questions, we positioned the work simultaneously as research and as practice. The resulting networks were not loose connections between individuals, but a clustering of interacting elements that, we envisaged, might have long-term consequences. Our different experiences of living in remote rural cultures provided an initial source of energy to explore in new ways, the relationship of art to its cultural context. We created learning spaces that involved the core participants in two-day workshops, held every six months across a three-year period. They included artist researchers, organisational leaders, geographical rural communities and, increasingly, other artists. The workshops took the form of discussion, cross fertilizing ideas, techniques and processes, as well as challenging default responses. Heather Delday, as doctoral researcher, led a process of placing the work in a wider national and international discourse on the changing nature of art, circulating selected critical texts. Different project partners took turns to host each workshop so that we were working in the places in which a project took form. In this way the research could support a process of defining what success and failure looked like. The core concern was to uncover the value (or otherwise) of artistic intervention as it came into play within experiences of social and cultural change.

The opening question of the first phase of *On the Edge* in 2001 was: How do you articulate forms of visual arts practice of quality in remote and rural areas? The question framed some problematic assumptions of how - and by whom - quality is judged, and also produced. We asked this question as artist researchers and inhabitants of remote rural places, rather than as sociologists; as makers and dwellers within the situation, not as observers outside the situation. The question challenged our assumptions of what art might be, and where and how it might be experienced.

A conventional model within the arts involves sharing at the stage of a completed product, at a point of reception. This is frequently dependent upon an institutional frame

and established protocols that position the work as art. A characteristic of *On the Edge* projects has been that artists were commissioned to realise projects. The default position in public commissions is to start with writing the commissioning brief. We adapted this procedure by foregrounding a research-based approach that focused on the visions and challenges of cultural leaders. We 'suspended disbelief' and sustained an open-ended exploration of ideas, ethics and principles of action so that projects started to emerge, to be identified through a process of recognition rather than by being pre planned or predetermined. The process of cross fertilisation created a starting point that was deeper, and more significant to the participants. By choosing not to work in conventional ways, we were free to focus on the challenges and unique character of remote and rural life. We needed to negotiate new terms of reference by exploring foundational principles – Who and where were we? Who and where did we want to be?

Vandana Shiva, a quantum physicist, activist and leading opponent of genetic modification and patenting of seeds, stresses the importance of biological and cultural diversity working together. In an interview with Wallace Heim (2003), Shiva describes a ritual process, *Akti*, in central India by which different groups annually donate, mix and redistribute rice seed. This has the dual function of resisting disease and sharing through ritual exchange.

This is a vivid metaphor for the aspiration and approach of art in public life. Isolation, including that of the artist or cultural leader or participant leads to a loss of resilience, a vulnerability to attack from conditions that threaten quality of creativity in everyday situations. A dynamic culture of inquiry through art is dependent upon infusions of new energy that might appear unexpectedly and from unpredictable sources.

Allan Kaprow, artist and theorist, is also a major point of reference in this research. He championed art's proper role as part of life—as distinct from the role that had come to be assigned to it by the institution of museum and gallery practice, as commodity. His point of entry was through an idea of play. Play is a perpetual, indeterminate state of mobility. It is an energy that avoids the traps, the fixed points, of entropy, the hardening of beliefs and ways of being. Play is the antithesis of certainty. Nonetheless, there is a paradox: mobility can be defined as going from one place to another. It relies on a negotiation between fixed points. The tension between a desire for mobility and its dependence on a contradictory force—determinacy—seems to get to the heart of an understanding of contemporary art that is situated within paradox (Kaprow 2003). In some sense mobility, as Kaprow suggests, is dependent upon a state of constantly questioning, of hovering in the intervals between points, not to “deaden the game” (Kaprow 1995). Kaprow's thinking and aesthetic approach is one of a number of artists whose work is research-led. Like John Cage, his mentor, Kaprow supported experimental practice in the world through a meta level of thinking explored through reflective writings.

It is important to say that co-operative energy did not always operate in this positive, developmental way. Four out of the five projects developed through collaboration with the research. In one case the collaborative ethos failed and a more traditionally autonomous practice resulted. Individuals consciously exercise choice and judgement in

its most heightened and skilled form, in the making and experiencing of art. This is true for the artist in declaring a musical composition or drawing as a success or a failure, and also for the audience correspondingly experiencing the work as a process of completing or resisting and rejecting it. In a similar way, the exercising of choice is an important quality of the research space - to act or not to act, to participate or not despite the availability of funds to do so, to learn from the experience or to choose learning from another source or mode of working.

Research Developments 2006 onwards: the aesthetics of leadership in social art practice

The questions have evolved beyond the remote and rural to embrace new kinds of cultural contexts. In 2005, the artist Suzanne Lacy approached *On the Edge* to support her PhD by practice. A recognised practitioner of international standing, Lacy was interested in reflecting upon a ten year body of work in Oakland, California that involved issues of youth, race and media education. It was challenging to imagine supervising the doctorate of an individual who is so widely known and regarded internationally, an individual who had already published a number of seminal texts in the field. A clue to an approach that chimed with the artist's aesthetic lay in performativity and public space, in particular Lacy's emphasis on public dialogue. *On the Edge* took the process of critical reflection into a public setting, inviting other key practitioners interested in the issues to learn together over a twelve month period (2006-7): a structured programme of invited lectures, discussions and studio sessions ending in the most public of contexts, the Scottish Parliament (September 2007). Thus Suzanne Lacy's personal research became *Working in Public*, a seminar series across the four major cities of Scotland with the intention of reaching artists, funders, policy makers and community partners who could benefit from the specific experience of a high level practice (Figure 2). In this sense, Lacy's Oakland projects acted as a case study of important experience to the whole community of public art practice. The research generated an analytical framework situating the different tensions at work in this kind of artistic endeavour. It drew on Lacy's specific experience and extrapolated the consequences. The framework sought to acknowledge the very real tensions between aesthetics and ethics (Seminar 1), representation and power (Seminar 2) and quality of art and quality of social process (Seminar 3) (Douglas 2007).



Figure 2: Suzanne Lacy, Grant Kester and participants , Seminar 1 *Working in Public* 2007 courtesy of On the Edge research.

Lacy finalised her thesis in 2013, *Imperfect Art: Working in Public, a Case Study of the Oakland Project 1991-2001*, situating her Oakland work in art historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts to assess its aesthetic merits. One of the major themes underpinning the thesis is to examine how the social claims in work of its kind can be evidenced. To this end she engaged with five sites: institutions within health, education, criminal justice, civic policy, and youth experience. She aligned her work with forms of pedagogy—from the expanded notion of public pedagogy to the intimate level of a mentoring relationship. Pedagogy underpins the work’s claim to hold a relevant place within both the public and professional art spheres.

In parallel with Lacy’s research and inspired by its complex leadership dynamic, *On the Edge* developed the *Artist as Leader* research. This was a research partnership with Cultural Enterprise Office, Scotland, a Scottish based organisation that defines itself as a specialist business support and development service for creative businesses and practitioners, and Performing Art Labs or Pallabs, a London based organisation that specialises in a methodology of creative labs across the arts, design, science and technology. It came at a time (2006-9) in which leadership was predominantly interpreted as good management and considered to be the key to success mainly defined in economic terms. The partners in the research wanted to distinguish leadership in the arts from arts management. The research report (Douglas et al. 2009) drew on in-depth interviews with key individuals across the arts and cultural policy, predominantly in Scotland. It distinguished three forms of leadership: aesthetic, organisational and social/activist. These were not intended to act as separate categories of leadership. A single individual could manifest leadership in all three forms but each form depended upon different skills and focus. Perhaps more importantly, the research laid down the foundations for critical discourse across the arts and policy sectors by engaging individuals in a debate on leadership and its meaning to their communities of practice. This work is currently undergoing development through new doctoral research into cultural leadership developed by Jonathan Price, a cultural theorist.

This history shows how *On the Edge* is formed by, and also influences, the different cultural contexts in which the research operates. The starting point in remote rural

cultures established an ethos of co-created research in which questions emerge out of shared interests across institutions and organisations, disciplines and diverse interests. In other words these questions were not driven by a single agenda, whether that of an individual doctoral researcher, or of an institution, discipline or research project. Collaboration and interdependence have involved us in raising questions through discussion, listening rather than determining, working across the academic hierarchies of doctoral and postdoctoral research experience. Methodologies have had to be constructed as part of the research process, along with relevant literature and analytical frameworks that illuminate both the aesthetic and social dimensions of the practices on the ground. The research approach has involved forms of dissemination that communicate across the diverse community partnerships involved.

What characterises doctoral research within the *On the Edge* programme? Researchers are frequently experienced practitioners, seeking to deepen their understanding of practice in a changing world. Each research project establishes exploratory threads, and tests different analytical frameworks as a lens through which to grasp the particularity of their approach and as a contribution to a shared discourse. They include artists and also arts related practitioners working with cultural policy or leading arts organisations. In the process, researchers encounter challenges of how to position their inquiries within established knowledge paradigms. They draw on mixed methods crossing different paradigms.

The following case study is a particularly complex and vivid example of doctoral research that develops in this way. Reiko Goto Collins joined the research team in 2005 at the planning stage of the *Working in Public* seminars with Suzanne Lacy and was central to the process of developing and realising the programme. She brought her particular expertise as an ecologist artist to the team. In the following analysis, Guba and Lincoln's framework of three questions is applied retrospectively to this doctoral thesis, a process that reveals how this practice-led research does not entirely fit with the specific paradigms that Guba and Lincoln define, provoking the thought that this area of research may in fact offer a different paradigm in its own right.

Part 2: Evidencing a Paradigm Shift: a case study of doctoral research

Ecology and Environmental Art in Public Place . Talking Tree: Won't you take a minute and listen to the plight of nature? Reiko Goto Collins

PhD Robert Gordon University 2012. Supervisor: Anne Douglas

“What can be known?” (Guba et al., p. 108)

Goto Collins' argues that it is possible to create change in understanding and behaviour towards the natural environment, if we understand that human life is interdependent and interrelated with nature in our environment. Her perspective is that of a practising artist of some twenty years, working with her partner, Tim Collins, on ecological issues. Prior to the doctoral study and as Carnegie Mellon Research fellows, their partnership had undertaken major projects focusing on recovering landscape and river systems of post-industrial contexts such as Pittsburgh, raising public perception and agency within

riparian environments (Goto Collins, 2010). Goto Collins knew that artistic interventions in these processes worked in certain circumstances, but not necessarily *how* they worked, and when - and why - they could also fail.

“What is the nature of relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?” (Guba et al., p. 108)

Through the research, Goto Collins was seeking to move beyond a planning-based approach to her art practice, and reconsider earlier ideas and practice where she was focused on individual relationships with living things. From the beginning, it was important to address the popular tendency to anthropomorphise nature, the position of the activist ‘tree hugger’. She aimed to contribute to moving ecology art to a respected position as a research endeavour that was well informed, clearly argued and evidence based, building on the research practices of other artists such as Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison (2008). It emerged early on in the research that Goto Collins’ challenge was to shift the dominance of positivism within ecology discourse and open up a discursive space that grew knowledge by engaging in deeply sensory and affective experiences of nature, increasingly opening these up as shared public encounters.

“How can the inquirer (would - be knower) go about finding out? Not any methodology will do ... “ (Guba et al., p. 108)

The methodological approach was complex, comprising a literature search into existing environmental theories (Brady 2003) and analysing three carefully selected case examples of ecology art practices: Sonfist’s *Time Landscape* (1978), Joseph Beuys *7,000 Oaks* (1982) and the Harrisons’ *Serpentine Lattice* (1993) as important examples of aesthetic mediation in the natural environment. In addition, Goto Collins developed her ecology art practice as a site of experimentation.

This complexity of interrelated areas of knowledge and experience demanded a pivotal concept to explore the resonances between her approach and that of other significant ecology artists in the field and to locate these artistic endeavours within a history of ideas including environmental theory, a changing field.

Each area of inquiry made a distinctive contribution to the research. Goto Collins realised that existing theories positioned the human imagination as mediating aesthetic perception and scientific constructions of nature. She went further in acknowledging that the artist could demonstrate particular skills and responsibilities towards harnessing perception if they focused on the imagination. To this end, she concentrated on the relationship between humans and other living things that share the environment, conceptualising this in terms of ‘empathy’.

Goto Collins distilled a concept of empathy drawing on the work of the phenomenologist, Edith Stein (2002). Stein approaches empathy as a sense of lived connectedness, an awareness of the relationship between body, mind and environment. Empathy is a reaching towards something that is foreign and beyond self-interest. It is different from

sympathy in seeking a new level of critical understanding through a sensitive reading of the expression of others (facial, bodily or spoken). Empathy is directed towards the unknown and the strange, as opposed to sympathy in which we map onto the world, our existing mood or understanding (Goto Collins 2012, p. 57).

Goto Collins chose trees as a focus of experimentation. Trees form the largest living thing that we encounter (above ground on dry land). They are at once utilitarian, aesthetic and alive. She developed a relational artwork in close collaboration with a plant physiologist and a computer programmer, in order to experience how plants ‘breathe’ (Figure 3). She translated the plant’s physiological processes of photosynthesis and transpiration into sound, using and extending an existing custom software system. At first this was played back through digital systems but increasingly, Goto Collins performed the data using wind instruments, imagining the data as a score or note-to-note procedure that could be explored through the performing body. Public performance imaginatively linked the human body to the breathing tree. She reinvented the *Plein Air* easel to hold the plants’ physiological system so that it could become a small portable station (Goto Collins, p. 89)



Figure 3: *Plein Air: The Ethical Aesthetic Impulse*, Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen, Scotland, 2010.

What are the implications of this methodology for what is found out?

Goto Collins' research situates and makes explicit the implicit aspects of our current utilitarian relationship to nature. She creates experiences that propose a different possibility, in which human beings are conceived as part of nature. The research embodies this way of imagining through the experimental work, shared as an aesthetic experience with a public. Through the deep mining of empathy as a philosophical construct, the research provides a critical base from which to evaluate empathy as an approach that achieves dialogue between human beings and nature. The practices and specific projects of other artists that manifest empathy in these terms, develop and nuance this critical base.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) in positioning research within competing paradigms, observe that facts are only facts within some theoretical framework. These are relative, not absolute. The same facts can be used to support different theories. Critical of the dominance of positivism within academic research, they challenged the tendency to focus on methodology as the determining factor in characterizing research. Both qualitative and quantitative methods, they argued, can be used appropriately in any research (ibid, p. 105). The question of method was secondary to the question of paradigm.

Goto Collins deploys both quantitative and qualitative methods. Her starting point challenges an objectivist stance in relation to nature, by establishing dialogue as a principle of empathy – knowledge is achieved through experience, through feeling in relation to what is foreign, not known or understood. Quantitative methods, adapted from plant physiology, create a point of access to the inner life of trees through their processes of photosynthesis and transpiration and beyond what can be observed directly through the human senses. However, this quantitative approach stretched conventional sampling within plant physiology to longer, deeper observation that revealed the immediate and sensitive responses that each tree makes to small changes in the CO₂ environment (Goto Collins 2012, pp. 111-114).

Guba and Lincoln claim that a paradigm is a basic set of beliefs: a world view that positions the individual within it. All paradigms are therefore human constructions that are subject to the same kinds of evaluative criteria: persuasiveness, utility, proof. In research, we need to make explicit these beliefs, understanding what falls within and outside of the limits of an inquiry.

They establish three interconnected questions that need to be taken in order. These have been used to articulate Goto Collins' research approach.

1. ontological: What is the form and nature of reality? Therefore what can be known? If the answer is driven by a belief in a 'real' world, then only those questions that relate to 'real' existence can be addressed. The concepts of aesthetic/moral assessment and value fall outside of this area.
 2. epistemological: What is the nature of relationship between knower and what is known? This again is not just any question – a belief in a 'real' reality positions the knower in relation to the world as objective, detached and value-free.
 3. methodological: How can we go about finding out? Not any methodology will do.
- (Guba et al. 1994, p. 108)

This metaphysical approach has provided an important way for the *On the Edge* research programme to construct practice-led doctoral and postdoctoral research projects. It supports the individual practitioner by consciously aligning research questions with the researcher's positioning, allowing for degrees of subjectivity and deep personal engagement with a set of issues. Methodologies serve the research question, not vice versa. Language, narrative, voice, follow from the intentions and position of the inquiry. The framework of questions allows the researcher to probe and critique assumptions underlying existing paradigms of research. In this way, Guba and Lincoln's framework establishes the case for interdependence between researcher, research questions, existing knowledge and methods.

In artistic research it has been crucially important to construct and render transparent the progression that a practitioner might make from research issues or questions to methodology and outcomes. This orientates the voice and experience of the practitioner as an important contributor to producing knowledge. Issues or questions emerge from the fields of practice rather than from other academic research, though this is by no means excluded.

Guba and Lincoln reference four existing paradigms: positivism, post positivism, critical theory and constructivism. The case example of Goto Collins' PhD analysed through their framework of competing paradigms (1994), reveals a useful method for arriving at a research design. However, their framework does not account for apparently contradictory research values in a single project. Goto Collins' research aim is clearly positioned within a constructivist paradigm that foregrounds the human intellect or imagination. Constructivism operates on the assumption that there are conflicting social realities at work that may change in the light of new knowledge. From a clearly constructivist position, Goto Collins challenges an objectivist approach to nature, creating a vivid and persuasive case for reappraising human/nature relationships as interdependent. At the same time a core aspect of her methodology is apparently positivist. This is evidenced in the approach used to collect data on the transpiration and photosynthesis of trees, data that was verified by a plant physiologist.

The crossing of existing paradigms within a single project begins to tell a story of inter- or trans-disciplinary approaches in which practice may be a pivotal element. In what sense does educating the artist as researcher imply a new research paradigm?

Conclusions: Positioning Practice-led Inquiry

At an ontological level, practice shapes what can be known, in the sense that the experience of (in this case) the making of art as an active process, adds to subsequent acts and is formative of the next experience: 'Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences' (Dewey 1997, pp.27-8). This generative force may open up new horizons of possibility and also limit them by closing out other possibilities to create focus. The artist's relationship with what can be known is quite distinctive. It is not based on hypothesis, the truth of which is *deduced* by moving from

the general to the particular. Nor is truth induced from a body of experience by moving from the particular to the general. The artist, and by extension the artist-researcher, holds in juxtaposition specific moments of experience with other specific moments, so that the one shows itself beside the other and produces what Agamben calls 'a new ontological context' (Coessens et al. 2009, p 95). In this way, concrete experience can constitute and make sense of a whole context from a particular perspective, without losing its particularity.

To return to the case example, Goto Collins' data gathering methods are not used for the purposes of prediction and control brought about through greater levels of generalisation, as fitting the aims of positivism. As readers or audiences of the thesis, exhibition or performance, we remain close to the visceral experience of the phenomenon. It is this proximity to - and experiencing of - the specific 'moment' of the breathing tree that creates an encounter and a common ground between ourselves and another organism. Through reflection, we understand our condition as interdependent with nature. By making trees present within human experience, a whole context is constructed that reframes human/environmental relationships from a different perspective.

Over a period of fourteen years, *On the Edge* research has developed an epistemological base that forms common ground across individual doctoral and postdoctoral projects. The thematics within this epistemology include remote rural cultures, leadership and public pedagogies, all of which position the artist as researcher. Across time and with deepening understanding, there has been a noticeable shift from working with art research as a lens to see differently (in this case remote rural cultures), to increased levels of creative intervention within self-imposed constraints. The *Artist as Leader* research set aside the current assumptions of leadership discourse, for example, and opened up a space for artists and policy makers to generate new understanding out of their conflicted expectations and assumptions. By drawing together two apparently incommensurable positions and laying these in juxtaposition, leadership - as it relates to the arts - was configured in ways that were distinctive.

These examples lead to the realisation that art can never be subsumed in generalisation without losing its point as art. Challenging truth is a fundamental task of positivism, but it is oriented towards stability. In contrast, the purpose of artistic inquiry is not to end up with stable truths that accrete, but to remain mobile. Constructivism and critical theory are more mobile, constantly creating more informed and sophisticated constructions that undergo continuous revision. Like the constructivist and critical theorist, the artist moves through realms of shifting meanings and subjectivities as a permanent condition of being, acting upon experience. Unlike the constructivist or critical theorist, the artist intervenes in those subjectivities by making and experimenting rather than observing from a distance. And in making art, the world is not just observed but also reframed.

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¹ On the Edge (OTE) is a doctoral and postdoctoral research programme at Grays School of Art, Robert Gordon University. Founded in 2001 through a research grant from the UK's Arts and Humanities Board, OTE has developed a number of research inquiries in which the practice of the arts forms a pivotal aspect of the research approach. Research strands include the role of the contemporary artist in remote rural culture, the artist as leader and increasingly art and ecology.

² These are the author's distillation of a number of conversations that unfolded over time

³ As above, these are the author's distillation of a number of conversations that unfolded over time.