

This text is a response to the current trend towards Practice-Based PhD's as discussed in the 'Third Cycle: Artistic Research after Bologna. International conference on the third cycle in higher arts education'. Felix Meritis 10 - 11 October 2007 by Nancy Mauro-Flude (artist and forthcoming PhD candidate). Thank you to : Geert Lovink, Michael Kolkman and Jan Lazardzig for their comments.

Theoria cum praxi: Some thoughts about practice-based PhDs.

I love writing because there are acoustic typewriters and electric ones. Its a physical act, but the word is still trapped on the page. The neat thing about performing is it keeps the act of creation alive. I love the process of creation, although the end product is in itself a necessary evil. Still, I'm glad it's there, otherwise I wouldn't have Rolling Stones records, William Burroughs or Rimbaud books to enjoy.

-Patti Smith. [1]

What is the function of a PhD?

At certain times in history the *theorie cum praxi* connection has been postulated, like in 17th century with Leibniz. Although far from being the only time, we stand in a *paradoxical age* of theory/practice, a time of deep change, including in the fields of Art and Science; these practices being inherently influenced by many things, including the ubiquity of computational media.

The 'Presentations of the third cycle in higher arts education in Europe' were naturally, mainly by European Higher Arts course directors in the wake of the Bologna declaration [2]. These PhD examiners (or equivalent) exhausted a wonderful gamut of complexities of how they have dealt with making artistic research an equivalent to a PhD.

The day began with a talk 'Efferent Education: Encouraging social impact through art and science education' by Jill Scott who presented the 'Z-node *art researchers* PhD Programme' in Zurich, Switzerland. By following the traditional manner of Anglo-Saxon study system it requires; written requirements, peer review, and study validation by a recognised University. In this case, it has an agreement with the University of Plymouth in UK.

This session was followed by a experimental approach, in a description about 'The Norwegian Programme for Research Fellowships in the Arts' by Johan Haarberg, Bergen. Skipping over the need to interface between critical methodology, research and practice, having no written requirements, the programme, aims to be equivalent to a PhD. Created in 2003, it singularly valued the importance of producing high quality artistic work evolving from interdisciplinary artistic research.

Although I am convinced that academics and practitioners benefit from close collaboration, I wonder what study at a doctoral level is, if the candidate is unable to make a careful analysis of the complex creative processes and contribute to a wider cultural debate?

Bringing theoretical knowledge to bear on radical creative experience and feeding experiential knowledge back into the critical theorising is an incredibly demanding process, especially if it is to be undertaken with high level skills and commitment in all domains. It is my view that a doctoral candidate in the arts is someone that has reached that exact point in their intellectual development where they are able to make a major contribution both to artistic practice and to the academic understanding of this practice.

"TEACH ME A NEW LANGUAGE, DIMWIT. A LANGUAGE THAT MEANS SOMETHING TO ME." [3]

Amongst the presentations by course directors there was a panel of artists involved in research at a graduate level. I experienced this panel of artistic practitioners as divided into those who had met traditional theoretical PhD requirements but still hold art practice as central, and those who were aiming or advocating for a 'practice-based PhD'.

I will give a brief recount how the four members of the panel explained their artistic research:

Paul Craenen's presentation 'Composed Performers' began with a clear position, that although he is a composer, he avoids talking about his *own work*. Claiming to have “fallen in love with theory”, he depicted his contrapuntal relationship between the articulation of the musical ideas and his own train of thought in theory that diverges and rejoins. This temporary separation gives his thinking a kind of autonomy when his thoughts again attach to the work. As if the mental discourse served as a relay for the musical discourse, while at the same time working with it.

Following this type of cogent and sophisticated research and analysis, researcher, Sher Doruff gave a talk, titled 'Practice Becomes Perception'. By elucidating upon the unique lacunae of artistic theory and practice she drew upon the analogy of an intersection of fault lines that converge together, where many divergent forces (among other things) carve out shapes, spaces and territories for new understanding and perspectives. Sharing some fascinating and timeless diagrams from artists' research, such as from Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketch book* (1923), and the diagram titled 'Exactitude Winged by Intuition' (see Fig. 1). She also gave brief description of her doctoral thesis, which drew upon systems theory and models of complexity in order to provide crucial insights into the specific complex phenomena of the artists experience in the making process, whilst operating in collaboration, using the translocal platform, multimedia synthesiser, KeyWorx software.

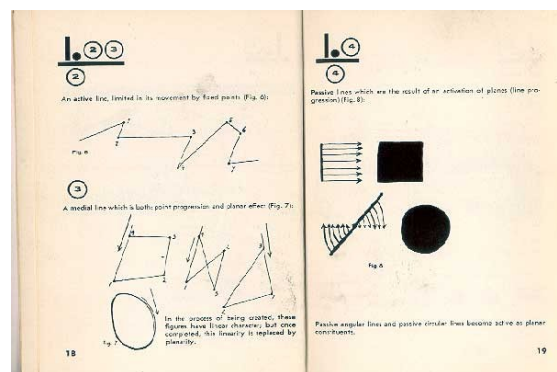


Figure 1. Exactitude Winged by Intuition (1923) by Paul Klee[4]

In both these research projects the issues they sought to address in their presentation, via spoken text, written text, interviews, images, diagrams and notations, and the clarity of scope and relation between the issues taken up in the text element and their practice were of central importance.

The other two artists who spoke in the forum, placed themselves as 'practice based researcher' in two alternative ways although both presenting a showcase of their artistic work. The first presentation titled 'Disappearance: self-loss in performance practice' was by Carolien Hermans who, in the conference programme, describes herself with a professional back ground in dance and new media. She started her presentation with heavy downward vertical thrust movements with her limbs, accompanied by exaggerated breathing. After this sequence, she returned to sit down with the rest of the panel and said “there are many minds in the room so I thought I would bring in a body”. And began to delineate how her movement research focused on self-loss and self-destruction. Showing a series of video studies about disappearance that consisted of: clusters of dancers wearing colourful T-shirts in physical contact - improvising and rolling through space in industrial areas in front of urban graffiti, scenes of staged self-violence bordering on (unintended) slap-stick, a duo performing combat martial arts next to unsuspecting people eating in terrace restaurants on the street, a flash animation project 'Body in bits and pieces' that was made by a programmer from V2, and she finally read the audience a poem in Dutch.

After this talk, many questions were raised by the audience: Did she interview the dancers about their

experience while doing these exercises; or more specifically, did they feel self-disappearance during the movement? What was her methodology? How does she intend to present the research as a whole? In summary the reply was that she will present it with different types of writing, and said "it was difficult to bring into words."

Indeed these remarks confirmed, among other things, that indeed performance is therefore an area of literary interest in and of itself and a space for new kinds of writing. However, 'being enamoured with ones own terminology becomes an end in itself, and tends to obscure the phenomena being studied and unintentionally recreates the very opposition they set out to oppose'[4]. Movement and life itself, can never be linguistically exhausted. It is often the case that some dance practitioners (most often ones that do not have a critical theory background) make uniformed claims that bodies are before, or other to language. In a proto-linguistic manner, text is imbued in our corporeal make-up. To recall an performing artist, researcher and theorist, Herbert Blau in 'Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre', writes that even though we are

'...running out of postures as of politics, somewhat bruised in the pleasuring of soul, having forgotten (what Yeats didn't, what Nietzsche didn't) that the values in our muscles are still attached to our minds which, even if blown, are made of language (1982:30)'. [6]

Rather than muddying this report with a critique about possible ways to write or approach movement research or theories of embodiment; I will continue.

The last case study was a performance artist, lecturer, poet and doctoral candidate from SMARTlab, Alev Adil who began with a dramatic monologue that harked back to Aristotle's Poesies, repeating tenets of his notion of praxis. In the conference programme she stated her "academic writing, poetry and art practice engage with diasporal identities and the interstices of private and political memory". She described to us her web project, a part of her doctoral thesis, 'The poetics of Exile : Memory and the New Media Environment' and how it focused upon her experiences a child growing up in wartime Cyprus, because she was making a collaborative database for other people to participate with content. Finally, she shared some podcast videos; emotive poetry, over a photo montage that consisted of hazy images of a woman in a *g-string* reflected in mirrors and lying in beds in different hotel rooms, a repetitive image of a glamorous angel sitting on couch, rustic images of Cyprus.

I will skip over the archival debate, not withstanding on what type of encoding or software may be the best for artistic research. But first and foremost some of these artistic works presented, rendered a promotional function, and were clearly situated in another context than for an artistic research archive for future researchers to draw upon. I consider the form of podcast as a consumer medium, and not an academic document and account into the process by which the artistic work was constructed as her research title 'Praxis and Poesis: the Art of Theory' suggests. Apart from the methodological problems raised in these later two presentations I have described, or even to make a comment of the quality of art work that adhered to a standard televisual grammar. In my view, anyone who seriously researches at a graduate level in new media and uses software whilst calling themselves a professional, knows that due to the evolving consumer market, encoding work with proprietary software, they have to also understand that their work will most likely be obsolete in 10 years, because when the developers decide they can make more money with a different product, the codec is scrapped.

My gripe here is not even about commercial market place and their stunning ability to reify artistic practice as objects, or even proprietary software used in graduate research, which is a well known topic to most that is in dire need of further research. What I want to highlight here is what Eugenio Barba precisely pinpointed when he spoke about the dilemma of 'Eftermaele: that which will be said afterwards'. Urging artistic practitioners, whose works were not objects but unstable events, to document and provide more of a *sui generis* bedrock claiming "...what really matters is what will be said afterwards when we who worked at the task are gone". [7] Thought about carefully, these are

scholarly documents (including use of photography, film, video and digital technologies and different video formats) should contribute to the memory and legacy of artists for scholars who will come after them.

If a graduate thesis in Higher Arts Education is a fabric of ideas, not like science, a body of general propositions expressing discovered facts, not a collection of moral truths learned by some other means than factual discovery; then this thesis is a stocktaking of the ideas in terms of which one expresses facts and laws, beliefs and maxims. In short, it is the study of the conceptual framework in which all our propositions, true or false are made. Put simply; even if someone is a perceptive analyst of artistic practice and a thoughtful reader of critical and theoretical material, if ones own writing fails to exemplify the qualities, even if it is abundantly evident in oral communication; I advocate that this is indeed artistic research, but not graduate doctoral study which encourages a more systematic consideration of a range of methodologies with wider cultural analysis and formulated conclusions.

What is the relation of Higher Arts Education and academia?

With the conference revolving around the fact that,

'Third-cycle programmes in the arts, common in many countries, are non-existent in the Netherlands. As a result, developing artists have no opportunities to further enrich their talents within the Dutch higher education system, and they are denied access to the highest academic degrees.' [conference programme introduction]

On a positive note from this divergent panel of artists and course directors, what is clearly established is that received ideas about the relationship between artistic writing, theory and criticism are being expanded.

There indeed is a lack of artistic PhD graduate programmes in the Netherlands, but instead there is fantastic funding support and post-academic art schools, such as: DasArts-advanced institute for the performing arts (currently being incorporated into the MA system of the Amsterdam School of the Arts [AHK]), Rijksakademie, Jan Van Eyck Academy and so on. These advanced research and artist residency centres in singular education are not equalled to by any other place in the world *per capita* in regard to their generous artistic research support and artistic production emphasis.

So is an entire practiced-based PhD simply an evasion to write a theoretical essay at the doctoral level required traditionally, and get a quick pay rise? Or simply a shying away from the acute critique of aesthetic judgment when one is engaged in more experimental practice in the field of Art?

It seems to me that amid the speculation of academic and the half-baked yet significant studio talk of artists, is that one crucial issue is never fully faced, but is skirted with a sort of intellectual awe, or treated emotionally with no demand for meaning at all, that is, the problem of artistic creation. Is an artist's work really a process of creation? What, actually, is created? Is there justification for the fairly popular notion that one should speak rather of re-creating than of creating things in art? Or is the whole idea of art for arts sake in the age of *the cultural industry* a sentimentalism?

These questions in doctoral research, demand a stricter treatment, 'careful observation and analysis', in this precise way performance studies theoretician Gay McAuley writes;

'The task of the academic specialist in the field of performance studies is, in my view, essentially to observe, record, document and analyse the creative process, the resulting product and its reception by audiences. The theorising which is a central part of any academic enterprise (and which is too often brushed aside as unimportant by Anglo-Saxons and carried on in isolation from practical experience by European academics) should emerge from and be rooted in this careful observation and analysis. Ultimately, some of the theoretical insights produced will be fed back into the creative practice of the artists as well

as shedding light for all concerned on the way the art form functions. (1985: 21)[8]

To bring this graduate research issue into the centre of our interest is to begin serious work on the subject at hand. Above all, it entails a special formulation of almost every major problem concerning art, notably that of the unity of the several arts, in fact of the often denied, yet patent fact of their actual division; the paradox of abstraction in a mode supposed to be characterised by concreteness; the significance of style, the power of technique.

In radical art practice are advancements made within the institutions or outside of it?

As I have described the PhD is not only a text (even if text is taken in a wide sense). It is not only a contribution and advancement of its academia, indeed it is this too but a PhD must be a detailed, scholarly exposition, a new contribution to the field. Higher Arts Education is a part of the field of humanities. When there is no incompatibility between artistic refinement and extreme views, you will have to admit that this raises many questions about the doctorate's validity. Therefore it must be objective and less personal than other texts you might write later on. This counters the dehumanisation, in all its forms, that is characteristic of so much art and that has made my cultural access to my own humanity more difficult to obtain. On the other hand, the role of the artist, fortunatley, does not have to answer to everything...

The reason for the demand of objectivity and detail, for it to be a sholarly exposition is that a PhD is also a passing of a grade. It is also an examination. Once you have passed the grade you are a member of the academic community, you can instruct others. Hence in the studentship one must also show that once can present matters in an academic lexicon, in a way benefitting the communication of the field to new people. A PhD could be of use if an artist then aims to become an instructor, it is then a matter of deciding what are important and relevant criteria.

A difference between arts and sciences could be that whereas most of the advancements of the sciences (and almost all of philosophy) are made by people attached to the Universities, this is not necessarily the case in the Higher Arts, (this does not mean that discoveries in the sciences cannot be made outside the institution but factually this is how things usually are). For the Higher Arts one can ask if advancements (defined which ever way) are made within the institutions or outside of it?

As an artist, I am also drawn to a highly traditional PhD environment (although I have a partial studio component), because not only I have a respected context in which to share my work, or the fact that I am almost guaranteed a situation to continue and share this perspective in a research institution, but I want to make an intervention in the theoretical field underpinning practice-related research from the inside. To highlight modes of pedagogy that are more inclusive of people who have had different pathways into the role of artist and researcher. People who might have an inability to articulate their pathway because of its lack of orthodoxy and who are unable to find a voice to communicate this because they are starved for an affirmation of their own historical existence.

I was questioned by the examination board in the entrance exam at the University of London (Goldsmiths, and Slade School of Fine art) because of my radical performing arts background in experimental media, and grass roots activities, 'Why do I choose such a traditional programe, when as a MA graduate of Piet Zwart Institute | Media Design and DasArts, I could choose the seemingly more progressive New Media PhD programmes at Plymouth University, or Zurich etc'. I was advised by my former professors at highly traditional University of Sydney where I conducted my Honors year, (meeting 1:1 class grade, which means I can pass right onto PhD), that after years of seeing me squirming in my chair with my blood boiling, in an attempt to articulate my passionate views in an academic discourse, I might be in danger of insanity if I was to go on to do a PhD immediately. Although welcome, I really should do go back to my artistic practice, at least for a while to make some interventions from that angle. And they were right. Because to reside in the paradox and to try and resolve it does not creating anything dynamic or meaningful. Doctoral study without a critically rigorous ability to understand methodologies, theory and practice in a complex manner, and

paradoxically to inhabit the *space_in_between* is harder, because it never feels as stable as moving from one extreme to another. This does not mean I can not maintain a strong connection and counterpunctual relationship to radical practices and contribute to counter movements taking place outside the institution.

Another crucial and political issue is at stake when Higher Arts institutions all over the world wiping out the guest-artist as teacher or mentor or 'artist-in-residence' programmes, where academic institutes worked in collaboration with radical artists across many artistic genres. Now a *play it safe* attitude is abundant with artists lecturers in a more regular position who possess pseudo-institutionalised vernaculars. This trend has serious consequences because it is creating an opposition to new forms of artistic practice. The most radical artists are mostly always ingenious people who have had different pathways to knowledge.

What about the future of honorary doctorates awarded to exceptional artists, after years of artistic work their *oeuvre* is eventually recognised? Or for any practices that attempt to operate beyond the borders of dominant discourse systems, say, an emerging body of writers or performers who are searching for new forms, new strokes, new way of accessing codes, new experiential models for creating performance work are stunted. If this continues their experiential craft knowledge will not be absorbed into larger critical reflection models, because their voices will not be heard. It is clearly making the problem of artistic practice displacement larger than it already is; creating a wide fault line with no divergent forces of understanding to push us to meet across this difference.

Is the progressive rush to certification, to show degrees and papers, a desirable development? Is this beneficial to the development of radical practice in the Higher Arts Education? Of course the colossal commercial and political apparatus that prescribes it simply reflects the agendas of the time. The artistic institutes that were once places for the *wild cards*, have turned commonplace. In a observation of this prevailing tendency, the conservative Adorno in *The Culture Industry*, writes,

'Tension is but superficially maintained and is unlikely to have a serious effect any more...This longing for 'feeling on safe ground'- reflecting the infantile need for protection, rather than the desire for a thrill – is catered to. The element of excitement is preserved only with tongue in cheek. Such changes fall in line with the potential change from a freely competitive to a virtually 'closed' society into which one wants to be admitted or from which one fears to be rejected. Everything somehow appears 'predestined' (2002:161).[9]

Contrary to common opinion, with the introduction of practice-based PhD's, wiping out singular artistic research institutes in the wake of the *Bologna process* I think that there will sadly be less artists with wildly experimental practices, rather than what people seem to think. And for myself, as an artist, who is still continuing my own body of work about to begin a PhD, having a counterpunctual relationship to the radical artistic research is vital for this continuation.

Therefore, my view, in regard to the term 'practice-based research PhD' or doctoral study without an attempt at written articulation it is mooted (could be even as small as 40,000 words with a body of work). Otherwise I will use the analogy of Herman Brood, a truly radical artist, who didn't see it necessary to do institutional practice based research, but was invited to institutes as a guest artist many times, and as the myth goes his bodily organs were even put into institutional research, after he died and not earlier...

[1] Shapiro, Susin. 1995. 'Patti Smith: Somewhere, Over the Rimbaud', in *Rock She Wrote* Eds. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers. New York: Dell Publishing. p.282

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna_Process

[3] Kathy Acker. 1984, *Blood and Guts in High School* plus two. Picador: London. p.96

[4] Cited in <http://thesystemis.com/dbn/images/klee1.jpg>

[5] New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications.

[6] This type of observation was often made by my former supervisor, Dr Lowell Lewis in his Embodiment Lecture Course at The University of Sydney, Australia Which I attended from 1997-2000.

[7] See 'Eftermaele: that which will be said afterwards', in *The Drama Review* 36, no 2 (T134), Summer. Note, that among other prizes Eugenio Barba has been awarded 7 honorary doctorates from the universities of Århus, Ayacucho, Bologna, Havana, Warsaw, University of Plymouth (UK) and the "Reconnaissance de Mérite scientifique" from the Université de Montréal.

[8] See 'Performance Studies: a personal view', in *Australasian Drama Studies*, No 7. October.

[9] *The Culture Industry*. First printed 1981. London: Routledge.