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A Proper Anxiety? Practice-based PhDs and academic unease.

The most pervasive of all the psychological aspects of doing a PhD is the anxiety that accompanies you through all its stages. At first it is very high and exemplified by such concerns as ‘am I clever enough?’ ‘will “they” realise what a fraud I am?’ and so on. As you progress, you go through periods of higher or lower anxiety but you are never completely free of it. It comes in bursts, and one of the reasons for feeling that a great weight has been lifted from you once you have successfully completed your PhD is that the nagging anxiety that has been your companion for so long has finally been lifted.

Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh, *How to Get a PhD: A handbook for students and their supervisors*¹

Anxiety is endemic to doctoral study; abnormally balanced or overly arrogant candidates aside, virtually everyone suffers from it. Yet, to others, a candidate’s anxiety can appear unfounded and is often treated as such – the student is obviously talented and simply needs to be more confident, to stop worrying, to get on and do some work. Like any other PhD, practice-based PhDs are also the focus of much anxiety but, significantly, those anxieties reach beyond personal doubt and are often shared by supervisors, examiners and senior academic management. In this instance I argue that the anxiety concerning practice-based PhDs should not be lightly dismissed because it is a product of the institutional relations practice-based doctorates put into place. At least in the short-term anxiety is structured into the qualification and the aim of this paper is to examine why.

Although academic regulations for practice-based PhDs have now been passed at some forty British institutions, a certain anxiety about practice-based PhDs still remains. , Katy MacLeod’s research on PhD methodologies revealed candidates often suffered from ‘an acute anxiety about retaining their identity as artists’.² Students were worried that the PhD might steer them away from art practice and towards overly academic concerns. In many cases, my own included, supervisory emphasis has been placed upon the written component. Elizabeth Price who recently completed a practice-based doctorate at Leeds comments:

Of particular concern was the relation of any formal critical writing to other activities, and the relative status of these things within the context of the PhD. As a new course these issues were not all defined. I think it is fair to say that probably 90% of the formal discussions I had were about the status and value of the written component. This was necessary but unfortunate.

Unlike most conventional PhD candidates, practice-based candidates not only have to deal with their individual project but contend with both the constitution of their PhD as such and the implications of doctoral study for their professional identity.

Likewise, Katy MacLeod's research notes that many supervisors were uneasy as to whether practice-based research would be comparable to other more obviously valid PhDs,³ an issue also made evident in the Higher Education Quality Council's (HEQC) report, *Survey of Awards in Eleven Universities*. By emphasising 'the need to clarify the use of new doctoral titles and to protect the significance of the PhD / DPhil' (my emphasis),⁴ the report implies that the validation of practice-based doctorates would undermine and devalue conventional doctorates. Equally, while the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design* is ostensibly sympathetic to practice-based research, it nevertheless exhibits doubts about the capacity of images to function as research.

One of the central concerns of the UKCGE report is the apparent difficulty of judging the intellectual and scholarly worth of artwork. As a solution the report stipulates a written, contextual component that will make such assessments easier:

... practice-based doctoral submissions must include a substantial contextualisation of the creative work. . This critical appraisal or analysis not only *clarifies* the basis of the claim for the originality and location of the original work, it also provides the *basis for a judgement* as to whether *general scholarly requirements* are met. This could be defined as judgement of the submission as a contribution to knowledge in the field, showing doctoral powers of *analysis* and *mastery* of contextual knowledge, in a form which is *accessible to* and *auditable* by knowledgeable peers (my emphasis).⁵

For the purposes of a PhD, artwork is deemed inaccessible to judgement unless accompanied by (con)textual material, while the creative work may demonstrate originality and so on, it is actually only the written research that can adequately clarify those factors and provide a basis for judgement. Yet artwork has been, and is still

successfully judged outside of an explicit relation to text, so why does the practice-based PhD destabilise what are established and educationally viable modes of judgement within art departments?

Until recently art practice and academia have been institutionally separated. A compulsory academic element was only introduced into higher education art courses in 1960, and even then the two remained both physically and temporally separate. The academic element, known as complementary studies, was taught in the classrooms, not the studios, and classes were usually held on Wednesday afternoons, the time traditionally reserved for games. Underlying these spatial and temporal divisions was a conceptual framework that similarly split theory from practice. Fred Orton has commented that 1960s British art education formed 'an integral response to Modernism',⁶ and that:

Insofar as a coherent and normal tendency can be identified for the art and art teaching of the late 1950s and 1960s in England, its ethos was largely established by the 'Modernist' representation of New York art of the 1940s and 50s.⁷

This ethos was largely exemplified by the work of Clement Greenberg, who famously argued for art's autonomy, not just from academia but from almost any other aspect of social, economic or political experience. Greenberg's insistence on the different spheres of art suggests something of what is at stake both in maintaining and, in the case of the practice-based PhD, working across discrete theoretical and practical areas.

Greenberg posited that 'whatever is intelligible in terms of any other sense or faculty'⁸ should be excluded from each art form. This exclusion was intended to move against the 'confusion of the arts'⁹ and to defend the particularities of each medium. It was a demarcation that extended to music, literature and even to thought, indeed Greenberg refers to 'the corrupting influence of literature'¹⁰ and to the 'necessity of an escape from ideas which were infecting the arts'.¹¹

Within this context art practice and art history or theory were defined as being entirely different ways of working and as belonging to different disciplines. Yet the boundary lines that Greenberg attempted to set up stretched further than this; Greenberg was not just talking about the separation of painting from academic work, but about a

complete demarcation of art from any other concerns, whether they be literary, musical or economic, social or political. For Greenberg, then, art and academia were mutually exclusive categories. It was this understanding that underwrote the art schools' separation of studio practice from academic study.

Despite the numerous artists and art historians who have argued against the autonomy of art, this framework was more or less adopted by British art schools and it is an approach that remains in evidence today. In 1986 Philip King commented at a debate on art and art schools that 'the values that artists hold inevitably have their source in a spiritual (state), rather than a mental or material one',¹² while at the 1991 Tate / Wimbledon conference on art education, Glyn Williams complained that fine art subjects have been 'interbred', emerging as 'various hybrids' creating an 'ideal environment for the art 'theorist' to flourish, toying with the fundamentals of the subject without the responsibility of practice'.¹³ Although notions of art's autonomy may seem outdated comments like these demonstrate the enduring legacy of Greenbergian Modernism within British art schools.

Both the separation of theory and practice within art schools and the institutional division of art and academia across institutions is also a contributing factor in the PhD candidates anxiety about losing their identity as artists, not least because expertise and competence are both at stake in these separations. For Greenberg the delineation of art's boundaries mutually ensured artistic competence and his own competence as an art critic. The exclusion of anything that was not specific to a particular art form guaranteed the purity of art which, in turn, allowed for a judgement of competence. Greenberg writes:

The avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a "purity" and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. The arts lie safe now, each within its legitimate boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art.¹⁴

This concern with purity, delimitation and with the marshalling of arts boundaries is essentially a concern for self-definition and an attempt to establish a clear identity for art, specifically for painting. As Greenberg notes 'purism is the translation of an extreme solicitude, an anxiousness to the fate of art, a concern for its identity'.¹⁵ The

exclusion of art historical, academic or any other issues is thus a way of clearly constituting art. In turn, this purity allows for the clear construction of competence:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.¹⁶

Greenberg can only argue for the superiority of modernist art, if the ground upon which excellence is judged is kept clear, so competence is necessarily tied to an insistence on maintaining the boundaries of aesthetic criteria. If the territory of art is heterogeneous or amorphous, it becomes difficult to make qualitative assessments. Alternatively, once clear criteria are established, namely, fidelity to medium, an emphasis on flatness and the exclusion of other forms of art, illusion, representation, literature, subject matter or ideas in any form, then what constitutes good art is much more obvious. In turn, being able to authoritatively pronounce on issues of quality is of course the measure of the critic's competence. It is not just the success of particular artists that is at stake in the separation of theory and practice, but that of the art historian.

The clear demarcation of disciplinary boundaries is similarly important for the academic. In order for a professional to master a specific aspect of knowledge it is important that what that knowledge is be clearly defined; it must be perceived as enclosed in order to be (supposedly) mastered. To become an expert you have to have a specialised field, a point that Samuel Weber makes:

A professional was - and is - a specialist ... who has undergone a lengthy period of training in a recognised institution (professional schools), which certified him as being competent in a *specialised area*; such competence derives from his mastery of a *particular discipline* ... professionalism lends its practitioners their peculiar authority and status: *they are regarded as possessing a monopoly of competence in their particular field* (my emphasis).¹⁷

A specialist field can only be only defended if its borders are clearly defined and policed. To construct or defend those boundaries is to assert a right to the territory, to make it one's own. It is to claim that art historians, for example, know what art history

is, and are better equipped to judge, teach or write about it than someone from outside its borders. Clement Greenberg constructed boundaries around the arts so that it was made completely clear which fields belonged to whom, and who was pre-eminent in each.

Precisely because the demarcation between specialist areas is so closely tied to judgements of competence and the attribution of authority it is unsurprising that people feel anxious when projects like practice-based PhDs cross boundaries and thereby shift the concomitant acknowledgement of authority and expertise. To some degree, however, this is nothing new. Like the practice-based PhD, many other art practices since the late 1960s have moved out of their designated areas and by shifting location have rendered their correlative area of competence significantly less clear. In an essay on British art schools Griselda Pollock recalls lecturers who did not consider it possible to assess feminist practice on the grounds that it was politics and not art. Likewise, when the conceptualist art group *Art & Language* taught at Coventry in between 1961 and 1971, one of their concerns was 'the ontological status of pieces of paper with writing on them' (i.e. text based art). Terry Atkinson, a founder member of *Art & Language* recalls that the dean summoned a philosopher from the University of Warwick to decide whether or not text based work counted as philosophy, in which case it could be evaluated as such. When the philosopher suggested it might well be art for all he knew, he was considered to have exceeded his brief and in Atkinson's words thus demonstrated that 'the regime hadn't the faintest inkling about what had happened in art during the previous decade'.¹⁸ The regime may well have had problems assessing the competence of text based work since they were attempting to judge according to 'modernist protocols',¹⁹ nevertheless it was *Art & Language* members who lost their jobs. After all, question of competence are not simply academic.²⁰

Questions of competence might be tied to definitions of art, but what is considered proper to art changes. The conceptual and feminist practices that were once unrecognisable as art are now situated firmly within the canon and are entirely amenable to evaluation. Both Michael Archer and John Roberts have commented on an affinity between 1960s conceptual art and contemporary 'Brit Art',²¹ while Jonathan Harris recently noted that

theories and methods relating to academic Marxism, Feminism, Postcolonial theory, Psychoanalysis, Structuralism and Semiotics have moved into the mainstream of art historical practice and debate since the early 1980s, and, to a certain extent, become institutionalised.²²

The possibility that what artistic competence consists of, or indeed what art is constituted as, can change, raises difficulties for a Greenbergian attribution of competence. Greenberg implies that there is something essential to art and if this purity can be established it will almost certainly result in good art. Yet, if what art is understood to be alters, then artistic competence cannot be securely established. Since contemporary art practice is often preoccupied with pushing the boundaries of art as far as possible, so much so that work is not always immediately recognisable as art, then assessing competence with reference to an unchanging canon is particularly difficult. Indeed, if we accept Griselda Pollock's suggestion that it is one of the marks of the avant-garde to attempt to establish difference in relation to current aesthetics²³ then establishing competence by excluding what is not art might prove either futile, or at least counter-productive to making new work.

Given then that there are substantial precedents for art practices that cross disciplinary boundaries of all kinds and that judgements of competence are always subject to change, why has the practice-based PhD caused such anxiety? Why isn't the PhD just a recent step in a history of theory and practice? Significantly, the practice-based PhD has involved a shift in the institutional arbitration of competence. In the past art was formally evaluated within art colleges and in relation to their traditions and practices whereas in this instance art is being judged within an academic context and with a different set of expectations in mind. Unlike other previously contentious forms of art practice, such as some feminist and conceptual art, this is not a change in medium or subject matter that nevertheless remains within the parameters of the art college, but is a shift in the way that the art object is legitimated as such. The practice-based PhD involves the theory and practice of art being acknowledged as academically valid. What then are the practical and conceptual consequences of academic validation for artists and how exactly does it provoke anxiety?

Greenberg demonstrates the degree to which competence and judgement is tied to a logic of boundaries, but competence, authority and evaluation are also closely linked to institutional space. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Michel Foucault draws out

the links between discourse, authority and institutions thereby suggesting why the practice-based PhD causes both individual and personal anxieties.²⁴ Foucault argues that discourses are constituted and differentiated from one another within a network of relations, specifically the relations between the places discourse emerges in, how discourse is classified and who the recognised authorities are. In relation to art practice the spaces of emergence would, of course, change historically but at present include art schools, universities, galleries, museums, publishers, auction houses, local art classes, community art, TV programmes, the press and so forth. Classification would involve a consideration of media, whether an object counted as fine art, craft or design, and its conceptual framework, while museum and gallery curators, collectors, art critics and historians would be among the relevant authorities and arbiters of art. Rather than conceiving of art in relation to a fixed definition, as Greenberg did, Foucault's analysis suggests artwork is recognised as such through this network.

What this means is that although art practice cannot be separated from another discourse, such as academia in terms of an essence, it can be distinguished as a discursive formation. In consequence art can incorporate academic practices, information and materials yet still remain recognisable as art. For instance, Hans Haacke's *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings* (1971) is a documentation and analysis of social housing in New York but, because the network through which that work emerges and is recognised, differs from that of academic enquiry, it is still understood to be art and not, say, social policy. It is not, therefore, the subjects or material that the practice-based PhD works with that potentially make it problematic, after all numerous artists have engaged with academic material and debates. Rather, it is the channels through which that artwork is recognised that change. In the case of the PhD it is precisely the places of emergence and the relevant authorities that alter.

In turn, where and how work emerges involves who is entitled to produce and validate work. By moving the right to legislation from the practising artist to the academic (and it is notable that a number of students are co-supervised outside of the art department),²⁵ a different series of institutional norms, professional and pedagogical practices are brought into play. It is this overlap between art practice into academia that potentially makes students, staff and management anxious. If authority is linked to specifically located and defined areas then it is clear that someone who is differently situated, who employs different processes, norms and frames of

judgement, will not have the same claim to authority. For example, I may know as much about law as a Queen's Consul but without institutional recognition will not be able to practice as such. An artist could potentially make the same statement as an academic, but like the legal statements uttered by a layman, without the recognised position of an academic, it would lack efficacy, value and status as an academically legitimate pronouncement. This is not to say that the declarations artists make do not have any status, but that they are constituted differently.

The practice-based PhD, however, effectively posits that artists can speak from the positions previously occupied by academics alone. This inevitably creates problems concerning competence. As with the lawyer, competence, authority and indeed the right to practice are linked to both the institution and the appropriately qualified individual. In this case, the competencies required by an artist are different to those demanded of an academic, yet a similar authority, that of being able to make academically legitimate statements and to conduct valid research, is being conferred.

Pragmatically, this means that the practice-based PhD potentially demands at least two sets of incompatible competencies, one that satisfies the demands of the university, and one that looks to the non-academic structures of art production. The specific criteria of competence for the practice-based PhD is not therefore immediately obvious, something that has far-reaching effects and raises questions such as; how do you produce or examine a PhD when it is unclear what competence constitutes per se? (Notably, my first choice of PhD examiner, an eminent art historian who had written extensively on contemporary art refused to examine it on the basis that she didn't feel sufficiently competent). Should the artwork be assessed in relation to contemporary art practice or should it be viewed as a thesis in images? Does the theoretical or intellectual investigation take place in relation to practice, or through the accompanying text? Does the artwork, like academic research, put forward a hypothesis and demonstrate a mastery of a canon or should the emphasis be placed upon technical ability and if so, how is technical ability judged? Should practice-based doctoral students be expected to write thesis of the same proficiency as conventional PhD students?

The anxiety practice-based PhDs provoke is entirely warranted. As Samuel Weber has pointed out habit is a strategy for the prevention of anxiety and here, habits and patterns of work, assessment and judgement have been broken.²⁶ While institutions do

vary in the criteria they establish for the newly inaugurated PhDs, candidates, supervisors and examiners are still expected to proceed without a clear map of what is expected and without established criteria of competence. This is not to say that we have a blank canvas and therefore the lack of parameters can be interpreted as an exciting opportunity for experiment and innovation. In fact, the canvas is overloaded with precedents that candidates and staff have to negotiate. Practice-based PhDs may be new but art practice and doctoral study are most definitely not and candidates inherit all the associated artistic and academic expectations.

Ironically, the UKCGE's attempt to negotiate these expectations and through the introduction of textual commentary, make practice-based PhDs academically respectable backfires. Rather than advocating an integration of theory and practice, the report, by privileging text in relation to research actually reinforces the distinction between them. 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 PhDs 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.

Alternatively, the anxiety practice-based PhDs provoke could be viewed in a more positive light. The separations between theory and practice, artwork and academia have served to build and maintain specific competencies and authorities; supporting particular groups of people and their interests to the detriment of others. The practice-based PhDs, however minimally, have had an effect on these constructions of academic space, opening it up to a different constituency, to different forms of knowledge and of practice. Given that boundaries favour the holders of intellectual territory, and not those people who are dispossessed academically or otherwise, the re-definition of academic and institutional boundaries offer different groups of people access to research and indeed, a changing recognition of what research is. This change in intellectual and administrative boundaries may well induce anxiety for some but for others it offers an opportunity to critically reappraise academic territory.

The critical productivity of anxiety in relation to institutional questions of knowledge and authority is, however, unlikely to offer much comfort to the doctoral student who not only has to deal with the unclear parameters of what is expected for a practice-

based PhD, but often has to cope with a very real sense of dispossession. Precisely because practice-based PhDs are institutionally uneasy, candidates are neither recognised as academics nor are their careers necessarily furthered as artists and it is as yet unclear how the acquisition of a practice-based PhD can benefit the candidate beyond a solely personal pleasure in working (which will not help your chances of making a living, much less of paying back your student fees). What practice-based PhDs are for is something that the institutions running them need to address and support.

While I would not wish to downplay the consequences of living with often acute anxiety throughout the duration of a PhD, an understanding of how that anxiety is structural as well as personal could help. Otherwise, it might simply mean biding our time, as it is perhaps inevitable that the field of practice-based research will itself become firmly established within higher education. Just as feminist and conceptual art practices were once considered inaccessible to judgement, but have now become thoroughly institutionalised, so too will the practice-based PhD. Instead of being an anxiety inducing but potentially groundbreaking path that confuses modes of judgement and established authority, it will become a beaten path with its own canons, authorities and precedents. As its critical potential fades the conferences, debates and disagreements on the subject will no doubt diminish but the doctoral candidates' experience might well be vastly improved.

¹ Phillips, E. and Pugh, D.S. *How to Get a PhD: A handbook for students and their supervisors* (1994), Open University Press, Buckingham, p. 80.

² Macleod, K. 'Research in Fine Art: theory, judgement and discourse', *Drawing Fire: The Journal of the National Association for Fine Arts Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (1998), p. 35.

³ Macleod, K. 'New Knowledge/Art Knowledge: postgraduate research in Fine Art', *Drawing Fire: The Journal of the National Association for Fine Arts Education*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (1998), p. 35.

⁴ Higher Education Quality Council: *Graduate Standards Programme Survey of Awards in Eleven Universities*, (1997), p.5.

⁵ United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education, *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*, (1997). For a more detailed discussion of this report see Candlin, F. 'Practice-based Doctorates and Questions of Academic Legitimacy', *International Journal of Art and Design Education* Vol. 19, No. 1 (2000), pp. 97-101.

⁶Orton, F. "Postmodernism", "Modernism" and Art Education (English) "Modernised", *Circa Education Series*, (1985), p. 64.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Greenberg, C. 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', Frascina, F (ed.) *Pollock and After, The Critical Debate*, (1985), Harper & Row, London, p. 41.

⁹ Ibid. p.35.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 41.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 39.

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- ¹² Philip King, quoted by Pollock, G. 'Art, Art School, Culture: Individualism After the Death of the Artist', *Block* 11, (1985 /6), p. 11.
- ¹³ Williams, G. 'The practitioner, once a ubiquitous presence in art and design education, is now a rarity: A history of the blooming and decline of the species', Hetherington, P. (ed.), *Artists in the 1990's, Their Education and Values*. Issues in Art and Education Vol. 1. (1994), p. 25.
- ¹⁴ Greenberg, C. op.cit. pp. 41 - 42.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. p. 35.
- ¹⁶ Greenberg C. quoted in Frascina, F. 'Introduction', *Pollock and After*, op. cit., p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Weber, S. 'The Limits of Professionalism', *The Oxford Literary Review*, vol.5, (1982), p. 66.
- ¹⁸ Atkinson, T. *The Indexing, The World War I Moves and the Ruins of Conceptualism*, (1992) Circa Publications, Belfast, p. 26.
- ¹⁹ Harrison C. and Orton, F. *A Provisional History of Art and Language*, (1982) Editions E. Fabre, pp. 26 -27.
- ²⁰ According to Harrison and Orton (ibid.) the faculty administration thought that 'the entire department was infected with practices contrary to the principles of implementation of liberal regimes and modernist protocols', a view that resulted in David Bainbridge and Michael Baldwin's dismissal. Terry Atkinson's book *The Indexing, The World War I Moves and the Ruins of Conceptualism*, ibid. gives a slightly different slant. In the summer of 1971 a new dean was appointed to the faculty with the explicit brief of closing down the Art Theory course with which Art & Language were identified. Atkinson hints at bureaucratic unimaginativeness and traditionalism (which is of course political) being behind the closure of the department rather than the consciously political vindictiveness Orton and Harrison register.
- ²¹ See Archer, M. 'Out of the Studio', Nesbitt, J.(ed.) *Live in your Head, Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965-75*, (2000) Whitechapel Art Gallery, p. 24 and Roberts, J. (ed.) *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976* (1997), Camerawork, pp. 7-8.
- ²² Harris, J. 'Theory in Art History 1960-1999', *Henry Moore Institute Newsletter*, no. 29 (2000), unpaginated.
- ²³ Pollock, P. *Avant-garde Gambits 1888-1893, Gender and the Colour of Art History*, (1992) Thames and Hudson, p. 41.
- ²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (1972), translated by Alan Sheridan, Routledge, London and New York.
- ²⁵ For instance, at Keele University I received informal supervision from staff within the Centre for Social Theory and Technology while practice-based PhD students at Staffordshire University were co-supervised within the philosophy department.
- ²⁶ Samuel Weber, 'The Limits of Professionalism', op.cit.