



Foucault's 'What is an Author': towards a critical discourse of practice as research  
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A problem confronting many artistic researchers is related to the need for the artist to write about his or her own work in the research report or exegesis. The outcomes of such research are not easily quantifiable and it can be difficult to articulate objectively, methods processes, and conclusions that emerge from an alternative logic of practice and the intrinsically subjective dimension of artistic production. Moreover, conventional approaches and models of writing about art generally fall within the domain of criticism, a discourse that tends to focus on connoisseurial evaluation of the finished product. How then, might the artist as researcher avoid on one hand, what has been referred to as “auto-connoisseurship”, the undertaking of a thinly veiled labour of valorising what has been achieved in the creative work, or alternatively producing a research report that is mere description (Nelson 2004)?

In this paper, I suggest that a way of overcoming such a dilemma is for creative arts researchers to shift the critical focus away from the notion of the work as product, to an understanding of both studio enquiry and its outcomes as process. I will draw on Michel Foucault's essay 'What is An Author ' (Rabinow, 1991) to explore how we might move away from art criticism to the notion of a critical discourse of practice-led enquiry that involves viewing the artist as a researcher, and the artist/critic as a scholar who examines the value of artistic process as the production of knowledge. As I will demonstrate, in adopting such an approach, practitioner researchers need not ignore or negate the specificities and particularities of practice – including its subjective and emergent methodologies which I have argued elsewhere, constitute the generative strength that distinguishes artistic research from more traditional approaches Barrett, 2005). In elaborating the relationship between these aspects and the more distanced focus made available through Foucault's elaboration of author function, I will draw on Donna Haraway's (1991, 1992) notion of “situated knowledge” and her critique of social constructivism which reveals how the scientific method is implicated in social constructivist accounts of knowledge. It is this alignment, suggests Haraway, that results in the effacement of particularities of experience from which situated knowledges emerge. In order to ground and illustrate the arguments and ideas presented in this paper, I will also refer to Pablo

Picasso's, *Demioselles d'Avignon* and a selection of critical commentaries on this work by Leo Steinberg (1988), William Rubin (1994) and Lisa Florman (2003).

## Discourse as Practice

A key aspect of Foucault's conception of discourse is that it refers not only to language, but to language and practices that operate to produce objects of knowledge. Foucault was concerned not only with understanding the particular historical context that allowed certain regimes of truth to prevail any time, but also to the apparatuses or discursive formations – webbed connections that link knowledge, power, institutions, regulations, philosophical and scientific statements, administrative and other practices – that regulate conduct and support or determine what counts as knowledge. Since human subjects can only work within the limits of discursive formations and regimes of truth, the idea that individuals are the source of meaning is negated. Foucault contends that whilst things may have material existence in the world, they cannot have meaning outside of discourse (Foucault, 1972). Stuart Hall summarise Foucault's ideas thus:

This subject of discourse can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces. It can become the object through which power is relayed, But it cannot stand outside power /knowledge as its source and author. (Hall, 1997:55)

These aspects of Foucault's thought provide a backdrop for his conception of 'author function'. (Foucault 1991). I believe his elaboration of author may help artist/researchers to: achieve a degree of critical distance in the discussion of their practice as research projects; locate their work in the field of theory and practice both within and beyond the specific field of creative endeavour and identify the possible gaps in knowledge that their research projects might address.

Foucault's view of author as function rather than as individual consciousness, opens up an alternative approach for practitioners to talk about their own work. However, this requires a shift in conventional ways of thinking. Foucault suggests that the understanding of author as function is often undermined by processes that continue to privilege more traditional notion of 'the work ' as an entity and has thus prevented us from examining the procedures and systems that allow a work to operate as a 'mode of existence, circulation and functioning of certain discourses within society' Foucault, (1991: 108). The 'man-and-his-work' forms of criticism still hold sway, refusing the idea of art and art practice as an interplay of meanings and signifiers operating within a complex system. Contemporary criticism still defines author in same way, insisting on a unity of writing that neutralises or resolves contradictions (and this applies equally to the visual and other arts): inferior works are removed from visibility; those that contradict the main body of others are excluded; works written or made in different style are excluded; references to the author's death are removed - or at least - the author/ genius artist is bestowed with an aura of timeless permanence and immortality. Further, Foucault suggests that the view of author as attribution, and of the work as the discourse of an individual with a deep motive or creative power, is a 'psychologising' or a projection of operations or procedures that allow a text/ artwork to come into being and to circulate as discourse (Foucault, 1986:111). I would suggest that within the context of artistic research, the notion of 'mode of existence' requires us to consider not whether the work is 'good' or bad, but the forms it takes and the institutional contexts that allow it to take such forms; 'circulation' may refer to the work's audience and subject positions the work may permit individuals to occupy; 'function' may refer to the social, ideological and other uses (and abuses) to which the work may be put.

Consider for example, a rendering of the nude in painting, Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, to which I will return later in this paper. Whilst the contribution this work has made to modern painting is unquestionable; the work bears methodological, ideological and philosophical traces that take us back to Ingres' 1863 painting *The Turkish Bath* - and if we are to take into account notions of idealisation in traditional nude painting, we may go back even further in history to Plato. Leo Stienberg's (1988) account of this work suggests that *Demoiselles* emerged not solely, but largely from a series of extrapolations and transgressions that took the Ingres' work as one of its starting points. By drawing on sketches from Picasso's preparatory studies for the painting and other examples of Picasso's work, Steinberg's account demonstrates that Picasso was aware of the discursive and methodological fields through which his artistic process was operating. Had Picasso been working within the context of practice as research, the task of mapping these discursive fields would have fallen on the artist rather than the critic. I am suggesting that Foucault's notion of author function is a useful tool for practitioners who choose to take on the dual role of artist/researcher. We cannot be certain of all of Picasso's motives and intentions, nor is it necessary for us to make such a claim. Indeed Picasso himself has commented, "A picture comes to me from miles away: who is to say from how far away I sensed it, I saw it, I painted it? And yet the next day I can't see what I have done myself" (Picasso, 1968, 273). Picasso's comment points to the difficulty of articulating both the processes and outcomes of creative production: Foucault provides the artist/researcher with a partial solution to completing the task.

Let us return from the man and his work to a further consideration of the context of practice as research. Foucault's terms "apparatuses", "operations" and "procedures" readily evoke an experimental and investigative scenario. More specifically they can be related to investigative methods. If we recall that Foucault's 'discourse' refers both to language and practice, it is possible to relate the terms not only to materials and methods of studio enquiry, but also to conceptual considerations that must be confronted in the design and implementation of the research project. Materials, methods and theoretical ideas and paradigms may be viewed as the apparatuses, or procedures of production from which the research design emerges. They are not the sole invention of the individual artist/researcher as we have seen, but are forged in relation to established methods and ideas. As Robyn Stewart has observed, practitioner-based research involves considering the essences of traditional research models in order to understand, critique and appropriate them according to need. "Its emphasis is largely qualitative, demonstrating and playing with the inter-connectedness between differing methodologies as a kind of intertextuality, a bricolage" (Stewart, 2006 in press). Stewart's notion of bricolage is not antithetical to Foucault's idea of the author function.

Engaging critically with these aspects of Foucault's account of author function provides the practitioner researcher with an approach to reflect, in a more distanced way, on the research process and the products of studio enquiry. In the closing section of "What is an Author", Foucault presents a set of questions that with appropriate application, constitute a programme for critical reflection on the research process. He suggests that, within the power/knowledge nexus, and where cultural production is so regulated by institutional and other disciplinary regimes and apparatuses, it no longer makes sense to focus on the author as the creator of meaning. A more generative analysis would involve a different set of questions related to the contexts in which a work might operate:

We would no longer hear the questions that have been heard for so long: Who really spoke? Is it he and not some one else with what authority and originality and what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse. Instead there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? (Foucault,1991: 119).

I would like to present a sketch or summary of how Foucault's ideas concerning 'author function' and 'the dispersed selves of author' may have more specific application or translation within the context of studio enquiry. The tables presented below are by no means exhaustive, but I hope will assist artists in their discussion of the research process.

## Author Function

### Foucault's Author Functions

#### Application in Practice as Research

Groups together and defines a certain number of texts/works according to their homogeneity and filiation.

The researcher who identifies and assesses methodological, conceptual and other links, in works produced in the current and previous projects.

Differentiates and contrast works from works of others in order to authenticate and show reciprocal explication.

The researcher who traces the genesis of ideas in his/her own works as well as the works/ ideas of others; compares them and maps the way they inter-relate; examines how earlier work has influenced development of current work; identifies gap/contribution to knowledge/ discourse made in the works.

Establishes relationships amongst texts in terms of concomitant utilization.

The researcher who assesses the work in terms of the way it has been, or may be used and applied by others.

The characteristics that the author function bestows on discourse can be extrapolated and applied as a critical method for evaluating one's own creative output as well as that of others. They provides a set objective criteria for grounding practice within the university research context and the general field of research and for articulating possible applications of the outcomes of studio enquiry. Foucault describes such works that carry the author function in the following way:

They are objects of appropriation can be used/applied by others

They guarantee the work a certain status so that it is received as having validity

The work is not spontaneous result of singular motive of an individual, but is the outcome of specific and complex operations

It is s linked to juridical and institutional system that determines and articulates the system of discourses

Does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilizations (Foucault 1991)

Foucault suggests that traditionally, discourse was not viewed as a product, a thing a kind of goods, but it was an act situated in a field between sacred and profane, the licit and illicit. This alludes to the transgressive potential of discursive practices and texts. which in the past, subjected them to appropriation and their originators to punishment. The link between transgressive and revolutionary dimension of creative practice is still attached to discourses that contain the author function, though today, we might argue that they are

often appropriated as “innovations” to be commodified within the system of exchange and capital.

### The Dispersed Selves of Author

Foucault tells us that the author's name as is not related to whether it designates the self as the subject (creator) of discourse. It does not refer purely to a real, singular individual: it can give rise simultaneously to several selves to several subject positions that can be occupied by others and is often trans-discursive (Foucault 1991:107).

As we saw in the brief consideration of Picasso's *Demioselles d'Avignon*, this trans-discursive dimension relates to the way in which the author or artist and his or her work operate as bearers of discursive practices that are antecedent to the research context. It also provides a springboard for reflecting on the multiple positions the researcher must occupy in reporting and writing up of the studio process and its outcomes. The table below indicates the way in which Foucault's ideas about the dispersed selves of the author may be extended and applied as an instrument for developing a more distanced and critical approach to research writing.

### The Dispersed Selves of Author

#### Foucault's Author “self”

#### Application in Practice as Research

Speaks in the preface and indicates the circumstances of the treatise or the works composition.

The researcher who locates him/herself in the field of theory and practice in the literature review.

Makes generalisation that may later be made or taken up by others who accept the same system of symbols and constructs.

The researcher who argues and demonstrates: uses terms like 'I conclude', 'I suppose' as they relate to the hypothesis and design of the project and constitute the rationale for methodological and conceptual frameworks.

Speaks to tell the works possible meaning and is situated in the field of already existing and yet to appear discourses

The researcher who discusses the work in relation to: other works; results obtained; contribution to discourse; new/transgressive possibilities; obstacles encountered and the remaining problems to be addressed in future research.

### Founders Of Discursivity

In his discussion of author, Foucault refers to a special group in which he places thinkers such Marx and Freud. He calls this group “founders of discursivity ” (Foucault1991: 114) and suggests they are different from (for example) novelists or artists that produce texts that only open the way for resemblances and analogies. I believe this binary can be questioned, though the scope of this paper does not allow me to do so in detail. However, I am suggesting that practitioner-researchers might appropriate Foucault's ideas concerning foundational discourses as a set of additional criteria for assessing the value of the own work and in doing so, may reveal some of the limitations of Foucault's position in relation to what I suggest is the separation of theory and practice and the privileging of particular modes of discourse as founders of discursivity.

Founders of discursivity are characterised in the following way:

They are not just authors of their own works, but produce the possibilities and rules for the formation of other texts;  
they make possible not only analogies and resemblances, but differences and divergences with respect to their own texts concepts and hypotheses;  
they make possible the creation of something other than their discourse, but which nevertheless belongs to what they have founded;  
the acts they found are on equal footing with future transformations and become part of the modifications made possible;  
the founding act can be reintroduced to validate and be validated by the transformations.

How might Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and critical commentaries on the work help to illuminate and critique Foucault's position? Let me turn first to William Rubin's account of this work. Referring again to Picasso's preparatory drawings, Rubin suggests that the painting found its genesis and was an extension of the *vanitas* genre. He uses Erwin Panofsky's iconological method to comment on the symbolic significance of the medical student holding a skull in one of Picasso's earlier studies (and which was eliminated from the final work) - as well as other symbolic elements in both the preparatory studies and the completed work linked to psychobiographical accounts of Picasso's life - to argue that *Les Femmes d'Alger* is an allegory concerning physical degeneration and death (Rubin 1994: 58). Steinberg puts forward a different reading on the work, (though what I am presenting here is a simplification of his erudite essay for the purpose of my own objective in this paper). His thesis that Picasso's painting is a refusal of traditional distanced, idealised and decorative renderings of the nude in painting, in favour of a direct confrontation with sexuality - indeed, a direct experience of the sexual encounter (Steinberg, 1988) - draws on a vast body of earlier commentary and refers to yet other artistic antecedents:

The *Les Femmes d'Alger* has been historicized and surrounded by a vast, varied ancestry. The influences imploding on this great masterpiece have been found to include not only Iberian and African art, to say nothing of Cézanne's compositions of bathers; we learned that they included Caravaggio's *Boy with a Dog*, Goya's *Tres de Mayo*, Delacroix's *Massacre at Scio* and *Femmes d'Alger*, and Ingres' *Turkish Bath*. (Steinberg 1988:71)

And so the list goes on. However, Steinberg declares, "The best commentary on Picasso is another Picasso" (Steinberg 1988:22). From this account, we may safely deduce that Picasso must have been aware of at least some of these influences; and that the making of this painting must have involved sustained critical engagement with philosophical and other discourses and technical aspects of painting and in particular to painting related to the nude. We can further surmise that this task involved locating the work at hand in relation to those discourses and testing his own creative vision and lived experience against these. On the basis of the way in which Picasso's work has ruptured and transformed thought and practices, and continues to validate and be validated in ongoing discourses, there may be a case for placing him within the category of founders of discursivity.

In any event, I believe that application of author function and Foucault's notion of founders of discursivity provides an approach for reflection, and discussion in the context of practice as research. It facilitates both historical analysis as well as the task faced by artists of situating their own work in the broader field of theory and practice. Moreover, these criteria may act as useful measures for considering the impact of research outcomes.

But what of the artist and particularities of artistic research that are not accounted for in Foucault's social constructionist ideas? Foucault is not silent on the topic of the subject of discourse. His notion of author function is intended to give us a better understanding of how the subject or self is constructed and positioned in discourse, its points of insertion, functioning and dependencies on the system - how a subject emerges out of discourse. However his constructionist approach does not provide an adequate account of the relationship between the particularities lived experience and discourse.

### Situated Knowledge

Because creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns, it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit knowledge. An innovative dimension of this subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view, particularities of lived experience that reflect new realities that are either marginalised or not yet recognised in established social practices and discourses. One of the problems with Foucault's social constructivism, is that it doesn't adequately account for lived experience and the way this, and subjective agency are implicated in the creation of discourse. In his work, *Material Thinking*, Paul Carter (2004) helps to extend understandings of the subjective and relational dimensions of the artistic process. He describes this process as one that involves a decontextualisation from established or universal discourse to instances of particular experience. In staging itself as an artwork, the particularity of experience is then returned to the universal. Carter suggests that "material thinking" specific to artistic research creates a record of the studio process as a means of creating new relations of knowledge subsequent to production. However, Carter's material thinking is, in his own words, 'a call to discursive arms' (Carter 2004: 184) and does not provide an adequate theory of the internal and emergent logic of studio methodologies and their subsequent applications and uses. Perhaps a more useful term for understanding this emergent aspect of artistic research and the dynamics of the circulation of artistic products, is artist and writer, Barbara Bolt's notion of 'materializing practices' which implies an ongoing performative engagement and productivity both at moments of production and consumption (Bolt, 2004). Bolt draws on the work of Martin Heidegger to suggest how new knowledge emerges from human involvement with objects in the world:

Heidegger argues that we do not come to "know" the world theoretically through contemplative knowledge in the first instance. Rather, we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling. Thus the new can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice. It is not just the representation of an already formed idea nor is it achieved through conscious attempts to be original (Bolt, 2006, forthcoming).

Rather than constituting a relationship between circulating discourses (Foucault) or image and image /text (implied by Carter's 'material thinking'), materialising practices constitute relationships between material processes and text - of which the first iteration is necessarily the researcher's own self-reflexive mapping of the emergent work as enquiry. In artistic research, a dialogic relationship between studio practice and the writing of the creative arts exegesis is crucial to articulating and harnessing studio methodologies for further application beyond the field of creative arts so that the practice as research extends the general field of research and is validated alongside other more traditional forms of research derived essentially from the scientific method.

Philosopher of science, Bruno Latour suggest that science is a process of amassing inscriptions in order to mobilize power. A great deal of scientific research is based on inscriptions: science predominantly works through study of graphs, maps, tables and data rather than actualities (La Tour 1986). These inscriptions and cascades of inscriptions (inscriptions which refer to each other, rather than material realities), are a process by which the optical consistency required to maintain immutability of ideas across time, and irrespective of where they are located or applied, is achieved. Invention of the printing press and other technologies reproduction of inscriptions or 'immutable mobiles' has sped up the spread of errors or inaccuracies so that knowledge becomes less and less tied to real conditions. Scientific inscriptions work like Foucault's webs of discourse or regimes of truth: they form a panopticon determining what counts for truth, what conduct is permitted and what is not. La Tour observes:

People before science and outside laboratories certainly use their eyes, but not in the same way. They looked at the spectacle of the world, but not this new type of image designed to transport the objects of the world, to accumulate them ... (La Tour, 1986:10)

Inscription results displacement of experience in favour of representation and discourse. In her essay, "Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective" (1991), Donna Haraway reveals the inadequacy of such methods for grounding knowledge in lived experience and calls for a "successor science" that takes account of the structure of facts and artefacts (Haraway, 1991:185). Just as I would recommend reading Foucault's essay "What is An Author" as an aid to developing more critical and distanced accounts in practitioner research, I suggest that Haraway's essay is required reading that provides a rationale and guide for re-inserting the self and lived experience into accounts of the research process. Haraway suggests that, in order to test embodied or real relations to events and objects in the world against those accounts given in established discourse, and to unmask doctrines of objectivity that threaten our sense of historical subjectivity and our embodied accounts of truth, we need to look at the issue of the relations of bodies to language. (Haraway, 1991:196)

The problem confronting the practitioner researcher is how to have simultaneously, an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims of knowing subjects, and a critical practice for recognising our own semiotic technologies for making meanings (Haraway1991, 187) Like La Tour, Haraway is critical of the social constructionist underpinnings of dominant accounts of knowledge and exposes science's false claim to objectivity. Moreover, Science's search for universal laws and claim of objectivity is a negation of particularities of embodied vision and existence, and as such is a reductionism. On the other hand accounts of irreducible difference (socially constructed knowledge), leads to relativism and a state in which only power can determine what counts as truth; together these, accounts of knowledge constitute the "god trick". It endorses the "conquering gaze from nowhere" that claims the power to see, and not be seen (Haraway 1991:188), and the view from everywhere, which is effectively the same thing. Haraway suggests that an alternative to relativism is:

Partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. (Haraway 1991: 191)

An acknowledgement of partial objectivity calls for re-admitting embodied vision and positioning in research. Embodied vision involves seeing something from somewhere. It links experience and theory to produce situated knowledge that operates in relation to established knowledge.

In another essay entitled, "The promises of monsters: a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others", Haraway declares: "theory is bodily, and theory is literal" (Haraway, 1992: 299). Her elaboration of what she terms a "reflexive artefactualism", one that produces effects of connection of embodiment and of responsibility (Haraway, 1992:295), can be understood as material thinking - practices involving bodies. And as Haraway observes:

Always radically and historically specific, always lively, bodies have a different kind of specificity and effectivity; and so they invite a different kind of engagement and intervention. (Haraway 1992; 298)

Let us return, finally, to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and to Steinberg's and Lisa Florman's (2003) commentaries on it. Towards the end of his essay, after garnering an impressive body of criticism and engaging in a close formal analysis of the work, Steinberg comments:

Let the truth be known.... The other day, I learned from a well-informed New Yorker (excuse the redundancy) that the secret is out: Picasso in 1907 had contracted VD, and painted the *Les Femmes d'Alger* to vent his rage against women. (Steinberg: 1988:71)

Could it be that after all, and notwithstanding admission of all the other possible interpretations and the intentions and motives the painter may have had, that this work often hailed as the birth of Cubism emerged from the particularities and passions of lived experience that could not be expressed in anything less than a new visual language, an extension of the possibilities of discourse? Yet Florman observes that before Steinberg's essay, these possibilities remained largely inchoate:

Before [his] essay, the *Les Femmes d'Alger* was the birthplace of cubism, the marker of the epochal shift from content to form in modern painting. After Steinberg's essay, it has become the marker of an epochal shift to a new kind of engagement with sexuality, one whose immediacy was unprecedented in the history of painting. (Florman 2003, cites Green: 789).

Florman's engagement with Rubin's and Steinberg's account of Picasso's painting is illuminating as much for its thesis, which suggests that *Les Femmes d'Alger* is a study in both detachment and immediacy that emerges through self-discovery predicated on experiencing the work (the work that the painting does), but also for its relevance to the issue of objective and subjective positioning of the artist as researcher. It is experiencing that allows us to "think with the other" (Florman, 2003: 777). Experiencing the painting becomes an activity in which we may be overcome by the extreme otherness of the sublime and the Dionysian or choose a more conceptual modality of engagement in order to maintain some degree of detachment. Florman suggests that it is the instantiation of these two positions through the alternating style (one more poetic and one more prosaic) of Steinberg's account that allows us to experience the painting more fully. This seems to reflect precisely the situation faced by the artist/researcher who is required to give account of his or her own work as philosophical enquiry.

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