

The UK Fine Art PhD and research in Art & Design

The UK government is in the process of reorganising the structure of Higher Education and there is a prospect of there being a distinction between 'research-led' and 'teaching only' institutions. At the same time, it has recently recognised that research is underdeveloped in the Art & Design sector and has offered a measure of protection for it over the next three years. As I will explain, future prospects are bleak but it would be useful to back track to the 60s, when the movement towards our future really started.

The story starts, in the early 60s, with the invention of the Dip.AD, which was intended to be the arts school equivalent of the university degree. It allowed for greater specialisation in the sector with diplomas being awarded in fine art and all the other design practices. Courses would be required to include 20% of study devoted to Complementary Studies including the history of art and design and that was what guaranteed them their degree status. Art historians were recruited from traditional university art history departments and in my own college, the then Nottingham College of Art and Design, they taught classical, medieval, renaissance and 19th & 20th century art history. I was recruited to teach the social history of art and later went on to organise a full-blown range of studies including art theory, child environment, drama, film studies, folk studies, literature, local history, music (taught by Michael Nyman), psychology, sociology, television studies and town and country planning. When the government started to radically increase student numbers and decrease the budgets for higher education, complementary studies was gradually phased out and then, finally, art history went as well. In the meanwhile Dip.ADs were changed into degrees and there still has to be 20% 'academic' study to justify the degree status. The logic of the early Dip.AD in Fine Art was fairly clear. The possession of the diploma meant that its holder could take up a career in teaching art as a specialist subject in secondary schools and could well be expected to offer art history to 'A' level. The current logic is equally simple: 'academic' subjects offer transferable skills that will offer the graduate a reasonably sophisticated level of communicative competency along with a sense of the location of the subject in the intellectual sphere.

With the emergence of the Dip.AD also later followed a small number of Masters courses to complement the ARCA (Associateship of the Royal College of Art) and the Slade postgraduate diploma. Typically students went on to take these courses as a first step into becoming art school tutors themselves. The Dip.AD and

later the BA (Hons) were generally regarded as a satisfactory terminal qualification for graduates wanting to become professional artists and designers, though it was generally recognised that both the Royal College of Art and the Slade offered networking facilities that could fast-track success. The London colleges offered a special cachet as well. In the 90's, art schools having merged into polytechnics and the polytechnics becoming universities themselves in 1992, the number of MA courses mushroomed and fine art PhDs began to emerge. The ability to offer a doctorate was seen as offering real university status. Arguments emerged over the nature of fine art PhDs and the arguments are still going on. My university, like the majority of others, does not exempt the fine art PhD from writing a dissertation but recognising the importance of 'practice' to the fine artist allows a reduction of the length requirement from 80,000 to 40,000 words. Mercifully it does not define the necessary content of the thesis except to say:

"The PhD shall be awarded to ... a candidate who, having produced published work, artefact or performance that is accompanied by a written commentary placing it within its academic context resulting in an independent and original contribution to knowledge has presented and defended a thesis by oral examination to the satisfaction of the examiners."¹

Mercifully again, the university is fairly flexible over who can be accepted as examiners and does not necessarily expect them to have PhDs themselves. The logic of the situation is fairly straightforward. Candidates presenting themselves for PhDs are not being rewarded for their work as artists but as artists aspiring to become academics. Some people argue that asking for a thesis is an unjustifiable demand or that it is not fair, being a so-called 'double-whammy' as artists don't have to be experts at written communication to function effectively as artists. I do believe, however, that, certainly in the UK, this view is misguided.

Chemistry graduates do not have to obtain PhDs to become practicing chemists; they have to obtain PhDs to become research chemists, either in industry or university. History graduates do not have to obtain PhDs to become historians though in universities the PhD is the measurable level of attainment for a graduate to teach the subject; the same is true for all of the other 'academic' subjects. The PhD is simply a requirement for getting a job in a university.

There is a double reason for the emergence of PhDs in fine art. First, the changes brought about by the decline of modernism and the current role of

¹ <http://www.ntu.ac.uk/registry/publications/unihandbook/section4.pdf>

'theory' in fine art practices. From 1968, few artists in education could afford to be naïve in relation to ideology. Herbert Marcuse believed that students and women could become the prime movers in social change because of their alienation from the dominant economic structures. Radicalism emerged as a deep requirement of interesting artistic practice and as ideology has to be articulated verbally to become recognised. Grunt practice garnered no respect. More recently, post modern irony is not obviously recognisable from the object itself. If, as Arthur Danto argued, Warhol's *Brillo Box* represented the philosophical end of art, it took Danto himself to point that out. Whether an image is a Baudrillardian *simulacrum* or an ironised reflection of its effect again is not obvious. One of my photography students caused an uproar by exhibiting visual bites of pornographic images along with decontextualised quotes from an antipornographic feminist writer. He fiercely argued that his work was *about* pornography but his fellow students would not let him off without a debate. In this context, prospective fine art tutors need to develop some sophistication over the debates that surround practice. The second reason is less healthy.

The bureaucratisation process has led to a situation where artists have to explain themselves in order to gain institutional funding. The emergence of the Arts and Humanities Research Board in the UK means that in order to gain grants they have to demonstrate that they are engaged in "research" and this is defined in the following way:

How does the Board define research?

11. The Board's definition of research is primarily concerned with the definition of research processes, rather than outcomes. This definition is built around three key features and your application must fully address all of these in order to be considered eligible for support:

- it must define a series of *research questions* or problems that will be addressed in the course of the research. It must also define its objectives in terms of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding relating to the questions or problems to be addressed
- it must specify a *research context* for the questions or problems to be addressed. You must specify why it is important that these particular questions or problems should be addressed; what other research is being or has been conducted in this area; and what particular contribution this particular project will make to the advancement of creativity, insights, knowledge and understanding in this area

- it must specify the *research methods* for addressing and answering the research questions or problems. You must state how, in the course of the research project, you will seek to answer the questions, or advance available knowledge and understanding of the problems. You should also explain the rationale for your chosen research methods and why you think they provide the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions.

12. This definition of research provides a distinction between research and practice *per se*. Creative output can be produced, or practice undertaken, as an integral part of a research process as defined above. *Equally, creativity or practice may involve no such process at all, in which case they would be ineligible for funding from the Board. [My emphasis]*

13. The Board's primary concern is to ensure that the research it funds will address clearly-articulated research questions or problems, set in a clear research context, and using appropriate research methods. The precise nature of the outcomes of the research may vary considerably, and may include, for example, performances, films or broadcasts; exhibitions; monographs, editions or articles; or electronic data, including sound or images. Teaching materials may also be an appropriate outcome from a research project as defined above.²

This paragraph must be read in the context of understanding that the paradigms for understanding research are drawn from the humanities and that no applications that do not apply the paradigms will, in the face of fierce competition, be successful. There's no money for practitioners and only money for academics. While money is available to enable history academics to practice as historians and, through a different Research Board, chemistry academics to practice as chemists, there is no money available for fine art academics to practice as fine artists.

Ironically, the government's Research Assessment Exercise has allowed greater freedoms to artists in academia to practice as artists because their work is peer-reviewed by fellow artists and the intrusion of alien academics has been fiercely resisted. The RAE helpfully declared:

The definition of research which applies in the exercise is:

'Research' for the purpose of the RAE is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry, as well as to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship*; *the invention*

² http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/ahrb/website/images/4_91249.doc

*and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights [my emphasis]; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. It excludes routine testing and analysis of materials, components and processes, e.g. for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.*³

Artists were invited to write a 300 word description of their work where its “research imperative” was not clear and a browse through the Art and Design returns⁴ reveals the degree of variety that was possible.

Having reported the good news, the majority of Art & Design having scored fundable 3a’s which means a significant and usable income, now is the time to report the bad. A combination of the government’s White Paper on Higher Education⁵, the Roberts Report “review of Research Assessment”⁶ and the Higher Education Funding Council’s report “Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes”⁷ would result, if implemented, in a dire setback to the UK fine art PhD and research in Art & Design.

If the government gets its way there will be a distinction between ‘research led’ and ‘teaching’ universities. The post 1992 universities, the old polytechnics that included art schools, are destined to become ‘teaching only’ universities. No HEFC money would be made available to allow staff to actively engage in research; all they need to do is to engage in ‘scholarship’, ie. keep up with what other people are doing. The Roberts Report will require PhD supervisors to be active researchers and to gain quality approval there must be “a minimum standard for critical mass of at least five research active staff or post-doctoral researchers and ten research students.” But, of course, if fine art staff are not allowed to become active researchers there is no way in which they will allowed to supervise PhD students. While the small minority of institutions that scored a minimum of 5 in the

³ <http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/PanGuide/Guide/guideann.htm>

⁴

http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/rae_dynamic.cfm?myURL=http://195.194.167.103/submissions/Inst.asp?UoA=64

⁵ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy/foreword.shtml>

⁶ <http://www.ra-review.ac.uk/reports/roberts.asp>

⁷ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/hefce/2003/03_23.htm

last RAE⁸ will be allowed to supervise PhD's, at least one will be ruled out on the grounds that RAE income is less than 2% of HEFC teaching income. And where will the lucky PhD graduates go on to teach? At institutions that are not allowed to award PhDs because staff are not allowed to actively engage in research for the RAE. Staff who are lucky enough to gain AHRB awards will have done so by playing the academic game and submit themselves to humanities' paradigms for research. This will mean that artistic practice as such will be discouraged in the teaching universities, QED.

In my experience, fine art tutors have been fairly clever at creating space for themselves within bureaucratic institutions. But with an increased emphasis on financial and academic accountability the space is quickly evaporating. One possible scenario for the future is independently financed art schools, but they will become the option for a privileged few. This is highly ironical since government policy declares the importance of "access" for the socially excluded.

⁸ For which see http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/rae_dynamic.cfm?myURL=http://195.194.167.103/Results/byuoa/uoa64.htm