Recent Developments in Practice-based/led Research in Art and Design

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In its recent document on post-graduate research policy and procedures, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) includes under the heading 'Types of Research', "creative work: the invention and generation of ideas, hypotheses, images, performances or artefacts".¹ It is now broadly accepted that practical creative work such as musical scores and visual art objects can form a part of a candidate's submission for a research degree in disciplines such as art, design and music.² There is still a requirement for a substantial written component of the overall submission, setting the creative work in its "relevant theoretical, historical, critical or visual context",³ but this may now be augmented by "a portfolio of works...a performance or exhibition".⁴

Recently however, the primacy of the written over the visual text has been challenged through the development of practice-led research. Under this approach the visual component of the research becomes the primary component, even to the extent of excluding its written counterpart completely.⁵ This paper will offer an explanation of how and why this situation has arisen, identify some current strands of thought on the issue.

Prior to the 1980s 'practice-based' research in the visual arts was virtually unheard of, and research activity was restricted to the art historical or theoretical domain. There was an accepted division between theory and practice, according to which research was seen as properly belonging to the domain of the theoretical. The first rupture in this tradition came in 1974, when in the UK, the regulations of the Council for National Academic Awards⁶ were changed to allow for the presentation of creative work in conjunction with a written thesis for a higher degree submission in the visual arts. In the Irish context, the newly created University of Ulster was the first to accept the validity of such a combination.

In both England and Ireland however there was some initial resistance to the idea that creative work could be viewed as legitimate scholarly activity, let alone fit into the definition of research. For one thing, art had traditionally been viewed as a distinct practice in its own right, with its own specific methods (usually expressive) which mitigated against offering a rational explanation of

³ Post-Grad Research Policy and Procedures, 37.
⁴ ibid, 40.
⁵ For example, an accompanying written thesis no longer a requirement of a practice-led Ph.D. at Leeds Metropolitan University
⁶ A national regulatory body for academic degrees, along the same lines as HETAC, but now defunct.
its end product; a requirement of conventional research. Also art education was deemed vocational, offered by specialist colleges and traditionally seen as distinct from university education.

Factors bringing about a change of thinking on this subject included educational transformations in art pedagogy during the 1980s. Perhaps influenced by developments in the field of contemporary art, such as the advent of the 'Art and Language' movement during the 1970s, which queried the distinction between the visual and the written text, art educationalists looked for closer linkage between theory and practice. Their traditional segregation of the two came to be regarded as counter-productive, and art historians were encouraged to 'engage with students on the studio floor'.

On the broader educational front in the UK particularly, many hitherto independent colleges of art became absorbed into conglomerate Polytechnics, which themselves later evolved into universities. The net result was that art courses were now required to fit an 'academic' template, and vocational art diplomas were replaced by 'academic' degrees. Also, in keeping with their new university teacher status, art staff became required to engage in research activity, just like their colleagues in other disciplines. In fact institutional funding, and the consequently the success or otherwise of respective disciplines, became dependent on the amount of research taking place.

As a result of these changes it became necessary for Art Departments in UK Universities to legitimise the concept of research in art and design, and the problem of definition then began. What exactly is research in art and design - so-called 'practice based research'? An immediate paradox was recognized when early writers noted the similarity between the orthodox methodology of art practice and the standard research process, i.e. identification of a problem, exploration of alternative solutions, and selection of the most appropriate. A crucial difference between the two was also recognised however, recently defined as follows: "whereas the artist/designer can simply present his/her end product and refuse further explanation, the academic art/design researcher is obliged also to map out for his/her peers the route by which s/he arrived at that product." To qualify as research the practitioner must become not only 'reflective' in the manner advocated by Donald Schon, but also chart his/her process of development and evaluate it.

From the early 1990s onwards, various attempts were made to identify the necessary qualities of practice-based research: "accessible, systematic

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7 The concept of research applied to visual art is still regarded as contentious in some quarters. At a seminar (20.11.03) on the subject held at Dun Laoghaire School of Art, the keynote speaker, Prof. Ciarán Benson, one time Director of the Irish Arts Council, dismissed the possibility on the grounds that visual art is essentially an 'expressive' activity, not conducive to analysis.


enquiry" (Allison, 1992), and "intentional, procedural, explicit and publicly accountable" (Gray, 1993). A definition of the activity soon evolved as, "some form of systematic enquiry which is reported to the field in which it is located in a form which renders both the methods and the outcomes of the enquiry accessible to others."\footnote{Brian Allison, "Research in art and design: research problems, programmes and databases," \textit{The Matrix of Research in Art and Design Education}, The London Institute, 1988, 26.}

Once the research concept was defined however, the next issue to arise was that of methodology. Artists and designers were reluctant to accept existing research methodologies, feeling that they were not appropriate to the specific nature of their discipline. For example, as Gray and Mallins pointed out, the conditions of generality and replicability required by scientific research cannot easily be applied to visual art; which values the unique and original.\footnote{See, Carol Gray and Julian Mallins, "Research Procedures/Methodology for Artists and Designers,' \textit{Principles and Definitions}, Winchester School of Art, 1993, 33-34.} Also, humanities and social science research methods, whilst sometimes appropriate for theoretical studies, were not seen as best suited to practical subjects like art and design. In the absence of any new procedures however, much early research in art and design was of an applied nature, cross-disciplinarity enabling it to utilise existing methods.\footnote{See for example, Peter Jordan, "Research in the Arts in Ireland," \textit{Journal of Higher Education Studies}, vol.5, no.1, 1992, 18-19.} It is worth noting that many research funding bodies, such as the Technological Sector Research Scheme currently operated by the Institutes of Technology, still tend to favour arts projects of such an "applied" nature.\footnote{For example, Technological Sector Research Strand 1 funding for Business/Humanities, 2000-2003, only funded two specifically art-based research projects out of seventy-eight, and both these were of an 'applied nature.' Information provided by Kate Wiseman, Council of Directors.}

As a starting point, Allison in 1992 suggested seven possible research procedures for art and design: historical, philosophical, experimental, comparative, descriptive, naturalistic and practical. As none of these was seen as particularly appropriate by practitioners however, the search for a methodology specific to the visual arts occupied theorists for much of the early 1990s. Bodies such as the European Post-graduate Art and Design Group at Winchester School of Art, the London Institute through its 'Matrix' conferences, the Centre for Research in Art and Design at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen, and the Research Working Group of the European League of Institutes of Arts\footnote{Most directly at a meeting at the Utrecht School of Art, Netherlands, in November, 1991.}, all put their minds to addressing the problem. Things came to a head at a formative international conference, held at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland, in 1996. There the possibility of a novel open-ended and less deterministic mode of enquiry, as posited by Stonyer,\footnote{Andrew Stonyer, 'Methodologies: a World of our Own,' conference paper, University of Art & Design, Helsinki, September, 1996.} United Kingdom, seemed to typify the elusive sought after ideal. Others suggested such things as a "cocktail of intuition, empiricism and analysis",\footnote{Maurice Owen, "Artresearch: Employing Art Strategies as a Research Method," conference} and just when a notional formula seemed to be emerging, the concept was
exploded as a "serendipitous" and "unpredictable" by Rebecca Disney, \(^{18}\) Paul Feyerabend's dictum that, "the only theory that does not inhibit progress is: anything goes,"\(^{19}\) comes to mind, and the appropriately entitled, 'No guru, no method' Conference, ended up in demonstrating just that.

One unambiguous thing to emerge from the Helsinki Conference was the realisation that there was an extreme diversity of opinion, world-wide, as to the precise nature of art and design research. Not only did each country have its own view of the concept, but individual colleges and universities within it differed in their understanding of the term. The problem of arriving at a specifiable and generally acceptable research method still preoccupies the world of art and design. Perhaps the advent of the Bologna agreement - aimed at unifying standards in education (and research) across Europe, will be able to provide some kind of consensus.\(^{20}\) One factor that has aided the situation in the UK itself has been the development of a doctoral research qualification in art and design during the 1990s. This has given rise to much debate around issues of quality and comparability between art and design and other subject areas, and has helped to further elucidate the definition of the research process within art and design.

The 1997 Report of the UK Council for Graduate Education into Practice-based Doctorates, whilst accepting that "an original creative work" might constitute a major part of the submission, stipulated that "it cannot alone lead to the award of a Ph.D." Basing its definition on the consensus of current Ph.D regulations for practice-based subjects, it required amongst other things that the final submission to be accompanied by a permanent record of the creative works, these works to be set in a relevant theoretical, historical, critical or visual context, and that... there be a written thesis."\(^{21}\) It also noted that the practice-based doctorate was "not the same as a Ph.D. based on conventional research", as in the case of the former, "significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the creative work." That said however, it maintained that "the commentary has a pivotal part to play, and must be accessible in an appropriate form - written, tape, video."\(^{22}\) Thus again, the research concept, whilst allowing for a practical dimension, still required it to have written explanation and contextualisation.

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\(^{19}\) Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 1988, quoted in Principles and Definitions, 34.


\(^{22}\) The advent of new technology and the internet have helped significantly to overcome the problem of accessibility to visual art research. See Julian Malins and Carol Gray, "The Digital Thesis: Recent Developments in Practice-Based Ph.D Research in Art and Design," *Digital Creativity*, vol.10, no.1: 18-28.
An exception to the above was made by the Report for musical doctorates. It was recognised that music had a "long established tradition of 'compositional' doctorates - premised on the claim that the composition embodies, and in consequence is indicative of, the research process, and that this is clearly accepted by the academic community." As much modern art is of an abstract nature - "an expressive arrangement of colours and shapes" (Matisse), an analogous argument could surely be made for visual art!

Much recent thinking on the nature of practice-based research has queried the necessity for a written component. Candlin has argued against the notion that "art practice can only be legitimised as research when it is framed by a conventionally academic enquiry." She suggests that "instead of trying to make practice-based research fit academic regulations it would be more productive to use practice-based Ph.Ds [research] as a way of rethinking academic conventions." She argues against the idea that writing itself is intrinsically explicit, on the grounds that like imagery, it also has form or stylistic variety or idiosyncrasy, and should not be seen as necessary for the clarification of visual matter. Further that "there is a long history of artists …making artwork which is thoroughly engaged at a critical level…and artists do not rely on dissertations to make the point." 

The vexed relationship between visual and written texts is further explored in a recent paper by MacLeod. She queries which of the two exactly constitutes the thesis, claiming that art itself can be a theorising practice, "It can produce the research thesis." MacLeod goes on to postulate the notion of a 'matrixial' theory (a complex of ideas, matter, form and theory), "dependent upon the relationship between the written text and the artwork but… demonstrative of the intellectuality of the making, which is not the same as the intellectuality of the writing." 

A number of other recent papers on art and design research, have been concerned with claims for the autonomous nature of the process. Evans and Le Grice contend that "art and design are intellectual pursuits in their own right, not requiring translation into other terms in order to have sense and coherence." They argue that art and design "embody 'meaning' through their interior symbolic language and syntax" and "through their discursive relationship to other works in their field." Finally they suggest that "art and

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23 Candlin, 96.
24 ibid.
25 ibid., 100.
26 Katy MacLeod, "The Functions of the written text in Practice-based Ph.D. submissions," working paper in Art and Design, Faculty of Art and Education, University of Plymouth.
27 ibid.
28 ibid.
30 ibid., 110.
31 ibid.
design works can be read by those trained in the subject, in the same way that, for example, mathematicians read mathematics.\textsuperscript{32}

These recent claims for a paradigm shift in emphasis away from the written to the visual, are reflected in the emergence of so-called practice-led research (as opposed to practice-based) It appears in an article by Anke Coumans, entitled 'Practice-led Research in Higher Education.'\textsuperscript{33} In this Coumans argues for the argumentation in art and design research to be carried by the 'visual essay'. The researcher "does not write a thesis but imagines or designs a visual essay on the basis of discovered research material." She goes on, "this is not to say that no words will appear in it, the point is that the argumentation is carried by the image."\textsuperscript{34} By adding this caveat, Coumans seems to be arguing not the complete abandonment of the written word in art research but for a 'reflexive' relationship between image and text, in a manner similar to that advocated by McCleod in her notion of 'Matrixial Theory.

Whilst the exciting possibilities for a new art research paradigm along the lines envisaged by Cardlin and MacLeod offers the possibility of a truly appropriate research methodology for art and design, there seems little likelihood, based on the evidence of current practice, of such a model gaining general acceptance. Commenting on the UK situation in 2000, Cardlin notes that whilst it is currently possible to do an art Ph.D. in over forty university departments, extreme diversity of requirement is still the order of the day. Expectations of the research submission range from a purely visual presentation at Leeds Metropolitan University, to one requiring an accompanying 80,000 word thesis at the University of Hertfordshire.\textsuperscript{35}

Ireland itself is currently lagging behind in the art doctoral stakes, and most research activity, at least within the IT sector, to which most art departments belong, is currently limited to practice-based masters degrees. These are required to conform to regulations laid down by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), which correspond to those of WIT, as cited at the outset of this paper. Within these rules however there is still room for considerable diversity, and examples of art research topics at WIT vary from the 'applied' \textit{Investigation of the role of the arts in the healing environment of Waterford Regional Hospital} to the 'pure' \textit{Art Apocalypse: Into the Ether}, an investigation of the validity of painting as an art form in the late twentieth century.

Presently a series of discussions are taking place amongst Heads of Art and Design institutions throughout the country, but there is no indication at this point of their adopting the radical proposals for reform as outlined above.

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\textsuperscript{32}\textit{ibid.} \\
\textsuperscript{34} An interesting example of this is the use of the photographic essay by the Brazilian economist Sébastiao Salgado to convey his arguments concerning the effects of globalisation. \\
\textsuperscript{35} Cardlin, 97. 
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