I am a Research-based Practitioner, not a Practice-based Researcher: A Laudation of the Everyday and the In-Between.

This essay addresses multimodal researchers thinking of working with practitioners or artists / researchers looking to use prototypes for research and identifies the struggles of positioning such research, as well as it highlights principles and benefits of practice when treated as main methodology.

I am writing this piece to openly discuss the tensions of my everyday as practitioner and academic. I studied Fashion (BA) and Design Interactions (MA) and have worked commercially in both fields before starting my own studio. Today, my work aligns to what commonly is considered design practice, but it also caters to the scientific analysis and data gathering of research. Rather than resulting in either products or new conclusions however, the work explores, tinkers, dares and tries, and sometimes fails. And through this sitting in between, I believe it has great advantages, some of which I will discuss in the following.

But I also write this piece as I find myself in a dilemma: witnessing a shift towards a landscape where arts universities have come to ask applicants to hold a PhD for any research or even academic positions, a certain preference for scientifically sound research over practice-based research seems evident. To ask someone to even just financially be able to accomplish both is a very great ask. And so – alongside other very capable practitioners I know of, I keep wondering if I will need to sacrifice my practice to surmount the seeming necessity of a PhD. One might say a practice-based PhD would allow me to continue my practice. But so far, I have not found options to truly integrate what I am currently working on without trying to box it into a prescribed program, and I have seen many practitioners not returning or being able to keep up their practice once they pursued a PhD.

> *In the creative fields, entry to the academy was until relatively recently founded on the ingenuity and contribution of the creative practice of the future professor. This would be coupled with an appropriate academic qualification, often a master's degree. In North America, the Master of Fine Art (MFA) or Master of Design are still deemed to be the terminal degrees for the creative fields, but this is changing. In Europe, Scandinavia, Asia and Australasia, there is an expectation that the PhD will be the entry-level qualification for an academic position irrespective of the discipline of the appointment. This has created additional expectations for practitioners who may aspire to a future academic position in a creative domain such as design. Now, they must be both an expert practitioner and a credentialed researcher by virtue of the completion of a doctoral degree.*
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> *Vaughan (2017) Practice based design research. London etc.: Bloomsbury academic. (p 11)*

I regularly converse with my colleagues and collaborators on the importance of *practice* in research areas related to artistic creation. I also observe a culture where practice is analysed and narrated to underpin it as research. But the dualism between practice and research established when treated as separate processes sits uncomfortably with me. It feels as though we are intentionally returning to the mind-body dualism. This text is a reflection and an account of the commonalities I detect throughout working with other practitioners and in my own rites and patterns of creating, directing, or producing. I identify underlying principles and concerns of practice that I share with other practitioners, and principles that I argue the discussion around practice would benefit from engaging with.

Uneasy Categories

My resentment against easy categorisation is important to open this conversation on practice. I consider the complexity and multimodality of what we do as the strong suit of being a practitioner. The multi-layered and often unconscious expression we can externalise through our work allows for interpretation, and it invites conversations, constantly aiming to abstain from stating facts verbally. Being asked to work on and support academic research on several occasions in the past, I see a compelling case to be made for practice to deliberately not set things in stone. That this is a crux describing why we still struggle to define the idea of practice-based research is a problem I find most fascinating although obvious: the relationship between research and practice if thought in the most traditional context is then sheer paradoxical. In the following, I therefor will make a case for the more prominent use of the category *research-based practice* instead.

> *Because research activity was defined in the language and methods of science and technology, it was logical to use the sciences as the benchmark when considering how the arts contributed to the research enterprise in the university setting. The argument used was the strategy of defining 'equivalence'. If the creative process involved in practice-led research was accepted as a form of research in its own right then it had to be shown to be equivalent to acknowledged research traditions. If 'research activity' could be readily defined according to the long tradition of institutional practices in place it seemed possible to define 'research equivalent activity' (Strand 1998: 46) to account for those inquiry processes that sought the same ends but pursued different means. Equivalency, it was claimed, was a viable approach for framing research policy statements because it positioned practice-led research relative to criteria used to define conventional research practices. The stance taken in Australia at the time was in the Federal report Research in the Creative Arts (Strand 1998), which included the following recommendation:*
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> *In addition to the conventional definitions of research, individual universities and the major funding bodies... should adopt the notion of research equivalence as an appropriate and valid concept for recognition of research-based practice and performance in the creative arts, and incorporate it into their documentation and processes for allocating research funds. Research equivalent activity should be recognised as being equivalent to research and scholarly activities in traditional fields. (p. xvii)*
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> Smith, H. and Dean, R. (2014) in *Practice-led research, research-led practice in the creative arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (p 45)

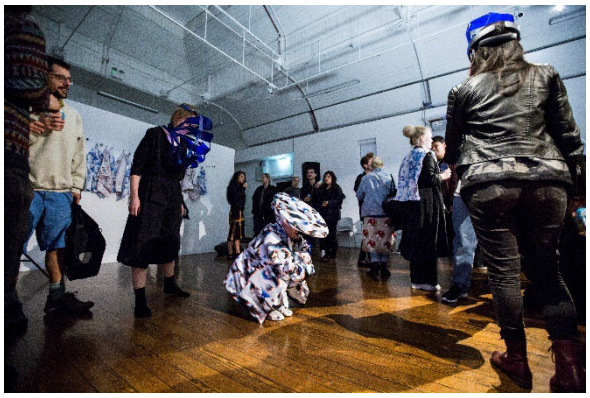
Like many of my fellow creative practitioners I struggle when asked to specify my profession. I might answer differently depending on the context or try to evade enquiry by staying simple and vague – "I am a Designer". After further rounds of 'what do you do' people usually arrive at the conclusion that I am to be a Fashion Designer, but despite having a BA in Fashion and working in fashion-related contexts, this is not a term I strongly identify with. I more strongly identify with the idea of designing interactions, yet that too has certain incorrect connotations.

This is the gruesome aspect of practice I feel urged to highlight: the simplification we are often asked to perform when discussing our work. *Practice* is most often generalised through the media it uses rather than by the thoughts that produce it, and this verbal categorisation is one that often discredits its content. Simply classifying what we do as 'multidisciplinary' however does not do our work justice, as this seems to discredit the specialism we have developed for the area we have carved out for ourselves.

So instead of using the media I work with to classify what I do, I would like to establish my research-based practice as follows:

I investigate body-centric themes and mediate them through the production of garments and artefacts as one-half of the Design Collective Peut-Porter. I work closely with designer Bine Roth, and we combine our material making skills with technology. We work performatively to create participatory moments. We invite audiences to join collective experiences wherein we see body-politics unfold. Although our work is motivated by socio-political macro systems, our knowledge of textile, garment and jewellery making is the guiding principle; it offers a chance to respond on a micro level and an opportunity to make the work tangible. For our public appearances, we create 'things that can be worn' (*Peut-Porter* is French for *Can-Wear*) and expand the realms of wearable technology, meandering the fine line between gadget and garment, costume and avatar, and the interdependence between self and other. As we augment reality through physical and digital means, we identify as 'Realists of a Larger Reality' (Ursula K Le Guin) and attempt to create alternatives to dominant narratives and modes of cultural consumption. Informed by and built around principles of co-creation and collectivism, we facilitate exchange across disciplines and negotiate social boundaries and everyday norms in our practice and as educators.

The sensory apparatus 'human' is our main playground - and we assimilate the work of the many predecessors who de- and reconstructed it throughout history with the help of machines, sensing technology or simple image making techniques. The idea of the subject-object, best described in the metaphor of a mask that only truly comes into being when activated - is one we study in our work. As we create interactions between audience and performer, audience-audience, and audience-object with the help of garments and devices, we centre our attention on the relational: being the one watching diverges from being watched, and the interplay between these states of existence is one we interrogate. Our semi-theatrical experiences offer entry to ritual-like moments of dressing and becoming, but they also involve ideas of gameplay and the passing on of agency.



Wear+Seek – London Design Festival (2017). Also shown at Museum of London: Wearable Resistance Salon (2018), and Fashion Clash Festival Maastricht (2019).
Concept, Production & Design: Peut-Porter. Watch the Video here.

The audience is asked to wear specially designed garments and can use the various vision systems made available: they seek for the garments responding to either of the vision systems they were endowed with. The aim of the play is to send the visitors on a quest to understand the process of 'being watched' and 'being the one watching' in a world where our bodies are more than ever read and quantified with the help of machine vision.

Two HoloLenses allowed a mixed reality experience that uses the various garments and patterns as triggers to create virtual camouflage. As further extension of the game, Jules Cunningham and Hannah Burfield performed whilst being followed by a person wearing an InfraRed Camera Headset – recording their various bodily heat-pattern modified through the garments and seen in contrast to those of the audience. The process of surveillance and spy-tools became a gamified and embodied process that soon led to an immersive play on enhanced vision systems and their future role in design and social interaction.

Massaging Rules without setting them

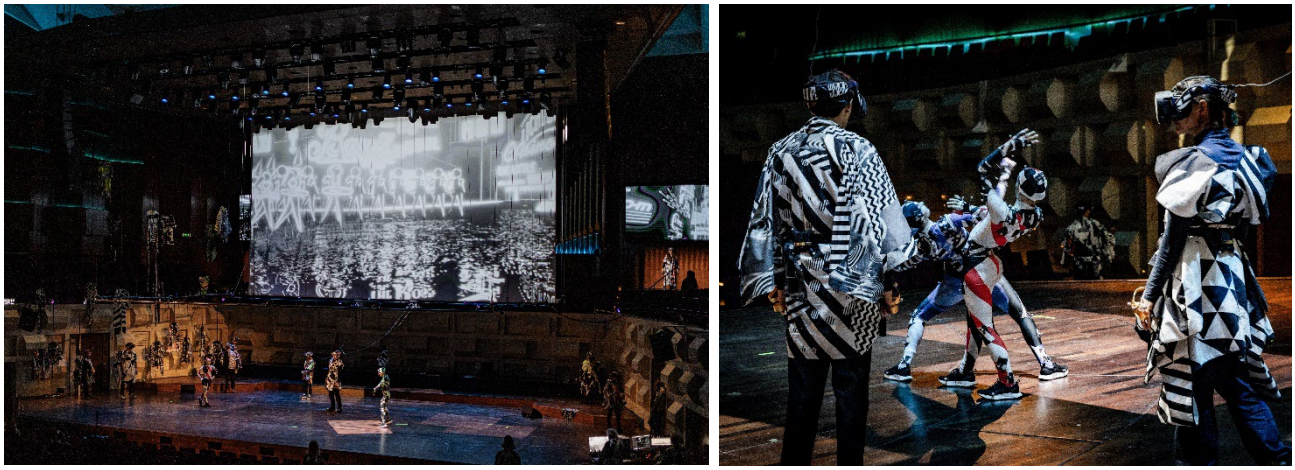
Research-based Practice follows mechanisms and processes of making, and although we are not working through a framework that can be easily identified, the rules in place are strong but evolving in the process. Practice springs from skill-based knowledge – to handle materials and tools, to master processes of production and when entering the digital realm, these tools are hard- and software. As such, practice consists in working with or manipulating existing matter, shapes, codes, or data. The first canon of rules we follow therefor depends strongly on the tools and materials available to us – and these define and limit practice in the most straightforward manner. Then, there also is the fairly obvious second set of rules are grounded in human preference (or should I say bias?) - function, proportion, aesthetics, cultural priming.

But it's the 3rd set of rules I want to focus on as they are the ones most important to this conversation. Whilst working through a project, we establish very momentary and project specific set of rules – a project framework so to say. They may not appear as such to the practitioner themselves as they spring from the thinking through making process. These principles appear without being written or set in stone. We may defend them when discussing our ongoing work with collaborators or other practitioners, but we might keep them to ourselves still weary of their existence. They are the decisions we take during the process of creation, and they define the territory, the volume, and the essence of the work.

An example: our most recent project 'DAZZLE – A Reassembly of Bodies' (2022), is meant to be staged as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) combining performance, fashion, and mixed reality visualisations. Audience members get dressed as they enter the experience. This act of dressing creates an active, collective moment, and the garments become vehicles to make audiences part of the artwork environment: as they meander the space, they are no longer identifiable as 'the other' and blend into the overall visual identity. The practicality of dressing an entire audience is challenging, as one must consider a vast array of body types, clean and mend the garments, and negotiate the comfort of the wearer – elements crucial to deliver an enjoyable experience. It further limits the number of audiences able to partake.

The rule we evidently established was that anyone on set – from director to technician, audience-member to performer is to wear one of the specially produced outfits. This rule was never officially discussed by the team until it was challenged:

As the project grew, we staged the work at a much bigger venue than originally planned and the curatorial team was excited to have a greater number of audience than we had so far anticipated being able to join this multidimensional performance. As there are many levels to experience the work, we considered the possibility to not dress all visitors and therefore to be able to accommodate higher numbers – to develop a tier system between those who wear an outfit and others who will not. Having the option to expand the audience number was something we had to negotiate, but we lastly decided this rule could not be altered just yet. Faced with the opportunity to do so gave us reason to reflect and understand the importance of the principle we had established as an essential aspect in the work, but it also opened conversations on how we might manipulate and expand this rule in the future.



DAZZLE – A Reassembly of Bodies. DeDoelen Theatre, Groote Zaal, Rotterdam (2022) , Premiere at Venice Biennale, 2022.

> *DAZZLE re-imagines the Dazzle Ball held at the Royal Albert Hall, London, in 1919. Zig-zag motifs -- inspired by First World War naval camouflage -- are applied to costumes and set design, playing with audiences' vision and perception. This project uses next-gen streaming motion capture and machine learning to deliver a fusion of dance & immersive technology for multiple participants. DAZZLE is a multi-sensorial experience inviting audiences on a journey to perform, explore and disguise in the many realities we call ours. Reality becomes fluid, and identities extend, shifting seamlessly between fashion and avatar, performance and live motion-capture, virtual and physical - a mind-bending masquerade. As an answer to our longing for togetherness, audiences choose to be active participants or observers as they travel through mixed realities, breaking with perceptions of art to be spatially separated or untouched by its visitors.*
> *In* DAZZLE, *we become art objects shrouded in garments and technologies of vision, breaking the fourth wall, inclusive and collective, a space for commoning, beyond narrative, language, body and gender hierarchies. The audience, physical avatars in the installation space. Future live performance enabled by technology—forward-looking with an eye on the past.*

Concept, Production & Design: Peut-Porter & Gibson/Martelli

Zooming out, this occasion highlights that *practice* at its core is a constant definition and negotiation of rules. We have given up on rules in the past, but it takes time and a series of developments or prototypes to define as well as to abolish rules – manipulating and updating what one explores in the work. Although I am writing about these project-based rules in a straight-forward manner, they can only be elicited in the process of making, presenting, and adjusting the work. Because they are negotiations that happen during the process of creation, they are essential to what I call practice. What meets the eye of the spectator, user or participant however rarely reveals these thought processes and rules; the final work may appear as a success or as mediocre, but the rules and the thought processes are not spelled out in the explicit ways a scientific observation would. Their existence however is what I consider *research-based practice.* As we perform practice, discussion and conversation take place: in the team, with the audience, the venue, and with the many other players involved. These have impact and push the discipline, give example and are tangible and accessible means to interrogate a subject. Bringing this knowledge to students, panels and the general public through shows, exhibitions or video is a means to impact the broader field, and such discourse is acknowledged as research-outputs by the wider community. To not publish these processes in written form or in relevant journals, conferences and institutions however weirdly sets our work apart from the research community, as if we are too intangible, or non-verifiable. At the same time, we are neither fit for commercial use as our testing, probing and interrogation has little market-ready value. We sit between – between commerce and academia, research and practice, making and thinking. And whilst we have found this position the most effective way to perform *practice as research*, it situates us in a place where funding and acknowledgement of the work in an academic context are a constant struggle.

Data-governance and the Untouchable

Artistic creation in our disciplines follows norms as much as it tries to evade them, but one norm we are most unnerved about is the concept of the untouchable. In the following I will elucidate how this separation of the embodied experience feels eerily similar to the separation of research and practice.

In 'Everything passes except the Past' (Haeckel, 2021), we are introduced to the idea that a mask must be seen as object-subject, something that only exists when used in its true purpose and therefore when activated. It needs to be performed, not decoratively hung on a wall, or placed in a museum for observation. The book highlights the 'academic' version of the mask when de-activated and put into a museum context. Whilst the book focuses on this example as a fitting depiction of colonial routine, to me, it also symbolises the thereby constructed importance and the higher ranking of rationalisation and data in large parts of western culture: the caption and information held about the mask, its net-worth to the museum, its analysis and display are put before the preservation of the mask's purpose – its activation and wearing is prohibited. Audiences in museums know all too well not to touch the displays.

In our own work within Peut-Porter, we try to move away from such intangible formats as we ask for participation and aim to break down the artwork-spectator dichotomy as much

as possible. But breaking the mould – or even just massaging it, has proven impressively difficult in our encounter with venues, curators, and other showcasing formats.

I suspect a similar dualism in the academic context of *practice versus research*: when practice gets dissected and rationalised, we thereby overtly introduce what can only be called data-governance. As means to make practice easily digestible for research purposes, we strip away the sensual experience that is so inherent and important. I work as visiting lecturer across a series of institutions and am subject leader in Wearable Technology at London College of Fashion; in these roles, I regularly see students and staff struggle to write about their work without boxing their thinking into formats most common, as academic structures and methodologies, and even just certain wording then justify their expressions as research. The observation and study of practice here tends to try and trump practice itself – and in so doing it also disregards the function of practice as a non-formulaic method to interrogate and assimilate knowledge even though it may not be easily quantifiable. I consider practice to rely on a multitude of senses, associations, and gut-instincts. Reflected upon at a later stage, decisions and rules that are established in these moments can be understood and formulated, but it is not this finding that constitutes what I consider research – but the process of getting to this point. Further, the residue of this process will always be knowledge that sits beyond the possibilities of words, numbers, methods, or categories. It will only be elicited if kept in its multimodal state.

Next to the above-described conundrum of the untouchable object, touch itself is a notable example of this dilemma. There are a vast variety of attempts to read and quantify our senses, with touch being the one most prominently trialled – and failed to translate to a satisfying degree.

The channelling of the outside world and the cultural semaphore that artistic practice usually has to master is rarely measurable in a scientific manner. The justification of work through gathering of data is difficult but often needed to establish practice as research. This links back to the now ever-dominant need and problems that come with easy categorisation discussed earlier on. The dominating mode of textual analysis is one we have come to feel most comfortable with as of its fully rational characteristics. To me, it reflects the main principles of the information age. The conversational and interactive relevance of practice as research however will be of increasing importance. Not only because we will need creative forms of study to discuss the complex issues we are currently facing within society, economy, politics. Practice allows for a more multifaceted engagement and discussion of research, can help solve problems of dissemination and inclusivity and might just be able to help us overcome colonial rites of knowledge production and distribution. If practice were allowed to define its own territory alongside rather than within the boundaries of traditional research, their relationship might be supportive rather than one of constant struggle over definitions.

The Use of Technology to meander between Disciplines

As I sat on a panel to discuss the importance of a *Creative Lab* wherein technologists, designers and performers meet and are given space and time to exchange and learn from

one another, I had an epiphany on why working with technology has always been favourable to me in the context of research. The philosophical discourse on how technology is shaping our socio-cultural constructs is brimming - full of critique and reflection on who we are as human beings and how we define our moral and ethical standards. Technology then is not just a tool to expand the disciplines we as creatives are defined in - be this fashion, performance, science or any other. It also stimulates discourse about their societal role, and thereby helps to bridge disciplines through common themes and allows practitioners to relate with one another through the technological challenges they are facing. When I spoke of data-governance and near binary coding of practice above, I understand many of these developments are owed to an everyday that is increasingly driven by technocratic constitutions: Impact studies need numbers to justify funding spend, outreach activities must be stipulated to tick-box requirements.

But to altercate and rub shoulders with another discipline is more easily facilitated when technologies are used to invite them onto the same stage. Through the creation of this interface, they are offered a way to negotiate inputs and outputs: one discipline delivering the input (the movement of the performer), the other then answering in form of an output (the design of the moving avatar) and vice-versa. Software is used to translate, facilitate combinations as well as to create feedback loops. I value this as a method of research where my practice is not only interpreted and developed or interrogated by another discipline through their own means but allows us to develop a non-hierarchical, co-creational output. It is as if the tech-interface is a vessel to remix our ingredients more effectively as it can free the work from original ownerships over skills and methods. In contrast to tools, software rarely is specifically aligned with a discipline: whilst the sewing machine is aligned to the fashion, textile, or costume designer, the same accounts for movement and somatic sensing abilities of the performer. In both cases, bodies are trained to fulfil tasks that cannot simply be passed on to those of another discipline. Software however does not rely on the embodied knowledge of practitioners - and therefor can be tool for interpretation and translation – without going as far as the textual analysis.

Another advantage of working with technology is the way it asks us to rephrase our work quite literally. An audience member of the above-mentioned panel brought an important argument to the room: language is a key element of collaborative practice, where one must navigate terminologies and techniques commonly used in the others work, forcing them in return to consider these terminologies and together develop or learn new ones. The spatial practice of a ballroom dancer for example defines the origin of their movement as 'place', but this definition of 'place' changes in other forms of dance: in Labanotation, place is *'directly related to the centre of gravity of the performer'*. (p.24, Guest & Anderson, 2016). Where is place in the virtual landscape of the avatar? Could a pattern cutter consider the idea of place in their practice?

Appropriating such terms is a means to interrogate one's own practice, hence expanding and conducting research using methods of experiment unique to this set of tools. Let's look at the relationship between the choreographer and the performer for example. This relationship could be metaphorical for the creative interplay between fashion designer and pattern-cutter. Instructions of choreographer/fashion designer are considered as input

that need to be translated into output by the performer/pattern cutter, thereby implementing an element of interpretation and highly subjective ways to read what is handed over or communicated. If this understanding were to be put in words or numbers, the interpretation would be radically different. If we introduce a tech-interface however, the conversations between these two entities can be mediated, explored, and studied.

On Associations

In a constant multimodal condition, many things suddenly seem to relate for the practitioner immersed in a project – we see everything through the lens of our work, and thereby we reproduce currents of socio-cultural and political character that may not be obvious. Fed back into our work, we are making them relatable to the person perceiving. This semantic context of cultural production could simply be noted down as creativity, but I highlight it here to explain the state of mind this situates the practitioner in, one which turns them into a visual digestion system which grants the wider public access to current debates. Such 'relational aesthetics' are well established since Baudrillard first coined the term in the 1990s. They are the essence of what I believe to be research-based practice but since they can hardly be translated into common research outputs, they need to be recounted in the context of this writing. Quoting or citing what has led the practitioner to produce work is impossible as the sensory apparatus of the human-practitioner is a filter that cannot give true evidence or reference on how they digested what they have been exposed to. And trying to do so will always feel insufficient.

The cultural semaphores we are producing as practitioners have their own right and reason to exist without having to go through a standardised validation process. They are research, but their validation needs a more multimodal framework. The hurdles we are facing in justifying or gaining funding have become sheer insurmountable for sitting in a design and arts context, and by proclaiming what I state here although partly obvious, I hope I can make a point in stressing this relevance not only to the reader but in fact to myself as I am being pulled and pushed to follow those rules and routes to further my career within research. As I hold the idea of research dearly and identify as a researcher as much as I identify as a practitioner, where should I situate myself in the existing landscape?

> *In design and performing arts, it has been a real challenge to have practice-based research acknowledged as a principled and rigorous activity. For many years, research in this area has privileged historical and theoretical study over practice in research, and the practitioner's voice is not always heard. In surgery, by contrast, the activity of practice-based research is simply referred to as 'research'. The label practice-based in this context seems tautological, as research in surgery is predominantly based on the practice of surgery and conducted by surgeons where collaborative teamwork is the norm. Inter-disciplinary work is a distinctive feature of many practice-based activities across different fields. In order to move away from the constraints of tightly enforced norms of their formative disciplines, practitioners have sometimes found ways forward by moving across to other disciplines. One of the unique aspects of practice-based research is the way different disciplines can come together through practice to benefit all the fields involved.*

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