This paper explores Ochirbat Naidansuren's PhD in the Visual Arts as a case study for a broader discussion of the nascent degree. A successful and accredited Mongolian Socialist Realist during the late Cold War period, Naidansuren relocated to Australia, where his qualification was not recognised, and recommenced his education several years after Mongolia's transition to democracy at Curtin University. His currently ongoing PhD, *Political parody in Mongolian contemporary art* (unpublished manuscript, 2012) entails an exegesis (or written component) steeped in historical/philosophical/visual analysis, and a body of artwork (or creative component) that experiments with the fusion of related historical, political, cultural and personal images. This undertaking combines reference points of shifting aesthetic and ideological pressures refracted through memory, identity and individual experience. The ensuing case study of this doctoral research presents Naidansuren's investigation as representative of the value unique to the PhD in the Visual Arts. This paper also – taking from Baker et al.'s suggestion that 'further examination of patterns of supervision could assist in establishing some best practice models to assist in creative-arts-specific research' (2009, p.86) – offers a model for the degree's successful provision by university art schools. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the powerful contribution to scholarship is made possible by the PhD in the Visual Arts' ability to bridge ideological, educational and aesthetic paradigms.

This paper is also, in part, a response to James Elkins' journal article, 'Theoretical remarks on combined creative and scholarly PhD degrees in the Visual Arts,' in which he outlines what he perceives as a series of weaknesses, internal contradictions and teleological ambiguities for the Visual Arts PhD (2004). The article examines what for Elkins, as an American Professor in the early 2000s, was a new and emerging terminal postgraduate degree for the Visual Arts. His analysis looks to models that had developed in the UK and in Australia, and based on this, postulates 'eight configurations' he believes the Visual Arts PhD might assume, concluding that most models, on balance, are deeply flawed.

This paper, then – using Naidansuren's doctorate as a case study – aims to demonstrate an alternative and more successful 'configuration' for the PhD degree in the Visual Arts to those listed by Elkins; indeed, it questions the very logic of compartmentalisation (which concerns the *separation* of artwork from its exegetical text) that would entail such 'configuration'. Rather, this paper constructs the PhD in the Visual Arts as a singular enquiry pursued using the artwork and the exegetical thesis as inseparable critical tools, much in the mode advocated by proponents of art practice conceived as research, such as Lesley Duxbury

(2011) in the Australian context. Fundamentally, the form of research that the doctorate takes and the new knowledge to which it leads (concepts seen by Elkins as unverifiable in the PhD in Visual Arts) are shown to be not only verifiable but also of immense value to the academe.

Doctoral research at Curtin University's School of Design and Art is conducted in pursuit of a 'single research question' which both written and visual production must investigate. The benefits of this approach can be observed in the productive dialectic of Naidansuren's theoretical study and art practice, combining written and visual research to explore the morphology of the trope of parody in Mongolian iconography. By reflecting on the synthesis of disparate knowledge and the ensuing creation of new knowledge in Naidansuren's research, this paper demonstrates how the PhD in the Visual Arts can constructively foster a productive encounter between geographically, culturally and pedagogically disparate paradigms. Ultimately, this case study documents the ability of the Visual Arts PhD to produce new knowledge, bifurcated in form but unified in philosophical ambit. In doing so, it demonstrates that the claim made by Elkins, that 'all of the official goals of existing PhD degrees in the United Kingdom and Australia are untenable' (Elkins, 2004, p.29), requires retraction.

Elkins' reservations about the potential of the PhD in the Visual Arts partly stem from overlooking the kind of substantial work undertaken in The Strand Report of 1998 – an Australian government funded comprehensive inquiry into the degree, which sought to provide a model by which the creative arts could be valued as a form of the research for which Australian universities typically receive government funding (Strand et al., 1998). Much of the subsequent scholarship on the creative arts PhD (Wissler, 2005; Haseman, 2006; Haseman & Mafe, 2009; Baker & Buckley, 2009; Buckley & Conomos, 2010; Duxbury, 2011; Wilson, 2011) has critically evaluated this formulation, leading to a now highly sophisticated discourse to support the notion that the PhD in the Visual Arts, when well constructed, is an indispensable form of research – poised to become not only institutionally established but also more appreciated by the government and the public.

This wave of discourse surrounding the nature and evaluation of the PhD in the Visual Arts in Australia has moved beyond the pitfalls outlined by earlier commentators such as Elkins. Such first principles – or rather, foundational anxieties – exemplified by Elkins include doubts about the value of historical, critical and philosophical knowledge to artistic excellence, the

categorical uncertainties of the exegesis written as both an artist and an art historian, and, perhaps most significantly, an inherent subjectivity to the research that threatens its claim to academia. Elkins writes:

> Studio art is only 'research' in the reductive sense that it involves certain techniques that artists can discover in the course of exploring new media - a technical and skill-based sense of 'research' that we surely do not want to adapt for twenty-first century artwork. I do not see any other sense in which 'research' is an adequate descriptive term for contemporary art. (2004, p.29-30)

Here, Elkins' view seems grounded in a rigid materialism – elsewhere, he writes with scepticism of the tendency of contemporary art theory to 'invest the materials of art with an intellectual or conceptual status' (2004, p.30) Such a conception, however, is integral to understanding perhaps the dominant mode of contemporary art, the kind of project-based practice that is oriented toward critical realism, the progenitors of which include figures such as Hans Haacke. Haacke's art demands to be understood as research into the machinations of power relations arising from capital; in fact, his investigations into monopolies, collusion and exploitation is research of a rigid materialist kind. Less overt, but perhaps more akin to research typically practiced in the field of art history, is another artistic mode that has prominence in the international, contemporary art context. The work of artists such as Yinka Shonibare, which explores a fusion of multiple cultural aesthetics (British colonialism; Dutch and African textiles; Victorian fashion), represents an accumulated and *visually manifested* research of iconography in several disparate areas that through their juxtaposition triggers new understandings in each. It is firstly as a form of research in this vein – as a material investigation of cultural and political iconography – that Ochirbat Naidansuren's doctorate has produced a wealth of 'new knowledge' that goes far beyond the mere technical experimentation that Elkins believes to represent the most credible form of artistic research. In demonstrating Naidansuren's doctorate's synthesis of existing knowledge and innovative new research, this paper offers a model for the combined scholarly and creative PhD that insures *against* the pitfalls foreshadowed by Elkins, pitfalls that appear rather less intimidating with the benefit of the eight years and numerous studies that separate this paper from his.

Ochirbat Naidansuren (born in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in 1964) began his career in a Mongolia under the heavily Soviet-influenced Mongolian People's Party. He was trained and

achieved success in the poster design, graphic agitprop and the aesthetic philosophy of Socialist Realism. Highly proficient, he worked as a lecturer in the Fine Art Department at the Educational University (EU, a university for art teachers) in Mongolia between 1992 and 2003, taking his PhD in Graphic Design History (EU) in 2001. Leaving behind an artist-academic career that culminated with a period as the Head of Department at EU, Naidansuren immigrated to Western Australia in 2005, where his PhD was not recognised as equivalent to the Australian doctorate under the Australian Qualifications Framework. In 2009, he recommenced his education, at Curtin University, at a fourth year, Graduate Diploma level.

Ironically, while unaccommodated by Australian frameworks, Naidansuren's Mongolian PhD took a form that might prove unproblematic under Elkins' rubric. A systematic taxonomy of the iconography of trademarks registered in Mongolia, Naidansuren's original doctorate contained nothing of the combination of academic and artistic output whose configuration so troubles Elkins, nor would its contribution to knowledge prove incommensurable with Elkins' materialist definition of 'research.' A radical departure from his first doctoral dissertation, however, Naidansuren's current PhD in the Visual Arts involves aesthetic (but no less intellectually tenacious) research in the form of an artwork component, unlike that of his former institution, as well as deeper philosophical (qualitative rather than quantitative) exegetical research. His creative production currently preserves elements of reanimated Mongolian folk art (Mongol Zurag), Buddhist iconography, Socialist Realism and political caricature; elements that are refracted through the criticality of a contemporary practice grounded in self-reflection, irony, pastiche and melancholic homage – a bridge between aesthetic paradigms that allows a clearer understanding of difference. Inherent is a deeper meditation on diasporic identity; the result of self-reflexivity, the inventive facilitation of which, this paper argues, the PhD in the Visual Arts should retain as a central task of supervision.

Naidansuren relates the aim of his PhD as 'to retrace parody in Mongolian modern art and, in particular, the period of Socialist Realist art.' He continues:

> My contemporary practice aims to reveal to viewers the historical truths that were distorted during the period of the Soviet regime, and so I have come to also explore the aftermath of Soviet styled propaganda art. I aim to analyse, deconstruct and contribute to the models of development demonstrated in Mongolian contemporary art (*Political parody in Mongolian contemporary art,* unpublished manuscript, 2012).

Naidansuren's scholarship identifies, analyses and contributes to the morphology of the trope of parody in Mongolian art, with his own practice opening the otherwise historico-philosophical analysis to the realm of contemporary image-making. Tracing the role of parody through the iconography of folk art, Socialist Realism, postcommunist art and the art of the Mongolian Diaspora, the first study of its kind, Naidansuren's most significant contribution to knowledge has been to identify that the strong, if poorly documented, thread of parody discernable throughout the long history of Mongol art demonstrates a continuous and surprising cultural core value.

Naidansuren's hypothesis is that the presence of the trope of parody throughout the iconographies of Mongolian image-making over a period of more than 2,000 years (as far back as the period of animism) is inextricably linked to a core value of *fear*. The fear underscoring the trope of parody in seemingly all the Mongolian visual art traditions finds form in the continually re-enacted anthropomorphosis of the *Manggus*, a demon-like creature variously manifested as: monsters responsible for natural disaster (in the folk tradition); the figure of the Buddhist monk (under socialism); the capitalist (during the Cold War) and the communist (during postcommunism). His extensive visual analysis having produced this knowledge, Naidansuren's contemporary practice is populated by a pantheon of such characters, allowing the archaeology of the archetype to come to life in works such as *The Mongols*.

The Mongols, first exhibited in 2012, represents the culmination of two years of experimentation, research and development on the part of Naidansuren. The most ambitious artwork to date in an ongoing body of doctoral artwork, it enacts most clearly the accumulation of Naidansuren's research. Taking the form of a panoramic landscape, *The Mongols* enfolds several disparate Mongol aesthetics into a single flattened plain, collapsing cultural, political and art history into a sweeping whole. Two towering figures drawn from Communist Party propaganda – a sinister caricature of the capitalist enemy (the *Manggus* figure) and a heroic icon of the liberated worker – are inserted to loom over the rolling steppes of Mongolia, depicted in a pre-Communist folk art style. While these monstrous figures first draw the eye, much of the visual edification of *The Mongols* is to be found upon moving closer and seeing the anonymous figures participating in a variety of micro-narratives across the length of the panelled support, which reference the foremost canonical work of Mongolian folk art, Sharav's *One Day In Mongolia* (1919)*. It is readily observable

that Naidansuren's painting is not only encoded in symbolic Buddhist colours and stylistic flourishes but also wrestles with the legacy of Communist visual culture, the falsities of propaganda and the disruption of folk tradition caused by these interwoven cultural forces. Less overt, however, is a self-reflexive gesture that locates the artist himself within the folk tableau. Of the many faceless figures that chase horses, erect tents and herd, milk and slaughter sheep around the canvas, one is distinguished by the insignia of a red kangaroo on his t-shirt. With this unobtrusive signal, Naidansuren parodically encodes himself, and his experience as an Australian migrant, into the mythos of the scenery. While the painting might appear a colourful pastiche of histories it is also a kind of self-portraiture – a personal history of migration and dislocation disguised as an epic. *The Mongols*, therefore, does not only represent a body of visual research into the history of Mongol iconography, the continuities and fractures of the folk, Buddhist and Socialist traditions and the ever present tropes of parody underpinned by fear. It also, due to the self-reflexivity fostered by doctoral supervision, refracts this knowledge through personal experience: becoming also a meditation on migratory, postcommunist, and diasporic identity.

Arriving at a methodology for the creation of work such as *The Mongols* has required considerable experimentation, research and artistic development on the part of Naidansuren. The success of the doctoral program has been to facilitate this process. Complicating – and, I argue, *enriching,* this methodology – has been the dramatic shifts necessary for Naidansuren, arriving from the legacy of his Socialist Realist training, to engage the contemporary, internationalist art discourses of an Australian university art school. Naidansuren's painting practice has been *empowered* by critical reflections on cultural iconography and aesthetic translation, as he has negotiated a shift from the utilitarian, collectivist aesthetic of Socialist Realism (in its austere Mongolian variant) to the individualist conceptual agenda associated with contemporary art. Simultaneously, however, his work also carries a melancholic lament for the classical pictorial values often eschewed by the contemporary art world – registered in his select, and at times parodic, redeployment of classical strategies.

It is this process of negotiation – between the values of competing ideological, aesthetic and pedagogical systems – that has proved the greatest challenge in the supervision of Naidansuren's doctorate, and the most generative site of tension in his production of new knowledge. It has not been the purpose of this paper, therefore, to present Naidansuren's 'progress' towards a contemporary practice as the chief evidence of the value of doctoral

study in the Visual Arts. Rather, Naidansuren's highly self-reflexive and at times deeply ambivalent adaption represents *itself* a major site of new knowledge in his doctoral research. Naidansuren's doctorate is a product of the intersection between two disparate aesthetic ideologies which, in its preservation of the tensions engendered by their encounter, offers valuable insights into both. It is this transformation – in tandem with his analysis of Mongolian iconographic history – that represents Naidansuren's doctorate's *enactment* of 'new knowledge': a knowledge that is described and also realised through a personalisation of the experience of ideology (well beyond the 'illustratation' of a thesis) in Naidansuren's creative practice.

As *The Mongols* demonstrates, it is the *self-reflexivity* instilled in Naidansuren's doctoral study that represents the condition of possibility for the production of this knowledge. Empowered to reflect critically on his liminal, diasporic status, Naidansuren is able to self-consciously experiment with disparate visual orders, transforming his personal experience of dislocation into a *critical investigation* of the forces of at times contradictory aesthetic ideologies. In his 2004 article, Elkins is critical of what he terms the 'grounding assumption' of the Visual Arts PhD, that 'self-reflexivity is an ultimate good.' (2004: 25) In Naidansuren's practice, however, it has been the inculcation of self-reflexivity that has transformed his creative practice into a contribution to knowledge regarding the conceptual contours, stylistic idiosyncrasies and critical potential of contrasting aesthetic ideologies. Perhaps it is unsurprising then, given his belief that 'self-awareness… needs to be treated as a problematic assumption, not as a guiding principle' (2004: 25) that Elkins finds it difficult to appreciate new knowledge generated this way. Carefully constructed in an epistemology involving self-awareness, the art practice of the Visual Arts PhD can demonstrably become the site of significant new knowledge.

This paper establishes Naidansuren's approach to the PhD as an exemplar of how such study can function and offers a model that escapes the pitfalls of the 'eight configurations' offered by Elkins. Where Elkins established a 'matrix' of how to integrate two separate modes of enquiry (the 'written' and the 'creative' component), Naidansuren's PhD instead demonstrates the value of conceiving of those modes as not in fact separate. Rather than segregate the text from the creative artwork, and then further distinguish the text by its classification as 'art history', 'art criticism' or another field, the model of Naidansuren's PhD bypasses this compartmentalisation, and its attendant anxieties, by instead returning to the original premise of the PhD. Conceived in answer to a singular research question that both

conventional and creative research pursue, Naidansuren's PhD returns the degree to its singular condition as a doctorate in *philosophy* in the original sense of the term. Neither subordinated to the text nor quantified into a discrete demonstration of skills, Naidansuren's creative output is itself a philosophical enquiry, and therefore an *enactment* of new knowledge.

It is not intended that this return to philosophy be seen as a 'ninth configuration'. Instead, it appeals to the original objective of doctoral study, aware that philosophy need not be confined to words on a page. Such flexibility is not only helpful in understanding the intersections between geographically, aesthetically and pedagogically disparate paradigms – it is in fact a necessity. By combining written and visual research into a singular and singularly philosophical enquiry, and grounding creative practice in an epistemology of self-awareness, Naidansuren's contribution to knowledge represents a model for the successful construction of the Visual Arts PhD. In doing so it should repudiate reservations and assail anxieties like those of Elkins, and point towards the future for an increasingly vital mode of study.

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