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Boundaries and Barriers: the Disciplinary Sites of Edgy Research

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Abstract

In this paper I will draw on a number of case studies to explore the rhetorical boundaries and real barriers that have been created to define visual arts practice in academe. I will propose that the rhetoric of cross-disciplinary research in the humanities particularly has been a successful survival mechanism that is ill-suited to practice-based research in visual art. Increasingly, the perceived permeability of the boundary that defines art practice has seen artists working as adjuncts or appendages to other disciplines. Such parasitic attachment to other disciplines is understandable since it is legislated in academe that artists or designers cannot get access to Australian Research Council Discovery or Linkage grants by following their primary activities. This exclusion through ARC funding rules represents one of the real barriers that separate the creative arts from science and humanities disciplines in universities.

Fostering edgy research is essential to the survival of every discipline in academe and this is why long established academic disciplines in the sciences and humanities stress discipline-specific research methodology and protocols in their teaching. Originality or innovation, more recently characterised as creative thinking, has always been the primary determinate of quality research. Creative insights or cutting-edge research in experimental science for example hardly ever means crossing disciplinary borders. Nobel Laureate, Ian Frazer's discovery and development of a vaccine for cervical cancer resulted from going back to first principles in his chosen field of study – a hyper-disciplinary focus not a cross-disciplinary one.¹ The cutting-edge of new work in the creative disciplines will likewise be found in specialist workshops and studios in art and design schools not outside them.

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I need to make it clear that my argument here is not opposed to cross-disciplinary research per se but the specific case of studio-based researchers working in Academe. Clearly, the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWA) and the Australian Research Council (ARC) promote and reward research collaborations but there is little evidence that the promoted view of collaboration reaches beyond research in traditional disciplinary groupings. It would be laughable to suggest, for example, that the creative arts were in any way considered for schemes such as National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) for which the previous Government committed \$542 million over 2005-2011 to provide researchers with major research facilities, supporting infrastructure and networks necessary for world-class research.²

My deep misgivings about cross-disciplinary practice as it relates to the creative arts in Academe are founded on two decades of experience where the realities for artists working across disciplines rarely match the benefits promulgated through the rhetoric. Rather than speak in general terms, I will briefly outline two examples of studio-based doctoral projects in fine art that encapsulate the difficulties of cross-disciplinary practice and one demonstrating the benefits of a singular or hyper-disciplinary focus on studio practice. We would hope that each PhD project is exceptional and by its very nature atypical. Even so, studies “A” and “B” are to the highest degree possible representatives of cross-disciplinary projects or approaches, as case study “C” exemplifies projects with a singular focus on studio practice. To confirm some parity between these comparisons it should be noted that the Doctorial submissions by all of these artists were considered exceptional and the potential for quality research by each was confirmed since they were all supported by an Australian Postgraduate Award.

Case Study A entered into a Master of Fine Art (research) program having completed Honours in Philosophy. The Masters degree was upgraded to PhD in the second year of his work as he had clearly demonstrated the scope and originality of his investigation of

Nietzsche's philosophy and the poetics of fire. Most impressive of all, however, was his ability to move into humanities disciplines and with considerable application and industry to absorb the necessary knowledge and skills to give his work a rigorous grounding. English was his only language so "A" formally enrolled in first-year German language classes to be able ultimately to read Nietzsche in the original. His progress in getting command of the language was exceptional. He would go on to read all of Nietzsche's writing not only in the original language but also in original manuscript form in the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar. In the early stages of his candidature, "A" also took an interest in the Australian involvement with Nietzsche via the work of Norman and Jack Lindsay. Because of this, he constantly engaged with scholars in the History and Philosophy departments in the University. Throughout this process he continued to produce and document his performance and object-based work in his primary field of visual art. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that in the latter stages of his research the majority of his time was spent in archives and libraries collecting data, in discussion and communication with Nietzsche or Lindsay scholars and on analysis and writing. During this period, as with many PhD students, he was offered tutorial work. However, this was in the German department as the breadth and depth of his work on Nietzsche was considered too far outside of the discipline of Fine Art, too specialised or too rarefied.

His PhD submission was examined by a senior curator, a senior artist/academic and a leading Nietzsche scholar from Germany. All examiners awarded the degree with high commendation and the Nietzsche scholar was effusive, highlighting new information and insights the candidate had uncovered in the eighteen months he had spent working in the Nietzsche archive and across historical sites in Europe. In any discipline one would expect that a shining academic career awaited but without teaching experience in Fine Art no offers were forthcoming in his primary discipline. Although post-doctoral scholarships are not an option available to PhD students in creative arts disciplines (at least I know of none yet awarded) the proven willingness of "A" to work across disciplines and the quality of his research in history, language and philosophy would surely make him an ideal candidate for a post-doctorate award.³ The fact that he wished to continue his research on the art and writing of the Lindsays in Australia would also seem to be a topic with broad interest in the humanities. Not so. All of his post-doctoral scholarship applications across different institutions and disciplines were unsuccessful and it became clear that no area

outside of the creative arts would consider a research outcome that included an exhibition of works of art – even a curated exhibition of books, art and documents related to the Lindsay family’s fascination with Nietzsche was considered outside the scope of research. He took a contract job teaching German at a provincial university campus in New Zealand, hoping this might be an entry point to gaining academic support for his research but after a year he realised that there was no future in Academe for a researcher with a profile encompassing artist and Nietzsche/Lindsay scholar. Work outside of Academe was the only option and the one he chose. More than the usual five-year limit has elapsed since the award of his PhD so a post-doctoral scholarship is not an option now and he continues to support his research through unrelated employment. This year, 2008, he spent all of his annual leave in an interstate library collecting data. Such an outcome awaits many PhD students and not only in the creative disciplines. Nevertheless, considering this was no ordinary Doctoral project, the example of “Case Study A” suggests that the impact and use value of a cutting-edge submission in fine art will be considerably diluted if the candidate strays too far across disciplinary boundaries and especially so if the other disciplines are among the embattled cluster of literature, history, philosophy and languages within the general humanities. It might be argued that the situation in the humanities has hardly improved since Allan Bloom’s contentious 1987 ‘report from the front’ in Academe where he noted the “[h]umanities are like the great old Paris Flea Market where, amidst masses of junk, people with a good eye found castaway treasures that made them rich.”⁴ This is especially so considering Barbara Stafford’s recent assessment of “the floundering humanities – complaining that no one knows what they are or what purpose they still serve in peoples’ lives.”⁵

Case Study B began her Doctoral project after studio studies and teaching in two other institutions. “B” had also worked at a high level in two different process-based disciplines in the fine arts, and although still young, she had built broad discipline networks and a deep skill-base. Her research topic involved female anatomy so she quickly gravitated to the anatomy lab of the medical faculty. Because of her drawing skills and graphic sensitivity she was invited to do several residences in the local teaching hospital. The success of this experience allied with her text-based research on the history of anatomical illustration led to a traveling scholarship to visit major anatomy museums in Europe. Her constant engagement with members of the medical faculty and their recognition not only

of the quality of her art production but also her considerable knowledge of the anatomical and medical imaging sciences led to further collaborative projects including developing and delivering an art/science course for first-year medical students along with co-writing and presenting a paper at a major Medical Humanities conference in Europe. “B” also visited SymbioticA, the art and science collaborative research laboratory at the University of Western Australia. When “B” submitted her PhD the exhibition was exceptional in evoking the reality and history of medical intervention with female anatomy without any recourse to abject, conventional or salacious imagery. The quality of the exhibition was reflected in the exegesis which was such a comprehensive survey of attitudes to the imaging of human anatomy, and the bibliography so extensive, that the candidate fulfilled a promise to send copies to the Wellcome Library in London and other institutions she had visited. Just before her submission exhibition, B was offered part-time work funded from a large medical grant. Formally employed as a research assistant, she was primarily to act in her role as an artist within the specialised medical unit. To be part of the regular review sessions reporting on progress it was expected that “B” also acquire the laboratory and other skills of a regular medical researcher. She was obviously very effective in acquiring these skills since she is currently working, supported by a three-year post-doctoral grant, on a specific project in another medical unit. When I recently spoke to her she said that as challenging and interesting as the work is, she has little time to make art and added the wry observation that one of the most demanding of the sovereign academic disciplines could recognise the highest level of excellence she had attained with her PhD research but her chosen field of visual art remained disinterested in her career after completion of her Doctorial study. “B”’s experience of moving across discipline boundaries and gaining access to post-doctoral support can rightly be framed as a success story, particularly since “B” has just been awarded a major Synapse Residency Grant by the Australian network for Art and Technology (ANAT), yet it is also an example of a powerful host subsuming the best of its attendant weaker disciplines as much as a model of cross-fertilization.

Case Study C came to art school with a degree in engineering and relatively brief experience as a production potter. After an undergraduate exchange to the United States he stayed on and completed a Master of Fine Art at a New York institution. Following this, he enrolled for a PhD at an Australian University and conducted his candidature mostly in remote mode working from a studio base in New York. During this period in the

United States he did part-time teaching stints in a number of major art schools. He returned to Australia briefly in 2008, for his submission exhibition. All of his work over the past decade has to different degrees interrogated the screen-image, its construction and representational truth value, with a clear progress towards a synthesis of material construction and the generation of a digital screen-image. The most significant development in resolving this synthesis into a single sculptural entity has occurred in the past three years. That is, since the time when extensive critical interest in his work was first triggered with an installation he built for the *Greater New York* survey show at PS1 MOMA, and an even more ambitious installation at the *Torino_Triennale* in Italy, both in 2005. Reviews of these, and subsequent exhibitions, including solo shows in New York and Vienna, have appeared across the full spectrum of the international art press including: *Art in America*, *Artnews*, *Flash Art*, *Modern Painters*, *Sculpture International* and *Artforum*. The March 2008 edition of the international journal *Art Review* identified him among the “30 Future Greats” and for the next two years solo exhibitions are booked across Europe and North America, including two in public art museums in the United States. The work submitted for his PhD exhibition was purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and *Art World Magazine* among others. In short, his career as a contemporary artist seems assured. If he so decides to supplement the income from his work with teaching in the United States he will have little difficulty since as well as his extensive exhibition record he holds both the terminating degree in the US, the MFA, and the much more rare PhD.

There is no doubt that the majority of candidates for studio-based research in the visual arts would hope that cutting-edge work would translate to a career outcome where they were positioned as a leader in the field. Case Study C would surely represent the model outcome. “C” worked internationally across a number of institutions, yet his research remained focused within the disciplinary boundaries of the art world including the academic network of art schools. Such an international career outcome in the field of contemporary art is also possible when working from within Australian university-based art schools. The next Australian representative at the 2009 Venice Biennale, Shaun Gladwell, is of course a product of the quality research programs in our universities. He gained Honours (First Class) in 1996 from Sydney College for the Arts and accepted an Australian Postgraduate Award to complete his Masters research at the College of Fine

Arts, UNSW in 2001 and subsequently spent a year as a Research Associate at Goldsmiths College, Univ. of London. Susan Norrie, a 2007 Venice Biennale Australian representative, is a Doctoral candidate at COFA. Vernon Ah Kee, another Venice 2009 selection to represent Australia is currently completing his Doctorate at QCA, Griffith University as is the internationally acclaimed Dennis Nona who is supported by an APA after successfully completing his research Masters.

Many other examples could be quoted of artists who have stayed focused in their primary practice-based research and achieved national and international recognition. A significant number could also be identified who work collaboratively outside of Academe.

Collaboration between artists, architects, designers and town planners is now relatively common, especially for public art projects although in most cases such work would not qualify as edgy research and usually follows traditionally established disciplinary networks or connections. This is not overlooking Paul Carter's important analysis of creative research in *Material Thinking* (2004) in which he exclusively dealt with collaborative projects. The creative collaborations analyzed by Carter are presented as unifications of experience and interests that, through an intellectual to-and-fro across disciplinary boundaries, materialises in the making process. Carter's study seeks to counteract the usual 'parasitic' role of the artist or creative researcher in a collaborative project, replacing this with a rationale that aims to avoid any sense of disciplinary divisions in an attempt to "materialise discourse itself". Such erasure of disciplinary boundaries is founded on a premise: "it's unlikely that an overarching discourse 'of', rather than 'about' [creative research] is either possible or desirable".⁶ This is not to say that Carter does not recognise the discipline specificity of creative practice. In the context of a discussion elsewhere on the "Ethics of Invention", Carter highlights a 'double movement' of decontextualisation and recontextualisation that occurs in all processes of invention and takes a distinctive form in practice-based research since the process is mediated materially. As he put it:

In our context, this double movement of invention is not simply a matter of praxis, it also represents the critical differences of creative research from other forms of critical enquiry: for cultural scholars – anthropologists, sociologists, historians – are no doubt skilled in analyzing the underlying structures informing our symbolic forms, but they cannot put back together what they have shattered. They are suspicious of our reconstructions, precisely because, in incorporating

self-differing qualities of growth, transformation and excessive materiality, they defy a unilateral semiotic reduction.⁷

It is not uncommon for senior artists such as Fiona Hall or Janet Laurence to be invited to work in institutions or fields outside of contemporary art; fields as diverse as botany, zoology, anthropology, biology and the physical sciences. In such cases, the motive is clearly to have the artist produce works of art informed by the experience of the host discipline rather than an outcome that synthesises the cross-disciplinary engagement. At least we would hope this is the case, by imagining the scenario in role reversal. If a top neuroscientist was given a month-long residency in a painting studio, for example, we would have to presume the benefits would be in gaining insights into her chosen field of enquiry rather than to make great paintings of the brain.⁸ If this unlikely scenario occurred, it is almost beyond the realm of possibility that a neuroscientist might be convinced to make a discipline shift and stay on in the painting studio to do her research. In other words, to make a disciplinary swap as exemplified in Case Study B. What makes this improbable is that such a move in Academe would be from strength to weakness, from centre to periphery. Working on practice-based research located in a painting studio or any other workshop would mean that no more ARC or related grants would be available and no research outcomes would be counted in the Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) measure of research output.⁹

This brings us to the so-called permeable boundaries that enclose the creative arts in Academe. The boundary might be best described as a semi-permeable enclosure using the scientific definition as a more accurate metaphor. That is, a semi-permeable membrane where the particular form of osmosis allows the passage of choice or selected ions or molecules in an outward direction only from less to more concentrated states. Reverse osmosis is an unnatural state and only possible with the expenditure of huge pressure.

It has taken a decade or more to gain some acceptance in Academe that research takes place in the painting studio or any of the other studio or workshop sites in Australian universities but the products of that research in the form of artifacts, objects or images have not gained full recognition as legitimate research outcomes. Timothy Emlyn Jones

has summarised the difficulties in mounting an explanation of how an object might embody new knowledge. He points out that “it might be possible to argue that an object, particularly in fine art does have an active capacity, but such a case has yet to be argued and won.”¹⁰ This is the argument that must be won if Doctoral and other research students in the creative arts are to gain full recognition for the outputs of their research and if they are to be given the same access to postdoctoral scholarships, ARC grants and fellowships as researchers in other university disciplines.¹¹ And what I have flagged in this paper is the potential danger in using the benefits of collaboration as a strategy or mechanism for evading this argument.

Notes

¹ At the time that the Nobel Prize was awarded various newspapers reported interviews in which Ian Frazer acknowledged that his team had worked since 1991 starting from the fundamental principles of the structural nature of proteins in cells. For a discipline-based assessment of his achievement see: Ronald T. Javier and Janet S. Butel, “The History of Tumor Virology” *Cancer Research* 2008; 68: (19). October 1, 2008 : 7698. Available Online:

<http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/cgi/reprint/68/19/7693>

² The original *Draft Implementation Framework* for this scheme and subsequent documentation on the DEEWA website makes no mention of creative arts.

www.dest.gov.au/NR/ronlyres/5FEF4A93-3D96-4539-9ACB-B4F9FCA29C89/484/ncris_cons_paper.pdf

³ After delivery of this paper I was alerted by Noel Frankham to the fact that the Tasmanian School of Art has funded one postdoctoral scholarship.

⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (London: Penguin Books, 1987) : 371.

⁵ Barbara Maria Stafford, *Echo Objects: the Cognitive Work of Images*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007) : 208. Stafford is quoting from a discussion paper by Norman Bradburn titled “What About the Humanities”.

⁶ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking*, (Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 2004) : 9.

⁷ Paul Carter, “Interest: The Ethics of Invention” (pp. 15 – 25) in Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt eds. *Practice as Research: approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007) : 15, 16.

⁸ My choice of a neuroscientist is a conscious reference to the recent case where the art historian, Barbara Maria Stafford, spent six years working in the Workshop on Computational Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. The outcome of her research published in *Echo Objects* (2007) will have significant impact considering she marshals the results of the new work in neuroscience as evidence for the importance of contemporary art in shaping the mind.

⁹ Guidelines on the outputs accepted for inclusion in the research data are published each year by DEST now DEEWA and since 2000, at least, no creative outputs have been included. The 2008 Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) *Specifications for the Collection of 2007 Data* document lists four categories for research income: Australian Competitive Grants, Other Public Sector Research Income, Industry and Other Research Income and Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) Research Income. The only research publications considered are: Books, Book chapters, Journal articles and Conference publications.

www.dest.gov.au/NR/ronlyres/E6FC4F57-9395-4CA7-B881-676CBBBF7CD/19677/2008HERDCSpecificationsFinalrtf.rtf

¹⁰ Timothy Emlyn Jones, “A Method of Search for Reality: research and research degrees in art and design” (pp. 20 – 34) in James Elkins, ed. *Printed Projects (the new PhD in studio art)* issue 04, (2005) : 27.

¹¹ The eligibility rules for the major ARC Linkage and Discovery Projects specifically exclude creative outputs. For example in the *Discovery Projects Funding Rules for funding commencing in 2009* point 6.3.1 states all forms of research are supported for Discovery Projects (DP): a, pure basic research; b, strategic basic research and c, applied research. However, guideline 6.5.1 notes that “DP does not support: b. 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.” The same exclusion clause is listed in the guidelines for Linkage Projects.

www.arc.gov.au/pdf/DP09_FundingRules.pdf