

Panel discussion: Concerning Doctoral Studies

Introduction: Mick Wilson



Nameless Science, Panel discussion, Cooper Union, NY, 12 December 2008: Grant Kester, George Smith, Mick Wilson.

Today we will have two speakers who are very well-versed in addressing the topic of doctoral studies in the United States of America. The first speaker is George Smith, the founding president of IDSVA, the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. He has recently established a unique doctoral program, specifically configured to facilitate artists in acquiring advanced studies across art theory, aesthetics and a range of discourses framing the discursive landscape of contemporary art practice. IDSVA has its headquarters in Portland, Maine, but the program is realized in a number of different locations including Harlem/New York, Venice, and Paris. Today, George is going to address a new philosophy of graduate art education: the non-studio PhD.

The second speaker is Grant Kester, who is based in the department of visual arts at the University of California at San Diego, where he is the coordinator for the new PhD-concentration in art practice. This doctoral studies program is designed for visual artists who realize research through studio production, but the program focuses on both practice and written work.

George Smith: I can't help but thinking about the *Nameless Science* symposium in light of another recent gathering, called *Thinking Worlds*. This was the *Moscow Conference on Philosophy, Politics, and Art* (Nov 2006 and Feb 2007), held in conjunction with the Second Moscow Biennial. Like the Cooper Union symposium, *Thinking Worlds* included scholars,

<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/panel.html>

philosophers, and cultural theorists currently posing questions on the relationship between art and knowledge. But there was a difference. While *Thinking Worlds* was gathered in the midst of a major contemporary art exhibition, not one artist was included in the conference.

I am not sure whether to call this sort of oversight arrogance or myopia, but I believe it involves the kind of thinking that explains a lapse in manners. I am reminded of the famous psychiatrist who taught at one of the major American medical schools. One morning he was taking his adoring interns on rounds and stopped in front of a catatonic, frozen upright in a straight back chair. Stepping up to her and pointing to her eyes, he turned to his students for diagnostics, whereupon she bit off the tip of his finger.

It has to be said that the art critical self-absorption I am talking about is less and less the rule in places like Russia, though it is still typical in the United States. And while no one is suggesting that American academics who analyze and critique contemporary art without bothering to talk to contemporary artists should lose any fingers, I think it is fair to say that many would be as surprised as the good doctor to find that the “object” of their “objective analysis” is alive and alert, that contemporary artists do think and talk, that indeed they pose and respond to the same or similar questions as those theorized in purely academic circles.

At stake here is knowledge: who creates it, who speaks it, who owns it. On this score, philosophy likes to see itself as the origin and oracle of knowledge, and, as self-proclaimed creator, speaker, and owner of knowledge, philosophy assumes itself in charge of art. Here by philosophy I mean academic thought in general, such as *Thinking Worlds*, for example, as well as philosophy in particular. Anyhow, philosophy’s superior attitude toward art goes back a long way. While Plato insists that the truth of art is false, Aristotle allows that art is better than history, because its truth, its knowledge, is closer to that of philosophy. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s point remains: philosophy is higher than art because art’s knowledge is less true. To trace the classical episteme into modern times, we might start around 1650, with Bishop Sprat: “The influence of [art] is now exhausted and our present concern is with the serious work of trying to behold face to face, through science, what was formerly seen through a [looking] glass darkly.”¹ And while Kant a century and a half or so later famously grants the artist the title of genius, Kant is only too quick to assure his Enlightenment reader that the classical hierarchy of knowledge is still the order of things, precisely insofar as the mind of the scientist/philosopher is still to be viewed as superior to that of the artist. A century after that, worried that Kant had made too fine a discrimination in saying the artist was a genius and the scientist of greater mind, William James, in *The Principles of Psychology*, takes the title of genius away from the artist and hands it over to the scientist.

In 1890 *The Principles of Psychology* was received as the most important contribution ever made to the study of human consciousness. But it is in the novels and tales of William James’s brother Henry that we see the first theorization of deferred action. As scholars are increasingly aware, deferred action is the key to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and indeed is the fundamental concept of Žižek’s philosophy.

Which is only to say that the artist has always been a philosopher. The reason, or at least part of the reason, why she has not been regarded as such is that the artist often does not know exactly what she is doing when she creates art, when she produces knowledge, when she creates philosophy. One might say she has attained in such moments to a Deleuzian pure immanence of a kind similar to that of our mutual friend, the catatonic. In this respect Sarat

Maharaj describes the creative process as “spasmic, interdisciplinary probes, haphazard cognitive investigations, dissipating interaction, and imaginary archiving”.² Here he is saying much the same as Kant. The difference is that Maharaj sees the artist’s creative process as a beautiful promise for the conception of knowledge; while Kant sees it as good reason to count artistic knowledge as less valuable, less credible, and, looking ahead to William James, less useful, less pragmatic, than so-called scientific/philosophical knowledge.

Two centuries after the *Critique of Judgment* and a century after *The Principles of Psychology*, what we are now coming to, thanks to Foucault and Lyotard and many others - certainly Deleuze - is that the process of knowledge production is not a measure of bona fide knowledge; rather, bona fide knowledge is the measure of legitimate philosophical inquiry, however and wherever it gets done - hypothetically or rhizomatically. And yet, because the process is different, the bona fide knowledge of the artist/philosopher is and will be different from that of the scientist/philosopher. To say that there is an equality of value is hardly to insist upon an equivalency of kind. Quoting Henk Slager from the *Nameless Science* symposium: the artist’s process not only “produce[s] fluent forms of interconnectivity and methodology through different forms of knowledge production, but leads to novel artistic strategies and intensities of perception”.³ On a slightly different plane, one might go so far as to hope that the relation between scientific and artistic philosophy has become or is becoming more dialogical and less dialectical.

Which reminds me to say a word about Hegel. Like so many philosophers who use art to prove their claims for the supremacy of philosophy, much of what Hegel says about art is good and true. For instance he says that when the philosophy of art is waxing you can bet that art itself is in decline. Such, I believe, is where we are heading now. How do we fling away the art philosophy that is today hyping art? How do we never mind about adorning art with art philosophy a la mode and devote our thinking and studio practice to art that is philosophy through and through? How, finally, do we get philosophy to see that genuine art is a concrete representation of philosophical abstraction, that the knowledge of art is the knowledge of philosophy? It seems to me that one answer lies with the artist-philosopher, which is precisely what the PhD in art prepares the artist to become.

The PhD for visual artists has taken on several forms. This is a good thing. We should not fall into the academic trap of insisting that there is only one way. Those of us who are pioneering the PhD curriculum for visual artists will continue, I hope, to see each of our respective enterprises as important work that supports the work of other colleagues and institutions in the field. To that end I propose the formation of an international association of PhD programs for visual artists.

Let me now say a word or two about IDVA - The Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. Founded in 2006 and headquartered in Portland, Maine, The Institute For Doctoral Studies In The Visual Arts is the first and only school in America founded for the sole purpose of providing doctoral education in philosophy to visual artists. We believe that rigorous philosophical study sharpens the hand and eye as well as the mind and extends the artist’s range of creative expression and her possibilities for the discovery of philosophical knowledge. The PhD qualifies the artist-philosopher to teach theory and philosophy - courses traditionally taught by non-artists in the American university. And the IDVA PhD is also meant to bring together a community of practicing artists for the study of theory and philosophy at a time when we need new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing.

The IDSVA academic year begins for first and second year students with a four-week May/June residency intensive at Spannocchia Castle in Tuscany. The Spannocchia intensive includes study in Siena, Florence, and Milan. At the end of the Spannocchia intensive students travel to the Venice Biennale, where they work with curators and artists, and engage in what is described as critical intervention.

In biennale off-years years, students go from Spannocchia to Paris to study and critique museum collections and art sites. At mid-year they attend an annual one-week intensive in Harlem and New York City, and third year students attend a two-week dissertation orientation convened in August at Brown University.

The residency intensive schedule is designed as unmediated educational experience. Students begin each year in residency at a feudal agrarian castle near Siena, a medieval city. The shift to Venice brings students to an aristocratic renaissance city, and Paris is studied as a bourgeois city born of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution. Harlem in particular and New York City in general serve as specimens of the American post-industrial urban landscape. All of these sites are brought into historical proximity with each other, especially in terms of what they reveal about the history of art in relation to class, race, and gender. In future years we hope to include travel to other European sites, as well as Africa, South America, and the East.

IDSVA students work directly with internationally renowned artists and thinkers. One self-designed independent study and one seminar course per semester comprise the three-year curriculum. Independent studies are faculty directed. Seminar courses commence in residency and continue online. While the seminar courses develop a sequential reading and critique of continental philosophy, the independent studies are designed to take the student in a direction of particular scholarly interest, with a view toward arriving at a thesis topic in the third year.

Online coursework and independent studies are pursued through fall and spring semester and include regular individual faculty/student discussions, study group discussion and collaboration, and project research conducted through IDSVA's virtual library.

Beyond the three-year curriculum, up to three additional years are allowed for completion of the dissertation.

Grant Kester: In the US system of higher education, art history and art practice are quite often segregated. This is especially the case at the graduate/post-graduate level, where PhD programs in art history are almost always housed separately from MFA programs in art practice. UCSD's Visual Arts department was founded with an explicit commitment to trans-disciplinary work that challenges this segregation. From its earliest days, the department's faculty included prominent artists who were also practicing theoreticians and critics, such as David Antin, Manny Farber and Allan Kaprow. It also included figures such as Helen and Newton Harrison, whose research moved across the boundaries between art and science.

In the mid-1970s, when the Department began to build its art historical component, it took care to recruit art and media historians who were interested in the issues posed by artistic practice and were committed to working with students in the MFA program. The continuity between studio practice and art history and theory is by now one of the defining features of

our department's activity. Today UCSD's Visual Arts department continues to bring practitioners, theorists and historians together to encourage innovative work at the boundaries of disciplines, discourses, and methodologies, as evidenced by the work of figures such as Teddy Cruz, Kyong Park, Amy Alexander, Ricardo Dominguez, Cauleen Smith, Jordan Crandall and many others.

In 2002, the department launched a PhD program in Art and Media History, Theory and Criticism that has rapidly become a magnet for young scholars committed to historical and theoretical research into contemporary art and media. Six years later, in 2008, the Visual Arts department added a new Concentration in Art Practice to the existing Art and Media History PhD program. The Art Practice Concentration is designed for artists engaged in advanced research who wish to pursue their work in an environment geared towards doctoral study, and to produce studio work alongside a written dissertation. The concentration was a natural outgrowth of the reciprocal relationship between history, theory and practice in the Visual Arts department. The new Concentration in Art Practice is unusual, if not unique, among practice-based PhD programs in the United States, as it parallels other areas of specialization within our existing art history and theory program (from Meso-American to Renaissance to New Media). It thus acknowledges artistic production as a field of intellectual inquiry capable of an equal level of theoretical elaboration and conceptual density. Art practice students fulfill the same requirements as students working in other PhD concentrations, including the completion of 2-3 years of graduate level course work, language exams, qualifying exams and the submission of a dissertation. Their dissertations, however, combine a shorter written component with a completed art project (film or video, exhibition, installation, public project, etc.).

There is, of course, some controversy regarding the introduction of art practice doctorates in the United States. While they have been common in Europe for many years, they are still relatively new here and many are suspicious of the perceived institutionalization and codification of a form of cultural production (art practice) that is traditionally understood as intuitive, transgressive and decidedly anti-institutional. While it is easy to sympathize with these concerns (which were also raised during the widespread introduction of Master of Fine Arts programs in the US during the 1970s), they underestimate the extent to which contemporary art production is already subject to disciplinary protocols and forms of formal and informal institutionalization that exercise a decisive influence on the kinds of art that younger artists produce. While it is wise to retain some skepticism about the ongoing professionalization of art education, it is also important to recognize the increasing pressures exerted on art production, and culture more generally, by the forces of neo-liberalism. One of its chief effects has been the growing assault on all areas of "public" discourse that challenge or resist the imperatives of the market system, from attacks on public education and publicly-funded broadcast media to the erosion of state safeguards against corporate misconduct.

The public university, for all its complicity with the mechanisms of corporate and military power, remains one of the few sites left in the American cultural landscape in which at least the principle of independent critical thought and analysis can still be defended. A ready example comes from the Visual Arts department itself, where artist Ricardo Dominguez (associated with the development and theorization of "electronic civil disobedience") staged a "Virtual Sit-In in Solidarity with the Striking Students of France" on March 16, 2006 using his UCSD *b.a.n.g lab* as a base of operations. The protest recruited several thousand supporters and the French government responded by threatening to block university access to

French internet sites unless UCSD shut down its own network. The university refused this request and Professor Dominguez was supported by both his department and the Dean of Arts and Humanities, who defended “cyberactivist” practice as a significant area of research deserving of academic protection (see: <http://post.thing.net/node/772>). We are hopeful that the Art Practice concentration will, despite the dangers of institutionalization, provide a space in which critical forms of cultural production and analysis can be sustained, and even flourish.

Mick Wilson: I would like to identify some divergences and convergences between what is happening in the European domain and what is emerging in the US. I think it is worth emphasizing that not all doctoral programs in Europe entail funding. They are quite often self-funding. In terms of the institutional politics of legitimacy, a key measure is to access funding for researchers, to demonstrate viability in the larger academic funding landscape and, thus, to establish proper status for a research undertaking.

It strikes me that in Europe - my colleagues from Europe might slightly disagree on this - the predominant mode of debate around the issue of a PhD in art has been to focus on methodology and epistemology, i.e. the production of knowledge through a creative act. Many of these debates have become tiresome in their repetition. The importance of the intervention of the *Nameless Science* exhibition is its attempt to displace epistemic kinds of debates by concrete instantiations of specific projects, so that a different kind of conversation might emerge. However, I am still intrigued by the little squabbles that might appear from biochemists or sociologists when the question of an artistic research project hits the committee table. I am curious to know whether the same contest of legitimacy would play a role in such context.

The motivation for the PhD programs in Europe is complex, since it is rooted in five or six different processes. On the one hand, you have what has been described as the discursive turn in conceptual and post-conceptual practice, whereby a range of practices outside of the academy engage with notions of the relational, the discursive, the production of meaning, the production of knowledge, and the production of science. The discursive turn is also allied with the emergence of a remarkable curatorial discourse; a discourse not filled by institutions of higher education or by museums, but actually emerging from the informal networks of cultural practitioners or artist-curators throughout the 1990s. That discourse started to put on the agenda questions of agency, of conditions for understanding what it is that you have done as a cultural practitioner. Within the academic discourse, the questions of agency seem to have been displaced by the triumph of a third-hand postmodernism. I think that is one of the reasons why there is a desire on the part of practitioners themselves to generate a space that is neither fully that of the art academy, nor fully that of the university, nor fully that of the art world, but something that is both hybrid and interstitial. Something between these modes allowing these spaces to co-produce an independent discourse.

Another contributing factor is I believe the issue of professionalization. The question of the competition for reputation, status, standing, and power within institutions as played out around and contested by the standing of the professor with PhD and the professor without PhD, expressed in salary differences and in terms of difference of authority when it comes to a discussion at the committee table. Other factors include the desire to take ownership of a body of theoretical and discursive work, which was largely seen to belong to philosophers. There is a significant engagement with doctoral programs in Europe prompted by mid-career artists with an established international profile, who re-enter an academic frame in order to

get empowered in relation to a body of theoretical work seen to be setting the terms for the discussions happening in mainstream art world.

A number of additional factors are at play as well. One of the things that is really important and has not been fully thematized enough yet is Grant Kester's reference to the universities and their privileging of the technocratic agenda, i.e. the agenda for science and technology. The emergence of such a subsidized research wing of corporate industry as a dominant within the university is a problem for the humanities in general. It seems to me that the art research agenda - not only the PhD construct, but also the larger agenda of art research - must be part of a permeable academic institution that re-addresses the situation cogently. The art research agenda is forcing new relationships with the world beyond the academy in a way that could moderate the debate across the entire spectrum of the humanities.

The debate in the humanities played out in the US is internationally known - as say for example in the sequence of "cultural wars" throughout the 1980s and 1990s. But a credible and disseminating rhetoric, with which to champion a hermeneutical humanities-type of enquiry that traditionally inhabit philosophy, history, literature, and so forth is still lacking. That could change. I am not talking of artists having a fetish for philosophy or, vice versa, of art historians and philosophers having a fetish for artists. This is something else. What is of interest here is a new domain coming into being, a space of independent possibilities. The bureaucratization of this space is also an eminent threat - something colleagues in the UK would be very well-positioned to address. Clearly, there is a dull, grey instrumentalization in many new research initiatives. Indeed, this is a very dangerous threat for us all and something we need to be more willing to openly discuss with each other in order to resist bureaucratic, institutionalized exercises of self-reproduction. Yet, an art-research mode of inquiry open to a larger world beyond the academy could take advantage of the potential of the academy and at the same time be transformative of the academy.

¹ Olive Cook, *The English Country House* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 107.

² See Sarat Maharaj, 'Unfinishable Sketch of an "Unknown Object in 4D": scenes of artistic research' in Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds), *Artistic Research*, (Amsterdam /New York,: Lier & Boog, 2004), p. 50.

³ www.apexart.org/exhibitions/slager.htm