

Critical Choice in “Documenting” Practice as Research

Lynette Hunter

From my particular landscape, as someone who has worked in PBR (practice-based research)/PAR (practice as research) since the 1990s as a scholar, an academic, and a practitioner, the most exciting direction has been the recent shift to Practice rather than Research, and to the growing awareness of the need for attention to the practices of communication about Practice.¹ I personally still use PAR, which was the common designator for a focus on practice in the UK in the 1990s, although now I also feel it insists on practice rather more than PBR. After all, all research involves some kind of practice, so for me practice as research asks us to focus on what we do as the research rather than how we articulate practice in research communication. I am aware that there are many other definitions for PBR, the distinction here is simply a gut response I have to the two designations.

Bringing PAR into the scholarly world of academic humanities, the focus has been on “research”: how to communicate what practice does, how it knows, how it values. There have been many intense studies of how to articulate in academically recognized vocabularies and grammars, the processes and products, the pedagogy of (mainly) arts-based work, artwork. In other words, how to *prove* that there is Research involved in arts practice, whether it be PBR, PAR, PbR, RbP, Artistic Research, Art in Action and so on. This work has usually meant adopting the categories and structures, and writing genres, of humanities research since people in those areas have seemed to be the most immediate with whom to have conversations, build courses, and make allies for funding and space.

PAR is in many places, and institutions, now accepted as engaged with insight, ways of being and knowing, that have not been acknowledged by society in the past. A corollary is that many of these insights have been significant for people presenting unseen, unheard, obscured, erased ways of living and valuing. Different to Art as the ideologically accepted resistance to powerful political discourse, PAR opens up the potential to consider artwork practices that generate alternatives to socio-culturally dominant epistemologies by labouring in the sociosituated (Hunter 2018). The concept of the sociosituated is developed from situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) and is an alterior running alongside both discourse and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). As PAR has become institutionally recognized, it has also spread into many disciplines outside the arts and humanities: the environmental and biological sciences, social studies, design and architecture, medicine, among others. It shows up in distinct ways in different fields of matter, and this may make it seem vague theoretically and methodologically. Yet with a growing confidence in the research contributions of PAR, there may also be a setting, a fitting in, a desire to be part of the structures of socio-cultural recognition, a compromise if not a complicity. One of the most challenging elements in current PAR is working on how to keep fluid, keep presenting the unseen.

In this light, from my necessarily particular perspective, the most exciting change in PAR is the shift of focus from Research into Practice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the practitioners

Lynette Hunter is Distinguished Professor Emerita of the History of Rhetoric and Performance at the University of California, Davis. She has written or co-written over twenty-five books in performance studies, feminist philosophy, the politics of decolonial and alterior aesthetics, and the history of rhetoric and performance, including *Critiques of Knowing* (1999), *Disunified Aesthetics* (2014), and *The Politics of Practice* (2021).

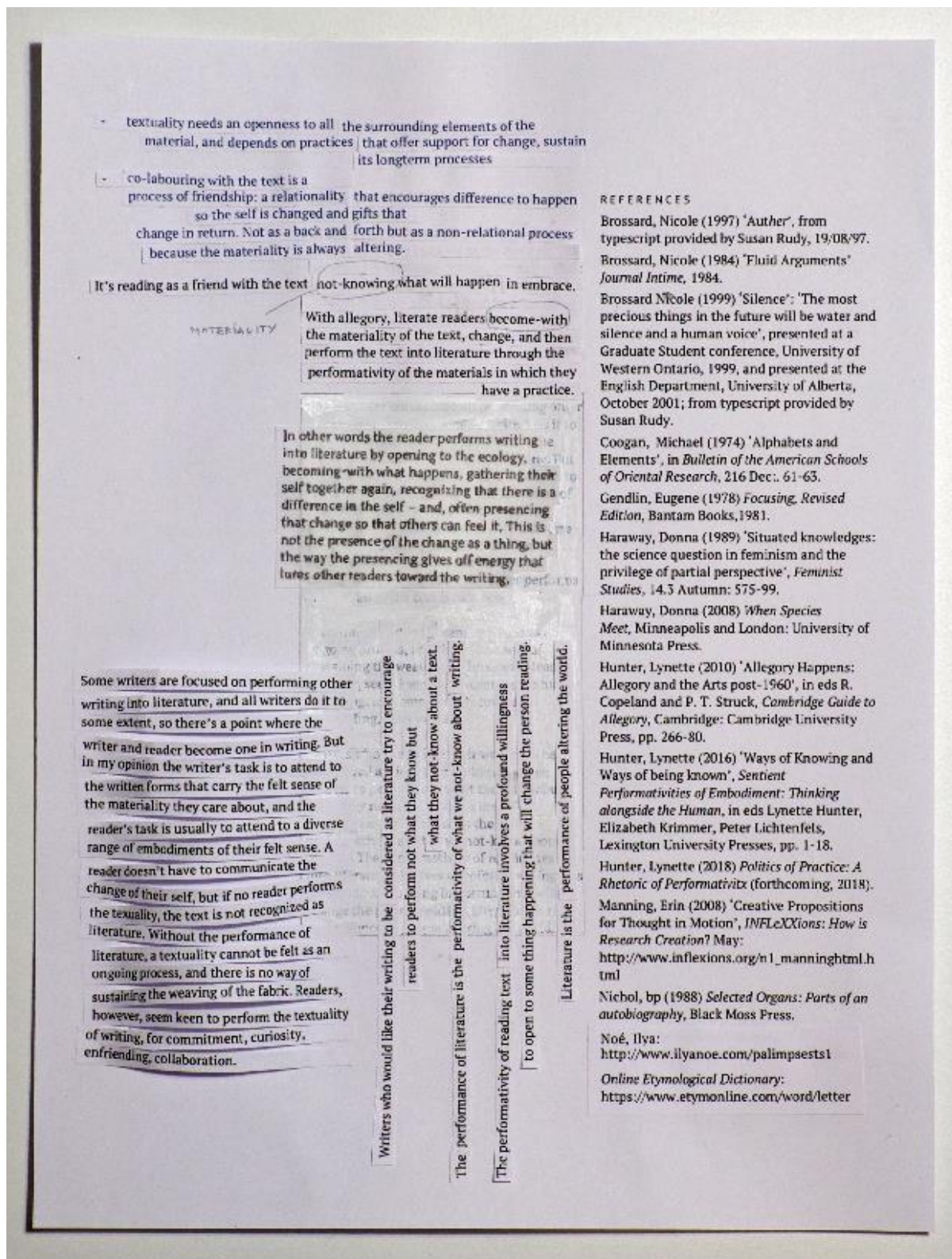
working in the field, this has brought with it an awareness of a need to attend to the practices of writing and other media—and, I would suggest, the practices of reading and engaging—that keep the research presencing.

The humanities critic conventionally articulates through writing essays, and to achieve research recognition, PAR began by focusing on articulation that delivers proof of knowledge in similar academic modes—such as a journal article. . . . Yet the focus on Practice has foregrounded that “practice” does not have a recognized academic vocabulary. The closest is possibly “critique.” In response, PAR research-practitioners have perhaps inevitably developed practices of writing that generate textuality or performativity with written words—by hand, by press, by digital tool. This has led to considerable graphic experiment, and also differently mediated audio/video methodologies. The recent coincidence of digital media with a focus on the practices of scholarly communication has also generated critical hypertexts, video essays, intermedial expression. These explorations often put PAR in a radical juxtaposition with normative humanities articulation.

To distinguish these practices of writing about Practice from the articulation of Research, I call the former kind of writing “documenting.” Documenting attempts, as any creative practice, to carry the energy of the felt change of experience as material for its audience(s). I offer now an articulation of one way of talking about Practice, and will conclude with a few observations on documenting, including, why I am not documenting in this essay.

For me, Practice is a learned way of engaging with materiality. The matter that is the soil of that materiality will be particular to each practitioner—clay, flute, word, fabric, building, aural/oral voice, tightrope, body, animal, molecule, software/hardware, and so on. Practice is also about learning how to gather the changes that happen in that materiality, feel the presencing of those changes in the body, find forms for the changes so they can be embodied in re-presencing and mediated to others, making material for their own practices (Hunter 2019, 2023). The terms in this articulation are simply there to alert us to, or make us aware of, some of the things going on in a practice. It does not matter what vocabulary is used. Inevitably, I have cast the processes of my articulation of Practice as my life has come to put them into words, and they trail veils of Daoist poetics and early Greek rhetoric. The landscape for Practice is broad, and I do not hope for it to be pinned down.

As noted above, many current writers on PAR have begun to loosen up the essay form.² My critical practice is one that takes writing as a material into which I try to loose the self (Hunter 2023, 180), have the materiality happen. In the past I have written and performed critiques,³ documenting the energy of the changes to which I have been able to attend. Working collaboratively with others on documenting has, for me, opened out this practice so the critical writing becomes a dance with another. But in many cases, such as this one, I find a need to articulate rather than generate a documenting, and this is to do with audience. There is a distinction between trans/scribing as documenting in the context of anecdotal performance—performance with a sociosituated audience⁴—and transcribing as articulation, or performance in socio-cultural discourse. Here I am transcribing, foregrounding the compromise, narrowing the energy, to fit into this article, to offer a fitting format or structure that will resonate with the socio-cultural.⁵



Hunter and Noé (2018, 250); the critical text was generated through a collaboration.

If the material of academic humanities practice is writing, and in particular the critical essay, when that form frays, tears, un/ravels, it can feel confusing. Yet it is in the process of becoming a skein finding another shape. When this happens, the audience also needs to learn new scores for their own practice, and this in my experience is challenging—for a writer and for a reader. The institutions of universities, colleges, publishing, conventional composition, normative

pedagogy have difficulty recognizing their own value when air gets into the bloodstream of communication. They may try to erase, shut down, condemn, even punish. Read an ordinary scientific paper and feel how set it is, how far away from its practice it is. Working with science and scientists, PAR research-practitioners often begin with the impoverished articulation of the experiment and work on ways to value the documenting because it carries the energy of that engagement. Yet the documenting is usually difficult to read because the critical mediation is not recognized by the readers.⁶ Just so, working with the performance materials of artwork, a general public audience is difficult to reach with documentings, despite the energy they carry and the diverse voices they sound out.

The ability to perform in a documenting what has not-yet been performed allows for the energy of that not-known to be carried to others, whereas an articulation is already speaking within the grounds of a dominant discourse that by definition cannot see or feel the energy—although it may convey its palimpsest. I'd suggest that in its pursuit of conversations about Practice, and in the context of the compromises and enervation of academically recognizable genres, PAR research-practitioners are in a good place not only to offer alternatives and alteriors to the normative practices of critical articulation but also to generate documentings, critical artwork. This is a critical choice: to articulate to a wider audience or to engage through documenting with a usually much smaller group of people who will collaborate on being with a not-known materiality. The recent focuses not only on a practice with a particular material, but also on the practices of criticism that PAR enables, are welcome.⁷ They suggest a critique not from the socio-cultural but from the sociosituated, and are politically attuned to be helpful both to unknitting socio-cultural trauma,⁸ and to generating long-term social awareness and change.

Notes

1. See the biography for Lynette Hunter.
2. The journal *Performance Research* has been a leader in this area; see, for example, “On Reflection—Turning 100,” ed. Richard Gough, special issue, *Performance Research* 23, no. 4 (2018).
3. See <https://lynettehunterperformance.com/>. For more recent critical artwork, see Hunter and Noé (2018).
4. See chaps. 5 and 8 in Hunter (2019).
5. The book *Disunified Aesthetics* (Hunter 2014), in which I attempted a critical performativity through video, playtext, translation, cartoon, layout design, and typographic play, was received by one reviewer in the *American Revue of Canadian Studies* with the comment “Much of her work comes across as very esoteric and highly personal, and to many, it may even seem like the manifestation of some sort of mental instability” (Taylor 2015).
6. See Dumit and Myers’s (2011) study of the biologist who needed, for recognition, to turn dance as a research method into mathematics.
7. Among those I have worked with on performativity and writing, see Moore (n.d.), Tsimbrovsky (2022), and Noé (2012). See also Sinha (2023).
8. For a psychobiological and somatic study of social and particular trauma, see Menakem (2017).

References

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–99.
- Dumit, Joe, and Natasha Myers. 2011. "Haptic Creativity and the Mid-embodiments of Experimental Life." In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, edited by Frances Mascia-Lee, 239–61. Chichester, UK: Blackwell.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–99.
- Lynette Hunter, 2014. *Disunified Aesthetics*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- . 2018. "Affective Politics in Álvaro Hernández' *Chairs* . . ." *Corpo-Gráficas* 6 (December): 16–36.
- . 2019. *Politics of Practice: A Rhetoric of Performativity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- . 2023. "Approaching Practices of Acting Through Daoist Philosophy." In *Performance Cultures as Epistemic Cultures*, vol. 1, *(Re)Generating Knowledges in Performance*, edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsen Jost, Milos Kotic, Astrid Schenka, 177–201. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Hunter, Lynette, and Ilya Noé. 2018. "Performing Literatures: Handling the Text." In "On Reflection: Turning 100," edited by Richard Gough. Special issue, *Performance Research* 23 (4): 246–50.
- Menakem, Resma. 2017. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialised Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press.
- Moore, Maurice. n.d. "Writing While Black." Maurice Moore (website). <https://maurice-moore-mkx7.squarespace.com>.
- Noé, Ilya. 2012. "S(c/t)roller." Ilya Noé (website). <https://www.ilyanoe.com/strollingscrolling/>.
- Puar, Jasbir. 2012. "I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *philoSOPHIA: Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 2 (1): 50–66.
- Sinha, Debashis. 2023. "Field Recording, Autoethnography, and the Entanglements of the Heard." *Performance Matters* 9 (1–2): 155–56.
- Taylor, Scott. Review of *Disunified Aesthetics: Situated Textuality, Performativity, Collaboration*, by Lynette Hunter. *American Review of Canadian Studies* 45 (2): 177–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2015.1045199>.
- Tsimbrovsky, Erika. 2022. "Tongue Writing." Uploaded to Vimeo on November 19, 2022. <https://vimeo.com/772851010>.