



The functions of the written text in practice-based PhD submissions

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This paper will be in two parts, both parts relating to higher degree research which is practiced based in Fine Art: the first part will deal with the function of a written text; the second part will briefly examine the concept of a text/thesis. In order to understand the function of the written text in MPhil and PhD practice based research, I find it necessary to look at what I take to be the different types of practice based research because, for each type the written element fulfils a slightly different function. My study, (Macleod, 1995 -) has led to the identification of three types of higher degree practice research: type A which is defined as positioning a practice; type B defined as theorising a practice and type C which has been given the in-progress definition of revealing a practice.

The type A research is where the researcher is concerned to position practice concerns; this positioning may be historical, cultural, contemporaneous or a combination of these. Here, the written text carries the information relevant to an exact positioning of the practice. For instance, the PhD study which is examining "silent painting", a term used by Lucy Lippard to characterise painting by Ad Reinhardt, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Agnes Martin et al, in order to "renew the practice". This PhD student has studied the history of "silent painting"; he has done this comprehensively examining all sources and references for each of the key artists brought under the title of silent painting and he has done this in order to "renew" the practice, that is, the practice of working without "noise", gesture or reference to any source which is external to painting. The written text provides exact and comprehensive evidence of "silent painting"; it also positions this researcher's practice. In this case, the researcher was ready for his practice to change and the research study, which involves renewing an historically based practice has in fact renewed and newly positioned this researcher's own practice.

If we take another example of a study geared towards the positioning of a practice, we can see that the written text performs a similar positioning function. Here, the MPhil written text submission was in two parts: the first presented a survey of feminist re-readings of Modernist painting practice and the second presented analyses of in-depth interviews with contemporary women painters from the USA, which complemented the research findings for part one but offered more appropriate possibilities for a young practising artist. Both parts of the written submission were conceived and produced to precisely position the

researcher's own practice. This was a practice which the artist felt had never been able to flourish because of the oppressive legacy of anti-Modernist discourse within feminist art historical practice. This researcher needed to position her practice in order to be able to paint as a woman who is conscious of and paints through her gendered identity. The written study therefore provided a concise context for her paintings; it allowed for an appropriate reading of them.

The third and last example I shall give is of the researcher who again wished to place his practice, but in this case the positioning was required for racial, political and cultural reasons. The written text precisely positioned twentieth century Palestinian artists geographically and thus cited their practices culturally. The artist/researcher's own practice was sited in the UK alongside that of Mona Hatoum, for instance and this siting was informed by an analysis of the critical reviewing of his work in the UK. The written text here again contextualised the submitted art practice; it gave it a precise provenance and again allowed for an informed and appropriate reading of it in a context which the researcher had devised.

The type B research which theorises a practice offers clear examples of research methodologies by researchers I have been drawn to categorise as artist/teacher/researchers, that is artists who have been long-time employed in an "Art Institution". The first example is of a researcher whose research proposition is the narrativity of painting; the proposition is that the narrative form most closely identified with literature or film is equally applicable to painting. Here, the written thesis defines narrativity as a theoretical premise and as a conceptual framework for a methodology. This researcher has been able to demonstrate the processes of his painting through a methodology determined by the theoretical framing of narrativity. In other words, the conceptual framework offered by the theoretical expositions of narrativity have been employed in the construction of the research methodology. This methodology is characterised not just by the written exposition of the narrativity of painting and the paintings themselves but also by a series of notations in Art Journals indicating the type of narrative used and the processes of development. This research methodology exposes on-going practice to a theoretical framing and a theory driven investigation. One of this researcher's main intentions is to demonstrate the theoretical drive of painting itself; he talks of the "intellectuality of painting". Thus, although the starting point of this research is the adoption and elucidation of theories of narrativity the central purpose of the research is precisely to demonstrate the theory of a particular type of painting practice. Here, the written text sets out the theoretical groundwork established in literary and film studies; however, it is the body of paintings and the annotated Art Journals primarily which demonstrate the research proposition.

The second example of type B, the theorising of practice research, involves the conjoining of sculpture with language. The proposition here is that the thesis of written texts and artworks together demonstrate a "sculpture/language homology". In the exposition of this homology, the written text examines the structure of language through key theorists such as Jakobson, Wittgenstein and Dufrenne in order to propose sculptural practice as demonstrating an equivalent structure. The bridge between this researcher's own sculptural practice and texts on the theory of language is an examination of a well established artist's practice to establish its equivalent structural form to language. Here, the PhD submission of propositional works was prepared for by the written text. Both written text and propositional works constituted a demonstration of the "sculpture/language homology" or the equivalence of sculpture and language in terms of framing propositions dependant upon a shared understanding of the structure of discourse.

In turning to type C, the revealing of a practice, it might be pertinent to indicate that it is this type of research which was responsible for generating my own study of student experience of practice based MPhil and PhD research in Fine Art. In relation to my own tutoring, what fascinated me about this type of research was the seesaw effect of working on the written text and on the art projects: what appeared to be happening in this type of research was that after the completion of one phase of the written text, when the seesaw was high in the air, the ensuing work on the art project would destabilise what had been achieved to the point that when the researcher returned to the next phase of research on the written text, the seesaw was firmly down on the ground and the text had to be completely reconceived; when the next phase of research on the written text was completed and the seesaw was high in the air, it was only to descend again when the work on the ensuing art project was underway. Thus, the written text was instrumental to the conception of the art projects but the art projects themselves exacted a radical rethinking of what had been constructed in written form because the process of realising or making artwork altered what had been defined in written form.

The clearest example of this seesaw effect was offered by an MPhil student whose eventual title for the MPhil submission mirrored this experience: it was "The Re-Positions of an Art Practice". The first art project involved in this research was an installation piece, a parodic memorial to the Gulf War. Its purpose was to propose an ethical viewing of a war which according to this researcher was unique in its virtuality, a virtuality constructed by the Media. The ethical viewing proposed was to enter into an understanding of the facts of war and thus to be an active rather than a passive viewer. Even though Art and Design Historians have enquired as to why this researcher did not research into the War Memorial or into the practices of contemporary war artists, this researcher was completely uninterested in this kind of contextualisation of his art project. What he achieved was a written exposition of the virtuality which the art project represented in a kind of live time in the sense that the written text examined Virilio's analysis of the virtuality of the Gulf War and Virilio and Baudrillard's theoretical framing of the virtual and the attendant role of the spectator/viewer in this new scenario for lived experience. The force of this part of the written text was its exposition of the interactive relationship of the artist-work-viewer. With hindsight, this would seem inevitable in the intense examination of the virtuality of experience.

The second and third art projects developed the artist-work-viewer relationship to the point where the viewer becomes part of the piece; the third project was very much dependent on the unexpected outcomes of the second and in its turn led to a fourth which was to be realised after the completion of the MPhil. In this MPhil the written text provided a parallel exposition of the virtual and of the theory of the artist-work-viewer relationship. However, the written text did not precisely position the art projects in the sense that the examples from type A could be said to do; neither did it theorise the practice in precisely the way the examples from type B proposed. This example of research does, however, approximate to both A and B types of research; there is an obvious overlap between all three. However, type C is not bounded by the written text in the way that types A and B are and this is precisely because in this type of research the drive is to understand what has been made or realised through art, to find, after the making, as this researcher put it "logics which match up".

A second example of the revealing of an art practice is of research which examines systems of viewing not to propose a theoretical premise based on an analysis of extant systems but rather to prepare for an appropriate viewing of the researcher's own virtual installation work. This PhD researcher's submission was a selection of viewing spaces; in

terms of the PhD submission, it was these which the External Examiners had to experience in order to conduct the viva. The Examiners had been prepared for the encounter through the written texts which analysed European systems of viewing, from the perspectival, to the optical, to the filmic. However, the characterisation of the researcher's own practice had not been undertaken. As far as the student was concerned, no appropriate precedent existed for his work and therefore no theoretical framework was available through secondary sources. What was possible and what the written work delivered was an appropriate contextual framing of the artwork. However, this framing was not equivalent to type A or B research; the written text had a much more tangential relationship with the artwork submission. At the point of the PhD viva, according to this researcher, the External Examiners had to work extremely hard to fully engage with the artwork thesis/proposition and entering into this provided an experience both he and they had found profoundly stimulating.

A third example of revealing a practice might also be briefly cited. This was a study of the enactment of Anglican ritual in the architecture of churches in a particular locale through a photographic enquiry. Here again a contextualisation of the PhD submission was offered by the written text but the artwork itself offered an equivalent revelation of the enactment of ritual through photographs. This example could be included in type A research but the revelation involved in the photographic processes of the research recharged the historical study and made it entirely secondary to the practice and to the demonstration of the research thesis. It also caught the researcher somehow unawares and deepened his own sense of the power of a creative practice.

This leads me to part two of the paper: the function of the text/thesis in a practice based research degree submission. Here, it will be appropriate to question the proposition that the text is the thesis, (unless, of course, text is to be read as "text", that is as artwork or written text). In all the examples provided in this paper the thesis of the MPhil/PhD submission is provided by a written text or texts and artwork. In none of the examples is the thesis formulated in the written text, then illustrated by the artwork. In type A the written text is highly instrumental and provides for a specific reading of the artwork submission; in type B the written text is inseparable from the theoretical framing of the submission; in type C it is instrumental and complementary to the artwork submission but the artwork here is the thesis; it provides the theoretical proposition. What, therefore, is the thesis, or, rather, what constitutes the thesis?

If we re-trace the beleaguered history of practice based higher degrees in Art and Design, we know that the CNAAB, for instance asserted that the thesis resided in the written text: in 1974 they opined that "creative work must be clearly presented in relation to the argument of a written thesis" which must be set in the "relevant theoretical, historical or critical context". More recently, Fiona Candlin has argued against the findings of the UK Council for Graduate Education which again presumed that the thesis is to be contained in a written text. Candlin writes in an article in the *Journal of Art and Design Education*, (Vol 19.1) that the UKCGE :

...draws a firm line between theory and practice, places academic research in opposition to practice generally and artwork specifically, and maintains the stereotype of art as anti-intellectual...

We can now assert that art is a theorising practice; it can produce the research thesis; it cannot be said to be simply an illustration of it. In this context, it might be appropriate to take up just one example of the study of art as theory: for instance, Daniel Herwitz's study

of the theorising of the Constructivists in "Making Theory, Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde". Here Herwitz makes a case for the equivalent theoretical thesis of artwork to written manifesto. He also makes a case for the intellectual and theoretical clarity of exposition of Naum Gabo's work and draws a comparison of this to Descartes's thinking in his "Meditations". Also, Holdridge and Macleod have demonstrated how the Surrealists' practices were theoretically charged in an article entitled, "Theory/ Practice: a relationship in the making", (currently submitted to the European Journal of Art Education).

Contemporaneously, theory is seen to be the domain of cultural, critical or art historical theorists rather than to artist theorists. However, it is possible to maintain that higher degree research is precisely the domain of the artist theorist. This is theory which is not written; it is made or realised through artwork. This theory is the result of ideas worked through matter. It might be appropriate to see this as a matrixial theory, a complex of ideas/matter/form and theory which is external to practice. This is inevitably difficult to articulate. However, this matrixial theory involves a conceptual framing; it is propositional. It may well be dependant upon the relationship between the written text and the artwork but it is demonstrative of the intellectuality of making, which is not the same as the intellectuality of writing.

Finally, I should like to propose that realised artwork is propositional of advanced thinking in this new culture of higher degree research in Fine Art. We could say that the demonstration of the intellectuality of making or realising artwork is effected (at the moment), through the combination of artwork and written text(s). It is certainly the case that we are seeing the re-emergence of the artist scholar. S/he was predicted by the first European Academy of Art in the sixteenth century and has been more-or-less undermined ever since simply because in art practice the theoretical premise is realised through artwork.

Hence, it is possible to argue that the thesis/text is not representative of the dialectical relationship at the heart of the practice based higher degree submission, but the thesis/artwork is.

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