

Double Blind: Supervising women as creative practice-led researchers

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ABSTRACT

Many women creative practice-led researchers appear inhibited by a number of factors directly connected to their gender. This article discusses these factors, including the culture of visual arts professional practice, the circumstances surrounding women postgraduate students and unproductive self-theories about intelligence and creativity. A number of feminist strategies are discussed as potential interventions that may assist women creative practice-led researchers and their supervisors to reap more personal and professional rewards from their postgraduate research.

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practice-led, supervision, women, visual art

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The productive and empowering relationship between praxis and feminist research has been well established.¹ As Jill Blackmore has pointed out, ‘for feminists, research is praxis, in that theory and practice are interconnected, and that any distinctions between theory/methodology/method are false’ (Blackmore, 2013, p. 178). The situation is more complicated, however, for female artist/researchers in the fraught field of creative practice-led research. There is a pervasive paradox whereby, rather than feeling empowered by the process of critical and reflective self-analysis, many women are inhibited by enduring insecurities about both the inherent value of their work and their contribution to knowledge in the academic context. The observable reasons for this are twofold: firstly, they are disheartened by the disproportionately small number of successful women artists, and secondly, they are concerned about where their research will take them in an academic research environment that mimics the dynamics of the art market beyond. This collaborative article draws on our experiences as both artist–researchers and educators to contextualise and analyse this paradox and it outlines strategic approaches for both supervisors and students.

Since late 2012, we have had the opportunity to consider collaboratively the circumstances regarding visual arts practice-led research for women in the academy, and why they appear to be at the mercy of a double bind that causes them ongoing anxiety and, in some cases, a complete crisis of confidence. As practice-led doctoral graduates, who have spent the subsequent period teaching, supervising and working with other women artist/researchers, it had come to our attention that women face additional barriers when they hope to forge a career in academia from their creative practice-led research and that these barriers are the product of a highly complex series of intersecting issues. These include challenges faced by women in both the worlds of professional art practice and academic research, as well as pervasive and highly counterproductive intrinsic theories about intelligence and creativity that have a gendered aspect.

We initially tabled this research project at the Australian Women and Gender Studies conference in 2012, where we were amongst a small number of creative practice-led researchers. In

a field of social science and cultural studies researchers, the differences in our methodologies became apparent. Our observations are based heavily on our own experiences as both artists and teachers. For this project, we have melded these with existing literature on creative practice-led research, higher degree supervision, self-theory and the position of women in the arts more generally. This diverse field of texts reflects some of the complications surrounding our initial concern: understanding the complex and sometimes difficult experiences of women involved in creative visual arts practice research. The foundation of this research is our position as artists and creative practice researchers, informed by our experience as teachers, mentors and supervisors to emerging women artist/researchers. These experiences have been gleaned from our work both within the institution and more broadly as feminist artists and activists.

It is still important to note that the term 'practice-led research' and its close relative 'practice-based research' are often contested and still evolving paradigms. As Grahame Sullivan points out, the original definition of practice-led research that our local models are built on is largely derived from one offered by the Arts and Humanities Research Board in the UK in 2003 (Sullivan, 2009). This definition of creative-practice research as the research practiced by creative and performing arts researchers did not help to define methodological and philosophical approaches to the field.² Happily, this tautological and self-evident definition has since been nuanced by a number of researchers, both in Australia and elsewhere, to include a way of thinking about research that can be highly speculative, generative and open-ended.³ These qualities of openness allow the specificities of gender to be accounted for as one significant factor in a field of inter-related complexities, which do not need to be strictly defined at the outset of a research project, but emerge through practice-based inquiry.

As the outcomes of practice-led research are designed to inform and shape practice, so too the objectives of this research project are to develop meaningful interventions that inform us as teachers and supervisors and empower higher degree research students as they progress through their candidature in ways that are particularly relevant to women and the visual arts. It has become clear to us since we began this research that the key doubts and insecurities women experience as practice-led researchers during their postgraduate journey are linked inextricably to the position of women artists in the broader field of visual arts professional practice. We soon recognised that if we want to develop strategic models for supervision we need to fully understand this complex of issues.

The Culture of Visual Arts Professional Practice

Recent high profile international and local exhibitions, highlighting the historical and contemporary practices of women artists, have created a renewed interest in feminism and the visual arts. While this interest is often ambivalent, it suggests to us a potentially pivotal moment in re-establishing the vitality and critique that feminism brought to the field from the late 1960s to the 1990s. Considerable scholarship has gone into the discussion of women's historical under-representation in the arts. From Virginia Woolf in the 1920s through to Lucy Lippard in the 1970s, and continuing through to today, it has been pointed out that women were less likely to succeed as artists because of very real social and economic barriers that prevented them from doing so. In her essay, first published in 1971, 'Why are there no great women artists?' Linda Nochlin observes, 'The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces but in our institutions and our education' (Nochlin, 1971/1988, p. 150). What is perhaps surprising, given at least 40 years of activism, is that in terms of professional success in the visual arts, things have not altered considerably.

Both the art market and the museums and galleries sector seem stubbornly resistant to the equitable inclusion of women. As Françoise Collin points out, 'women [historically] could not benefit from the patronage of great commissioners of art from the Court, the aristocracy or the Church, any more, moreover, than they can even today be regarded as dependable items on the "art market,"

which is the contemporary era's court of legitimisation' (Collin, 2010, p. 84). This inequity has been consistently documented by the American feminist activist collective, the Guerrilla Girls. While their analyses of gender imbalance in the North American art world are usually associated with the 1980s and 1990s, their recent findings do not indicate a significant improvement. In 2011, only 4% of artists in the New York Metropolitan Museum's contemporary art collection were women. As they put it, 'We were sure things had improved. Surprise! Only 3% in the Modern and Contemporary sections were women (5% in 1989), and 83% of the nudes were female (85% in 1989). Guess we can't put our masks away yet' (Guerrilla Girls, 2012). In an Australian context, the situation is not strikingly different. The CoUNTess website, which reports on the inequitable representation of women in galleries, museums and other major exhibitions, has identified a disturbingly familiar paucity of women in a range of venues. Notable examples have included an average 60 to 40% male to female ratio of exhibited artists in Contemporary Art Organisations Australia network spaces in 2011 (CoUNTess, 2012a); depressing statistics on the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art survey exhibition, *21st Century: Art in the First Decade 2011*, which featured 68 male, 28 female and eight groups; and the even grimmer numbers reflected in the Kaldor Collection donated to Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2010, which contained works by 194 male artists, seven collaborations and two female artists (CoUNTess, 2011).

In industries that have traditionally had very low numbers of women participating, the difficulties encountered by women in those fields appear explicable. In the visual arts, however, where women are numerous and regularly make-up well over half of undergraduate enrolments in visual arts courses (CoUNTess, 2012b); complaints by women about difficulties they encounter in our industry suggest a more insidious pattern of power relations and patriarchal resistance. The complex and elusive qualities of this require greater scrutiny and analysis.

The aim of revisionist art history was to bring to light the works of women artists who may have been ignored by their contemporaries because of the sexist attitudes of their age. In her 2013 keynote address at the *Alternative Modernisms* conference, feminist art historian Griselda Pollock made it clear, however, that from her perspective the ongoing resistance to women's visibility in the arts has revealed the fallacy of historical ignorance as the root of gender inequity in the sector. In her address, she asked why it is that successful and innovative women artists are repeatedly forgotten. Her argument suggests that the relatively small number of female historical role models is a product not of ignorance, but the deliberate erasure of women from existing canons. This invisibility becomes a vicious cycle that women struggle to overcome.

In the Australia Council's *Women in Theatre* report (2012), Elaine Lally's research identified both logistical and perceptual reasons for the lack of women in key creative leadership positions in the performing arts. Many of these are also pertinent to the visual arts sector. As one survey respondent identified, in a resource-poor arts environment 'safe' decision-making becomes the norm:

Part of the problem is the time-frames, there isn't enough time to make a greater investment into getting more women onto projects. It's easier to go with people you know and whose work you know. [...] The choices are between a celebrated handful of blokes and a group of women whose work you haven't seen and who haven't been celebrated. You want certainty for your program, solidity and confidence that you can sell tickets. (Lally, 2012, p. 26)

Replace 'tickets' with 'sales' or 'audience numbers' and the observation becomes relevant to the museum and galleries sector as well. So, once these aspects of professional practice are assessed, the relative disadvantage of women artists becomes visible. We wanted to understand why these factors are also so important for women visual arts practice-led researchers.

The Culture of Academic Research

After the first *Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Report* was completed in 2010, it became clear that the process of assessing the quality and impact of creative research relied heavily on high

prestige venues to validate research outcomes. Non-traditional research outputs (NTROs) constituted approximately 4% of outputs submitted to *ERA* in 2010—and these included curated or exhibited events, live performances, original creative works and recorded rendered works. In the 1905 code of Visual Arts and Crafts, 91% of the submitted outputs were ‘non-traditional’ in 2010 and this trend largely continued in 2012 (with 88%) (Australian Research Council, 2011, 2012).

Prior to the release of the 2012 *ERA Report*, our key question was whether NTROs in the visual arts would still in large part be determined by the prestige of ‘outlet’ (effectively museums and galleries) as this would be a direct mimicking by the research assessment process of the logic of the art world. In the discussions that followed the 2012 *ERA Report* outcomes, one peer review panel member, reflecting on his observations as Member of Research Evaluation Committee, Excellence in Research 2012, Humanities and Creative Arts panel, agreed that while he was not privy to all of the processes of assessment, it was clear to him that prestige venues heavily influenced the outcomes. He went so far as to suggest that he saw this process potentially exacerbating gender disparity in NTROs, as universities compete to ‘buy in’ established talent.

What is also largely missing for creative practice researchers are those mechanisms, like the blind peer review process for journal articles, that are meant to provide the opportunity for quality research to be published, regardless of the author’s identity or reputation. The art world effectively has no equivalent blind processes of this kind (although the recent announcement of the international *Project Anywhere* initiative as a peer-reviewed exhibition opportunity offers a promising first step). In his recent Reith Lecture in the United Kingdom, the artist, Grayson Perry has described the legitimisation of artists as a ‘lovely consensus’ arrived at by the established processes of the art world. Artists become known as exemplary practitioners by their acknowledgement amongst fellow artists, curators, critics and art dealers (Perry, 2013). This process relies heavily on the identity of the artist, who is involved in a complex web of social relations, rather than the work alone.

There are clearly risks inherent in research outputs developing as a mirror image of the commercial art market and its attendant structures (including galleries and museums). It is worrisome that the research environment would replicate the distinct gender imbalance of the commercial market, but it also suggests that the practice-led research process is being used, either deliberately or inadvertently, to reinforce that existing commercial mechanism. As researchers who embrace a feminist pedagogical approach, we believe that the creative research process has much to offer women as a pathway to emancipatory knowledge, but also that it should be a clearly identified and feasible career path.

Women and Postgraduate Research Study

In our experience, women postgraduate students and recent graduates are all too aware of the precarious nature of paid employment in the arts and understand that their research qualifications will not necessarily guarantee them any financial security. As McRobbie (2011) has pointed out, women are particularly vulnerable to the tender mercies of ‘immaterial labour’ in the arts and creative industries more generally. Women artist/researchers are more likely to be bearing the responsibility of care for their families, both nuclear and extended, and are nervous as a consequence about the risks of pursuing such insecure work.

Balancing ongoing family responsibilities with their studies, accessing and using childcare and feeling tied into traditional domestic roles are key concerns for women postgraduate students, which can lead to self-doubt and lack of confidence, as well as feelings of guilt and frustration (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013, p. 8, 3). As Jane Bacon discovered during her experience working with practitioner/researchers, women often carry guilt about their creative activity. She quotes one of her students as saying, ‘I should be at home looking after my children or out looking for a job. I feel like this is a sort of avoidance, I shouldn’t be here. This isn’t the important stuff’ (Bacon, 2010, p. 66). Our

experience suggests that this is a common sensation. During a series of dinners organised by the women's artist-run-initiative, LEVEL as part of the Melbourne Next Wave festival in 2012, this story of 'sacrificing' personal creativity for other responsibilities and/or feeling guilty about the time and resources spent on nurturing a career in the visual arts was a common theme. This guilt over both doing and not doing creative work has tangible consequences for the women as they are shaping their careers. As Brown and Watson discuss, these responsibilities have a profound impact on women graduate students, with issues including work/ home life balance and less access to academic opportunities such as attending conferences, creating feelings of marginalisation and exclusion from the academic culture (Brown & Watson, 2010, p. 385, 398). A 2011 study by Stimpson and Filer concurs, finding that male students were distinctly more satisfied with their balance of study with family life responsibilities than their female peers (Stimpson & Filer, 2011, p. 103).

As Gina Wisker points out, gender may impact on success in postgraduate studies due to a range of additional issues. These include the supervisor–student relationship, gender and power relations, varying levels of acceptance of feminist research methods (where relevant), institutional factors and social pressures (Wisker, 2005, p. 213). Women practitioner researchers often grapple with their internalised insecurities about the validity of their practice while also rubbing up against the unyielding realities of patriarchal institutional structures and power. In addition to domestic or family responsibilities that may conflict with study, and women's anticipation of future employment difficulties, women also grapple with their potential isolation in male-dominated university departments and what Hammick and Acker describe as a 'chilly climate' in the broader institutional environment (Hammick & Acker, 1998, p. 337). Leonard argues that the realities and challenges of women's lives do not sit easily within the 'masculine' academic context and its 'business-like' approach to research (Leonard, 2001, p. 43). Therefore, it is often a lack of institutional support for women postgraduate students rather than any academic deficiencies that effects their ability to successfully navigate their study (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000, p. 50).

As the literature on women in postgraduate research makes clear, the higher degree journey is fraught with pitfalls and difficulties for women that can obscure and impede their career path. As Wall observes, 'Traditional gender roles and gendered organisational hierarchies combine to make doctoral education an inherently different process for men and women' (Wall, 2008, p. 219). These challenges are exacerbated by the socialisation of female students from an early age, which internalises attitudes towards learning and creativity.

Women and Self-Theory

As Carol Dweck's lengthy research into intrinsic theories of intelligence have shown (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Bush, 1976), women are particularly vulnerable from an early age to 'entity theory', which reinforces the notion that intelligence is a fixed trait. Dweck's research has indicated how girls and young women are generally encouraged to adopt this mindset through their educational experiences. This entity theory approach is particularly unhelpful for women setting out on the daunting intellectual task of analysing and theorising their practice as research because, as Dweck points out, this mindset is associated with a loss of self-esteem, motivation and effort in the face of challenges and difficulties (Dweck, 1999). In the case of creative practice-led research, this issue is exacerbated by similar social attitudes towards creativity as well as intelligence. In their working paper on the consequences of beliefs about the malleability of creativity, Alexander O'Connor, Charlan Nemeth and Satoshi Akutsu observed the same dynamic. Study participants who believed in the malleability of creativity, or the idea that creativity could be increased by focused effort, were more likely to succeed in creative problem solving and demonstrate observable 'lifetime creative achievement' (O'Connor, Nemeth, & Akutsu, 2012). This 'incremental theory' or 'mastery-oriented' mindset, which indicates greater success in both intellectual and creative pursuits, is often difficult for women to maintain in the face of insidious gender-based assumptions about their potential.

We might imagine that Virginia Woolf's description of the assumed creative and intellectual inferiority of women in *A Room of One's Own* (1928) is an antiquated observation of outdated opinions, and yet the celebrated German painter, Georg Baselitz felt quite comfortable proclaiming in an interview in *Spiegel* magazine (2013) that women artists simply do not 'pass the value test' and that, 'women don't paint very well. It's a fact. [...] despite the fact that they still constitute the majority of students in the art academies' (Beyer & Knöfel, 2013). In a clear example of both an entity theory-informed position and the mechanics of Perry's 'lovely consensus', Baselitz's observation was based on his claim that the market is always right and that women's absence from the league table of top sales was based on their lack of creative 'brutality'.

Feminist Pedagogy in the Visual Arts

As mentioned previously, our goal for this research was to identify and test a range of potential interventions that clarify our practices both as professional mentors and academic supervisors and assist our students to navigate these complex issues. Our approach to this task has been explicitly feminist. This position is informed by the substantial international history of feminist pedagogy in the visual arts, dating back to the Feminist Art Programme at Fresno State College in 1970. Feminist approaches to education in the visual arts have traditionally acknowledged the complex of issues faced by women both within and without the academy. As Griselda Pollock explains, the Women's Art History collective in the United Kingdom, responsible for both an education programme and publishing in the field, was 'founded in 1973 as an informal grouping of artists and would-be art historians and journalists, attached to the women's workshop of the Artists' Union' (Pollock, 2010, p. 21). This connection between academic activities and the professional world of arts organisations is significant. Pollock describes a pedagogical approach that emerged in the Masters Programme in Feminism and the Visual Arts at Leeds University in the early 1990s as one that sought to break down both discipline and hierarchical barriers (Pollock, 2010, p. 23). This clearly correlates with Gina Wisker's characterisation of the feminist research approach as fundamentally challenging and reinterpreting what is considered 'knowledge' (Wisker, 2005, p. 226).

Feminist Methods for Students and Supervisors

While not all of the creative practitioners we have been involved with take an explicitly feminist approach to their own work, we do not believe that this reduces the relevance of a feminist-informed approach to their supervision. Feminist research practices emphasise a diversity of views and perspectives, as well as the importance of personal experience and responses (Wisker, 2005, p. 225), and these are all highly pertinent to the practice-led research methodology. Additionally, a collaborative rather than hierarchical approach to research, where 'the position of the researcher as a person' is acknowledged (Wisker, 2005, p. 226), fits comfortably with the goal of promoting an incremental theory approach to both intellectual and creative work in higher degree candidates. Lesley Johnson, Alison Lee and Bill Green identify collaboration as key skill for researchers and a new mode of producing knowledge. As they point out, the embrace of collaboration 'could precisely open up a different space for those women in the academy who, in the past, have found their identities as scholars and gendered beings in conflict' (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000, p. 146). Interestingly, this more horizontal and collaborative feminist position acknowledges that it is not only the female research student who experiences insecurities and doubts, but potentially their female supervisors as well. As Marilyn Hammick and Sandra Acker observe in their research, women supervisors in general express more doubts about their supervision methods than male colleagues (1998, p. 343). This suggests that it is equally important to utilise feminist strategies that assist women supervisors to feel more confident in their approach. One possible strategy of this kind is the establishment of collaborative supervisory teams in place of the intense hierarchy of the principal supervisor/candidate relationship.

In addition to the clear need for logistical and financial support for women post-graduate researchers and a reconsideration of traditional supervisory structures, a few additional key strategies have emerged out of this complex of issues that warrant further investigation. First and foremost is the strengthening of collegial networks for women practice-led researchers as self-determining and mutually supporting structures. While sympathetic supervisory support is important, the traditional student/ supervisor relationship is one of vertical mentoring, and the gender equity benefits of mentoring appear to have been overestimated. The horizontal networking of peers may indeed be more effective for women than vertical mentoring. As was pointed out in the Australia Council 'Women in Theatre' report of 2012, '[...] it appears that having a mentor has an impact on high achievers' career advancement from the very start of their careers, but that men reap greater benefits from mentoring than women' (Carter and Silva in Lally, 2012). Additionally, mentoring alone may intensify the self-doubt created by stubborn entity theory beliefs regarding intelligence and creativity; often women express that they dare not reveal the difficulties they are experiencing for fear of appearing inadequate to the task (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013, p. 9). Using these networks can mitigate the isolation of the individual artist/researcher and lay bare the difficulties and insecurities experienced by women in an environment that may encourage a mastery-oriented response. Aitchison and Mowbray identify the crucial importance of forming supportive research groups for women to share experiences (2013, p. 6). This approach will also help women practitioner/researchers to create professional networks that will assist with not only the emotional work involved in their research, but their ongoing professional success as well. The effectiveness of such networks can be seen in the example of the feminist collective and artist-run initiative LEVEL, where programmes focused on supporting women artists at diverse stages of their careers provide a model of intergenerational mentoring and peer support in terms of both practice development and professional opportunities.

The ongoing gathering of data, as exemplified in the *CoUNTess* project and the political advocacy of the Guerrilla Girls, for deployment in postgraduate research supervision is another key strategy. These data can be utilised to advocate for the visibility of female role models as both academics *and* creative practitioners. As Australian artist Kelly Doley, a member of the Sydney art collaboration Brown Council, has noted, 'As a young art school student, I was surrounded by female students, but female lecturers were few and far between. I didn't feel like I had a female mentor, and the examples used in the studio, in lectures, in our readers and textbooks were mainly male artists' (Doley & Moore, 2012, p. 14). Women postgraduate students look at the gender imbalance that becomes increasingly apparent in the ranks of senior academics and feel similarly disenfranchised: 'I do believe that being a woman will significantly incapacitate my ability to obtain an academic appointment. Men slip easily into these positions while women must fight for them' (Brabazon, 2004, p. 170). Not only do these data call institutions to account on their representations and support of women, but it also assists women researchers to comprehend the barriers they encounter as symptomatic of systemic gender inequities rather than simply personal failure and inadequacy.

What has become clear as we cross-reference the literature regarding practice-led research, women in the visual arts, and women as postgraduate research students, is that we are grappling with a number of understood barriers that are meeting in quite particular ways in our field. If the inequitable position of women in the visual arts has been a historical blind spot that feminist research in our area has sought to correct, then how much more pressing that women researchers should be involved in the self-reflexive exploration of their own position. If as women artist-researchers, we and our students and colleagues are caught in a double bind, partly due to the lack of a true double blind test of our creative capacities, then we must intervene in the research culture that inhibits us. A feminist approach to higher degree research supervision in creative practice that utilises collaborative methods and supports the development of horizontal networks offers a number of potential pathways to both address and reinterpret the observed challenges women researchers are facing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber's summaries of feminist research, in anthologies such as *Feminist approaches to theory and methodology: an interdisciplinary reader* (1999), *Feminist research practice: a primer* (2007) and *Handbook of feminist research: theory and praxis* (2012), provide a clear overview of the crucial interdependence of feminist research and praxis.
2. 'Practice-led research is a distinctive feature of the research activity in the creative and per-forming arts. As with other research conducted by arts and humanities researchers, it involves the identification of research questions and problems, but the research methods, contexts and outputs then involve a significant focus on creative practice. This type of research thus aims, through creativity and practice, to illuminate or bring about new knowledge and understanding, and it results in outputs that may not be text-based, but rather a performance (music, dance, drama), design, film, or exhibition' (p. 10).
3. While creative practice-led research is not alone in displaying these characteristics, these qualities are increasingly being embraced as methodological strengths. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt published a survey of the Australian approaches to the field in 2007, where Barrett suggests, 'we can now argue that because of its inbuilt reflexivity, the emergent aspect of artistic research methodology may be viewed as a positive feature to be factored into the design of research projects rather than as a flaw to be understated or avoided' (Barrett & Bolt, 2007, p. 6).

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