

# Commentaries

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## Is there a doctor in the house? A riposte to Victor Burgin on practice-based arts and audiovisual research

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### Abstract

*I suggest that to properly understand current resistance within parts of the academy to practice-based doctoral programmes in the creative arts one has to understand the deeply entrenched character of the social division between intellectual and manual labour in our society. Victor Burgin's typology of doctoral candidates for visual arts programmes and tripartite structure of doctoral study is, I argue, hierarchical, privileging traditional humanities scholarship over studio-based methodologies of research.*

### Keywords

visual arts practice  
research  
doctorates  
division of intellectual  
and manual labour  
abstraction

### Introduction

In a recent edition of this journal (Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 101–108), Victor Burgin shared some of his thoughts with us on the status and requirements of PhD programmes in visual arts practice. As he admits, he joins the debate about 'practice-as-research' or 'practice-based research' late in the day and after many of the major positions have already been staked out. Burgin was absent from the United Kingdom for 13 years while teaching in a US university. Significantly, the debate that has raged here over the status of practice-based research – and its suitability for PhD study – has barely touched the States.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, the distinctiveness of visual arts programmes continue to reside in the primacy of studio-practice and the core commitment to 'making work'. The terminal degree remains the MFA based primarily on student-centred, studio practice.<sup>2</sup> This remains the favoured form of advanced graduate provision in the visual arts rather than the PhD based on a research design model requiring candidates to undertake an extended body of critical writing in addition to preparing a body of exhibited art work. During his sojourn teaching in America, Burgin worked in a department of humanities rather than within an art school or media and communication department. As he suggests, this may have coloured his initially sceptical reaction to the introduction of the creative practice PhD in the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, given Burgin's stature both as a distinguished conceptual artist and as a critical theorist,

- 1 This was the route of advanced graduate study that Burgin himself followed taking an MFA in the Fine Arts Department of Yale University, rather than following a PhD programme.
- 2 The MFA seems to be losing its status as a 'terminal' qualification in this context. For example, see James, E. (2004), 'Theoretical Remarks on Combined Creative and Scholarly PhD Degrees in the Visual Arts', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 38: 4, pp. 22–31. Elkins argues: 'The PhD in visual arts is inescapable: it is on the horizon. In just a few years, there will

be a number of such programmes in the United States, and if the trend mirrors the expansion of MFAs after the mid-1960s, then in a few decades the PhD will be the consensus "terminal" degree for artists'. See also Grant, D. 'How Educated Must an Artist Be?' *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2, November 2007.

- 3 See for instance my own arguments in Bell, D. (2004), 'Practice Makes Perfect? Film and Media Studies and the Challenge of Creative Practice', *Media Culture and Society* 26: 5, pp. 734–749.
- 4 McRobbie, A. (2003), 'Everyone is Creative', in T. Bennett and E. Silva (eds.), *Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life*, London: Sociology Press.
- 5 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (UK), Education and Skills Working Group, *Education and Skills – Final Report*. 21 November, 2006.
- 6 Offe, C. (1985), *Disorganised Capitalism: Contemporary Transformation of Work and Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 7 The Polytechnic of Central London, subsequently renamed the University of Westminster in 1992.
- 8 See Burgin, V. (1982), (ed.), *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan.

his opinions have been attended to eagerly. In this short article I seek to respond to some of the issues he raises.

### Arts research and creativity

Burgin begins his article by 'demonstrating' that neither common sense nor standard dictionary definitions support the view that 'research' is something associated in the popular mind with the activity of the artist. This debunking gesture in the ordinary language tradition of philosophical analysis – sets the professorial tone of his piece. Burgin wryly observes, as others have done,<sup>3</sup> that the introduction of the word 'research' into the promotional discourses of art departments can be read as a defensive measure. Art Colleges and departments, he surmises, may be taking up their research capacities as a response to changes in higher education policy in the United Kingdom. Creative arts education finds itself vulnerable in a political economy of higher education characterised by research selectivity. As he notes, the substitution of the word 'research' for the word 'creative' in art departments' description of their staff and graduate students' studio activities may represent a discursive strategy to protect studio teaching practices and resources, rather than constituting a fundamental reorganisation of arts education.

It's probably worth noting that in the years of Burgin's absence the notion of *creativity* itself has become tarnished currency. As Angela McRobbie has shown,<sup>4</sup> the term has entered the discourse of government manpower policy planners where it been conflated with notions of entrepreneurship. The 'agenda for creativity'<sup>5</sup> – advanced by the UK government – has become closely associated with the corporate goal of promoting flexibility in labour markets and with the training imperative to prepare young people for entry into what Claus Offe<sup>6</sup> christened over twenty years ago, 'disorganised capitalism'. As McRobbie argues, policy makers have sought in the practices of casualised labour and artisanal enthusiasm that characterise the cultural industries, a model for promoting 'flexibility' across the UK economy. Universities have also been caught up in this redefinition of the notion of creativity with 'schools of creative industries' mushrooming across colleges in the United Kingdom. In the context of a creeping instrumentalism in arts and media education we can understand why the discourse of research might appear more attractive than that of 'creativity' to many art educators, in so far as it appears more resistant to corporate ideologies of education. We might also recall that Burgin in his PCL<sup>7</sup> days was a prime critic of spurious self-serving notions of creativity within film and photography studies.<sup>8</sup> He rightly argued that the mantra of creativity often obscured a refusal on the part of photography and film students to engage with critical discourses on art and society.

So far, so good: Perhaps nervous that his initial sceptical position might be seen as undermining the intellectual credentials of arts education more generally, Burgin then proceeds to briefly review the historical contribution of scholarship and systematic thought to the emergence of the modern art school. He rightly identifies the Renaissance as the key period where painting (and we might add sculpture and architecture) began to be considered as intellectual rather than manual or artisanal pursuits. Each

discipline drew upon the new sciences of mathematics and, in particular geometry, to fashion the perspectival modelling of pictorial and architectural space. As he argues, the emergence of the art academy in the seventeenth century rested on this improved status of fine art. Painting now shaped by scholarship and the intellect, and increasingly by a rationalist agenda, could be viewed as a liberal art, distinct from 'mere craft'.

Uncontentious cultural history, but invoked to identify an historical continuity between the original idea of an art academy and the contemporary concern with bringing critical studies and creative practice together within an integrated arts curriculum in what Burgin tellingly calls 'literate practice'.<sup>9</sup>

### Theorising the division between intellectual and manual labour

Perhaps a more useful critical perspective in any enquiry into the epistemic status of art practice in relation to dominant models of knowledge and research is provided by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, the Birmingham school teacher and erstwhile critical theorist associated with the 1930s Frankfurt School<sup>10</sup> who was subsequently to become a school teacher in post-war Birmingham. In his classic text *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (1970),<sup>11</sup> Sohn-Rethel sought to relate the division of intellectual and manual labour, which appears in post-Renaissance society to the development of the capitalist mode of production and to the emergence of the commodity form within this epoch. Sohn-Rethel builds his argument upon Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism,<sup>12</sup> tracing the drive to abstraction within thought and the subsequent absolute division which emerges between intellectual and manual labour within early capitalist society to the law of value. This takes hold as goods are exchanged in the market place facilitated by the emergence of a money-based economy. The formal structure of exchange rests on an abstraction of value in a market economy operating through the use of money. For Sohn-Rethel, this abstraction finds expression not only in the economic realm but also in the ideological and cultural.

Obviously, I do not have the space here to do justice to the power and intricacy of Sohn-Rethel's argument.<sup>13</sup> My point is simply that a properly critical interpretation of the intellectualisation of art practice – and the subsequent development of a specialist academy distinct from the master craftsman's atelier – requires us to locate this development within the broader social division between intellectual and manual labour within capitalist society. We are still living with this division. Indeed, it profoundly shapes the contemporary structures of education; historic divisions between liberal education and vocational training remain. These divisions colour the current debate about the character of visual arts education as they do the relationship between theory and practice within this and the role of research and intellectualisation within arts practice.

### Arts education and the binary system

Traditional universities and established departments of humanities (of the sort I currently work in) have an undisguised horror of anything that

- 9 He describes his development of the undergraduate photography curriculum at PCL as being guided by the question: 'What does an artist need to know to establish the basis of a literate informed practice?' (1982: 103).
- 10 Sohn-Rethel was never formally a member of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Change, having pursued his doctoral studies on Marxist political economy under the Austrian Marxist economist Emil Lederer. However he met and corresponded with Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin, sharing with the Institute a range of theoretical concerns arising from Marx's materialist approach to ideology and knowledge.
- 11 Rethel, A.-S. (1977), *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press.
- 12 In particular he draws on the opening section of *Capital* and on Marx's 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.
- 13 Sohn-Rethel's book has been sadly neglected within critical studies of culture and education. This original if autodidactic work merits, I would argue, closer study.

- 14 Leitch, S. 'Skills in the UK: The Long Term Challenge'. HM Treasury (December 2005).
- 15 Stafford, B. (1996), *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtues of Images*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press.
- 16 See Bell op.cit. for discussion of the report of the RAE Panel of Media and Communications.

looks remotely like training for manual labour and this is so despite the lip service currently been given to the so called 'skills agenda' that has emerged from the Leitch Report.<sup>14</sup> Traditional humanities academics working predominantly with text have a great unease about studio teaching methods and with the idea of practice as research. They are also unhappy with the assessment of staff activity on the basis of the creative excellence of art works produced rather than on peer reviewed academic publications. Some of this unease rests, as Barbara Stafford has argued,<sup>15</sup> on a resistance within the academy for the use of visual culture as a means of scholarly communication. There is unease too with the craft and professional considerations which often undergird audiovisual practice. Liberal education remains concerned with the reproduction of cultural capital and the preservation of structures of social distinction. Research selectivity plays its part in this machinery of social stratification. The masochistic enthusiasm displayed by many British academics in traditional universities for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – the UK's national system for evaluation research performance and for allocating government funds resources accordingly – has been an unedifying spectacle for those who believe that as publicly funded teachers and researchers we have a political responsibility to challenge the class-based hierarchies which continue to run like a fault line through the entire British education system. Research selectivity has encouraged the continuation of the binary character of UK higher education. Traditional universities have sought to consolidate their elite status in part by reinforcing their credentials as research achieving, liberal arts institutions. Arts education, now largely integrated into the former polytechnical institutions, has found itself caught in a difficult bind. Art departments, while often punching above their weight in terms of 'research performance', find themselves located within polytechnical institutions, which compete on very unfavourable terms with traditional universities in the research stakes. The project of practice-based research finds itself unwittingly located in a particularly precarious point on the binary fault line. The evidence from the last RAE exercise in 2001 suggests that in some units of assessment academics were reluctant to put forward practice-based research outputs believing, rightly or wrongly, that these were likely to be received less favourably than traditional written publications.<sup>16</sup>

### **Who wants to follow a PhD via creative arts practice?**

With this material context in mind, let us proceed to explore Burgin's approach to doctoral study in the visual arts. Burgin identifies three types of candidates who might embark on a PhD in a visual arts department – a list I will argue that is both unnecessarily stipulative and overly restrictive.

His first type is an individual, 'who is both an accomplished visual artist and who not only wants to write but is capable of writing a long dissertation'. In my experience such candidates are few and far between, particularly in the audiovisual field. Those who are successful film and programme-makers are usually too busy pursuing their successful careers in an increasingly competitive marketplace to envisage combining a research degree career, and earning a living in the cultural industries.

More common is the candidate who while successful in their professional field wishes to develop an academic career – either because of declining opportunities for critical and innovative programme-making in the current broadcasting and cultural environment, or because of a commitment to teaching and because the academy appears to offer autonomy from commercial pressures in the making of work. Of course, it imposes other structures of accountability under the rubric of research. Such a candidate may well have already taught on a part-time basis within higher education, or indeed hold a fractional post in a university. They often want to tackle a PhD as part of their professional development as an academic. Such candidates often wish to draw upon their professional practice and output as part of their research design. Indeed, without endorsing the current rhetoric of ‘accreditation of prior learning’, a practice-based PhD programme in the visual arts should be capable of accommodating such a student/practitioner.

Burgin’s second type of doctoral candidate is also quite rare, namely, ‘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’, Burgin suggests, ‘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’. My experience of such candidates is largely restricted to social anthropology graduates (and to lesser extent students of critical media and communication studies with limited practice experience). I have generally found that such students want to follow practice-based research programmes and to acquire the production skills to do so. They often seek to work in a specialist field like ethnographic or documentary film and photography. With such students, careful negotiation of the balance of the critical, scholarly element of their research with a programme of practice-based work is essential both at the outset of the registration and on an ongoing basis as the research progresses.

The last type of student Burgin identifies is in my experience even rarer. Indeed, it may be the product of his own intellectual preoccupations as an artist. He identifies a candidate ‘who makes works of art and who also reads enthusiastically’. Interested in ideas, she or he seeks to, ‘turn concepts encountered in reading into practical projects.’ Burgin refers to this borrowing of theory as an ‘instrumental’ one. The relationship between theory and practice envisaged here seems of an axiomatic rather than of a rhizomatic<sup>17</sup> character. Significantly, Burgin’s own practice as an artist has often been criticised for being too schematic and dependent on fashionable intellectual formulations.<sup>18</sup> The conceptual art strategy he has embraced seeks to re-evaluate the seemingly Gnostic dimension of art sometimes at the expense of the aesthetic dimension of the work produced. Surely, studio practice (and I interpret this term in its widest possible sense to include art-based fieldwork activity and artisanal film and media production) should be the crucible within which disparate intellectual, material, formal and experimental elements are brought into creative alignment and we should not seek to valorise abstract intellectuation at the expense of other creatively driven practices.

- 17 Deluze and Guattari identify the different features (‘Principles of connection and heterogeneity’) operating in the rhizome as opposed to an axiomatic system. As they argue, ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.’ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 7, 1987.
- 18 See McElreavy, T.S. (2002) ‘Paradise Lost/Paradox Found: Materializing a History of Conceptual Art’, *Art Journal*, 61: 4.

19 The term is his. It sends shivers down the back of someone my age who remembers the facile attempts to justify academic selection in the UK in the early 1960s by reference to a tripartite structure of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools, all of whom it was proposed would enjoy equal status under the terms of Butler's 1944 Education Act.

Burgin's typology is too restrictive; it seems to foreground an unacknowledged hierarchy of knowledge. Burgin identifies three different modalities of doctoral study within the visual arts: the humanities type PhD in history and theory, assessed by a full length dissertation; the practice-based PhD, involving a dissertation requirement 'half the length required for the history and theory emphasis' submitted together with a body of art work; and lastly a sort of rump 'Doctorate of Fine Arts' with a minimal written requirement and with an emphasis on achievement in studio practice. The adoption of this 'tripartite structure'<sup>19</sup> of doctoral study is, he claims, necessary to discharge the responsibility of 'the training and legitimation of those who will transmit knowledge and critical and analytical skills to the succeeding generation'.

I would argue that such a projected hierarchical organisation of doctoral study in the arts would institutionalise existing divisions between theorising and practicing, writing and making, intellectual activity and studio activity. Burgin seems to me to be reproducing the very divisions between intellectual and manual labour and the valorisation of abstract theory at the expense of reflective practice that many of us would want to question.

## Conclusion

In this short reply I have sought to identify a range of alternative PhD candidates within the visual arts including audiovisual studies:

- those with a background in the cultural industries and achievement as creative professionals who wish to advance their understanding of their professional field via an innovative mix of making work and documenting and reflecting upon their studio practice in a sustained critical engagement. This might seek to interrogate craft practices and professional conventions to arrive at a reconfigured art activity.
- those who have completed undergraduate studies involving both critical study and forms of creative media practice (the majority of students today following courses in media, film, communication and imaging studies) and who wish to proceed to a research degree where the integrated practice they were introduced to in their undergraduate studies might be developed through advanced study.
- those who have undertaken undergraduate studies in the social sciences or cultural studies but who wish to acquire the creative skills and practice methodologies (initially perhaps through a conversion masters programme) in order to develop research expertise in areas such as ethnographic and experimental film where a productive synergy between creative practice and cultural theory can be explored.
- those whose basic training is in studio arts but who wish to reframe their practice within critical discourse as a strategy for renewing it – not primarily by turning abstract ideas into art works but by developing a studio practice attentive to critical discourse as it is to mastery of technique, experiment with form and material and articulation of a cultural role for their work.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Moreover, the identification of these different types of candidate for practice-based doctoral research implies no

particular codification of how they should be assessed along the text-art production continuum. The research programme and assessment commitments of such candidates have to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis with the proviso that every candidate accepted onto a PhD by practice mode should expect to produce both a body of critical writing contextualising their work and a body of documented practice. They should also be able to demonstrate clearly to their examiners that the body of work presented is motivated by a research design within which a studio practice methodology (in the widest sense) is a major investigative context and strategy in advancing their research. The issue I believe is not one of defending an outmoded notion of academic rigour by demanding that PhD candidates produce a dissertation of a stipulated word length, nor is it one of romantic resistance that demands that practice candidates be free to present only creative work without an obligation to contextualise this in a body of writing. Rather our aim as doctoral supervisors and mentors should be to encourage a circle of reading, making, documenting, reflecting, writing up, public communication and criticism – a ‘virtuous hermeneutical circle’ of critically informed practice.

In fact, most sets of doctoral regulations within UK universities can accommodate the above requirement. No special category of professional doctorate or doctor of fine arts degree is necessary. The plurality of forms of practice-based research can be facilitated within the existing PhD award. Perhaps rather than fretting about the stipulated word length for written components of practice-based PhDs or defending the primacy of the art object as a stand alone codification of new knowledge about the arts, the pressing task is one of identifying exemplars of good practice which might lead doctoral candidates to make informed choices about their research design.

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