

What is Artistic Research?

[Paulo de Assis's video](#) provides a great introduction to Artistic Research. In his view, Artistic Research merges the contrasting activities of the artist and the researcher: whereas the artist is concerned with making, imagination, experience, sensation, and the 'subjective production of new relationships', the researcher focus on analysing, measuring and giving meaning towards objectively articulating new knowledge. Artistic Research therefore lies at the intersection between making and analysing bringing together two distinct modes of operation (De Assis, 2020).

Artistic Research is a field in constant development where many different perspectives co-exist (Arlander and Bonenfant, [Introduction](#), Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020). It allows for a plurality of possibilities, where each project brings a unique set of potential directions for development and knowledge production. As Annette Arlander poses 'supporting differentiation actually rather than trying to create consensus, is important and valuable and helps in maintaining a healthy research environment' ([Principles of Artistic Research in Performance Doctorates](#), Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020). Thus, one of the challenges that doctoral students face is finding an appropriate methodology for their research, as students often need to develop their own methodologies.

Brad Haseman proposes Performative Research as a methodological paradigm for artistic practice as an alternative to qualitative and quantitative approaches, where practice leads the way for research outcomes to be expressed in performative or presentational forms as opposed to numbers or words (2006). His [article](#) may provide a good starting point for understanding how Artistic Research develops. You can find examples of previous Artistic Research projects in your field archived in institutional libraries, and a wider scope in the [Research Catalogue](#).

Artistic Research is:

- **Full of potential**

Artistic Research has the ability to unsettle current narratives of what a piece – written or performed – might be; creates spaces for otherwise hidden voices.

(Triona Ní Shíocháin, Envisioning the Future of Artistic Doctorates in Ireland, Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020)

- **The new avant-garde**

What once was called the Avant-Garde, that role is now in Artistic Research. To fundamentally rethink, to propose new practices, new ways of thinking about things is in our hands. (Paulo de Assis, Artistic Research in Music, Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020)

- **A space for failure**

If a PhD is pursued with rigour and passion it is very rare that the aesthetic product is 'bad'. However, when people create bad work, in other words work that isn't living up to a form of seemingly socially agreed measures of artistic quality, the person articulates the learning from that. (Yvon Bonenfant, Envisioning the Future of Artistic Doctorates in Ireland, Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020)

Doing an Artistic Research PhD

The way the plant looks with all the stems and parts going off of it, that's what my research process has been like. (...) It sums up my journey to date so well because there are so many things going off in different directions. (...) It's really hard to plan where the plant is going to grow next but it's kind of evolving all the time. (PhD Student, 2020)

The process of doing an Artistic Research PhD is often non-linear, iterative and exploratory, where each iteration of practice takes your thinking further and feeds into the next experiment. Throughout your degree, you will be constantly moving between practice, writing, performing /screening, and synthesising. You will engage with [creative practice](#) in whatever form that may take; with [forms of writing](#) to explore your thinking and engagement with the sources; you will [perform/screen](#) your work for an audience or a group of peers; and [synthesise and integrate](#) your learnings as you progress.

At the end of the doctorate, you will deliver one piece of work which embodies your argument and contribution to the field in the form of a written thesis and a portfolio of practice. The balance between writing and practice varies across institutions and fields. In Ireland, the written submission for Artistic Research doctorates ranges between 30.000 and 60.000 words, with 30–40.000 being the most common. Each institution has specific requirements around the practice, which may involve performances, concerts, or films (specific information on this is normally available in the course handbook or regulations).

You are expected to submit some form of the following for examination:

- **A written thesis** – the written component explores what emerged in an experiential / sensorial / reflective process as well as relevant contextual and theoretical materials. The length is outlined in the course regulations or decided in consultation with the supervisory team.
- **Artistic outputs** – performances, film, sound works, video-essays, scores, dances, exhibitions, artworks, software applications, audio-visual materials to name but a few. They are likely to be experienced live by an audience during your degree and by the examiners as part of your examination.
- **Documentation** – a portfolio documenting your artistic production and/or your process. This may be in the form of digital documentation of practice (for example, a USB with video recordings of performances, a website or a DVD) or a physical portfolio such as a book of photographs of events or of the process.

Whilst these may appear to be fragmented and are often addressed through the dichotomy of theory and practice, you will submit one coherent body of work that together represents the contribution to knowledge of your research to the field.

Principles of an Artistic Research PhD

The mindset to try new things and keep trying new things. When I started, I tried to take a very flat path. If I could give myself advice I'd say just be as open minded and experimental as possible. Because it's just a beginning of a marathon. (PhD student, 2020)

Three key principles guide the Artistic Research PhD:

- **Rigour in intellectual and creative practice**

Artistic Research PhDs follow the same rigorous intellectual standards as traditional desk-based research. They integrate Artistic Research processes and practices into the overall project, where the practice often embodies the research outcomes.

It is really important that we can showcase the intellectual rigour of the research. I also think it is important to do that from the outset – to explain to a candidate what's expected of the PhD – it is a really challenging life experience in many ways. (staff member, 2020)

- **The role of practice in advancing knowledge**

An Artistic Research PhD is best suited to address questions that cannot be answered by other means beyond practice. Whilst the form and role of creative practice can take many shapes, in an artistic doctorate, the practice has a strong input in the advancement of knowledge. Ideally, the practice brings forth a contribution to knowledge 'in ways that cannot be embodied in words or in traditional writing' (staff member, 2020). Often the process of making and/or the artistic outputs reveal the innovative aspects of the research and embed the contribution to the field.

One area I love and am interested in is studio practice, how we integrate the rigour of doctoral study with our creative practice tools. I feel that the artistic practice should inform things like methodology and tools that are used. And

that's where the innovation can often lie. It's quite an exciting space. (staff member, 2020)

- **A process driven by artistic practice**

Creative practice can often lead the research process, where each iteration of practice informs and guides the pathway, refining the research to reveal what is essential and what is secondary. Building in time to reflect, to write and to critically examine the practice before embarking on the next iteration allows the process to unfold productively.

I think it's important if that can lead. That this knowledge base [practice] which can be so profound and detailed, that that is the thing that can lead the process to some degree. (staff member, 2020)

For an overview of principles of Artistic Research in performing arts, see [Annette Arlander's](#) rich exposition of tensions within the artistic doctorate.

Proposals for Action: Reflection on Practice

What is important is that the practice forms the core modality of the investigation. (Vida Midgelow, Looking Forward: Artistic Doctorates in Dance and Movement Practices, Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020)

Considering your doctoral research project:

- **Which strategies can you use to cultivate reflection in your practice?**

If you don't have a practice diary notebook, consider getting one and building in space to reflect, draw, think within your creative practice. What other strategies can you implement? Consider recording voice memos or building in time at the start or the end of a practice session to reflect. If you work with other practitioners, for example, in rehearsal situations, consider embedding dialogical reflections. They can be guided starting with general opening questions such as 'how

did you find that?’ and then focussing on particular aspects that you want to explore / reflect on collectively. Experiment with distinct approaches and see what works best for you.

- **What is the role of practice in your study?**

Your artistic practice can take many different roles and it will feed into or embody your research contribution to knowledge to some degree. Reflecting on the role of practice can help you to understand how your creative work and critical reflection inform one another.

- *Strategy 1: Bring a relevant excerpt of text from your sources to your practice session.* Place it in parallel with your most recent work / work in progress – for example, perform a section of your piece or watch a film edit you are working on, and read the excerpt right after.
 1. What does that text mean in the context of your creative practice?
 2. How does the work you are making relate to this piece of text?
 3. Why is your practice important in your project, and what does it bring to it?
 4. If you are compelled to, return to your practice to develop a small experiment in response to your emerging reflections.
- *Strategy 2: at the end of a practice session, reflect on the following:*
 1. What did I just do?
 2. How does that relate with the last thing I read / analysed / wrote / explored in thinking?

Return to these reflective exercises periodically to develop an understanding of the relationships between different elements in your work and the role of practice in your research.

- **How might your practice lead your Artistic Research PhD?**

A Recipe for wondering about what leads:

1. Bring to mind a recent aspect of your artistic practice.
2. Recall where and how it started.
3. What was it about this theme / form / idea that compelled you?
4. What patterns do you notice about how you make work?
5. How does this relate to other forms of written research you may have been involved in?
6. In your own experience, do you start with the creative idea or does the creative idea emerge from forms of research?
7. What is in the driving seat?

Consider how your practice may be the driver of the project and how that process evolves.

[> For Artistic Research PhD Students](#)

We tend to think of the artistic process as a non-linear road, but often, there are certain activities we return to. Reflecting on how your practice develops, and how your research unfolds provides you steady ground in what appears to be an unknown journey.

Resources

See the [Bibliography](#) for more resources on Artistic Research.

[Artistic Doctorates in Europe](#)

[Advancing Supervision for Artistic Research Doctorates](#)

Arlander, A. (2019) 'What do we mean by Artistic Research? Some Nordic perspectives on artistic doctorates'. Available at: <https://www.artisticdoctorates.com/2019/07/29/what-do-we-mean-by-artistic-research-some-nordic-perspectives-on-artistic-doctorates-by-annette-arlander-uniarts-stockholm/>