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Fiona Candlin

A Dual Inheritance: Practice-based PhDs and the politics of educational reform

Over the last forty years the relationship of art practice to academia has been quietly but fundamentally changing. Within the post 1960 art school, art practice was often conceived of as divorced from any notion of academic or theoretical work, as John Stezaker recalls, 'the image of the artist as the kind of impassioned and emotional anti-intellectual is something we all know about in art schools from this period'.¹ By the 1990s, however, the ground had shifted to such a degree that it was possible to pursue doctoral study in art practice. This emergence of practice-based PhDs can be considered as part of a larger shift in art education and its acceptance of theory.

This article attempts to trace the pedagogical, institutional and political history of the practice-based PhD. On the one hand, the emergence of the practice-based PhDs can be located within a certain intellectual, ideological and practical set of approaches and be considered as the product of, among other things, social art history, conceptual art, feminist theory and post-structuralism. Although by no means homogenous these approaches and debates were broadly critical of modernism and of the notion that art was autonomous in regard to social, historical, political, and theoretical issues. In this context the practice-based PhD could be interpreted as the logical consequence of critical, politically aware practices.

On the other hand, the founding of the practice-based PhD can also be connected to a series of educational reforms which are, in turn, related to the political climate of the mid to late twentieth century. I argue that the very possibility of these critical practices being taught in art schools, colleges and later universities, is linked to a series of educational reforms, in particular to the 1960 Coldstream Report and to the 1991 White Paper on Higher Education. In other words, the practice-based PhD, which emerged from a predominantly left-wing tradition may also be closely linked with conservative education policies. This institutional and legislative history is important because it raises difficult questions concerning the critical potential of theory and practice that might otherwise remain hidden.

The paper begins with a discussion of post 1960s art schools, the introduction of theory and its eventual canonisation within art education. I then explore more

recent educational reforms, considering the effect of university management on both the constitution of research and the consequences for a critical art practice.

The introduction and orthodoxy of theory

Prior to 1960 art education in England considered design, sculpture and painting to be based on good drawing skills and a firm knowledge of anatomy, composition and perspective. Yet after the recommendations made by The National Advisory Council on Art Education (1960), better known as The Coldstream Report, this emphasis on professional craft-based training was to shift towards a liberal education in art. It was a change that had massive implications for art education, in particular for the relationship of studio practice to art history and theory.

The Coldstream Report aimed at bringing art education closer into line with undergraduate degrees and did so partly by including a compulsory academic element into the new Diploma in Art and Design (Dip. AD). Coldstream intended the history of art to form a 'complementary and helpful counterpoint' 'to the main object'² and recommended that it 'be studied throughout the course and ... be examined for the diploma'.³ What was to be taught under the rubric of complementary studies and art history was, however, vague and the definition of 'helpful' was left to the individual discretion of the tutor or the institution.

The range of subjects that could be potentially included under complementary studies is illustrated by an anecdote told by Stuart Morgan. Morgan conjures up an image of the art schools of this period as havens of creativity and fun. He recalls Mrs. Brady, the Head of Complementary Studies at an unspecified art college, who on his first day told him to forget his university education and to remember that 'these are artists Mr. Morgan, their brains are in their fingers'.⁴ Classes on poetry, Egyptian culture, Italian language and extra sensory perception went on alongside Scandinavian studies and Japanese, all as Mrs. Brady thought fit.

While the Dip. AD legitimated art education by introducing an element of academic work, the concomitant lack of formulation that Morgan celebrates ensured that complementary studies remained marginal in relation to art practice. Although The Coldstream Report can be credited with introducing complementary studies into art, it certainly did not guarantee that any critical or rigorous art theory or art history was in fact taught. Indeed, four years later the follow-up Summerson Report criticised both the 'lack of emphasis given to the study of original works' and the absence of

'serious interest in the social relationships of the arts, either in the past or in our own time'.⁵

Moreover, in some ways the Coldstream Report actually exacerbated the divide between theory and practice. The Summerson report registers:

a certain resistance to the whole idea, as if History of Art were some tiresome extraneous discipline which was being imposed on the natural body of art studies.⁶

Complementary studies and art history were supposed to have a strongly supporting role in the newly formulated Dip. AD, but in removing history and theory to the safe distance of the classroom and by restricting it to twenty per-cent of course time, The Coldstream Report actually programmed a gulf between art theory and art practice into higher education:

The priority, autonomy and prestige conferred on studio work guaranteed a generally irreconcilable breach between studio and lecture room, practice and theory and history, 'doing' and 'talking'.⁷

Nevertheless, The Coldstream Report did enable the introduction of theoretical material into art education, and, paradoxically, the lack of structured and rigorous education in art history (or in studio practice) gave room to more marginal groups and critical stances. Griselda Pollock has commented on this situation:

In practice art schools deliver very little education ...The absence, however, of systematic induction into an (ortho)doxy leaves open unexpected possibilities for counter-courses, women's workshops etc.⁸

Both the introduction of complementary studies and the shift away from craft based training meant that by default The Coldstream Report opened up possibilities for theory and, as Pollock points out, for feminist theory to be taught and practised within art schools.

While the emergence of feminism generally and in art schools specifically does not mean that the integration of theory and practice met with wholesale

acceptance, feminism is obviously informed by a recognition of the roles and representations of women within society. Precisely by engaging with feminism the art practitioner also engages with theoretical, historical and cultural issues. How that engagement was, and is, articulated differs widely. Nonetheless, it did mean that feminism formed one of the main intersections between theory and practice in art schools.

Conceptual art similarly brought the relationship between theory and practice clearly into question. As with feminist art practice, conceptual art pitted itself against the concepts of artwork as a purely visual process which were prevalent at the time. Artists such as Art & Language produced work, which was an explicit critique of Fried's advancement of an art 'accessible to eyesight alone'⁹ and of Greenberg's construction of art as being autonomous.¹⁰ Not only was conceptual art work often produced in tandem with theoretical discussion, but theoretical discussion was integral to the artwork. For instance, Art & Language's *Indexes* (1972) consisted of eight filing cabinets filled with texts that could be read in situ and, along similar lines, Joseph Kosuth's *Information Room* presented 'art as idea as idea'¹¹ by displaying two large tables covered with books on linguistic philosophy. Conceptual art, rather than being concerned with a reduction or eradication of external issues attempted to be a critical investigation of them, specifically those considerations concerned with the discursive constitution of art. In this way many Conceptual artists not only sought to eliminate the theorist/writer divide, but explicitly worked against the exclusion of theory from the studio.

Feminist and conceptual art practice formed one of the routes through which a separation of theory and practice was questioned and bridged, but this was not the only means through which it happened. In their introduction to *The Block Reader* (1996) the editors retrospectively outline the areas of enquiry and thought which were a response to the secondary role of art history in art colleges prevalent during the mid to late 1970s.¹² These responses contributed to a critique of 'the tired formulas of sensibility-plus-dates' and aimed at an understanding of art as a social, material and expressive practice determined by specific forms of production and reception. By the late seventies social history, institutional critique, the cultural analysis of Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, varieties of reception theory were all current, as was the work of Althusser, Foucault, Lacan.¹³ These differing approaches were by no

means mutually exclusive and together they constituted different ways of re-thinking the boundaries of art and art history.

Arguably, work that integrates theory and practice is now commonplace. The intellectual ground that was fought for in the 1970s and 1980s has become relatively accepted, with 'the new art history' finding 'a place in commentaries, curricula and publishing catalogues'.¹⁴ By 1992 feminist commentators could talk about 'the orthodoxy of scripto-visual work',¹⁵ while theoretical and social historical approaches became sufficiently usual within art institutions to prompt Christopher Frayling to write that 'the new art history has recently become the new orthodoxy - art as a carrier of social values'.¹⁶ Likewise 'radical' art practices have become increasingly mainstream. In 1997 John Stezaker commented that:

I would never have believed I'd still be talking about conceptualism. Yet it has become almost the dominant mode. You only have to go round art galleries to see that you're exceptional if you're not working in one way or another in a conceptual mode.¹⁷

Art *is* increasingly taught and made in relation to wider intellectual, social and gendered concerns. At the same time art education is by no means homogenous and enough teaching remains sufficiently rooted in notions of art's autonomy from historical and theoretical issues for Michael Ginsborg, from Wimbledon School of Art, to write in 1993:

One could posit two very broad, interdependent tendencies in current art practice. They should certainly not be taken as exclusive ... In the first critical discourse is not only admitted into the arena of practice, it is seen as constituting it ... In the second tendency the values at work are very different. Intuition, discovery and spontaneity are the priorities ... Verbal articulation and criticism are secondary in the face of the visual practice itself - unless, that is, they deal with form, technique, or process.¹⁸

Like other institutions, individual universities and art schools are not homogenous and competing beliefs and practices can be voiced in the same studio or classroom. Similarly, there are differences between institutions; the university or art college

'system' is not univocal. Despite this there is an identifiable tradition of critical theory and practice within art education.

In many ways the practice-based PhDs in art are the logical consequence of the theoretically informed art practices that have emerged over the past three decades. Although previously marginal these practices are now firmly located within art education; a clear institutional acceptance of theory and practice to which there are several possible responses. On the one hand, it could be read as marking the importance of critical discourses such as feminism and social histories. In this context, the inauguration of practice-based PhDs would demonstrate the validity of ways of working that were problematic within the parameters of modernist art education and practice.

On the other hand, while there may be individual practitioners, or even departments wherein the integration of theory and practice retains its critical agenda and is used to deconstruct the silent ideologies of modernism, theory and practice could be understood as having become another orthodoxy. Pessimistically, the practice-based PhD could be conceived of as the formulaic version of its forebears; it maintains the form of theory and practice but has lost its original impetus. Rather than challenging the status quo it now upholds it. Theory/practice may still retain some adversarial potential against 'the staunch defenders of the purity of art against social histories of art or theoretically informed (who) dread the contamination of the visual by the verbal',¹⁹ but it might already be just another higher qualification.

Alternatively, there could be a less polarised interpretation of the practice-based PhD. The institutionalisation of debates does not necessarily imply a simple assimilation and therefore eradication of all critical potential. Any process of assimilation or incorporation changes that which assimilates and here the practice-based PhDs do have an effect upon the politics of knowledge within the institution. The inauguration of the practice-based PhD assumes that artwork counts as knowledge, as legitimate academic research. By crossing traditional academic boundaries, such as those between theory and practice, words and images, fact and fiction, the PhD becomes an active agent in changing the literal and conceptual construction of academic work. Ways of working and types of knowledge that have been excluded from the academic or artistic sphere are legitimated with the introduction of the practice-based PhD. As the heir of these feminist, conceptual and poststructuralist debates on theory and practice, the practice-based PhD starts to re-

figure the boundaries of what knowledge is considered to be in the university. The major difference is that this happens from within the institution and not from an adversarial, apparently non co-opted position.

Yet some caution is necessary. The practice-based PhD can be conceived of as critically re-formulating the constitution of academia but this does not address the question of what is at stake for the institution itself. After all, it is unlikely that the universities who have now officially recognised art as a research activity did so purely on the grounds of inclusion or out of a desire to embrace the multiplicity of knowledge. In the next section I shall discuss the institutional investment in practice-based PhDs and consider how more recent educational reforms have re-situated theory and practice within the academy.

Practice-based PhDs and market-oriented reform

The Coldstream policy decisions on art education decisions were not external to art practice but had a significant impact on what it is possible to teach, learn and produce within art schools. Likewise, the reasons for instituting practice-based PhDs are not solely intellectual or pedagogical, but, arguably, are inextricably connected to educational reform. I shall now look briefly at the changes in art education since 1991 and their eventual effect on the institution of practice-based PhDs. To what degree have recent and current university reforms affected the kind of work that might be carried out therein?

By 1992 a large number of undergraduate degrees in art were being taught within the university system. This was mainly due to two changes in art education, namely the institution of undergraduate courses in art, and the impact of the 1991 Government policy White Paper on Higher Education across the board. The Dip. AD, which the Coldstream Report introduced, had initially been conceived of as 'corresponding to a first degree'²⁰ and in 1974 when the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design (NCDAD) merged with the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the Dip. AD was converted into an undergraduate degree. Following the merger and the change from Dip. AD to Bachelor of Arts it was stated that 'in future art and design will be regarded and treated as an integral part of higher education rather than an isolated subject area with its own institutions, procedures and validation body'.²¹

Although a clear integration of qualifications in art and higher education was intended, some ambiguities did remain. The lack of formulation evident in art schools continued into polytechnic course design, something that Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin took issue with:

In the NCDAD report there is a bald statement asserting 'the central problem is one of fostering a satisfactory relationship between art and design and the rest of the educational system while protecting the unique features which are essential to the character and quality of art and design education.' The interpretation of this statement will be particularly crucial in context of the recent inclusion of many fine art departments in the new Polytechnics. Now the NCDAD give no clue as to what, in their view, might constitute a 'satisfactory relationship' (and also their notions of 'unique features' and the 'character and quality of fine-art education' are, in the final analysis, vacuous and foggy).²²

Despite calls for integration, art and design was perceived by the NCDAD report as being somehow different from mainstream education. Nevertheless, art courses now took the form of undergraduate degrees and in many instances were being taught within the auspices of Polytechnics rather than art schools.²³

Whether or not art schools remained independent or whether they became part of polytechnics, in 1991 it became possible for both polytechnics and to a lesser extent colleges, to take on university status. The Government *White Paper, Higher Education: A New Framework*, recommended that the 'binary line' between polytechnic and university education be abolished. This line, or rather the lack of it, was identified as the key to related changes, among which were:

A single funding structure ... greater cost efficiency through more competition and better use of resources; degree awarding powers to all major institutions; the right to use the title of university; a United Kingdom-wide quality unit developed by institutions; funding - related quality assessment by the funding councils.²⁴

Under the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act*, the majority of polytechnics did rename themselves universities, enabling them to award their own taught and research degrees. Likewise some art colleges who had never integrated with polytechnics merged with universities.

The funding structure introduced by the *Further and Higher Education Act* was to have major consequences for universities generally and art teaching specifically as it became tied to (largely full-time) student numbers and to the results of the research assessment exercise (RAE). RAEs had predated the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act* but this explicitly linked them to funding. Although RAE money is distributed by universities in different ways and often it is only a percentage which goes directly to the department, the combination of large students numbers with strong RAE results can benefit a department in many ways, including more staff, teaching assistants, bursaries, better library resources or funded conference trips.

The role of postgraduates in art and any other discipline, is an ambivalent one in relation to the RAE. What material the postgraduates work on, or the quality of their output, has no explicit bearing on the outcome of the exercise, but in broader terms they are seen to add to the general profile of a department. 1996 RAE History of Art, Architecture and Design Panel noted:

The number of higher research degrees awarded and the number of studentships will be regarded as indicators of quality: higher degrees, and doctorates in particular, will be rated more highly than studentships. Quantified evidence that a department is stimulating successful postgraduate research will be taken as an indicator of a healthy research culture.²⁵

Quantity counts in that a postgraduate presence is seen to be indicative of a department's research culture which is, in turn, made credible if postgraduate and departmental areas of research correspond. Hence, postgraduates have an indirect effect on the RAE and subsequent funding.²⁶

Postgraduates have a more direct influence in terms of the fees that they bring into their university and, to a lesser extent, the department. This is no doubt reflected in the fact that nationally the numbers of creative arts postgraduates have almost doubled in seven years.²⁷ Thus it is in the interests of the university and can be in the

interests of departments to have postgraduates for financial and cultural reasons, although developing a good research culture is itself potentially financial reason.

Due to the institutional separation of art practice and academic research there has been no history of doctoral study in practical art and only a minority of institutions have offered MA courses. Within the terms of the RAE, which the new universities are now subject to, art departments answered to the same requirements and assessment procedures as other disciplines. One of the criteria for RAE's is, as I have commented, a postgraduate presence and it is notable that doctoral programmes in practical art have, on the whole, only been in evidence since postgraduate work became an important issue in the relationship between research activity, status and funding. The practice-based PhDs can be considered as part and parcel of the departmental need to self account both financially and academically. As such, I would suggest that they are connected to departmental strategies for survival and that the very possibility of conducting research using practical art is, in part, a product of conservative educational policy and market-oriented educational reform. In this context it is perhaps difficult to see how an integrated theory and practice PhD could possibly be perceived as critical in relation to current cultural, institutional or party politics.

Management's self-critique?

The Summerson Report noted in 1964 that practitioners perceived theory to be the optional extra on top of practice, and indeed theorists and practitioners alike have often seen managerial decisions as an irritant, something to be dealt with before the proper business of producing art begins. Yet, as The Coldstream Report demonstrates, administration is not something that simply gets in the way and ultimately remains discrete from the art and research. The regulation, funding and structure of art courses does not form a backdrop against which this thing called art is played out, but rather, academic management forms a leading role in constituting what art is understood to be in educational terms. So while theory and practice may have had an effect on the politics of knowledge within the university, university politics have a significant effect on the form art practice and theory can take within higher education.

The practice-based PhDs can trace their lineage through certain pedagogical concerns but are also the product of conservative educational reform. The PhDs are symptomatic of a market-led university culture in which departments are assessed on

the basis of their research culture. In this context they do represent a re-thinking of academic boundaries – not one that takes place for ethical or critical reasons – but in response to educational reforms that force departments to prioritise financial survival above intellectual inquiry.

The way in which a predominantly socialist commitment to integrated theory and practice meets with Thatcherite educational reforms over the ground of these PhDs is uncomfortable. It is not, however, a cause for complete despair. Educational reforms *are* of great consequence to making art, but this does not then imply that managerial recommendations *determine* the sort of art or theory that is produced, indeed at council level there is rarely any consideration given to the specific art objects made. Moreover, in the case of the Coldstream changes, the new structuring of art colleges opened up the potential for critical discourses, such as social history and feminism, to be taught within the walls. These managerial changes effectively helped in the production and development of feminism and social art history. Along with its recommendations, the Coldstream Report therefore, in effect, allowed for the possibility of its own critique. More recently, conservative educational reform may have prompted the inauguration of practice-based PhDs, but paradoxically may have created a site for the critical re-thinking of academic practice. In this sense restructuring can never be watertight or closed to what it did not intend and while managerial decisions can be said to have a constitutive relation to the work made, they are not simply deterministic.

¹ John Stezaker quoted in John Roberts (ed.) (1997) *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966 - 1976*, Camerawords, London, p.145.

² Ibid. (emphasis in text).

³ The First Coldstream Report para 25. quoted Clive Ashwin, (1975) *Art Education; Documents and Policies 1768 - 1975*, (Society for Research into Higher Education, London, p.98.

⁴ Stuart Morgan, 'The Pleasure Principle', *The Curriculum for Fine Art in Higher Education. The Essential Elements of Fine Art Courses in the 90s*. (1993) (Transcript of a one day conference held at The Tate Gallery, Millbank, London) p. 52.

⁵ The Summerson Report, Clive Ashwin (ed.) op.cit., p.112.

⁶ Ibid., p.114.

⁷ Fred Orton, 'Postmodernism', 'Modernism' and Art Education (English) Modernised', *Circa Education Series*, 1985, p. 63.

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- ⁸ Griselda Pollock, 'Art, Art School, Culture: Individualism After the Death of the Artist', *Block* 11, Winter 1985/6, p. 11.
- ⁹ Michael Fried, 'The Achievement of Morris Louis', *Artforum*, February 1967, quoted in Charles Harrison (1991) *Essays on Art and Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p. 32.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', Francis Frascina (ed.) (1985) *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Harper and Row, London.
- ¹¹ Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, E.P. Dutton (1972) New York, p. xi.
- ¹² Bird, Jon; Curtis, Barry; Mash, Melinda; Putnam, Tim; Robertson, George; Tickner, Lisa, (ed.) (1996) 'Introduction', *The Block Reader in Visual Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, p.3.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Griselda Pollock, 'Painting, Feminism, History', in Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (eds.) (1992) *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 63. Here Pollock takes on the critics of the orthodoxy of scripto-visual work and defends the importance of a theory of representation in art practice.
- ¹⁶ Christopher Frayling, 'Preface', in Paul Hetherington (ed.) (1994) *Issues in Art and Education: Artists in the 1990s, Their Education and Values*, Tate publishing, Millbank, London, p. 9.
- ¹⁷ John Roberts (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- ¹⁸ Michael Ginsborg, 'Coming to terms with Values', Paul Hetherington (ed.) (1994) *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.
- ¹⁹ Griselda Pollock, 'Trouble in the Archives', *Women's Art Magazine*, Sept./Oct., 1993, p. 10.
- ²⁰ Clive Ashwin, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.149.
- ²² Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, 'Art Teaching', *Art - Language*, Vol. 1, no.4, November 1971, p.43.
- ²³ Following the Robbins Report of 1961 the Department of Education and Science presented *A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges* to the Government. This paper proposed thirty new institutions, catering to students of all levels and oriented towards applied subject matter and technical education. Degrees would be awarded by the newly established Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). In addition, *A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges* aimed at reducing the number of colleges engaged in full time education. To achieve this end many such colleges were merged to form the basis of the new polytechnics. This, of course, included the previously independent art colleges and resulted in most art degrees being offered within the Polytechnic sector. By 1970 all but four of the proposed thirty polytechnics were in place. See Ivor Morrish, *Education Since 1800*, (George Allen and Union Ltd, London, 1970), pp. 108-111.
- ²⁴ Jennie Brookman and Alison Utley, 'More Students for Less, Major Promises', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, May 24 1991, p. 2.
- ²⁵ RAE History of Art, Architecture and Design, 1996, p. 137.
- ²⁶ RAE History of Art, Architecture and Design, 1996, p. 137.

²⁷ *University Statistics Students and Staff*, Universities' Statistical Record, Volume One, 1988-89, Table 13, pp. 46-9 and Volume One, 1993-94, pp. 44-47.