

Begging the Question:

Performativity and Studio-Based Research.

Keywords

practice-led research
research question
visual art
ontology
exegesis
performative

Abstract

The requirement that candidates in studio-based or practice-led higher degrees by research should formulate a research question has been found to be problematic by some writers. The present article argues that this stance, particularly as it is articulated by proponents of the influential category of 'performative research' (Haseman 2006, 2007), is ill-founded and that formulating a research question correctly can instead assist the creative project and prevent it separating into two separate enterprises: one practical and the other theoretical. Drawing on the principles of General Semantics as formulated by Alfred Korzybski, it suggests ways in which the relation of the question to ontological considerations can affect its usefulness for studio based research.

Introduction: Questioning the problem

Within Universities, in all disciplines, a research question is universally acknowledged as intrinsic to doing research. Universities keep track of postgraduate progress by requiring an articulation of the research question and being informed of any changes that are made in the course of the research. Proposals for funding are based on justifying a research question. Postgraduate candidates are advised to explain their research question clearly from the outset of their thesis. Much time is spent on fully understanding the question and articulating it in a manner that can be understood by others.

In the UK, the main funding body for art and design, the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC], rules that creative practice can be regarded as research provided

there are *explicit research questions*[my italics], that it is clear what methods are being used and why, and that the outcomes of the research are disseminated to others. (Biggs MA, 2010)

In the Netherlands, in order to differentiate *art practice-as-research* from *art-practice-in-itself*, Henck Borgdorff adapts the Arts and Humanities Research Council criteria to conclude that Art practice qualifies as research if:

- Its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes.
 - The research begins by addressing questions that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world.
 - Researchers employ experimental and hermeneutic methods that reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes.
 - Research processes and outcomes are documented and disseminated in an appropriate manner to the research community and the wider public.
- (Borgdorff, 2006)

Significantly, Borgdorff finds that such research must happen *through making art objects* that contain tacit or embodied knowledge but nonetheless he also finds an essential role for hermeneutic methods and for the research question.

Questioning, of course, is traditionally associated with artworks. 'Challenging' artworks are said to 'throw into question' this or that. To *not* throw something into question seems almost unthinkable for contemporary practice. Yet the role of the research question in Practice-led Research or in Art Practice as Research still generates considerable anxiety.

For example, the conference report of the Research in and through the Arts Conference held in Berlin in 2005 notes that many delegates 'identified the difficulties of finding a clearly articulated research question, particularly in the visual arts' (Universität Der Künste Berlin, 2005). European delegates were evidently wary

of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise(RAE)-driven 'predetermined' approach. The RAE, to be replaced in 2014 by the Research Excellence Framework, the REF, required extensive documentation of processes and outcomes for its task of assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. Objections to the research question as a necessary criterion of studio research similarly arise in the 2007 Arts and Humanities Research Council's 'Review of Practice-Led Research in Art Design & Architecture', in which Paul Rader observes that 'one long standing distinction between fine art and design is the idea that fine art is grounded in problem-finding while design is more likely to be problem-solving' and that in problem-finding the research question is not significant (Rust C, Mottram J, Till J, 2007).

The anxieties surrounding a research question for practice-led research may be founded in an insecurity concerning verbal competence among some visual artists and a certain distrust of the hegemony of words, but also out of a belief that art should be unpredictable and ambiguous and, as I will argue here, out of a misunderstanding of the form and role that an effective research question should have.

In Australia, Brad Haseman categorises the conventional research paradigms as 'problem-led research' stating that:

It is well accepted in the literature on both quantitative and qualitative research that research design needs to flow from a central research question or problem statement, or (in grounded theory) from the experiences and understandings of the population being researched. The importance of identifying 'the problem' or 'the issue' is evident both in competitive grant processes and in framing research proposals for doctoral study. As a matter of course, applicants are asked to give a clear statement of the problem; to set out aims and objectives and the research questions to be answered; and researchers are often asked to list the hypotheses to be tested. Statements of purpose, background, relevant literature, significance of the research

problem and definitions of key terms follow. These requirements constitute problem-led research, and this can be addressed both by qualitative and quantitative methodologies. (Haseman, 2006)

In a later paper, Haseman (2007) argues that traditions of problem-led research have a deleterious effect on 'practice-led' researchers, particularly in the early stages of their project.

This absence of problem, especially early in the research process, can make particular difficulties for practice-led researchers. Take the case of PhD candidates, for instance. Across the higher education sector we find a key milestone within the first six to twelve months of candidature asking candidates to describe:

- Background to the study
- Significance of the study
- Purpose of the study
- A statement of the problem
- Research questions—unambiguous questions to be answered
- Hypotheses—clear statements to be tested
- Definition of terms or operational definitions.

In effect, these frame Problem-led Research and my key point is that our 'major milestones' can impair progression when they impose the protocols of problem-led research on practice-led researchers. (Haseman, 2007)

Thus practice-led research, according to Haseman, has to be considered as quite distinct from the traditions of quantitative and qualitative research. Although Haseman concedes that we have yet to develop 'distinctive protocols, principles and validation procedures' in order to evaluate this form of research, he contends that arts researchers are generating a 'third paradigm' for research that he calls

‘performative research’. Performative research, according to Haseman, resembles the ‘speech act’ as theorised by J.L. Austin:

utterances that accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects. His influential and founding example of the performative is: ‘I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’ which enacts what it names. The name performs itself and in the course of that performing becomes the thing done. So in this third category of research—alongside quantitative (symbolic numbers) and qualitative (symbolic words)—the symbolic data, which may include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code, all work performatively. (Haseman, 2006)

Problems with performativity

But does a ‘performative’ research project never require a question? If practice-led research is, as Haseman believes, an act as well as a symbol of that act, to what does it respond? Does not the classic example offered by Austin—the statement ‘I do’ in a marriage ceremony— still depend for its existence upon implied questions such as ‘Which man or woman?’, ‘Taken as what?’ and ‘Under what circumstances?’. Moreover, could not insufficient reflection upon these questions result in ‘repenting at leisure’? Haseman’s formulation, I think, gropes for a genuine aspect of artistic practice, but it has serious flaws. His assumption that the validity of an artistic ‘statement’ is somehow guaranteed by its own utterance implies that practice led activity purely ‘begs the question’ from its outset and thus cannot result in new knowledge. This is at the root of the problem identified by Haseman’s colleague Andrew McNamarra (McNamarra, 2012) when he charges ‘the self-referential aspect of the PLR [Practice Led Research] definition’ with being ‘the source of most of its confusion’.

Haseman’s argument bears the same blind spot that Jacques Derrida found in Austin’s argument (Derrida, 1988). Derrida’s lifelong critique of ‘the metaphysics of

presence' effectively discredits the assumption that *any* practice can be fundamental and self-sufficient. In his critique of Austin, Derrida points out that the context on which the speech act would depend is itself contingent, dependent on its own temporal configuration of contextual circumstances rather than being a stable framework for an enactment to take place. And, as Foucault (1972) has persuasively argued, the significance of any utterance is utterly dependent on power relations¹. For example the statement 'I pronounce you husband and wife' has a vastly different import when uttered by the marriage celebrant than when whispered by someone in the pews. The work of art, just as these exemplary 'speech acts', can exist in many temporal iterations. Its context is not just the happenstance of gifted maker and sensitive audience but of institutional legitimation and social rituals and dependencies that, without the utterance of an imaginary interlocutor, i.e., a particular question to which it is a response, can have many forms of significance and indeed of insignificance. The important thing, as everyone in Las Vegas knows, is not that the marriage celebrant is empathic but that the marriage licence is paid for and he or she has the right to declare this marriage legal. But even these institutional conditions, as Derrida argues, do not guarantee, with regard to either a marriage or a work of art, that once 'performed', no one will 'put them asunder'. Contingent contexts always threaten to 'divorce' a work from its status.

To be fair, Haseman (2007) admits that

it is important not to claim that practice-led researchers do not *have* a problem and do not need to articulate one. If you get to the end of a PhD or research grant and cannot identify the problem you've been addressing, then something is badly awry!

However, what he goes on to write implies that the role of the question for him is merely perfunctory:

¹ For an extensive application of Derrida's and Foucault's critiques of speech act theory, see Judith Butler's work on gender 'performativity'. In contrast with Haseman's attempt to apply performativity to an *original* act, Butler (1990) stresses its normative role.

So yes, practice-led researchers do meet the first test of all research - there is a 'problem' (often several problems) —but its definition will emerge during the research and it may well be that it is only *in the final stages* [my italics] that a practice-led researcher will articulate and explicitly connect the problem with the trajectory their research has taken. (Haseman, 2007)

The objection that the question might pre-empt the creative whim misunderstands the provisional role of the research question in all forms of research. The iterative nature of the research question as of its 'solution', the constantly adapted hypothesis, cannot be overemphasised. In laboratory research, just as in studio research or practice-led research, what *happens* in the course of research is of paramount importance in shaping the rationale that accompanies and mediates the final results. This said, the resulting rationale is expected to be cogent: its central research question needs to correspond accurately with the outcome. It is this convention of research to argue in support of a thesis *in the present tense* that tends to create the illusion of seamless progress from question to discovery rather than the other way around, or, more accurately, in cycles of mutual critique.

In art, also, to *question* is useful throughout the cycles of production. It is difficult to see, for instance, how any meaningful reflection can take place without questioning. And, after completion of the research, given the constant threat of contingent contexts noted by Derrida, a function of the 'question' and of the exegesis may be to stabilise or preserve as far as possible within desired parameters, not merely a meaning, but perhaps the very ambiguity and thus broader potential significance of the artwork.

Throughout a Research Higher Degree candidacy there is the expectation that the research question becomes adapted as much as refined. What becomes apparent is that the research question might best be considered not as a determinant of practice but as an essential instrument for observing and reflecting on the progress of that practice. If this is the case, the research question implied by practice needs to be periodically identified and articulated as clearly as possible, despite the ambiguity

necessary for the artwork itself, so that due attention can be paid to its implications in the next cycle of artmaking.

Problems with the relation of the question to ‘reality’

Candidates with poorly articulated questions tend to drift about aimlessly because the implications of a poorly articulated question are more difficult to discern. Typical of this is the question that promises more than can be delivered, or the question that has no solution, or the question that radically changes on a daily basis.

What problems do candidates encounter in framing their research question?

1. Not knowing or misinterpreting what motivates their work and thus adopting a question in which they lose interest.
2. Asking too large a question to be adequately addressed within the scope of their degree.
3. Expressing their question so vaguely that it is not a useful tool for reflection.
4. Asking a question that it is impossible to address.

The first problem can be solved, as Borgdorff’s formula for artistic research suggests, through hermeneutic processes. The candidate can be encouraged to show images of past accomplishments and invite peer reaction. A question that emerges out of this process is more likely to be meaningful to the artist than some brief new interest.

Here it can be conceded that phases somewhat like what Haseman calls ‘performative research’ do play a role in studio research. Although Haseman’s recourse to Austin and its consequent conclusion about the role of the question may be inapposite, the observation that artists can think through their work is accurate. And for Research Higher Degree candidates in studio disciplines, images, acting as provisional ‘solutions’, often precede the articulation of questions. What Haseman aptly terms an ‘enthusiasm’ rather than a question, frequently forms the initial drive towards artistic creation. But how can any meaningful reflection, and thus focused research, take place without forming questions? Given that working for two or three

years in the anticipation that a question *might* emerge right at the end is somewhat risky, I would argue that what needs to occur is not the delaying of the question, but an attitude that maintains the question as always provisional – in a dialectical relation with the creative product rather than in a determining one.

For this reason, beginning researchers in the studio should first be advised to examine what they have hitherto produced, perhaps in their undergraduate years or in their exhibiting history, in order to identify questions that their work might already imply. In my own experience as convenor of postgraduate seminars and lecturer in research methods, I have found this to be initially best done as a ‘blind critique’² (without verbal support) so that audience interpretation provides the candidate with new insights into their own work and its motivation. Exposing their work to hermeneutic scrutiny while deferring verbal elaboration enables as yet unarticulated questions underlying their enthusiasms, or what in the case of fine artists frequently appear to be obsessions, to be identified. These formerly ‘tacit’ questions do not lose anything by becoming articulated. In fact, they enable a focusing of ‘enthusiasms’ and a critique of the performance of these ‘enthusiasms’ in place of pursuing less productive diversions.

But how can these become more effective tools throughout the candidature?

First, for overall coherence, one question has to become dominant. Candidates are often loath to abandon the diverse range of interests that characterises many artists, so they need to be assured that all these interests can in some way or other manifest themselves under the umbrella of their central question. The typical ‘enthusiasm’ at the beginning of a candidature is initially identified as a topic or theme. Articulating it as a question invariably first results in huge abstractions and generalisations that cannot be addressed adequately within the scope of a higher degree. So, as in other

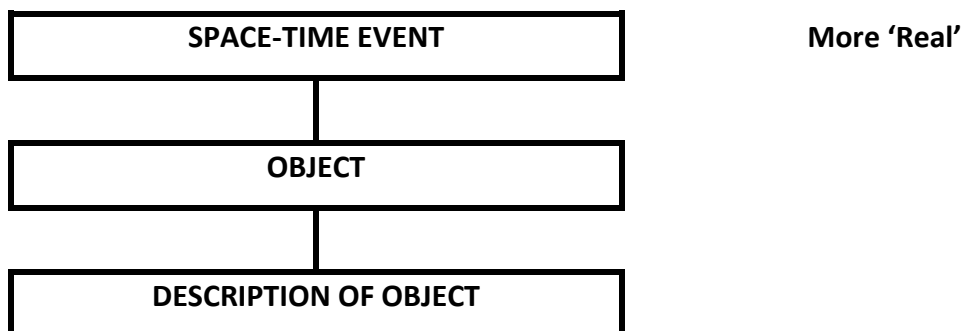
² The strategy of blind critiques I borrow from Goldsmiths College in London, where its apparent purpose is mainly to teach students to place more of the burden of communication onto the visual product (Petelin, 2006).

disciplines, the task is often one of delimiting the question in order to give it a concrete reference and make it accomplishable.

The remaining problems are thus all of semantics: the relation between language and the reality it seeks to represent.

Lessons from General Semantics

For this purpose, I have found useful the schema devised by Alfred Korzybski (Korzybski, 1958) in the field he called General Semantics. Korzybski argues that misunderstanding language, for example, mistaking abstractions and generalisations for existing entities, loosens our grip on reality and results in errors of judgement at best and passionate conflicts at worst. ‘Obviously there cannot be something, somewhere, at no time or something, nowhere, at some time or nothing, somewhere, at some time’, says Korzybski. So, if we want to refer to reality, we not only have to name the phenomenon, but specify it in time and place. For example, how accurate is it to refer in any unqualified way to Leonardo’s Mona Lisa? Are we talking about that picture at its time of creation, or after its restoration, or as a reproduction on someone’s t-shirt? It exists, in the most precise terms, only as a space-time event. Citing only its title or label could lead to serious misunderstandings and false conclusions. According to Korzybski the levels of ever greater generalisation, and hence departure from precise reality, can be visualised as a ‘ladder’ of abstraction (Fig.1.) ranging from the ephemeral space-time event to the more or less durable object, to the specified description, to the title or label, and then to inferences and finally larger abstractions such as ideological categories and political systems.



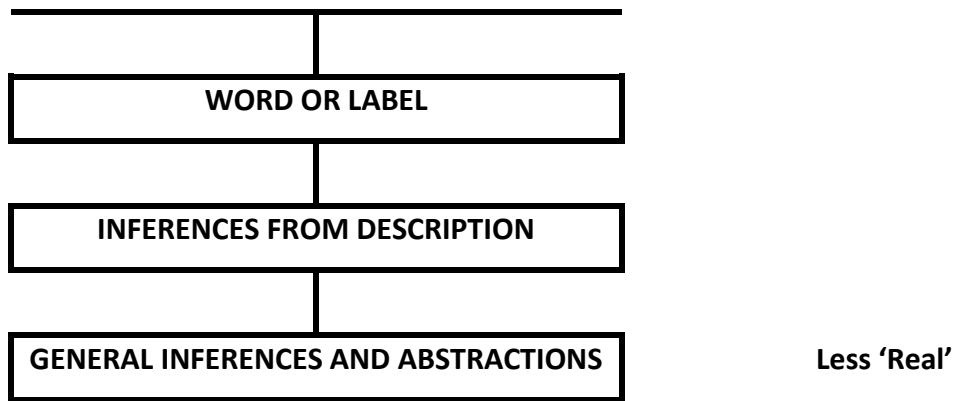


Fig. 1. 'The Ladder of Abstraction' adapted from Korzybski (1958).

The ladder of abstraction has obvious implications for writing a research question. The overgeneralised initial theme articulated by the candidate may either encompass more concrete phenomena than can be dealt with in a lifetime or cite an abstraction whose phenomenal manifestations are inaccessible for scrutiny or simply do not exist. The research question, by the time it heads a dissertation or exegesis submitted for examination, is a promise according to which the success of the thesis is judged: Do the exegesis and studio work together address the promised question? To what extent does the work fulfil the promise of the research?

To reduce the degree of generalisation, and to be a precise and useful guide, the research question would have the following general form:

To what extent, what kind of, or how, or why, a thing (or a precisely specified number of things) occur/s in a particular time and place?

A question that starts out to be overly general, for example 'How does globalization affect artists?', implies that to answer it adequately one must identify all forms of globalization, and their effect on all artists at all times in all regions. As an instrument for identifying areas of knowledge to be researched and clarified, it is almost useless. On the other hand, a question that is too specific risks being too parochial or self-indulgent. In truth, because of the onerousness of the studio component, research undertaken for a practice-led higher degree can seldom afford to be of any greater magnitude than a case study from which greater generalisations may be inferred. And this is perfectly acceptable, as long it is acknowledged. Korzybski's purpose in

devising his 'structural differentiation' model was not to discourage abstraction and generalisation, but to distinguish among their different levels so that they are never confused with reality. As Korzybski says, we must not confuse the map with the territory. Various other considerations enter into devising a research question: it is advantageous for it to be open-ended rather than being answerable by simply 'yes' or 'no'. It should require the thesis to argue something that is not already patently obvious, etc., etc. An additional delimiter that also marks out a research territory might be a phrase that starts with 'given that' to identify a condition that makes the present research necessary.

While no question would satisfy all of the following conditions, I have found this list of criteria (Fig. 2) to be a useful guide for making a research question more viable.

More Viable	Less Viable
Uses concrete terms with clear referents.	Uses vague abstract terms.
Uses terms that have one clear meaning or explains them precisely.	Uses terms that are ambiguous.
Expresses one clear purpose.	Tries to encompass several purposes at once.
Requires a complex answer – why, how, to what extent, etc.	Requires a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer or a purely descriptive answer.
Is controversial or contrary to first impression.	Is self-evident or tautological – based on the same assumption it promises to prove.
Requires material evidence that can be examined by others.	Requires 'evidence' that cannot be examined or confirmed by others.
Requires evidence that can be acquired and analysed in the allocated time and with the resources available.	Requires evidence that takes too long to acquire or is remote or inaccessible.
Specifies a discrete period of time from which the evidence or object of study will be drawn.	Leaves the time span unstated or assumes it can prove <i>eternal</i> 'truths'.

Specifies a discrete location or set of examples to which it will apply.	Does not specify a discrete location and examples or assumes that it can prove <i>universal</i> 'truths'.
Incorporates conditions in relation to which the research gains significance.	Does not identify theories or circumstances in relation to which the question arises.
Can be expressed in a clear single sentence.	Requires a convoluted 'impenetrable' sentence or multiple sentences.

Fig. 2. Criteria that contribute to the viability of a research question.

For example, early in his or her candidature a student struggles with the following question: 'How has the transformation of culture, resulting from globalisation, been depicted in the visual arts?' The question framed this way does not indicate where the candidate will start and how we will know when the task is accomplished. It implies that the project will deal with the whole of art history, all of the visual arts, and with all forms of cultural transformation. To be made more precise, it *may* be transformed to read as, for example, 'How has photojournalistic coverage of mass migration published in Australian metropolitan newspapers from 1970 to the year 2000 represented the plight of refugees?'

However, this does not pose a question for the candidate's own practice – only about that of others. It may be fine for a Cultural Studies thesis, but if studio work were to logically address this question it would have to be an illustration of the work of others. So despite being useful for researching *about* art, *for* art, or even *through* art, a question based on the above schema still fails to incorporate the essential component of art *as* research.

What sort of research question is appropriate for studio practice?

What has to distinguish a research question within studio research is that it should primarily pose its question about *making* art in response to an aspect of external reality, rather than about that reality *per se*. Therefore, a question incorporating some of the same concerns by an *artist* researcher might be better expressed as, say,

‘How can documentary photography most effectively convey the plight of refugees in Australia 2010, given the decrease in credibility of the documentary image’.

A question in artistic practice must be *about* practice; otherwise the art becomes merely a vehicle for other knowledges rather than constituting knowledge itself.

Thus combining the need for precise and specific articulation with the need to address practice, studio research might ask questions of the following type:

What would be an appropriate strategy, (or form of practice) for ...(you as a specific individual with a particular history and social membership), in order to ...(produce some effect), in relation to ...(certain circumstances in a given time and place)?

or

How can (a certain form of practice) (respond to, comment on, or discover) (a particular phenomenon), given that ... (certain circumstances which may constitute a difficulty or contradiction in a specific context)?

or

What would be the necessary qualities of a set of works in a given medium, in a particular context, in order to ... etc.?

A studio question would ask not only about a *thing* in a given *time* and *place*, but also about how a specific *individual artist* and their *medium, technique, form, and philosophy of practice* combine to adequately respond to that ‘thing’ in a specific context. In simple terms, the studio question asks ‘what is an appropriate way to make art, given certain conditions that are examined in the exegesis’. The answer to that question is always: (pointing at the candidate’s examination exhibition) ‘like this!’. The work of art does not give an answer *to* some external issue but *is* the answer itself — an answer, however, that has evolved through both practice and informed reflection and retains a dependence on the cogency of that reflection. The accompanying exegesis, as an articulation of the questioning necessary for

reflection, need not be groundbreaking in form or method, for it is the art work that constitutes the contribution to knowledge. However, it seems advisable at all stages to aim for it to be as relevant as possible, rather than merely perfunctory, in its task of assisting the work to survive erosive contexts both during and after its production. And 'performative' research, for want of a better term, instead of characterising the whole of studio research, should be seen as just one essential component of its microcycles.

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