

## Book Reviews for *Dance Research Aotearoa*

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*independent artist*

- Quaresma, J., Longley, A., Dias, F.J., & Mendas, J.M. (Eds.). (2016). *Research in arts and absurdity: Informal methods and institutionalization of the conflict*. Lisbon, Portugal: University of Lisbon.
- Quaresma, J., Longley, A., Dias, F.J., & Freitas, M.A. (Eds.). (2015). *Research in arts: Irony, critique and assimilation of the methods*.
- Quaresma, J. & Dias, F.J. (Eds.) (2015). *Research in arts: The oscillation of the method*. Lisbon, Portugal: University of Lisbon.
- Quaresma, J. & Longley, A., Dias, F. R., & Mendas, J. M. (2016). Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema, & National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries (University of Auckland). *Research in arts and absurdity: Informal methods and institutionalization of the conflict*. Lisbon, Portugal: University of Lisbon.
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*Investigação em Artes* is a book-series reflecting modes of practice-led research from international perspectives, which has published seven volumes to date. Initiated by Portuguese artist-researcher José Quaresma, the books contribute rich collections of essays to the growing field of artistic research. With essays in multiple languages, these books make visible the multilingual world we live in, creating space for the travel of artistic ideas through Portuguese, French, Spanish and English and providing significant resources for artist-researchers in countries such as Brazil where theoretical texts in both Portuguese, English and other European languages can be used to validate and substantiate the emergence of practice-led research in the Academy. These books present stimulating examples of artistic methodologies, critical challenges to the dominant curricula of art academies, and provocations to the question of defining knowledge and knowledge production with perspectives from London, Brazil, Lisbon, Chicago, Helsinki, Brisbane, Auckland, Berlin and Sweden. *In repeated rejections of straight and uniform logics, the sensibility of these books regards practice-led research*

*occupying a space for advancing artistic thinking itself, in all of its manifestations and possible interpretations.*

This review discusses the most recent three of these editions, *Research in Arts and Absurdity: Informal Methods and Institutionalization of the Conflict (2016)*; *Research in Arts: Irony, Critique and Assimilation of the Methods (2015)*; and *Research in Arts: The Oscillation of the Methods (2015)*. I will respond to and reflect on the significance of the essays authored by Alys Longley and Mark Harvey, as well as the work of James Elkins, Henna-Riikka Halonen, and Henk Slager, to consider how these publications advocate for new research pathways, *and* open space for criticising and assimilating methods and anti-methods of research in arts.

Alys Longley, performance maker, researcher and senior lecturer in Dance at University of Auckland, New Zealand, has been part of the editorial team for the last two editions of *Investigação em Artes*, facilitating a partnership between Auckland University's Creative Arts and Industries and Lisbon School of Art in Portugal. Longley has also contributed chapters to editions five, six and seven, adding to her growing archive of enticing essay titles including; 'Half-hearted donkey routines we cannot do without' (2016, pp. 101-112), and 'Smashing eggs; On the ironic pleasures of mangling in artistic research' (2015, pp. 30-43).

In 'Half-hearted donkey routines we cannot do without', Longley works around questions of new logics, 'coming-to-know', and political and environmental events through a series of narratives. Longley works with narratives as "allowing ruptures in the veil of language and the possibility of getting at the affects of things in innovative ways, not necessarily to produce non-sense, or nuisance, but to produce new kinds of sense" (2016, p. 104).

Engaging with philosopher and scientist Andrew Pickering's concept of the mangle of practice as a way to "frame and better understand the complex and often contradictory processes of knowledge production in artistic research" (2015, p. 30). 'Half-hearted donkey routines we cannot do without', again employs a series of narratives to investigate key issues. Longley considers the process of thesis writing for the PhD in artistic research, using a tormented, dread-filled and painful story of the Helsinki based choreographic researcher Per Roar, who contorts his physical practice for the sake of completing his thesis writing. From the perspective of an artist-academic working full time in an academic department, Longley shares valuable observations on the rich and productive contributions that practice-led researchers might make in their communities, also questioning

whether institutions will continue to allow these artistic practices to thrive or grow.

In the essay ‘Practice-led dance writing; Oscillating between proximity and distance’ (2015), Longley discusses methodologies for artist books, in relation to performance experiments such as *The Hills*, from the longer work *Radio Strainer* (Longley, 2013). This essay makes clear links to Longley’s contribution to the fields of choreographic practice, practice-led research and interdisciplinarity through the creation and publication of artist books which consider what a book can do, such as in *The Foreign Language of Motion* (2014) and *Radio Strainer* (2016), both published by Winchester University Press (UK).

The work of New Zealand’s Mark Harvey sees an approach to writing about public art projects seeking to destabilise the pillars of New Zealand neoliberalism and institutionality. In ‘Unproductive Productive, Productive Unproductive’ (2016, pp. 163-180) Harvey discusses three socially-focused public art projects as ‘attempts of idiotic sociality’, with Tao Wells’ *The Beneficiary’s Office* (2010), Harvey’s own work *Productive Bodies* (2012), and *Just in Time* by Tim Barlow (2015), all curated by the collective *Letting Space* who commission projects “that attempt to bypass dominant modes of capitalism” (p. 164). Harvey discusses how *The Beneficiary’s Office* addresses unemployment and national colonial myths about hard work and fairness, as a way to subvert the capitalist status quo. *Productive Bodies* carries on a conversation about work and occupations within the institutional contexts of the Wellington City Gallery and the New Zealand Festival of the Arts, questioning these frameworks’ usefulness and productivity. Responding to redundancies in government employees between 2010 and 2012 in Aotearoa, the work engages a group of laid off government employees and unemployed people to perform actions such as offering a protective shield, and other acts of service and consent, using an ‘opt-out’ option. The essay muses on whether idiocy can be used “to repair the trauma of neoliberal processes?”

In discussing *Just in Time* (Barlow, 2015), Harvey considers a key Māori concept of *manaakitanga* in relation to Barlow’s ‘mobile quick response community centre’ and ‘Camp-o-matic’ through logics of ‘getting things done just in time’ and the ‘hospitality of the Hillman Hunter’. Harvey’s essay explores how public performance, as a form of practice-led research, engages with notions of the absurd and productivity in relation to dominant institutional frameworks. Key themes of idiocy, state ideological apparatus, power and state economies, art and institutionality are contextualised by Harvey in relation to being a male

Pākehā/European New Zealand artist/academic. Mark moves the notions of absurdity beyond typical signification as non-serious foolishness, to contemplate a promise of ‘productive idiocy’ to pull apart the dominant power structures in society, such as the institution. Using images, and rich descriptions of performance activations, Harvey’s writing creates a strong connection between artistic sensibilities, the aliveness of political motivations and intentionality. This chapter provides an absorbing insight into an artist/academic practice, revealing the authors’ level of investment in criticality and inventiveness.

I note how the chapters of the *Arts and Absurdity* edition embrace surprise and impossibility in approaches to art-making, research and knowledge production. I am excited by the way absurdity is discussed in relation to argumentation, aesthetic judgment and artistic production across disciplines and knowledge domains.

Contributors work to define and understand hierarchies of knowledge within institutional frameworks, a tussle that continues to vie for the recognition of arts-based research. I am drawn to the text of James Elkins, who offers a productive and probing critical analysis of the current state of practice-led research internationally. Elkins, a practitioner-researcher who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, opens the possibility of rethinking the literature about practice-led research from the ground up, with an eye to producing new forms of the degree programme itself.

Elkins’ Chapter Six: Cultures of the PhD Around the World (2016, pp. 55-60), articulates a provisional categorisation of models of ‘culture’ in over 200 institutions offering Doctoral degrees in visual art. The Continental model, The Nordic model, The United Kingdom model, The Japanese model, The Chinese model, and The lack of North American model are referenced in considering the degree differences with regard to administration, curriculum, faculty, the emphasis of theoretical and philosophical texts, and the special strengths or weaknesses of institutions. Notably, Elkin establishes a strong critique of the assumed universality of the foundational concepts of ‘research’, ‘assessment’ and ‘knowledge’, to encourage institutions to highlight the specificity of their cultural and historical contexts bonded into these concepts.

Elkins essay in the *Arts and Irony* edition (2015), “Fourteen Reasons to Mistrust the PhD”, focuses more on the principle objections to the growing normativity of the PhD for artists. Taking excerpts from his book *Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Visual Art*, he presents here a rich range of

perspectives and opinions on the degree at the juncture between the university and the artistic world. Elkins questions the defacto status of the degree for artists, asking “if not, what then?”

Also in the edition regarding arts and irony, a playful reinforcement of the notions of fiction and ambiguity from Henna-Riikka Halonen’s “Throw of Dice, Ambiguity and Methods” (2015, pp. 93-104) proposes “an endless circulation of interpretation where the Method similarly to other characters and objects of the story are left to circulate more openly and works together with the notion of Ambiguity” (p 99). We might imagine with Halonen’s vision, the cultivation of undetermined outcomes for research, to consider the value of their non-linear, formless functions.

Henk Slager’s *Experimental Aesthetics* reflects a shift away from “dogmatic art-historical hermeneutics” to practices that deal with “experimental, laboratory-style environments and researching novel forms of knowledge and experience” (2015, p. 83). Slager’s questioning of the rigidity of academic-scientific guidelines is still valid ten years into the development of the field of practice-led research where the tensions between rigidity and fluidity in knowledge production through artistic thinking remains a steadfast dynamic.

These books will be of interest to researchers working across disciplines, and to practitioner-researchers working in relation to the academy. They offer critical and theoretical perspectives and insights from the point of view of diverse international artist-researchers, working within the academy and art-worlds. After closing these books, I am left feeling the interconnectedness of theory and practice, appreciating the diversity of reports on practice-led research from a theoretical standpoint. I am imagining the scope for future editions to be translated across and between languages, as the introduction has been in the most recent edition, to further increase the usefulness of these books for researchers invested in validating practice-led research in countries just starting out in this harrowing process of authenticating the value of this field of study in higher education. Can we float between home languages in places of discomfort, unrest, war, occupation, protest, homelessness and exile to further spread the readership in advocating a multivocality of artistic research?

## References

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