



# PROCEEDINGS OF SYMPOSIUM ON DEVELOPMENT OF ARTS EDUCATION

ARTS EDUCATION FOR TOMORROW

HONG KONG ART SCHOOL



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## FOREWORD

The Arts Education for Tomorrow Symposium, presented by Hong Kong Art School (a division of Hong Kong Arts Centre) and held on 6 and 7 October 2016 in Hong Kong, aimed to stimulate dialogue on arts education practice among practitioners and researchers in arts education. The conference theme opens up discussions towards a key question: How does arts education respond to the needs of tomorrow's social development? The two-day symposium presented local and overseas speakers of different disciplines in visual arts and performing arts who shared practice and reflected on the opportunities and challenges of arts education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Attended by over 250 participants, including artists, art teachers, art students, art administrators, researchers and government officials, the symposium fostered fruitful exchange and generated rich ideas in relation to the practice and the future planning of arts education. To further illustrate and acknowledge the processes and outcomes of artistic creation and research, a series of visual arts and performing arts activities were also organised alongside the symposium.

These symposium proceedings document the presentation of the speakers, discussion amongst the participants, as well as visual documentation of the arts activities presented during the symposium. In compiling this volume, we hope that this will serve not only as a source of information about the symposium, but also a stimulus for further dialogues and reflections. The materials are organised according to the structure of the symposium, starting with a review of the landscape of current arts education in the first panel session. It is followed by an examination of the roles of the arts in the contemporary society through the second panel session, and an investigation of innovative approaches to arts education in the third panel session. Finally, the concluding session consolidates key issues

arising from the three panel sessions, and poses further questions for reflection with regard to the field of arts education.

The notions of rethinking about arts education and renegotiating boundaries were variedly stressed in the different discussions within the symposium. We hope by sharing these proceedings, the readers will join us and all the speakers in considering new paradigms and actions in our current practice as well as our future planning, with an aim to nurture a new generation of art practitioners and educators.

We thank all presenters and participants for their contributions to these proceedings. We would like to also express our gratitude to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council for commissioning the symposium, the Asia Society Hong Kong Center for providing venue support, and Lam Kin Chung Morning Sun Charity Fund for providing sponsorship support to the fringe activities.

Hong Kong Art School  
(a division of Hong Kong Arts Centre)



# Theory as Practice and Practice as Theory: Praxis and the PhD in Art

Frank VIGNERON

**Introduction: to take care of the distinction between DFA and PhD in Art**

The distinction between a Doctorate of Fine Arts and a PhD in Art need not occupy us here. Even RMIT University in Melbourne, still the only doctorate level programme in studio art available to residents in Hong Kong, decided to change their DFA into a PhD in art. Preferring to abandon the misleading ambiguity inherent in defining the DFA as a "professional" doctorate, most institutions now prefer the more open-ended notion of PhD in Studio Art, a notion that also seems to fit better the expectations of practising artists. That choice is, however, strictly an institutional question and does not raise fundamental issues about the nature of such programmes. The title of PhD in Art to talk about a doctoral level degree will therefore be the only one used in this article.

**Theory as Practice**

This paper revolves around the issues raised by Jonathan Dronsfield, Reader in Theory and Philosophy of Art at the University of Reading, UK, and supervisor of many PhD in Studio Art candidates, with the idea of "theory as practice" as the underlying principle for this postgraduate degree Art. In one of his papers, titled *Theory as Practice: Notes for Discipline*, Dronsfield tries to define the limits between theory and practice, limits that he deliberately attempts to blur by opening up a space of reflection between the artwork, something produced by the artist, and what is said about the artwork, something produced by other viewers. It is that liminal space of reflection that the artist must occupy in order to close the gap between theory and practice:

"Part of what research in visual art is, always is, is to draw out either or both what the art says, and what can be said about the art. We are interested here in the former, what the art says about itself or seeks to say about itself. And we will call what the art says about itself

something written in the work, something textual about what can be seen. Visual art is not simply visual – there is always something written in the work, something textual, in what is seen, whether or not "words" are present in the form of legible signs. And the two, what is seen and what is written in what is seen, need not be in correspondence. Indeed, necessarily they are disjunctive and not reducible one to the other. And it is in the space of that disjunction between what is visible and what is textual about a work that a researcher on art resides (whatever the "model" or methodology of their PhD). The disjunction between what is visible and what is textual is the space drawn out in the form of the researcher's writing..." (Dronsfield, "Theory As Practice: Notes for Discipline")

In the end, after mentioning the group Art & Language (that famously considered that the practice of theory in writing was just as valid as the making of art objects) as well as Arthur Danto (the philosopher who claims that the question "What is art?" has been handed over to philosophers), Dronsfield concludes with an emphasis on a "practical and performative use of theory":

"The practical and performative use of theory by artists reveals something not just about the theory that theory "in itself" is unable to show, but about the *materiality* of such text. To use theoretical text as material may have the effect of allowing the artist to assume greater control over the conditions of the presentation and interpretation of their work, even if it constitutes an attempt to loosen or otherwise disrupt the boundaries of art, but it would seem to be always something else as well, a question as to where lies the distinction between theory and practice. The emergent use of theoretical text as a material constituent of contemporary art



practice is another way of questioning the order of dependency between theory and practice." (Dronsfield, "Theory As Practice: Notes for Discipline")

This definition of a gap between theory and practice that could be occupied by the artist and his/her "practical and performative use of theory" can be explored further with definitions provided by one of the most influential academics in the field of art in the UK, Christopher Frayling, former rector of the Royal College of Art and former chairman of the Arts Council England (but certainly more famous for his research in popular culture).

#### Research to art and research through art

Within the field of practices possible for the PhD in Studio Art, Christopher Frayling defined two possible methodologies, i.e. research to art and through art, that he articulated in three possible fields. Christopher Frayling studied this idea for research as praxis (after Herbert Read in 1944) in a number of published and unpublished papers (in particular "Research in Art and Design" for the *Royal College of Art Research Papers* and "To Art and Through Art" for a book titled *A Curriculum for Artists*). But it is in an unpublished paper delivered at a conference at the Guildhall School, London, that he defined the most clearly what he understands by this concept. For Frayling, there are several ways to reflect more profoundly, with text and research, on art practices, and therefore, there are three kinds of research possible in a doctoral degree in studio arts.

The first kind is what he calls "research into the arts", which we would call in Hong Kong, with the sort of postgraduate research undertaken in the department of Fine Arts both at the Chinese University and at the University of Hong Kong, a PhD in Art History. It therefore does not need to occupy us here. The second category is what he calls "research through the arts",

which will not occupy us either here since it is the sort of research, often technology-based, that is the domain of design education institutions. It would be the sort of postgraduate research undertaken in the Design Department of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University or even in the School of Creative Media of the Hong Kong City University. There are of course many overlaps between the domain of design and that of Fine Arts, but this discussion would lead us too far from our present topic.

The third category, and the only one I would retain for a possible doctoral degree in Hong Kong, is the one Christopher Frayling called "research for the arts", or "the arts as research":

"The third category is still by far the most contentious: that is, research for the arts, or the arts as research. Research where the end product is an artifact or a performance or where the thinking is, so to speak, embodied in the artifact, or where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication at all, but in the sense of visual or musical or physical communication or product semantics or the experience of the moving image." (Frayling, "Research In and Through the Arts: What's the Problem?").

A doctoral degree in studio art has therefore to be something else and that something else might as well be defined starting with what has been the main issue with the idea of a doctorate in art especially in the US: the idea that a doctorate thesis has to produce new knowledge. We might take the problem from the other end though: the doctoral degree in studio art would precisely be the *topos* where practising artists establish that their art practice is the creation of new knowledge, a place where the "anything goes" of the Euro-American artists of the 1970s gets

formulated in words by situating the art practice within an art historical framework and substantiating it with the appropriate theoretical basis. That would be the simplest way to define the in-between praxis defined by Jonathan Dronsfield. In a sense, the PhD in Studio Art is a degree where professional artists become "academics", not necessarily in order to become one professionally, but more to become someone with a similar rigour in self-analysis and understanding of their art practice's position within the contemporary art field. In so many words, the requirements of writing a thesis would turn them into theorists; it is in that sense that they would produce new knowledge. Some examples of that type of postgraduate research will illustrate that idea of theory as practice/practice as theory.

#### Examples form (almost) around the world

Although the PhD in Studio Art already has a fairly long history in Europe and the Commonwealth (Hong Kong's first introduction to an equivalent degree was through the possibility offered by RMIT to obtain it through their distance learning programme), it is still slow to develop in the United States for reasons that need not be addressed here. The question of the requirements for a PhD in art was part of a symposium in Chicago organised by James Elkins on the theme "What do artists know?" Elkins is also the editor of a book on the issues raised by the creation of a research degree for studio art (*Artists with PhDs. On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art* published in 2009). The two following examples from around the world (one in the UK and one on the other side of the globe in Australia), chosen simply out of personal interest for the topic, is taken from the second part of this very instructive volume where artists with PhD provided abstract of their dissertations.

- Phoebe von Hold  
Phoebe von Hold, who is in 2012 artist in

residence at King's College London, wrote a dissertation titled *Diderot's Paradox of Alienation: Critique and Affirmation of Communication in Le Neveu de Rameau* for which she obtained a PhD in Fine Art at the Slade School of Fine Art in the UK. She is very much a performance artist, although her practice includes many other media.

According to Elkins writing about her thesis:

"Her reading is not a study of the influence of Diderot on Brecht, but an analytical investigation of the "conceptual difference and contrast" between texts written in two historical periods. She means to call into question "the ideological and aesthetic assumptions underlying Brecht's concept of alienation". The concept of the actor's self-alienation leads, in the two writers, to very different conclusions." (270)

Based on a profound knowledge of the issue of alienation in the works of Enlightenment philosophers and its subsequent analysis in the early 20th Century, Phoebe von Held infused all her stage work and her art work with the issues raised in her research. Here also, it is not a question of where the limits between theory and practice stand, but clearly a question of where the artist stands: she found a place in that gap Jonathan Dronsfield identified and created an art practice that clearly stems from that idea of "art as research" formulated by Christopher Frayling. Continuing that reflection on Diderot, Phoebe von Held also produced a series of self-reflective animations that are as intriguing and entertaining as they are philosophically coherent.

- Jo-Anne Dugan

Primarily a photographer, Jo-Anne Dugan wrote a thesis titled *Beyond the Surface: The Contemporary Experience of the Italian Renaissance* for a Doctorate of Creative Arts she obtained from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University



of Technology, Sydney. According to James Elkins:

"For Duggan, museums that have Italian Renaissance art "paradoxically intersect 'high' art with a phenomenal popularity that appears ever-expanding through endless reproductions and representation". Ultimately, she hopes that her thesis will "argue for a slower, more considered engagement with art that encourages the viewer to experience the sensual as well as the intellectual aspects that this opulent environment offers". (170)

Straddling the line between art history, the sociology of art and art practices, Jo-Ann Dugan produced her reflection in the form of text and images that cannot really be separated, even though most viewers would experience them as independent images. This is actually where the point of contention really lies: if it is possible to present the resulting visual artworks without the accompanying written research, is it still a form of art where theory acts as practice and practice as theory? The answer might simply be that we are only dealing with the creative phase of these intertwining of practice and theory. The question of the reception of such visual artworks is quite another matter and, in many ways, does not involve the artist since, if the viewer is the equal of the artist, what becomes of the visual artworks in the mind of the viewer is another, quite independent, issue. In any event, the following cases, all from Hong Kong artists, make it clear that the question of whether such research can produce truly creative art practices and produce new knowledge makes the question of reception less pressing.

#### Examples from Hong Kong

The desire to obtain a PhD in Art has been quite widespread in Hong Kong and RMIT's offer of a DFA in a distance learning mode has allowed many local artists to engage in this reflection about theory as practice,

since the basic requirements called for an "exegesis" of no less than 15,000 words (the difference between a "thesis" and an "exegesis" will also not occupy us here). Three fairly recently completed DFA from Hong Kong will show how research and art making can be integrated into a praxis undertaken at doctorate level. Tim Li's research explores questions related to public space in public performances, Koon Wai Bong's research concerns the notions of the traditional and the contemporary, while Phoebe Man's research straddles the line between the public and the private in an exploration of issues both profoundly personal and rooted in societal problems.

#### • Tim Li 李民偉

In addition to the art making itself, Tim Li also published a book on his DFA project. Taking a certain type of folding bed as the core of his art practice, Tim Li used this object to reflect on the concept of public space in Hong Kong. Starting from a historical perspective – explaining how the folding bed became the standard measure of public housing in Hong Kong – Tim Li exploited this object in a series of performances involving the inhabitants of very specific areas of Hong Kong. Tim Li's use of public space as well as the bed as signifier of private space makes of his work just as much a reflection on cultural identity as a series of considerations on the general opposition of the public and the private in a modern city.

In the section of his book called "The debate", Tim Li interviewed several Hong Kong personalities involved in art making, but also policy making, with a concern for the notion of public art. Out of these interviews, we are left with a solid understanding of the possibilities of an artist's intervention in the public space in Hong Kong where that issue has generated quite a number of debates over the last few years. In these interviews, it is the question of what is allowed and what is not allowed



in public spaces that Tim Li also wants to consider with his object, the bed, as well as with his public performances. In that sense, his work covers the whole gamut of contemporary art practices, from political and administrative considerations to aesthetic ones as well as the concepts more specifically involved in the questions of performance and its relationship with the art object.

In his conclusion, Tim Li answers clearly the research questions he gave at the beginning of his exegesis. His ambitious project of performances, involving large numbers of people, are straightforward explorations of the issues of public and private space in a dense urban area: very clear in its development but extremely rich in meaning, Tim Li relied as much on his knowledge of the history of Hong Kong as on his thoughtful approach as an architect to develop a body of work that not only brings new knowledge to the field of public art but is also entirely satisfying as an art project in an aesthetic and relational sense. The fact that he succeeded in producing these works and showcased them in a beautifully designed book is another manifestation of the fact that his reflection not only succeeded in producing new knowledge but made it transparently explicit through different means ranging from historical descriptions to the interviews conducted by the artist while producing the various levels of his art practice.

• Koon Wai Bong 管偉邦

A lecturer in Fine Arts at the Academy of Visual Arts, Koon Wai Bong made of his reflection on what constitutes "Chinese painting", i.e. *guohua* (國畫), the central theme of his DFA research. The "Epilogue" of his book, *Reworking the Classics* (經典再造), contains, among many other articles about his own work written by local and international art critics, sections of his exegesis for a DFA. Among many other detailed theoretical analysis of his painting practice, he explains how he conceived differently such classically Chinese notions

as "void" (*kong* 空 or *xu* 虛) and "solid" (*shi* 實) in works like the painting titled *Reworking the Classics* (經典再造). He presents these concepts as not only compositional requirements but also endowed with profound philosophical meaning in literati painting theory. Making the choice of, as he wrote, "exaggerating" the "void", he ensures that his very subtle paintings cannot be mistaken with those of, for instance, the Orthodox painters of the early Qing dynasty.

But the novelty does not stop at these striking and extremely elegant choices and the way this multi-paneled work was displayed also plays an important part: "In *Reworking the Classics*, I demonstrate how to display paintings in multi-panels in which the overall rhythm does not undermine the completeness of individual painting." (Koon 2010, 95). The choice of an "unusual" display actually goes even further as Koon Wai Bong decided to mount these works on rather thick stretchers, making them protrude from the wall in ways that would never have been seen in any *guohua* paintings even from the time of the Lingnan School for instance. One can see with this single example from his research that the exploration of literati painting theory was a stimulus to explore new possibilities, thus illustrating how theory and praxis cannot be separated.

• Phoebe Man Ching Ying 文晶瑩

Assistant professor in the School of Creative Media, Hong Kong City University, Phoebe Man successfully developed a body of works concerning the issue of sexual violence. Herself a survivor of sexual assault, she studied the sociological and cultural issues in the context of Hong Kong by analysing several sources (including research undertaken in Hong Kong on that subject as well as blogs where victims and concerned citizens are addressing the issue). This background study supported very efficiently her visual works and gave it a sense of seriousness that made its relative lightness all the more striking. To

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support her research into a visual media, Phoebe Man introduced the works of several artists who approached similar issues. The works of Sue Williams, Nancy Spero, Yoko Ono and Ana Mendieta were analysed and contextualised to reveal their strategies in approaching sexual assault. Phoebe Man covered with this array of artists the entire gamut of emotions one can feel in front of the issue of sexual assault.

Phoebe Man studied carefully the works of these female artists generally active in North America in terms of their strategies and themes but chose to bring her work in the context of practices clearly identifiable as Chinese. She chose the medium of Chinese paper cutting (of which she wrote a short analytical history in her exegesis) to convey the notions raised by her own experience and the study of the social problems of sexual assault and, in so doing, gave to the work a quality of lightness and airiness that might feel inconsistent with the theme explored. On the contrary, it was precisely this choice that made the work all the more efficient and disturbing: by choosing paper cutting and displaying it in a very beautiful setting, it only reinforced the horror of the problem of sexual assault by forcing the viewer into a state of near-innocence. Looking at sexual assault from a place of loveliness, it made the issue all the more disturbing for the viewer.

The first stage of the creative process involved in creating this show was narrative, and Phoebe Man wrote stories based on her own experience, that of a friend and a case she read about on the Internet. This writing process gave her new insights into her own experience and the social and cultural issue of sexual assault and generated the strategies developed in this exhibition. Such a clear-headed method is obviously one of the strengths of the artist who could thus develop the various stages of making without falling victim again of her own experience. For her exegesis, Phoebe Man described clearly and exhaustively the process of creation as well

as the finished exhibition. Her study of precedents is also clearly conducted and contextualised her own work very efficiently, thus also exemplifying how research and reflection can feed an actual art practice.

#### **Concluding remarks: "creating new knowledge" as a secondary requirement**

Although it remains important to define the requirements for a PhD in Studio Art as a way to create new knowledge, it should not be the main preoccupation when defining what candidates should accomplish to qualify for such a degree. Praxis and its "writability" are more important, describing the creative process through a reflection manifesting itself into a body of work (from the most material – like painting or sculpture – to the most immaterial – like relational aesthetics) and a piece of writing that cannot be separated.

The very idea of knowledge is in fact ambiguous. A very simple distinction could be made for instance between scientific factual knowledge and a more "humanistic" form where additional distinctions between epistemological knowledge – certain, based on truth and established by an academic community – could be opposed to doxological knowledge – not so certain, founded on opinion and shared by everybody. The difference between episteme and doxa, already present in Aristotle, was still a fundamental distinction on what constitutes knowledge in the works of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the late 20th Century. Although founding PhD in Art research in the desire to "create new knowledge" is possible and important, the very vagueness of what constitutes knowledge in art research should in fact put that requirement behind others, more important, like the relevance of the art practice itself to the artist and his/her social and cultural context. Experienced PhD in Art supervisors, like Jonathan Dronsfield and Christopher Frayling, put the emphasis on different requirements than the mere desire to "create new knowledge": this idea



### PANEL THREE

of theory as practice, where the written word and the artworks are not separated, and the idea of "to or through" art, where even the limits between art history and art practices are blurred beyond recognition.

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