

## Art Project PhDs

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What might Art Project PhDs contribute to the broader research cultures? Such questions are vital. Without them, there can be little justification for recognition of the specificities of this area of doctoral research, specificities such as reluctance to adhere to the instated procedures and methodological imperatives of argument and proof of research findings, also the question of theoretical probity. How is it possible then to see such reluctance as a plus rather than a determined minus? I shall maintain in this paper that it is this very reluctance to follow the research rule book which provokes important questions about the imperatives of research: that is, why the unalterable assumption that the doctoral thesis will take the form of writing? And why theory is assumed to be determined by named theoretical source rather than conceptual or theoretical construction? And why in the broader research cultures that assumption apparently precludes experimentation with the written submission *as* thesis.

On one level I could argue that there is little point in negotiating an answer to the question of assumptions concerning the written thesis. This paper, after all, is a written justification of my research into PhDs in Fine Art. However, if it is the case that the written component of a PhD in the practice of Art is the *sine qua none*, then those of us who are invested in Art need to ask, what kind of writing is fit for this purpose? Because Art in the course of research requires a constant negotiation with its own terms as it seeks to renew its de-stabbing purposes in making sense of the world: Art is porous to prevailing cultural, political and economic conditions; it is also subject to new and muddling conjunctions within the research Art process as artwork takes shape within and against its own methodological imperative.

Perhaps at this point, I should say that this is not the case for all research in the discipline of Fine Art: there is a long and substantial history of PhD submissions of historically based art practice renewed through research art projects; there is also a long and robust history of submissions of technical or technological innovation and of course this constitutes an important area of renewal and revitalisation of practice. International scholars, for instance, James Elkins, in *Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, (2009) have sought to prioritize such PhDs. It must be said here that Elkins has also suggested (2009) that one of the PhDs I shall direct you to might prove to be of considerable interest. This is Elizabeth Price's PhD (University of Leeds, 2000), which Elkins thought might offer a "radical possibility" (2009, p161) for doctoral degrees. He added that this would be a PhD where there is "no research component". In such contexts it becomes vital that we make sense of the Art project PhD designed to pursue the purposes of Art, that we attempt to understand how such a submission can possibly be of use beyond the particularities of its own framing, that is its specific realisation *as* an Art PhD.

Of course, once the primacy of words is questioned, then a host of other questions ensue. If words are deemed ill-equipped to deal with the realisation of Art as research and they are the *sine qua none* of research and PhD submission,

then the nature of those words must be critically examined and a new kind of writing will inevitably take shape. And if there is to be a new kind of writing then how theory is formulated comes into question. Jonathan Miles argues in “Research in Fine Art” in *Intellectual Birdhouse Artistic Practice as Research*, (2013)<sup>1</sup> that artist researchers should not seek theoretical ascription to substantiate or justify their research, their especial contribution is to put questions to theory. Miles outlines some of the ways in which Art seeks new formulations to propose research. He emphasises invention rather than method, for instance and research presentation rather than representation to fit Art research purposes. He adds, “the work of art answers its own laws only if it is incommensurable and undecidable on grounds of theory” (p218, 2013).

At this point a steely voice might be whispering in your ear, surely the prevailing components of research fit all PhD submissions: Research focus, question(s), context, methodology, findings, analysis, summary and recommendations to the field? There is nothing here that the respondents to my original research enquiries between 1996 and 2000 failed to recognise and endorse.<sup>2</sup> However, more recent research projects into PhD submissions has evidenced that as soon as the question of the validity of research argumentation and proof of research is raised and writing is seen as an area for vital experimentation, the consistency and reliability of the relations of one component to another is brought into question.<sup>3</sup> Once that happens discussion takes shape around what a PhD might be. How it might perform its purposes. Also how it might stick to its core values and begin to ask: why not pay due attention to what artists have produced *as* research? Why not value Art and its determinations in this context of the PhD? Such questions must be entirely pertinent if the PhDs in question are to advance the discipline of Fine Art.

In this paper I shall propose that each of the PhDs I cite can be seen as a provocation: a provocation about writing, about research presentation, argumentation and construction of the thesis. Each PhD engages with the prevailing assumptions of research presentation and proof; each involves risk, (a quality invariably written into assessment criteria for each attainment level of Fine Art). As a consequence, each PhD requires an unusually high level of active engagement from the reader or viewer if there is to be any appropriate recognition of new knowledge or new insight into the research area in question. These PhDs are not easy submissions. They also raise issues of repeatability and models of research practice. All of this makes them troublesome to broader research arenas. I invite you to consider, even given this brief insight into their purposes, whether their contribution to those broader research arenas has validity.

The first PhD I would like to consider is the one already mentioned *sidekick* by Elizabeth Price. This PhD offers several provocations which were timely and certainly of importance to my research in the mid 1990s, most particularly in

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<sup>1</sup> See Dombois, 2013

<sup>2</sup> See Macleod & Holdridge 2004

<sup>3</sup> See Macleod & Chapman 2014

relation to the relationship between written text and artwork, their relative weight and value. Here the PhD submission is in the form of a live address to the evolving artwork as mutual research submission. Even in the PhD title, *sidekick* there is a provocation to fret about what '*sidekick*' might mean. When the research text is being read- and I would recommend reading this research text aloud- the question of to whom it is addressed, the addressee is raised. In this case, it is the artwork which immediately engenders the question, why would a research text address an artwork? What is the point? What this address does is to direct the reader's attention to an enduring and irredeemable relationship of writing and art: *sidekick* insists, through its presentation on this equivocal and constant relationship. (IMAGE -'boulder' plus wall piece ) This text cannot exist without this particular artwork while this art, as the author maintains is mute. The viewer/reader encounters in *sidekick* a conceptual schema, writing-art-research.

*Sidekick* research submission is devoted to the purposes of Art; it describes at considerable length the unfolding artwork, the conditions within which work is undertaken; the specifics of the labour and its production is spelt out in considerable descriptive detail. The labour involves unrolling packing tape from the manufactured roll back onto itself, to construct a new ball of tape. This new configuration is called Art. Nomenclature and words do have value in this PhD but we must look closely at their purposes. The text gradually becomes both a register of the artist's labour and a work of duration; it is a work of description and a disquisition on specific assumed relations within a PhD and research context. Artwork and text then are labile, working concurrently to provoke thought about what is being produced: what it is and its precise value and on whose terms. (IMAGE - research text)

In the context of PhD research, *sidekick* then becomes speculation about what will be valued as determining proof. However, instead of providing substantial evidence of research proof, this researcher entitles the developing artwork, *boulder* and writes a series of questions about whether this particular boulder might just be a hollow, a 'hoax'. It is left to the reader/viewer to establish the value of this hoax. In my repeated analyses of this PhD, I have assumed the value lies in a Duchampian gambit: moving a manufactured object from the place of manufacture to a place of Art casts troublesome questions about the value of labour and context and the conditions within which things are made and displayed. This gambit also opens up for speculation the flux of affect and critique: what do we want from works of Art? What do we require of them? How might they perform meaning in the arenas of research? *Sidekick* makes demands on an immediate apperception of the simultaneous production of written text and artwork. The mute presence of Art signals a consistently developed and sustaining art method as it adheres to written text: distinction and compression: separation and mutual incompatibility are bound together as speculative enquiry into the nature of each and their relative value.

The second PhD provocation I should like to consider is also concerned with art and writing. This time under the rubric of a single proposition: art-writing. Submitted as a box of texts, this PhD by Neil Chapman, *Protowork as Art's*

*Expanded Writing Practice* (University of Reading, 2010) subsumes this question of the relationship of Art to written text within propositions about word/image constructs. (IMAGE – PhD box)

*Protowork...* is a conceptually charged PhD much closer to named theoretical source than *sidekick*. In terms of PhD culture, the culture at Reading University when Chapman undertook his PhD was very different from that at Leeds, where Price undertook hers, almost a decade earlier. The research culture at Reading University was led by an artist trained in Philosophy, Jonathan Dronsfield and included Philosophy students. Theory was key to research seminars and presentations. I give below an excerpt of the discussion between two PhD students preparing for their Viva, Chris Chapman and David Stent (It is Chapman speaking):

“...The important reading has been comparisons between different philosophers. I have found resources in Giorgio Agamben’s work, but his writing would not have been the resource if not for my reading of Georges [sic] Deleuze, which has given me a critical approach. The same is true of Peter Hallward’s work for my project. And both Hallward and Agamben, in their own ways, have given me a fresh critical perspective on Deleuze. Jacques Rancière has been important too for similar reasons...He has helped me to identify a shortcoming of my work...where the image is concerned...”

In this conversational exchange, the careful trawling of sources from Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze back to Peter Hallward and on to Jacques Rancière is rehearsed as foundational to the research artwork produced. A key source, Jacques Rancière’s *The Future of the Image* (2007) is described as offering a way into new thought about how to conceive of the image. In the previous PhD by Price, theory is embedded in the written text: Marxist materialism, Duchampian absurdism, Michel Foucault’s theory of power relations and so on, are all evident within the research writing. This theoretical underpinning while of absolute centrality to the PhD, is nonetheless implicit in the written text. In Chapman’s submission, theoretical source is explicit. Chapman’s detailing of theory however is not straight forward: Book jacket covers of a text by Rancière, a sci-fi novel, a do-it-yourself manual; found texts by Georges Perec and invented texts by the artist are all included as are plans and diagrams requiring assembly. The full submission is designed to present an event of reading: that is, each text requires a different kind of reading, different kinds of attention, differing apperception of form and image formulation in a relational presentation. It is an event in and of itself. On one level this PhD follows what James Elkins advocated in 2009 to address the specific *paradox* of a PhD in Art, that is new habits of critical reading. Elkins proposed such reading would be necessary to deal with the ‘conceptual problems’ posed by such PhDs (p164, 2009).

One could justifiably maintain that Chapman’s art-writing absolutely presents a conceptually charged event for renewed critical reading. In relation to several other submitted PhDs in recent years, this PhD caught the zeitgeist of interest in new forms of writing by artists. In *Protowork as Art’s Expanded Writing Practice*

writing is identified as image production beyond metaphoric illusion or simply fiction, as a conceptual challenge to new thinking, much as Rancière outlined in *The Future of the Image*, (p17, 2007) concerning how to rethink the image as:

“...logical, paradoxical intertwining between the operations of art, the modes of circulation of imagery, and the critical discourse that refers the operations of one and the forms of the other to their hidden truth.”

Here ‘hidden truth’ is what might be essential to the visible and the sayable, the question of how an image is constructed. Chapman’s PhD presents the event of reading as taxing encounter with image construction. It also presents an immanent methodology. By paying attention to the particularities of each text, the reader begins to understand the sustained method of reading this engenders, that is a method designed to provoke new thought about image construction determined by the practice of Art.

At this point it might be useful to speculate about how Chapman conceived, beyond what had become his central theoretical source, Jacques Rancière’s *The Future of the Image*. I have deduced from research interview material that the method was formulated after Chapman’s encounter with absolute darkness, an experience of sensory deprivation, blindness if you will, a dislocation of space and relationship, and the impossibility of a clear sense of what and where things are. Out of this blankness, Chapman began to assemble a method which would demand of the viewer/reader an equivalent, clean slate bewilderment.

In Chapman’s PhD submission, through an oscillation of readings and divergence of demand, a clear sense of things adding up is taken away. This writing presents itself as Art construction which requires a new realisation, as writing-art; it is diversionary, awkward and exacting. It proposes the possibility of an art-writing as theoretical object. In Art we have already encountered artists presenting such constructs, for instance the Surrealists with their poème-objets: one thing as another in one formulation. Such a formulation prefigures a proposition by Jonathan Dronsfield, Chapman’s PhD supervisor and director of the PhD research culture at the University of Reading, the proposition of:

“Not the word after practice but the word as practice, not theory before practice but theory as practice.”<sup>4</sup>

That is, not theory before practice but *theory as practice*.

The third PhD I shall cite is by Dan Hays, *Screen as Landscape* (Kingston University, 2012). This PhD also renews image construction but very differently as landscape painting. *Screen as Landscape* speculates about how landscape can be engendered as image -as painting- as screen, that is as a conceptualisation of landscape painting, formed and formulated within a screen dominated culture.

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<sup>4</sup> See Dronsfield 2009

Dan Hays identified himself in a research interview, as already a researcher before entering into a PhD. He maintained a strong case for the meticulous and systematic approach he took to his art practice to be seen as research whether he was undertaking a PhD or not. However, the research element of his practice was undoubtedly heightened through undertaking a PhD: Just the many meanings of 'screen' and 'screening' provoked new thinking about what landscape is or might be in a digital age, also how a painter might more accurately encounter the experience and meanings of painting in this context, now.

Hays recognised that landscape is always enculturated, always screened but what his PhD research identified was that this process is rarely realised in the painted image of landscape. Here, more than in the last two PhDs the research processes of Art object are presented: the painted marks themselves present as conceptually charged: the viewer sees these marks as landscape and also merely marks, dots and dabs of paint, an illusion of illusions. (IMAGES - dots, landscape, PhD show, landscape)

The experience of the PhD submission exhibition in a public gallery, the Stanley Picker Gallery, presented a sustained invitation to build an argument for the central proposition, 'screen as landscape': a proposition which questions how to assemble a landscape through paint; how the painter in this instance paints snow as landscape; how these dots add up to a snowy landscape. What landscape is this? And so on. The viewing experience is both compelling, because these paintings are exquisite and disturbing because up close, they are also just seemingly random dots of intense colour. Apperception of them requires thought, not just about perception but also about the subject. In this context, in the submission exhibition painting titles present landscapes in Colorado and from the CV detail it is obvious that this artist lives and works in the UK. Why? Because the proposition of screen enters this artist into the global research arenas of the digital, the shimmer of the actual and the digital. The viewer can be in the studio or in a snowy mountainous hideaway beyond anything that he or she has ever encountered in life. That surely is a substantial proposition as an event of the screen within the genre of landscape painting.

To contextualise further, proliferation of identity, or source and meaning became of considerable interest to Hays in the course of his research: he made contact with another Dan Hays in Colorado and the snowy landscape is the result of a digital image of the other Dan Hays' environment, sent to the author. These research works only yield a conception of landscape from a certain viewing point and from that point sets of relations; space, distance, time, the actual against the imagined, apperception and resistance to meaning, mark as against concept, all present themselves. Found image as against painted image. Found identity destabilizes authorial certainty. The speed of screen communication against the slowness of painting production assembled as viewing experience, highlights the means of communication of two dissembling events.

Hays' thought provoking Art proved to be of intense interest to the external examiner, John Stezaker, who was compelled by the complexity of the research

paintings. Alongside the submission PhD show, there was a written text which presented a virtual exhibition of fellow contemporary artists who deal with the representation of landscape. Each artist's work was selected as a constituent part of the argument for 'screen as landscape', the flux and evanescence of image and place and interceptive relations. In this imagined, curated exhibition perception is dazzled by delays and interruptions in understanding, also renewed understanding of how an artist might ask questions of landscape.

The fourth provocation, the last example of a PhD very briefly considered here is again about Art formulation. The researcher, Katrina Palmer, proposed a writing with found objects and imagined sculpture in *Reality Flickers Writing with Found Objects and Imagined Sculpture* (Royal College of Art, 2012). In an enquiry which disdains sculpture as object, the submitted research Art is a performance and a written text. I shall concentrate on the written submission. This is how it starts:

“With her striking blade, the killer cuts into the body's bulging throat. A slash across the larynx splits the thyroid gland and the swollen trachea. A massive obstruction is revealed. She drops the scalpel. Her urgent fingers more accustomed to qwerty keyboards, now delve into the startled opening and trip across the slippery surface of the object, without ever grasping it...

...with violence.” That 'violence' signals a break with accepted form.

Palmer's research text interweaves fiction and imagined documentation, direct address and fictionalised persona, caught up in the highly charged narrative. One of these personas is the philosopher Slavoj Žižek who appears as an academic locked in his study crying for help. The main protagonist, who is an art student determines the narrative plot of a single student/self locked in an art school where all other students have vanished and all making of Art has been banned. The narrative hinges on missives from the Rector and his assistant to this one art student and her responses. The philosopher Žižek is identified as both victim of narrative plot and protagonist of theory along with Hegel; the art school is described as context and method of confinement for both art student and Žižek. Hegel is introduced as dead authority or muse. The text is a complex construct of competing stories of potential violence against restriction in the context of the Art School where a single student protagonist has only one requirement, which is to make work. In the face of such restriction the whole written text is conceived as a 'sphere' with a molten core; it is conceived as an object of writing.

In *Reality Flickers Writing with Found Objects and Imagined Sculpture* the artist, Katrina Palmer imagines an artwork as writing; the written text is presented as form, as art object. A subsequent project, *End Matter* was produced by Palmer three years after the completion of the PhD. Its construction is more thoroughly realised as complex form: it is a live Radio 4 broadcast; a published book and a guided walk; each feeds into the other. My major commitment here is to the book. It is a work of fiction which deploys original documents, photographs of site and fictional stories of protagonists drawn from the histories of the Portland promontory, a truly desolate place. (IMAGE -landscape)

Once devoted to quarrying stone for the rest of the UK, and primarily for London, the few who laboured in Portland were quarrymen, often men from the approved school there, also government inspectors of works, for instance, the Loss Adjustor. The job of the Loss Adjustor was to ensure that the quarry continued to provide stone and so it was his sole job to ensure this vital and profitable quarry so essential to the construction of buildings in London did not cave in. In *End Matter*, the Loss Adjustor is portrayed as corrupt, no doubt because the full exploitation of the quarry was his only interest in being in Portland. Palmer's narrative hovers around exploitation of labour, corruption and stark endurance. The fiction fits the site and evokes the specificities of that place. Arguably it could not have been written without the PhD research and marks the substantial stake in on-going practice that the PhD submission made. **(IMAGE - EndMatter postscript)** This is important to the research culture of Art Project PhDs because they are intended to advance Art.

Also, important is the recognition that all the PhDs cited here provoke serious questions about the practice of research: they present writing as provocation to question the validity of research proof, to present and engender theory dislodged from named theoretical sources and provoke questions about what theory is; all account for the labour of production as central to research findings and thus cast light on the relationship between the labour of research and labour more generally; each of them insists on sets of relations as productive and digressive in the face of meaning production. These PhDs propose writing as necessary and elusive, as an urgent and a compelling source of experimentation. Experimentation is surely central to vital research cultures.

Art Project PhDs are not designed to offer any easy formulations of research, what they offer is endless provocations to keep questioning and being open to new apperceptions of how sense is made and when any sense is made, the nature of Art's materiality within and in the face of linguistic construction. In the delay between sense and non-sense, the endless return of the spaces and things of life and the constructs of art, lie new and compelling insights into the possibility of new approaches to research and new ways of constructing a thesis.

Art is not theory and not Philosophy but it can and does lay questions at the door of each: at its best Art does "puncture horizons of expectation" as the Philosopher Peter Osborne requires in *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (p211, 2013). As such its reach lies well beyond Art.

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