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Contributors
The Three Configurations of Practice-Based PhDs

James Elkins

This is a revised and expanded version of a talk I gave in fall 2003.1 My notion was to describe the practice-based PhD degree in a neutral fashion, as a kind of philosophic problem. I left aside all the pressing problems of the job market. I did not mention the fact that the new degrees have spread quickly in the UK in part because departments get funding based on how many advanced students they have, and that PhD students generate more money than MA students. I didn’t raise the question of whether or not graduates with the new degrees would have an unfair advantage over those with MFAs—and even that they might compete for two jobs at once, one in their chosen artistic medium, and the other in their academic field. And I didn’t say anything about whether most student artists at the MFA or MA level are capable of writing 50,000 word dissertations or doing PhD level research.

In short, I gave the talk pretending that the new degree has no economic, practical, or political dimensions. I did that because it seemed very important—and it still does—to consider what the degree might mean for intellectual and creative life in the university. Can it contribute new ways of thinking about interdisciplinarity? Can it help reconfigure the conventional ways of conceptualising the difference between making something and studying it? Can it help justify the presence of studio art departments in universities? Can it provide models for bridging history, theory, criticism, and practice—models that might have meaning even beyond the humanities?

None of this is to say that the philosophic issues raised by the PhD in studio art can help solve the economic, practical, or political problems; or that those problems are less important than questions of conceptualisation. But it would be a pity, I think, to see the new creative-art PhD spread through the US and Europe, and not be theorised as cleanly as possible. Each of the philosophic models I propose here could be implemented in a number of ways: the student’s research, for example, could be weighted as two-thirds of the degree, and the visual art as one-third. Many such configurations are already in place. What is missing is a theorisation of the possibilities in the abstract, before the exigencies of actual departments and resources come into play.

A note about nomenclature. The degree in question goes by a bewildering number of synonyms and acronyms: the DCA (Doctorate of Creative Art), the DFA (Doctorate in Fine Art), the studio-art PhD, the practice-based doctorate, the interdisciplinary creative-arts PhD. I will use these interchangeably, because the remarks in this chapter are largely independent of the actual configurations of the degrees in the UK and elsewhere. Sometimes I will make a gesture in the direction of the differences by referring to “the new degrees” in the plural; other times it makes more sense to consider the degree as a single thing. I also refer to the written component of the degree using both its US name, “dissertation,” and its UK appellation, “thesis.” And finally, a dissertation is assumed to be a “written dissertation,” as it is sometimes called. The artwork itself, together with its accompanying exhibition and statement, is also sometimes called the “thesis”: that is a radical possibility, which I mention at the end; usually a dissertation is a written text that follows some protocols of scholarly research.
It seems to me that the PhD in visual arts is inescapable: it is on the horizon. There is a large literature on the administrative requirements of such degrees, and on their funding. Many are set out in the next chapter. There is also the beginning of a literature on the outcome of such degrees, as seen from the artists' point of view. (For that, see the third chapter.)

What is needed is an investigation into the conceptual shapes that the new degrees might take. The US is well positioned to do this, and to become the place where such programmes are rethought from the ground up. At least there's a chance of doing that in the US, because it does not have the administrative structures (such as the RAE, Research Assessment Exercise) and the administrative jargon (principally the call for a new definition of "research") that have shaped the development and implementation of doctoral programmes in the UK. The studio-based PhD might begin again, differently, in the United States and elsewhere.

In this essay, I propose four configurations that such degrees might take. This text was originally a supervisor's report for a creative-arts PhD dissertation called "Beyond the Surface: The Contemporary Experience of the Italian Renaissance," written by Jo-Anne Duggan for the University of Technology, Sydney. (See excerpts from her thesis in Part Two of this publication.) Duggan was a candidate for the DCA, Doctorate of Creative Arts. She is a photographer, and her special interest is photographing art inside museums; her thesis explores the history and theory of that practice. The report I wrote for her was the basis of this paper, because I found that her thesis is a mixture of what I think are the three principal possibilities for combining PhD level scholarship and creative work.

The first model is relatively common, and the second and third are rare but, I think, preferable.

**First model: the dissertation is research that informs the art practice**

I think the most obvious relation between the PhD candidate's scholarship—the written dissertation or thesis—and her creative work is that the dissertation informs the artwork. The artist positions her scholarship so that it variously supports, modifies, guides, or enables her art practice. Within this first large grouping I distinguish five kinds of written dissertations. They depend on which department in the university supervises the written dissertation.

1. **The dissertation is art history.** Perhaps the most common option is to write an art historical dissertation, covering the history of practices that lead up to the writer's own practice. The student would normally have a supervisor in history of art, and one in studio art. In some Australian theses (see Part Two) the dissertation is written in anthropology, archaeology, sociology, or geography, but history of art is the most common choice. Among the advantages to this model is that, in theory, the candidate would be able to go on to teach in a department of art history (or anthropology, or sociology) as well as in a studio art department.

   A guiding assumption of this configuration is that art history can strengthen, or at least productively inform, art practice. I think the point is often true, but it is debatable as an assumption, if only because so many artists have done so well by misinterpreting, travestying, simplifying, or otherwise distorting works and ideas that an art historian might say are most pertinent to their work. It's also the case that moments in art history were made possible by the artists' carelessness or ignorance of the relevant art history. It can be argued that German
Expressionism depended, around 1910, on an insouciant disregard of academic criteria. If Kirchner or Nolde had acquired PhDs, with the history of German art as their field of research, it is possible that they might never have been able to break the grip of academic work as effectively as they did. It matters that there have been times and places in art history where it would have been inappropriate to educate artists using a theoretically-intensive regimen of research and writing. In some cases such an education might even have hurt the resulting practice. In the question-and-answer session after the talk in 2003, I mentioned Sol LeWitt’s minimalism: if he had a practice-based PhD, and if he had chosen mathematics as his research area, he might never have undertaken some of his projects, because as Rosalind Krauss has argued they rely on a low-level understanding of geometry and math.

It is not difficult to raise this kind of question within art history as it is presently constituted, because “reception history” (Rezeptionsgeschichte), especially in the paradoxical and critical forms that it has been given by Michael Holly and Mieke Bal, is well suited to consider problems of indirect, inaccurate, repressed, or illogical influence. Georges Didi-Huberman’s revisionary critique of art history, which follows Warburg and Freud, offers another model. Few such scholars have considered the question of reception from an artist’s point of view, but the theory is in place to allow that kind of exploration.

What is more difficult for art history is the thought that it—the discipline, its knowledge—might not always be beneficial for students. I would say it is generally supposed that knowledge of art history is in itself not a bad thing: but for a working artist, it may also be that too much art historical knowledge might hamper or even ruin ongoing art projects. An enormous amount of research needs to be done on this historical question: what kinds of art might be served by PhDs? What kinds are, potentially at least, inimical to it? As the new degree proliferates it may be easy to lose track of this question, because presumably the students and faculty who are attracted to the programmes will already believe they might benefit from PhD level instruction. I don’t doubt that some strains of contemporary art require high-level conceptual work: as Thomas Crow has said, some advanced work proposes philosophic problems whose difficulty matches or surpasses what is studied in academic philosophy. But it is important to consider that there is no general account of what kinds of art are not well matched to PhD level research. That may sound like an inappropriate demand, but consider that other academic fields have sturdy criteria for evaluating which college graduates might be suitable for further study. The fact that relatively few art students in the UK out of the total of those with college degrees are attracted to the PhD does not constitute a solution to the problem of determining which kinds of art practice are suited.

In Canberra I met Ruth Waller, whose MA thesis was on fifteenth-century painting (her work is excerpted in Part Two). Her own painting, she said, was enriched by her detailed historical knowledge. But in the history of art, artists’ assessments of their influences are notoriously unreliable: artists commonly claim to be influenced by other artists even when those influences turn out to be inscrutable, idiosyncratic, or otherwise unavailable to historians and other viewers. One of the many fascinating questions raised by combined studio/scholarship degrees is whether advisors should get involved at that level: should an advisor point out that an increase in historical knowledge might not be good for a given practice? St. Andrews is an example of a programme where it is assumed that historical knowledge (in their case, of photography) will be relevant to current practice, and in my experience the official self-descriptions of PhD granting programmes claim or assume as
much. It would seem more prudent, and more historically responsible, to raise the question wherever possible. It may be a good idea to offer special seminars in practice-based PhD programmes, in order to continuously explore the relation between the intellectual scope of the PhD level research and various historical practices of art.

Another issue with a dissertation supervised in history of art is when it might be appropriate for the student to break out of the art historical way of writing—meaning, roughly, the guiding intention of elucidating some past practice—and speak in her own voice—meaning, here, the desire to use the historical material to effect an ongoing and separate art practice.

For example Duggan mentions "the Renaissance artist's quest to truthfully imitate nature—or as I see it, represent vision" (p. 10 of her thesis). The first phrase belongs in art history; the second in criticism or in an artist's statement. A pure history of art PhD thesis would have to omit the second phrase or justify it in the name of some larger argument, if only because it is anachronistic in a way that the first phrase isn't. Duggan could have made her assertion into a moment of reflection by inserting a comment about different kinds of transition between history and artist's interpretations. She could, in other words, have written something like this: "I'll just note in passing that I am aware that these two interpretations are potentially on either side of a gulf. On one side is a commonly received description of Renaissance practice, and on the other a formula that points to current interests in vision and visuality. That paradox will be an ongoing theme." That way Duggan could make a theme of all such breaks with art historical practice. Yet even an explicit acknowledgment wouldn't solve the problem of the disjunction between two disparate ways of conceiving the purpose of art history, or ensure that her dissertation would work more effectively as a support for her art practice—but each acknowledgment of the problem would let readers and supervisors have a greater share in the project.

2. The dissertation is philosophy or art theory. An artist's scholarship can also support her practice if the scholarly component is philosophy rather than art history. The dissertation might be a philosophic investigation of, say, the phenomenology of video practice instead of the history of video. A philosophic thesis, in this context, can be thought of as a professional outgrowth of the ubiquitous artist's statement. It could be supervised in a philosophy department, or in an art department, or in the history of art; but the supervisor would, in this case, be treating the dissertation as philosophy or theory rather than history.

The same questions of relevance apply here: even though the PhD student might believe her practice is supported by her philosophic inquiry, the relation might appear very differently to her viewers, critics, and (eventually) her historians. Often artists' theories turn out to be irrelevant to what comes to be taken as most important about the work. And as studio-art instructors know, students who construct elaborate theories about their work sometimes use theory not for its content as much as its rhetorical force: the philosophy or theory of art serve as a smokescreen, hiding what is actually of interest in the work. (Or, in the studio, hiding problems the artist suspects her work may harbour.)

Parts of Duggan's second chapter are philosophy, for instance her focus on "the physicality and auratic presence of the Italian museums" (p. 40), and art theory is threaded through her dissertation. When an art historical dissertation is intermittently philosophic (by which I mean,
in this context, that it pauses to seriously consider issues of art theory) it might tend to appear that the philosophy helps support the art history. If the purpose is to write a new theory of a period or practice, then it will probably be necessary to bring the philosophy out of its matrix in art history—out of its role as conceptual support for empirical inquiry—in order to have it stand together with the creative work. If Italian museums are to be said to have an “auratic presence,” and if—for example—Walter Benjamin or Rudolf Otto were to be the texts that support the concepts of presence or aura, then the claim is inherently critical and philosophical, and not art historical. In an art historical text, one that is not part of a creative-art PhD, such an interpretation of Italian museums could be justified as part of a wider examination of the history of ideas about Italian museums—“auratic presence” could take its place in twentieth-century theories about museums. In Duggan’s thesis the passage I have just quoted is a temporary departure from art historical writing, because it works as an interpolated truth about museums rather than an idea with a specifiable genealogy.

It is not immediately clear whether Duggan intends her characterisation to be read as an observation about Italian museums in general, or if she means to offer it as an historically delimited judgment. The ambiguity is not necessarily productive or meaningful. How much, a reader may ask, does Duggan believe in the auratic presence of Italian museums? Does she believe it is also an historical phenomenon, or that it matters that the judgment itself has a history? In art history, the philosophy is assumed to be historically specific (Benjamin’s sense of the aura, and so forth), but in creative work the philosophy can directly support the art practice. For that reason I think that such philosophic moments are in special need of being made explicit when there is also creative work involved.

Another example occurs a few pages earlier, when Duggan writes: “Surrounded by a crowd no less than twenty people deep, these paintings [Botticelli’s] have a presence...” (p. 17). When does she, or did she, feel that Botticelli’s paintings have an intrinsic “presence”? How much is generated by the crowd and the excitement? An art historical version of this sentence would put the judgment in an historical frame. She could write, for example: “Because they are surrounded by a crowd no less than twenty people deep, these paintings [Botticelli’s] seem to have a presence...” Because hers is a creative-art PhD dissertation, there is no reason why Duggan cannot equivocate between philosophy and history. Supervisors of such dissertations, however, will have to ponder the meaning such equivocations between art history and philosophy can have, given that the texts are intended not “simply” as philosophy, but as adjuncts to particular artistic practices. I would wonder under what circumstances it would not be useful to spell out the distinction between philosophic and historical judgment.

3. The dissertation is art criticism. The student’s scholarship can also support her art practice if the dissertation is art criticism rather than philosophy or art history. This is, I think, the most common form of creative-arts PhD dissertation, and it can also be found outside the visual arts. I have seen an example produced in the PhD programme in creative writing run by the University of Houston. The student, Mark Caughey, wrote a hundred-and-fifty-page critical examination of his own poetry, which served as an introduction to the dissertation (which was a book of his poetry).

In the UK, creative-art doctorates of various kinds have been around long enough to get an uneven reputation; some are not much more than over-extended Master’s theses, with a written component that is essentially critical in nature, with an admixture of art history and art
theory. They tend to be supervised in history of art or simply in the relevant art department. They are, in that sense, very similar to the theses ("dissertations" in the UK and Ireland) that are written by MA or MFA art students; those texts tend to be mainly art criticism, aimed at elucidating the student's practice. The most immediate challenge to the development of the practice-based PhD in the US is to find ways of preventing it from slumping into a protracted MFA thesis. To that end, it is important to reconsider two issues that are constitutive of art criticism in the academy.

The first is self-reflectivity. The purpose of the juxtaposition of art criticism and artwork at the doctoral level would presumably be to reach a pitch of sophistication in the description and evaluation of one's own art, on the reasonable grounding assumption that improving self-reflectivity is a central purpose of graduate study. As far as I know, self-reflectivity is not doubted as a goal in any graduate studio art programme. In 2003 the promotional text for the programme at Goldsmith's, for example, said the course is for "artists who would like to explore and develop their understanding of their established art practice." The same confidence in the importance of self-reflectivity can be found in the administrative texts that support the new degree in the UK: self-reflection is mentioned, for example, by Donald Schon, who is discussed in Jones's paper in the next chapter.

Yet many artists have made compelling work even though they had no idea of the critical matrix to which their work belongs, and despite the fact that they were only minimally reflective about their own practice. It is also true that some artists' work thrives on self-awareness; for artists of that kind the new PhD degree might be ideal—although there is no account of what kinds of art have been best served by self-awareness. This idea that self-awareness is a desideratum for PhD level instruction needs to be treated as a problematic assumption, not as a guiding principle.

A second issue with creative art dissertations that take the form of art criticism is that the subject of art criticism is virtually never taught in PhD programmes in philosophy or history of art. Art criticism appears as a historical subject in history of art curricula—there are courses on Baudelaire, Diderot, and so forth—but not as a practical subject. In the absence of structured sequences of courses on practical art criticism it is dubious that art-critical dissertations can be effectively read and critiqued on a PhD level. It would, of course, be possible to find philosophers or art historians who could assess such dissertations, but only for their logic (if they were read as philosophy) or historical veracity (if they were judged by an art historians).

4. The dissertation is natural history, or economics, or any number of fields outside the humanities. In this option, the candidate looks further afield than art, history of art, or philosophy. At the 2003 conference David Williams, Chair of Art at the Australian National University in Canberra, said that it is very popular option among his students to write a "subthesis," as they are called, in the sciences. The student has an art practice, in any medium, and chooses to obtain a PhD in biology, say, or in genetics: whatever field they are qualified to enter.

I think a science or non-art dissertation, set to the purpose of furthering an art practice, is an entrancing prospect. Let me mention three questions, two abstract and the third practical.
(a) If the dissertation is to be assessed according to the protocols of the discipline in question then it will have to be science, economics, medicine, law, or engineering; it will have to exemplify its field as if the candidate were not also an artist. If that criterion is abandoned (I am not suggesting it should be) then the dissertation can be about science, economics, medicine, law, or engineering. Such a dissertation would be the equivalent of a PhD in the history, philosophy, or sociology of science: that is, it would be an interpretation of the particular branch of science. (For a history of science doctorate, for example, the candidate usually has to obtain a PhD in the relevant science.)

Presumably the option of writing about the science or other discipline would not be open to students whose dissertations are supervised, at least partly, in the different departments in question; but I mention it to underscore that a creative-arts PhD might not be modelled on existing interdisciplinary or dual degrees. If the function of the dissertation is to further the art practice, then the dissertation will necessarily be at least partly a matter of observing, adapting, appropriating, and critiquing the non-art discipline. That relation between art and science, in which the artist borrows whatever she wants from science, is an historically normative one, but it means that the new degree will not be a combination of science and art in the way that a dual degree in biochemistry and genetics would combine those two disciplines.

(b) If this kind of dissertation (either the dissertation as science, or the dissertation about the science) becomes popular in the US or the UK, it will need to be asked when combinations of art and science (or any non-art discipline) are a sensible direction for visual art. Historically speaking only a tiny fraction of Western art has been centrally informed by science and other non-art subjects despite a vocal minority of scholars who study the subject. Only a few contemporary artists, such as Dorothea Rockburne, Eduardo Kac, and Vija Celmins, effectively bridge the sciences and art. Is it cogent to promote cross-pollination if there is no broad call for contemporary art that addresses science? I find this fourth option one of the most interesting because it makes good use of the university, mixing sciences and humanities in new ways. But there is a danger of producing more marginal practices that do not participate in the principal conversations about contemporary art.

(c) The practical point I want to mention—the only purely pragmatic subject I want to raise in this essay—is that if this fourth option becomes widespread, then art schools will be left behind. Universities, in the US, will be the best positioned to offer combinations of sciences and visual arts, and art schools will play marginal roles.

5. The dissertation is a technical report. There are media and kinds of artmaking that are not fully mastered by students at the MFA level. At Alfred, New York, a school well known for its ceramics programme, there is a laboratory that specializes in high-tech, non-art ceramics; they have in the past made the tiles that protected the Space Shuttle. That laboratory is not utilised by the MFA students as much as it could be because the students lack the education in inorganic chemistry. A PhD programme in ceramics could remedy that. Printmaking techniques like metal engraving are commonly omitted from the MFA; they could be taught given a few more years' worth of courses. At the 2003 conference at which I first gave this paper, Christina DePaul, Dean of the Corcoran College of Art, told me about advanced fabric techniques; she noted that an MFA is not usually sufficient to teach them. A PhD in fabric or fibre arts could accommodate the missing techniques.
There are many advanced industrial materials that are not taught in art schools, and a PhD would be a way to institute a kind of catch-up in the relevant contemporary materials science. Such a degree would also help to mitigate the disjunction between current engineering, with its many sophisticated materials, and art practice, which still keeps mostly to oil, clay, metals, paper, and wood.

In a sense this kind of PhD exists in a few North American and UK institutions, where studio art students can continue to pursue their studio practice for several years beyond the MFA, eventually earning the PhD (or D.Litt.). However those programmes are not PhDs in the sense I am speaking of here, because they do not combine ongoing studio practice with scholarly work at the PhD level.

It would be possible to institute a PhD-granting programme of the kind I am exploring here, provided that the advanced techniques are documented in doctoral-level written dissertations. Such a programme would have a strong historical precedent in the Bauhaus, which made extensive use of contemporaneous industrial manufacturing. In the US, university studio art degrees in the first half of the century often combined research dissertations with art practice. Midway Studios at the University of Chicago turned out theses on the manufacture of public fountains and public sculptures with water features; the students made fountains, and also learned the plumbing and engineering. In that sense, the PhD in "advanced techniques" would be, effectively, a creative-arts PhD with a dissertation in Engineering.

Second model: the dissertation is equal to the artwork

In the first model, the dissertation is a repository of research that informs or otherwise aids the art practice. The remaining models don't work that way: in them, the dissertation is implicated in the artwork, or even considered as the artwork. That has the advantage of freeing the scholarship from its ultimately informational or supportive role, and potentially making the research equal to the artwork—or even making it into the artwork. In this second model, the dissertation is considered as conceptually equal to the art. The research doesn't support or inform the art, but complements it, with each one illuminating the other. Research and artwork, in other words.

I will divide these into two possibilities. In the first, research and art practice come together into a new interdisciplinary configuration.

1. Research and artwork comprise a new interdisciplinary field. In this case the creative-art PhD might be considered as an example of the confluence of disciplines that are currently congealing into the field called visual studies or visual culture. The new PhD becomes an opportunity for a student to collect an idiosyncratic collection of disciplines, with art just one equal among others in a collection of disciplines. It differs from the fourth model (in which the student writes a dissertation in a non-art subject) because there, the non-art field is used to inform the art project; here, the non-art field or fields are all taken to be equal contributors to a new constellation of interests.

In visual studies, the sky is the limit, and in US universities it is effectively possible to arrange any configuration of disciplines. I have strong reservations about this option, because
historically art practice has been excluded or marginalised in university curricula, so that combining it with academic fields as if it were one among many options might obscure the very deeply rooted differences between studio art and other university departments and faculties. The conceptual disparity between a dissertation comprised of elements of anthropology, film, and art history (to take an example I encountered recently), and a dissertation comprised of anthropology, film, and studio art, is large. The place of studio art in the university is problematic, and it should not be regarded as one of several otherwise equal options: a dissertation that includes studio art is a different kind of creature, requiring a justification different from the theorising that currently addresses the convergence of academic disciplines into the field of visual studies. (The same observation about the difference between studio practice and other disciplines applies, in reverse, to art schools, where academic disciplines exist in abbreviated forms, and are not always well integrated into the predominantly studio-based curriculum.)

It is superficial, I think, to imagine that art practice can just be added to an eclectic selection of disciplines composed by the candidate. There are academic pursuits that result from combinations such as anthropology + sociology + linguistics, or art history + archaeology + semiotics, but there is no academic practice that combines creative work with any other discipline.

The concatenation of new "fields," "centres," "courses," and "concentrations" can also lead to the breakdown of boundaries between disciplines, and in that respect I am in sympathy with Mieke Bal’s comments in the *Journal of Visual Culture*. (Though not in sympathy with her comments on my essay?) She argues that there is no payoff in policing disciplines, and that new configurations should question each of the participating disciplines. The first five options in my list are not meant to imply that history of art, art criticism (in whatever department it might appear), and philosophy are clearly separate, or that they should be: rather that in existing creative-art PhDs, the contributing disciplines tend to remain distinct. In many ways the new field of visual studies works by not worrying the boundaries and ostensive purities of disciplines, and in that respect it can be a model for the creative-art PhDs of this fifth type: they need not keep disciplinary fences intact.

It seems likely to me that studio practice may be the strongest component in these collaged PhDs, whether or not they break down disciplinary borders. The PhD candidate’s studio art practice will probably turn the other disciplines to its purposes, in effect making the dissertation into an expanded artist’s statement. It will be difficult, I think, to argue convincingly that the collection of non-art disciplines has equal standing to the artwork. In Duggan’s thesis each one of the chapters is ultimately (by the end of the chapter) fully the work of an artist and not of an historian of photography, an historian of museology, or a theorist of the gaze, because all of her examples are aimed at a personal rethinking of her own desires.

2. *Research and artwork are understood as wholly separate projects.* This possibility is like the previous one, in that the student’s art practice and the associated non-art disciplines are imagined to be equal participants in the overall project of the PhD. The difference is that the new configuration of fields is not understood as a potentially coherent project, but as a juxtaposition, whose rationale does not need to be analysed. Even the candidate herself might not be sure of the pertinence of her research interests; she might just have a strong interest in both video art, for example, and scholarship in some other field. In this case the function of the
faculty would be to help advise the scholarly portion of the dissertation and the art practice at an appropriate level, leaving it up to the student to work through the possible connections between them. This is in some measure the model adopted by the Canberra School of Art, which is represented in several of the examples in Part Two.

I find this option the second-most intriguing. It is interesting to contemplate what an artist might accomplish by keeping two sets of activities separate from one another for the duration of a PhD programme, without being asked to formally theorise their connection. It also seems wholly in keeping with the way art is often produced, in the company of many disparate interests that do not, at least for some time, seem to be directly linked to one another. It avoids the usual academic demands of coherence, rationality, and intellectual synthesis—which again is appropriate for much of visual art.

This model would be directly opposed to a universal criterion of MFA programmes, that they help nourish the artist’s single “voice” or “style”: and that would be an interesting assumption to question. The model would also circumvent the common assumption that self-reflectivity is an unexceptionable good. It would make fascinating use of the resources of the university, by finding new configurations of fields without proposing that they have underlying similarities or points of convergence. And it would remove the difficulty of deciding how advisors in different fields can collaboratively supervise a combined creative-art PhD. (More on that below.) In short, the radicalism of this option is intriguing.

The models I have named up to this point have serious, if also potentially productive, conceptual flaws. The third and last model is the most interesting to me—and raises, potentially, even more difficult philosophic and practical problems.

Third model: the dissertation is the artwork, and vice versa

The final option that occurs to me is to imagine the scholarly portion of the thesis inextricably fused with the creative portion, so that the artwork is scholarly and the scholarship is creative. (This would be Christopher Frayling’s “research as art and design,” as that concept is mentioned in Tim Jones’s paper in the next chapter.) I have seen attempts at this solution, including a multimedia dissertation done at the University of Chicago that includes a CD, photo exhibit, 16mm films, and written dissertation. But I haven’t seen examples in which the scholarship melts into creative work. In the University of Chicago thesis, for example, the writing is clearly situated in art history, anthropology, and film studies, and it remains distinct from the student’s films, CDs, and photographs. But why not try to write a PhD dissertation in history of art as if it were fiction?

Again I divide this into two possibilities.

1. The research dissertation is intended to be read as art, and the visual practice as research. The models for a more radical fusion of text into creative work would be writing by scholars such as Michel Serres or John Berger (who mingle poems and art history); there are very few such examples. If such a dissertation existed, it would be extremely difficult to evaluate in an academic setting because the entire apparatus of scholarship, from the argument to the footnotes, would have to be legible as creative writing. (It would be like Nabokov’s Pale Fire, or,
more provocatively, like his supposedly impeccable scholarship—which ends up being both fictional and unreadable—in his edition of *Eugene Onegin.* I have come across this problem in a class I teach on art criticism, because some critics (Peter Schjeldahl, Joanna Frueh, Dave Hickey) think of themselves primarily as poets—which has to mean, among other things, that content is secondary to voice and style. That kind of art criticism is only about art by chance, as it were: it might just as easily be about television repair, or TV news, provided the voice and quality of writing meet the writer’s and the reader’s expectations. I think it would be difficult to imagine this kind of thesis being evaluated by a faculty in scholarly disciplines: and logically speaking, such a thesis would be in no need of fact-checking anyway. (Could a Chemistry professor evaluate a chemistry PhD as poetry? Wouldn’t she have to limit herself to checking the student’s research—and wouldn’t that be, by definition, beside the point?)

2. There is no research component: the visual art practice, together with its exhibition and supporting materials, simply is the PhD. This last possibility is, perhaps unexpectedly, more common than the previous one. It has been practiced in a handful of institutions in the UK. The argument is basically that visual art practice should not borrow from other academic fields, but remain true to its own media and purposes. It has also been said that the creative-art PhD, in any of the forms I have been listing, is inherently unfair because it requires a student to complete doctoral level work in an academic field and also create doctorate-level visual art.

I think this last and most radical possibility is also the most interesting. It is a logical endpoint for the new degree, because each of the foregoing models presupposes that visual art practice can be taken to the level of the doctorate. This last option is simply more consistent than the previous models, because it permits the visual art practice to carry the burden of competence that will allow it to be taken as a doctoral-level accomplishment aside from whatever writing might support or augment it.

It goes without saying that this final possibility presents severe problems when it comes to assessment. How is a studio-art instructor to determine if the studio practice is at PhD level? I think this question is, in its very form, unanswerable, and it may not be a productive approach to the general problem of assessing the new degrees. It may be more sensible to ask first how supervisors might read and respond to the research dissertations that are produced in all the possibilities I have discussed except this final one. When guidelines for assessing those models are in place, it might make more sense to try to say what PhD level assessment creative art might look like.

Consider, in this regard, the fundamental philosophic problem underlying all assessments of the new degree. In my experience, combined studio and scholarly PhDs are supervised by scholars and creative artists in the disciplines nearest to the candidate’s interests. That is appropriate and inevitable. But when the thesis is ultimately bent on supporting ongoing artistic practice, as opposed to understanding and interpreting that practice, it is not logical to have the text checked by experts in different academic disciplines, even when the dissertation is not to be considered as artwork, as it is in the model I have just described. Why? Because the purpose of the candidate’s forays into different disciplines is to mine them in order to further her artwork. Hence normal scholarly criteria of truth, the production of new knowledge, thoroughness, clarity, and scholarly protocol just do not apply. The dissertations can still be checked, and the candidates can be advised as if they were students of art history, anthropology, and other disciplines: but in fact they aren’t, and the normal protocols of
readings by specialists is not logically appropriate. It needs a separate justification. In Duggan’s case, why try to be accurate or thorough about the history of museums in Italy? Why consider previous photographers of museums? Why not write a personal, or partial, or partly fictional account of the history of museums? What logic assures the reader, or the candidate, that such approaches wouldn’t be better?

Because this point has been elusive in the literature, let me put it another way. A PhD dissertation on, say, seventeenth-century Dutch group portraits might be impeccable by art historical standards—it might include all the relevant literature, primary texts, restoration reports, and the latest interpretive theories—and yet fail as the support for an ongoing art practice. The art historian who supervises such a thesis must read with an eye to rigour, argument, research, and all the normal criteria of excellence in art history, because as an art historian she has no choice—there is no possibility of improvising different criteria for art historical excellence other than ones determined by the current state of interpretation in the field. And yet such an art historical reading can never be sufficient or even demonstrably appropriate. What matters for the student, presumably, is something about the historical material that can be used in their own art practice. If the student tells the supervisor, “I am interested in the awkwardness of the poses,” then the supervisor might send the student to sources that help address that particular interest. But at that point the art historian stops assessing the thesis as a contribution to seventeenth-century Dutch group portraiture, and begins acting as a bibliographic research assistant to the student. What is at stake is no longer how the dissertation might contribute to the understanding of the subject, but how the dissertation might illuminate an interest the student has developed in awkward-looking portraits. It’s a simple problem, and it almost seems invisible: but it is enormous, and it has no solution. If a supervisor cannot evaluate a thesis according to the current interests of the field in question, then there is no way to evaluate the thesis short of an improvised critique—and that, aside from bibliographic matters, is something that can be done by any number of readers in different fields. The specialist no longer acts as a specialist in her own field. And what does it mean for an art historian to read a text as if it were produced solely for the production of art? The question barely even makes sense in art historical terms, and that is not even allowing for the radical final possibility I have just presented, in which the dissertation is exhibited as art from the beginning.

Notice, too, that all this assumes the student has control of what she wants and needs, and that she can formulate questions well enough so that the supervisor can just lead her toward the appropriate historical resources. But often in art history that has not been the case. Artists seldom know exactly why they want to see a given image or master a given body of knowledge. And if a studio-art instructor has a hard time figuring out how to direct a student, how much less likely is it that an art historian—a specialist on some far-flung period of art—or a philosopher, or an anthropologist or chemist or engineer, will have a better idea? It seems that the problem of evaluating creative-art PhD simply cannot be solved unless disciplines give up their shapes and readers step outside their normal interpretive habits: exactly what might make the new degree so interesting, and at the same time ensure it cannot be commensurate with other degrees.

I am thinking that from now on I will agree to supervise practice-based PhDs only if the student can explain why historical accuracy is necessary or appropriate, and when the other readers have worked out the limitations of their roles. I don’t think there is a solution to these
problems, other than just assigning people to read as art historians, or as photographers, or as anthropologists... but that amounts to assigning blindesses that may not be in accord with the readers' interests. Nor is it satisfactory to say to a supervisor: "Please just read this for accuracy, and suggest missing references," because that shrinks the function of the supervisor from the de facto representative of a discipline or field to a reference librarian. I think I would supervise theses if they can include a kind of secondary critical commentary which reflects on this dilemma, and sets out a theory of the supervisors' roles and limitations.

In the end this problem is one of reading, and it has to be addressed as a paradox, and not with an eye to solving it. It would make sense to put seminars on theories of reading—especially Paul De Man's—at the heart of the new programmes. Translation theory, too, could play a part, and so could anthropological theories of interpretation. Perhaps the new degree should be understood as a fundamental critique of disciplinarity itself—in which case it might fruitfully engage with existing debates about the nature of interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and subdisciplinary work in many other fields. If courses on these conceptual problems were built into the new degree programmes, then the nearly intractable difficulties posed by the new degrees could be addressed within the dissertations themselves. That might not increase the students' self-reflectivity (which might not be a good thing, even if it were possible) but it would make the new PhD degrees more interesting, and more challenging, for the university as a whole.

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1 It was given at the annual meetings of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) and the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design (AICAD) in Los Angeles. An earlier version was also published as "Theoretical Remarks on Combined Creative and Scholarly PhD Degrees in the Visual Arts," Journal of Aesthetic Education 38 no. 4 (2004): 22-31.

2 This is argued in my "On Modern Impatience: Krutische Berichte" 3 (1991): 19-34.

3 Thomas Crow, "Critical Reflections," Artforum May 1992 pg 104 – 105. Crow's observation begs the question of what those philosophic problems are, and his privileging of philosophy as a term is also open to criticism: but I agree with the tenor of the claim, that there exists conceptually challenging work whose difficult nature is made possible and expressed by its setting "within" the visual and outside of academies. This is discussed in my book, What Happened to Art Criticism? (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2004).

4 This is a subject of my What Happened to Art Criticism? (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

5 This is argued in my Six Stories From the End of Representation (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), introduction.

6 Film, computers, and video don't count as advanced materials in this sense: they are fully-developed technologies that are used, but not normally understood at the level of materials and processes.
