

Strategies For Artists Becoming Writers: Postgraduate Supervision in the Regions

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There are many debates addressing various ways in which creative practice might constitute research, when it is appropriate to consider creative practice as research, and accordingly, various models for preparing and evaluating the written component to accompany practice-based artistic research. Although some argue that a dissertation need not assume the form of a scholarly text, this paper will nonetheless assume a preference for the production of a thesis containing a substantial written component. Moreover, with the parameters of artistic practice continuously expanding, disciplinary categories blurring, and the lines between artistic, curatorial and collaborative ventures contested, it is probably reasonably sensible for artists that are relatively inexperienced with research culture to opt for a reasonably structured approach. Alert to the dangers of overly prescriptive definitions of the relationship between thesis components, and responsive to debates about the legitimacy of such research, this paper will assume that since more artists are applying to undertake doctoral research, more institutions are accepting candidates with relatively limited academic experience, and more academic staff are routinely expected to supervise such candidates, a modest collection of pointers directed at the task of assisting artists in the task of becoming writers is probably something worth assembling.

With notable exceptions (and despite the centrality of 'text' in contemporary art), many artists are relatively less familiar with the task of presenting ideas within the context of scholarly writing than they are within the vehicular medium of their own artistic practice. In many cases, this unfamiliarity with scholarly prose is exacerbated in the case of candidates from regional, lower socio-economic, or non-English speaking backgrounds. As a supervisor at the satellite campus of a regional university where many students are the first in their family to attend university, the task of facilitating the translation of ideas located within the multiple languages of creative expression into the structural expectations of the academy presents a consistent challenge. As participants in the race to conscript candidates, regional universities are perhaps more predisposed to accepting artists with little or no academic research experience. Although this tendency has given more artists an opportunity to enter the academy, the role of the supervisor in facilitating the difficult transition from artist to artist researcher is particularly central. Also, with less direct access to participation in metropolitan artist communities, the supervisor needs to become a more active conduit to appropriate art and art research networks. Here, the supervisor can build confidence by pointing to some of the unique advantages availed of regional perspectives. Just as many Australian artists have positioned distance from global centres as strategically advantageous, so too might regional perspectives potentially avoid the limitations of being embedded within the often solipsistic confines of the so-called art world. A predilection to question the centre is often preferable to the falsely knowing nod of the insider. Just as the arguments presented within this paper are developed in response to working in the regions, building the specificities of space and place can be put toward the service of enriching research and researcher confidence.

Getting started: artists becoming writers

Broadly speaking, the increased use of text in the visual arts is symptomatic of a desire to respond critically to the image inundation that defines our existence. Although activities such as writing, reading and listening are often substituted for looking within the art experience, it is important to distinguish between the use of text in art and the use of text to discuss and analyse art. This distinction is worth making to candidates setting out to radicalise the form of the dissertation itself, a tendency that is sometimes potentially counterproductive to the task of legitimising the ability of artists to communicate academically. With exception, in conforming to the structural expectations of academic prose, the candidate is arguably freer to

explore the experimental possibilities of the creative component - an option that is invariably attractive to many artists.

Unfamiliarity with academically structured language, coupled with a default to descriptive accounts of art making, remain tendencies that are still inadequately addressed at an undergraduate level at many universities. This is particularly evident at some regional universities. Although undergraduates are expected to write, the reality that writing is not as central as it is in most academic disciplines, compounded by a commonly institutionalised separation between theory and practice, can invariably delay the development of a critically analytical relationship between practice and writing. This situation leaves many candidates ill prepared for research. Postgraduate research is complex undertaking, without adding inexperience with academic writing to the mix. Fortunately, the speculative and maverick processes of imagining through creative production, paired with a structured supervisory approach, and patient attention to the form and relevance of the overall thesis and each of its constituent parts, can foster increased confidence and autonomy as the research project grows.

There are clearly many ways in which the nature of practice might influence approaches to the dissertation component. Just as 'anything' can potentially become material for art practice, the manner of research methods and models available to artists can vary enormously. From a conceptually or linguistically grounded practice, in which the process of making is relatively perfunctory to the realisation of the creative work, to more intuitive approaches in which each constituent part remains dynamically responsive to and 'calls' for the next, the practical work will nonetheless have evolved in relationship to specific historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, the first task is establishing a coherent topic of investigation. As institutional demands to develop a plan at an early stage can prejudice artists without conceptual provisions, candidates without the confidence to resist the deformation of research will need support to limit the hand of institutional hoops. Meanwhile, since practice and dissertation components are typically inter-responsive, the dissertation needs to be considered right from the outset in order to avoid becoming an adjunct illustration formed in retrospect. To this end, a series of dynamically interrelated structural components must be considered, and then reconsidered. Here, delineation of the field and the confidence to discard peripheral issues is crucial. Investigation might start with the language of the artist's own practice. In this way, using the words of U.S. art historian Richard Shiff, 'a work of art becomes a hypothesis-in- the- making, as if it were calling out, "explain me, put me in order, give me a lasting purpose." Why this, not that?'¹ Here, it is worth reminding the candidate that the research topic may reflect a focus other than aesthetic or art experience, and that it is ultimately the originality of the claims at stake rather than the originality of the art. Stressing this point can actually reduce stressful self-expectation that the 'whole' creative practice need somehow be accounted for within the thesis. As a provisional list of elements starts to form a map of the literature review, emerging questions as to how and why each listed element might point toward a rough map of potential headings and sub headings can develop. Dynamic and open to constant revision, the process of tweaking this rough map will break the enormity of the task into manageable snack sized portions.

What is the relationship between the creative output and the dissertation?

Although the creative work might be discussed where appropriate as a case study, the prospect of devoting an entire exegesis to the candidate's own work in the same breath as its historical exemplars can be a recipe for the worst kind of writing. The candidate should remain mindful of the difference between describing one's own practice and analysing the ideas that underpin it against a carefully framed ground. This is an important characteristic of art scholarship. It is not an argument for or against the relative merits of artists and artists doing PhDs (good and bad artists clearly both do and don't do PhDs!). Regional programs in particular are afraid to stress this distinction. The challenge here is to encourage speculative and experimental creative thinking without supporting fluffy scholarship. Thinking through

making and thinking through writing are not the same thing, yet at the same time neither activity is equivalent outside the academy. Consequently, the criteria for evaluating practice based research and art are not the same thing. The research degree, which includes practical, creative work of any kind alongside a written component, is assessed in terms of its contribution to knowledge. Working in concert, all components must advance a case or set of claims that are significant, original, and robustly supported. A research degree is an apprenticeship in becoming a researcher. It is not a validation for artists. For Robin Nelson, a champion of practice based research; 'it is time to speak less of practice-as-research and to speak instead of arts research (a significant methodology of which just happens to be based in practices).'ⁱⁱ

Remaining mindful of the value of art as a conduit for expression capable of distinct forms of communication, it is important to remind the candidate that although the creative work supports the overall thesis, it is not necessarily literally translatable into the scholarly text and vice versa. Given that research aims to uncover and communicate new knowledge, the legitimacy of practice-based research is based on an assumption that some forms of tacit knowledge are potentially discovered and communicated through the production and experience of creative works. Consequently, although the significance and context of claims to knowledge are described in words, a full understanding is only obtained through direct experience of all outcomes. Acknowledgement of the partial or complementary role of the scholarly text is of course something that the text itself should clearly articulate. This acknowledgement can also provide comfort to artists that prefer to see the whole exercise as something in service of the expanded potential of their practice. In this sense, the dissertation is simply performing the requirement that tacit knowledge be explicitly understood as research.

'How do I talk about my own work?'

Given that the distinction between 'outcome' and 'documentation' is often blurred, and that exegetical elements can be included within practical outcomes, approaches to discussion of practical work within the dissertation vary enormously, especially given the potential for recursion in projects that emphasise dynamic, participatory, or unfolding outcomes. Generally speaking, although each outcome attends to the same overall thesis, the text need not literally 'explain' the work. In a limited sense, the text provides a form of explanation, but it does so via an analysis or interrogation of some kind, or through translation into a realm of discourse that evokes expanded comprehension. The candidate might choose to devote a section to their work in the form of a case study. Here, success is somewhat dependent on whether the decision to transform artistic motivation into a research project was necessarily the best option in the first place. Unless a frame is constructed to place the work in relation to a significant question or problem, the solipsism that emanates from grandstanding one's own work (apart from being a bit snifty) is a condition that confuses art with research (and does neither any favours). More important is a conviction that practice-based research fills a gap in established models and addresses bias toward the standalone thesis as the most appropriate forum for the presentation of research. For British philosopher David Pears, 'practice nearly always comes first' in knowledge production, for a discriminatory response typically precedes an ability to codify that response.ⁱⁱⁱ For Pears, this preemption is evident 'if only because the use of distinct symbols to codify them is itself an example, indeed a sophisticated example, of a discriminatory response'.^{iv} Nonetheless, the validation of thinking through making and experiencing still finds itself on shaky ground. Notwithstanding the challenge that embodied forms of knowledge pose to the locus of knowledge and power in the Western academic tradition, we are still drawn into justifying the value of practice in words. This paper serves as yet another example.

The challenge of balancing experimentation and the structural constraints of the candidature also involves availing sufficient time for the thesis to be informed through and by creative

production. This process, in which the artist affects the work and the work affects the artist,^v can be revealed through hitherto unexpected turns. Since research is described as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in new and creative ways to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings, an original analysis of these ‘hitherto unexpected turns’ can be easily distinguished from more problematic claims of original art.

In stressing that the component parts are not assessed separately we dispel the myth that the text is simply ‘theory’ in the form of a discursive apparatus through which the practice is presented. It is not the case that imagination is assessed through the creative work and intellect via the exegesis. Although a cogent argument might be made for a specific relationship between the dissertation and the overall thesis, and correspondingly a specific relationship drawn between the creative work and the overall thesis, this parallel conception does not predicate their literal equivalence. Although many artists are capable of historically and culturally contextualising their chosen subject and identifying and analysing key ideas, many still fall over when addressing the task of writing about their own work.

Keeping things under control

Right from the outset, it is important to address formal aspects such as layout, clarity, style, and referencing. Time invested early will avert an insurmountable editing task at the end. Inexperienced writers and candidates from non-English speaking backgrounds can respond well to repeated and rigorous co-editing of early fragments of text. Meanwhile, the supervisor can repeatedly ask how and why each part of the text relates to the next, and in turn, to the overall thesis. It is also important to stress some of the structural idiosyncrasies of writing in the creative arts - a speculative field in which lines of question, argument and conclusion are often better accommodated with an air of modesty and deference to the art of disclaimer. In this sense, the difference between ‘it is’ and ‘and’ and ‘it might therefore be argued that’ can distinguish a valid and an invalid argument. Given that interpretations are contingent, inescapably influenced by the socio-cultural and historical context of the author, it is best to avoid singular interpretations that claim to legitimately reflect truth. To a certain extent, we handle specifics by generalizing, and in doing so we reflexively acknowledge contradiction where we must. Luckily, artists are often suspicious of the potential for generalization to slip into ideology. Here, the careful use of disclaimers and limitations can attenuate the problem of potentially unsubstantiable claims.

Is it good enough?

There are currently widely differing conceptions of the quality of intellectual argument and written expression acceptable at a PhD level. In any case, it is important to consider whether the candidate is communicating the intent and realization of the thesis effectively. Does the overall project demonstrate knowledge of critical ideas and professional standards within the field? Does it demonstrate competence in research and execution? Does the creative work demonstrate a technical and/or material proficiency appropriate to the communication of the claims? Is the overall thesis of publication and/or exhibition standard? If the specific methodological, theoretical or formal requirements of the project are clear, it should be assumed that the thesis be judged on those grounds. Although some argue that criteria for excellence are unnecessary, and an experienced assessor should simply experience the work, the context is often manifestly unclear without a well-articulated dissertation. Without a good contextualizing argument, it can be difficult to determine anything other than professional skill or formal qualities in the work, and harder again to determine its specific context and contribution to knowledge. Literary presentation skills are useful criteria. This includes evidence of literacy in the specific vehicular medium of the work.

Despite the enormous workload created for supervisors, a candidate with sophisticated ideas and lesser academic writing skills arguably remains preferable to empty-headed projects full

of academic bells and whistles. Artists, particularly from regional, lower socio-economic, or non-English speaking backgrounds, are often more sophisticated within the language of their chosen medium than they are within the structural confines of the academy. We must somehow strive to balance the value of the scholarly dissertation as a key element within the overall thesis without unnecessarily prejudicing otherwise strong candidates without confident academic language skills. In challenging conditions, we must strive to facilitate the translation of advanced practice-based research across the full diversity of the creative arts into the structural expectations of the academy. Although practice-based research is now relatively well established in the academic world, for some, its legitimacy as research remains misunderstood. Perhaps, to avoid prescriptively limiting the experimental and speculative frontiers of advanced art practice, the task of legitimising such activities as research is made easier with the support of a coherently structured dissertation. As artists in the academy, let us keep our 'bird flights into cold heights' (to repurpose the words of Friedrich Nietzsche) as free as possible, if only by conceding the parallel role of this structural formality.

ⁱ Richard Shiff. 'Every Shiny Object Wants an Infant Who Will Love It', *Art Journal*, New York: Spring 2011, Vol. 70, Iss. 1.

ⁱⁱ Robin Nelson. 'Practice-as-research and the Problem of Knowledge', *Performance Research*, 11:4, 2006, pp. 105-116.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Pears. *What is Knowledge?*, London: Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1972, p. 29.

^{iv} *Ibid.* pp. 28-29.

^v For an excellent critique of this relationship, see: Richard Shiff. 'Every Shiny Object Wants an Infant Who Will Love It', *Art Journal*, New York: Spring 2011, Vol. 70, Iss. 1, pp. 7-34.