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Practice as Research Approaches Critical Mass in Academe

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Artefacts, images and the other outputs of practice-based research help define the difference of the arts from traditional research disciplines through the perceived plurality of the possible interpretations they offer. Resistance to accepting the validity of practice-based work in universities stems in part from the difficulty in those disciplines outside the arts conceiving of any assessment protocols that involve critical judgment based on individually developed agendas that include affective and intellectual elements. Several years ago James Elkins expressed doubts that a "critical mass of writing might help re-attach studio art practice to the university" and warned against the assumption that new discourses, concepts, theories, or methods would meliorate the problem. (Elkins, ed. 2005: 42) After more than a decade supervising studio-art Doctoral projects in Australian universities, I find some sympathy with his view. This is not to say, however, that I share Elkins pessimism since I believe creative arts research will find a place among the leading disciplines in academe. It is already the fastest growing area of Doctoral research in Australian universities with creative arts projects forming a significant percentage of RHD candidates in many universities. To achieve greater recognition for practice as research in academe I propose that the locus of attention should be shifted from the analysis of methodology or process to an emphasis on outcome and interpretation. The imperative to demonstrate the validity of the creative research being carried out using a myriad of different approaches, models and mediums no longer exists since in Australia we now have a significant number of different, successful, rigorous and insightful Doctoral research submissions that are sufficient to demonstrate the quality and value of work in the creative fields. It is also becoming clear that a range of sustainable theoretical positions are being articulated. Significantly, these are often in texts that have not been initiated by a desire to justify a place for art production in the university. Instead, they have been generated by a focus on the interpretation of contemporary art and its significance.

While the methodology of practice-based research can be made to mimic the qualitative nature of humanities research and the intuitive, experimental material manipulations of science, research outputs in the visual and performing arts are different to those in both the humanities and sciences precisely because the new insights are embodied in contingent experience of object, image or event. Much time and effort has been invested in establishing the validity of the methodology used by practice-based researchers, mostly by finding equivalences to established models. In this paper I position my argument against what I see as continuing tendencies to deny the distinctive differences in creative research and against clear trends to bring conformity to the inherently heterogeneous practices of creative research.

In the past decade several hundred studio-based researchers have been awarded Doctoral Degrees from Australian university-based art schools. It might come as surprise to discover how different these PhD submissions were in terms of format, models or presentation modes across the nation. The range includes 80,000 word documents, paperless digital submissions on DVD, large exhibitions supported by papers of several thousand words, small and large exhibitions supported by an extended exegesis of over 50,000 words, actual performances and records of performances among others. Such

variations in format only raise concerns for those seeking to align practice-based research with the established humanities model of a submitted written 80, 000 word thesis. This traditional humanities thesis model is not a knowledge-model or indeed the guarantee of a research method. In the experimental or practice-based sciences the thesis model is more flexible allowing it to be adapted to the needs of a particular enquiry, data analysis or discovery. The reasons a chemistry PhD thesis presented as a compilation of complex equations is an entirely acceptable submission are twofold. Research in chemistry operates within well established empirical methodology using clear protocols for presenting evidence and verification and most importantly because countless thousands of different Doctoral submissions in the discipline have established a consensus for quality and rigour.

Traditionally, the PhD in academe has provided the basic training in research methods achieved through completion of a project that leads to new understanding, insight or knowledge and the situation is no different with practice-based PhD projects (Timothy Emlyn Jones in Elkins ed., 2005: 27). When the assessment of the originality and rigour of Doctoral projects is carried out by senior artists and academics acting as examiners they are of course constrained to operate within the scope of the degree rules proscribed by the particular university where the candidate is enrolled. These rules do vary across institutions, particularly on the interpretative emphasis placed on the studio output.

When James Elkins published his survey of the "New PhD in Studio Art," using examples exclusively from the UK and Australia, he presented a number of models for such PhDs but agreed that the logical endpoint of the new degree would be acceptance of "the visual art practice, together with its exhibition and supporting materials, simply as the PhD." (Elkins, ed., 2005: 17) This has been the model favoured in Australia for the past decade with most studio-based research Doctorates requiring the submission of a body of work supported by a written paper or exegesis. All the major programs in Australia avoid the term "thesis" for the written component (usually reserving this description for the combination of studio submission and exegesis to meet long established university Doctoral Degree rules). Nevertheless, the distinctive differences across institutions are usually found in the stipulated form of the exegesis or research paper. Some institutions allow degrees of flexibility in writing of the exegesis depending on the particular nature of the studio submission. Formats include: a description, report, reflection, contextualisation, argument, parallel art historical enquiry or a combination of these. There is general agreement that the exegesis must place the studio project in an historical and contemporary theoretical context within the field of enquiry and serve the function of summarizing the potential insights or original outcomes that are embodied in the presented studio work.

Mostly, it is assumed, if not articulated in degree rules, that if the project is successful the submitted work should make manifest the results of the research although it seems this burden is constantly being placed on the exegesis. Barrett and Bolt in their recent publication *Practice as Research: approaches to creative arts enquiry* 2007 have conveniently presented a template for writing the creative arts exegesis based on the premise that "the exegesis is about process rather than product" with the exegesis following the thesis tradition of the research question as a trigger for enquiry. (Barrett & Bolt, eds., 2007: 202). Admittedly, Barrett notes that the exegesis must serve the function of tracing and highlighting the logic of practice or the "logic of specific experiential inquiry" partly because of the "lack of critical mass of discourses that expound the merits of creative arts research." Further to this she importantly calls for

"continued efforts to promote and publish the outcomes of research in as many ways as possible." (Barrett & Bolt, eds., 2007: 163)

Perhaps it requires familiarity with the status of creative practice as research in Australian universities to understand this seemingly illogical situation where we have the exemplars of several hundred successful practice-based Doctoral projects but are still waiting for a critical mass of written exposition to demonstrate the validity of the methods followed by these researchers rather than using the evidential value of their outcomes. In what is a significant milestone, the Federal Government, through its Australian Learning & Teaching Council, recently awarded a major grant for a scoping study *CreativeArtsPhD* that aims to survey the current state of doctoral programs in the creative arts in Australian universities and to investigate corresponding programs in a sample of overseas universities. The rationale for this benchmarking project is couched in terms that seem to deny the fact of the present situation: "As the creative arts PhD becomes the defining benchmark of quality and innovation in the field, the graduates, artists/researchers, will be the academics of the future." (<http://creativeartsphd.com/index.html>). Reading through the relatively few advertisements for permanent or continuing academic positions in Australian university-based art schools over the past twelve months it is now commonplace to see the need for a PhD or equivalent listed as an essential or desirable requirement and this includes positions at tutor level – evidence that the future has indeed arrived.

Significantly, this large grant for *CreativeArtsPhD* was not awarded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) the body that disseminates the major part of the Governments research funds. The ARC has for many years denied arts practitioners access to major grant funds. The ARC funding rules for both Discovery and Linkage Projects specifically exclude from eligibility: "activities leading solely to the creation or performance of a work of art, including visual art, musical compositions, drama, dance, film, broadcasts, designs and literary works." Not surprisingly, it would appear from the available data that in the past decade in Australia not a single ARC large grant has been awarded to a project with a primary creative output. There is a pervasive myth that it is possible to gain an ARC grant for an exhibition if the catalogue is stipulated as the research output, although I know of only one case where a grant was awarded for a large project that included an exhibition combined with book or catalogue. Since ARC grants have been awarded to write about various forms of art or popular culture or to analyze the cultural industries, it would appear that in the ARC conception of the sphere of research, practitioners play a production role only, with their outputs valued as source material to be validated by researchers in humanities and social sciences. The reason given for the direct exclusion of arts practitioners from ARC project grants is that artists have access to other funding bodies such as the Australia Council. This is misleading because most artists working in academe do not qualify to access such grants. What is more, the monetary amount of the largest grant available from the Australia Council is less than the minimum amount that the ARC considers for its Linkage and Discovery grants. The Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) collects research data from universities each year to determine the research performance and therefore future funding to be allocated. DEEWR is much more forthright about its attitude to creative outputs in calculating these returns since it simply excludes all creative outcomes from the collected data, although the studio-based PhD completions are counted in calculating research activity in a particular university.

We are confronted in Australia with the undeniable fact that in recent years many of the brightest students entering academe have opted to study in the creative fields. In the University in which I teach nine of the students admitted to the Fine Art program in 2008 received the highest score possible on their secondary or entrance examinations making Fine art the program of choice for the highest achievers ahead of all other areas disciplines. In 2008, two-thirds of all the students who achieved the highest entrance score entering my University, that offers a full range of programs, opted to study in the creative fields. One of the major reasons for this is that such areas offer the freedom to develop new perspectives, original approaches and relevant outputs, unconstrained by established methods and mediums.

One of the first findings of the *CreativeArtsPhD* scoping study will surely be the heterogeneous character of the Doctoral programs across Australian universities and we can only hope that a correlation is then made between flexibility of approach and quality of outcome since quality in the arts is often determined by the distance from conformity. The danger, of course, is that benchmarking will not occur by selecting exemplary outcomes but through consensus on procedures, protocols or degree rules. In Elkins' earlier mentioned mini-survey of creative arts PhDs he presented a summary and excerpts from eight impressive research projects. Making reference to these examples only to highlight the different models or attitudes to the written component (referred to with the US nomenclature of "dissertation") Elkins concluded that the problems with the new degrees were nearly intractable and particularly at the level of assessment or interpretation of the studio work. Inevitably it would seem, more theory is needed or as he put it: "it would be a pity, I think, to see the new creative-art PhD spread through the US and Europe, and not to be theorised as cleanly as possible". (Elkins ed., 2005: 7)

To highlight the general problems of assessing the new degrees, Elkins posed what he claims is an unanswerable question: "How is a studio-art instructor to determine if the studio practice is at PhD level?" (Elkins ed., 2005: 17) It is setting up a straw argument to claim that a PhD level cannot be identified until objective or value-free guidelines for assessing a creative Doctorate have been established. A studio-art instructor will make a subjective judgment on the quality of a PhD as measured against their experience of other PhD level projects, particularly those benchmarked for excellence. This is no different to the situation in the sciences for example where judgment as an act of perception and cognition long ago replaced the concept of objective interpretation of pictorial data measured against protocol driven procedures as Peter Galison has so powerfully demonstrated. (Galison ed., 1999: 338)

Seemingly in contradiction to the call for interpretive clarity with studio outputs, Elkins has elsewhere argued that a range of possible interpretations inherently operate across art and non-art images or visual artefacts and particularly the constant and often simultaneous acceptance of the "pure picture" interpreted without connection to verbal or written reference and the picture filled with determinate meaning as in writing. (Elkins, 1999: 55). Shifts of meaning or this unavoidable duality of meaning between purely visual objects and coded images, Elkins noted, was a fundamental part of writing about art in the twentieth century where the best work never insisted on pictures being basically legible or illegible. (56) Elkins also noted that non-art or scientific images and diagrams often begin to operate like art where a range of metaphoric and other pictorial possibilities come into play along with aesthetic judgments. (38) This highlights a common prejudice that only the abstracted or theoretical fields of discourse can cope with ambiguity. Besides this, if we take the example of the most recent publication by

Elkins it would appear he demands more of art practice than he does of his own art historical enquiry. His text *Six Stories from the End of Representation* consists of "six separate stories" related to art and scientific images and the reader is left to make the links between them. In explaining his risky, fragmented approach Elkins notes that "starting from first principles and writing a book to fit would have been yet another capitulation to philosophy." (Elkins, 2008: 19)

Art practice is most often positioned outside of the limits of reason or logical argument by both those inside the discipline and by those outside, especially commentators in the humanities. Philosophers, such as Theodor Adorno and Benedetto Croce, have argued for art as a privileged form of aesthetic or critical understanding. Nevertheless the insight that comes from such an aesthetic encounter with art is not characterized by the usual interpretative semiotic models where meaning can be locked down to established signifier/signified binaries. This is not necessarily a barrier to interpretation but may in fact be the means to achieve an extension of understanding or a triggering of new assumptions. As Christoph Menke has noted: "since the signifier can never be definitely identified by the process of aesthetic understanding, but always loses itself in an unending vacillation, in aesthetic understanding, the bridge – which defines the comprehensible sign – breaks down between the two dimensions of semiotic representation." (Menke, 1998: 36) Such a position not only gives art an autonomous position outside the humanities and sciences but suggests a unique agency for its operation as Ernst Van Alphen has argued. It is not because contemporary artists long ago abandoned mimetic representation but because they operate in a terrain where they are able to fashion meaningful and sometimes powerful configurations by intelligent, material transformations in a field of potential infinite semiosis. In this way, artists reconfigure the potential for understanding. As Van Alphen put it: "Only visual art is able to merge the two senses of reflection – intellectual and specular – so effectively that the resulting agency affects, rather than merely influences, the viewer at the threshold of awareness and sensation." (Van Alphen, 2005: xvii)

In a more expansive explanation of the importance of art or visual expression, Barbara Stafford has shown that contemporary art is an "evidentiary practice -- putting the visible into relationship with the invisible and manifesting the effect of that momentary unison." (Stafford, 2001: 23,24) Operating as analogy, the art object contrasts with the intrinsic textuality and nonrepresentational abstractness of allegory as Stafford demonstrates but furthermore the work of art materializes, displays and disseminates an enigma that escapes words.

However Stafford's most recent research (published in *Echo Objects: the cognitive work of images* 2007) brings to focus the fundamental importance of contemporary art practice in not only rethinking human subjectivity but shaping brain-mind convergence and cognitive-organic integration. What is more Stafford positions contemporary practice into a historical framework of embodied experience of the world including the nonverbalizable, intimate experience of qualia (pleasure, pain, the entire gamut of feelings) (Stafford, 2006: 149). Using the evidence of recent neuroscience, Stafford suggests that the material spatial arts do more than excite the senses but serve to "make the mind" through processes such as enacting the mutual interdependence of pattern generation with pattern recognition and through visual models such as heraldic devices, blazons and mosaics that force the viewer to reperform and reinvent them, thus demonstrating how thought interpenetrates the components of sensation and the elements of sensation enter into thought. (Stafford, 2007: 3.& 215)

Stafford's work reactivates a number of earlier lines of enquiry obscured in recent decades by the dominance of linguistic models of understanding. These include the perceptual psychology of Ernst Gombrich and the writing of others such as J. J. Gibson and Rudolf Arnheim who sought to explain the conscious experience of images. The parallels that Stafford draws, with the aid of neuroscience, between the physical production of abstract and emblematic forms and the development in the brain of conceptual categories seems to also give support to the conclusions in recent publications on cognition aimed at professional arts educators in the United States such as Elliot Eisner's *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002) and particularly the study by Arthur Efland *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum* (2002). Efland emphasized that categories as they are formed in the brain are abstracted from multiple experiences that are largely perceptual in character, cognitive achievements, although not disembodied since they arise from distinctive actions of the body such as grasping, touching, or seeing (Efland 2002: 142).

Efland selects a good number of late twentieth-twentieth century examples to demonstrate the ability of the arts to "enable individuals to integrate their understanding of the world" (Efland 2002: 105) However, the range of historical and contemporary art examples analysed by Stafford in her study is most impressive ranging from Australian Aboriginal art to the work of Hanne Darboven and Olafur Eliasson. Yet apart from this, the most compelling reason that this should become a key text for artists working in academe is Stafford's contention and demonstration that "contemporary artists are leading the way" for the humanities, neurosciences and cognitive sciences in overcoming problems with interpretation and categorization. As Stafford implies, contemporary artists have no problem "transferring things and meaning not just from one domain into another, but into a greater commonwealth of research and scholarship as well as to the educated public at large." (Stafford, 2007: 208)

If artists make video or sculpture, construct installations, or paint pictures it is irrelevant to the primary interpretive function of their work. All contemporary art presents the same problems of interpretation and this uniquely defines visual art as distinct from other disciplines. We are approaching a critical mass of completed creative PhDs and these present the best evidence of the quality of practice-based research. Reflecting on the recent writing of Van Alphen and particularly Stafford, along with the other work that is expanding our understanding of cognition, will help give clarify and amplify the active capacity of art to shape our understanding of the world. It is now time to move beyond the challenge of justifying process or methodology and locate our theorizing of creative arts research in interpretive models applied to artefactual and imagistic outcomes.

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