

# Doctoral Writing in the Visual and Performing Arts: Issues and Debates

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## Abstract

Drawing from a larger study of doctorates in the visual and performing arts, we examine here the diversity of relations which can exist between the creative and written components of a doctoral thesis in these fields in terms of diversity of naming practices for these relations, institutional variation in guidelines and expectations, and fundamental functional roles for the respective components. By bringing together and highlighting key details in these debates and issues, this article provides a foundation for further studies in this complex area.

## Introduction: doctoral writing in the visual and performing arts

There has been little investigation into the actual nature and structure of practice-based doctoral texts in the visual and performing arts, and the goals, assumptions, values and understandings that underlie the work that is written and submitted for examination in these areas of study. As MacLeod & Holdridge (2004, 156) point out, 'there is a remarkable dearth of material which provides substantial evidence of the "form" and structure of doctorates [in fine art]'. This article reports on a larger study which aims to fill this gap, focusing in particular on aspects of the history of the practice-based PhD, especially in Australia; the areas of contestation over ways of describing the nature of doctoral research in the visual and performing arts, and the status of creative practice as a form of academic research. This article also begins to outline the variation in guidelines and structures for acceptable doctoral research in these fields, and the various functions which the written component of the research can be understood as taking.

The practice-based doctorate in the visual and performing arts is relatively new, both in Australia and internationally. As Stone notes: 'As a new form of degree, practice-based doctoral courses in Australia have not yet earned academic legitimacy, largely due to the ambiguity of their nature and purpose' (Stone 2005, 1).

The PhD in the visual and performing arts is distinctive in that significant aspects of the claim for the doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. The practice-based PhD is, however, a somewhat contested academic site. As an emerging genre it is both in the process of being defined and of defining itself. The various attempts to codify and reach consensus on the nature and structure of the practice-based doctorate are a further indication that it is a site for both genre invention (Bawarshi, 2003) and evolution. This is evidenced in university guidelines for this degree as well as in the debate over the terms 'practice-based' versus 'practice-led' (see, e.g., Candy 2006; Durling & Friedman 2000;

Haseman 2006; Haseman & Mafe 2009; Smith & Dean 2009).

This article draws on a broader study, 'Writing in the academy: the practice-based PhD as an evolving genre' ([http://www-faculty.edfac.usyd.edu.au/projects/writing\\_in\\_academy/](http://www-faculty.edfac.usyd.edu.au/projects/writing_in_academy/)), the aim of which is to examine the nature and character of the written texts that are part of the submission requirements for visual and performing arts doctoral degrees in Australian universities. It also aims to explore the goals, assumptions and values that underlie both the written and creative components of these submissions, as well as the range of practices, variation and trends in doctoral writing in the visual and performing arts.

The PhDs that were examined for the study all had a significant creative practice component which constituted part of the examinable content of the overall work. Taking Australian universities as a case, this project included a nation-wide survey of institutions offering doctoral programmes in the visual and performing arts, their assessment regimes and numbers of recent graduates (1990–2007), to determine the extent of practice-based doctoral submissions taking place in Australia in the fields of visual and performing arts. Further perspectives on this were revealed through surveys and interviews conducted with supervisors and students who had completed PhDs in the visual and performing arts at institutions across the country.

## History of the practice-based PhD

The doctorate has a lengthy history. Noble (1994, 11) suggests that its eight-hundred-year history carries with it considerable 'educational inertia', with the consequence that amendments which deviate from the traditional historical characteristics of the doctoral degree, such as can be seen in the practice-based doctorate, are not easy to implement in traditional universities. Doctoral degrees in the visual and performing arts are a fairly recent entrant to the research higher degree landscape. In the USA, the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) was, until recently, seen as the terminal degree in US art schools (Jones 2006), although this has now started to change (Jones 2009). Authors such as Elkins (2009) and Buckley (2009),

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for example, argue that the PhD will increasingly become a requirement at the highest level for teaching studio art in US academic institutions. Similarly, the 2001 UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE 2001) report on *Research Training in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design* stresses that there has, until recently, been no well-established tradition of research degrees in these areas in the United Kingdom. The PhD is, thus, a very new genre in these communities.

In Australia, the move to a United National System of higher education in the late 1980s saw the amalgamation of Art schools with universities, and this change has been identified as a primary catalyst for the ongoing consideration and development of higher degrees in the visual and performing arts and more general discussions of the visual and performing arts as academic research (Evans *et al.* 2003; see also Fairskye 1993). The 1980s saw the introduction of Australia's first research higher degrees in visual arts at the Tasmanian School of Art and the introduction of the Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong (Candy 2006; Snell 2007). The gradual development of higher degrees in this field, beginning with the establishment of a graduate diploma, then a Masters degree, and finally a PhD or professional doctorate has been a typical route for the establishment of doctorates in the visual and performing arts in Australian universities.

Currently, practice-based doctorates in the visual and performing arts can be found in 29 Australian universities, and are often discretionally allowed (while not advertised) at a number of others. Debate about the status and form of the practice-based PhD has taken place at a number of visual and performing arts schools that have been established in this field, such as at Queensland University of Technology which developed the Faculty of Creative Industries in 2001, and those art school schools that amalgamated with universities in the 1980s, such as the University of Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts, Sydney University's Sydney College of the Arts, University of New South Wales's College of Fine Arts and Edith Cowan University's West Australian Academy of Performing Arts.

The Evans *et al.* (2003) survey of practice-based PhDs listed in Australian libraries identified the first Australian practice-based PhD as Milgate's 1988 thesis 'Fourteen stations of the cross' from the University of Wollongong. However, we know of at least one practice-based PhD awarded in 1987, at the University of Queensland, in composition. The recipient, Andrew Schultz, required a special letter of dispensation from the University's academic board to include original compositions as part of the doctorate (Andrew Schultz personal communication).

In terms of enrolments, 2007 saw a total of 1,647 students undertaking doctoral studies in the visual arts in Australian universities. However, the differentiation between doctorates in the visual and performing arts generally and practice-based doctorates specifically is not a statistically simple one. A number of doctoral programmes in the visual and performing arts offer, within a single enrolment category, a range of course options from primarily practice-based to wholly thesis-based within the one programme. At Sydney University's Conservatorium of Music for example, the PhD programme can be taken as thesis only or as a mix of thesis and practical work: that is, a portfolio of compositions with an accompanying thesis of 15,000 to 20,000 words, or three substantial recitals with an accompanying thesis of between 30,000 and 80,000 words.

### Contested terms seeking legitimacy

Evans *et al.* define doctorates in the visual and performing arts as including areas such as painting, music, dance, drama and sculpture. However, they write: 'the boundaries of the field may be less clear ... the new media often push the boundaries further with film, video, computer-graphics and other "multi-media" creations being included' (Evans *et al.* 2003, 3).

The terminology used to define doctoral work in this field is much debated and definitions sometimes overlap or are used interchangeably as various contested terms, such as 'practice-based research', 'practice as research', 'practice-led research', 'performance as research', 'research through practice' and 'creative practice as research' seek legitimacy (Phillips *et al.* 2008a). As

the findings from the *Future-Proofing the Creative Arts in Higher Education* (Baker *et al.* 2009) scoping study indicate, this terminology arose with the need to legitimate the introduction of the artefacts of visual arts as research outcomes in higher education, and in doing so to distinguish them from humanities and science research outcomes.

While favoured terms differ from institution to institution and discipline to discipline, the field of practice-based research in the visual and performing arts might in broad terms be captured in the following three definitions:

- i. Research which is initiated in creative practice in the visual and performing arts, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of creative practice and practitioners;
- ii. Research that is carried out through both creative practice and the practice of scholarly writing, i.e., a thesis, using methods familiar to both practitioners and academics;
- iii. Research that has its primary focus on developing conceptual, practice-based and formal innovation that progresses knowledge in the project's designated field (School of English, Media and Performing Arts, University of New South Wales, 2008, 1).

In the *Creativity and Cognition Studio's Guide to Practice-Based Research*, 'practice-based research' is specifically defined as:

*...an original investigation carried out partly through practice and the outcomes of that practice, with the doctoral thesis being demonstrated through creative outcomes including 'images, music, designs, models, digital media or other outcomes such as performances and exhibitions'. Whilst the thesis context and climate may be stated in words, it can only be understood in direct reference to the creative outcomes.* (Candy 2006, 1)

In contrast, *practice-led research* is defined as research that is 'concerned with the nature of practice', but 'may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative work' (Candy 2006, 1).

Alternatively, others in the field place their emphasis differently in defining *practice-led research* as that which not only situates practice within the research process, but also leads the process through practice. The research occurs through the practice, which informs the methodology, content, context and conceptual frame of the total research design, and the creative practice is generally considered to be the primary component (Phillips *et al.* 2008a). *Practice-based research*, by way of contrast, is then defined as putting 'practice at the centre of the research' but 'the practice itself might not be part of the examinable component' of the PhD (Phillips *et al.* 2008a, 12). In this way, some adherents of the first definition of practice-based research would be included in the second practice-led definition. Yet the focus of the second definition is narrower, with focus placed on projects in which creative practice is the central catalyst for investigation and thus leads the doctoral research.

These contested definitions, while signalling the emergence of a new genre of doctoral practice in the process of defining itself, also reflect the diversity of relationships between creative practice and written text in this field. As Yeates explains:

*...while some practitioner/researchers embed and 'perform' theories, other appropriate, delve into, rupture and refashion the wealth of theories circulating within and across the humanities disciplines. Further, another group would rather examine more closely the nature of practice itself and build theories from within their own artistic practices.* (Yeates 2009, 145)

It is therefore not surprising that these different orientations would produce different levels of connection or emphasis with regard to the written component of the practice-based thesis. For the purposes of our study we have focused on practice-based PhDs, understanding these to be represented by doctorates which have both a visual or performance component and a written component, and where the creative practice component is a significant focus of the project and constitutes part of the examinable material.

### 'Gatecrashers at the university's dinner party': the question of creative practice as academic research

The questions troubling the form and status of practice-based PhDs in the academy are a product of a broader debate over the legitimacy and recognition of art practice as academic research. Of the merger of art schools with universities, Fairskye observed that these 'arranged marriages' were 'encouraged by economic circumstances and political pressure rather than mutual passion' (Fairskye 1993, 2–3). The arrangement of these marriages has been a catalyst for a push for artistic forms of practice to seek to be formally recognised as academic modes of research within the academy.

Research has been typically understood as 'scientific or scholarly investigation' through experiment or study that applies 'facts, theories or laws' with the outcome 'assumed to be knowledge'; by way of contrast, art making is associated with artistic creating which 'neither dictionary nor commonsense associate [with] the term research' (Burgin 2006, 101). The modes that constitute artistic research have for some within the academy been unrecognisable as academic forms of research. In this context, artistic practice has been presented as distinct from, and subordinate to, academic theory. Artists in the academy have felt like 'gatecrashers at the university's dinner party ... asked to show their I.D. before they're allowed to sit down at the table with everyone else' (Fairskye 1993, 3).

One argument for legitimacy emerging from the fields of visual and performing arts doctoral work focuses on identifying similarities between the methodological practices of artists and those of other scholars (Fairskye 1993). Arguing for the equivalence of art practice and other methods of academic research, Fairskye (1993) asserts that it is common for artists to conceptualise their studio as a laboratory in which their art is research. She goes on to argue the case that, in this context, artists, just as scholars in other fields, engage in 'research into what the art work is to be about; research into other art relevant to one's practice; technical research into materials' and so on (Fairskye 1993, 2).

Possible problems with expanding the definition of academic research to include modes of exploration through other forms of intelligences (as same but different) have been posed by various theorists including those concerned with the dilution of rigorous methodologies, and the generation of unreliable knowledge-claims such that there is 'a general debasement of the term "research" (increasingly meaningless through being applied to far too many activities)' (Hanrahan 2005, 3–4). Continued concern remains that the tension between the creative arts and the academy may contribute to undermining 'the validity of art's own modes of thinking; implying that to be worthy of its place within higher education, art needs to improve itself' (Hanrahan 2005, 3–4). Yet the case has also been made that tension between art and the academy may be useful in that it places pressure appropriate to the creative development of theory, providing, for example, a space for new ways of thinking about the nature of art in collaboration with other disciplines (Hanrahan 2005).

Voices from within the performing and visual arts disciplines have begun to call for the legitimisation of a third mode of research specific to the visual and performing arts. This third mode is neither qualitative nor quantitative but performative: a mode that adequately recognises the importance of the 'sensual transport' of the arts, and that asserts its equivalence through difference. Haseman (2007, 147), for example, advocates a 'performative research paradigm' in which the symbolic data expressed through performance is the research itself.

### Balance between written and creative components

Due both to the newness of research degrees in the visual and performing arts, and framed by a broader struggle for art practice to be recognised and legitimated as academic research on its own terms, the parameters of the constitution and expectations of practice-based PhDs in the visual and performing arts have been beset by institutional vagueness. This has led in some cases to greater flexibility in the range of interpretations, possibilities and outcomes available, and in others to confusion around parameters and expectations.

With no standard guidelines for practice-based higher degrees in Australia, definitions and guidelines vary significantly between institutions. Murdoch University's guidelines, for example, state that the written component of the PhD must always be the major part of the study, but in their 100 per cent research doctorate in composition, the 'critical commentary' is only 20,000 to 25,000 words in length, in which the student must demonstrate their:

*...capacity to articulate the conceptual and aesthetic basis for their folio of compositions, to assess their compositional work in the context of contemporary music and sonic art, and to research and convey creative processes involved in the production of sound and music.* (Murdoch University Graduate Centre 2010, 1)

At some universities, such as the University of New South Wales (UNSW) the emphasis is placed on the practice component. UNSW's published guidelines assert that particular emphasis in their PhD in Practice-Based Research is placed upon practice as research. However, this practice component is equally weighted with the written component in examination and candidates also submit a written dissertation of 40,000 to 50,000 words for examination in addition to the practice component.

Some university guidelines, such as those of the University of Melbourne, require that the practical project should represent the equivalent of those words foregone from a more traditional written thesis. Their guidelines state:

*In the case of the creative arts disciplines, where the thesis may take the form of creative works and a dissertation, the integrated thesis should normally represent the equivalent of 80,000 words ... The length of the dissertation will also depend on what proportion of the thesis it constitutes, but will normally be at least 40,000 words.* (Melbourne School of Graduate Research 2008, 5)

In reply to this convention, graduated PhD student, Berridge, muses, 'I asked myself how I would know that my creative product was the

equivalent of 60,000 words? I still don't know the answer' (Berridge 2008, 12).

While such institutional vagueness can lend itself to flexibility, it has also raised the question of how PhD candidates in these areas are to meet unarticulated expectations. In examining their PhD programme, the University of Sydney's Sydney College of the Art's PhD working party found that 'expectations of both the creative work and the written component of the thesis (and their interrelationship) were not stated' in their institutional material. Further, there was an 'absence of guidelines regarding what constituted research quality in the creative work component of the thesis' (Fairskye *et al.* 2008, 4). Duggan (2005), a graduate of a practice-based PhD in the visual arts, reflected that during her candidature no models of high-quality practice-based theses were available to her, such that 'with no models of methodology or guidelines, and during my time too few relevant examples, it was difficult defining the parameters of the project or even understanding what form it could possibly take' (Duggan 2005, 2). She concludes that 'for either the candidate or the examiner – analysis and assessment of the process and outcomes proves somewhat elusive' (Duggan 2005, 3).

This is reinforced by the results of our interviews with PhD students who were recommended by their supervisors for the high quality of their work in this field. Having to 'blaze a trail' or 'walk a boundary' with their PhD were recurrent themes. One student stated that, finding 'few, if any, guidelines' to direct her PhD, the process of producing the written component 'wasn't really straightforward at all'. Another described the process as 'excruciating' as she 'didn't have a ground ... I didn't sense that there was a territory of expectation I could work for or against. So I felt quite lost.' On the other hand, she continued, 'the expectation was that the field was open and that this was the opportunity to make new territory' (PhD student interviews, 2009).

The development of the practice-based doctorate in the visual and performing arts has opened the question of how pieces or bodies of visual or performing art can be judged as higher academic work. With the aim of the creation of



new knowledge integral to the PhD, the questions of what criteria are used to identify the knowledge generated through the creative practice, and what constitutes a piece of creative work as a piece of research become of central consideration (Lebow 2008; Milech 2006). In response, it has been observed that there are demands 'made of work that is submitted for a PhD that are not normally demanded of artwork; demands such as a clear and sharply focused presentation of its context and reflections, and coherence' (Hanrahan 2005, 3). The Sydney College of the Arts PhD working party responded to these concerns by asserting that in visual arts research the original contribution to knowledge is found in 'new understandings about the nature of creative practice, and/or the advance of knowledge within practice' and that this is often located in the creative work itself (Fairskye *et al.* 2008, 3).

The, at times, incongruent fit of practice-based visual and performing arts PhDs into the traditional halls of academic research is also reflected in the identity concerns voiced by practice-based PhD students. Researchers have found that PhD candidates in these fields often suffer from anxiety about losing their primary identity and practice as artists, to academic concerns (Candlin 2001). For example, PhD candidate Webber held reservations about becoming 'too much of a researcher in that you may lose some of your creative capabilities as you begin to think too much about how you work' (Brannigan 2005, 1). More positively, another student saw the practice-based PhD as an opportunity to bridge two worlds '[the thesis process helped me] to develop as a "thinking" artist – one who expresses himself with his brush marks and with his "own" voice, a "voice" that provides a personal identity for both disciplines – writing and painting' (Milech 2006, 6).

### The status of the written component

The question of what constitutes the practice-based thesis in terms of the relationship between the practical project and the written component, the weighting and importance of each and the percentage taken up by each in the

total examination process, is a vexed one that illuminates the broader debate over the place and form of artistic practice in the academy. With tensions between the practical creative and written academic text as primary, some have gone so far as to describe the relationship between the creative work and the written component of the PhD thesis as 'dysfunctional' (Dena, 2005).

Asking the question, 'What is the exegesis and what it is good for?', commentators in this field have acknowledged that:

*... there is almost universal confusion in respect of the status of the written component of the degree. Most damagingly, there are widely differing conceptions of the quality of intellectual argument and written expressions that is acceptable at PhD level.* (Burgin 2006, 107)

There is considerable dislike for the term 'exegesis' itself, with 'written component' emerging as a more favoured term. It has been argued that 'exegesis' implies a separation of creative and written work that 'tends to emasculate the creative work of its own embedded knowledge as more importance is given to the reporting of the work within the exegesis' (Vella 2005, 2), whereas 'written component' simply acknowledges that the written work is one of two components that make up the 'thesis'.

At one extreme, some academics question the need for a written component at all. They argue that practice itself is the embodiment of theory. For example, one doctoral student felt that he commenced his research degree with a strong sense of theorised practice, but expressed concern that the institution 'simply could not "get" the concept that a practice was in itself (or embodied) a "thesis"' (Vella 2005, 1). Similarly, some practitioners of visual arts argue for the artwork's capacity to stand alone:

*...artwork has been, and is still successfully judged outside of an explicit relation to the text. So why does the practice-based PhD destabilise what are established and educationally viable modes of judgement within art departments?* (Candlin 2001, 2)

In the practice-based PhD, is the written component re/presenting creative practice in a written academic form, and/or is it a work of importance unto itself? Programmes range in emphasis from those in which creative practice is considered a support to academic research to those in which the studio is understood as the crucible for research (Petelin 2006). For example, at Griffith University the written component is directed to 'contextualise the work and its contribution to the field' (Griffith University 2008, 2). In Queensland University of Technology's PhD by Creative Practice (Practice-Led Research), the creative work is situated as the primary outcome of studio-based inquiry, and is supported by a 50,000 word exegesis. They write: 'The artwork should be the research outcome, while the exegesis should describe the research process and elaborate, elucidate and place in context the artistic practice undertaken' (Creative Industries 2008, 26). In RMIT University's Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art, the 'thesis' written component is used for 'defining the purpose and theoretical base of the work and the factors taken into account in its conception, development and resolution' (RMIT Research Committee 2007, 3). The University of Newcastle describes the written component of their visual and performing arts programmes as one which must provide 'a rationale for the techniques and strategies adopted in the creative component, and must situate them in relation to a theoretical and/or historical cultural context. Where appropriate, it may include a sustained account of the creative process' (University of Newcastle 2008, 8).

Figures 1–3 compare single pages from three of the doctoral theses in our corpus, each manifesting differing approaches to the presentation of the written component. While these are used here as illustrations only, the figures indicate some of the variation that is found in these theses in terms of how the written and creative components may be construed to relate to each other (hardly at all, as in Figure 1, or more extensively, as in Figures 2–3).

The creative component of Haley's PhD was an exhibition titled *After Reflection*, made up of paintings, light jet photographs and projected works, including animations that were projected

## Shard 1: Reflection

### Introduction to Shard One

Mirrors, above all else, reflect.<sup>29</sup> They do so with such efficiency- without scattering light but neatly bouncing it along the axis of its incident - that an image is formed. The instant this occurs we are swiftly drawn into the dizzying worlds of representation and epistemology, worlds we shall come to directly. Meanwhile, the mirror reflects at the sharpness of its tain and in reflecting, neatly divides the world in two. In turn, these reflections have two major aspects. Looked at in one way, a reflection appears as a simple, symmetrical, faithful, double that *corresponds* to the object it reflects, but reflections are more complex than simple repetitions. Since this corresponding double exists in transmogrified, insubstantial form it is also *different* from the object it reflects. Just as reflections produce similarities they also produce differences.

In short, the double, the reflection, or the simulacrum opens up at last to surrender its secret: repetition does not presuppose the Same or the Similar – these are not its prerequisites. It is repetition, on the contrary which produces the only 'same' of that which differs, and the only resemblance of the different.<sup>30</sup>

Among these differences, mirror reflections also produces asymmetries. Left and right are reversed for example, and a fundamental division between the subject and its reflection is created. A divide is created between the real and the virtual, the object and its image, between what is here and what is over there. What emerges from these aspects are related to issues of representation and will be dealt with later in greater detail. Here, however, it should be kept in mind that the mirror creates two, seemingly contradictory modes of reflection - a repetitive double of verisimilitude, and a series of distinct oppositions, reversals and differences.

<sup>29</sup> Mirrors here are understood as those devices specifically designed to produce an image, not simply the world of ambient light reflections described by Kepler in the introduction.  
<sup>30</sup> Deleuze, G., *The Logic of Sense: European perspectives*. (Columbia University Press, New York), Translation of Logique du sens., Trans. Lester, M., (1990), p259

onto the walls of the exhibition space. The written text he submitted (see Figure 1) was an analysis and critique of the mirror in Western visual arts practice, from the Renaissance to the present day. Haley's text is generally fairly conventional in its layout, organisational structure, writing style and the use and formatting of quotations, footnotes and figures. The structure of the text carries through the theme of mirrors in that the chapters are called 'shards', and the sections within them 'rays'. Amongst our data set, Haley is relatively atypical in that his written text barely mentions his creative work, and does not include images of his creative work within the text. In these terms, a great 'distance' can be seen between the written and creative components of his doctoral thesis (although there are many other respects in which they are intimately connected).

Figure 2 is an extract from Fenton's (2007) doctoral project, 'Unstable Acts: A Practitioner's Case Study of the Poetics of Postdramatic Theatre and Intermediality'. In his PhD, Fenton

Figure 1  
Haley, S. 2005.  
Mirror as Metasign:  
Contemporary  
Culture as a Mirror  
World. Unpublished  
PhD thesis, Victorian  
College of the Arts,  
University of  
Melbourne, p. 1





explored the practice and poetics of postdramatic theatre, or what is elsewhere known as 'performance art'. He produced a theatre piece that was developed in collaboration with a number of performers as well as people with expertise in lighting, theatre design, audiovisual techniques and so on. His written text describes the development of, as well as theorises about, his creative project. Fenton's text, like Haley's (2005), is generally conventional in layout and structure, but he uses many images of his creative work to illustrate and explain points in his dissertation. This creates a somewhat closer apparent connection between the written and creative components of his doctoral submission.

Armstrong's (2002) doctoral project, 'Towards an Ecosophical Praxis of New Media Space Design', focused on the development of three artistic works titled *#14, public relations and transit\_lounge*. These works were a performance project (*#14*), a public art project for a state rail corporation (*public relations*) and an interactive

multimedia installation which focused on the daily operations of a building that houses a number of innovative arts organisations (*transit\_lounge*). Armstrong's text uses an unusual layout, including landscape orientation, multiple columns and decorative use of colour. The written component (see Figure 3 for an extract) included more than 500 images of his works, the processes of making them and supporting material (such as the advertising material shown on this page). In these and other ways, Armstrong merges the elements of the creative and written components in the text that he submitted as part of his doctoral examination.

### The possible functions of the written component

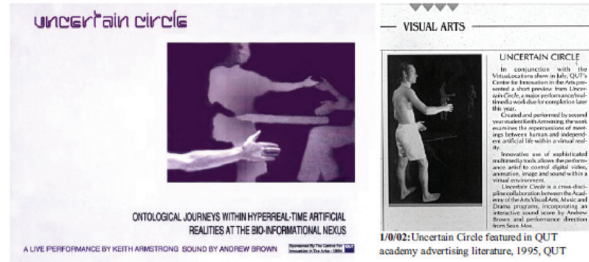
In answer to the vexed question of whether creative practice can stand alone as doctoral level research, and if it cannot, how it should be presented, a number of models have arisen. Each of these models can be characterised by their answer to the question of how the creative work relates to the written texts, the purpose and the primacy or weight of each component of the thesis and where the demonstration of originality and contribution to the field of the PhD lies. In doing so they have also set out to define and differentiate the terms used (such as 'exegesis' and 'written component' as already noted).

Discussions of the written component in practice-based research primarily centre on three models – Context, Commentary and Research Question (Berridge 2007, 8; Milech 2006, 7). In the Context Model the written component outlines 'the historical, social and/or disciplinary contexts' from or within which the creative component has arisen (Berridge 2007, 8). The strength of this model is described as 'the breadth of language that can be used and the way in which it can conform with the institutional needs of universities' (Berridge 2007, 8). It is argued, however, that the Context Model is disadvantageous in its failure to address the relationship between the two components of the PhD (Berridge 2007; Milech 2006).

The Commentary Model puts the practice component first by offering an explanation or

video and live sound technologies I performed this work solo, working alongside a further projected image of myself. This performance, undertaken in collaboration with QUT Music lecturer Andrew Brown, was shown at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Woodward Theatre (1995) (Figures 1/0/01 & 1/0/02), filmed for the SBS TV Arts show 'Imagine', in the QUT Department of Music Auditorium (1995) and was later filmed for the ABC TV arts program 'Review'. It was also shown at Noosa Regional Gallery (1995) (for the 'Zero 1' Exhibition and Conference), Pseudo (for the 'Brisbane Fringe Festival' 1995) (Figure 1/1/08), the Erwin Rado Theatre, Melbourne (1995) (for the 'Experimenta' festival) and the University of Melbourne (for the 'ASCIILITE 95' Conference) (Figure 1/1/09).

'Uncertain Circle' dealt with the inner reconciliation of self and other, a dualism which I later began to collapse through my investigations into the possibility of an ecological self. Throughout that stage



1/0/01: Uncertain Circle, advertising poster, 1995, Keith Armstrong

in my research I remained concerned with the negotiation of relationships underpinned by examinations of the spaces that lie between different entities/beings. My interest in the philosophy of technology also led me to focus upon ideas surrounding the ontology of cyberspace. This led to the 'Mandala'-based performance works 'Escolas De Sambas' (1995), at Brisbane's Museum of Contemporary Art for 'Volt the New Performance' and 'Liquid Architecture: Hacking a Private Space in Cyberspace' (1996) (See Figures 1/1/02, 1/1/04 & 1/1/06 in Images-1) performed at Brisbane's 'Livid Festival' warehouse.

My continuing commitment to community practice also led me to work on applications for 'Mandala' technologies that could assist communication for profoundly disabled young people. It also led me to

towards an ecosophical praxis of new media space design

keith armstrong 2002



1/0/03: Uncertain Circle at Pseudo, 1995, Loon Frainey

create 'Dragon Dreams' (1995) (Figure 1/1/03), an Interactive fly-through and real time VR adventure which was incorporated in a theatre show that toured Queensland Special Schools and was shown at the 1995 'Warana Festival' in Brisbane's Southbank Parklands.

performatives

Those early experiences in performance art and installation were influential in the proposal I was developing that led to this study. My intention was to marry these key interests in a new site-specific praxis. In 1996 I proposed a form I named the 'Performative': many of the ideas of the Performative later became manifest in the evolving Ecosophical approaches of this study, most notably within the work 'Public Relations (On Line & Off Line)' (1987-88). At that time I described the Performative as:

*A structure and method of technological and practical facilitation to stage a live, creative forum, which then is allowed to develop over a period of time dependent upon the audience's actions. The Performative's function is to apply and*

commentary on the practical component (Berridge 2007, 8). The weak version of the Commentary Model has been described as a 'brief explanatory annotation' (Milech 2006, 7), or a 'gloss' to the practical creative component. The strong version is a research report that 'present[s] the research framework: the key questions, the theories, the disciplinary and wider contexts, of the project; or a report that tells the story of the research: its aims, its methods, its achievements' (Milech 2006, 9). In this model when the studio is 'the crucible within which disparate intellectual, material, formal and experimental elements are brought into creative alignment' (Bell 2008, 175), the written component often becomes a process-based report that outlines 'the pre-project reflection (including theory), the work episodes and post-project reflection' (Berridge 2007, 7). Thus, the written component can become a valorisation of the creative practice, an elaboration of the values of its outcomes (Barrett, 2004). The Commentary Model 'implicitly position[s] the creative/produ-

tion component of the thesis as essential research, and the exegesis as writing that supplements creative practice' (Milech 2006, 7).

The Research-Question Model seems, in Australia at least, to receive most critical favour in these discussions. In this model both the creative project and the written component respond to a single research question. Thus the relationship between the two components is reconceptualised, with both components seeking to offer independent answers through the introduction of a 'third term - the research question' (Milech 2006, 10). Each component offers answers which are independent because each enquiry is processed through a 'different disciplinary language' yet are interrelated, not only because each answers

*... a single research question but also because of the intense reciprocity between the two lines of inquiry/expression as the research develops. In this way the two components of the research*

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Opposite page:

Figure 2  
Fenton, D. 2007. Unstable Acts: A Practitioner's Case Study of the Poetics of Postdramatic Theatre and Intermediality. Unpublished PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, p. 76

This page:

Figure 3  
Armstrong, K. 2002. Towards an Ecosophical Praxis of New Media Space Design. Unpublished PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, p. 41

*thesis are neither ambiguously related, nor does one component undermine autonomy of the other. (Milech, 2006, 11)*

This model is thus seen as having the advantage of resisting 'the divide between artist/scholar and other similar binaries' (Berridge 2007, 8). Similarly, it is seen to respect the 'authority, autonomy, languages and conventions of the disciplines that produce creative/production pieces' (Milech 2006, 11).

Advocating the importance of distinctly different yet interrelated components of the practice-based doctorate, Edith Cowan University's *Dancing between Diversity and Consistency* project which investigated higher degree assessment in the field of dance, was 'careful to use the term "component" when referring to either of the two aspects of practice-based research, the embodiment (usually a performance) and the written exegesis'. Through this, they explain, the thesis can be 'understood to be all of the work presented for examination (performances, artworks, process demonstrations and exegesis)' (Phillips *et al.* 2008b, 5). This is reflected in the guidelines at Melbourne University, for example, where the thesis can 'take the form of performance and/or corpus of creative work plus a dissertation which addresses, elucidates and contextualises the work': in this context the creative work and dissertation are examined as an integrated whole (Melbourne School of Graduate Research 2009, 1). Similarly, in the Sydney College of the Arts PhD by Thesis and Creative work, the text and creative work are presented as integral components of the final submission for examination.

While our survey found that many universities supplied guidelines for the structure of the written component of the thesis, supervisors overwhelmingly described these as general guides only that ceded a necessary flexibility to the student-led creative project. Our study also found significant variation in how practice-based theses (that is, both the written and creative components) are examined. Examiners may, for example, see the creative component with or, on occasion, without the written component. Reflecting the variety in styles, the written component they

receive may be the fully developed piece of writing or it may, in some cases, be a framing document with the more extended piece of writing being submitted some time (in some cases months) after attending the exhibition or performance of the creative component. Very strong local institutional factors were also key to shaping what is considered an acceptable piece of writing for this degree, what it should do, and what issues it should address, all of which continue to demonstrate the variety in practice found in this still emerging doctoral genre.

### Conclusion

As a relative newcomer to the academy, and framed within a broad debate over the legitimacy and recognition of art practice as academic research, the diverse range of relationships between creative practice and text are reflective of the fact that the practice-based doctorate is an emerging genre in the process of defining itself. These relationships demonstrate a probably necessary flexibility that responds to the range of projects inherent to this kind of doctoral research. Reflective of this, while our study has unearthed schools of preference, there is no evidence that one model represents best practice, nor that one single model should be sought.

In this article we have taken established debates in the field, contextualised historically, and examined them through the lens of a study which focuses on Australian universities. It reveals the diversity of relations that can exist between the written and creative components of a doctoral thesis in the relevant fields, as manifested by the contestation of terms for describing these inter-relations, the variation in institutional practices and guidelines for the relative weighting of and emphasis upon the creative and written components, and the potential diversity of relations between written and creative components of the thesis. These are preliminary steps in a larger study which aims to interrogate the nature of this diversity in further detail. The findings presented here emerge from our nationwide survey of universities regarding guidelines for the structure of practice-based PhDs, and from our surveys and interviews with students

and supervisors. It is clear that for students and supervisors alike, there is a manifest tension between experiences of confusion, flexibility and creative growth.

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