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Some Thoughts on the Dissemination of the Practice-Led PhD Around the World

The studio-art PhD is proliferating, but there is still no organization involved in comparing programs, and no initiative to compare national and regional accreditation, benchmarking, assessment, or curriculum. In the book I've edited, *Artists with PhDs* (much-expanded second edition out in June 2014), I tried to characterise some local, national, and regional "flavours" of the degree in different parts of the world. It seems to me that in ten or twenty years' time these "flavours" will intensify, and the degree will become more diverse and interesting. Meanwhile it is entirely possible, from a student's point of view, to choose the programme that makes best sense for you.

In the past few years I have been traveling widely, collecting information on studio-art PhDs around the world; in 2012-13 I visited programs in China, Japan, Singapore (where they are planning a PhD), South Africa, Ghana, Portugal, and Uganda. No one, I think, has visited more than a fraction of the total number of institutions. As a result, there is no way to be sure how to know if the PhD is a coherent phenomenon worldwide. Here I want to risk some generalization and simplification, and propose there are different cultures of the PhD around the world. I'd also like to suggest that these sometimes subtle and elusive differences are important, and that as all conversations become more global we need to be careful not to inadvertently homogenize different practices.

Let me suggest, in the most provisional manner, six cultures of the PhD.

1. The Continental model is found in Continental Europe, especially Scandinavia, along with some institutions in the UK, in Central and South America, and in southeast Asia. Northwestern Europe, if I can use such an expression, is where most of the publishing about the PhD is taking place. It is also the center of a certain sense of research. In literature like Henk Slager's *The Pleasure of Research*, the concept of research is aligned with a poststructural critique of institutions; research is partly a matter of mobile, oppositional spaces, and of intellectual freedom. Research is less the institutionalized, science-based practice of hypothesis, deduction, experiment, and falsification, and more the name for a set of strategies for reconceptualizing art in relation to existing academic structures. This sense of research is becoming more widespread mainly because of the influence of publications from northwest Europe. (Exceptions include design academies and art universities, because design has its own tradition of PhDs, and its own more quantitative sense of research based on the social sciences.)

2. The Nordic model emphasizes what Henk Borgdorff calls a "sui generis perspective": it stresses "artistic values when it comes to assessing research in the arts." Programs in Norway and Sweden follow this model, which is based on the idea that what counts as "research" in the arts should proceed according to properties of visual art; in that sense it engages Christopher Frayling's original "research for art," which he described as not about "communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication."

3. The UK model is practiced in the UK, Australia, South Africa (Michaelis, in Cape Town), Uganda, Canada, and other Anglophone centers including Malaysia and Singapore. What might be called the "UK model" is widespread in countries that have English as their first language, and whose universities are influenced by the UK model. There are many overlaps with the first entry on this list, but there are also significant differences. The UK was one of two places in the world that developed the studio-art PhD in the 1970s, and the influence of UK administrative structures on assessment and outcomes is still visible in many institutions. Among other characteristics, the UK model involves sizable bureaucratic and administrative oversight, including sometimes elaborate structures for assessment, specification and quantification of learning outcomes. It remains closer to the scientific model of research than what I am calling the Continental model. Because of Herbert Read and Christopher Frayling, the UK is also the origin of the discussions about how research might be conducted "in," "for," "as," and "through" art. (These terms are all discussed in the book *What Do Artists Know?*, co-edited with Frances Whitehead.)

A note on these first three models: I owe the idea of splitting the "Nordic model" from the "Continental model" to Henk Borgdorff, whose essay "A Brief Survey of the Current Debates on the Concepts and the Practices of Research in the Arts" draws these distinctions slightly

differently. He associates what I am calling the “Continental model” with Vienna. This third model, the “UK model,” he calls “the academic model”; his description, “puts value on traditional academic criteria when it comes to differentiating art practice as research from art practice in itself,” fits the UK administrative growth very well. But these are early days: it’s not easy to see how the schools and styles of the PhD will separate.

4. The Japanese model. One of the main surprises of this research, for me, was “discovering,” in 2010, that Japan has twenty-six universities that grant the PhD. Japan, along with the UK, were the first countries to develop the PhD in the 1970s. In terms of the length of their tradition and their independence (if not in terms of international influence or number of students), Japan and the UK are the co-founders of the studio-art PhD. Most Japanese institutions take their cues from Tokyo Geidai, the principal institution; but there is so far no history of the Japanese institutions. The Japanese model has been developed in isolation, and its dissertations are still largely studies of natural, technological, scientific, and artistic precedents that are then applied to the students’ practices. In that sense the Japanese system is not yet participating in the debates about research “in,” “for,” “as,” and “through” art.

5. The Chinese model. China has a much smaller, more recent tradition of PhDs. As of January 2014 there are only three PhD-granting programs in China, in CAFA (Central Academy of Art); Beijing CAA (China Academy of Arts), Hangzhou; and THU (Tsinghua University), Beijing. Part of the reason that the PhD is not expanding is administrative: the degree is given under an administrative research heading, which does not exist in other academies such as Chongqing and Nanjing. It will require a change at the level of the Department of Education to make it possible for other academies to offer the degree.

The question at the moment is where China will get the models for its studio-art PhD offerings. In the last few years I have been working on a complete list of art history, theory, and criticism books translated into Chinese; the overwhelming majority of titles translated since the 1990s are from North America; the majority translated before the 1990s are UK titles. As of this writing, none of the books or principal essays on the PhD have been translated into Chinese, and as far as I know there have been very few exchanges with institutions in other countries that offer the PhD. China’s PhD programs have largely been developed without exchange with other countries. Because the degree in China began in a university (Tsinghua), it was not based on other studio-art programs but on the concept of the PhD in the university in general. In spring 2013 delegations from CAFA and CAA toured North America and Europe, gathering information; in the next few years Chinese institutions will probably choose the contacts they prefer.

6. The lack of a North American model. I call this last entry a lack, rather than a model, because there is no consensus in North America about how the PhD should look. Of the North American programs, several have distinct flavors. IDSSVA has no rivals for what it does; it has a fixed curriculum of theoretical and philosophic texts that are intended to inform any artist’s practice. Because the Director, George Smith, has a background in literary criticism, the IDSSVA has had

a roster of prominent guest lecturers outside of the visual art world. Santa Cruz has a strong program in North American-style visual studies, which also involves gender theory, postcolonial studies, and anthropology. Rensselaer Polytechnic is one of the United States's leading technical universities (alongside Georgia Tech), and the nearby State University of New York at Albany houses one of the world's largest nanotechnology laboratories; so students at Rensselaer have a unique combination of political theory, activism, and science. The University of California San Diego is the home of Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, who have been actively engaged in developing a new, environmentally focused PhD. (As of this writing, the program hasn't been implemented.) In my experience, because of the unique cultural configuration in Canada, there is little communication between the Francophone and Anglophone institutions, to the point where several times my Canadian correspondents have been surprised to discover the existence of other institutions that grant, or are contemplating, the PhD.

I mention all this to suggest that North America is the least formed of the PhD "cultures" around the world. That is also my source of interest in this subject: I am skeptical of a number of the concepts and administrative structures in existing institutions, so I think North America has an opportunity to rethink the fundamental conditions of the PhD. In some other parts of the world, particular understandings of "research," "knowledge," and other terms have become naturalized, and therefore not as accessible to foundational critique.

One effect of the large literature and the proliferation of PhD-granting institutions is that many institutions are proposing changes that are already implemented in other places. Another consequence is that younger traditions, like China's, are susceptible to influence by the more developed traditions, which can then come to appear as international norms. It can be very tempting, for example, to ask whether a dissertation at Tokyo Geidai might be made more reflective by engaging with Christopher Frayling's idea of "research through art"; but that would risk overwriting the less theorized Japanese sense of what a dissertation might do for a student's work.

An interesting emblem of the conceptual problems in the worldwide dissemination of the PhD is posed by Africa. As of this writing, January 2014, there are six institutions in Africa that grant the PhD. I have visited three of them: Michaelis School of Art in Cape Town, South Africa; the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), in Kumasi, Ghana; and the Makerere University, in Kampala, Uganda. Each one differs from the others, and all differ from EU and North American practices. Michaelis School of Art is the closest to European practices, and has the most contacts. A sample of a recent PhD from Michaelis is given in Chapter 18. But Michaelis has not yet engaged the debates begun by Charles Harrison regarding research "into," "for," "through," and "as" art (see for example Chapter 13) and so it is not involved with the concerns of writers like Slager, Dronsfield, Biggs, and others (see for instance Chapters 8, 11, 17). There are many points of overlap, but in my estimation Michaelis has chosen not to be

part of the conversation that problematizes “research.” KNUST in Ghana is quite isolated and impoverished by comparison, although several of its faculty exhibit in Europe and elsewhere. In my visit there was little talk of the international conversation on the PhD, and more on the dissemination of art theory—a concern that is common in many institutions other than the PhD. Makerere University in Uganda has a larger, robust program; when I visited I met with most of the current PhD students, who showed a very wide range of concerns. One was studying forms of clay that could be used in water filtration projects; several others were looking at forms of central and eastern African avant-gardes. But there was a surprisingly wide range of awareness of art theory, from what would be in North America a beginning BFA-level awareness to work on a par with many PhD programs. No one I talked to was conversant with the literature I listed at the beginning of the Introduction to this book.

I do not at all mean to say that these programs are somehow deficient, or that they might “catch up” by engaging the literature. That would be at once unreflective, condescending, and too easy. The challenge here is equal for those observing such programs, and those studying in them: it is necessary to appreciate the local cultures of the PhD that are developing in such places.

I hope that as the PhD expands, organizations that are involved in graduate-level (third-level) art education, such as the CAA (College Art Association), the Mellon Foundation, and SHARE (Step-Change for Higher Arts Research and Education), can make the field more interesting by highlighting differences and allowing regional and national practices to find or develop their autonomy. The alternate, which I hope doesn’t happen, would be the spread of one of the predominant models of the PhD: a way to guard against that is to increase the awareness that certain understandings of words like “research,” “assessment,” and “knowledge” are not unproblematic or universal, but bound to particular cultural and historical settings.

What I am hoping for here is not a worldwide conversation on the PhD in which there is a shared vocabulary and bibliography. I’m hoping for an environment that is capacious and thoughtful enough so that each community, each “flavor,” can understand and appreciate the others. In the fields of art history and art theory, there is an increasing danger that the next generation will bring homogenization. The methods, bibliography, concepts, and narratives of art history are all becoming standardized. The art historians who are interested in “global art history” or “worldwide art history”—and I am one—tend to originate from western Europe and North America, and when they travel they tend to bring with them their own interest in the theorists *du jour*, the latest scholarship, the most intriguing new results, and the latest ways of writing, and the result is that marginal and peripheral art historical communities are increasingly oriented to western Europe and North America, and increasingly interested in learning and “catching up.” It is the responsibility of the scholars who travel from the centers of art history to resist their own proclivity to correct, augment, suggest, and inform; and it is the responsibility of the scholars who are only now encountering western European and North American models to nourish and articulate their own interests. “Worldwide art history” or “global art history” a large subject in art

history and art theory; there is not yet an equivalent literature for visual art education. My own interest, in relation to art history and theory, is resisting the impending homogenization. (I am working on a book on this subject, which is currently partly posted online; it's called *North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives*.) I hope that the studio-art PhD will also engage these issues as it spreads, and not simply grow passively into a coherent or standardized set of practices.

In the absence of an effective international organization that might observe and communicate with the plurality of PhD-granting institutions, I have suggested that it's possible to consider different "flavors" of degree. It's also entirely possible that the growing worldwide interest in the PhD will work to homogenise these "flavours," producing a more uniform set of practices, requirements, goals, and assessments worldwide. I hope not.

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