

Who is Afraid of Artistic Research?

Lindsay Brown/Cornelia Sollfrank

One-day symposium at Dundee University, 22 May 2008, organised by Cornelia Sollfrank and Lindsay Brown (PhD Forum)

The PhD Forum is a self-organised group of artist researchers based at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at Dundee University and was set up in 2006. This interdisciplinary group meets on a regular basis to discuss topics that relate to their research; it is from these discussions that ideas are developed into seminar themes. Thus, once or twice a year international experts are invited to expand the internal discussion and also involve a broader audience.

The one-day symposium in May 2008 was the first of a series of seminars that set out to explore the epistemology and context of practice-based and practice-led research, the value of such research and where this type of study and exploration fits in with the greater ethos of research within University education. Can artistic research be valued within this system? Is the artistic process compromised by a set of methodological verifications that are alien to this specific form of knowledge production? What is knowledge production within art?

Compared with the established epistemologies of the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences, the discourse surrounding practice-based and practice-led research in art and design is relatively young and includes a range of diverse approaches. What practice-based and practice-led research in the arts is or is not, is highly controversial. Does it mean that the researcher investigates his/her own visual practice, or rather, that visual practice is a means of investigation? Other questions arise in the context of 'normal science' and the knowledge economy: What are the goals of such research? And what is the desired outcome? What are the connecting lines between art and science, between practice and theory? And last but not least: Why would an artist want to do 'research'?

Practice-based and practice-led research can be understood as a process, evolving from and changing through the practice undertaken by the individual researcher. The challenge here is that research (still) can be undertaken in relative freedom. Entering the arena of ongoing discussion, negotiation and re-adjustment, and engaging in the discourse about methodology, essentially contributes to constituting this freedom. This an expressed aim of the PhD Forum.

The symposium 'Who is Afraid of Artistic Research? #1' was instigated to look specifically at the larger structure of research. Key speakers were invited from both Europe and Scotland to enable a comparative discussion between the British system and the newly formed modular structure of education in Europe after the Bologna Process. The first of these speakers was

Laurence Rassel from Constant in Brussels. She explained approaches to research within a small institution that is independent from the larger hierarchical academic machine. These open and equal methods were set in contrast to Professor Nigel Johnson, who discussed a number of completed PhDs within the traditional academic structure in Dundee (not included in the present volume). To exemplify some of the problems that artistic research may encounter within this system, Simon Sheikh (Assistant Professor of Art Theory, Malmö Art Academy) talked of the phrase research in terms of a study that did not include the art object, and thus questioned what the role of artistic production was within the knowledge economy. To support some of these concerns, Dr Dieter Lesage (Erasmushogeschool Brussel) conveyed the pros and cons of the new European system, but concluded that a new form of verification for artistic research be developed, rather than relying on existing University-wide verifications that are not relevant to research within the art academy. This out-dated way of thinking about the value and commodification of artistic process, was exemplified in the screening of the film *A Portrait of the Artist as Worker (rmx.)*, by Ina Wudke, where the artist, dressed as a clown, repeats again and again the unpaid labour that she must partake in to realise her projects. This undervaluing of artistic process and skill has the potential to be changed within a University institution that verifies these outputs as valued systems and ways of working.

The second edition of ‘Who is Afraid of Artistic Research?’ took place in November 2008. The third edition of ‘Who is Afraid of Artistic Research?’ will take place on 8 May, 2009. For documentation and further information about the events please visit the website: http://www.vrc.dundee.ac.uk/Research/PhD_Forum.html