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Artistic Research and Fieldwork as Social Practice

Cornelia Sollfrank in conversation with Gavin Renwick

In his exhibition "Home Office" (spring 2008) Gavin Renwick explored ideas about land use, ownership and home. For the time of the exhibition, the Cooper Gallery, which is part of the Duncan of Jordanstone School of Art and Design at Dundee University functioned as a workspace for the artist, and had been transformed into a place for social interaction, with a programme that included discussions about anthropology, education and art. Cornelia Sollfrank used this opportunity to visit Gavin in his "home office" and talked to him about his work in Canada with the Dogrip First Nation people, and how this work relates to Gavin's practice as artist researcher and particularly the practice-led PhD Gavin has completed in 1999 at DoJ.

Cooper Gallery, Dundee, 3 April 2008

Sollfrank: You were one of the first candidates to submit a practice-led PhD thesis in Fine Art at Dundee University in 1999. How did you arrive at doing practice-led research?

Renwick: I did my undergraduate degree in Design and Masters in Architecture, and then I chose to work with the performance artist Wendy Gunn and spent two years working with her in Istanbul. Usually, I describe the work I did prior to my PhD as research-led practice opposed to the work I did as part of my PhD practice-led research. And when I talk about practice I mean art practice as well as practice in other disciplines. I was a practitioner with a research component, but I flipped that doing a PhD. The outcome was no longer art practice for instance, but research: communicable, transferable knowledge, with part of the outcome being art/ practice. The difference between research-led (art) practice and practice-led research is quite important, because it determines you as a researcher or a practitioner. You can flip between, both are legitimate, but the latter is a PhD. What I am saying is that the determinism in your PhD has to be self-imposed and constructed to the content of your PhD, that's all. That doesn't say you cannot communicate that, you have to. Not only in your Viva.[1] The lack of absoluteness is really important to me.

Sollfrank: Why did you decide to go back to the university and do a PhD in Fine Art?

Renwick: I could say it turned out that I was working more as an artist than as an architect, but I refuse such conventions of nouns and disciplines. For me, Fine Art is the only domain area, the only discipline that is not determined by a greater authority. It does not have a professional body, there are no absolutes.

Sollfrank: That is a very ideal understanding of Fine Art.

Renwick: That is why I came into Fine Art. I refuted at the time to become a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, which you have to be a member of to call yourself an architect in

the UK. That determines a convention, a way of seeing and a way of practising. That was different in Fine Art and thus convenient for me.

Sollfrank: During your PhD research you also participated in the first conference on PhD in Fine Art and wrote a report about it. What were the main aspects of the conference?

Renwick: The conference took place in Columbus, Ohio, in 1999, and it was one of the first steps in designing what practice-based or practice-led research could mean in the context of Fine Art. Initially, there was the desire to consolidate a universal idea that we all can buy in and sign up to about what practice-led research is. But what the conference basically agreed in the end was, "No, we can't." There are as many constituent ideas as there are PhDs. The irony was that it turned out to be particularly difficult to implement practice-led research in the US. The PhD there is a taught degree, which means it is a heavily structured addendum to the Master's Degree. In fact, a lot of the speakers at the conference were Australian and European. In Australia, especially at places like RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) they were grappling with it; also some Scandinavian countries, e.g. Finland. There it is much easier to implement practice in the academic context because the vocational system is strong, and practice is presumed in their relationship between theory and vocation.

Sollfrank: I really appreciate the freedom that comes with the indeterminacy, but I also see the danger to fall back into the same mysteries we have had for too long in art education. I am not talking about definitions, but about a set of concepts and questions, which constantly have to be readdressed and negotiated. It is not enough to say, "everything is possible."

Renwick: But the practice-based PhD should be something very personal and individualistic, a case of form following function; it's pertinent to the content and to the subject of your research area.

Sollfrank: This is what I would call a concept, and to guarantee that openness it needs to be codified as a framework.

In the introduction to your paper, you claim that practice-based PhD must stress procedure and must turn from action research to strategic research.

Renwick: Murdo Macdonald has this great phrase: "Leap before you look." And with that he refers to all the practice-based and practice-led research in Art and Design. The notion of action is primary and then reflection upon that action is what constitutes the research. I like that simplistic idea of it. But also I am talking about the highly subject nature of the main area, the book *Thinking through art*[2] came out. The editor, Katy Macleod, has been the anthropologist looking in what is slowly emerging, from the very beginning, observing 'us.' As she is not involved herself, she sees quite objectively what we are doing.

Sollfrank: What is the motivation for artists/practitioners to do a PhD?

Renwick: There is no general answer. As a supervisor I have seven PhD students at the moment, amongst them an archaeologist, an anthropologist, a journalist, a government negotiator, and a psychologist, they all do a PhD in Fine Art, and what they are doing is to use the potential of the practice-led PhD. By the way, they are all older than me, some considerably! But AHRC[3] recently has changed conditions because of funding cuts; they would not support elder students any more. If you cannot

demonstrate that you have an academic career ahead of you, they would not invest in you.

Sollfrank: Is there an explicit age limit now in place? It is hard to imagine that they would publicly state any form of exclusive definition of who you are and why you can apply.

Renwick: It is not explicit, but it is understood. I was always interested in working with people within the realm of the possibilities of art, art in the broadest sense of the word, people like Tom Andrews and Patrick Scott. They are in their 50s, they have 30 years of professional life behind them, and the PhD becomes a vehicle for communicating a life's experience, a very personal knowledge. Through their own domain area, as a consequence of that PhD, what they now have—instead of a personal knowledge that would go with them—is a body of transferable knowledge. A knowledge people can refer to. And I am interested in that idea of the PhD–as opposed to that of the PhD for an academic future.

Sollfrank: The term "transferable knowledge" seems to be central to your notion of the PhD. What does it stand for?

Renwick: I see it very literally. It means that knowledge can be disseminated beyond the subject. Embodied knowledge can become transferable, which is useful. The idea of skill and of tactile practice is implicit, e.g. for Tom Andrews as a field archaeologist. Ironically, if you strip away the conventions of nouns, he shares a lot in relation to tactic, tangible knowledge, but interestingly his PhD is about the non-tangible. He is the first government archaeologist in Canada who begins to recognize e.g. ethnological sites, like First Nation ethnological sites as places of spiritual rituals and he is prepared to register them as archaeological sites, but

there is no evidence of them being archaeological sites. And that is based in 20 years of practice. Doing a PhD means giving parity to that knowledge. Another aspect is that although he is one of the top Canadian archaeologists, he cannot apply for a research grant, because he does not have a doctorate. He does not work within the academy but out in the fields, that's why the only way he could do a doctorate is through practice-led research. We acknowledge the knowledge that is in his practice. Another example is Alison de Pelham, an anthropologist, who had started a PhD 25 years ago, a very conventional social science PhD. But she went out to do fieldwork and fell in love up in the north, stayed there and did not complete her PhD. Now after 25 years of experience and a sensitivity to post-colonial ethics, the idea of becoming an academic can be something totally different. The practice-based PhD allows her to define her experience without having to objectify or claim ownership over that knowledge.

Sollfrank: What I find striking about your work is how you manage to combine academia and not only art practice but in particular also a form of social practice. It seems like you are using the potentiality of the ambiguous field of artistic research and filling it with a notion of art that leaves conventional concepts of art behind. Interdisciplinarity and social impact–catchphrases in the context of art and research, which all too often don't mean much–get a new meaning in the context of your work. And I like the idea of using university facilities to contribute to emancipatory projects.

Renwick: For instance, all my students are registered here in Dundee, because there is no opportunity in Canada. And I have also managed to get money from the First Nation and the government of the Northwest Territories to do a feasibility study on establishing an annexe to our Visual Research Centre in the

north, which is going to be running with the idea of being practice-led. If academia recognises that there is knowledge in art making, and an artist can get a PhD, then therefore why can't First Nation elder get a PhD through e.g. talking a PhD? Their epistemological basis is within orality and oral transmission. So can we create structures that facilitate a First Nation person doing a PhD in their own terms? That is what the feasibility study is going to be. And does the annexe therefore need to be embodied? Maybe not. We are not sure yet how to call it: annexe or institute? We certainly will not call it a "centre." First Nation people do have gatherings every year, called assemblies—that might be an interesting model. Almost like Celtic cosmology with a multi-centred universe, we may have gatherings several times a year on the land, and all the researchers involved come together; that's it! Still, it would be part of the university, which is ready to underwrite this at the moment. It is also about breaking down the spatial manifestations, not just the epistemology of the Western university.

Indigenous Knowledge and Artistic Research Practice

Sollfrank: How did you get in touch with the First Nation people? How did you start working in Canada?

Renwick: When I started my PhD, I was more interested in colonialism, in how people went elsewhere and re-created a sense of home, despite the context. I was interested how art, design and architecture are a fundamental part of the colonial experiment. So, I went to that place called Yellowknife, which is the capital of the Northwest Territories in Canada. Yellowknife is in the Conradian[4] sense the outpost of progress, it is like a mothership

of Western life, landed in the taiga, in the arctic, despite everything, not caring about everything that surrounds it. That interested me. Because of its extremity in every sense: climate, geography, also the extremity of conflicts.

Then, people from the "Dogrib Traditional Knowledge Project" approached me because they heard that there was this guy in town asking all kind of questions to government and government people. My intention had been to go there for two weeks; that was eleven and half years ago. That willingness to follow one's nose is quite important as opposed to sticking to a concept; so they asked, "can you change your flight," and I said "yes." Then they invited me to come up to the seasonal fish camp, north of Yellowknife. I went up, stayed for two weeks in this camp, met the elders in a tipi, and then left. While there, I was told I was not there as a researcher, but as a visitor. They did not want me to ask questions or to take notes. Later, I realised that this meeting in the tipi was my interview. They wanted to find out if I was a guy they can work with. The reason was that they were working towards land claim at that time. They needed to define their idea of habitat on our terms to facilitate the negotiations process. What they were doing was working with a whole series of Western scholars. Their universalism, their holism in relation to their relationship with the environment, both spiritual and practical, could not be described through their own language. So they were working with an ecologist, an economist, an anthropologist and because I was interested in the notion of home, and land as home, they were interested in supporting me doing this work. They wanted me to explore their notion of home and articulate it in a Western way.

The other reason is that "the Dogrib person has to be strong like two people." They are a thriving culture, maybe one of the few last legitimate aboriginal cultures left. They still speak their own

language, have self-government, but also recognise that adaptability is as fundamental to hunters as conservation is to our agrarian culture. The idea of taking on new ideas, new technologies is something they are very comfortable with as long as it is in their terms.

The problem why they partly reject modernity is that it directly relates to colonialism. So what they are trying to do is to go from the pre-contract series of governance and knowledge to the post-colonial, post-modern idea of governing themselves in the 21st century–still being Dogrib.

Sollfrank: Part of the exhibition is also a video installation with interviews with young Dogrib people.

Renwick: The youth are all under immense pressure "to be strong like two people," to be a traditional Dogrib, to have the skills to live in the land, to inherit the stories and the language, while being 21st century youth–which is incredibly complex and a difficult thing to be. The elders were interested in people like me who are working as a kind of cultural intermediaries–also between generations, but mainly between knowledge traditions.

Methodologies in Art and Research

Sollfrank: If we come back now to questions of research and art. In terms of the methods you are using in your research, how would you describe them? And are you doing research for art? Or would it be more research through art?

Renwick: Within my own PhD both were represented. It is not a case of either/or but of what is appropriate at what moment in

time. That is also the reason I sectioned my PhD in the way it is sectioned. There is one section that is entirely visual which would be "through art," it is utilises and works with the potential of visual narrative and communication. Ultimately, I am more interested in research through art. I think we are still struggling with the lack of confidence regarding the legitimacy and the parity of non-text-based research, like the visual; that is what interests me. There is still the requirement from the university to back the visual with writing. That posits a question: wouldn't it be possible to do an entirely visual PhD? And I don't know the answer to that.

Sollfrank: What was the role of writing for you?

Renwick: I found the writing-up time quite bizarre. Six months before the submission you have to stop everything, you have to stop new ideas, ongoing practice; that felt very artificial. I did not particularly enjoy that and I have asked myself many times if I want to do that or not, but the moment you submitted, that was ...

Sollfrank: What was the format of your thesis?

Renwick: I was a mature student with an extensive amount of practice behind me. I was very conscious of the fact that I would be the first person submitting something that was not a bound thesis. I was aware of the fact that I needed to work with that reality. That's why in my PhD each section has an introduction. That was important to me because that was how I was contextualising the work, explaining to what body of knowledge the particular work would refer to. That was for me the role of the writing: to tell the person how to appraise, how to read or view the work that followed.

Sollfrank: My point is that I have found there are difficulties in accessing practice-based PhD theses. They are only accessible in the libraries of the universities where they were submitted. That reminds me of the concept of the original, of an original piece of work which I can only access in a certain museum. How can that newly generated knowledge be accessed and communicated more effectively?

Renwick: That is a really interesting question. Some parts of my thesis are published on my website for example. But you move on, and for me, my PhD is not so important any more. I hardly refer to it any more.

Sollfrank: I find your considerations regarding the structure very interesting. It reminds me of some kind of hypertextuality, of a format that includes the possibility of working in an open-ended manner, and at the same time, of publishing things and making them accessible during the process. Obviously, digital media and the Internet offer the biggest potential to publish research papers. Unfortunately, that is not a standard yet, and most of the research in the field is difficult to access, which in my mind is a contradiction to the notion of transferability and the communication of research.

The role of art in future societies

Sollfrank: When you educate artists you need to have an idea of what their role in society should be. You very often speak about the Scottish notion of the democratic intellectual. Could that be a role model? What would you say is the role of art in society in future?

Renwick: This university once embodied that very tradition. There was an inherent visual literacy as well. Professors in the early 20th century like Darcy Thompson and Patrick Geddes worked in various disciplines, and they worked visually. So, interdisciplinarity, generalism and visual thinking have always been implied here. In democratic intellectualism the role of the artist could be one of a cultural intermediary, a bridge between civic life and academic life. The university helps facilitate this in a way, and now pay me a salary, but beyond that I am more interested in the practice, in what I am doing as a researcher in Canada where I am totally involved in social issues. Being seen as a kind of an advocate; as artist you can break down imaginary boundaries.

Sollfrank: So, the notion of the democratic intellectual would be the role model?

Renwick: I refuse to formulate it as an absolute, but for me this model is interesting and also has to do with Joseph Beuys' idea of art as a social mechanism. Giancarlo de Carlo, the Italian architect and anarchist, speaks about urban planning as a revolutionary act—the very act of planning a community can be a revolutionary act. That is the context in which I like to place myself. That is the space I would like to occupy. That also presumes an ongoing vulnerability because you are exposed: there is not a methodology, there is not a distinct thing you can fall back and defend yourself, there is no security. That can make it quite difficult.

Sollfrank: And the notion of the democratic intellectual and its qualifications as interdisciplinary cultural intermediary also gets attention from another side …

Renwick: You mean the story of the IBM chairman of Canada who recently came to defend the liberal arts tradition in Canada.

The conservatives in the government don't support the idea of liberal arts and free thinking, because it is threatening and of course they do not want to spend money on it and cut funding. The chairman of IBM came to the defence and said in Canada's main paper *The Globe and Mail* that in the early 21st century, companies like IBM need creative generalists trained in research. They don't need specialists who think in a linear manner and only in one discipline. And I thought it was fascinating that the corporate world now recognises that the complexity of issues and ideas and problems are no longer discipline-specific and what they need is what "we" are capable of doing.

Homepage Gavin Renwick: http://www.gavinrenwick.org

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[1] Viva is the British name for the thesis defence, an oral exam that represents the culmination of the PhD examination process.

[2] Macleod, Katy, and Holdridge Lin (eds.), *Thinking Through Art* (Innovations in Art and Design), Routledge, 2005

[3] Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is one of the major funding bodies for academic research in the UK.

[4] Refers to Joseph Conrad's *The Outpost of Progress*, a British novella that later has become the subject of postcolonial critique.