

That Obscure Object of Desire

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The title of my essay, borrowed from a film by Luis Buñuel¹, seems to me to be an apt description of my profound interest in the doctoral studies of artists and in artistic research, and also of the preconceptions many people seem to have about artistic research. In this essay, I discuss artistic research conducted at the Department of Postgraduate Studies in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in 1997–2008, which I have participated in both as a doctoral student (1997–2002) and as Professor of Artistic Research and Head of the Department (2004–). I also discuss artistic research more generally, especially the status of the work of art as part of doctoral research projects.

The Beginning (1997–1999)

When I began my studies in the Department of Postgraduate Studies in 1997 among the first batch of doctoral students, everything seemed to be simultaneously fascinating and confusing. We were a small group in a new situation: Satu Kiljunen as director of the programme,² Tuomas Nevanlinna and Juha-Pekka Hotinen as senior contracted lecturers of theory, the Advisory Board for Doctoral Studies as the coordinating background group,³ and six students.⁴

Postgraduate studies were already at the time organised into monthly seminars usually lasting three days. Our work resembled, and still does, the post-doctoral schools funded by the Academy of Finland. The mood in the group was good, but not overly convivial; we hardly saw each other outside the school. In work seminars in particular, we had at times quite heated discussions about the students' new works and their relationship to artistic research. Our department seemed to provide a place for a critical open-mindedness that one hardly saw anywhere else in the world of art.⁵

The starting points of our education were radical, perhaps even Utopian; we had no practical experience of where it would lead, except to a formal degree and title. Subsequent events have shown, however, that had the Academy stopped to consider and wait instead of charging ahead with speed and taking risks, doctoral training in the Academy would not today be an internationally recognised institution and trailblazer for art universities setting up doctoral programmes of their own.⁶

For us early students, however, the situation was quite demanding: there was hardly any instruction in academic writing, for we were assumed to have adequate skills, learned at some earlier stage, for producing theory within artistic research.⁷ Nor was there any systematic instruction in scientific research methodology, as individual methods for the production of new knowledge were assumed to emerge automatically in the production of artwork within

the research projects.

When I travel abroad, people often ask me how doctoral training in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts was established; how was it possible, within a university framework, to set up a unit where creative work and art are the most important aspect of research? The absolutely crucial thing in the planning of the doctoral programme in the Academy of Fine Arts was the independent status of the school.⁸ This autonomy allowed us to take the visual way artists explore the world as the starting point for the development of our curriculum and the standards of our demonstrations of knowledge and skills. The artist Satu Kiljunen was invited to design the doctoral curriculum, assisted by the philosopher Tuomas Nevanlinna and theatre researcher and director Juha-Pekka Hotinen.

Subsequent Experiences of Artistic Research (2000–)

Upon entering the new millennium, the Department of Postgraduate studies changed a great deal. New students began to be admitted annually into the programme, and our group was joined by artists from an ever-increasing range of artistic disciplines. Already the first group of postgraduate students was cross-disciplinary: painters, a sculptor, a moving image artist and a photographer. Now the group was complemented by a community artist and a sound artist, as well as by an artist working in the intermediate ground between visual art and architecture.⁹

The decision to place postgraduate studies in a (cross-disciplinary) department of its own instead of being spread out between other programmes focusing on different genres, has proved to be useful. For example, I personally found it rewarding and a radicalising experience to participate in seminars that dealt with artistic approaches and traditions that were foreign to my own practice.

On the other hand, the ever-increasing cross-disciplinarity means that it is becoming more and more difficult each year to plan the curriculum. The principle, which has always been the aim of general studies, namely that seminars should include both specific information serving the needs of individual students, as well as more general information that involves the entire field of visual art, has been increasingly difficult to follow.

The question of cross-disciplinarity has been important and challenging also in the selection of new students to the programme. People applying to the postgraduate programme have typically been artists working with moving images, painters, and artists working with several media. It has been a difficult task for the admission evaluation team to find the best possible group of artists who would also represent the broadest spectrum of artistic approaches.

The first Doctor of Fine Arts graduated in 2001. Jyrki Siukonen's demonstration of knowledge and skills, consisting of three exhibitions and the publication *Uplifted Spirits Earthbound Machines*, explored the relationship between painting and flying, and seemed very ambitious and challenging to us other postgraduate students.¹⁰ The sights were set high at the outset. The public examination of the research was also demanding for all participants: the auditorium was filled to capacity, the examiners were an artist and a theorist of science, and the languages used were Finnish and English.¹¹

Siukonen's publication contains an amazing amount of historical information about the relationship of artists and art practice to airplanes and flying. As a writer, Siukonen has distanced his own role in the traditional way of scientific writing, although he at times takes even rather great liberties with the conventions of academic writing.¹² In the book, Siukonen does not discuss his own works at all, analysing them only in the executive summary of the research. Many people were perplexed by the separation of the demonstration of knowledge and skills into two methodically different parts (works – theory) instead of consisting of an intermingling of verbal and visual elements. In other words, Siukonen's work, just like so many university theses in visual arts, contains a split.

Is it possible to avoid such a split, even in principle? Should it be avoided at all? Can a mode of operation based on the split, with the artist making works of art and producing separate reflective material, be a meaningful and productive way of doing artistic research?

The original aim of postgraduate education and the demonstration of knowledge and skills was to merge theory and art. This idea proved to be so hopelessly Utopian, however, that when I was elected Professor of Artistic Research in 2004, I suggested that the demonstration be split into two separate components, a theoretical part and a production part. My purpose behind such a division was not to have doctoral students split themselves into two different researchers, with one making art and a separate "other" who would write "objective" theory. It was a formal solution: verbalisations of the artistic production and/or research topic were henceforth called the theoretical part, and the larger component, the creative productions, was called the production part.

Although the theoretical and production parts are today defined as separate entities, even as regards the credits earned from them, they nevertheless remain productions of the same person, and therefore have a mutually intensive influence. Preventing the split, merging the theory and the works into one whole, would call for the creation of a set of standards for artistic research that would favour artists who make only textual works (in practice, texts). This would be absurd for Finnish art.¹³

The doctoral demonstration of knowledge and skills at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts remains, in spite of its dual nature, a research entity that cannot be considered solely on the basis of either the productions or the theory that it comprises. The works themselves are a form of research (instead of being just its starting point or theme or topic), but they can be that solely and exclusively in a demonstration of knowledge and skills that contains a theoretical element. Theory, on the other hand, is a research medium for the works of art, and it does not have the status of artistic research without the works that go with it.

Latest Changes

The Department of Postgraduate Studies has grown rapidly in the last few years. There are currently 26 doctoral research students in the department, and three professors (two of them part-time). The department has also a post-doctoral researcher who enjoys funding from the Academy of Finland, a part-time theory teacher, an assistant and a planner.¹⁴ The greatest changes in recent years have involved the continuous improvement of writing instruction, increasing international cooperation in artistic research, and the founding of a Preliminary Evaluation Board that operates independently of the department.

The teaching staff became international in one fell swoop in 2007 when two new professors in artistic research were appointed to the department: Jan Svenungsson, a Swedish artist based in Berlin, and Ray Langenbach, an American artist living for the most part in Malaysia. Svenungsson, an interesting artist working with multiple media, is an experienced teacher and an expert in writing and texts produced by artists. He has specialised in instructing postgraduate students in writing skills, and at the end of last year he published a book that analysed texts by artists, *An Artist's Text Book*.¹⁵ Ray Langenbach is a PhD as well as a versatile artist-teacher. His greatest contribution to the department has been his lectures on international contemporary art, and the supervision of several doctoral students' research projects. Langenbach is also a specialist in art theories of the past few decades, such as post-colonialism.

The department's international character has also been strengthened by the admission of foreign students. There are currently three foreign artists studying in the department, from Malaysia, Japan and Canada.

Cooperation between the Department of Postgraduate Studies and other European postgraduate programmes has increased rapidly in recent years. When in the end of the 1990s and early 2000s it seemed quite natural to meet professors and doctoral students from abroad maybe once or twice a year, it is today a given and even a necessity that teachers and students in the department take part on an almost monthly basis in some international seminar or conference held somewhere in Europe.

Internationalisation is not an end in itself, however, and excessive focusing on what others do may prove to be a waste of resources and time. As countless programmes of artistic research are being established in Europe in the coming few years, the number of seminars dedicated to research will grow exponentially. Far too many of such meetings focus on the theoretical legitimisation of artistic research, however, using now this and now that theory to convince oneself, colleagues, artists, the university, the science community, and perhaps even the public, that art too can be research. It is seldom that one sees performances or works by research artists in these events.

The most rewarding international cooperation for the Department of Postgraduate Studies and indeed the entire Academy has come about through sustained networking. The European Artistic Research Network (EARN), established in Helsinki in 2005 by six institutes of higher education in the arts, offers an opportunity to meet regularly once a year for benchmarking meetings.¹⁶ The problem of EARN is, however, that some of its members have had doctoral programmes in place for a long time, while others have only recently set up their own.

The joint seminars of doctoral research students from the Department of Postgraduate Studies at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at Göteborg University, and the Centre for Practice-Led Research in the Arts programme of the School of Fine Art at Leeds University in 2007–2008 proved to be thoroughly rewarding. The general topics of discussion have included actual artistic research projects, complete with works and theories, and overly abstract aspects have been avoided, such as general conditions under which art and science might co-exist in a university context.

The Preliminary Examination Board established in 2007 has been a success in terms of quality management of research conducted in the Postgraduate Department. The need to

change the existing pre-examination practice was obvious: the preliminary examination of research projects was carried out by a board that served in an advisory capacity under the department head, yet the permission for final examination was issued by the same head of department.

The current board, comprising six members, artists and theorists, operates as an independent unit. It can have at most one official from the Academy.¹⁷ The board elects from among its members two pre-examiners for each demonstration of knowledge and skill, but the final decision regarding the acceptance or rejection is made collectively after studying the demonstration and the pre-examiners' reports.

The Future (2008–)

The future of artistic research at the Department of Postgraduate Studies at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts seems good in terms of its content. There are 26 interesting research projects currently in progress. Problems for the department may arise, just like everywhere in the public sector today, from the lack of funding.

Doctoral research students in the arts are in a difficult position as regards funding. Among those bodies that finance scientific research they are considered researching artists and do not necessarily get the funding they need, whereas organisations dispensing grants to artists wonder how to view artists engaged in artistic research, when the established practice is to finance traditional art projects.

Doctoral students in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts are expected to complete their degree in four years. Owing to the lack of financing mechanisms, this has proved to be an insurmountable task for nearly every student in our department.

They have sought to secure funding in many ways. Many have applied for and been awarded traditional artist's grants; they are not intended for artistic research, however, but for traditional artistic practice, which is expected to be active and visible. That has been the situation for most of our students, but often in such measure that their studies have been delayed considerably. A few of our students have succeeded in getting specialised grants for artistic research from private foundations, but there are few such grants available compared with the number of applicants. Then there are students whose only option to secure a living is to take a full-time job, such as an art teacher. This has always led to a dramatic postponement of completion.

The question of the success and future development of visual art and also of other artistic disciplines (such as theatre, music) and of doctoral studies and degrees is therefore very much a political one. Is Finnish society prepared to invest in small academic units that do not make an economic profit, but paint a picture of the human condition in this day and age?

¹ *That Obscure Object of Desire* ("Cet obscur objet du désir"), an intense drama directed by Luis Buñuel in 1977, is titillatingly reminiscent of the relationship between the university world and artistic research. Fernando Rey plays a wealthy, idle gentleman, who falls madly in love with his maid Conchita (Carole Bouquet, Angela Molina). Conchita is alternately friendly and seductive, she tantalises him with promises, but always turns him down at the crucial moment. When the situation becomes too difficult, Conchita disappears. Obsessed, he goes

to look for her and finds her in a surprising place. The stubbornness of both characters, his passion and her apparent indifference lead to absurd situations, yet the bond between them can no longer be broken.

² Satu Kiljunen initially worked as the coordinator of doctoral studies. In 1998, she was elected Head of the newly founded Department of Postgraduate Studies, and in 2000 as Professor of Artistic Research.

³ The advisory board consisted of experienced artists and art theorists, including Carolus Enckell, Altti Kuusamo, Marja Sakari, Riikka Stewen and Henry Wuorela-Stenberg. The task of the group was to monitor and evaluate the development of doctoral studies. Members of the board participated actively in postgraduate seminars especially in the first few years of the doctoral programme.

⁴ Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Jan Kaila, Teemu Mäki, Tarja Pitkänen, Jyrki Siukonen and Jan Kenneth Weckman.

⁵ *Artists often claim that art discourse in Finland is trite. There are several reasons for this, but two things emerge repeatedly in discussion: the hegemony of the Helsingin Sanomat daily newspaper in art criticism, and the art world of a small country that breeds favouritism, where everyone knows everyone else and no one dares to say anything outright.*

⁶ During my tenure as professor, I have advised many foreign professors and teachers setting up doctoral programmes and I have also lectured in several international seminars on artistic research about the structure and operations of our department.

In addition to praise, we have also received condemnation. In 2003, Tuomas Nevanlinna and I participated in a conference on artistic research in Amsterdam. The purpose of the conference was to further the creation of doctoral studies in art academies in the Netherlands and Belgium. Pleased with the situation back home, we let fly – both of us waxed eloquent about the benefits of higher education degrees for artists. We were not prepared for the fact that the situation in Continental Europe is quite different from that in Finland: many art academies are small autonomous schools where the formalisation of education into MA-level programmes – not to mention doctoral training – is often perceived as a threat that carries the potential risk of forceful annexation of the academies to big universities, which for the price of licensing an academic degree would project on the schools their own research traditions that are foreign to art. Be that as it may, the discussion that followed our talks was fierce and we were even accused of being Stalinists! The aggressive seminar discussion is documented in part in Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds), *Artistic Research, L&B, Volume 18* (Amsterdam/New York: Lier en Boog, 2004).

⁷ This does not imply that artistic research and art research would not have been covered in lectures – especially in the first five years, a huge number of researchers and art experts visited our department.

⁸ When the doctoral programme was being planned, the Academy was a higher education institute, and received university status in 1998.

⁹ Pekka Kantonen, Simo Alitalo and Jan-Erik Andersson.

¹⁰ Jyrki Siukonen, *Uplifted Spirits Earthbound Machines. Studies on Artists and the Dream of Flight 1900-1935* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society 819, 2001).

¹¹ In addition to Siukonen, the following have graduated as doctors: the author (2002), Teemu Mäki (2005), Jan Kenneth Weckman (2005) and Tarja Pitkänen-Walter (2006).

¹² A good example of this is the way Siukonen plays with footnotes, which he commented on in an e-mail he sent me on 25 June 2008: “I wanted to demonstrate the potential of the footnote apparatus as an area of disinformation, that is, digressions, tangential ideas and associations – not to mention typography. As a kind of area of creative thinking. Most of the footnotes are factual, but there are also those which construct a secondary or sub-narrative, such as the recurring notices concerning the weather.”

¹³ When I commented on the split in artistic research, in the same way as I did in this text, in a talk I gave in a seminar held in Göteborg this year, a Swedish postgraduate student was furious. He accused me of undermining artistic research and thought I was utterly conservative. He thought that artistic research should be completely new and unprecedented – research that would have nothing to do with the kind of tinkering with visual and theoretical parts currently done in academies. When I asked him where such research might suddenly come from (since artists seldom engage in it) he retorted that it is not about artists, but about research.

¹⁴ Professors Jan Kaila, Jan Svenungsson and Ray Langenbach, post-doctoral researcher Hanna Johansson, theory lecturer Tuomas Nevanlinna, assistant Johanna Lecklin, planner Anna Herlin.

¹⁵ Jan Svenungsson, *An Artist's Text Book* (Helsinki: The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2007).

¹⁶ The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Akademie der Bildenden Künste (Vienna, Austria), Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht (Holland), Konsthögskolan i Malmö (Sweden), the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media (Dublin) and the Slade School of Fine Art (London).

¹⁷ The Preliminary Examination Board in 2006–2008 comprised the following: artist Satu Kiljunen (chairperson), artist Carolus Enckell, PhD Marja Sakari, PhD Anita Seppä, DFA Jyrki Siukonen and PhD John Sundholm.