



Walls are not my friends: issues  
surrounding the dissemination of  
practice-led research within  
appropriate and relevant contexts

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You don't need a PhD in chemistry to become a practicing chemist or a history PhD to be an historian (Woodfield, 2004: 104). Artists don't *have* to do a PhD and you don't actually *need* a PhD to be an artist. But if you choose to embark on doctoral research, the context of where it is undertaken and where and how the results are disseminated are absolutely essential. Since 1993 when Christopher Frayling defined practice-led research as being research *into* art, research *through* art or research *for* art, there has been much debate and discussion surrounding the defining of *what* research is (Frayling, 1993: 1-5). The relevance of *where* this research takes place is the topic to be considered here. This paper is concerned with highlighting the issues surrounding dissemination of fine art research within relevant contexts making observations specifically in regards to the art institution and gallery models.

The researcher/practitioner is central to the inquiry as is the context in which the research is taking place. (Malins and Gray, 1995: 3).

It is accepted that the context and surroundings of the space an artist occupies have a direct affect upon their working practice. The art school model supports the students by accommodating these needs and is itself a product of this premise. Artist/researchers tend to find themselves located within the art school environment as their inquiry involves art practice so the assumption is they should be placed where the activity of making art occurs. It is in this context that they are supervised mainly by members of staff who are themselves art practitioners and teachers or sometimes by supervisors from the art history/critical theory department. Artist/researchers are expected to produce a body of work and a written component. The practice is usually exhibited and a

written thesis submitted. An external examiner is invited to examine the PhD thesis in a viva.

I suggest that the presumption that the art school is the appropriate context for all forms of practice-led research is a problematic one.

The validity of research is judged in the space in which it is located. In physics, for example, other physicists within the context of the laboratory judge it. In the art world, art is validated by artists, critics, curators, and the art educators, using institutional and gallery models. But these may not be adequate or appropriate . If validation is influenced by the institutional context, might the work be validated *as art* rather than research?

If a doctoral research project is developed within the art school studio environment, then it would follow that its validity is judged in accordance with institutional theory which functions ontologically rather than epistemically (Dickie, 2001: 37) and those who validate it, validate it *as art*. It must also be accountable to the institute and fit the criteria set out by the government and other funding bodies (Biggs, 2006: 192).

The art school and the art gallery-museum circuits add up to a star system in which the former is increasingly whittled down to a clearinghouse for the next crop of celebrities.... Today the star league figures almost as the *raison d'etre* of art schooling. (Maharaj, 2004: 45).

This description of the art school system's development of the artist as celebrity rather than the art practice is somewhat cynical, but none the less it is a good demonstration of how art practice can seem to be overshadowed by its maker. Often we see the artist rather than the painting, whereas research is bigger than the researcher. Art can have many purposes. For some its purpose is to communicate, or to educate. For others it is to entertain or to bring beauty to the world. For others the making of art satisfies their impulses to explore the breadth of their own practice or can help them understand themselves through their own

creative output. The purpose of research is to search out forms of truth using organized and systematic methods of raising questions and answering them.

The work of artists like Duchamp and Picasso, who experimented and took risks in their practice, are often cited as examples of 'artistic research'. The work produced by them is hugely important to the art world in the context of groundbreaking works of art *as* art. But whilst artists can be influenced and inspired by these works, researchers can write *about* them and their impact culturally be acknowledged, the practice produced itself is not research. It is art. It does not contribute to the knowledge economy and as such cannot be built upon or added to as the criteria for doctoral research demands. These fundamental differences may have a bearing upon the effects of embarking on an investigative research inquiry within the context of the art institution..

An absolutely critical aspect of some forms of practice-led research which is sometimes very difficult for artist/researchers to contend with is the effect research may have upon their practice. It is essential that their own practice be allowed to change if necessary and adapt appropriately to the research question as it develops *as* research. This affords the artist/researcher greater freedom to expand and pursue their inquiry more fully, but within the context of the art institution, this essential aspect of project development is sometimes misunderstood, or worse, actively discouraged (de Vries, 2004: 18). All too often it is the production of 'good' art which is a central concern to supervisors in art institutes (Macleod, 2000: 7) and conversely this is reflected in the concerns of students researching within this environment who fear producing work in advance of making it, producing poor work or not producing any work at all. (Macleod, 2000: 5). In the same way that a thesis does something very different from a novel, a work of art does something very different from an artefact created as part of the inquiry of practice-led research. A thesis uses text, words, sentences and punctuation. It has a beginning, middle and an end. It might be intriguing, fascinating, or full of statistical hard data but what it does is reveal knowledge. If the author is particularly good, it might even tell a story, but it is still not the same as a novel and anyone who tries to submit a novel as a PhD

thesis would be misjudging the criteria of doctoral research. A good thesis might not be particularly well written and a well-written thesis might constitute very poor research. A novel does not constitute academic research.

The art school teaches us about defining art, and informs us of its history, processes and meaning. It is where we are taught to paint, to draw, and are offered new techniques and processes. It is where we discuss and reflect upon practice and materials. Instruction here is effectively about the training of the artist as artist (Macleod, 2000: 14).

So practice within this context, as within the gallery context, is judged *as* art rather than *as* research and the model for judgement is in the form of the ubiquitous 'crit.' This is concerned with assessing a work's quality and significance on the basis of clearly defined critical criteria within the context of art pedagogy and is mainly concerned with issues of studio method and practice. It incorporates four main elements; Identity, (what is it?), coherence, (is the composition successful?), effectiveness, (do the colours work well together?), and purpose, (what was the student trying to do?) (Wolff and Geahigan, 1997: 81).

The aims of the crit. are to address what is wrong or lacking in students' understanding, offer provision of practical/technical solutions for improvement, and raise consciousness and awareness through critical debate. It works along the premise that as you are in an art institution you must be creating art and therefore the work must be defended within the boundaries of the teacher/student relationship, endemic of the art school, rather than the researcher/supervisor relationship, which is specific to a PhD (Wolff, 1997: 82).

The following example of the confusion and misconceptions surrounding issues of context in practice-led research reflects a common occurrence,

Ferguson was initially faced with the problem of being accepted as a craftsperson in an academic scientific research environment while also satisfying

the demand to produce work of high aesthetic quality in an art school. (Seago and Dunne, 1996: 2).

I do not feel he should try to be accepted as a craftsperson in the academic scientific research environment. Surely as his research is interdisciplinary he has needed to appropriate the necessary skills from that field. But this shouldn't mean he is trying to *be* a scientist, after all, he is not embarking upon the study of a PhD in science. The scientists are interested in him *as a researcher* and the methods employed in using his craft skills to answer a problem which itself is specifically placed in the position of being investigated from within a practice context. Why does he wish or need to satisfy the demand to produce work of a high aesthetic quality in an art school environment when the work should be judged within the context of its validity as research?

As a craftsperson, his focus on research in metallurgy is unique as it is from the position of someone who understands the creative process. It is imbued with the knowledge and ability he brings to the research as a maker of the objects. He can make them as well as investigate and write about them. His understanding is radically different from a research metallurgist. But it was the science environment that helped him develop his research strategy, not the art institution.

Within the art institute, techniques in information collection, self-dismantling and self-reflexive investigation of one's own practice are taught, all elements essential as part of the development of advanced practice, and useful methods to use in the pursuit of research but they are techniques in assisting development of a project and do not fit the criteria of doctoral research in their own right.

Describing *how* to paint or draw is not research, it is description. Making a painting or a drawing is not research, it is practice. (Mottram, 2005). The split between practice and writing in practice-led research seems to be perpetuated by the art school where the model most prevalent for the written component of research within the institution is contextual theory. This can be seen within the art school curriculum where the practice: theory ratio established for

undergraduates is 80:20. The writing encouraged here usually takes the form of describing works, a practice which is completely separate from thinking through art where the knowledge is within the work itself and the epistemic search for knowledge in practice which formulates many types of practice-led research (Jones, 2006: 227).

This would fit in with the first category of practice-led research, research *into* art, which examines the historical and contextual theories surrounding an art object but is not satisfactory or relevant to the other modes of practice-led research. PhD methodologies programmes attempt to address the problem of academic writing versus contextual theory writing, but the emphasis of the importance of the practice supersedes this within the art school context.

Could the practice itself be a text, equal with other modes of information? This might be valid in the context of visual thinking and the epistemic nature of images formed as research *through* art or *for* art where they embody knowledge as artefacts themselves, but it would be dangerous to rely on an exhibition and viva alone. This would subject the research to too much interpretation. In the case of many forms of practice-led research, *as* art, the work cannot 'speak for itself'. *As* research, it communicates new knowledge and contributes to the wider understanding of the subject being investigated. A written thesis as a parallel mode of informing would allow each activity to complete or contribute to the other (O'Riley, 2006: 94). Within the context of art *as* research, practice no longer has to result in a product or commodity (Slager, 2004: 12).

If it is inappropriate and unhelpful to evaluate some forms of practice-led research using art school or gallery models, what criteria can be used for judging art *as* research?

Doctoral research has very clear definitions whereas art is being redefined regularly. A PhD is required to demonstrate: originality, methodological rigour, use of appropriate methodologies which are replicable, transparent and transferable, and bring about new knowledge which has to be subjected to a

defence to validate it. It must also demonstrate the 'transmissibility of the final outcomes of the research project'. (Seago and Dunn, 1996: 1). Within the specific context of a practice-led PhD, it must also demonstrate why the inquiry should be conducted within the field of visual art and in what way the questions raised and research theories investigated can only be developed and tested within an art and design context.

Research doesn't exist without outputs and the results must be transmitted. These outputs have to allow future researchers both access and the ability to add to and build upon the knowledge you have brought to their attention.

Where do you put practice-led research? What form should it take? If visual outcomes of research and artefacts are created within the context of an art school, then the presumption is they must be art. Where and how the final results of your research are disseminated is as important as the actual research itself and as already stated, research without outputs, doesn't really exist.

As important as where the information is revealed is the question of who should examine it? As practice-led research is still relatively new there aren't many people qualified to supervise it, let alone examine it. If an artist examines it, will it not then be seen in the context of art *as* art? If someone from another field examines it, will they be equipped to understand what they see within the context of art as research? Whoever does validate your work and where and how the results are disseminated, has to have relevance to your inquiry, otherwise, the research loses its significance. How vital this aspect is can be seen in the case of peer review where an article is scrutinized by a panel of experts who evaluate its scholarly merit and decide if it warrants publication. It is their experience, knowledge and status that lend authority and credibility to the published research.

If a major problem faced by artist/researchers concerns the outcome of their results, shouldn't planning and use of appropriate models be addressed at an early stage of the undertaking of the PhD? Very often, the product of the

research manifests itself in what appears to be a piece of art. Just because it looks like art doesn't mean it is art. But in the case of some practice-led research, just because it looks like art does not mean it *is* art. But if it looks like art, and then is presented in the same manner as art, then one shouldn't be surprised if it falls into the trap of being judged within an art context. How can you guarantee that art *as* research is judged as that rather than as art *as art*? As the practice-led PhD has already been defined within the context of where the inquiry took place, i.e. the art school, it is natural to assume that the location of its dissemination should be where artists would expect their work to be seen. In a gallery.

Walls are dangerous places. Putting an image on the wall invites it to be seen as art, especially if that wall is within the context of the gallery and or an exhibition space within the art institution. Often it is presumed the PhD will culminate in some sort of exhibition and usually the institution has a designated area for students to show their work. This is also usually the setting for the viva. When research is bound within the disciplines of the conventions of the art institute, or the context of the gallery, it begs to be critiqued and discussed within terms of visual language, the interaction with the space around it and all those other gallery issues. It becomes understood as a product, a commodity that is part of the history and tradition of fine art practice, rather than as an epistemic form of visual research. If the artefact is a valid part of research and communicates new knowledge, it should not matter whether it is good or bad in these terms. What it does and how effectively it communicates information are far more important concerns than what it looks like. Therefore a research context has to be found in which work can be placed to prevent it from being inappropriately judged using the wrong criteria.

The need for a framework offering alternative ways of presenting and distributing research outputs other than in the form of an exhibition and accompanying text is essential. (Bangma, 2004: 129). The model of exhibition in the context of the institution and the gallery is simply not appropriate to all practice-led research as it is set up to accommodate art *as* art within the accepted models previously discussed.



Asked to participate in an event held within an art institution, the intention was to use the space as a vehicle to test out visual findings at a critical point in my research. The first problem was that the space was in an art school. Others perceived the space as being a gallery space in which work was exhibited rather than a research space in which visual information could be revealed. So the context was predetermined and defined using the inappropriate models of art institute/gallery. This meant that those who encountered the work engaged with it *as* art rather than as part of a PhD investigation.

The next problem was the word exhibition. Whilst it was intended as a research event to test out aspects of the on-going inquiry, the word exhibition crept in and with it, the preconceptions and connotations associated with all that an exhibition entails.

The research, placed within this context, aggravated the inappropriate reading of the research in terms of art *as* art. The vital issue of what the drawings were doing and how they were informing the viewer *as* research was negated in favour of the safety of the familiar model of art school/gallery. The work was subjected to a crit. and was discussed in terms of what it looked like, style, process and aesthetics rather than in terms of appropriateness of the research methods employed and critical assessment of the success of answering a research question.

In an attempt to pre-empt the problems foreseen in regards to the research being transmitted within the context of a gallery, rather than put the work on the wall I placed it along a large shelf specifically designed for the purpose, which ran all the way along the longest wall. This was large enough to accommodate A3 portrait size pieces and was positioned at a 45° angle and set at a comfortable chest height. The intention was to allow a viewer to 'read' the information in a similar way one might read written information. Hands could be placed either side to allow comfort and intimacy whilst spending time taking in the information on the paper. The work was a mixture of visual knowledge

generated as part of the inquiry, found visual information, extracts from the written information and texts from relevant journals. They invited close scrutiny and a different relationship than the one offered by the display of art on a wall where a viewer is never at an angle or range conducive with as intimate and involved an act as reading. They had the effect of being an unbound book.

The work was sensed as being informative and offering knowledge because of the nature in which it was revealed, but the overwhelming understanding of the context of the space continued to control the reading of the work. There was no escaping that the space was still seen as a gallery and was subjected to the expectations found within that context. This changed the way the work was perceived and at times negated its attempt at being seen as research and it reverted to being seen as art.

One group of students came in not to see the research at all but because they were intrigued about the shelf itself. The shelf as vehicle for dissemination, intended, as a way to overcome the context of the surroundings from being counter productive to the transmission of information, became a victim of its own success. The room seen as a gallery dictated how the work was perceived. The shelf as a way to escape the contextual reading of the space, as gallery, became the object of interest and scrutiny. The shelf was then seen in the context to some extent, of being an art installation.

Maybe the knowledge within the research should be disseminated within the context of a library or museum. The museum model does have advantages. Expectations of the museum environment are different from the art institute/gallery model. Within this context we expect to be informed both textually and visually and actively seek out knowledge. But could there still be the danger of misinterpretation? If the research looks like art, might it be perceived as being an art installation within a museum? Then we are back to it being judged within the context of it being art *as* art. In 2008, the results of my PhD research will be disseminated in the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England where they are intended to reveal new

knowledge. Consideration and planning for this began at the end of 2005 as the issues of context of dissemination are so important to the research.

So this leaves the crucial question of where and how do you transmit your findings?

One model might be that of a PhD submitted in 2000 by an Industrial Designer. Justified in transmitting knowledge through drawing and text, it was quickly realized that the dissemination of Graham Whiteley's doctoral research at Sheffield Hallam University would not involve an exhibition. Instead, the unusual decision to use Microsoft Power Point as a method of producing the thesis allowed the visual and textual information to work together in one united system embedding the knowledge within the paginated format of the thesis. This aided distribution and availability to other researchers and dispelled the myth that a body of work must be exhibited. As the research was interdisciplinary, experts from the two disciplines the inquiry occupied examined the PhD (Rust, and Wilson, 2001).

The viva marks the final examination of the PhD but as already demonstrated, there are numerous other occasions when the artist/researcher wishes to transmit their research. A model that might allow this is within the context of the conference. This fulfils certain criteria and is a platform provided specifically for researchers to engage in discussion. But it can only offer a twenty-minute or sometimes sixty-minute snapshot of somebody's thoughts. And conferences have themes so only whichever aspect of the work that fits within this remit may be offered up for view. The main advantage of this model and the journal model are that they are both peer reviewed and therefore offer validation to the research. The journal is more specific so appropriate audiences can be targeted to whom your research will be relevant. Both textual and visual knowledge can be transmitted with equal weight and can be read and digested at the reader's chosen pace. At present, there are very few journals specific to the range of fields artist/researchers now work in, many deal with the educational aspects of PhDs. The answer may be to start your own. This is the one area where control over

content and context can be maintained, but it does take a great deal of commitment and energy and risks not being read by many people.

Where and how research is disseminated is a critical part of the inquiry and must be dealt with as early as possible. The outcomes and outputs of research and how they are to be transmitted must be considered and integrated into the design of the PhD plan from the outset of the programme of study.

Where should/can you do a practice-led PhD? So many researchers are situated in art schools and though I cannot categorically endorse any other location as being ideal, I think the issue regarding the problems raised by research being situated within this context must be highlighted. Corresponding directly to this model is the gallery system. This too can be hugely problematic and attempts to transmit research in this context risk being judged in critical terms which validate art *as* art, not as research.

The importance of practice-led PhDs is that they are a legitimate way for artists to reclaim their work back from the historians, philosophers and critics by gaining an authoritative, academic voice through the validation of a doctorate.

Research should be creative and revelatory in its journey as well as its outcome, and for a practice-led researcher this is doubly so. Finding the appropriate context in which to reveal this is the final hurdle for the PhD student. It carries such significance that I would suggest it must not only be a fundamental concern to all students from the beginning of their studies, but a central underlying issue to be dealt with by the institutions themselves via whatever PhD taught programmes are offered as part of students' ongoing training. It has so far been a neglected area. It can no longer afford to remain so if practice-led research is to be seen as equal in academic status to research done in other fields. This paper points out the problems caused by working with the models already in place and suggest alternatives. Whilst there is no one solution, the aim is to highlight this concern as being far more critical to practice-led research than may previously have been realized.

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