

UNWEAVE, volume 2 (DCP-Visual Arts Department, UCSD, July 2013)

The Contest of the Faculties: Doctoral Art Education in a Research University

No young man or woman with the ambition to become an artist in the United States needs credentials from a university graduate school to achieve the goal.

Frederick M. Logan, *The Journal of Higher Education* (November 1962)ⁱ

The past several years have witnessed a growing interest in the concept of doctoral-level education for artists in the United States. While Ph.D. programs in art practice have been well established in Europe and the UK for many years they remain a novelty here. The programs that have emerged thus far are quite varied, from the peripatetic Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA), which provides training in art theory to artists, to the Fine Arts doctoral program at Texas Tech University, which is open to students in music and theater as well as art, to programs with a specific focus on overlaps between art, design and computing (e.g., MIT's Ph.D. in Media Art). The response to these programs has been equally varied, ranging from genuine enthusiasm to outright hostility. Some commentators have expressed the fear that they represent a pernicious credential-creep in art education, and will lead inevitably to the Ph.D. becoming the new terminal degree for teaching in the field.

I think this is unlikely to occur in the United States, at least in the near term. Doctoral programs in art practice expanded in Europe and the UK in part because there was funding for them. European governments have been, until recently, willing to provide generous support (for both tuition and living expenses)

for students in Ph.D. programs, including art practice (that's one reason for the "registration" process I'll discuss below). That is simply not the case in the U.S., given the current political and economic climate. Certainly in the UC system we have been facing several years of significant budget cuts and retrenchment which have significantly diminished our ability to support graduate students even in our currently existing graduate programs.

I suspect that the anxiety produced by the prospect of an art practice Ph.D. has deeper roots. It seems to be motivated in part by the belief that excessive exposure to an academic environment, beyond the two to three years required to earn an MFA, poses an unacceptable threat to the integrity of the artist's creative vision. In these debates the two cultures of art and academe reenact the conventional discursive structures of romanticism, with art appearing as an embattled bulwark against a rationalist and instrumentalizing dominant culture (represented by institutions of higher learning). In this view the capacity to create art can't be taught, codified or regularized. Rather, it is the natural excrescence of certain preternaturally gifted individuals: a state of being fundamentally at odds with the programmatic demands of formal education.

At a more general level these criticisms reproduce similar debates that occurred in American higher education following WWII, in response to the dramatic expansion of college enrollments resulting from the G.I. Bill. As early as 1962 Frederick Logan, a professor of art and art education at the University of Wisconsin, identified the fear among artists that graduate art education was subject to a stultifying process of "bureaucratization". In an essay for *The Journal*

of Higher Education Logan notes that most artists teaching in colleges and universities during the 1950s and early '60s had Masters level training (either an M.A., M.S., or M.F.A.). As a result:

they want to stress the achievement they have made in art and the progress of their students in art, and to keep the nature and the complexity of graduate-school requirements in the background. In this endeavor, the faculties of art-studio departments have built up a pathological aversion to developing programs leading to the doctoral degree.

At the same time, as art education expanded from a handful of private art schools to a national network of colleges and universities, teaching artists found themselves under increasing pressure to “earn a doctorate,” the recognized terminal degree of American higher education. Unfortunately, the only doctoral-level programs in the arts at the time were either the Ed.D. (in art education) or Ph.D. programs in art history. While the College Art Association was pushing to develop uniform guidelines for a two year MFA, Logan reports that as of 1962 there was “no significant progress . . . in the acceptance of the Master of Fine Arts by college regents or presidents as a terminal degree for fine arts-studio teachers.” “The conclusion,” he writes, “seems obvious. University art departments will begin offering doctoral programs in the fine arts.”ⁱⁱ

Logan’s predication, of course, proved slightly premature. In fact, the 1960s and '70s witnessed the triumph of the MFA as a terminal degree and an unprecedented expansion of MFA programs in the visual arts. It is this tangled history that lends the current re-emergence of the art practice Ph.D. its particular pathos. In the initial drive to establish the MFA as a terminal degree there is an

important claim to the relevance of training as an artist outside the university (in the studio, in the gallery, in the field) as being distinct from, but equally valid as, the training provided inside the university. At the same time, this claim exhibits a certain circularity. The very concept of a “terminal degree” is relevant only to those who hope to teach art (and aspiring artists) at the university level, and who are thus already committed to some form of institutional credentialing. The wary calibration of these respective forms of validation remains key to current debates.

Much has changed since the early 1960s. In particular, the MFA went from being a teaching credential to something quite different: a kind of incubator/salon for art world talent, often with only a tangential relationship to the pedagogical training of artists. For many MFA students today teaching is a secondary concern: something to be endured in order to provide the economic support necessary to make art, and something to be abandoned as soon as gallery sales or commissions allow them to do so. This accounts for the failure of most current MFA programs to provide their students with any real training in teaching itself. Notwithstanding the ambivalent relationship some artists have to higher education, universities, colleges and art schools provide one of the single most important forms of patronage and support for artistic careers and research in the U.S. today. This support has only become more important over the past two decades, with the dramatic decline of direct public funding for contemporary art in this country. It would seem self-evident that this system of patronage has exerted a decisive influence on the nature of the artistic practice produced under its

auspices, and on the identities of the artists who benefit from it (even if this influence is, as yet, little understood).

In the remainder of this essay I'll discuss the evolution of one new doctoral program which I've been involved with at UCSD, and then raise some more general questions based on my experience with this program and as a member of doctoral art practice committees in Europe over the past several years. Our program is only in its third year and we have yet to graduate any students, so it's very much a work in progress. It's important to begin by noting that the UCSD art practice program was developed as a part of an existing Ph.D. program in Art History, Theory and Criticism. It offers, in fact, not a doctoral degree in art practice, but rather, a doctoral degree in art history with a "concentration" in art practice, which is simply one area of possible study. This is the result of both expedience and the particular ecology of our department. In developing the program within the UC system the department chose to take the less time-consuming route of attaching it to our existing Ph.D. program (the approval process for an entirely new Ph.D. program can take several years). At the same time, the integration of an art practice concentration into our existing art history Ph.D. was only possible because of the particular culture of the Visual Arts department.

We are the only Visual Arts department in the UC system (and one of few nationally) that combines both an MFA and a Ph.D. program. In other UC campuses graduate education in art history and art practice is offered in separate departments, colleges and even divisions. As a result of this structure our

department is relatively well equipped to handle exchanges among and between artists, historians and critics. Art history faculty members regularly serve on MFA committees and participate in critiques of student work, while studio artists serve on Ph.D. committees. Moreover, we have a number of faculty whose research and training cross over between art practice and history and theory (either artists who are recognized as theorists and critics, or art historians with an ongoing artistic practice). This interdisciplinary ethos extends to interactions between Visual Arts faculty and other departments and research areas on campus (our faculty collaborate regularly with colleagues in Archaeology, Urban Studies, Communication, Literature and Computer Science, among other disciplines).

Since the art practice concentration students are part of our broader art history Ph.D. they have to fulfill the same requirements as all the other Ph.D. students, as outlined in our graduate program guidelines. These include approximately three years of course work, two language exams, the passage of an oral and written qualifying exam and the completion of a dissertation. There are, however, important differences in the way art practice students approach these guidelines. In their course work they are free to take classes throughout the department, with art faculty as well as art historians. It's likely that art practice students will end up taking a larger number of their classes with artists than the students in other concentrations. In addition, their dissertation consists of a written component (shorter than a normal dissertation, and somewhat more flexible in format) along with a practice-based component (whether a film, installation, public project, performance, etc.).

This structure is more course-driven than the systems I've encountered in Ph.D. programs in Europe and the UK, which tend to focus on the student developing an extended theoretical reflection on their own past artistic practice, with relatively little formal coursework (aside from research skills courses and personal tutorials). Moreover, many European art practice students only enroll in a graduate program after submitting a detailed proposal that includes their research topic and thesis, methodology and a time-line for the completion of specific stages of the project (a process known as "registration"). Andrew McGettigan, who currently teaches at Central Saint Martins, has identified some of the limitations of this approach:

. . . the demand to render these decisions [about the precise direction and focus of research] into a plan at an early stage of study, as is common at 'registration,' may . . . militate against art students more than others and privilege conceptual practices that involve strong previsions which are then executed (closest to the hypothesis form which dominates social science research), at the expense of more intuitive approaches.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to McGettigan this approach tends to "deform practice to its own ends (as a means to marshal or generate evidence)." These two factors, the registration process and the lack of non-directive course-work (which might bring students into contact more readily with new disciplines or new areas of research with which they aren't familiar), encourage an approach to research practice in which the outcome is anticipated or projected beforehand. We might say that in this system "research" is understood as a process of scholarly collation and transcription that is intended to impose a formal intellectual coherence on an essentially distinct (and presumably informal) creative practice. While applicants

to our graduate program are asked to provide a detailed description of their past research interests, the future direction of their research once they arrive is up to them, working in collaboration with their advisors. It is assumed that they will develop new ideas and new research interests as a result of their interactions with faculty, fellow graduate students, and the larger campus environment during their three years of course work.

Notwithstanding these advantages, the art practice concentration is founded on a central elision: a differing thematic or periodic focus (Latin America, Modern, Renaissance, etc.) is equated with an entirely different form of practice (art making vs. the writing of art history). This both a weakness and a strength of our program. On the one hand the practice students are part of a diverse academic community in which the scholarly traditions of both theory and practice are well integrated. On the other hand, art practice students can feel cut off from the MFA students and the studio faculty (who are most familiar with mentoring MFAs), but not fully part of the art history area (due to the fact that the art history faculty are, by and large, not working artists). The presence of students working towards an ostensibly more “advanced” degree can also create some insecurity and defensiveness on both sides (a tendency by the practice Ph.D.s to set themselves apart and by the MFA students and faculty to perceive an implicit hierarchy in this separation). The long-term survival of our program will depend on developing strategies to mitigate these tensions, along with a research culture that is appropriate to artists and not simply imported from the sciences or conventional art history.

A second, related, problem with the definition of “research” in our department stems from our location in a university with a strong investment in the sciences and engineering. It is an environment that privileges a lab-based model in which the faculty member acts as a “Primary Investigator” or “PI” who generates large grants (National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, etc.) to support cadres of graduate students, equipment and lab facilities. In exchange the faculty member is expected to do very little classroom teaching. The university generates revenue from this system in the form of “indirect cost recovery” or ICR (retaining a percentage of grant income for administrative and other costs). This system doesn’t really translate well to the arts because of the dramatically different scale of funding involved (a large grant for an artist would be in the range of \$100-\$200,000, while a large grant for a scientist can be several million dollars). As a result the ICR generated by the arts is insignificant. Nonetheless, the pressure on artists to work in this manner (establishing labs, acting as a PI) is significant. This can lead to a two-tiered system in which those faculty who embrace the artist-as-PI model of research are able to generate funding for their own graduate students, claim additional space (always a marker of power on a university campus), and buy out their teaching, effectively isolating them from the broader community and pedagogical mission of the department. This tendency is especially marked in those areas (computing, digital media, etc.) that have some potential for private sector or industry involvement.

Given the diverse, and often competing, models of knowledge production and validation that exist in a large research university, along with the equally

complex forms of economic exchange on which the university depends, it's inevitable that artistic production and training here will encounter points of tension, conflict and resistance. There are also, however, many opportunities for productive exchange and interaction. I would suggest that these points of tension (the conflict, for example, between science-based research protocols and those found in artistic practice) can be productive. It's precisely at those points at which the normative conventions of each discipline come into contact, and challenge each other, that new insight and new analytic perspectives can emerge. This is the where the potential of doctoral-level art education in a university context is most promising. The possibility exists, in these awkward and even contentious encounters, to enrich and complicate our understanding of both artistic and scientific practice.

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ⁱ Frederick M. Logan, "Graduate Work in the Visual Arts: Professionalism and University Education," *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 33, no. 8 (November 1962), pp.429-435.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p.432.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew McGettigan, "Art Practice and the Doctoral Degree," *Afterall//Online* (Published June 5, 2011).