

## The Irrelevant Consumers of Culture

### Biography:

**Ross Woodrow** is Research Convener in the School of Fine Art at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. Born in Queensland, he studied at Kelvin Grove College, Brisbane, the University of Queensland and University of Sydney. He has published widely with book chapters, catalogue essays and articles in a range of academic and popular journals. His most recent publication is "Lavater and the Drawing Manual" in Perceval and Tytler eds. *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavater's influence on European culture*, University of Delaware Press, 2005. Since working in the National Gallery of Australia in the 1980s, he has curated a significant number of exhibitions including *Plastic Newcastle* at the Newcastle Region Art Gallery in 1997 and *Drawing Centre NRAG*, 2005. He continues his studio practice and his extensive exhibition record includes solo exhibitions at Cook's Hill Gallery, Newcastle and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane.

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The link between university-based artists and their communities is to become a most contested relationship judging by the Research Quality Framework proposed by DEST for assessing the quality and impact of research in Australia. The Framework for *Measuring Research Impact* (Table 3) presented in the Issues Paper explicitly and exclusively endorses performative knowledge with commercialization as its primary measure of impact. Even the points listed to exemplify knowledge relationships outside the university and engagement with the community focus solely on industry cooperation, consultancy and economic activities. Of the suitable measures for assessment of *Research Impact Outputs*, suggested in the paper (Table 2), only three relate directly to art and design. Included as one of these is "audience/attendances at exhibitions/performances" – raising the spectre of visual and performing arts assessment reduced to the mentality of bums on seats. The more recently published RQF Advanced Approaches Paper does nothing to allay these fears, although it softens the commercialization imperative. At least this more recent paper corrects the glaring omission of any direct reference to the impact of research on visual culture or culture more broadly.

Quoting from the initial RQF Issues Paper:

Research impact has two elements. In its narrower sense, research impact can be seen as tangibly or directly related to research outputs. An example of this type of impact is citations. In a broader sense, research impact refers to social, environmental or economic impacts.

By comparison the RQF AA paper:

An RQF should examine the quality of research (including its intrinsic merit and academic impact) and its broader social, **cultural**, economic and environmental impact or usefulness.

Importantly, both papers give prime significance to academic impact in terms of peer review and metric measures of quality. These are the measures most problematic for the creative arts. Presumably then, the social and cultural impact of creative arts will have to be given greater emphasis to compensate. If so, how will the creative arts be measured by their social value? Obviously, the creative arts do impact on the social sphere but there is a significant difference between artists producing “socialized” art and working for “social good” to use the artist Mike Kelley’s terms. In fact I want to use the example of Mike Kelley’s work *Pay for your pleasure*, 1987 – 1992 [FIGURE 1] to tease out the problems of measuring art by its social impact. The difference between the cultural and social can be conveniently defined in relation to this work by Kelley as the difference between the “symbolic” and the “concrete”.

Before it was purchased by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Kelley exhibited this work in a number of international venues. The basic installation was the same with a long corridor lined with images of many of the great thinkers of history. On the wall at the end of the corridor was a single painting. Structurally, the work suggests a perfect metaphor for the position of creative art in academe - a solitary artifact isolated among giants of science and history. However, whenever the installation was shown the work of art chosen by Kelley for the end wall was by a convicted murderer such John Wayne Gacy, aka Pogo the Clown (the early nineties was the period of great interest in so called “killer art”). Naturally, this context suddenly makes the painting a compellingly interesting work for many viewers - or as Kelley notes - as you walk down the hall of great thinkers, “all their words are meaningless now.” Kelley’s motivation in creating the work is worth quoting at length:

The work was a reaction against the rise of stupid political art that refuses to differentiate between symbolic action and direct action. A lot of people are now saying if you do something symbolically, it doesn't mean anything. The whole purpose of art is that it's dead, that it's removed from reality. You can consider it and then filter it back into reality. I wanted to show that there was a big difference between a criminal's art production and an intellectual's art production. An artist talks about evil, but he/she uses evil and destruction towards social good. He/She uses antitraditional forms to work against the status quo, to make you question the structures that produce evil. When you look at the painting of a criminal, it's usually a totally socialized painting. They paint in the manner that society expects them to paint. When you look at the painting of a criminal, it's usually a totally socialized painting. They paint in the manner that society expects them to paint. ...When you see this painting done in a standard way, you realize the difference between symbolic and concrete thinking. The concrete person is stupid. The artist does something constructive by trying to change idea structures, whereas the killer just adopts the given social structure. (Kellein 27)

Kelley’s work highlights the complex way in which contemporary art operates in the cultural sphere where popular expectations conflict with critically rarefied artistic intentions. Researchers in sociology or history for example make a clear demarcation between academe and popular

culture. The social fabric is the source of their studies but they conduct their research and debate within the protective confines of the academy. Even though their work might ultimately be disseminated in the broader sociocultural sphere, its primary value is measured by peers within the academy.

In the creative arts, the example of Ricky Swallow has been well rehearsed as an artist who found endorsement and enormous critical success in spite of his institutional experience. Recently, not only has his distance from the academy been heralded as a positive attribute but also the impact of his work in the current Venice Biennale has been analyzed as a deep psychic expression of the Australian character. (Clemens) It is not unusual for artists to view the academic art school environment as too distanced from the main game of cultural engagement. Practice is so embedded in the sociocultural sphere that many senior artists working in Australia, such as Fiona Hall or Mike Parr, long ago severed formal links with the university art school environment with a seeming enhancement to the progress of their careers. In fact it might be persuasively argued that the move of art schools into the university structure has caused or at least accelerated the widening of the gap between academic and non-academic practitioners.

There is no parallel in any humanities discipline where a large quantum of the acknowledged authorities or expertise operate outside of the academy. This raises the question as to what distinguishes studio-based practice inside and outside the academy.

Again this is best interrogated by using the example of an artist's work - Michael Parekowhai's *Ten Guitars* 1999, exhibited in the 1999 Asia Pacific Triennial. [FIGURE 2] This deceptively simple display is made up of an installation of ten hand-crafted guitars each with a subtlety different inlaid paua-shell pattern, seven lightboxes printed with traditional Maori designs and a video showing performances using the instruments. It is a complex reflection on sociocultural hybridity which celebrates the significance of popular music and cultural symbolism while at the same time deconstructing stereotypical expectations. In conception, proficiency of production and impact it surely surpasses many PhD exhibitions - many that I have seen at least. *Ten Guitars* is a powerful work of art but it is not the result of research as defined in the academy. Obviously, when exhibited by Parekowhai the installation was not accompanied by the usual exegesis found with a PhD exhibition and instead the artist offered a brief autobiographical reference to its genesis and a perfunctory pointer to the significance of the guitars being superficially similar but different in detail. He also mentions the unifying nature of popular music but notes the outmoded stereotype of the "happy Maori" entertainer. However informative his summary statement on the meaning of the work, it would hardly rate inclusion in an exegesis: "Sort of what the guitars are about really. It's all about the individual becomes less important where the group becomes where it's at." (Genoux)

This is not to make the point that an exegesis makes for a PhD exhibition (even though it seems this is becoming an orthodoxy in some universities) but to emphasize that when art operates in the sociocultural sphere its operational value resides almost totally in its expressive immediacy, visuality, materiality and the quality of its consensual or critical impact. Extended explanation or

written support is not only unnecessary but also may be considered a distraction or compensation for the works inadequacy. This is not said to promote the unintelligent artist's claim for the primacy of blind intuition but to highlight the significant difference between the operation of visual arts practice and humanities disciplines. For example, a sociological study of New Zealand's bi-cultural policy would no doubt include quantitative economic data and qualitative assessment of Maori and Pakeha interviews and so on. This validation would allow such an academic study to move into the wider social sphere and perhaps make direct impact on political or Government policy making, for example.

On the other hand, *Ten Guitars*, like the best in contemporary art, is the product of the usual mix of intelligence, intuition, selective and critical application of lived experience, skills and knowledge. Perhaps only a work of art can demonstrate what is lost and gained in the process of amalgamating Elvis, Engelbert Humperdinck and traditional Maori culture. The insights and understanding it evokes are felt directly from the moment it is exhibited, yet it may take considerable time to seep into the consciousness of visual culture. After all Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly* paintings made little impact when they were first exhibited. There was a large attendance at the various performances at the Queensland Art Gallery when musicians played the guitars that made up Parekowhai's work and even greater numbers visited the APT3 exhibition.

Nevertheless, the audience for Parekowhai's work is relatively limited, encompassing those who attend art galleries, but this is still far greater than any number that reads sociological research or other academic studies. Even widely read examples such as Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (1984) could never be characterized as a popular success. We know that Bourdieu's study is significant since it was ranked in the twentieth-century's ten most important works of sociology by the International Sociological Association and any citation index for the last twenty years will indicate its consequence for the profession. The importance of Parekowhai's *Ten Guitars* is more intangibly demonstrated since the record of its impact is limited first to those who have experienced the work directly and secondly to those who see the work in the popular media or art press where writers and curators discuss the artist and his work.

Parekowhai's work will be judged by his peers as is the case for Bourdieu or any other humanities scholar but the significant difference is that the artist's peers are almost exclusively located in studios and galleries outside of academe. This separation of expert knowledge in the studio arts from the academy can be demonstrated in another way. It would be a rare instance, for example, to find a media commentator or popular newspaper columnist being called to examine a sociology or political history Doctorate in a university. However, it is not at all uncommon to find occasions where senior artists (not holding higher degrees, themselves) are called to examine research PhD candidates in university studio-based research projects. [I can list a half-dozen senior artists, without Doctorates, who have examined PhD candidates in my own and other institutions] This alone should indicate the distinctive nature of studio-based research compared to the majority of disciplines in the humanities. In short we have the absurd situation where, as noted above, Parekowhai's work does not qualify as research but he would appear to be one of the few artists

with demonstrated expertise to examine a studio-based researcher working on some aspect of popular culture and postcolonial theory. And indeed he would make an ideal examiner, if the aim was to measure the success of the work for its expressive artifactual value.

If this point requires further emphasis, the example of Mike Parr is a telling one. It would seem a very difficult task to find a more suitable expert than Parr to examine a PhD that resulted from an autobiographically based performance project. Although Mike Parr did briefly teach in the pre-amalgamated art school scene, he holds no higher degree and in interviews and biographies often highlights the point that he has no formal art school training.

If time allowed many other examples could be quoted to emphasize this division between art practice inside and outside the academy. Suffice to say, studio-based research has not found a comfortable home within academe. This point was made most emphatically when the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) in a recent draft submission to the Federal Government (April, 2005), argued that the creative and performing arts should be once again given autonomous institutional structures within or outside the current university framework. The submission notes "the artist's studio does not find, within the comprehensive university system, a similar recognition to the humanist's library or the scientist's lab." (Yaman)

Since the publication of the Strand report in 1998 the obsession has been to define research in the creative arts as equivalent to established research paradigms in the humanities (and science). After a decade it is obvious that the notion of "equivalence" has been used to discriminate as much as differentiate creative arts activity from other research in science and the humanities. The idea of equivalence has become a clever refusal to acknowledge that creative arts practice is different but equal to the other practice-based disciplines in academe such as experimental-chemistry or physics. We have all become adept in writing grant applications and reports that require description of major contemporary artists as "scholars" ceramic workshop practise, for example, "as enquiry," trips to exhibitions as "field work," and artefacts as "research outcomes." But surely this attempt to talk the talk of the ruling disciplines is indicative of what the New Zealand Tertiary Education Advisory Commission described as "goal-displacing behaviours" when outlining the disadvantages of applying generic performance indicators to research in universities.

The limited success in demonstrating equivalence between creative arts outputs and the established framework of publications and bibliometric measures favoured by science and humanities has been determined by peer review of quality and varying degrees of goodwill by research committees in individual universities, if not in DEST itself. With the establishment of the RQF in 2007 more rigorous, competitive and rigid attitudes to measurement of research quality and impact will be legislated and the current expedient masquerade of dressing artists and designers in academic gowns will be exposed. If the visual and performing arts are to gain their rightful share of research support funding they must be seen as distinctively different to science and the humanities in their mode of operational research, outputs and community impacts.

The New Zealand Performance Based Research Fund (NZPBRF) has been running now for five years and uses a mixture of peer review and metric measures to assess research. Unlike the NZ model at least the Australian RQF will attempt to measure the impact of research. It will be incumbent on ACUADS and other peak bodies to lobby strongly that the cultural sphere of influence and impact for the creative arts is acknowledged as a primary measure. The ACUADS Response to the Issues Paper goes some way towards this by emphasizing the role of popular and non-refereed publications as a measure of impact – (although this is not explicitly reflected in the RQF Advanced Approaches Paper). Less clear in the ACUADS Response was the emphasis on discipline specific assessment panels and no mention of such a policy is noted in the most recent Paper). It can hardly benefit researchers in the creative arts if assessment panels are appointed from within the existing CHASS framework and ACUADS should assume a prime role in determining the make-up of any creative arts Assessment Panel. The NZPBRF recognizes creative and performing arts as a distinct research category and accordingly appoints a distinct Creative and Performing Arts Assessment Panel. This should be an absolute necessity in the Australian model.

And finally, the fundamental definition of research used by DEST and the expert panel in framing its RQF papers must be broadened, perhaps in line with the New Zealand PBRF. No reasonable reader in the wider community could accept a definition for research that states “creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge” with an addendum noting – “this definition encompasses creative work and performance”. “Creative work” that includes “creative work” – this is the academic Wonderland speak we have all come to accept. Work in the creative arts is research only when the ruling disciplines say it is, in other words. Ask our constituency in the wider sociocultural sphere what “creative work” means and they will be unequivocal – creative arts practice.

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**Figure 1** Mike Kelley *Pay for Your Pleasure* 1987 – 1992 (MOCA, LA)



**Figure 2** Michael Parekowhai *Ten Guitars* 1999.