# Metode

From artist to artist-researcher *

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Adventuring into practice-driven research

*By Laura Navndrup Black*



*Video still from 'It won't be the same here when it is no longer now' (2017)*

*One KUV project down, the next under way, and a year into my PhD studies... unlike my experience as a dancer, choreographer, and facilitator spanning many years of practice, artistic research in an academic context is new to me. Below, I share considerations that spring from a recent KUV project at the Danish National School of Performing Arts. They reflect on making the shift from artist to artist-researcher in a case where participatory practice is at the core of the proposal.*

## It won't be the same here when it is no longer now

In Autumn 2017, six artists – two established choreographers, two young people, one dance partnership student, and myself – spent a week together on the island of Bornholm, working on the KUV enquiry 'It won't be the same here when it is no longer now' (hereafter 'It won't be'). The intention was to identify the artistic and pedagogic potential of a performance format that was inherently a temporal-spatial challenge.

Three cameras rotating at fixed speed allowed a 360 degree ever-evolving view of the location. The footage from each camera was shown alongside the other vantages, offering multiple views of the same time and space, but not necessarily with the same – or any – of the performers in the frame. In practice, this meant that the performers were most often unaware of whether or not they were in the frame (on stage) and of the angle from which the camera (audience gaze) was approaching. Only when watching the accumulated footage at the end of the day could we strategize, identify choreographic potential (or the lack thereof), and set forth new propositions to try out the following day. In addition to the practical performance work in the forest, the week contained lectures, readings, and discussions offered by the participants and myself, as well as living, cooking, eating, and socialising together.



*From screening of 'It won't be the same here when it is no longer now' (Laura Navndrup Black, 2017). Image credit: Signe Allerup*

### Children and young people as choreographers and choreographic material

'It won't be' fits neatly within my overarching research interests which explore the borders between pedagogic and artistic intent. I am curious about the artistic potential of approaching children and of young people as choreographers, as well as choreographic material in work of a conceptual nature, understood here as choreographic work that abandons referential movement language and (self) expression as key characteristics. In doing so, this work takes into consideration current choreographic trajectories in the European contemporary dance field and ultimately cuts bonds with practices in the area of creative dance for children that are largely founded on the modern

notion of expressive movement and encourage exhaustive kinetic exploration.

At first glance, many of the qualities we associate with children partaking in creative dance projects seem challenged by a practice that favours choreographing problems over composing dances. So-called conceptual work is perceived perhaps as less child-friendly, too intellectual, impenetrable. However, as Bojana Cvejić (2015) convincingly argues, disregarding style and movement language as dominant aesthetic categories may actually enhance accessibility, as it opens dance to those who do not have prior experience of watching or partaking in dance. I want to find out whether this idea of accessibility – attained through singular sense making and self-contained logic rather than simplification or adaptation – not only applies to the meeting between work and audience member, but also to the relation between heterogenous collaborators in the process of performance making.

In 'It won't be', I explored how a particular compositional challenge might allow young people and adults to collaborate on ideas at a similar level of complexity – discovering whether a stubborn focus on the task alone might allow us to find common artistic ground as performers and performance makers, despite variations in age and experience. Due to a scenario (a spatial question) in which neither the young people nor the adults were experts, all had to re-negotiate and invent the artistic potential of this particular situation.

## OVERVIEW OF TAKES

*I had already set the spatio-temporal challenge framing the research, but the group attempted to negotiate the proposal using various strategies.*
*Each 20-minute take was different. All were first attempts.*

### DAY 1:
**Individual responses** to the place without relating to its forest-ness. A thrown-togetherness of approaches: architectural, private vs open space, disorientation, dimensions, textures, topology etc.

### DAY 2:
**A structural approach**, working on proximity and distance. The group sets their own task together.

### DAY 3:
**Sound**: working with distance and space through sound.
**Repeated construction**: repeating the same situation in various guises.
**No fixed position + there is no 'here' only becoming**: using two sentences as stimuli.

### DAY 4:
**Blind group**: verbally describing a sensorial experience as it unfolds.
Morphing: moving as an anonymous flock.
Circles and lines: working with strict geometry.

### DAY 5:
**Group response**: last take, no guidance from Laura.

## Re-approaching the field

The role of researcher is not my native state. I identify as a dancer, performer, and choreographer, who is learning to approach my field, my land, from the point of view of the researcher, grappling with the supposedly dual role of belonging and researching. I say supposedly in the hope that this duality can be avoided in my research, in the hope that I may inhabit my practice-driven artistic research process in a way that allows me to engage with the work/material/participants through full immersion *and* critical reflection. In this sense, I recognise aspects of the experience of indigenous researchers returning to their peoples after western scholarly training, as described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012).

Though it is situated in the social sciences and has a very different agenda, Tuhiwai Smith's work on indigenous methodologies informs my research approach in several ways and suggests points of awareness that I believe are also important to consider in participant-involving artistic research. Naming is one such contentious issue. The special affordance of a practice-driven artistic research project allows its practical collaborative components to be presented to its participants with an emphasis on either research (academy) or practice (art) – or perhaps a new description that avoids both terms. Either choice brings particular connotations and expectations of what the work could and should be.

## Practice-driven research

The term 'research' certainly requires clarification when making the shift from artist to artist-researcher. Previously, research in my artistic practice indicated anything from developing the organisational foundation for a project to the artistic process on site or in the studio. Now, I aim to establish new knowledge or develop 'substantial new insight' (Nelson, 2013, 25) through practice-driven research.

But before pressing on, we might benefit from further groundwork concerning terminology. Practice-driven research: what is it? I must admit, I drew the elements of this term from a sea of established vocabulary: practice-led, practice-based, practice-as-research, to name just a few. Each has a slight difference in emphasis, but all point to research processes where the creative artistic practice is central to the enquiry.

Linda Candy (2016) suggests a distinction between *practice-based* and *practice-led* research. In *practice-based* research the artistic practice and the outcome of it (the artistic artefact) is the basis of the knowledge contribution. While the research may be supported and contextualised in writing, the project cannot be understood without directly referencing or engaging with the outcomes, which may take any form that is appropriate to the research. *Practice-led* research is closely related to action research in that its aim is to foster new understandings about and knowledge within practice. While practice is an integral part of the research method, the outcome of the research may or may not include creative work.

Robin Nelson (2013) seeks to place artistic practice centre stage, preferring the term *practice-as-research* to denote research in which practice is the central mode of enquiry and where (potentially multi-modal) practice is a substantial part of the output. I tend to agree with Nelson's contention that the term practice-led somewhat implies that knowledge follows *after* the practice, and subsequently that the real knowledge production takes place in the thinking that follows the doing. I am similarly hesitant to adopt the term practice-based, which I find intuitively misleading in that 'base' implies safe ground, an already known place allowing a return; and if there is something I

hope that my artistic research practice will not be, or lead me to, then it is precisely such safe and already-known places.

Thus, my sense is that none of these terms encapsulate the kind of urgency I seek when describing my research approach. I am looking to dive into the unpredictable, and to do so through experimental and speculative practice (Arlander, 2017). Therefore, I suggest the term 'practice-driven' to describe my approach. For me, a constant focus on the artistic artefact and process is essential, and while contextualisation certainly plays a role in the enquiry, the artistic practice is both the object, the method, and the outcome of the research. For participants, 'practice-driven' may signify that their role is not to provide empirical evidence (to be studied) but rather to help me drive forward the research, to work alongside, to collaborate.

My intention when entering the forest was to immerse myself fully in the choreographic investigation as performer and choreographer alongside the group. However, practical circumstances meant that I had to take on the role as technician instead. This put me in a peculiar situation: on one hand I was the initiator of the situation, and as such the person the group looked to for direction; on the other hand, my comprehension was perhaps the least astute, as I lacked both the felt sense of the performers and the visual perspective during takes as I quite literally had to hide in a ditch so as to not be seen by the cameras. This dynamic, combined with the open success criteria, confused proceedings more than once. In future, it will be necessary to establish a well-mapped researcher role in relation to children and young people (and to the partaking adults for that matter). Are they participants? Are they subjects? Are they co-researchers? I do not know yet. Maybe all of the above? They are probably all of the above.

> The following quotes from the participants were gathered on the last evening of the work week, and were based on the participants' own questions. I asked them to think about what they would like to be asked. They then wrote down queries, chose questions from a shared pile, and directed their answers to me privately.
>
> I want to suggest that the questions that are asked may say as much about their experience as the answers. Below are the questions that were answered:

## Usefulness

Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes how, for communities with a history of oppression by colonial powers, the word 'research' is much contested. Tainted by exploitative research projects of the past and imposing a hierarchy of knowledges favouring those of Western origin, in the Maori context that Tuhiwai Smith writes from, the word researcher is shunned in favour of *"project workers, community activists or consultants, anything but 'researchers'"* (Smith, 2012, 17).

*How was the group in decision making, consensus seeking?*

*What surprised you most this week?*

*Did you feel you had time for reflection this week?*

*What did you learn about ways of working, ways of being together in a work process?*

*What is your relationship with the other player/performers in the film?*

*Did you recognize different approaches to the work according to age or experience?*

*How do you think living together has affected the process?*

*How would you describe the place of action in the woods?*

*What is the work?*

*How much do you think the work process has been shaped by individual personalities?*

*What is the research, pedagogically?*

*What has been your biggest obstacle / difficulty throughout this week - external / internal?*

Smith points to the importance of inviting indigenous people to be active participants in research processes and suggests that a sensitive research approach requires the researcher to not only live up to scholarly criteria such as validity, robustness, and rigour. The community in which they work is likely to pose additional criteria that the researcher must also live up to. In a Maori context, this would for instance include that the research must be 'indigenous', 'friendly', 'just', and 'useful'.

The participants' experience of the usefulness of my project seems a prerequisite for engagement and hence for shared insight to occur. I may ask myself: What would a successful research project be to my future collaborators and co-researchers? What criteria will they apply? And crucially, when in the process can we even start to have a conversation about this if it is to avoid becoming a checklist that predetermines the process?

## Non-linearity

Another aspect of decolonisation practices which resonates with my research process is resistance to the idea of development as a linear progression along a fairly predictable path. Geographer Doreen Massey (2005) argues that focusing on the dynamism of place rather than time as the dominant factor enables an understanding of place not as fixed, but rather as a social dimension where a myriad of possible stories may co-exist and perhaps interconnect. In the processes of decolonisation and globalisation, the inability to make such a shift in understanding results for instance in the notion that so-called Third World countries are simply behind in terms of technological and social progress and will eventually 'catch up' with their Western counterparts. This kind of thinking robs each country, each people, each person of their own future following a yet to be imagined path that may lead to a significantly different society than what we hold as our Western standard. From this, I draw a parallel to the idea of the child's linear progression towards an adulthood encompassing fairly predictable circumstances that require similar skill sets as those possessed by present-day adults within the society the children grow up in. Although not a novel notion, it is a point of contention that is rarely radically acted upon. It seems to me that artistic research involving children and young people as collaborators is a suitable space within which to contest given trajectories in order to imagine and construct unknown futures.

In my experience, open-ended artistic processes are precisely where we can meet across ages and cultures; and yes, perhaps even meet as descendants of the colonised and colonisers of the past. I believe this to be especially true within choreographic strategies that are less concerned with movement language and operate instead within the field of expanded choreography, as such strategies allow participants to skip the translation of (culturally dependent) movement language and to more readily move into a shared artistic investigation. In such a space, age as well as different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds can be recognised but the real foreground is the interaction present in the contemporaneity of the choreographic reality (Black and Macedo, forthcoming).

*Video stills from 'It won't be the same here when it is no longer now' (2017) Image credit: Laura Navndrup Black*

## From one practical proposal to the next

While much (but not all) research within the qualitative or quantitative tradition operates on the basis of a hypothesis, I do not consider this a requirement for the practitioner-researcher. Shunning the question-answer model as a compositional backbone of the research process may lead me towards previously unforeseeable insight, but it also requires me to find another, perhaps less linear pathway through the research. Not least when it comes to formulating practical artistic experiments, knowing what should come next is rarely founded on certainty or logic.



'It won't be' may now seem like a perfectly reasonable suggestion for a practical inquiry that is at the same time straight to the point and open-ended, but it was initially conceived on the basis of what felt like sheer intuition, a clear yet unfounded idea, a moment of insight to feed further insight.

Insight is commonly described within social and cognitive research as constituted by four main characteristics: *suddenness* – the idea seems to arrive out of the blue; *ease* – much effort may have gone into working on a particular problem, but the moment of insight is experienced as easy and fast; *positive affect* – an immediate feeling of joy, not connected to pride; as well as *truth and confidence* – the gained insight is immediately and confidently experienced as true, also before verification (Topolinkski & Reber, 2010).

Sascha Topolinski and Rolf Reber (2010) elaborate on felt sensations of insight and deem processing fluency to be one indicator of insight (i.e. the level of ease at which information is cognitively processed). When a solution to a problem occurs, a person will feel pleasure and have confidence in the found solution. These researchers also show how it is possible to induce false insights in subjects (illusions of insight) through experiments designed to first hinder, then allow, processing fluency. In other words, a sense of insight does not necessarily mean that the insight is valid or indeed applicable, and special caution is required when the problem-solving process has

been particularly challenging.

Hence, a researcher's work is to create conditions for relevant insight to occur, and then subsequently to validate or dismiss them as such. It would be tempting now to claim that insight within practice-driven research concerns the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit understanding, but that would be simplistic and diminish the value of practical thinking inside the practice-driven research process as well as counteract my belief that explicit knowledge must not necessarily be indicated by the ability to account for it verbally.

## Validating relevant insight

In her discussion of the radical learning potential of the 'academy' (understood not as a place but as a series of processes) Irit Rogoff (2007) stresses the importance of a move away from criticism (fault-finding operating from set values) and critique (looking at underlying assumptions). Instead, she advocates a move towards criticality:

> *While being able to exercise critical judgement is clearly important, it operates by providing a series of signposts and warnings but does not actualise people's inherent and often intuitive notions of how to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem rather than by analysing it. This is true across education whether theoretical or practice oriented.*
> (Rogoff, 2007, 8)

For Rogoff, when we exercise criticality it is paramount that we inhabit the culture or problem with which we engage. This notion of embeddedness is a key to my research process: a necessity in order to exercise validation of insights in a rooted manner. Granted it can seem a bit flimsy to rely on one's *'intuitive notion of how to produce criticality'*; but given that this intuition is built on years of experience of practicing, encountering the practice of others, reading, listening, trying out, making decisions, being curious (i.e. years of *working* in the field), I would argue that my ability to apply criticality is actually well-rehearsed. In the past, these parallel modes of working may have been, if not indiscriminate, then at least dictated by whatever situation I found myself in as a freelance artist living the kind of precarious work life that dancers and choreographers tend to live. Now, what I do and what I surround myself with must be orchestrated carefully throughout the research process in order to stimulate the emergence of relevant insight.

## Disruption

Claire Bishop (2012) points out that a disruption of current prevalent practice within both the social and the artistic field is necessary in order to achieve success in works that span pedagogy, participation and performance:

> *'Like all long-term participatory projects, this art must tread the fine line of a dual horizon - faced towards the social field but also towards art itself, addressing both its immediate participants and subsequent audiences. It needs to be successful within both art and the social field, but ideally also testing and revising the criteria we apply in both domains'*
> Claire Bishop on 'art-as-pedagogy' (Bishop, 2012, 247)

While I partially failed to embed myself in the practical work during 'It won't be,' its particular generative system was successful in creating a platform for shared choreographic thinking. The transposed live performance required the participants to relocate the 'work' and prompted them towards new choreographic insights – 'what works' – which could not have been premeditated, and which did not already exist within the participants' usual vocabulary of choreographic or compositional solutions, irrespective of their prior experience with performance making. A similar disruption could be traced in the social realm, as the inter-generational group struggled and then managed to find ways of collaborating (and living together) despite differences in experience with performance making. Again, the lack of reliance on transferable knowledge played its part. While it is not surprising, it is worth noting that it seemed more challenging for the more experienced participants to accept that the younger people were as capable of providing choreographic solutions.

'It won't be' is an example of a methodological approach that allows for insight to occur for both the artist-researcher and the participants. I resist the temptation of suggesting it as a model for future implementation as a repeatable method. I would, however, insist that the idea of disruption is transferable and useful as a guideline for shaping future practical artistic experiments.

Transforming an artistic-academic research proposal into practical choreographic form is both exhilarating and terrifying, and it requires a particular kind of well-informed, embedded naïveté from the researcher. The imagined aim (my goal for the not-so-distant future) is to establish an overarching accumulation of unforeseeable insights built on an innate belief that there is more to the child in the artistic process than we are currently unfolding; that we can get more – or at least something different – out of our time together if only we find ways to unleash it.

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