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Problems of Practice-Based Doctorates in Art and Design: A Viewpoint from Finland

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Abstract

Although the development of practice-based art and design research in Finland can be clearly recognised in an outstanding number of edited books, the number of completed doctorates and researchers who utilise this approach seems to gradually diminish and the approach itself is not well accepted within academic research communities. This paper aims to identify problems that hinder the progress of practice-based doctorates in art and design, by examining the forms of practice-based doctoral dissertations accepted in five Finnish art universities. A major problem of practice-based doctorates in art and design is the unconvincing argument that practice as such is a form of research inquiry without need for further validation and explanation. This ought to be solved in order to establish practice-based doctorates in art and design in a larger academic context.

Keywords: practice-based; practice-led; artistic research; art; design; Finland

Introduction

Alongside other universities in Europe, Finnish art academies and universities began to adopt practice-based research as an alternative approach to their doctoral education in the early 1990s. Practice-based approach enables researchers with backgrounds in art and design tradition to achieve their academic merits and to advance their professional skills [3] [5: 7-18] [6] [20]. The approach is interchangeably called 'research through practice', 'practice-led research', 'practice-based research', 'studio-based research' or 'artistic research' (for the discussion of the different terms, see [16: 22-39]).

Although Finnish universities have since demonstrated the theoretical development of practice-based art and design research in an outstanding number of edited books [9] [11] [15] [17] [24], completed doctorates and researchers who utilise this approach in their research seem limited in number [4] [14]. The limited number of practice-based doctorates may imply the approach's vulnerable position in the field of art and design and its unattractiveness for research funding.

This paper thus attempts to pinpoint and clarify hindrances that hamper the progress of practice-based doctorates in art and design. The paper examines doctoral education offered in five Finnish universities in various creative fields, such as fine art, design, music, and performing arts. It discusses the forms and structures of practice-based doctoral research projects accepted in these institutions as well as their strengths and weaknesses. The paper explores past and ongoing debates around practice-based doctorates in Finland. The exploration centres upon observations and documentations from research training activities in various creative fields in Finland and is partly based on the author's experience of completing her doctorate in textile art and design.

Doctoral Education in Art and Design in Finland

In Finland, doctoral education in art and design is offered in five institutions of higher education: Aalto University School of Art and Design (former name: University of Art and Design Helsinki, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Sibelius Academy, Theatre Academy Helsinki, and University of Lapland's Faculty of Art and Design.

The inclusion of artistic part in doctoral research or practice-based dissertations has been possible since the 1990s [18]. Until the end of 2009, the number of completed dissertations which include creative enterprise is 70, 15 in the Aalto University School of Art and Design, 5 in the Academy of Fine Art, 43 in the Sibelius Academy, 4 in the Theatre Academy Helsinki, and 3 in the University of Lapland's Faculty of Art and Design [5] [14: 30] [16: 39].

In the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, doctoral education aims to generate new knowledge based on artistic work created by students who are already experienced and well-known artists. Research carried out in the Academy is called 'artistic research'. The doctoral programme does not adopt any direct model from other well-established scientific fields or from practice-based PhD programmes in the UK [10: 6]. A Doctorate in Fine Arts (DFA) is earned when the artist's knowledge and skills are demonstrated through the production and theoretical part of his/her dissertation. The production part can be an exhibition, an event, or other artistic acquisition that ought to be presented publicly. The theoretical part comprises the student's written analysis of his/her own creative work in relation to the chosen research topic [10: 7].

Doctoral education in music offered by the Sibelius Academy is structured in three study programmes: research, art, and development [22]. The art study programme is equivalent to artistic research obtainable in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. This programme emphasises independent artistic work. An artistic project can include public concerts, published recordings, public performances of a composition or published compositions. To gain a Doctorate in Music (DMus), five concerts that manifest a cohesive artistic component are required. Formerly published recordings that are closely connected to the doctoral research topic can substitute for no more than two concerts. The written part is to be submitted for approval before the third concert. It should construct a harmonising whole that facilitates the student's artistic development [12].

In the Theatre Academy Helsinki, a doctorate can be accomplished through either a research-oriented study or artistic-oriented one [8]. The artistic-oriented study is the Academy's research focus. It aims to stimulate students' intellect to create groundbreaking pedagogical, practical and methodological connections in dance and theatre, mainly through the student's own expression and experimentation. The structure of the study is similar to the artistic research programme at The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts and the art study programme at the Sibelius Academy. The artistic work includes public performances that explore new possibilities in a respective field. The written part is in the form of essays that reflect the student's artistic productions and to some extent present new knowledge and understanding of the art of theatre and dance [8].

Although every artistic doctoral dissertation in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, the Sibelius Academy, and the Theatre Academy Helsinki is required to accompany a written component reflecting on the creative process, the written text does not necessarily meet academic requirements or undergo a scientific examination process [14] [18: 13-15]. The text can be considered as self-reflection.

At the Aalto University School of Art and Design, a Doctor of Arts degree (DA) is comparable to a doctoral degree offered in other scientific fields. Nevertheless, the opportunity to include artistic creation as part of the dissertation is available. The inclusion of artistic work in doctoral research is often seen in the field of photography and design (in particular, craft-based design such as textiles, ceramics, and glass), and is commonly called 'practice-led research' [14]. The artistic work is usually presented in the form of a series of 2-3 exhibitions. Regardless of the inclusion of the artistic component, the written part is expected to meet academic requirements as all studies undergo a scientific evaluation process. The written thesis submitted together with artistic productions must demonstrate a dialogic and analytic connection to the artistic part [1].

The requirements for a doctorate (Doctor of Arts in fine arts, music, art and design, and theatre and dance) in the University of Lapland's Faculty of Art and Design are comparable with the Aalto University School of Art and Design. A dissertation may include artistic work, which covers a maximum period of half of the doctoral dissertation [23]. The artistic part must have relevance with the dissertation. It can take place in the forms of exhibitions, product development projects, production concepts, etc. The written part of the study is demanded to meet academic requirements and go through a scientific examination process [23].

Problems of Practice-Based Doctorates in Art and Design

The problem of practice-based doctorates in art and design has arisen due to the lack of explicit clarification of the different terms (e.g. practice-led research, practice-based research, artistic research, etc.) used to call research that includes artistic practice into the research process. The use and meaning of each term varies among countries, institutions, disciplines, or even researchers within an institution. For example, practice-led research is the most recent term used in most institutions in the UK and in the field of design, while 'artistic research' is more prevalent in other European countries and in the field of fine arts. More importantly, the use of the term 'artistic research' itself seems to have led to the argument that practice as such is a form of research inquiry without need for further validation and explanation (e.g. [2] [13] [21]). Several art universities in Finland, such as the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts and the Theatre Academy Helsinki, has quickly adopted this approach to their doctoral education. However, understanding 'practice as research' seems to have made 'artistic research' isolated from academic research. Art and design practitioners often say that research is an essential part of their professional practice in general. This idea of research could be synonymous with Christopher Frayling's research *for* art and design [7: 5]. This problem also leads to other problems such as the dissemination and application of practice-based research.

Although any creative practice involves both seeking ideas and finding out methods or techniques to realise those ideas, research in this sense cannot be valid as academic research on several grounds. One reason could be that while the former intends to fulfil an individual's aspiration, the latter aims to contribute to shared knowledge in a wider research community and emphasises the transparency of the aim, methods, and results [16: 33]. Research accepted in academia must generate original apprehensions that are not just novel to the individual creator or viewers of artefacts [19]. Therefore, in order to gain wide acceptance in academia, artistic research needs to develop in the direction towards deeper understanding of the nature of research and its fruitful relationship with artistic practice and creation.

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