Exhibitions as interfaces between practice and research

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This paper explores questions that stem from debates about the relationships between practice-based and practice-led research in design. Approaches to describing research through practice are often differentiated in terms of focus on materiality, form, functionality, and authorship. We propose that in addition to establishing nuanced differences in the interfaces between research and practice it is timely to conceptualize areas they also share. Our argument is derived from reflections on three exhibitions organized by the School of Design Studies, COFA, UNSW over the last 12 months at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery: *Re-frame* curated by Karina Clarke, *Integration: the Nature of Objects* curated by Liz Williamson, and *Connections: Experimental Design* curated by Katherine Moline. Each exhibition presented aspects of the nexus between visual art, craft, and design, from the perspectives of: engaging with sustainability in social exchanges; working between traditionally distinct disciplines of fine art, craft and design; and discursive designs that question the standards and norms in professional art and design industries. The paper focuses insights that the exhibitions provided in terms of: the trained incapacities of both practice-led and practice-based research; the neglected value of null hypothesis; and the challenges of exhibiting research in galleries.

Introduction

Written from the context of the School of Design Studies at COFA we aim to question certain assumptions underpinning discussions regarding research in art and design and the RQF. Rather than only discussing research as practice on a case by case basis we note there are certain conventions emerging that require debate. Without debate, conventions become entrenched, and institutions fall into practices that reproduce the same mistakes until they become the tradition. We participated in the exhibitions in various roles at different times: as practitioners exhibiting work; as curators selecting works; and as catalogue essay writers. Consequently we speak from three of the performative roles involved in curated exhibitions. We draw inspiration from Anka Bangma's definition of how institutional structures can be understood as performative in that:

> as dominant structures or habits [they] acquire their authority and weight by the way in which we (artists, curators, educators, theorists) fill them in, act them out, reproduce them over and over. This performative understanding of institutional structures also creates space for change, by making a difference in the ways in which we act them out, inhabit them, ….[1]

Our aim in this paper is to focus distinctions that have emerged over the 14 years since Christopher Frayling's description of three modes of research practice: research *for*, research

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[1] Anke Bangma 'Observations and Considerations' A.W. Balkema & H. Slager (Ed.s) *Artistic Research. Lier en Boog Series*, Vol 18. Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi B.V. 2004 126-134 p.128

about, research *through* practice. Our working definition of practice-led research fits Frayling's third category, while practice-based research fits between Frayling's second and third category. Rolf Hughes describes Frayling's modes of research as:

> Research *for* [practice] is generally applied to investigations oriented towards a [practice] application; research *into* [practice] denotes historical and theoretical studies of [practice]; whereas research *through* [practice] regards [its] processes as constituting the research methodology itself, or at least the greater part thereof.[2]

The Strand Report in 1998 mirrored Frayling's categories and distributed forms of research *in* practice as either "conservative", "pragmatic", or "liberal"[3] and argued that publication takes the form of exhibitions for practitioners in the visual arts and craft.[4] In contrast, the definition of research by the Research Assessment Exercise in the U.K. (2000) includes some hope for delineating practice and research because it notes a congruence and difference in comparing science and art beyond the criterion that research is transferable and generalizable. The RAE includes in its definition of research, the statement that research can be "the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights."[5] This definition of research is helpful because it recognises 'insight' as a legitimate research outcome.

Our discussion of three exhibitions pulls out contemporary examples of practice-led and practice-based research according to questions of function, materiality and authorship. From our experiences of these exhibitions, we suggest that more finely tuned measures are necessary to describe how exhibitions can function as the publication of practitioners' research. Although often grouped together, or used interchangeably, the two terms practice-led and practice-based research infer particular approaches. For example, art historian Terry Smith noted, albeit bluntly, the contrasting attitudes to materials in fine arts and crafts as: "for artists

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[2] Chistopher Frayling 'Research in Art and Design' *London Royal College of Art Research Papers*, Vol 1 No.1 1-5. 1993 cited in Hughes p.287

[3] Dennis Strand 'Research and Publication in the Creative Arts.' *Research in the Creative Arts*. Canberra: Evaluations and Investigation Programme, Higher education Division, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. 1998 p.40

[4] Strand p.55

[5] Richard Woodfield 'The UK Fine Art PhD and Research in Art and Design' A.W. Balkema & H. Slager (Ed.s) *Artistic Research. Lier en Boog Series,* Vol 18. Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi B.V. 2004 103-108. p.106

they are a vehicle; for craftspeople they are sacred".[6] To assist in developing more nuanced arguments for practice as research, our paper discusses different perspectives to find what we share as well as identify where the differences might lie.

Defining practice-led research

We define practice-led research as focused on the properties of particular materials, and that tests materials in their combinations and processes of making. In many ways this approach is embedded in the history of craft, but is not limited to the traditional media associated with craft, and its emphasis in tacit knowledge or knowing-in-action. We draw our definition of practice-led research in the terms of "material thinking" recently proposed by writer Paul Carter. Carter argues that "creative knowledge" is indistinct from the materials with which it is produced,[7] and in his definition of "material thinking" as the "mutually informing relations" between form and content,[8] he claims that current research conventions do not know how to "read' creative texts or understand creative practice as research.[9]

While it is not a new idea that artists, designers and craftspeople engage with materials, only recently has this been defined as a form of research. Artist Barbara Bolt draws from Carter's thesis and recently argued that:

> … materials are not passive objects to be used instrumentally by the artist, but rather the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that come into play in interaction with the artist's creative intelligence.[10]

Given that Bolt's concern is how to adjust pedagogy to accommodate material sensitivity, her characterisation of practice-led research emphasises tactile knowledge, notably she insists over conceptualisation.[11] We agree that Carter's and Bolt's propositions release practitioners from a means-end approach to making in art, design and craft contexts. It also raises questions about whether terms used to describe practice-led research (for example 'designer-maker') infer a traditional and technical skills led approach to research. Bolt addresses this in her claim that the term "skill with" rather than "mastery over" diminishes the controlling 'technical expertise' aspect of practice-led research, however we sense that underlying both Carter's and

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[6] Terry Smith 'Craft and contemporary theory' in *Craft, Modernity, and Postmodernity* Sue Rowley (Ed). St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1997. 18-28 P.21

[7] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004. p.1

[8] *ibid* p.4.

[9] *ibid*. p.6.

[10] Barbara Bolt, 'Materializing pedagogies.' *Working Papers in Art and Design* 4 Retrieved 7/8/2007 from URL http:www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research papers/wpades/vol4/bbfull.html ISSN 1466-4917. p.1

[11] *ibid*. p.2. Practice-led research is defined by Bolt as "a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice".

Bolt's analyses lies the objective to legitimate 'doing'. This is not to underestimate Carter's and Bolt's analysis. We regard such work as absolutely necessary as it tempers what can seem at times a distortion of practice in a research framework.

We distinguish practice-based research from practice-led research in that it often draws from a wider range of factors than conventions and practices of the atelier or specialist studio model. More akin to conceptual traditions of the visual arts than a crafts ethos, we suggest that practice-based research is as focussed on the explicit symbolism of materials and processes and their implicit and explicit social relations, as it is on what materials can do. In contrast to an apparent mandate in practice-led research that the activity of making is necessary for research to be deemed valid, practice-based research does not perceive making as integral to research, given that a design can be a plan rather than a fabricated object, and that writing itself can be considered the 'object of practice'. While historical contextualisation occurs in practice-led research, our observation is that it tends to focus on specific traditions of a material or process. In contrast, practice-based research *develops* historical contextualisation, and looks to the effects of works rather than upholding a regard for materials as properties in themselves.

Our definition of practice-based research accords with industrial designer Anthony Dunne's claim that:

> research in the aesthetic and cultural realm should draw attention to the ways products limit our experiences and expose to criticism and discussion their hidden social and psychological mechanisms.[12]

Dunne describes research-based projects as "by-products of investigation into a synthesis between practice and theory where neither practice or theory leads."[13] Architect Peter Downton's description of praxis is useful in clarifying this definition further. Downton asserts that praxis describes the mutuality of theory and practice, and he correlates praxis with reflection in that it "utilises explicitly formed theoretical positions not unexamined implicit positions."[14] Like us, he observes the conflicts that the practice/ theory or practice-led/practice-based distinctions prompt:

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[12] Anthony Dunne, 'Hertzian Tales: Electronic products, aesthetic experience and critical design.' London: Royal College of Art CRD Unit. 1999/2005 p.12
[13] *ibid.* p.14
[14] Peter Downton, *Design Research*. Melbourne: RMIT University Press. 2004 p.78

Formally theory is expected to give an account of practice in a field. This can give rise to abuse from those who see themselves as 'practical', as people who 'just do things' and who criticise others for being theoretical and probably residents in ivory towers.[15]

The contradictions between practice-led and practice-based research are embedded in the divergent historical developments of design, craft and fine art. Simply put, we propose that practice-led research draws from the historical conventions of the crafts and explores the attributes of material in form making, with technological variation, while practice-based research infers associations with the term praxis and connotes reflection that "utilises explicitly formed theoretical positions not unexamined implicit positions."[16] What they share, however, we can summarise in three points: certain "trained incapacities" that each lend themselves to; the exclusion of a null hypothesis as a valid practice research outcome; and the difficulties of exhibiting research in galleries.

How have the differences between practice-led and practice-based research defined in three exhibitions at Ivan Dougherty Gallery over the last 12 months?
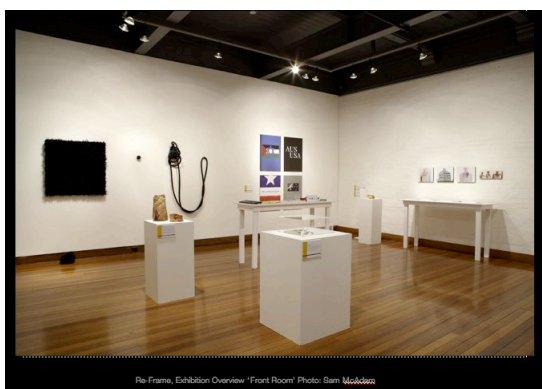
Re-Frame, Exhibition Overview 'Front Room' Photo: Sam McAdam

We interpreted indicators[17] that an artist or designer or craftsperson was directed by a practice-led research ethos when they used terms such as "designer-maker"[18] or "the personality of materials".[19] Works we interpreted as practice-based were instead described by practitioners in phrases such as "social experiences,"[20] and "[v]isual and sensual connections to culture[21] or "political identities".[22] The exhibition *Re-frame*, curated by Karina Clarke in 2006, presented a range of works from three of the fields of practice at COFA: fine art, craft, and design.

Rod Bamford's catalogue essay celebrated how the works included in *Re-Frame* drew from "the histories of design, craft and art",[23] for example dada artist Marcel Duchamp and design

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[15] *ibid.* p.77

[16] *ibid.* p.78

[17] For the purposes of this paper we distinguished practice-led from practice-based research according to the implications of statements by practitioners' included in the exhibition catalogues and exhibition panels.

[18] Julia Charles 'Biographies' *Re-frame* Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW 2006 p.23

[19] Rod Bamford 'Forward' *Re-frame* Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW 2006 p.4

[20] Katherine Moline 'Artists statement - Exhibition label' *Re-frame* Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW 2006.

[21] Nicole Barakat 'Artists statement - Exhibition label' *Re-frame* Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW 2006.

[22] Kevin Finn 'Artists statement - Exhibition label' *Re-frame* Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW 2006.

writer Victor Papanek, with the aim to question "mainstream consumptive practices."[24] On reflection, what was most interesting to us was how certain works emphasised capacities according to their implicit allegiances to practice-led and practice-based definitions of research. For example a capacity to 'work' materials was favoured in examples of practice-led research, while practice-based research emphasised interpretation.

We suggest that both practice-led and practice-based research produce a kind of "trained incapacity" based on assumptions about the forms of expression regarded as appropriate for practitioners. We borrow this term from Rolf Hughes who defines "trained incapacity" as an acknowledgement that "any way of seeing…is also a way of not seeing".[25] We believe that evaluating the relative merits of a practice-led exegesis (that explains what happened during the research), and a practice-based research paper (that reflects on interpretative methods), requires more finely grained definitions for either to be evaluated as research. One way to develop such measures might be to consider how each produce certain capacities and minimise others. That is, we need to clearly identify the pitfalls of particular research practices.

In building a case for practice and research in art and design educational institutions we must be mindful of Hughes' observation that "A professional trains his or herself to view the world through a certain set of assumptions, and thereby necessarily filters out other impressions."[26] The focus on material and tacit knowledge in practice-led research tends towards a "trained incapacity" to articulate critical evaluation of practice in written form. Likewise, the focus on rationale and reflection in practice-based research lends itself to a "trained incapacity" to respond intuitively to practice without sometimes excessive caution. Although distinct in orientation, both practice-led and practice-based research approaches share the capacity to inculcate and reproduce some assumptions about art and design over others.[27]

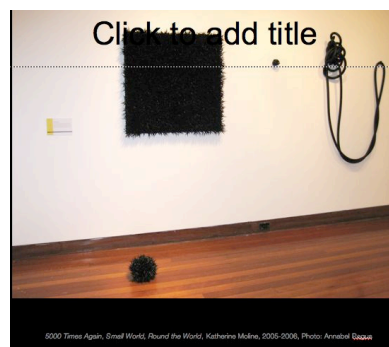[23] Rod Bamford 'Forward' *Re-frame* Sydney:Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW 2006 p.4

[24] *ibid.* p.2

[25] Rolf Hughes 'The poetics of practice-based research writing' *The Journal of Architecture* Vol 11 No. 3.2006 283-301 http:dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602360600930906 p. 285. Accessed 7/8/2007 Hughes points out that 'trained incapacity' was established by Kenneth Burke in *Language as Symbolic Action (1966).*

[26] *ibid.* p.285

[27] The Research Quality Framework in its current formulation recognises both types of research practices as long as the work is framed as a technological innovation, and as long as the practitioner can provide or anticipate an immediate utility for their research results. This observation was stated most explicitly by Mark Burry when he pointed out that if a project involves technological innovation it is more favourably received by funding bodies such as the ARC. The "trained incapacity" this produces, as Burry implicitly pointed out, is that the current preference for utility omits practice-based research that integrates historical interpretation, let alone social, political or aesthetic outcomes. Mark Burry 'That difficult nexus:creating meaningful relationship between design education, research, and practice' *ConnectED International conference on design education*, UNSW Sydney July 2007.

The work of Rodney Love for example demonstrates a design-led practice where the materials are reworked and recontextualized into new environments, forms and functions. Love's work titled *Six Degrees* uses recycled hair to create wall textiles.

In contrast, practice-based works in this exhibition asked questions about the conventions of fine art and design. For example a comment on political dominance in typographic puns of the anagrams AUS / USA by graphic designer Kevin

Finn. Another example is Katherine Moline's work *5000 times again* which explores whether any material, even industrialised decorations such as plastic pot plants, emanate aura if woven by hand. Both question the social exchanges that design and fine arts practices create. The different research perspectives in the works were discussed in a review of *Re-Frame* by Andrew Frost. His question about whether innovation was evidenced in an exhibition that he claimed resembled a shop, and his assertion that the works that "function best" in this context are those that "have an explicit reference to their own status as conceptual objects rather than those that flirt…with faux-utility" indicates an inclination on the part of the reviewer towards practice-based research.[28]

Integration: the nature of objects, curated by Liz Williamson, presented works according to her commitment to practice-led research, as exemplified in Donald Fortescue's *Gourd* (2007), a work based on integrating digital and manual processes. Fortescue's criticism of new technologies was expressed in his claim that he "find[s] that much digital design and fabrication suffers from a lack of understanding and feel for materials and processes."[29] His interest in authorship was expressed in his concern for the maintenance of "the presence of the maker."[30] Similarly, Roseanne Bartley described her practice as expanding the domain of jewellery circumscribed by definitions of craft as limited to "speaking in a particular form, technique and/or material."[31] The exhibition contrasted these examples of practice-led research with works that better fit our working

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[28] Andrew Frost 'Material Witness' *The Art Life* http://artlife.blogspot.com/2006/08/material-witness.html. Accessed 8/8/2007
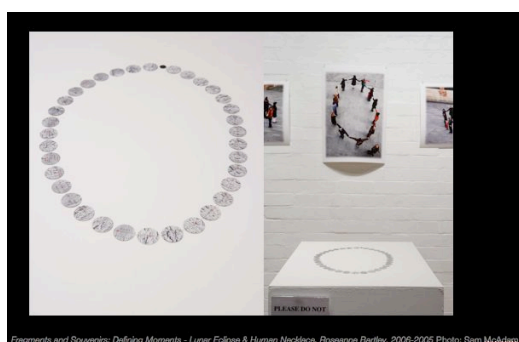[29] *ibid.*
[30] *ibid.*
[31] Rosanne Bartley 'Artist statement' *Integration: the nature of objects* Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW p.12

definition of practice-based research, for instance *Moustaches* (2005) by Inga Sempa. Although the curator Williamson describes Sempa's practice as "intuitive", [32] Sempa's work *Moustaches* relates to a larger domain than the constraints of materials, and comments on design, decoration and gender.

This theme was expanded in the catalogue essay 'Whose zooming who: *design art* and *new craft*' by Katherine Moline. Interrogating two threads, design-art and new craft, that seemed to inform the practitioners included in the exhibition, the author discussed the nuances of the term integration, and questioned whether the connotations it has with totalitarian regimes were addressed when practitioner-researchers aim to not merely synthesise disparate aims and histories but work between the conventions of fine art, craft, and design. [33] The essay argued that what drops out of terms like 'integration' are works that are not 'total' (for example null hypothesis), in that they dis-integrate and become invisible. The omission of null hypothesis leads to practitioners only producing 'progress reports'. Practice-led research and practice-based research share the omission that research can be valid although it leads to a null hypothesis. Excluding null hypothesis means that practice research is limited to only reporting 'progress' on a theme rather than reporting what is learnt from wrong turns or inaccurate interpretations. Related to null hypothesis is the reporting or misreporting of 'happy accidents' that occur during research. Retrospective justification for something that went wrong but turned out to illuminate an alternative but worthwhile trajectory is often mangled into creative rewriting in research through practice of both persuasions. [34]

Fragments and Souvenirs: Defining Moments - Lunar Eclipse & Human Necklace, Roseanne Bartley, 2006-2005 Photo: Sam McAdam

One response to *Integration* however, was pre-disposed towards a practice-led research orientation that mandated a certain attitude towards materiality. Although Bartley describes her interest in expanding her field of practice by using a wider range of materials but within the rubric of jewellery, a review by Emily Howes claimed that Bartley actually

[32] Liz Williamson 'Foreword' and Inga Sempe 'Artist Statement' *Integration: the nature of objects* 2007 Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW p.2 and p.28

[33] Katherine Moline 'Design art and new craft: Who's zooming who?' *Integration-the nature of objects* Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA UNSW 2007 p.8

[34] For an example of the 'happy accident' in Science, see the report by *Catalysts* on the ABC, 2.8.2007 where a researcher, out of frustration, throttled a lever and accidentally 'invented' a fuel for space travel that cuts travel time to Mars by a third.

presented work as both a jeweller and as a photographer.[35] A misunderstanding of Bartley as working two domains at one time draws our attention to the assumption that practice-led research is limited to one material at a time.

Connections: experimental design, curated by Katherine Moline in 2007, continued the juxtaposition of different approaches to practice-research but emphasized practice-based research. Works directed by a practice-led research ethos in this exhibition addressed recombinations of existing technologies in ways that raise questions and demonstrate alternatives. For example, materials misbehave in the animation *Aberrant behaviours* by Ann Wilson (2004), while Jenny Sabin's *Fourier carpet* (2006) recombines two 19th century technologies for a self generating woven textile. In contrast, an example of practice-based research, *H_edge* by the Advanced Geometry Unit at ARUP, questions the dangers of mythologizing the conventional hierarchical relationship between engineers and architects. Similarly, Emiliana's discursive design *Hot Box* (2003) explored conventions derived from debates concerning the function of design when defined as a service.[36] In *Hotbox*, Emiliana shifted the 'design-as-service' debate by focussing on the safe working conditions of sex workers rather than their clients.


Hot Box, Emiliana, 2003, Photo: Sam McAdam
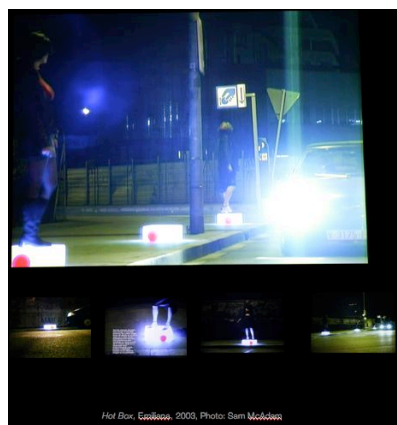
Contradictorily, as the third exhibition in the series, our increased understanding of how practice-led and practice-based research operate differently in art and design led to less clear definitions of practice-led and practice-based research. For example, if design's 'material' is understood as the use of a product, *Hot Box* can also be interpreted as an example of practice-led research that re-defines design as engaged primarily with the functions that design enables. Another work in *Connections* that contested our definitions dealt directly with design's relationship to issues of authorship. *Re-magazine* by Jop van Bennekom reworks the notions of originality and authorship and questions the most recent redefinition of authorship in design as a form of entrepreneurialism.[37] An issue, we noted in retrospect of both these works, is the problems of

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[35] Emily Howes 'Integration' *Object Magazine* No. 53 2007 p.46

[36] Victor & Sylvia Margolin 'Social Model of Design issues of practice and research' *Design Issues* vol. 17 no.3 Summer 2001 p.35-39 and Richard Buchanan 'Human Dignity Human Rights: Thoughts on the principals of human centred design' *Design Issues* vol. 17 no.3 summer 2001 p 35 – 39

[37] Steven Heller 'Better skills through better research' Audrey Bennett (Ed.) in *Design Studies* New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2006 p.11

displaying video projection and printed magazines. For us, this exhibition raised questions about distinguishing art and design research when it is exhibited in a gallery. While a gallery is a space of exception for designers where they can test out approaches without the constraints of a client, for artists, galleries are the sites of publication. The response to *Connections* by critic Heidi Dokolil positioned the curator as translator of the work.[38] This raises the difficulty in challenging standards of behaviour associated with galleries, for instance contemplation rather than inquiry, and demands

I-Cycle Bridge, Technological Dream Series #1 (Robots), Fourier Carpet, Photo: Sam McAdam

questions about whether research based exhibitions require dedicated spaces. We also suggest that an exhibition can also be a research methodology, rather than only a publication, as an exhibition is a public forum for testing approaches. [39] Lucy Lyons has explored exhibitions as publications and argued that when practice-led research is exhibited in a gallery it is often mistaken for art, and it is evaluated according to the conventions of art rather than those of research. That is, instead of being evaluated in terms of whether the research "communicates new knowledge,"[40] or according to the validity of the methods used, the work is assessed "in terms of what it looked like, style, process, and aesthetics".[41]
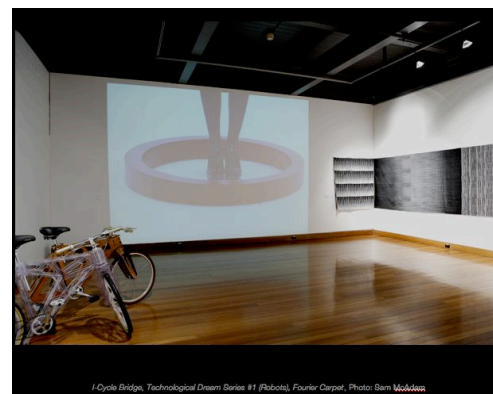
Conclusion

On the basis of our reflections on the insights that the exhibitions we have described provide, the terms of materiality, form and function, and authorship, vary according to the domains in which practitioners are involved. As a result of identifying some of the differences and convergences that practice-led and practice-based research share we suggest that it is necessary to consider alternative sites in which to publish research.[42] Perhaps COFA's exploration of the role exhibitions play in testing and disseminating research can be compared with exhibitions at other institutions so we, as practitioners working in universities, can

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[38] Heidi Dokolil 'Connections: Experimental Design. An interview with Katherine Moline' *Inside magazine,* Issue 48, 2007 As uncomfortable as this is, perhaps it is understandable given that all but one participant had not exhibited before in Australia, and indicate the perspectives audiences bring to work exhibited in galleries.

[39] Some institutions are establishing stand alone spaces in which to 'publish' their research endeavours, for example the D-Lab at UTS.

[40] Lucy Lyons ' Walls are not my friends: issues surrounding the dissemination of practice-led research within appropriate and relevant contexts' Working papers in Art and Design 4 Retrieved 14/08/07 from URL http//www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research/papers/wpades/vol4/llfull.html ISSN 1466-4917 p.5

[41] Lucy Lyons p.5. Whether or not Lyons' suggestions for alternatives for the exhibition of practice research in libraries or museums, or in alternative media such as a Microsoft Power Point bears fruit, we agree with her that the location of a exhibition is crucial.

[42] For example the Artspace publication series that publishes colloquium papers held in conjunction with the exhibition.

develop debate that might: question the 'trained incapacities' we are producing; consider the value of null hypothesis; and test the viability of dedicated spaces for research led practice. While distinguishing practice-led and practice-based research may seem preoccupied with semantics, our aim is to bring to the surface some of the unspoken but keenly felt assumptions we take for granted, and to reflect on the implications of the narrow terms of reference in the RQF for us as practitioners. We gratefully acknowledge that the opportunity to investigate how exhibitions might function as research would not have been possible without the confidence of the Head of the School of Design Studies Jacqueline Clayton, and the assistance of Annabel Pegus and Rilka Oakley at Ivan Dougherty Gallery.