

## **Testing Times: the artist as academic and the current university research climate**

Lesley Duxbury  
School of Art  
RMIT University  
Melbourne  
[Lesley.duxbury@rmit.edu.au](mailto:Lesley.duxbury@rmit.edu.au)

I have a number of interests and curiosities about the notion of material thinking especially in relation to its application in universities through PhD programs and the ways in which academics engage with it as artists both within and outside the institution.

According to the UK academics Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge, who have undertaken considerable research into the practice-led PhD, “thinking through art leads to new thought.”<sup>1</sup> The idea that art as a physical and material activity, through which the artist by engaging with materials and processes, can generate new knowledge, is currently provoking much interest and is at the heart of the pedagogy of research programs in the School of Art at RMIT University.

Practice-led research in the creative arts is now commonplace throughout Australia and most universities with creative arts Schools and Departments are increasingly offering PhD programs. However there are currently as many variations in the requirements for and assessment of the PhD as there are programs. The majority of them consist of two parts – a practical outcome usually in the form of an exhibition accompanied by a written text, varying in length. Some institutions emphasise the creative project as the research while others privilege the text, tagging the creative project on as an illustration of the ‘real’ research.

In *Printed project issue 04*, ‘the new PhD in studio art’ James Elkins illuminates 3 models of combining PhD level scholarship with creative work. Each model is broken down into several possibilities, in all 9 different ways of considering research at the highest level in the creative arts. With so many variations and interpretations it is virtually impossible to apply the same assessment criteria across the field and each university in Australia has its own definitions of what constitutes research in the creative arts at this level. As the Art Schools and Departments struggle to produce legitimate research outcomes they are pressured internally to mold and shape what they do to fit the university ideal and with so much variation it is challenging to consider creative practice-led research seriously in such a competitive environment. Without an agreement about what practice-led research is or is not, how can a PhD be assessed and evaluated?

Artist-academics are being pushed into producing more acceptable research outputs by writing book chapters, journal articles and conference papers to legitimise their

---

<sup>1</sup> K. MacLeod & L. Holdridge, ‘Monstrous thinking: On practice-based research’, 7<sup>th</sup> ELIA Biennial Conference, Dublin, Ireland, 2002

research. Most have already done the equivalent of 2 PhDs through a substantial creative project supported by an extensive thesis and now are being asked to not only continue having outputs (exhibitions) as artists but to also write as academics – double the research without double the research time.

I am interested in the conceptual and practical questions and issues of the practice-led PhD in relation to assessment and evaluation from my personal viewpoint as an academic who is a supervisor and examiner of PhD projects and as a graduate of a practice-led PhD program.

I am also curious about the dual role of artist-academics and why we do it – why we as academics are compelled to pursue our arts practice as research to comply with the academy and also in what ways the research that ensues can be different from the work produced as professional practice. How does the work produced by academics in their pursuit of a PhD differ from that of their peers outside an educational institution, if at all? Do we concoct topics that have no agency beyond the institution walls or do the resulting artifacts – images, objects, videos and sound products – actually generate new knowledge and contribute to and benefit the community through exhibitions? Does having a PhD improve the art and/or the artist?

Other disciplines have a strong relationship and connection to their industries through research and innovation but does this apply in the artworld? What role can the University Gallery play in promoting and disseminating art as research?

**Lesley Duxbury** is Associate Professor and Postgraduate Research Coordinator in the School of Art, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. She completed a practice-led PhD in 2004. Lesley currently supervises research candidates and promotes postgraduate research through art practice. She has acted as an examiner for practice-based doctorates for other institutions. As an artist she exhibits regularly and is represented in the national and most state public collections in Australia. She uses both traditional and contemporary print media, photography and printmaking to make artworks that question perceptions of the natural environment, especially the atmosphere and its phenomena.