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Transatlantic Reflections on the Practice-Based PhD in Fine Art

Jessica B. Schwarzenbach and
Paul M. W. Hackett



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Once, the US was the only country in the world to offer a doctorate for studio artists; however, the PhD in fine art disappeared after pressures established the MFA as the terminal degree for visual artists. Subsequently, the PhD in fine art emerged in the UK and is now offered by approximately 40 universities. Today, the doctorate is offered in most English-speaking nations, much of the EU, and countries such as China and Brazil.

Using historical, political, and social frameworks, this book investigates the evolution of the fine art doctorate in the UK, what the concept of a PhD means to practicing artists from the US, and why this degree disappeared in the US when it is so vigorously embraced in the UK and other countries. Data collected through in-depth interviews examine the perspectives of professional artists in the US who teach graduate-level fine art. These interviews disclose conflicting attitudes toward this advanced degree, and reveal the possibilities and challenges of developing a potential doctorate in studio art in the US.

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To Paul

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Introduction

“ . . . the growing interest among art schools and universities (mostly abroad so far) in offering a PhD in art makes the blood run cold.”

Roberta Smith, Senior Art Critic, September 13, 2009,
the New York Times

The above quotation by Roberta Smith, a *New York Times* critic, is not uncharacteristic of the art world’s response in the United States to the concept of a PhD in fine art for visual artists. The PhD in fine art, a philosophical doctorate awarded for research in the arts, including painting, drawing, sculpture, and other studio-based disciplines, has been granted in the United Kingdom for over 30 years. This advanced degree is offered in all other English-speaking nations, in numerous member states of the European Union, i.e., Austria, Sweden, Germany, Finland, and Spain, and in various other countries around the world, all of which consider the degree to be a vigorous intellectual expansion of the artist’s work through practice-based research as well as a beneficial component of the artistic process. Although PhDs are awarded at US institutions to artists in the disciplines of music, drama, dance, design, digital media, and most recently, creative writing, negative attitudes toward the PhD in visual and studio art continue to pervade the arts community.

While conducting the research for this project, the authors encountered similar antipathetic attitudes toward the fine art PhD from the US art world. The authors, both visual artists and researchers, observed how many artists, gallery owners, and art academics in the United States commonly perceive fine art as being a subjective and emotion-based experience without rules. These members of the art community consider art ‘special,’ a form of nonverbal communication that consists primarily of intuitive knowing (a capacity to sense or know without conscious reasoning). In recognition of this interpretation of art as a universal enigma, art critic and art historian James Elkins (2006) irreverently quips, “[A]rt is such a mysterious thing—it’s so poorly understood even by those of us who study it” (p. 247). Thus, many artists argue that the making of art is based on feelings and opinion rather than facts

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and evidence, and therefore the PhD, a research degree, is not applicable to the practice of studio art. The dialectical tension between the belief that art is a product of ‘mystery’ and the association of a PhD with methodical accuracy (the very opposite of mystery) lies at the core of this book.

The PhD degree in any field is an academic award that shows the holder has successfully completed higher-level research in a particular area of study. The PhD in fine art, as any PhD degree, must include a form of systematic and rigorous inquiry, and a critical and reflexive analysis of the accumulated data, the outcomes of which must communicate an original contribution to knowledge in that field of study. If a contribution to knowledge is claimed, the research process and results must be distributed and supported amongst peers to validate that claim (Birmingham Institute of Art & Design, 1996, pp. 9–11). By academic definition, research must generate communicable knowledge (see E. Boyer, 1990).

The PhD in fine art, or what is often termed studio art in the US, is awarded in the UK (and other countries) to artists who use their art practice as the major component of their research methodology and most often includes a written dissertation (Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2009). The first author [Schwarzenbach] initially became aware of the concept of a philosophical doctorate in fine art late in 2004. At this time, she was introduced to the British PhD in practice-based research in art and design at the University of Gloucestershire, and later met the second author [Hackett], who was a graduate student in fine art at the same university.

In the fall of 2005, the first author attended the annual conference of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), a major accrediting body for art schools in the US. During this conference, the organization attempted to facilitate a discussion of studio-based research among its members. Although NASAD did not strive to be prescriptive concerning studio research, but rather expressed support for experimental approaches to content, degree level, and method, a negative response from the art professionals in the audience was witnessed. NASAD’s endeavor to open a dialogue on the subject of research and studio work took place nearly a decade ago, and its website shows the organization continues to support the possibilities of a PhD in fine art (NASAD, 2013, pp. 132–133). However, another powerful American art institution, the College Art Association (CAA), has had a more difficult time accepting the concept of a PhD in studio art. The CAA is a national organization comprised of art historians, art critics, and art professionals, and although it is not an accrediting body, the association carries great influence in the art world. The CAA has consistently maintained that the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) is the terminal degree in fine arts and equal to the PhD in other university subjects. However, since PhD programs in visual art are beginning to surface in the US and the CAA perceives its role as a guide to its members and their institutions, the CAA’s Professional Practices Committee (PPC) outlined a course of action to develop a Statement on PhD and other Doctoral Programs in the Visual Arts. A final

draft, which included reactions from its members, was prepared for review by the PPC, CAA staff, and legal counsel, and approved by the CAA Board of Directors in October 2014. In its Statement on Terminal Degree Programs in the Visual Arts and Design, the association once again “affirms that the MFA is still the terminal degree in studio art practice” and that the master’s degrees (MFA, MDES, MGRAPH, and MAD) are still “the terminal degrees for practitioners and educators in studio art and design.” However, there is an exciting, albeit slightly confusing, modification. The statement also declares that the CAA acknowledges “the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Fine Arts (DFA), Doctor of Visual Art (DVA), Doctor of Studio Art (DA) and other doctoral degrees that incorporate art and/or design practice” and “recognizes that such programs offer research-intensive study in the visual arts and design and affirms that offering such opportunities is not only within the purview of individual institutions but has the potential to add to the diversity of research in higher education (CAA, 2014).”

This is a monumental shift in the attitude of the CAA toward doctoral work in the visual arts, even though the association still maintains clearly that the MFA is the terminal degree in studio art practice. There appears to be an underlying resistance in the US to consider studio artists as scholars. This is curious, as the first PhD in fine art was actually developed and awarded in the United States at Ohio State University in 1929. The PhD itself is an academic award first introduced in Germany to extend doctoral achievement to include the humanities. At that time, subjects exploring aspects of human culture were often placed under the broader category of philosophy. This new doctorate was to confer equivalent academic status to these disciplines alongside the already established fields of medicine, theology, and law (Rüegg, 2004). We will consider these historical antecedents to our research in greater depth in later chapters. At this point, it is useful to examine the educational processes associated with art and PhD education, and what constitutes research within both of these.

While visual art in Western culture has been recognized as a form of knowing since the time of the European Renaissance, the inclusion of studio practice in the university setting has occurred relatively recently. Until the European Renaissance, visual artists were predominantly considered tradesmen who created within a master/apprentice system that emerged out of the tradition of the medieval guilds. Independent art academies, such as the Florentine *Accademia del Disegno* were established during the 16th century, and the education of artists has most often continued to take place in settings separate from the university environment. However, by the first half of the 20th century in the US (and later in the UK), art schools began to establish themselves as higher education institutions and became employers of large numbers of artists. Although they offer a viable alternative to other forms of patronage, these institutions of higher learning impose the constraints of academic culture with their own standards of rigor and research upon the studio practitioner.

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As preliminary research for this study, the authors have investigated the history of the British PhD in practice-based research in art and design, and what was once termed the PhD in Studio Art in the US. This degree comes with many titles, depending upon the country, the year, or the institution in which this philosophical doctorate for practicing artists is awarded. Therefore in this monograph this PhD degree may have a myriad of designations, such as PhD in Creative Practice, the Practice-Based PhD in Fine Art, PhD in Practice-Based Research in Art and Design, the Art PhD, PhD in Visual Art, PhD in Fine Art, PhD in Studio Art, and other PhD in practice-based research in art and design variations of these titles. The first author has interviewed numerous UK artists who were undertaking PhDs in sculpture, drawing, painting, etc. and found that often the most difficult aspects of understanding the value of a PhD is how an artist and his or her colleagues understand the concept of 'knowledge' and in what manner the notion of 'research' can be applied to the making of art.

In the UK, even though the PhD in practice-based research in art and design has been in existence for over 30 years, doctoral students still discover that there is no single paradigm of inquiry in the fine arts. The possible confusion that students and others feel towards what constitutes the fine art PhD is exacerbated by the use of multiple research methodologies with the understanding that ontologies range from positivist to interpretivist positions (Gray & Malins, 2004). How people perceive 'reality' affects their epistemology (their relationship to knowledge) and how they go about attaining that knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Moses & Knutsen, 2007). The term ontology is used here to refer to the explicit or implicit beliefs people hold about the nature of reality. Whether people believe in one 'true' reality or accept multiple versions of reality influences how they comprehend research. Along with innovators from other disciplines, contemporary European visual artists are challenging the established research conventions and the assumptions of what constitutes knowledge.

However, the European art community is not united behind a common vision of what comprises artistic research. There is discourse concerning pluralist approaches to what 'knowing' can be (Jones, 2006; Slager, 2004), yet many artists still argue that art practice either lies outside the realm of traditional knowledge concepts (McAllister, 2004; Morgan, 2001), or conversely, that the lack of an identifiable artistic research strategy undermines the validity of the fine art PhD (Kaila, 2004; Schwab, 2006). Artists who hold that art is 'special', or 'different' from all other subjects often support art as having a tradition of research, yet can be adverse to locating fine art within the context of a university research environment (Slager, 2004; van Odiijk, 2004).

Regardless of the heated discussion over the credibility of the PhD in fine art, the degree continues to be offered at over 40 universities in the UK (Macleod & Holdridge, 2004). The PhD in fine art requires the artist

to write an approximately 40,000 word theoretical component (the word counts vary, as the length of the dissertation is dependent upon the amount of art practice included). The written text supports and communicates new knowledge and understanding developed through the student's own artwork. The PhD in fine art is under consideration in most other European Union countries due to the influence of the Bologna Process (2014) and its effects on the standardization of higher education. It has been claimed that a PhD in fine art has even been initiated at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing (Jones, 2006, p. 232); however, this assertion indicates one of the difficulties that we encountered when attempting to verify the content of professed fine art PhDs. We were unable to confirm a practice-based fine art PhD either on the school's website or through written communication with the administration. However, the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou appears to offer a three-year PhD in fine arts, i.e., painting, sculpture, printmaking, etc. (China Academy of Art, 2014). Another PhD program in fine arts has been attributed to the University of São Paulo, Brazil (Elkins, 2009; University of São Paulo, 2014).

The debate among art academics in these countries reflects a similar discussion to that which surrounds the quantitative and qualitative methodologies of the wider disciplinary communities and may be perceived as arising from the epistemological tensions between scientific and sociological world-views. Artists create fine art within conceptual systems. Artists, like other people, 'think' by using these conceptualizations (for a more sophisticated analysis of conceptual systems in relation to art, see Siegel, 2010). Artists employ verbal language as well as visual communications to express ideas in these conceptual systems, both overtly and covertly, as how we conceive of reality (ontological positions) influences what questions we ask and how we value concepts of knowledge (see Harold I. Brown (2007), who has written widely upon concepts and conceptual systems).

The authors propose that art research has empirical aspects and may sometimes include a type of scientific method, as well as a neurological component (Hackett, 2013, Starr, 2013). Yet, because art making is predominantly a socially constructed activity (Becker, 1982), PhD in fine art research comprises a continuum of research methodologies. We suggest that this range of ontologies causes not only confusion among artists and academics as to the types of research relevant to the fine arts, but also fuels a resistance to the concept of the PhD in fine art itself.

As stated above, the first author has carried out previous interviews with numerous artists in the UK who were in the process of attaining or who had already completed PhDs in fine art. These artists, for the most part, shared with her how the PhD experience enhanced a deeper understanding of themselves and their studio practices. Although this PhD in fine art is rapidly gaining popularity around the globe, the degree continues to be viewed with opposition in the US. This study explores how the MFA faculty who teach at influential art schools in the US derive meaning from their roles

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as makers in the greater art world and as teachers within the art institution. Through the interpretation of narratives collected through interviews and observations, we have been able to gain a more comprehensive and informed understanding of how American art academics present their relationship with the possibility of a higher degree in the studio arts. This study does not anticipate effecting a change of perception or behavior within the American art community; however, the conversational interviews create an exchange of ideas that may potentially lead toward a greater and more thoughtful discourse about the relationship of art making with research and knowledge construction. In the chapters that follow, we will start by considering in greater depth the notion of using fine art as a form of research within a PhD structure.

The attitudes of artists and other art professionals will be presented, as will the role of ontologies in shaping our thought processes. Following on from this, in chapter two, a historical, political, and social context will be investigated so as to reveal the interplay between these contexts and the existence, or otherwise, of the fine art PhD. Historical considerations will include higher education factors within both the UK and US during the middle of the last century. In the third chapter, we will present the methodologies we used and the data that was garnered during this research, and this will be followed in chapter four by the results of our interviews with six MFA faculty from top-ranked American art schools who discuss their views on teaching, the art world, and the notion of a higher degree in studio art. In chapter five, we analyze these results and discuss how the findings illuminate our understanding of the PhD in fine art in relation to the identities of artists and the role of art teaching. The type of knowledge implicit within art and the fine art PhD are discussed, as is the role and type of qualification within fine art. In the final chapter, we draw conclusions and suggest extensions and limitations to the research.

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1 The Notion of Fine Art as Research

A PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT

Although the significant number of UK PhD programs in fine art mentioned above seem to attest to the acceptance of the PhD in art, artists and academics from the UK as well as from the wider global art community still indicate discomfort as to the appropriateness of awarding the highest-level academic research degree to an artist¹. In 2005, European artists, designers, and teachers of higher art and design education attended *Sensuous Knowledge II*, a conference sponsored by the Bergen National Academy of the Arts, Norway. Mo Throp, installation artist and, more recently, Professor of Fine Art at the University of the Arts London at Camberwell, wrote in her summary as chair of Discussion Group B that the members of her group at the conference “seemed to be intrigued by the fact that there still is no common ideas, values or terminology that can be agreed upon when it comes to what artistic research might be” (Throp, 2005). Echoing these thoughts is a quote from P. Rosenbloom, a painter and former course leader of the Master’s in Fine Arts Program at the University of Gloucestershire, in which he wrote, “I think if you could define what research in the arts consists of, you’d be up for . . . the Nobel Prize! I’ve been to several conferences and no-one seems to be able to agree” (P. Rosenbloom, personal communication, January 30, 2008).

These doubts are not only relative to the current British PhD, but they were also apparent during the 36-year existence of the American PhD in studio art. Chuck Csuri (personal communication, September 26, 2006), an internationally known digital artist and Ohio State University faculty member, believes the unresolved question, which terminated the American PhD in fine art during the 1960s, was the fact that no one could define what constitutes research in fine art.

The above references regarding art as research indicate that some artists and art academics believe that research methods can be isolated from research questions. However, the guidelines established for the PhD in practice-based research in art and design by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council have long held that questions drive methodological

decisions. We contend that what in fact fuels the debate about what constitutes ‘knowing’ in art making is a clash of the historic attitudes that are deeply ingrained within the art community itself. It is this division, rather than any sense of the appropriateness of the methodology to the questions asked, that undermines the validity of the PhD in fine art in the minds of so many artists.

ATTITUDES WITHIN THE ART COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTE TO THE MISTRUST OF THE PHD AND THE NOTION OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Although artists understand that the fine arts have a visual language of their own, there are two prevailing beliefs that create tension over the notion of research in the art community. The first is that art making is a type of empirical research from which knowledge is gained about the world. Art is thus perceived as being aligned with science and the notion of objective reality with which science is associated. The second belief is that art is subjective, emotive, not rule-bound, but ‘special,’ a form of nonverbal communication and intuitive knowing. The making of art, therefore, is based on feelings and opinion, rather than on facts and evidence, and thus is outside of the realm of research altogether, for multiple versions of reality are acceptable. However, this second notion, while denying empirical verification, often includes an affinity for the philosophical position that considers that truths are established by subjecting propositions to interrogation through reasoning. Thus, while denying the scientific approach, this second position may incorporate a version of logical argument that seems to contradict a position based merely upon intuition and emotion, yet is inclusive of expressive practice.

We will briefly trace these two seemingly opposing convictions from a historical perspective, and then attempt to tie them into their fundamental ontological and epistemological underpinnings.

Art and Science

During the 15th and 16th centuries, influxes of scholars, astronomers, artists, philosophers, scientists, and theologians, etc., streamed into Western Europe, and are thought to have been the stimuli for what we now call the European Renaissance. These émigrés reintroduced Classical education to Europeans through the Ancient Greek and Roman texts they brought with them, resulting in a renewed interest in the study of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music, and harmonics.

Geometry began in Egypt as a method to restore property boundaries after the yearly flooding of the Nile. In Greek, “geometry” means, “the measuring of the earth.” Thus, the conception of drawing squares over the silted valley floor became the basis for the study of natural order and the