

The phantom “practice only thesis”

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As the academic world begins to get used to the idea of research degrees in the arts and universities become accustomed to the quirks and complexities of their art and design faculties, a body of literature has emerged that explores some of the possibilities of a doctorate in the arts. This concerns such fundamental themes as the types of knowledge that might be generated through research, as well as the different forms that it might take and through which it might be communicated. In the area of fine art in particular, although not exclusively, there has been a drive from some practitioners towards a purely practice-based thesis. Its exact form varies, but the model is that the final thesis might be entirely autonomous; perhaps embodied in a physical output or body of work such as an exhibition, installation or performance. Importantly, there would be no requirement for a written exegesis. In fact, this would actually undermine the meaning generated by the body of work itself since it is the very non-verbal nature of the work that forms part of the language and context of the argument. There is also the concern for some students that explaining a piece of creative work would necessarily mean that ‘the magic would go’ (Hockey & Allen-Collinson 2000: 352).

The entirely text-free thesis is admittedly an extreme case, perhaps even an impossible ideal. But it is easy to see how the doctoral demand for new knowledge maps comfortably onto the avant-garde’s historic ambition to create new forms and ways of seeing the world. Rosalind Krauss writes that

[t]he theme of originality, encompassing as it does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian and the maker of art.

(Krauss 1985: 162)

The idea of creativity as originality is deeply embedded within the discursive structures of the arts, and remains so even after the many critical deconstructions of postmodernism. Although sometimes conceptualized with reference to pedagogic ideas like ‘tacit’ or ‘embedded’ knowledge, or ‘affectivity’, in many ways this is still the classic stereotype of the Romantic expressive artist who resorts to art making when he or she finds it impossible to put something into words.

From the point of view of the institution, there is also a possible case for claiming the parity of creative work with that of other disciplines within the university. 'The argument here is basically that visual art practice should not borrow from other academic fields, but remain true to its own media and purposes' (Elkins 2009: 161). In short, why should visual art need to rely on techniques or conventions outside of their media (such as writing) in order to express and establish new knowledge at Ph.D. level? Fiona Candlin has written about the structural mismatch between the language of the academy and the language of practice which it tries to interpret through commentaries and explanations.

Paradoxically, while this may make the practice-based PhD academically legitimate in the most conventional of ways, its overall effect is to reinforce the illegitimacy of art practice as research. Conversely, if practice-based Ph.D.s could be simply practice based, then artwork would be more clearly acknowledged as a valid mode of intellectual enquiry and the concomitant anxieties concerning whether or not art can constitute research might be reduced.

(Candlin 2000)

There are several pressures, then, that operate to promote the possibility of an entirely practice-based research degree, and it is widely considered to be an interesting possibility for creative research even if the epistemological difficulties of interfacing these different discourses have not yet been quite resolved.

In the meantime, students produce work, theses are submitted and new doctorates are awarded. One interesting form is for the practical work to be accompanied by a written component that is in some way creative, subjective, or thought of as in parallel to the practice.

Macleod and Chapman produced a study of several theses in this mould (Chapman & Macleod 2014), where innovative methodologies and creative approaches to writing enabled the text to perform an alternative function alongside the artwork. In this type of strategy, which Kill has labelled the 'type-C thesis' (Kill 2012), it is important that the textual component avoids explicitly explaining or justifying the practice. Just as in the Romantic model of artistic expression, 'it should not be possible to articulate the pertinent thoughts or arguments that are embodied in the artwork. If that were possible, then the claim would not be that the artwork embodies thought, but that it enables thought' (Elkins 2009: 125). If the writing serves the purpose of explaining the artwork, then the artwork itself is rendered merely illustrative and therefore unimportant, and again the creative discipline finds itself in the position of being subservient to theory.

In this article I want to argue that the hypothetical ideal of the practice-only thesis is not only an unrealistic illusion that puts pressure on students, but also that it does not reflect contemporary professional practices. Drawing on well-established sociological understandings of the art world, I will show that the ideal of the entirely autonomous artwork no longer exists, if it ever did. In fact for an art practice to be meaningful and to communicate any sort of specific knowledge it must be entirely embedded in a pre-existing and continuously evolving flux of discourse that is produced through written and spoken language. Rather than demonstrating authenticity or disciplinary independence, an artwork that is not written about simply does not exist.

Academic practice is a subtly different variation of practices to be found in the rest of the world at large. It takes its cues, its reference points and themes from those to be found in the wider discourse of each discipline, and in many cases competence in the academic world is taken as signifying competence that can be applied professionally. So it would be natural to look to see if there are any examples of practice-only research in the professional world of each discipline, and it might seem at first that these are easy to find. In the world of fine art there are plenty of artists who eschew wordy conceptual justifications, who present material objects in one form or another, and who just want the work to 'speak for itself'. We are also looking for work which is of a high quality, in order to be equivalent to the ambitions of doctoral level research, and that seems to embody or communicate a specific argument or thesis. This final quality

encompasses more than just the tacit knowledge embodied in the skillfulness of artistic work. This 'more' is the ability of art – deliberately articulated in artistic research – to impart and evoke fundamental ideas and perspectives that disclose the world for us.

(Borgdorff 2010: 60)

If it is possible to point to artists who meet these three criteria, then they should provide useful precedents for the artist-researcher who hopes to work entirely through their creative practice and ultimately present a project that is legible purely through non-linguistic media.

Take as an example the work of the American contemporary artist Trisha Donnelly, who is unusual in the world of contemporary conceptual art in actively resisting the demand to explain or interpret herself using language. Based on her formidable record of exhibitions in large international institutions such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Portikus in Frankfurt, and her inclusion in prestigious group

exhibitions like *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the 55th Venice Biennale, she undoubtedly produces artwork that is considered to be of the highest quality.

Donnelly staged a large solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2014, which consisted of video projections, sculptures, ambient sounds and various slight alterations to the fabric of the gallery such as opening side doors and adjusting the lighting. The overall atmosphere was pensive, with a general mood being created rather than a focus on striking images or dramatic moments. As is characteristic for the artist, she provided no wall labels, no explanatory texts, and no explanation for her work (in the past she has taken this to the extreme, answering interview questions with snatches of music, and offering recordings of drum beats to people who ask what it all means). Presumably because of its fairly mainstream audience of central London art lovers and tourists wondering in from Hyde Park, the Serpentine Gallery felt the need to produce a simple folded A4 handout offering interpretive guidance and explaining that 'her exhibitions traditionally eschew press releases, catalogue essays and wall labels, with the artist intent on avoiding the bureaucratic trappings of exhibition display' (Peyton-Jones & Obrist 2014). A viewer encountering this combination of artworks and (semi) explanation would clearly be led to the understanding that Donnelly's intention was to emphasize the unmediated experience of the encounter.

This idea of a pure, unmediated encounter is one of the major interpretations of her work to be found in reviews and other press coverage. The Serpentine Gallery exhibition generated four significant pieces of art criticism: a review by Polly Staple for ArtForum, a preview article by Martin Herbert for Art Review, a review in the Daily Telegraph by Mark Hudson, and one in the Guardian by Robert Clark. All underline the point that she 'doesn't permit explanatory wall panels, written gallery guides or even press releases in relation to her exhibitions' (Hudson 2014), and this is understood to have the effect of emphasizing the pure experience of seeing the work. In his long preview article, which also refers to many of her previous gallery shows and performances, Martin Herbert concludes that 'in an age where so much art is experienced – if that's even the word – through online aggregators and through documentation, Donnelly's art insists on being taken in real time and real space, so that it can ask what those things even are' (Herbert 2014). Polly Staple agreed that the artist created 'something increasingly rare in our age of nonstop streaming media: an old-fashioned space for contemplation' (Staple 2014: 278).

In these circumstances it is interesting to ask the question – who is responsible for the meaning of Trisha Donnelly's work here? It is possible to walk out of the exhibition with any number of thoughts and interpretations jostling for prominence. But the discourse which surrounds her work in the art press, in art world discussion, and in

publications, has gradually congealed into an accepted interpretation, and this is what the artist 'Trisha Donnelly' stands for (and why international curators find her interesting). She appears to have communicated a coherent meaning purely through a creative practice utilizing images, objects and sound. But in actuality there is a solid body of written text that contextualizes and actively directs our reading of her work, writing that is necessary in order to make explicit the new knowledge of the artist's implicit thesis. It is just that this writing is *not produced by the artist herself*. Curators, gallery education departments, press offices, professional art critics and culture bloggers all fulfill this function.

Sociological descriptions of the art world since the 1970s have repeatedly pointed out that the individual artist and the work that they produce are 'entirely dependent on the existence of the structures and institutions of artistic practice which facilitate that work' (Wolff 1984: 119). These include everything from the schools of art which train young artists to the ritual of the annual Salon exhibition (or today, the art fair), patronage, and the dealers and auction houses which generate wealth from sales and resales. It is easy to understand that such structures will have a profound influence on the nature of artwork that is produced. But there is also a discursive and constitutive function carried out by 'the producers of meaning and value of the work – critics, publishers, gallery directors, and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such' (Bourdieu 1983: 319). In fact if the world of contemporary fine art can be characterized by one thing, it is the massively complex apparatus of museums, curators, galleries and critics which is entirely concerned with drawing out and disseminating meaning from artworks.

Since the rise of the artist-theorist in the early 1960s it has become more and more crucial to generate writing – interpretation – around artwork once it has been exhibited.

That something should be written about art is taken as self-evident. When works of art aren't provided with a text – in an accompanying pamphlet, catalog, art magazine, or elsewhere – they seem to have been delivered into the world unprotected, lost and unclad.

(Groys 2008: 111)

It is through this discursive field of language that a work's meaning is established and agreed upon. Once an approximate consensus has been achieved through magazine reviews and panel discussions, it is the role of the larger institutions to set that reading

into a broader art historical context through their curation and validating interpretations. This might sound overly mechanistic or perhaps even rather cynical, but in many ways it is a similar process to the solidification of knowledge described by Polanyi back in 1967, '[k]nowing-in-action becomes knowledge-in-action when we describe it' (Brockbank & McGill 2007: 89). The process of moving towards a shared interpretation of the meaning and significance of an artist's work is a linguistic process that takes place outside of the work and after it has been made public.

This explains the vital imperative that many artists feel to get their work written and talked about, for until a work begins to circulate in the discourse formed by catalogue essays, monographs, magazines, journals, websites, interviews, panel discussions, seminars, conferences and study days, then it hardly exists at all. This discursive economy creates an imperative to publish something, no matter how modest, to accompany every exhibition. Words must be woven around the work at all costs, because without language it simply does not mean anything. So artwork that might initially appear to be producing its meaning entirely autonomously in fact should be seen as a kind of collaborative practice involving the artist together with their professional interpreters.

A work must enter the discourse of the art world in order for it to even register as art, much like a scientific paper adding to the cumulative body of knowledge of a different field. The very worst thing that can happen is for nothing to be written about an exhibition. Just think of all the provincial artists, Sunday painters and even highly skilled makers who produce and sell high quality work but do not register as part of the contemporary art world. Their work simply does not mean anything, because no one has written about it in order to articulate its potential significance.

All ambitious contemporary artists recognize this imperative. In the large studio building in Berlin where Olafur Eliasson's team of assistants go about their business of developing and fabricating new works for the global market, several art historians are also employed 'who assist him in the crucial domain of critical discourse, i.e. the editing of interviews and statements, the invention of titles, or the organization of seminars' (Ursprung 2009: 167). Eliasson strategically opens his studio to 'scholars and researchers, people who are in a position to control and direct the production of discourse' (Ursprung 2009: 175) because he recognizes that the thinking that contextualizes his works needs to be clearly articulated in order for them to signify unambiguously in the unpredictable and highly contingent world beyond the studio.

Back in the realm of the postgraduate research student, this professional ecosystem creates a problem, because of course the requirements of the art world and the research university are very different. All of the tradition and scholarly convention of

the university system are geared towards recognizing individual achievement in the conferment of awards like the doctorate. What is the ritual of the viva if not a challenge and assessment of the individual mind? As a consequence research students are required to produce a coherent and self-contained project by themselves which would seem to preclude the incorporation of writing or academic interpretation by others. But this is simply not how the actual art world operates.

One possibility that can be imagined is for a student to submit a body of work that is accompanied and contextualized by published reviews and commentaries. A convincing set of critical responses from reputable authors could successfully articulate and direct a specific interpretation of the body of creative work, and therefore the new knowledge would be shown to have been made visible. There would be the positive side effect of aligning academic success with professional success, avoiding the familiar problem of a successful Ph.D. thesis which is nevertheless irrelevant outside its academic context (see Suchin 2011). Another possibility is that the examiners more explicitly take on the role of the critic, analyzing and interpreting the practice offered up by the student, and in effect making the claims for new knowledge on the student's behalf. Again, this would reproduce a familiar structure where it is often the critic who is responsible for articulating the significant claims of the work, and the artist's role simply to produce it.

But aside from such speculative propositions, my argument is really that it is fundamentally unrealistic for students to attempt to produce a meaningful thesis without any written component, and unfair to demand such a thesis, since it does not exist in the actual world of contemporary art. The practice-only thesis is a pure phantom. Of course students can and do use writing strategically and creatively in order to position and nuance their works. One only has to look at the output of an artist like John Russell of BANK to see how language can offer an interpretive framework for visual work without needing to explain it or pin it down, and the Turner Prize winner Elizabeth Price's Ph.D. is often noted as an example in this mode. But it literally does not make sense to isolate one aspect of this collaborative system of knowledge production, and expect creative practice to operate successfully when it is cut off from its interpretive and validating discourse.

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