

# Keeping it Visual:

## The Studio-based PhD

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Since America finally entered the debate about studio-based PhDs in the visual arts, books, magazine articles and conference halls have filled with discussion on the topic. Every conceivable point of view has been put forward: some urge a total re-think of the whole university system, in addition to the art school's place within it; others urge an expansion of how we define 'research'; and yet others, such as Professor Robert Storr at Yale, deny that artists do, or should do, research at all.

Most of us know what it is like when a department or school goes through that death by a thousand cuts known as a 'restructure'. Every faculty member puts forward their own utopian vision of how an art school should be run and in the end nothing can be decided upon, which is usually just as well because management has probably decided already. It is a little like that with the whole PhD debate. Many, although by no means all, who lead the debate in print come from a 'theory' background and see theory as making up a large part of the studio-based PhD submission. I argue that many of those theoreticians have never fully understood that art is a language in its own right, like music or mathematics, and arguments can be made in paint and through drawing and photography, or in the physicality of matter (sculpture, installation art) without recourse to words. The new knowledge produced is contained within the physicality and idea of the artwork, not in the text that accompanies it, although the text is very useful (especially to the examiner) as an explanation, or *exegesis*, to the studio-based research. The revolutionary work of the Impressionists, for example, was argued through paint on canvas, not as text on paper which at some later date would be translated into *tâches* of paint on canvas. Indeed, it was imperative that words be kept out of the artist's head as much as possible so that *visual thinking* could occur. Significantly, the methodology of the artist is driven by trial and error and is profoundly reliant on 'process' as well as speculation, or asking the question 'what if?'

Art historians and theorists generally arrive after the messiness of the primal event and are thus well placed to apply a disciplined methodology to the interpretation of not just the artwork but the society through which the artist lived. Artists should of course be exposed to these theories while at art school, but most, in truth, go well beyond the confines of postcolonial theory, or deconstruction, or queer theory, in the search for inspiration, and feel themselves free to construct artworks from any and all aspects of this strange universe in which we find ourselves: from biochemistry and animal behaviourism to systems theories, the psycho-geography of the city, or the vagaries of the stock market. All are grist to the artist's research mill and should be encouraged.



Our language is visual. My mantra for artists, and for research programs, has always been KEEP IT VISUAL. We are artists, not scholars, or musicians, or mathematicians. Some say our studio research has more resonances with the scientist's laboratory than with the interpretive studies of the art historian, yet our outcomes are not scientific, they are poetic, or socially reflective, and relate to the human condition in its entirety.

Artistic production is often at its most exciting and subversive before it has been named or had theories built around it. In the early 1970s, John A. Walker's *Art Since Pop* described the work of minimalist sculptors, performance artists, and a new breed of thinker/maker to be called Conceptual artists that included Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Beuys. These new and not yet understood movements were thus initially defined by what they were not, i.e., they were not Pop Art. So in a weird Rumsfeldian way, when we are talking about artists undertaking doctoral research we are talking about 'Unknown Unknowns'. It is not so important that artists develop a disciplined methodology as that they discover and develop their own visual language, a 'personal methodology', that is disciplined according to its own internal structure (as numerous artists – Cy Twombly, Imants Tillers, Emily Kngwarray, Douglas Gordon, Hany Armanious and Rosalie Gascoigne – have all done).

My own journey into the PhD debate began in the mid-1990s. At different times I have been a sceptic, an evangelist, a candidate, a supervisor, and an examiner. Now, I see myself as an optimistic realist and like to think that the bottle is at least half-full and acceptably drinkable.

Australia has led the way in studio-based PhDs, the UK followed a few years later, and now America is eyeing the



water nervously. Which brings me back to the wide range of books currently available on the topic. One of the interesting and satisfying things is the contribution that Australia has made to the international debate. The recently released *Artists with PhDs* is edited by James Elkins, Professor of Art History at the Art Institute of Chicago. The first part of it contains eleven quite contradictory essays ranging from Timothy Emlyn Jones's 'Research Degrees in Art and Design', to Charles Harrison's 'When Management Speaks', to Hilde Van Gelder's 'The Future of the Doctorate in the Arts', to James Elkins himself, 'The Three Configurations of Studio-Art PhDs'. Part Two is comprised of examples of different PhDs from around the world and of the eight reproduced five are Australian candidates: Jo-Anne Duggan, University of Technology, Sydney; Sue Lovegrove, Australian National University, Canberra; Frank Thirion, Australian National University; Ruth Waller, Australian National University; and Christl Berg, University of Tasmania, Hobart. The remaining three come from Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts, London, and Slade School of Art.

Turning to *Art Practice as Research* from Sage Publications in California, we find contributions from a range of COFA (UNSW) staff including Joanna Mendelssohn and the late Nick Waterlow, Anne Graham (University of Newcastle) and Jayne Dyer. In *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, from The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada, we have a book that is totally international in content and edited by Brad Buckley and John Conomos from Sydney College of the Arts. Other contributors include Sue Baker and Edward Colless, both from the Victorian College of the Arts and Music.

The contributors to some of these books totally understand what visual arts research is, notably in *Thinking Through Practice*. Others show that twinned with the danger of not understanding that art production is a form of research, is the other danger of not understanding what a PhD is. The most useful book in the list above is *How to get a PhD, a handbook for students and their supervisors* by Estelle M. Phillips and Derek S. Pugh, now in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Open University Press, 2005). It is full of very good practical advice to candidates and supervisors on such topics as 'Managing your Supervisor', but it is in the wonderfully titled chapter on 'How Not to Get A PhD' that we find section-headings that relate to some of the mistakes made by some of the authors of *Artists with PhDs*. 'Not understanding the PhD by overestimating what is required' is followed by one called 'Not understanding the PhD by underestimating what is required', and the next, sadly very important, section, 'Not having a supervisor who knows what a PhD requires'.

Many overestimate the issue of 'originality'. This book puts it into perspective, and lists fifteen quite separate ways in which a candidate can be original. They only need to satisfy one of these (even in an otherwise pedestrian presentation) to be awarded the PhD. These include:

Setting down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time [or for painters I would include 'on canvas for the first time'; 'on a cave wall for the first time'; 'in a new material for the first time'];

Continuing a previously original piece of work [perhaps Damien Hirst extending Jeff Koons's use of objects suspended in glass tanks];

Showing originality in testing somebody else's idea [Michael Landy re-visiting Ives Tinguely, for example];

Being cross-disciplinary and using different methodologies [the i-cinema collaboration between the College of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Engineering at UNSW, notably in the work of Denis del Favero];

Taking a particular technique and applying it in a new area [Gary Carsley laminating images onto IKEA furniture for the 2009 Singapore Biennale].

It is worth repeating that a candidate need only be successful in one of the fifteen ways of showing originality to satisfy the doctoral award, and you can find the other ten ways on page 62 of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of this remarkable book.

Elsewhere Phillips and Pugh caution: 'You may hear people telling you about the "ideal" length of thesis. Pay no attention. A thesis should be no longer than it needs to be in order to report what you have done, why you did it, and what you have concluded from the results of your work. Don't be impressed by theses that run to two volumes: it is often (correctly) said that a lot is written to obscure the fact that little has been achieved.'

I once asked a research scientist what was the shortest PhD he had seen and he replied: 'About two or three pages. There was an equation and its justification – in fact, the examiners' reports were longer than the PhD itself.' So while the PhD is a universal award it is presented in many different ways. The written component for a studio PhD might range from 10,000 to 40,000 words. The studio component might be as large as a Christo wrapped coastline or as small as an Indian miniature. It is the rigour of the PhD combined with the new knowledge, and the conclusions drawn, that are important.

*How to get a PhD* states quite clearly that a PhD is a research training exercise, the outcome of which 'should allow you to examine the PhDs of others with authority'. It is the start of your research career, not the culmination of a life-time's work.



There are too many good things about this book to recount them all in a single essay. Chapter 6 is extremely useful in which the 'form' of the PhD is examined, using analogies with music. As a sonata is a broad but particular form of music, so too, the authors explain, is the PhD a particular form of research. 'Since not all research conforms to it,' they contend, 'you have to be aware of what the elements of its forms are'.

I first entered the debate in 1995 when I wrote an article for this magazine called 'Is There a Doctor in the Art School?' (AMA, No 84, October 1995). I received requests for photocopies of it from overseas, from academics in Canada, the UK, and America. And I was challenged to do one myself by Terry Batt at RMIT University, one of several around the world that were already offering fledgling doctoral programs. I've now been through the process as a candidate, a supervisor, and an examiner. In almost all cases I've been impressed by the extraordinary high standards of not just the studio research and studio supervision but the quality of the writing found in the written component or exegesis.

One piece of advice for candidates is, 'Don't expect your examiners to be mind readers'. Tell them upfront what your research questions are, and return to them in the Conclusion. These might be listed as bullet points somewhere in the Introduction. It is quite proper that these questions will change during the course of your project. In the Conclusion you might, for example, say that Question 2 dropped out altogether, while two new questions arose out of Question 3. The examiners will see that your research has evolved between the start and the finish and that, importantly, you have not been trying to predict the outcomes of your research.

It is also useful to state near the beginning what your research is not about. Somewhere in the text you may use several case studies looking at the work of others in the field and locating your own research in relation to theirs. This helps examiners to locate the breadth of your knowledge. Sketchbooks and journals are also important ways of showing the development of your research. Much of the first third of your PhD you will spend collecting information and doing a thorough 'library search'. For visual researchers this means looking at what exhibitions have been mounted, globally, in your field as much as it means being aware of texts published in books. In the final third of your PhD you might feel overwhelmed with information and source material. Try and have a mental cut-off point as to where this project ends and the next one(s) begin. As someone once said, the sign of good research is that two questions now exist where only one existed previously. So keep a box-file or sketchbook for 'future projects' and look forward to



P6/ Yvette Watt, *Second Sight* series, 2008/8, gicleé print on Hahnemuehle photo rag paper, 65 x 58cm; clockwise from top left: sheep, cow, chicken, pig.

1/ Brigita Ozolins, *Look On*, 2005, mirrored Perspex, 175cm x 900cm x 3mm. Installation view, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Ten Days on the Island Festival.

2/ James Newitt and Justy Phillips, *write/here*, 2005-07, 27 billboards installed around Hobart between 1-10 April, 2007.

p7: 1/ Meg Keating, *Her name is Tan Hua*, 2007, performance installation with Mei Kuang Li, Taipei Artist Village, Taiwan. Image courtesy of the artist and Criterion Gallery, Hobart.

2/ Wayne Brooks, *Pozzo's prophecy*, 2007, acrylic on board, 90 x 120cm. All images this article are courtesy the artists, who all hold PhDs.

the continuation of your research career.

Keep it visual. Be Curious. And, as Samuel Beckett said: 'Fail. Fail again. Fail better.' ■

#### Background reading:

Estelle M. Phillips and Derek S. Pugh, *How to get a PhD, a handbook for students and their supervisors* (4th edition), Open University Press, 2005.

James Elkins (ed.), *Artists with PhDs, on the new doctoral degree in Studio Art*, New Academia Publishing, 2009.

Steven Henry Madoff (ed.), *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2009.

John Conomos and Brad Buckley (eds), *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School, the artist, the PhD, and the academy*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2009.

Lesley Duxbury, Elizabeth M. Grierson, and Diane Waite (eds), *Thinking Through Practice, art as research in the academy*, RMIT Publishing, Melbourne, 2008.

Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds), *Practice as Research, approaches to creative arts enquiry*, I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd, New York, 2007.

Rowena Murray, *How to Survive your Viva*, Open University Press, England, 2003.

Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research, inquiry in visual arts* (2nd edition), Sage, California, 2010.

Robert Nelson, *The Jealousy of Ideas, research methods in the visual arts*, www.writing-pad.ac.uk, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2009.

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