Are ambiguous research outputs undesirable?
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This paper supports the position that interpretation in the visual and performing arts is fundamentally different from other disciplines. It argues that 'interpretation' should not be constrained by the requirement of unambiguous language and that practice-based research should strive to demonstrate its findings by methods most appropriate to the mode of practice in question. More specifically it responds to the question: 'Are unambiguous research outputs in the arts possible or desirable?' and argues that ambiguous research outputs are both desirable and inevitable. The paper explores what it is, more precisely, that might be ambiguous. With reference to the fallacies of ambiguity and Jacques Derrida's procedures of questioning assumptions at every level of meaning construction, we attempt to distinguish between knowledge and understanding and between questions and outputs. We suggest that the clarification of terms and context can differentiate between fallacies and valid applications of doubt and ambiguity. We discuss the problems associated with ambiguity in terms of knowledge and practice-based research and suggest that practice can utilise ambiguity in the pursuit of knowledge. We propose that it is possible to embed an argument in practice and to demonstrate an exchange between practice, value and theory and that it is ambiguous questions, which are not desirable.

We are talking about fine art practice in the broadest sense, and which we understand as not necessarily resulting in an artefact or anything unambiguous. Our assumption is that any variety of practice will be a discursive construction that embodies values and theories and must conform to some order of language and structure (e.g. modernism, conceptualism), which (in the context of research) will always require the question: what is the premise for this structure and this practice? We promote the hypothesis that art practice, as discursive expression and defined by its manner of presentation, can display a manner of thinking that makes a different, but equivalent, contribution to cultural debate (and to written analysis), particularly in the way it can challenge assumptions and conventional expectations of meaning and objectivity. Our ultimate aim is to proceed from the convention of interpreting art, as merely illustrating social, political and philosophical
ideas discussed in other disciplines or situating practice within some context, to investigating practice (images, objects and performances) as provoking thought and discourse (philosophically, culturally, politically) and producing forms of knowledge. The challenge for practice-based research is: what is that knowledge and how is that knowledge and ideology understood? This is potentially a huge project and, as we have found, a taxing one. This paper is more specifically concerned with identifying why 'ambiguous research outputs' might be a problem and with demonstrating their desirability. Our aim is to establish the legitimacy of ambiguity and doubt.

A usual requirement of the PhD process is to clarify any ambiguity of terms used. We attempt here to identify confusions that derive from the terms ambiguous and ambiguity and their use, and to locate more precisely where the ambiguity lies. Is it possible to distinguish different locations of ambiguity? Does the ambiguity reside, for example, in linguistics or inexplicable concept? This is a difficult task as the subtleties of ambiguity are extensive and language itself is ambiguous, both lexically and structurally (Bach). In everyday language, vagueness and ambiguity are seemingly the same, however they can be said to function differently in critical thinking. Something is ambiguous if it has at least two meanings that make sense in context, but vague if the intended meaning is unclear in application or context. What is crucial to the question of ambiguity, and to unravelling prejudices that derive logically from traditions, is the clarity or misappropriation of context, terms and usage. Imprecise uses of language lead to incorrect patterns of reasoning (fallacies of ambiguity), which are logically false but appear to be true. Plato's dialogic device and the logic derived from fallacies of ambiguity provide models with which to question the articulation and validation of outputs and whether they are acceptable or not. The notion of fallacies originates in logical reasoning and philosophy's concern to determine any interference with getting at the truth; fallacies present obstructions to establishing the truth. Fallacies arise when a premise from one discipline moves into another and, if adopted without question, can develop into a convention. In the context of art, the term ambiguity inherits the association with fallacy and falsehood and directs us to a confusing field of conflated ideas: truth and/or fiction and/or art, aesthetics and/or art practice, philosophy and/or aesthetics.

The usefulness of fallacies of ambiguity is that they focus the confusion between terms, the confusions about fallacies and the confusions about ambiguity in the context of practice-based research. The following example highlights the potential confusion concerning process and output (product). Having been asked to determine whether a piece of work addresses the question 'what is bad (good) drawing?' a respondent proceeds to assume, firstly, that what is required is to determine whether the drawing presented is either good or bad, secondly, that the starting premise must be that nothing about a drawing is self evident and thirdly, and logically, that any number of factors subsequently influence that decision and therefore, without written amplification by the maker of the drawing, no comment can be made. This logic, although legitimate within its own premise, demonstrates process-product ambiguity as it confuses drawing, as a questioning process, with drawing as output. In the context of logical argument and the search for truth, there are five basic linguistic fallacies of ambiguity as defined by Aristotle: those of accent, amphiboly, composition, division and equivocation. 1 Here we have made use of the fallacy of equivocation, which results when a single key term with two or more meanings is used in the same argument, as with drawing-as-verb and drawing-as-noun. Having established the confusion derived from process-product ambiguity, we need to distinguish between two questions: the validity of ambiguous process and the validity of ambiguous output - between the research process and the outputs produced as evidence.
For the purposes of this paper we shall be referring to a fictional research output, which appears as a glass of water. The choice of a glass of water references its various use as subject matter from Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin's Glass of Water and Coffee Pot (1760) to Michael Craig Martin's An Oak Tree (1973), and acknowledges Kristina Neiddrer's use of the water glass to explore the role of artefacts as data and evidence in practice-based research (2004). A dialogue that is almost entirely a continuous series of fallacious questions and answers/statements and which appears as facetious, but contains notable examples of ambiguities, might go something like this:

A: That glass of water looks sublime is it [part of] your research?

B: Possibly ... hmmm ... the sublime glass of water. This glass of clear liquid (water) is my practice and I practise research so it follows ...

A: What ... that this glass of water is research?

B: Well I have taken photographs of the glass of water but they were not developed.

A: Oh ... and am I right in thinking that there is water in the glass and that therefore there is always water in the glass?

B: Yes there is water in the glass

A: Trees need water to grow so is this glass of water growing?

B: Like an oak tree?

A: Well I would like to think that it is as solid as a glass of water

[Pause]

A: So is it begging the question?

[Continued]

Clearly, confusion with the different use of terms can occur within a discipline, which can be further compounded by the application of terminologies from processes of thought established by other disciplines (e.g. science). This can be construed as a misappropriation of terms - a fallacy of ambiguity in itself - of equivocation. In taking on the terms methodology, knowledge, evidence from the sciences, we should be careful not to also take on the assumptions associated with those terms from those of other disciplines. The question 'Are unambiguous research outputs in the arts possible or desirable?' is grammatically (and ambiguously) complex and implicitly carries a negative connotation. What is the problem with ambiguity? If ambiguity means 'undetermined, of intermediate or doubtful nature, indistinct,' not defined as any one thing, is this then not desirable? If the purpose of research is to establish knowledge and insight, why is it a problem when outputs generate a number of interpretations, argument or controversy? Can one determine research outputs as undesirably ambiguous if in the process and of necessity, they encounter ambiguity? The desire for the removal of ambiguous outputs arises from a concern for transparency in the validation of practice as research and is dependent on principles grounded in the traditions of empirical research and their subsequent suppositions. Empirical methodologies require us to dispel uncertainty by translating
experience into logical processes and categorical and oppositional definitions in order to construct a form of knowledge. Following this traditional mode, David Durling (2000) states:

Research seeks primarily to extract reliable knowledge from real or artificial worlds, and tries to articulate that knowledge in such a way that others may reuse it. This supposes that the results of research will have been sufficiently abstracted and generalized.

A traditional PhD requires verification and evidence, transparency and communication. Modernist traditions of art practice fly in the face of this; art is expected to be original in the sense of new and untraditional, to break the rules, to provoke, to invoke doubt and disturbance or to encompass some sort of subjective vision. This then presents four problems at least: the communication of research outcomes, the question of truth and verifiability, the presence of doubt and uncertainty, the presence of both objective and subjective content. There is a mismatch and, in our anxiety to justify practice as being validly acceptable by the research community, we have developed procedures that are recognisable. In so doing, it is possible that we have adopted some assumptions resulting from logical reasoning, which have in turn have become immutable research principles and fixed conventions, rather than developing alternative or difficult hypotheses which step towards something (Plato, 2003: 239).

A PhD demands a question and responses to that question, but as Michael Biggs (2003) usefully states, research in the humanities can only offer interpretations and not answers to problems. Practice-based research has developed conventional methods with which to reduce the ambiguity of interpretation. If it is defined as prioritizing 'experiential content' over 'cognitive content', which is then assumed to be problematically inaccessible, then we have the ensuing problem of communicating that content (Biggs 2004: 2). A number of models endorse a cognitive reflexive account (usually by the practitioner), which either situates the practice in relation to wider cultural issues, or investigates that experiential content, thereby confirming the understanding of experiential knowledge as private and one that has to be translated or represented (e.g. Barrett, 2007). As Biggs points out, this can permit accounts of personal development with limited interest to the wider community; his differentiation between art as cultural practice and art as personal development is useful (2003). Biggs then considers the problems encountered in translating experiential content into words, practice into explicit arguments. This translation method works in both directions; practice is also required to convert linguistic aspects (theories) into non-linguistic modes of practice (Biggs, 2004: 13). Both Biggs and Anne Pakes reference Gilbert Ryle's distinction between practical and explicit knowledge, which Pakes pursues for possibilities of reasoned justification for 'intelligent' practice (Pakes, 2004: 2). However, practical reasoning also appears to require linguistic articulation. This remains a problem. Biggs indicates that the transition cannot always be made easily as language cannot adequately describe experience (2004: 6) and Pakes, concerned to find a reasoning 'embedded in the activity itself' states: 'as soon as that articulation happens, it begins to assume the guise of a conceptual order imposed from outside the action per se.' (Pakes, 2004: 2)

Biggs (2003) proceeds: 'if the aim of research is to communicate knowledge,' we should reduce what is uncontrollable and constrain extrinsic factors in order to communicate efficiently. Communication requires the exchange of information, a sense of mutual understanding, a means of access. To communicate requires us to convey a thought by speech writing or gesture (perhaps) but does not prescribe specifically linguistic access. In a research context, as a means of giving definition, giving context, or stating some
position, communication is achieved most efficiently using words, but art practice may provide access by other methods. Rothko, for example, talking about his works as ‘facades’ with doorways and windows suggests a more ambiguous means of access. Perhaps the term dissemination, which Biggs uses interchangeably with communication (2004: 2), allows more appropriate access to practice outputs. As we have seen, with the likelihood of process-product ambiguity, the many constituents of the research process are bound to contribute confusion. One could say then, that following the distinction between process and output, what is necessary is that the process, the question, the rationale and the context needs to be communicable and transparent, rather than the requirement of an unambiguous output.

[Continued] 3

B: I am presenting this glass of water as a research output

A: How do you communicate that?

B: My practice does not aim to communicate

A: How do you communicate that? What describes it as a glass of water?

B: Its properties ... the glass of water describes itself. Colourless and translucent ... it modifies surroundings and tells us about itself ... [Pause] ... even as condensation or steam?

A: What does this glass of water say?

B: It says that it is The Glass of Water and always needs a surface on which to rest. It makes sense of itself. If the liquid and glass were separated we would have a puddle. A liquid in a glass make sense of one another.

A: How is that communicated?

[Sound off] Plop!

A: What does that mean?

[Sound off] Splash!

A: Is it consistent with its coherence?

[Sound off] Crash!

B: The glass enables the water to be accessible; it defies gravity and gives meaning and now after the crash it is no longer ...

[Pause]

A: Fulfilled?

[Continued]
We begin to see how assumptions and expectations of practice-based research become conventions. It is assumed that interpretations need to be communicated and if practice is submitted alongside written interpretation, then the practice can be used most easily as a method of expansion to illustrate the interpretation. We question whether this method will fully utilise the potential of practice. An alternative attitude sees the possibility that practice and linguistic argument each tackle the question differently - each according to their method. This attitude attempts to thoroughly and positively use the practice to answer the question, rather than reflecting upon practice in terms of its process or the practitioner's experience. Pakes's search for a validation of practice-as-research as a form of knowledge, raises a number of useful instances and possibilities. She looks at the relationship between knowledge and practical reasoning processes and asks what is the mode of knowledge that art produces, how is it disseminated and do the outcomes have primacy over the process? She aligns 'action' with art practice for the purposes of exploring the whereabouts of knowledge and considers Aristotle's 'practical syllogism', as opposed to 'theoretical syllogism', as a reasoning that may offer justification of an action (practice). This seems promising as it indicates an appropriate reasoning for a demonstration through action/practice as knowledge. Pakes asserts art practice as 'underwritten by a logic that emerges in and through the activity itself,' which characterises action as a mode of knowledge 'with its own distinctive logic', not dependent on deductive or inductive reasoning. 'In this view, action neither requires theoretical explanation nor functions to illustrate insights acquired theoretically: rather it is in itself intelligent.' (Pakes: 2) Her argument persuades us that the convention of documenting or justifying practice has developed by default.

However, this does not mean that by establishing practice as 'intelligent' or by questioning the documentation of process, one logically dismisses verbal argument that can parallel practice; rather it questions what that verbal articulation contributes. We do not advocate a PhD model with non-linguistic content only, nor one that doesn't involve a substantial amount of writing and we do not dispute the need for the research process to include contextualisation and methodology (Biggs 2003) and agree that one should not merely adopt a model but, by critical and analytical means, provide a rationale (Biggs 2004: 11). But further to this, if practice is going to be useful, we advocate methods that avoid resorting to explanation of the practice and that allow practice-as-demonstration, to take precedence over practice-as-illustration. Extending Biggs's statement that practice can only generate interpretations, logically then, practice, which invites layers of visual connotation and assigns meaning in completely different contexts or creates hitherto unseen usages, must be ambiguous. One could say that ambiguity is a requisite of practice-based research and further, that art needs to be a fallacy of ambiguity itself in order to avoid truth by logical means. We need to establish however what the practice contributes, and specifically the possibilities of ambiguity, in addition to contextualisation. We want practice, through its particular means of representation, to develop the argument and this is what taxes us and causes problems for aesthetics or what sort of art it is or what sort of research it is. One can construct linguistic arguments. One can construct non-linguistic demonstrations. As it is more likely to provide a series of propositions, a more difficult question is whether the practice is required to demonstrate an argument.

The range of terminology (practice-as-research, art-as-research, research-into-practice, practice-based research etc.) is problematic as each mode attempts to qualify and implicitly justify itself by referring to its method. To use any of these terms without clarification engenders confusion and fallacy. An ultimate aim may be to dispense with the qualifying terms practice-based or practice-led (as qualifying adjectives) and refer to arts research that may be confident enough to assume that practice may be validly utilised to
demonstrate the issues in question. At any rate, in seeking an ideal, the arts based research community need not be resigned to adopting compromising terminology. In many ways ambiguity can only exist if we (the research field, the community of users, the audience) don’t agree about definitions and meaning.

[Continued] 5

B: I am presenting The Glass of Water as a research output.

A: Yes you’ve almost said that before ... so for the purposes of clarity would it be appropriate to qualify The Glass of Water as [your] [the] practice as research or as perhaps your research into practice?

B: Maybe

A: Practice ... is that based, led, integrated or aligned?

B: Maybe

A: Definitely?

B: Definitely [,] Maybe

[Continued]

There are two points at issue here that keep discussion circulating around a justification of practice-based research: the question of multi-faceted outcomes and interpretations and the question of knowledge and what that might be. If we bracketed off the conclusion that practice cannot produce evidence in the terms expected of the sciences, then where do we go from here? Perhaps we do need another terminology. Ultimately we need to move on from the question of whether practice represents knowledge and ask how does practice demonstrate knowledge using its own representational structures (e.g. an image)? The Western tradition of distinguishing between theory (the domain of knowledge) and practice (interpreted as its application or techne) perpetuates a number of assumptions, which confuse any development of knowledge that understands practice as being defined by its manner of presentation or that merges practice and theory. 6

In order to build an argument that supports ambiguous outputs and to move toward locating that knowledge, we need to explain a shift in understanding. We have established that the humanities present interpretations or alternative perspectives with which to view an issue or question. Roland Barthes (1977) describes any 'work' that generates meaning as initiating a 'methodological field.' If we consider a practice output in these terms, its extension can be found in discourse, contemplation, and perhaps even argument (Barthes, 1977: 155). Subsequently Barthes's term 'text' refers to the discourse invoked by any such 'work' (piece of writing, artefact, film, image, performance, space). Nicholas Davey (2006) suggests that Hans-Georg Gadamer's term 'subject matter' (the matter that concerns us) can provide a focus for both theoretical and practice-based methodologies. Gadamer interprets the Greek term theoria as a procedure 'without a specific end' and theoros as a process with an emphasis that is not on knowledge or opposing theories, but in encountering relationships within networks of meaning (Davey: 26). Both these conceptions of understanding suggest that practice and its outputs extends to all that they provoke, however ambiguous. Mieke Bal's approach to research sidesteps direct address to the object and focuses on the concept instead, which extends beyond clear categories
Our knowledge of scientific principles does not change with re-examination but re-examination of ideas does change our understanding (Foucault, 1998: 311). And histories and contexts change, requiring us to ask: what attitude and perspective shape this knowledge? The meaning of any-thing changes in different locations and time and thereby the conception of knowledge evolves. Michel Foucault reminds us to ask: What does one bring to the analysis? And to what effect? How does one account for this position? What are the laws governing this particular discourse? What validates these ideas? (Foucault 1998: 314) It is a process that considers knowledge to accommodate context, to be something besides that of a physical fact and attempts to set aside bias and assumptions. In contrast to the logic of defining oppositional categories, if we understand practice as a means to invoke cultural discourse, then practice can be seen as operating within a 'field' of knowledge. In these terms, the notion of knowledge has become fluid, unstable and various (Bal 2002: 136).

And in order to argue the desirability of ambiguous research outputs, we're looking for a justification for digression and simultaneity and the ambiguous location of knowledge - for thinking that advocates simultaneity and possibilities of doubt. If we accept that art practice is but part of a wider cultural debate, it is not difficult to find support and models of thinking for our position. In questioning logical reasoning and the mechanics of representation and meaning, Derrida (1973) uses a rhetorical means of displaying simultaneity, for example in his neologism différance. Différance, as it conflates difference (the spatial) and deferral (the temporal), represents a decentring dynamic, which disturbs the logic of diegesis and definition and encourages dialogue and dispersal. Derrida reminds us that a logical conception of the world is not necessarily common sense and celebrates the logical absurdities in texts as a necessary consequence of their disturbance. Logical truths and trust in certainty are dependent on the notion of an entity, entire unto itself, and separated from time and thought in its constitution, a thing that has an essential nature that does not change. The dynamic of différance challenges the distinction between form and subject (matter), which persists, but is somehow now inadequate in the context of contemporary practices. Différance necessitates a reflection on meaning in the visibility of a text (word, performance or image) itself and promotes the non-oppositional nature of meaning in the possibility of multi-faceted and simultaneous meaning. This gesture of visuality shifts our manner of understanding from a translation of text, governed by the logical progression of verbal language, toward a conceptual framework that can grasp the scope of an idea visually or performatively; it is significant in the way that we apprehend experience, understand an idea and formulate what we call knowledge.

In negotiating the territory of what appears to us as contradictory, much of Derrida's writing addresses that which is contrary to itself, inconsistent or oxymoronic (where contradictory terms are combined) as it uncovers the paradoxical nature implicit in the assumptions of thinking. What we might have understood as contradiction, in the sense of opposition or denial is but another expression of difference (Derrida, 1993). No one meaning is privileged over another and any text offers signification in a number of directions simultaneously, so that 'this' or 'that' are no longer opposed, nor even equivalent, but are different (Johnson, 1981: xiii). As Derrida’s premise of différance embodies apparently digressive directions, temporally and spatially, and asserts difference over identity and certainty, it insists that this disruption is present in any signifying act (visual or verbal). His expansion on aporia (unpassable path, impasse, not knowing where to go) introduces
doubt and incorporates plausible possibilities that are inconsistent or cannot be concluded (Derrida, 1993: 20). Thereby as soon as one meaning is established, it is differentiated from others, which unlocks further possibilities that are different again. One cannot simply overturn an existing position with one that opposes it. The co-existence of different interpretations obstructs a logic that insists on 'either/or' and signals the possibility of any number of modes of being or diverse elements that may be simultaneous (temporally and spatially), and 'absolutely heterogeneous' (Johnson: xv), but not oppositional. This approach to understanding insists on a shift in perspective that focuses on what else is possible and encourages apparently incongruent or absurdly associated elements (visual or conceptual) to co-exist, rather than a reduction to binary opposition.

As an example of practice, Derrida's Right of Inspection (1989), demonstrates the reading of photographs as an active dialogue between the photograph and the reader that is changing and contradictory. His analysis of Marie-Francois Plissart's photographic sequence takes the form of a contradictory speculation, which allows every detail to have significance and each participant to have a voice. He steers us away from a definitive account and demonstrates methods of looking and understanding through his questioning of implicit interpretations. His procedures for looking perform his thinking about meaning, and demonstrate the mediation of perception by thinking and association and what one sees as entirely imaginary, symbolic and inseparable from perception. Hence 'there never was any 'perception'' (Derrida, 1973: 103). It is typical of the rhetorical performance that demonstrates his critique through the manner of his writing; his theoretical position is inseparable from his expression. His rhetoric holds the meaning in the very structure and expression of the writing (practice) by using words as a place of ambivalence rather than definition. Referring to visual works as 'mute tableaux,' he puzzles over the contextual mutability of words and their potential promiscuity, the impossibility of interpretation and the consequent 'drama' of the glasses, of the broken glass,' and 'the multiple scene of the drinking glass that is shattered.' (Derrida, 1989: 18-23)

Numerous forms of art practice, sometimes referred to as postmodern, exemplify Derrida's questioning of signification. Michael Phillipson (1985) describes Philip Guston's painting as breaking with the belief that painting's take us nearer to things in themselves - to their inner meaning (truth). Michael Craig Martin's 'interview' discussing the An Oak Tree (1973) demonstrates (as a practice) the critical issue of intention for art practice and its meaning. John Smith's A Girl Chewing Gum (1976) demonstrates the ambiguity of documentary better than any theorising text. Joseph Kosuth articulates similar concerns of differentiation to Derrida and demonstrates art as a form of theory in practice (One and Three Chairs, 1965). They each embody changes in attitudes to critical thinking and representation, marking a significant point of transition. Art practices can encompass a complexity of speculation, only constrained if explained in words. For instance, Cornelia Parker's objects transfigure process: a wedding ring that circles a room (Wedding Ring Drawing (circumference of a living room) (1996) refers to the process of its extension and its possibilities of physical materiality; a silver spoon extended to the length of the Niagara Falls (Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon, (1997); a shed, transmuted by an act, reconstitutes its shedness ('Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View (1991) or (Hanging Fire (Suspected Arson), (1999). Perceptions and levels of materiality are opened up by technical process and demonstrate the potential of the material and signification in its reconstitution. One reality is shattered to present another reality. As artworks, they are definitely ambiguous and they extend the possibility of material, process or thinking by demonstration. If we imagine the examples of practice above as 'research outputs,' they are both ambiguous and valid, as they each address philosophical and/or material questions; they can be discussed, but they also contribute aspects that do not equate with
verbal translation. The visual and experiential does not necessarily need to illustrate verbal text or require verbal explanation. Yet, have these attitudes been assimilated by practiced-based methodology? Following Kaprow (Allan), Kosuth and Koons (Jeff), the discontinuous space of practice is surely firmly established as more than artefact. Guston’s desire to 'include more,' which 'comprises one's doubts about the object, plus the problem, the dilemma, of recognising it' (Phillipson: 154) approaches a practice that acknowledges doubt and disturbance as its premise. Our suggestion is that invoking doubt is positive. Biggs (2004: 14) acknowledges a 'dynamic relationship between context, question, method, answer and audience.' Can we extend this dynamic to encompass that of différance and one that invokes doubt and aspects of not-understanding. Rather than looking for knowledge 'embodied' in the artefact, should we look rather for an understanding in the dynamic (relationships) invoked by the object/practice?

An 'emerging theory of interpretation' needs to acknowledge its fundamentally different dynamic of doubt, differentiation and ambiguity, if it is going to establish different and valid forms of knowledge. It needs to accommodate an attitudinal shift that understands knowledge as something fluid and not easily contained. The suggestion that outputs are undesirably ambiguous invites the question: so what is acceptable meaning in arts research? Meaning is not only explained by definition, classification or generalisation. Tracing words, concepts and their travels between complex theories and ordinary language is never simple (Bal, 2002), but can open up the capacity for creative and unpredictable dimensions found in word play, humour and practice. It is possible that the phrase 'ambiguous research outputs' is the result of a fallacy of ambiguity and thereby unsustainable. And established logical procedures that appeal to common practice for their validation can be changed. Derrida's general project, questioning how we comprehend thought, language and meaning, undermines our perpetual dependence on polarities. In its wake, any research, in regarding the desire for certainty and definition, must at least consider the field of assumptions upon which it is based. How can one subsequently deny the co-existence of different directions emerging from any one thing or that they should be embraced? Is this then ambiguity? Or is it better described as digressive or various or aporetic? Rather than eliminating ambiguity, what might be the benefits of adopting digression and aporia as a principle? If, in the visual and performing arts, we can establish that different interpretations and meaning are inevitable and desirable, so ambiguity becomes fundamental in the pursuit of knowledge.

In reconsidering the validity of research outputs, we must recognise what we assume as essentially validating an ambiguous practice-output: that practice must contribute to answering the question. Demonstrations of ambiguous possibilities can sustain scrutiny if they distinguish between ambiguity and vagueness and between the research output, which may have several directions or layers, and the research question/content/context, which must be clearly outlined. The application of key terms needs to be clarified and unambiguous, the research outputs do not. If the research methodology follows the rigorous process outlined by Biggs: that the methods are clearly thought out; have a clear rationale and demonstrate informed and aware decision-making strategies; that there is a clear outline to the framework, context and language used; that the discourse outlines what the implications of the question are, what impacts on that question and how it might be answered - then ambiguous outputs have to be seen as valid. We must be more precise about what the practical content and the written content each contribute. Biggs's reference to the dynamic relationship between the different dimensions of research is indicative in moving toward a more assertive methodology for arts research. However, in moving forward, we are left with a number of questions for further consideration:
[Continued]

[B, now alone, addresses The Glass of Water]

How do I [Practice: a practitioner] enact critique through visual or performative formats?

Silent reply [non verbal]

B: How do I engage with objects, images and events to interrogate the different and continuous arguments they embody?

Silent reply [non verbal]

B: How do experiential practices present ideas in ways that are specific to their form?
Silent reply [non verbal]

B: How can experiential practices be said to embody some sort of knowledge ... how can this knowledge be sustained as a resource?

[Fade out and continued]

Rather than perpetuating the divisions between practice and theory, we can utilise the tensions that emerge from a practice that attempts to demonstrate theory in and through its delivery; both practice and theory can encompass purpose, different kinds of knowledge, experience and understanding. Rather than situating practice or explaining what practice is commonly termed about, we can consider art as an active dimension of processing, visualising and embodying thinking and knowledge. Both Davey and Pakes use Gadamer's discussion to negotiate a way to consider practice as subject matter and knowledge and Gadamer possibly offers a source for further investigation in asserting meaning in the practice output itself. Gregory Ulmer's heuretics (1994) might suggest alternative methodologies to those driven by hermeneutic theories in apprehending practice and more appropriate approaches pertinent to multi-faceted practices that question and provoke via digression. Pakes usefully emphasises the autonomous potential of practice in whatever mode it presents itself, rather than focusing on the artist's reflexivity or 'experiential feeling' requiring translation. She asserts that artworks 'as autonomous structures' can move us 'towards a participation in the work's play-structure,' (Pakes: 6) which may be ambiguous and maintain a fluid, simultaneous dispersal of meaning.

We emphasise the potential in utilising practice and ambiguous outputs to demonstrate thinking. The precise scrutiny of how different modes of practice can address objects/ideas differently from the written word and present alternative, and more digressive, forms to that of rational, objective and linear synthesis must be the subject of further papers. For now we concern ourselves with the question of locating ambiguity, in whatever form, more precisely. Moving methodologies in arts research forward, we emphasise the need to recognise, firstly, the different locations of any ambiguity involved and secondly, where any assumptions deriving from fallacies occur. We assert the equivalence of practice with verbal discussion and that arts research should aim to demonstrate, through the considered use of both practice and verbal articulation, the 'field' of possibilities that is being questioned.

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Endnotes

1 Aristotle was both the first formal logician codifying the rules of correct reasoning, and the first informal logician cataloguing types of incorrect reasoning, namely, fallacies. He was both the first to name types of logical error, and the first to group them into categories in his Sophistical Refutations (Sophistici Elenchi) 350 BC, which identified thirteen fallacies (12 + 1) as follows:
Linguistic fallacies: Accent, Amphiboly, Equivocation, Composition and Division ('two sides of the same coin'), Figure of Speech;
Non-linguistic fallacies: Accident, Affirming the Consequent, In a Certain Respect and Simply, Ignorance of Refutation, Begging the Question, False Cause, Many, Questions

2 Miguel López-Remiro (ed.) Mark Rothko: Writings on Art, Yale University Press, 2005, p.xiii cites Rothko speaking at a conference at the Pratt Institute, 1958: 'My pictures are indeed facades... Sometimes I open one door one window or two doors and two windows... There is more power in telling little than in telling all.'

3 This dialogue references the demonstration of Bang in: 'Art and Art-like', a paper given by James Ming-Hsueh Lee (PhD candidate Loughborough University) at the in-house postgraduate research conference LUSAD, July 2008.

4 Loughborough University guidelines for Practice Based Research Degrees: 'A research degree submission with a practice element is designed to accommodate the idea that not all knowledge is best represented and communicated in written form.' And: 'The written element of the submission is expected to be normally 40,000 words in length.'

5 At present, LUSAD guidelines for 'PhD by Practice' outline four models: practice based, practice led, practice aligned and practice integrated

6 Pakes (2004: 3) further explores the complex distinctions between techne, phronesis, praxis and poesis. They can be seen to categorise practice in different ways according to who is translating and hen and in what context it is being translated.

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