The H.W. Wilson Company/WilsonWeb

Wilson Web

AUTHOR: Victor Burgin

TITLE: Thoughts on 'research' degrees in visual arts departments

SOURCE: Journal of Media Practice 7 no2 101-8 N 2006

ABSTRACT

Starting from dictionary definitions that underpin commonsense notions of 'research' as 'scientific or scholarly investigation', I go on to consider how scientific and scholarly investigation has been pursued in visual arts departments. I then describe the type of research activity that I encounter most often in such departments -- one that conforms to neither dictionary definitions nor common-sense. I conclude with a brief consideration of the relation of writing to practice in the particular case of research degrees in audiovisual arts -- and with a practical recommendation.

Keywords

visual arts; practice; research; doctorates

Introduction

I first had to think about Ph.D. degrees in visual arts departments in 2001, on my return to the UK after thirteen years teaching in a humanities department at the University of California. I responded to such prevailing language as 'research-led practice', 'practice-led research', 'theory-led practice', 'practice-as-research', 'research-artist' and so on, in a position paper for a 2002 meeting of a Goldsmiths College research committee.(FN1) What follows is drawn mainly from this paper, and perhaps retains something of the surprise of my first encounter with the now familiar phenomenon of doctoral research degrees in art practice.

Dictionaries and commonsense

The word 'art' does not appear in dictionary definitions of the word 'research'. Typically, 'research' is defined as: 'scientific or scholarly investigation, especially study or experiment aimed at discovery, interpretation or application of facts, theories or laws'. Such a definition agrees with commonsense understanding, in which the word 'research' may conjure images of white-coated scientists, electron microscopes and particle accelerators. This same commonsense would probably allow that the term also apply to the image of a tweed-clad historian, among piles of documents in a dusty archive. In both cases, the outcome of research is assumed to be knowledge -- of the cause of the common cold, of the behaviour of electrons, of the causes of the First World War, and so on.(FN2) Neither dictionaries nor commonsense associate the term 'research' with the image of the artist. Picasso declared: 'I do not seek, I find'. The assertion succinctly confirms commonsense understanding: scientists and scholars 'research', the artist 'creates'. An informative research project would be to trace the introduction and dissemination of the word 'research' in the self-publicity of art departments, and to correlate this discursive history with changes in government policies for Higher Education. I would suppose that the waning of the language of 'creativity' and the waxing of the language of 'research' has a political, rather than intellectual, cause -- to be the consequence of external dictates, rather than of self-searching and self-redefinition within the art schools. Today, typically, one department describes itself as a centre for 'practice-based research activity', another claims to be 'one of the leading centres of studio research practice'. It may be that such expressions represent little more than the substitution of the word 'research' for the word 'creative', while the practices they describe remain largely unchanged. Such terminological evolution -- necessary to survival in a potentially hostile political environment -- is eccentric to ordinary language use. There is however a history of research initiatives in art departments that do conform to the popular understanding of 'research' -- a history of initiatives aligned along the axes of 'scientific or scholarly investigation'.

Scientific investigation

The association of art and science has a long history. Bernard Berenson complained that the art of the Italian Renaissance suffered from a 'fatal tendency to become science'. John Constable wished that painting might become a 'branch of the natural sciences'. The self-styled 'laboratory artists' in the Soviet Union of the immediate post-revolutionary period claimed that their work was the equivalent of pure scientific research. The late 1960s saw such initiatives as 'Experiments in Art and Technology' (EAT) in the US, and the 'Cybernetic Serendipity' exhibition at the ICA, London, presaging current computer-based convergences between art and technology. This history, however, is not cumulative but rather a concatenation of unrelated events. Berenson's remarks apply to contributions by painters to the development of geometrical systems of perspectival representation. Constable was speaking, in the context of the aesthetic ideology of Realism, in favour of an 'objective' representation of atmospheric effects. The 'laboratory artists' found political and artistic asylum in the western market for non-representational art. EAT prospered only so long as corporate sponsors could be led to hope for a return on their investment. In an essay published in 1980, the art historian and critic Jack Burnham, who was closely involved in the major art and technology projects of the late 1960s, gives a retrospective account of his own experience of EAT: 'While EAT and other art groups held out the boon of "new discoveries" to corporations funding them, most companies were cynical and wise enough to realize that the research abilities of nearly all artists are nil'.(FN3)

Scholarly investigation

The modern art school owes its very existence to scholarship. In the Middle Ages, the arts were divided into 'liberal arts' and 'mechanical arts'. The former were intellectual disciplines taught in universities, the latter were manual skills taught in artisanal guilds. In the Renaissance, painting began to be considered a liberal art by virtue of the superior learning then required of the painter -- primarily in geometry, anatomy and literature (mainly classical mythology and biblical texts). In the Baroque era this change in status was used by painters in Paris to justify their secession from their crafts guild, the Ma^itrise, to form the first art academy. The 1648 Académie inaugurated the modern art school by bringing theoretical and practical knowledge together in a coherent teaching. This newly intellectual status of art was confirmed and consolidated in the other discursive-institutional inventions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries -- aesthetics, art history, art criticism and so on -- to form the foundations of the modern art institution. In effect, the teaching of the first academy was a response to the question: 'What does an artist need to know to establish the basis of a literate and informed practice?' In 1973 I joined the Polytechnic of Central London, School of Communication, with the brief of designing the academic component of a three-year B.A. (Hons.) course in Film and Photography. My colleagues and I set out to answer the question: 'What does a student need to know to establish the basis of a literate and informed practice in film and photography?' The course that was subsequently approved and taught was based on three components: history (knowledge of the evolution of changing forms of film and photography); sociology (knowledge of the socio-institutional context, and political economy, of film and photography); semiotics and psychoanalysis (knowledge of the construction and derivation of meaning and affect in photographs and films). These three types of knowledge formed the basis of a history and theory curriculum that occupied fifty per cent of the three-year undergraduate course. Inevitably, ideas and terminology from this curriculum entered the studio 'crit session', but scholarly research in history and theory was never confused with the practices of critical debate in which it might be deployed -- each area was recognized as possessing its own discursive specificity, and criteria of legitimacy. Some students who completed the BA 'theory-practice' course at PCL went on to write PhD dissertations in university humanities departments. Today, they would have the option of studying for a PhD degree in a visual arts department.

Three types of candidate

It should be self-evident that those setting foot on the PhD degree track in a visual arts department should not be conspicuously less well-prepared than are their counterparts in any other department of the university. They should be already trained -- or self-educated -- up to at least a minimally acceptable BA level of literacy and proficiency in the field (anthropology, sociology, semiotics, history and so on) where they most clearly locate their intellectual interests and arguments. Training 'from scratch' is the job of an undergraduate course, not a graduate programme. Students should be supervised by appropriately qualified faculty. If such faculty are not available from within the visual arts department itself, arrangements should be made to enrol supervisors from other departments. A PhD programme may provide a supportive environment for a type of candidate who is both an accomplished visual artist and who not only wants to write, but is capable of writing, a long dissertation. Another type of candidate is one who received a thorough introduction to a specialist academic literature as an undergraduate, but has little experience of practical work in visual arts. This candidate is primarily interested in producing a written thesis, but seeks the close contact with an environment of art production that few humanities departments can provide.

A third type of student is one who makes works of art and who also reads enthusiastically. This student is interested in ideas, and turns concepts encountered in reading into practical projects. The research of this type of candidate typically has a mainly practical outcome, with academic work playing a subordinate and 'instrumental' role. For example, I was once introduced to a student who, after reading Bachelard (and my own book) on 'space', made an installation of stuffed toys that he turned inside out -- so that all their electronics, and other hidden details, became their exterior surface. There is nothing in either Bachelard or in my own work to recommend this treatment of stuffed toys, but if this person had not read the theory he might not have thought of doing this. This instrumental use of theory has a respectable history. For example, in 1624 Claudio Monteverdi composed the Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda and, in so doing, launched a revolutionary new musical style. In his introduction to the published version of this work, Monteverdi said that he had been prompted to invent this new style (stile concitato) by his reading of medical treatises. According to the medical theories of his day, there were three distinct 'humours' produced by corresponding bodily states -- love, tranquility and anger. Monteverdi was struck by the fact that there were extant madrigal forms to express the first two, but not the third. This got him thinking, and the Combattimento was the result. If Monteverdi had been embarking on a PhD, he would have been concerned with such things as the origins of the theory of humours in such classical sources as Galen and Aristotle; or he might have launched a critique of the idea by invoking the authority of such contemporary thinkers as Harvey, in England. His thesis might have affected the evolution of medical science in Italy, but it would not have given us the stile concitato. What is most appealing about the Monteverdi relation to 'imported' theory is the fact that the result (here, a musical work) is independent of the provoking idea. Medical science today probably takes a dim view of the doctrine of humours, but this has no consequence for the appreciation of Monteverdi's music. The student eviscerating stuffed toys reads cultural theory the way Monteverdi read medical treatises. He was unable to tell me the title of the book he had read by Bachelard, nor was he able (greater cruelty) to remember the title of my own book. It had clearly not occurred to him to wonder whether there was agreement or contradiction between my own arguments and those of Bachelard, or what (if anything) Bachelard's use of the word 'psychoanalysis' has to do with the Freudianism of my own work. But these are precisely the kinds of issues he would have had to deal with -- given his declared point of departure in the two texts -- if he had been writing a PhD. This 'third type' of student is in my experience the most commonly encountered kind on a visual arts PhD degree course. The question in respect of such students is not 'Are they engaged in research?' -- clearly they are -- the question is rather: 'How are they to be assessed'? But visual arts departments confidently assessed such students before the coming of the PhD. Throughout the history of art the finished 'work of art' has represented the culmination of a process of research; a large part of the routine work of artists is a work of research. Although the shift from a language of 'creativity' to a language of 'research' may confuse that part of commonsense inherited from nineteenth-century Romanticism it is otherwise easily justified historically. The question of whether visual art production constitutes research is not a significant issue. The substantive issue for visual arts departments now is the widespread inability or disinclination to clearly distinguish between an art work and a written thesis, a tendency to obfuscate or ignore the differing specificities of two distinct forms of practice.

Audiovisual art practice -- an exceptional case?

It might be objected that the audiovisual arts are an exceptional case, one that cannot be considered within the same terms as such static objects as paintings and photographs. Audiovisual works, it may be argued -- films, videos or some other form -- are already discursively articulated, they not only incorporate language (as dialogue, voice-over, intertitle and so on) but are quasi-linguistic in their very form. The analogy between language and cinema, for example, has been explored with particular rigour in structuralist film theory, not least in the work of Christian Metz. It might be argued that if audiovisual forms are inherently discursive, then an intellectual argument can equally well be presented in the form of a film or video as in a more conventional written form. Let us suppose that students in a philosophy class are set the task of writing a critical essay in response to a passage of their choice from Plato. In place of an essay, one of the students submits a DVD containing a film she has made. The film shows two women talking together in a domestic interior: one is ironing, the other is smoking a cigarette. Later, the woman who was ironing is seen putting on her makeup while still conversing with her friend. The women talk of the relationship between morality and self-interest, and between the dominant and the subordinate classes. The instructor in the philosophy class recognizes the conversation as an adaptation of the dialogue between Socrates and Callicles in Plato's Gorgias. The instructor is both engaged and entertained by the video, but refuses to accept it in place of an essay. The student protests that her mise-en-scène of the Socratic dialogue in a space of domestic labour constitutes a feminist critique of Plato's text. She says that by conflating the space of the agora with that of the gynaecaeum she has exposed the fact that the discourse of Plato's male protagonists -- ostensibly concerned with absolute universal truths -- is in fact historically contingent. The instructor replies that to expose this fact is not to argue it; although the film provocatively and successfully suggests the basis of an argument, it does not make the argument. The example I have just given is not entirely hypothetical. The film exists, as the first of the three parts that comprise Anne-Marie Miéville's Nous sommes tous encore ici (1997). Miéville's film was variously received, but none of the reviews I read treated it as a philosophical

commentary on Plato.

In a series of conversations between Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, first published in 1996, Stiegler raises the question of evolving supports of knowledge: from the book to such multi-media supports as the DVD. Modern historians, for example, may draw upon such archival materials as documentary films -- why should they not incorporate audio-visual materials in the final form of presentation of their research? The discussion of this issue leads Derrida to the question of the relation of writing to multi-media in the educational context. He recalls that in the course of his teaching in a Californian university he invited the students in his seminar 'to propose a text upon a corpus of their choosing, in the usual form of a paper'. Two of the students submitted videocassettes they had made in place of a paper:

Derrida: 'My inclination was to accept this innovation, ... I did not accept [it], however, because I had the impression, in reading or in watching their production, that what I expected from a discourse, from a theoretical elaboration, had suffered from this passage to the image. I did not refuse the image because it was the image, but because it had come to substitute itself in a somewhat crude way for what I think one could have and should have elaborated more precisely with discourse or with writing. A difficult negotiation. I did not want to seem reactionary and backward-looking by saying to them: 'No, you have to send me that on paper', but at the same time, I did not want to give way on requirements, apparently more traditional, to which I continue to hold. So I wrote them a letter to tell them, in substance, this: 'OK. I am not against that in principle, but there has to be as much demonstrative power, theoretical power, etc., in your video-cassette, as there would be in a good paper. At that time, we can talk about it again'.

Stiegler: 'A scholarly, if not scientific, practice of the image, ... broadly spread throughout the University, ... does not yet exist, but it will have to come'.

Derrida: 'It has to be encouraged, but provided that it does not come at too high a price, provided that rigour, differentiation, refinement do not suffer too much as a result... That is what I said to them ... when I explained: 'If your film had been accompanied -- or articulated with -- a discourse refined according to the norms that matter to me, then I would have been more receptive, but this was not the case, what you are proposing to me is coming in the place of discourse but does not adequately replace it'.(FN4)

A practical recommendation

There should be three distinct kinds of 'terminal degree' in visual arts: a PhD with a 'parenthetical notation' in history and theory, a PhD with a parenthetical notation in practice and a Doctor of Fine Arts degree.

* The 'PhD (history and theory emphasis)' would require a thesis comparable in length and scholarly depth to a PhD in a Humanities department, and might often involve the student in working between two departments, for example, between Visual Arts and Anthropology, or Visual Arts and History. For purposes of assessment, emphasis would be primarily on the written text. The purpose of the practical work required for this degree would be mainly to establish a first hand familiarity with the technical and formal aspects of the type of practice discussed in the dissertation -- providing a level of intimacy with visual art production which could not be achieved in a traditional Humanities department.

* To satisfy the requirements of the 'PhD (practice emphasis)' the student would produce both a long written essay -- albeit half the length required for the history and theory emphasis -- and a substantial body of practical work. For assessment there would be equal emphasis on the writing and the visual work. Various models might be proposed for an appropriate relation between the two, the model I have called 'What do I need to know'? allows for genuinely 'practice-led' research in that the writing contextualises the practical work -- offering critical insights into the history of the art practice in question, and critically interrogating the various theories that may inform and legitimate it. The resulting thesis would be assessed on its independent merits, and should advance arguments that may be applied beyond the confines of the author's own practical work. An 'artist's statement', no matter how lengthy, would not be acceptable.

* The 'Doctor of Fine Arts' degree (DFA) would meet the requirements of those students who wish to do further work beyond the MFA, who are interested in ideas and draw upon historical and theoretical writings, but have little aptitude for, or interest in, constructing lengthy written arguments. For purposes of assessment, emphasis would be on the practical work. For the final examination, these students would submit short essays, notes and bibliographies, rather than a structured thesis.

A 'bottom line'

Students enrolled on PhD degree courses in visual arts departments are required to submit both the visual and the written results of their research for examination. However, 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 expression that is acceptable at PhD level -- not only between different departments, but between different faculty

within the same department. If this current state of affairs continues it can only undermine student morale and public confidence in the value not only of research degrees in visual arts but of PhD degrees in general. The university is charged with the training and institutional legitimation of those who will transmit knowledge and critical and analytical skills to the succeeding generation. To adopt the tripartite structure I have suggested would be a minimal concession to the gravity of this responsibility.

ADDED MATERIAL

Contributor details

Victor Burgin is Millard Professor of Fine Art in the Visual Arts Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London. He has published extensively in the field of the visual arts and his artworks have been exhibited internationally. Contact: Visual Arts Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW.

E-mail: v.burgin@gold.ac.uk

Footnotes

1 Albeit my paper was not discussed on that, or any subsequent, occasion.

2 A distinction would be made between the types of knowledge produced -- science offering, in this popular view, sure and certain knowledge; the findings of the humanities seen as perpetually subject to debate.

3 Jack Burnham, 'Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed', in John Hanhardt, (ed.), Video Culture: A Critical Investigation, Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986, p. 243.

4 Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, Échographies de la télevision, Galilée-INA, 1996, pp. 158-160; [Trans. Echographies of television, Polity, 2002, pp. 141-143.]

Suggested Citation

Burgin, V. (2006), 'Thoughts on "research" degrees in visual arts departments', Journal of Media Practice 7: 2, pp. 101-108, doi: 10.1386/jmpr.7.2.101/1