



Assessing the exhibition and the exegesis in visual arts higher degrees: perspectives of examiners

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Within the last decade there has been a merger of art schools into academic institutions. The subsequent proliferation of higher degree courses in the visual arts has created pressure for these courses to justify that their research content 'measures up' to more traditional research practices. There has been vigorous debate within the Visual Arts both within the UK and internationally about the place held by research in the Creative Arts and the characteristics of artefacts as doctoral outcomes alongside the written thesis in traditional disciplines (McLeod, 2000). Some art academics and practitioners argue that the nature of artistic research is often 'chaotic' and such a process should not try to emulate conventional scientific research models, while others argue that an artwork can only be deemed 'competent' if it is accompanied by a written theoretical elucidation (Durling 2002; Gray and Pirie 1995). There are concerns that in an attempt to attain academic legitimacy, artistic research may be manipulated to adhere to the traditional and dominant models of established research in science and social science (Candlin 2000; Eisner, 1995).

The study reported in this paper aimed to investigate how examiners approach and reconcile the dual demands of assessing a Visual Arts thesis, which in Australia, typically is comprised of both a written and an exhibition component. This perspective gives an insight into the qualities that the written and practical components contribute to the creation of a Visual Arts thesis as well as identifying the outcomes and standards that examiners expect to find at post-graduate levels of study.

In the UK and the US respectively, the terms practice-based research and arts-based research have been used to describe the kind of degree that includes both a creative work as well as a written thesis. For the past decade there has been debate over whether an art work can stand alone as a doctoral outcome or whether it needs to be accompanied by a 'clarifying' written document (UKCGE, 1997). The arts community have expressed concern

that practice-based research will elect to conform or be coerced to conform with 'scientific' methods in an attempt to prove its 'validity'. Some members believe that scientific methods, such as formulating hypotheses, pursuing solutions and reaching conclusions may be incompatible with artistic practice. In the UK, Biggs (2002) has questioned whether it is likely that practicing artists set themselves explicit problems to answer, while in the US, Baronne (1995) refutes the notion that only rational-logical, empiricist models of research can be defined as 'legitimate'. Baronne described traditional scientific research, involving experimentation, data analysis and theory testing as a process of 'uncertainty reduction', while the more organic and provocative nature of arts-based research results in 'uncertainty enhancement'.

According to Eisner (1995) the primary aim of research is to advance understanding and artistic representations have the capacity to contribute to this advance by recontextualizing the familiar and awakening viewers to new ways of seeing, thinking and knowing. Since 'good art' questions existing paradigms and world views it can be argued that this alternative form of inquiry is a legitimate research activity.

Apart from the debate over the legitimacy of alternative forms of research, there are also concerns about how 'non-traditional' research and the products arising from it can be assessed and/or equated with a conventional written academic thesis. Eisner (2002) has identified some common misconceptions which appeared to lead to a reluctance within the arts community to embrace the concept of formalised assessment. These included the fear that judgements about the quality of a students art work could impede creative potential and that assessment typically evaluates outcomes or products whereas in the creative arts, it is the process that is regarded as most important. Eisner disconfirmed both of these assumptions by claiming that judgements themselves are not necessarily harmful as long as they are conveyed 'sensitively' and suggesting that the distinction we make between process and product is somewhat artificial. If examiners adopt a long-term perspective to view a students work then the final products can be regarded as part of a larger process, "They are markers along a journey; the end is also the beginning" (p. 181). The notion of practice-based research as a process of discovery has been advocated more recently in the field of design. Marshall and Newton (2000) suggest that the parameters of research could be broadened 'to embrace other forms of understanding and engagement' by using the term 'scholarship' which would encompass 'academic research beyond common scientific enquiry' (p.2). One of the guiding principles underlying scholarship is discovery, which according to Boyer (1990), implies a freedom of inquiry where a researcher can follow an investigation wherever it may lead (cited in Marshall and Newton, 2000). Eisner believes that in artistic research the journey or process is paramount and that the merit or worth of this journey can be adequately represented in the artefacts produced.

The parameters for assessing the dual outcomes of a visual arts doctorate, that is the art work and the written text are, according to Marshall & Newton (2000, p. 2), in a state of 'constant reinvention'. In regard to examining the exhibition component, Eisner (2002) identified three common and salient features which should be considered when assessing art work. These include a) the technical quality of the work produced; b) the extent to which the work displays an inventive use of an idea or process; and c) the expressive power or aesthetic quality it displays. In regard to the exegesis or written thesis, the UKCGE report (1997) indicated that this component should act as a 'supporting document' and explain and clarify the research basis of the art work. Hockey (2003) conducted interviews with 50 supervisors of research degree students in Art and Design and found that these supervisors devoted much effort to facilitating a 'research vision' among their

students. The supervisors indicated that they expected students to be able to produce written documentation which located their work within a particular field or tradition and provided an analysis of their own practice. However, McLeod (2000) indicates that while the written text in practice-based doctorates may act to contextualise a researcher's practice or establish a theoretical framework for the chosen methodology, it may also function as an interactive component in both the conceptualisation and the actualization of the practice. Along with Candlin (2000), McLeod asserts that it should not be assumed that the written text merely supports the artwork. The role and function of the written component has also been raised by Durling (2002) who is concerned about the varying institutional requirements for a PhD in art or design in the UK. In some institutions the written component may be merely a catalogue or may not be required at all. Durling questions whether an exhibition of artefacts can adequately represent the research processes underlying the exhibition. Durling uses the metaphor of a 'talking pot' and queries whether an artwork without accompanying documentation can 'speak' with sufficient clarity to establish its research credentials. The importance of clarifying the relationship between the written and practical components has implications for the evaluation of practice-based doctorates where the weighting given to each aspect will determine the final assessment outcome (Hoddell et al., 2002).

Because the doctorate in visual arts is a newly emerging degree, there is as yet, no strong consensus among the arts community about the parameters and expectations of the form that it should take. The desire to establish a discourse by which to describe and evaluate the 'ways of knowing' that are unique to the culture of art is gaining momentum (Fordon, 2000; Piantanida et al, 2003). Piantanida et al. call upon the arts community to clarify and articulate the norms for conducting and judging arts-based research in order to avoid the imposition of "narrow, rigid and exclusionary definitions" that may be dictated by scientific research methods. Similarly, Fordon (2000) suggests that it is vital to "become familiar with the ideas of those who create and study art in order to take advantage of their knowledge" (p. 51). The current study seeks to explore the views of those who are in a position to influence the form and nature of artistic research and practice in higher degrees, that is, the examiners. The views of examiners provide a valuable insight into the assessment of the products from non-traditional doctorates and the aspects that are being valued in Visual Arts theses. An understanding of how theory and practice are being interpreted, conducted and judged in Visual Arts theses is an important step in articulating alternative research methods and establishing their equivalency.

## Method

In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with 15 Visual Arts examiners from 10 Australian higher education institutions. There were nine male and six female respondents representing three eastern Australian states. The occupations and backgrounds of the examiners included four curators and eight current and three retired academics. The academic positions were comprised of two heads of school, three professors, one associate professor and four senior lecturers. Four of the examiners had attained a PhD. Most had examined in more than one institution and about one half had been an examiner at least 12 times, and had examined PhD work across several Australian states. Although the sample could not be considered 'representative' it does cover a broad range of individual perspectives.

The interview protocol had been sent ahead and in the majority of cases the informants had made notes to refer to, or had generally reflected on the questions beforehand. Although the interview questions were structured, the questions allowed each informant's

ideas to build and depth of response to be obtained. Moreover, there was the flexibility to probe (see Appendix for interview schedule). Two Fine Art academics conducted the interviews, which ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour. The fact that the interviewers were from the same field and shared the same technical discourse and could empathise with the experience partially mitigated the need for the gestures, nods and other physical cues that usually accompany, and play a key role in eliciting a 'contextually natural' response in a face-to face interview (Shuy, 2001).

Based on the findings from a previous review of written examination reports on 30 Fine Art theses (Dally et al., 2003) two aspects of higher degree examination in the Visual Arts were selected as a focus for the interviews: (1) examination process and the role of the examiner; and (2) the outcomes, qualities and standards that examiners anticipate and apply for each of the exhibition and written components. Examiners perception of their role and issues concerning examination processes are discussed in a forthcoming publication (Holbrook et al., 2004) while the latter qualities are the focus of the current paper. The interview questions relating to the qualities and standards of doctoral work in the Visual Arts field form the basis of the current analysis. First, examiner perspectives about the overall qualities they look for in a Fine Art thesis are reported. Second, the specific qualities that examiners consider acceptable and unacceptable in each of the exhibition and written components are discussed and finally, the way examiners balance their judgement between these elements is explored.

### Examiner Perceptions

In Australia, there is considerable variation among institutions in the criteria employed for higher degree research awards in the Visual Arts and in the guidelines provided to examiners. A survey of criteria from 15 institutions across all seven Australian states revealed that PhD degrees in Fine or Visual Art are generally, but not always, comprised of both an exhibition and a written component. The written component is typically referred to as the 'exegesis' and most institutions indicated that this document should be treated as providing 'explanation, exposition or interpretation' of the works produced. Some institutions (a quarter of those surveyed) gave candidates the option of presenting a written thesis only instead of a thesis consisting of a combined exhibition and exegesis. However, typically the term 'thesis' was used to describe the combination of exegesis and exhibition and examiners were asked to consider both the studio works and the written component as being mutually essential to establishing the quality, strength and originality of the research.

### Qualities Overall

In the interviews, none of the examiners referred to a situation where they had marked a doctorate comprised of a written component only. In response to the question 'What qualities do you hope to find in the students work overall?' examiners consistently identified that they expected to see a 'relationship' between the exhibition and the exegesis and that they expected the exegesis to 'articulate' and 'clarify' the research element. In line with the UKCGE report (1997) the role of the exegesis was perceived to be the medium by which the meaning and/or significance of the exhibition is conveyed. Examiners indicated that the artwork should demonstrate creativity and originality while the exegesis was seen as a 'supporting' document which positioned the artwork in an appropriate context and explained why the work was 'significant.'

The exegesis investigates the theories and contexts underpinning the creative work. (Informant 3)

I think the written component is secondary and should support the exhibition. (Informant 5)

...the exhibition, that to me is where you are looking for the original contribution. I think the exegesis has got to be able to demonstrate that. (Informant 14)

Another theme emerging from examiners reflections about the overall qualities they anticipate was the notion of 'journey' or 'development'. Examiners wanted to see evidence that candidates had 'progressed' during the course of their degree. This development was discussed in terms of either a process of 'personal discovery' or the resolution to specific challenges or questions identified by the candidate as the starting point in their exegesis.

I like to see evidence of the journey. Without becoming too prosaic I really like to see how we got to where we got with this final work and make some sort of connection between the journey and the exegesis. (Informant 6)

I think that I actually look for development, development from where it appears that they were at to where they are now. .... You know, see where they were and where they've come to. I want to see if they're meeting the goals that they set out at the outset and if they haven't met them, whether they've actually accounted for the change in direction which has brought them to where they are. So I want to see some kind of development. And then at the end, I want to see some evidence of competence, some evidence of imagination and personal development to a high level of understanding and resolution in what they've actually presented. That's in both the exhibition and the exegesis. (Informant 11)

### Qualities of the Exhibition

Although examiners indicated that they approached the examination process looking for an integrated and cohesive connection between the exhibition and the exegesis, they also nominated separate and specific qualities for each element. For most examiners the exhibition was regarded as the 'crucial thing' (Informant 9). When discussing the qualities they expected to see in the exhibition, examiners responses fell into five main categories. These included evidence of a 'journey', research elements, technical proficiency in the execution and presentation of the work, the aesthetic impact of the work and its ability to communicate.

**The Journey:** As discussed previously, the theme of 'journey' was recurrent and examiners commented frequently on the importance of the candidate demonstrating a development in their own understanding of their project and communicating this growth in the exhibition. The fact that the examiners had no difficulty reconciling the demands of evaluating the progress a candidate had made by examining the tangible 'product' of this process concurs with Eisner's (1991) observation that the distinction between the process and product of arts-based research appears to be artificial. Although examiners expected the documentation or written material to explicate some of the processes involved in the creation and representation of the final work, they also expected that this development should be evident in the art work itself.

...in an exhibition, I'd want to get some sort of sense of which works were the earliest in the exhibition and which ones were later so I could just see if there'd been a shift and what character that shift had taken. (Informant 11)

I like to see a certain variety where issues have been approached through more than one media because that demonstrates a sense of enquiry, and openness. I'm fairly sceptical if there's only one work in evidence. I like to see evidence of the journey. (Informant 6)

One examiner suggested that making the process of artistic growth transparent is a defining feature of doctoral artwork and is one element that differentiates it from 'non-academic' exhibitions.

The exhibition has to demonstrate where the student is and where they've been. And as distinct from a commercial exhibition one hopes to see what has gone into it. (Informant 13)

The distinction between 'commercial' or 'normal' art practice and 'academic' art practice was most evident when examiners referred to the research basis of the doctoral exhibition.

Research elements: Although examiners believed that the exegesis should elaborate and communicate the research process underlying the artwork, they also expected that the exhibition should convey the research basis of the project. As indicated by the preceding quote, examiners expected to see evidence of the research process, not only in the written component of the thesis but also in the art works emanating from the doctoral journey. While the majority of examiners expected a lucid and detailed written explanation addressing the candidate's research process, almost half of the examiners also anticipated that the exhibition would reveal to some extent, the inspired proposition, the challenges involved in creating the art work and the final resolution. If we interpret these responses in the context of Durling's 'talking pot' metaphor, these examiners indicated that at the doctoral level, a requirement of the artwork is that, to some extent, the 'pot' can speak for itself.

... studio activity has to my mind always been a viable area of research. I have always thought of ambitious studio work as research activity. ...I have always thought that post-graduate research study is a chance for people in the arts to undertake work that is more self-conscious than normal studio activity. (Informant 10)

I believe passionately that visual arts research actually can be carried out through a practical investigation...and that the investigation can provide genuinely new and original knowledge in the field. (Informant 14)

The exhibition is the core of the research (Informant 3)

While not all examiners nominated the visibility of the research process as one of the qualities they looked for in an exhibition, when examiners were asked to identify what they considered an unacceptable standard, the lack of a research basis was one of the most frequently mentioned aspects.

In the exhibition I would find it unacceptable if there was no evidence of research or thought or in fact competence in carrying it out...So if it appears to be carelessly researched or carelessly carried out or not having some sort of evidence or commitment to research and resolution or development (then it doesn't reach the level she expects) (Informant 11)

I am looking at systematic research and if the exhibition is all over the place, totally disorganised, incoherent in terms of the approach to the work, then I would be very concerned (Informant 9).

An unacceptable standard for the exhibition is...

One where the investigation as it is explained in the exegesis and the abstracts is patently not there in the work itself (Informant 14)

For most examiners, what differentiated an acceptable from an unacceptable standard of exhibition was the candidate's capacity to communicate the development of the project through the final installation.

In the exhibition, I would look for the development of the ideas that the student had begun with, how they had worked with them over the period of years, developed them and then whether they had been able to resolve whatever challenges and difficulties came through in the work and how well they demonstrated that. And that the ideas that they were working with were of a sophisticated, complex level in the exhibition. (Informant 9).

Technical Proficiency: As was evident in the preceding quote, in addition to evidence of the research basis of the project, examiners expected to be presented with artistic practice that was not merely competent but which displayed 'mastery', 'professionalism' and 'sophistication'. Examiners appeared to anticipate that they would be looking at the work of a 'mature' rather than a 'novice' artist.

Well professionalism, in terms of an exhibition, it's something that I would consider worthy of exhibition in any world art museum. (Informant 4)

Another aspect of the work at that level of study is it should be fabricated and presented with a high degree of mastery. It's something intended to look beautifully made and crafted and aesthetically sublime, then anything that was made shoddily or just didn't have that presence, aesthetic presence, would in my opinion, make it less than the standard which is required. (Informant 7)

In addition to the candidate demonstrating mastery of their chosen medium, examiners also wanted to see evidence that the candidate had put sufficient thought, time and effort into the work. While examiners were careful not to equate 'magnitude' with quality, the words 'depth' and 'extensive' featured prominently in examiners responses to what they considered an acceptable standard for the exhibition. This finding suggests that the examiners considered that there was both a minimum quality and quantity of work that they expected at the doctoral level.

I look first of all for work, for extensive work. One thing I hate...is seeing somebody who I know has produced everything in the last three minutes. (Informant 13)

Examiners indicated that they regarded an exhibition as being of an acceptable standard if there was...

...enough work of sufficient depth and coherence with other works (Informant 5).

...an extensive body of work and an extensive sense of process within that work and thought within that work, and transition and change and development (Informant 12)

However, while examiners wanted to see a certain quality and quantity of work as well as evidence of progress and process within the exhibition, they did not want to be shown everything. It is important for candidates to not only skilfully execute the work but to also present their work in a 'thoughtful', 'sensitive' and 'authoritative' manner. Fordon (2000) notes that the amount of planning, organization, reflection and analysis that goes into both the creation and the presentation of an exhibition is often underestimated. The examiners indicated that 'intelligent editing' is an important aspect of a professionally presented exhibition.

You know, they should be well prepared to leave things out for the good of the show and for the good of the viewing experience. (Informant 5)

It's that kind of quality of presentation and decision making about what to show and how to show it. (Informant 1)

One examiner commented that an inappropriate level of understanding about the 'hanging of a show' could be a cause for asking for a resubmission. In the examination of a tangible creative product, it is conceivable that a candidate could address problems of presentation in a resubmission, but it is hard to envisage how a candidate could respond to examiner dissatisfaction with the quality of the art work itself. While the practicalities of dealing with this eventuality were not pursued in the current interviews, a number of the examiners indicated that they would be prepared to disqualify a candidate if their art work was deemed to be 'unacceptable'. These examiners appeared to be concerned that they have a standard to uphold in terms of artistic competence and it would be detrimental to their field if they accepted work that was merely adequate or less than excellent.

I'd want to see work that was exemplary in the field (Informant 11)

Well, look this is the terminal degree in visual arts. You can't get away with less really... You do feel as though if you let shoddy work through, then the next generation of artists will have to pay for it. (Informant 3)

Aesthetic qualities: For a minority of examiners, methodological proficiency was a minimum standard and these examiners anticipated that the exhibition would also demonstrate qualities that surpassed mere technical accomplishment. These qualities included the capacity of the exhibition to 'surprise', 'excite' 'move' and 'communicate' with its audience.

If there are shivers running up and down your spine then you feel as if it's getting to you. (Informant 4)

From time to time I'm looking for real excitement! (Informant 2)

I do think that the work should speak to you and you can be surprised by that. (Informant 12)

When talking about technical proficiency and research evidence the examiners appeared to be speaking from the stance of the well-informed 'art expert'. However, those examiners who identified the aesthetic qualities that they would anticipate in an exhibition took on a broader perspective of how an audience, not just an examiner, might react to viewing the candidate's artwork. In these cases, the examiners identified the role of the artist as a



'communicator' of new perspectives and acknowledged that a successful exhibition should have the capacity to bring its audience to a new understanding.

I think art is about communication and how the work communicates. (Informant 12)

Not everyone is going to like everything but it should be work that is strong enough to communicate individually as well as collectively (Informant 5)

What impact is this work having on me? Is it attracting my awe? Is it attracting some new thought, new perception, new way of looking at the world? Is it interesting me so that I am hovering on the work so that I am being attracted to it, to study it, looking at the whole space, being enveloped by the whole space, being drawn to read the captions, to take on the whole thing of going into that space of total experience. (Informant 4)

However, as indicated in the preceding quote, the impact of the work on the examiner appeared to be of greater importance. The capacity of an artwork to communicate with a wider audience was mentioned infrequently and did not appear to be either a common or essential criteria among most of the examiners. In fact, one examiner (Informant 10) commented that most PhD exhibitions 'do not see the light of day' and therefore have limited potential to 'make a difference to human culture'.

#### Unacceptable Aspects of an Exhibition

Interestingly, although examiners nominated evidence of development, research elements, technical proficiency and aesthetic appeal as desirable criteria for acceptable work, when asked to identify what aspects they considered unacceptable in an exhibition, examiners focused mainly on an absence of a research framework or a disjunction between the exegesis and the exhibition, with some examiners indicating that methodological 'incompetence' was also unacceptable. However, examiners seemed disconcerted by the question on unacceptable standards for the exhibition and a number of respondents commented that it was unusual to encounter unsatisfactory levels of artistic practice in doctoral examinations.

I haven't found too many unacceptable exhibitions. (Informant 12)

I have not been in that situation when that has happened. (Informant 5)

References to inadequately researched exhibitions were much more common with respondents indicating that they were judging more than just the artistic merit of an exhibition. When pressed to consider what elements would disqualify a candidate from achieving a judgement of 'doctoral' quality for their exhibition, the examiners most commonly identified the absence of a research context or framework.

I find it difficult to answer that question about unacceptable. I don't usually think bad or good or anything like that. Obviously, I'm talking about the experience of engaging with the art and realizing that it is more than just the surface of it. (Informant 12)

What's bad art? Gee, that's a good question. I'm not necessarily looking in a judgemental sense of 'good' art or 'bad' art, but whether the original hypothesis is carried out with absolute authority and conviction. (Informant 4)

Finally, there appeared to be agreement that candidates who attempted to 'push the boundaries' of existing practice should be applauded, even if their attempts were

unsuccessful. Examiners acknowledged that it was preferable for candidates to undertake a challenge rather than avoid risks by presenting a safe 'formula driven' exhibition.

I like to be challenged. I like to find innovation (Informant 13)

I don't like it when there isn't any evidence of any kind of experimentation (Informant 6)

Although the examiners used terms such as 'new', 'fresh', 'imaginative' and 'innovative' to describe desirable characteristics, very few examiners volunteered 'originality' as a quality that they looked for when examining an exhibition. When directly asked whether they expected to see evidence of originality in a Visual Arts thesis, examiners appeared to be evenly divided, with about half of the examiners appearing equivocal about the usefulness of this concept in judging visual arts doctorates while the other half indicated that originality was almost a given in any artistic process. Among this latter group there was almost unanimous agreement that the exhibition should demonstrate originality and the exegesis should explain and contextualise the significance of the candidate's contribution.

### Qualities of the Exegesis

The majority of the respondents indicated that the purpose of the exegesis is to explain the investigation process, to contextualise the focus of the work and to articulate how and why the work is significant.

I believe a PhD should be new knowledge and I think the paper has a really important role in ... giving the candidate the opportunity to prove how this is the case. (Informant 15)

Overwhelmingly, the exegesis was seen as a 'supporting' document to the artwork.

The paper should be an intelligent and thoughtful backup for the work and also it should provide a verbal kind of depth to your understanding of the work. (Informant 5)

Well, the exegesis – the same sort of fluidity and lucidity of expression in the exegesis. I think it's got to be well written, I think it's got to attend to the requirements that the institution has set down – to do that clearly and thoroughly – and generally that means to explain the aim of the project, to contextualise the project in terms of other practice – both of other artists and earlier practice, to talk about the methodology and the way the project's been brought to the mind, plus any other “new territory” – what it is the project's about: doing all of that in an eloquent and suitably sound academic way. (Informant 2)

The exegesis should be more explanatory to the point of the work .....It creates a sort of background document that aligns the art in its relevant body of artistic experience or history or ideas or theories (Informant 13)

In this way, the visual arts exegesis appears to fulfil a similar role to the literature review in conventional theses by positioning the work in the current context of its field. Similar to examiners in traditional research disciplines, the candidates are expected to demonstrate a 'comprehensive' understanding of the subject being explored and provide evidence of 'broad reading and broad research'. One respondent used the discourse of 'scientific research' to explain the role of the exegesis and its relationship to the artwork.

...the student is actually addressing a problem or a thesis or posing themselves a quest at the beginning that they then in scientific terms “prove” although that's inappropriate

language for art. But investigate thoroughly so they're turning over every stone and unwrapping every aspect of their topic so that they're drawing from it some conclusion that they've either expressed in the information in conjunction with the written thesis or embedding it in the work and the thesis addressing the work. That's the relationship really. (Informant 7)

In contrast, another respondent suggested that such a 'systematic' approach to documentation may be incompatible with the chaotic nature of artistic creation.

If you're going to do these degrees based on studio practice I wonder whether in fact there aren't close parallels between the kinds of demands the supervisor should be making of the work with the kinds of things that are expected in a written thesis. I really don't know, I'm just thinking... you know, the kind of way in which when you're writing through, you check back to see whether what you're doing now is actually contributing to your overall project, whether this page makes any kind of sense in terms of what you said you were going to do... I mean, maybe this is all completely irrelevant to studio practice which is a lot more like throwing a lot of things up in the wind and seeing what happens, because the creative process does have an awful lot of random in it. (Informant 1)

Despite the fact that the preferred medium for most Visual Arts candidates would presumably not be verbal, the majority of examiners expected high levels of literary competence with requirements for the exegesis to be 'written in an academic way' and with 'scholarly rigour'. Most examiners adhered to the belief that it is reasonable to expect 'lucid verbal expositions' from visual arts doctoral candidates.

A student who undertakes a Higher Research Degree should be capable of clearly expressing what it is they're doing, how they've done it and what they think the results are. (Informant 10)

Similar to their responses about unacceptable standards for the exhibition, when examiners were asked to identify an unacceptable standard for the exegesis they identified inadequate research and poor presentation as the primary indicators of unsatisfactory work. Examiners identified as unacceptable, research related features such as, 'sketchy research', 'broad generalizations without qualification' and 'inadequate references'. Work that was 'poorly expressed' or 'poorly edited' was criticised, along with 'shoddy presentation', 'muddy thinking' and ideas that were 'vacuous, disconnected and incoherent'.

### Balancing their Judgement

When examiners were asked to explain how they balanced their judgement between the written and practical components of the Visual Arts thesis, they reported that at times this was dictated by the institutional guidelines. However, when free to make their own determination, the majority of examiners indicated that the exhibition was for them, the most crucial component. If there was a disparity between the quality of work in the exhibition and the quality of work in the exegesis, most examiners suggested that a good exegesis could not compensate for poor art work, though a good exhibition may 'carry' a weaker written component.

Obviously you're looking at the exhibition. There is no way that the exegesis could actually make up for poor practice or poor presentation of the practice. (Informant 1)

If the exhibition is very, very strong it would carry a weaker document, perhaps, on balance. But the other way around, where the document might be very elegant and articulate but the work is underdeveloped, I think that would not carry in the same way. (Informant 2)

Well I take the viewpoint that if it is in fine art, then the exhibition is the crucial thing, so that if a student presented a brilliant exegesis and an appalling exhibition, I would not see that it would necessarily be worthy of the degree because if they had created a post-graduate degree, where the studio component, was, if you like, the flagship of it, then that has got to be the thing that swings it. On the other hand, if it was brilliant work and a poor exegesis, it would, with some changes in the writing, be acceptable. (Informant 9)

However, one very experienced examiner took the opposite perspective. This examiner indicated that he would 'forgive' poor practice and pass a thesis 'even if the painting is 'ham-fisted' and a 'little ordinary' if he is convinced that 'the goals were pursued and achieved'.

I think the things got to stand or fall according to the project. These things are about research questions and research answers and that's the primacy of it. (Informant 10)

## Conclusions

In summary, this sample of examiners appeared to be relatively consistent in the criteria they employ to judge a Visual Arts doctoral thesis. For the exhibition, the desirable qualities identified included candidates demonstrating the development and successful resolution of their research focus, an extensive level of application and exemplary technical proficiency as well as an ability to represent and communicate original ideas. Examiners expected that the exegesis would position or contextualise the work within its field, explain the research process and/or clarify the contribution and significance of the project. Examiners appeared to have no difficulty in reconciling their judgement of the process of the doctoral journey with its product. They expected the artwork to 'speak for itself' (Durling, 2002) while at the same time anticipating that the exegesis would continue the conversation. Overall, examiners expected to see clear evidence of a relationship between the written and practical components, with the artwork primarily seen as the defining element in determining whether or not the degree should be awarded.

On the surface, there appeared to be less consensus surrounding the discourse about the purpose of a PhD in Visual Arts and how to reconcile a disparity between the quality of the practice and the quality of the exegesis. While the majority of examiners indicated that exemplary or at least proficient craftsmanship was essential, one examiner conceded that poor practice may be considered acceptable if the research elements underlying and informing the project were adequately pursued and resolved. However, such a sentiment is not incompatible with the view cited by the majority of the examiners, that the main reason for judging an exhibition as unacceptable is the absence of a clearly conceived research focus. Although it was rarely directly articulated in the interviews it appeared that the examiners had a distinct framework by which they judged doctoral exhibitions, which one respondent referred to as an 'academic evaluation'. This framework differed somewhat from the perspective that is typically adopted when evaluating commercial or 'non-academic' art by its requirement for the artwork to demonstrate evidence of the candidate's 'journey' or of the project's growth and development. Examiners were in agreement that they were not judging 'good art' or 'bad art' and that that the candidate needed to demonstrate something more than artistic merit or potential with one examiner

commenting, 'In a way you don't need a higher degree to be an artist, do you?' (Informant 1).

It was generally expected that the exegesis should be an articulate and 'well-researched' account of the artists 'quest' and its resolution. Examiners did not comment on the difficulties this may present to candidates whose main form of expression may be visual rather than literary (Hockey, 2003). However, as indicated previously, examiners tended to be more lenient with a 'weak' exegesis than they were with unsatisfactory studio practice. Apart from the prominence given to the practical component because it was seen as the 'flagship' of a visual arts degree, examiners felt they could make recommendations for changes to an exegesis and that it would be reasonable to request revision and resubmission of the written component.

Although the question of how an exhibition judged to be unacceptable could be revised and reassessed was not directly addressed, the issue of how to reconcile inconsistent standards between aspects of a thesis is not confined to doctorates containing two different types of product. Powell and McCauley (2002) have observed that similar questions arise in traditional doctorates where examiners may be dissatisfied with fundamental aspects of a study, such as the research design, but deem that the candidate has adequately explained the limitations of the methodology employed. Similar to the situation in a Visual Arts degree, where the artwork is 'completed' it is difficult to insist that candidate's refashion their study in line with the examiners ideas about how a study should have been designed and conducted. It is perhaps in these cases, that examiners may forgive 'ham-fisted' practice, if the written exposition adequately compensates for deficiencies which cannot be revised.

The fact that there was a general agreement about the qualities and standards that examiners anticipated in a Visual Arts doctorate seem all the more remarkable given that there is such variation in the guidelines provided by Australian institutions and that this group of examiners came from a range of different backgrounds, including curators, art historians, art practitioners and academics. The degree of consensus attained in the current study contrasts with the results reported by Powell and McCauley (2002) of the interviews they conducted with 29 examiners from traditional disciplines. These researchers found that there was little agreement between examiners with regard to the criteria they employed to evaluate PhD theses and that the 'implicit' criteria examiners applied, appeared to be idiosyncratic.

While the current study was limited to a small sample of examiners, their views are important when they are considered in the context of the small pool of examiners who are currently available to evaluate higher degrees in the Fine and Visual Arts (Hockey, 2003). As research degrees are relatively new to this field, there is still much to be resolved regarding the form that the thesis should take and the standards by which it is judged. In traditional disciplines the examiners have been referred to as 'gate-keepers' because of their capacity to determine who is and who is not allowed to 'enter the 'academy' (Jackson & Tinkler, 2000). Because of the evolving nature of practice-based doctorates and the examiners' role in determining acceptable qualities for this degree and thus shaping the nature of the courses being provided, the current group of examiners in the Fine and Visual Arts field may be better described as 'foundation builders'.

The current study, which involved examiners from diverse backgrounds, suggests that there is considerable agreement, at least in the Australian context, about what elements should comprise a Visual Arts doctorate and how these components should be assessed.

However, while these examiners appeared confident in their own ability to 'judge' a thesis, they were eager to 'continue the conversation', not only about acceptable and unacceptable forms and standards, but also about how to support students and supervisors in the PhD process. As noted by Piantanida et al (2003), a continuing discourse among members of the arts-based community will contribute to the evolving articulation and development of appropriate methods and standards for conducting, guiding and evaluating practice-based research.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Informant Number \_\_\_\_\_

Introductory comments:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in our interviews with Fine Art examiners. We are very grateful that we can draw on your opinions and expertise.

We have a few sets of questions focusing on the role of examination in Fine Art, the different components of the examination process, the qualities you look for in a Fine Art thesis and any challenges you face in the examination process.

We will be recording this session, please tell us if you want us to stop the tape, otherwise it will run for the duration. Please feel free to use examples and illustrations in the knowledge that identifying information will be deleted from the transcripts and specific comments will not be attributed to individuals. Transcripts will be sent to you for checking and additional comment.

Do you have any questions or queries about this interview and its use?

Did you receive the interview questions prior to this interview? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_

Thank you the interview will now commence and we are switching on the tape recorder

Questions:

To begin please tell us what experience you have had examining research higher degrees in Fine Art?

First your thoughts on the process and its components

What type of guidelines or knowledge do you draw on to help you examine?

Have you a particular philosophy about examination in Fine Art?

Are you aware of taking on a particular role or roles during the examination process? Do they differ across different components of the examination?

What particular qualities and skills do you think an examiner in Fine Art should have?

Have you been involved in a viva? YES\_\_\_NO\_\_\_

What specific contribution do you think a viva can make to the examination process?

Do examiners generally reach a collaborative agreement?

The qualities you look for in the student's work

When you accept the invitation to examine what qualities do you hope to find in the student's work overall?

What qualities do you look for in the exhibition and what qualities do you look for in the exegesis?

What do you consider as an acceptable standard for the exhibition? The exegesis?

What do you consider an unacceptable level of work for the exhibition? The exegesis?

In what ways do you balance your judgment between the exhibition and the written component to determine a final result?

Do you think that the way the examination process is conducted can influence your judgement?- for example- how does reading the exegesis before you see the exhibition influence your judgement of the exhibition?- and vice versa- how does seeing the exhibition influence your judgement of the exegesis?

Your thoughts on originality and contribution, particularly in regard to PhD theses.

Firstly, how do you interpret the request to judge whether a PhD makes an original contribution to the field?

Do you expect to find originality and/or evidence of a significant contribution in both the exegesis and the exhibition?

What impact do you think your written report has? (e.g. on candidate, on supervisor)



Do you feel the university committee takes full account of your comments?

The last section deals with your feelings about any challenges or constraints connected with Fine Art examination.

In your opinion are there particular challenges or issues connected with examination? Can you please provide one or two examples to illustrate typical difficulties or challenges you have faced.

How do you think these issues can be addressed?

From your own experience what do you believe are the main training needs of Fine Art supervisors or examiners?

Finally, there is debate in most other disciplines about whether the PhD should be regarded as an end-point or a beginning. What position would you take in this debate in regard to the Fine Art PhD?

That concludes our list of questions. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like to add or discuss?

to cite this journal article:

Dally, K. et al (2004) Assessing the exhibition and the exegesis in visual arts higher degrees: perspectives of examiners. Working Papers in Art and Design 3

ISSN 1466-4917