

THE STUDIO AS STUDY: REFLECTIONS ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES IN FINE ART

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ABSTRACT: This article joins the debate on the exact nature of the doctorate in fine art, a well-established qualification in some countries but more recent venture across art schools in the United Kingdom and the United States. Taking as a starting point the experience of establishing and developing the doctoral programme of the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at the University of Oxford, I address questions of the overall rationale for the introduction of this research degree, the integration of fine art graduate programmes within the research environment of larger academic institutions, as well as the orientation and components of doctoral projects. A further question that is raised is the danger of loss of autonomy and the excessive academicization of artistic practice and its potential deterioration into illustration of theoretical ideas.

KEYWORDS: art and research; doctorate in fine art; art school; doctoral programmes

The Doctorate in Fine Art, known in the English-speaking world as 'practice-led PhD' or 'studio PhD',² is new to some of us and well-established elsewhere. As more art schools are joining this

¹ What may come across as English-speaking bias — which merely reflects the author's greater familiarity with, and engagement in, this particular segment of debates on the fine art doctorate — will hopefully serve as an invitation to enrich the debate from more perspectives, bringing in the experience of programmes as they are run in Brazil or France.

² Decisions concerning the choice of terms are fraught with difficulties. "Practice-led" aims to highlight the primacy of artistic practice, but also seems to involve the implicit assumption that practice 'leads' in some unclear way any theoretical investigation, which accordingly would be subordinated to it, while "Studio-PhD" seems to employ an outdated term in the post-studio era. In addition, the persistence of applying the antiquated term 'fine art' is open to criticism.

venture (sometimes succumbing to institutional pressures to align themselves with existing frameworks across other departments of the university and to produce 'research' for assessment purposes, as for example those exerted by various incarnations of the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK) while others are considering its introduction, the debate on its exact nature has been, once again, gaining momentum. This is reflected in the proliferation of publications on the topic.³ In a recent volume, entitled *Artists with PhDs: On the new Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, James Elkins, an outspoken defender of the claim that the term research is inapplicable to artistic practice,⁴ has put together a number of theoretical essays on the new doctorate, including proposals for different kinds of such programmes,⁵ together with case studies that analyse specific PhD projects currently underway in Australia and the UK. The conclusions are moderately encouraging at best. Writing ahead of the introduction of the PhD programme at his own home institution, the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, where it would complement the well-established MFA programme, Elkins concludes by rehearsing some possible objections in a passage that is worth quoting in full: "And besides — you may say — how many MFA students are capable of serious research? Or if you don't like the word 'research', then how many can write 50,000 or 100,000

³ See indicatively: Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds.) *Artistic Research*, Rodopi: Amsterdam and New York, 2004; Katy McLeod and Lin Holdridge (eds) *Thinking through Art: Critical Reflections on Emerging Research*, Routledge: London 2005; Lesley Duxbury, Elizabeth M. Grierson, Dianne Waite (eds), *Thinking through Practice: Art as Research in the Academy*, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Publishing: Melbourne, 2007; Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, University of Edinburgh Press: Edinburgh, 2009; Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds.) *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, I. B. Tauris: London, 2010. See also, the special issue of *Working Papers in Art and Design* 1.1 (November 2000).

⁴ James Elkins (ed.) *Artists with PhDs: On the new Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, New Academia Publishing, 2009. See also Elkins, 'Theoretical Remarks on Combined Creative and Scholarly PhD Degrees in the Visual Arts' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 38.4 (Winter 2004), 22-31. Following Charles Harrison (see note 7 below), Elkins has argued that the term 'research' is inappropriate, having entered the vocabulary of PhD programmes through administrative jargon. Regarding 'production of knowledge' as a companion term, which is equally problematic, Elkins finds the jargon both unnecessary and misguided.

⁵ See Victor Burgin's paper 'Thoughts on Research Degrees in Visual Arts Departments' in Elkins (ed.) *Artists with PhDs*.

words on any subject? And look what happened in the UK: some PhD-granting institutions are interesting, but many are a kind of prolonged MFA, with students just sitting in their studios for another two or three years, producing more of the same art, navel-gazing, trying to achieve a pinnacle of self-awareness that may or may not make their work more interesting.”⁶

In the UK, one of the earliest and most frequently cited conceptualisations of the possibility of art as research in an academic context dates back to 1993, when Christopher Frayling, Rector of the Royal College of Art, unravelled some initial thoughts in a brief paper entitled *Research in Art and Design*, putting forth the claim that research “has been, can be and will continue to be an important, perhaps the most important nourishment for the practice and teaching of art, craft and design”.⁷ At the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum, however, the applicability of the term ‘research’ to artistic practice is fiercely contested. A forceful attack can be found in a paper given by Charles Harrison, just over a decade ago, under the telling title ‘When Management Speaks’ (derived from a slogan coined by the conceptual group Art & Language). Tracing the origins of this terminology in the frameworks introduced by institutional research assessment and arguing forcefully that these assessment processes and the forms of self-institutionalisation they require are incompatible with the moral character of research, Harrison describes the “embarrassing or sad” situation arising as a result of the confluence of interests between “those who are eager for political reasons, to encourage so-called research in art and those artists employed as teachers in higher education — whether they may be dedicated but deluded, or trapped and desperate — who need to defend the credibility of increase the funding of their departments”.⁸

Harrison refers to “mystificatory research projects” and to the questionable reconceptualisation of theory as research: “The irony of this situation”, he wrote then, “is that those who argued for the

critical relevance of Art Theory thirty years ago did so in explicit opposition to the mystificatory equation of artistic practice with research. Theory is, I think, of some merit in the arts as critique and as a form of insurgency — and it is best left alone by funding bodies.”⁹ And continues: “It may also be true that the mushrooming of Art Theory as a quasi-academic subject will in the end offer some opportunities for rigorous if generally very tedious study. However, it has to be said that most of what passes for Art Theory at present is a little better than low intensity Social History of Art or heavy-breathing Cultural Studies. This notwithstanding, nobody should be deluded that they can now reproduce as matters of institutional convenience those exotic and highly contingent circumstances under which it made sense thirty years ago for Art Theory to be pursued as a critical form of art practice.”¹⁰

A good number of years after these statements and five years after the introduction of the DPhil in Fine Art at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, the Fine Art Department of the University of Oxford, this seems like a good standpoint to reflect on our experience, the challenges and aspirations that fuel a programme that still feels quite new and, thankfully, resists precise definition. In the process of establishing the programme, we took into account our strengths, our institutional idiosyncracies, and also our restrictions. The Ruskin is a small art school, the size of its undergraduate programme being dictated in certain respects by the requirements of the Oxford tutorial system, which relies on one-to-one tuition across disciplines. The ‘Ruskin model’ is that a closely-knit community, and the DPhil programme reflected a desire to preserve this. The greatest advantage at our disposal was that the Ruskin, unlike many other art schools, is part of a major research university. This also implied that the programme would be embedded within a broad pre-existing research framework and a set of established academic regulations, which allowed limited margins of adjustment. But in terms of running the programme, identifying and mobilising the relevant areas of research expertise by establishing interdisciplinary and interdepartmental links has been a fascinating exercise. From its inception, the programme fostered collaboration and knowledge exchange patterns with a number of university departments, research centres and museums. The immediately recognisable status of the

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Elkins, ‘Brief Conclusions’ in *Artists with PhDs*, op.cit.

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Christopher Frayling, ‘Research in Art and Design’ in *Royal College of Art Papers in Art and Design* 1.1 (1993-4), 4. See also his more recent ‘Research degrees in art and design — why do people have problems with them?’, delivered as a lecture at the Royal College of Art in 2006.

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Charles Harrison, ‘When Management Speaks’ in *Research and the Artist: Considering the Role of the Art School*, ed. Antonia Payne, published by the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford 2000, p. 65.

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Harrison, op. cit., p. 66.

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Ibid.

'artist in residence' was invoked as a model that lent clarity to this process of gentle infiltration of diverse institutional contexts by Ruskin doctoral students. With major points of reference, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Ashmolean Museum, and Modern Art Oxford, and research centres ranging from the Wellcome Trust to the Future of Humanity Institute or the Centre for Environmental Studies, as well as the availability of research conducted within the neighbouring disciplines of the Humanities and across the social and natural sciences (with neuroscience, medical imagery and biotechnology rapidly establishing themselves as focal points of interest for artists), the possibilities of interdisciplinary exchanges have proven to be remarkably wide-ranging. In practice, this process has also presented a challenge that is endemic to all conceptualisations of art practice in terms of interdisciplinary research: How are the outcomes of these interdisciplinary excursions to be imported back to the studio and how are they to inform art practice? The problem was not novel, for it underlies all 'art-science' projects, which by now have become an established component of contemporary practices. One theoretical attempt to prove a strong affinity between art and science has been made by the former Professor of Art History at Oxford, Martin Kemp. Relying on the concept of 'visualization', Kemp theorised the process whereby artists and scientists structure reality in terms of shared 'structural intuitions'.¹¹ He describes these as structures of inner intuitive processes that are shared by artists and scientists, leading to the articulation of 'acts of seeing'. Acts of seeing (of realities outside us), Kemp has argued, are structured in terms of "existing deposits of perceptual experience, pre-established criteria of interpretation, new and old acts of naming and classification, the physical parameters of our sensory apparatus and above all (and underlying all) deep structures operating at a pre- or sub- verbal level".¹²

If this is true, then it provides an explanation as to why artists and scientists may visualise the world in analogous ways (and the essays in *Visualizations* give ample evidence of surprising overlaps of image and intuition). This strong model may indeed apply in some cases, but in more general terms, all that is arguably reasonable to expect from the interaction with science is an artistic response — a response rather than an interpretation.

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Martin Kemp, *Seen/Unseen: Art, science and intuition from Leonardo to the Hubble telescope*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2006. Also, M. Kemp, *Visualizations: The Nature Book of Art and Science*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001.

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Kemp, *Visualizations*, 1.

The vagueness of this open-ended term poses a further problem for the conceptualisation of artistic practice as research in these interdisciplinary cases. If we were to agree to characterise it as such, what sort of research would it be? Clearly, it would not operate along a continuum with primary scientific research. Nor would it involve illustration and hence the visual popularisation of science. Rather, research would be embedded within artistic practice, which would in turn aspire to the model of a research programme. Inevitably, the need arises to seek precedents. Leonardo's experimentation, cutting across the boundaries of art and science, offers a distinguished paradigm — to be sharply differentiated from the academic obsession with anatomy that has formed the backbone of Beaux-Arts training for too long. Studies in perspective and their visual implementation offer a further precedent, whereas another example can be found in the idea of analytical cubism as a research programme. More recently, David Hockney's experimentation with the camera obscura and the direct application of these experiments to contemporary portraiture¹³ provides a contemporary example of art as research. A further challenge is presented by the nature of writing involved. In this respect, the main options, which have been explored by different programmes, appear to be three: (a) creative writing, (b) reflections on practice, and (c) academic writing. The first two often represent the kind of writing involved also in a number of MFA programmes. At the Ruskin, at least in the first phase of the development of the DPhil programme, both these kinds of writing were encouraged, but, crucially, they were regarded as part of the studio output. It was acknowledged that studio work may involve an element of *textual practice*, which could be quite substantial and the nature of which falls under the broad heading of creative writing; and that the conceptualisation of the project may rely on a written exploration of various aspects of the practice, which may extend well beyond the merely explanatory and may generate highly accomplished pieces of writing. From the perspective of the Ruskin programme, neither of these can be channelled into the thesis. The precise definition of the nature of the thesis itself, however, remains open-ended. Aside from stipulating that it should fit into the overall research project, providing some form of contextualisation for the practice (and specifying its length as 40,000 words), there are no further specifications. Experience has shown that the distinctive, internal understanding of artistic practices that artists have can

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David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, Thames & Hudson: London, 2006.

generate excellent pieces of art criticism. This would indicate that the context of practices that share common objectives or somehow operate in a similar vein to one's own is an obvious choice in terms of a thesis topic — although this kind of sustained and lengthy engagement with the work of others could prove counterproductive in different ways. Defining one's practice against that of others, becoming too analytical about matters that are close to one's own creative activity, or too critical of strands of practice that may have close affinities to one's own, heightening an awareness of dead ends to be avoided, all these are some of the potential difficulties that may arise from extensive theoretical engagement with closely-related artistic practices and could conceivably inhibit practice by making it excessively self-conscious.

Another obvious context is that of ideas. In this case, the thesis would address broad ideological and intellectual contexts, which are of relevance to the practice. In this capacity, it would most likely interact with historical, philosophical or literary disciplines and with certain social sciences, such as ethnography, anthropology, cultural geography — to name but a few. A whole set of challenging methodological issues arise in relation to these patterns of interaction. For within these disciplines, discussions of topics that may come across initially as of general interest, quickly become highly specialised. How can it be ensured that rigorous writing is produced when interacting with a discipline in which one has no formal training? What standards are to be applied? And how is the topic to be approached methodologically? The guiding principle is that this is determined empirically and on a case-by-case basis, with specialised supervision playing a key role in circumnavigating some of the most difficult to resolve issues. In all cases, one is constrained by the critical standards applicable to the existing discourse: it is not possible to engage, for example, with analytic philosophy without using sustained argumentation or to address a problem formulated within the social history of art without drawing upon that particular methodological framework if only in order to transcend it.

The prevailing objection to all the above is that the doctorate in fine art relies upon — and inevitably leads to — excessive academicization of artistic practice. There is an element of truth in this. But even if aspects of the project may be dominated by academic work, the practice itself should build strong defences against any potential academicization. The imminent danger is that of deteriorating to some form of illustration of theoretical ideas; and also, of loss of intrinsic interest, ultimately of loss of autonomy. There is a fine balance to be achieved: the practice is complemented by the 'academic' component (the term 'academic' being used here for

lack of a better work since 'theory' imposes a dichotomy between theory and practice that remains deeply problematic), while at the same time emphatically asserting its independence.

The long and diverse tradition of artists' writings provides an interesting field of comparison. A number of prominent examples come to mind: Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Joseph Kosuth, Art & Language, Gerhard Richter, and Jeff Wall, to mention but a few, all have engaged in a strong textual practice.¹⁴ Jeff Wall who is widely described as "an artist who writes" (a somewhat strange-sounding description) has been quizzed about his writing in a number of interviews.¹⁵ His understanding of his writing practice is particularly interesting: he describes it as a parallel activity — and it is this mode of existing in parallel, while at the same time being part of an organic whole, that applies precisely to one understanding at least of the written thesis component of the PhD in fine art. Interestingly, in most of these cases the writings engage with ideas within the wider context of artistic practices and do not indulge in subjective reflections or creative literary modes. At the same time, their length is that of an essay rather than an extensive thesis, and thus, regarding them as precedents lends support to the written aspects of doctoral projects in certain respects and perhaps not in others. The best recommendation is to keep matters open-ended, retaining as much flexibility as possible in the definition of the thesis, bearing in mind that for every artistic project there are numerous alternative thesis topics that can be pursued productively, and that in the best of cases, they may even stimulate the artistic practice, although, crucially, the patterns are likely to be implicit and complex.

In all cases, doctoral programmes would ideally provide rich intellectual contexts, importing as many ideas as possible from their surrounding research environment. A vital infrastructure of

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See Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, University of California Press, 1996; Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Complete Writings of Robert Morris*, MIT Press, 1991; Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy' (1969) in *Art After Philosophy and After*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass 1993; Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, London: Thames & Hudson 1995; Jeff Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007.

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See, for example, 'Writing on Art: Interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-Francois Chevrier' in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*.

research seminars, work-in-progress seminars, invited lectures and artists' talks, as well as the establishment of numerous research and artistic networks and collaborations supports this effort. From the early stages of establishing the Ruskin doctoral programme, we aimed to cultivate the potential of its most distinctive characteristic: the fact that it encompasses two strands. The practice-led DPhil co-exists together with the theoretical DPhil, officially known as 'DPhil by thesis only' – the nomenclature being indicative of the difficulties that arise in trying to define its nature, in particular when it involves the term 'theory'. Both strands are emphatically parts of the same context and academic infrastructure. The theoretical DPhil (to revert to this shorthand term in order to distinguish it from the practice-led doctorate) is of course familiar academic territory. The attraction of pursuing theoretical doctoral research in an art school, as opposed to a specialised university department, arises from the high level of specialisation in contemporary art but also with the fact that the interdisciplinary ethos of the contemporary art school (where the generic concept of art has to a large extent superseded older divisions among artistic categories)¹⁶ offers an environment that encourages research that is less constrained by a preoccupation with disciplinary boundaries. Doctoral researchers who pursue this route are often motivated by a desire for interdisciplinarity that regards the constraints of having to operate within a clearly delineated territory of a specific academic discipline as unconstructive. This does not mean that the methodological issues arising within interdisciplinary research are avoided. On the contrary, they are confronted right at the outset and continuously since, generating an ongoing meta-level, second-order debate that is particularly productive. Furthermore, the two strands engage in a mutually corrective and mutually enhancing dialogue: the artists subject their work and ideas to the critical scrutiny not only of fellow artists but also of theorists who approach it from a diverse and sometimes unexpected standpoints; and in turn, the theorists are 'not allowed' to become too detached, but have their ideas subjected to the sometimes unforgiving reality-check of the studio. The outcome in both cases is highly constructive – and even offers the potential to generate joint research activity and collaborative curatorial projects.

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An interesting, and idiosyncratic, genealogy of the transition to the generic concept of art can be found in Thierry de Duve's, *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press: Cambridge Mass, 1996.

The oblique reference to Daniel Buren's critique of institutional frameworks in 'The Function of the Studio'¹⁷ in my title points to the idiosyncratic redeployment of the studio as a study in the era of 'artists with doctorates'. Describing the studio as an ivory tower, Buren argued that it is linked to the museum and the gallery "to form the foundation of the same edifice and the same system".¹⁸ In its reinvention as a study, the studio could not be more of an ivory tower. While this may be subjected to new strands of institutional critique, at a different level it is simply something to be aware of. The doctorate in fine art offers a different matrix of possibilities for artists who are interested in a sustained engagement with academic life. One of the biggest challenges it poses lies in striking the right balance between engagement and distancing, in retaining the vitality of art and not getting too comfortable inside the ivory tower, since, just like other forms of intellectual activity, art suffers when it takes itself too seriously.

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Daniel Buren, 'The Function of the Studio', *October 10* (Autumn 1979), 51-9. For a collection of diverse approaches on the artist's studio, see Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner (eds.) *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2010. Press: Cambridge Mass, 1996.

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Buren, 'The Function of the Studio', 51.



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