

Brad Buckley
Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney

As Adam Smith would have certainly asked: Do art schools have anything to offer a neo-liberal society?

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWskaUHb4T0>

We have art so that we do not die of the truth.

Friedrich Nietzsche

. . . voyaging begins when one burns one's boats, adventures begin with a shipwreck.

Michel Serres

Our word 'history' comes from the Greek word meaning 'enquiry.' It embodies the assumption that men and women are curious about life on earth; that they wish to question the dead as well as the living, and to ponder the present and the future as widely as possible from knowledge of the past.

Shirley Hazzard

Many of the ideas in this paper come from a collection of essays, published as *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: the Artists, the PhD and the Academy* (NSCAD University Press, 2009), which I edited with my colleague John Conomos. John and I began collaborating in 1999 when we organised two successful forums at Artspace Visual Arts Centre in Sydney in the lead-up to the referendum which would decide whether or not Australia would become a republic. Unfortunately for those of us who are republicans, the referendum was lost.

The papers from this conference were later published as a book, *Republics of Ideas* (Pluto Press, 2001). It was the first book to examine the social, political and cultural implications of an Australian republic in the context of the visual arts and the new global economy. Now, however, after the GFC, it is looking rather tarnished.

Thus began a discursive and polemical collaboration with John Conomos that has produced or refined many of the ideas in this paper. It draws on various published papers, some of which we have co-authored, and on *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*.

Rethinking the Contemporary Art School examines the reasons for the art school and for its continued existence, its role in society and what should be taught and learnt in what is now a

globalised art world. The book also considers various art school models, from innovative graduate programs to independent stand-alone schools such as Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University (NSCADU) and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, to art schools which are departments or schools within major research universities – and the problems the latter face being ‘marginalised in university life’, as US theorist James Elkins describes it.’

The relationship of the art school and its academic staff to the university is complex, and at times strained. This creates a range of challenges and issues related to the nature and level of the appropriate terminal degree, when the visual or fine arts can be research, and how this research should be funded.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part offers some insights into these issues in the broader Western tradition of educating artists and higher degrees, with an added focus on the extended writing required for most PhDs, the role of the academic and the problems surrounding research funding. It also looks at the ongoing debate in the US and Canada about whether art schools should offer PhDs, and discusses some of the reason for there being such resistance to this idea.

The second part considers the impact of these issues and difficulties on artists who work in Australian university art schools – these artists are often expected to obtain research funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC), despite there being no ARC categories for creative work. Finally, the chapter considers what artists know that others don’t.

The art school higher degree and why there is still resistance to it

What confronts today’s tertiary art institutions, their academics and, not least, art students is a complex and shifting geopolitical situation in which art and education are undergoing unpredictable transformations. Simply put, opinions about what role a PhD might play in visual arts education depends on where one is. Everywhere one looks there are substantial “push and pull” factors – primarily, the battle is between innovation and experimentation on the one hand, and tradition and conservatism on the other.¹

Therefore, one is obliged to rethink what a contemporary art school is and whether a PhD has a viable future in academic institutions. How will a PhD benefit the present and future generations of students who wish to be artists? Whatever our specific socio-cultural and political context, art

¹ See my paper ‘A New Horizon: what is on offer for the artist with a PhD?’ delivered as part of the session *PhD for Artists: Sense or Nonsense? Part 1*, 100th College Art Association Conference, Los Angeles, US. This session was co-chaired by Professor Bruce Barber, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University and Dr John Powers, independent artist and scholar.

academics must locate visual arts education between research and the marketplace. Both are multilayered in meaning and significance.

Art students are very aware of the risks, implications and possibilities of becoming 'professional' artists. But how do we define an 'artist' today? Is it just a word that indicates 'professional status' and social acceptance, or does it signify something more? Does it also mean being engaged in a critique of one's place in our shared world? Is it possible for artists to have professional status that is consensually recognised, as other professions that tertiary education is responsible for (accounting, architecture, law, medicine) do?

If art schools are to become merely departments within progressively more corporatised universities, what value will we place on art as "experimentation" (Deleuze) and socio-cultural critique? Will art become a profession equivalent to the minor decorative arts? Will there still be art (and art education) as Socratic enlightenment? To echo Louis Menand's recent fine probe of what ails our universities today, are they just marketplaces for occupational training and recruitment, or should they maintain their traditional larger role as a marketplace for ideas?

These are some of the more compelling issues that the idea of a PhD in visual arts is raising. Each tertiary institution will respond differently, depending on its context – culture, geography, history, politics and economics – and its willingness to explore the educative, critical and professional value of enhancing the creative, research and occupational horizons of our art students.

Let us now briefly look at what is happening with PhDs in the visual arts in Canada, the United States, Europe and Asia. Few institutions in the United States currently offer a PhD degree in studio art, and the College Art Association (CAA) remains very sceptical of the idea that the PhD will replace the Master of Fine Arts (MFA).²

Over the past five years, the debate has shifted somewhat. At least five university art schools in Canada have introduced PhD studio programs, and in the United States, the Institute for Doctorial Studies in the Arts and the University of California at San Diego also offer a PhD.³ A number of prominent art schools in the United States are considering their options, so it remains a hot-button issue at every CAA conference. But though the debate continues there, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Japan and some northern European academies such as the Finnish

² Adopted by the CAA Board of Directors, 16 April 1977, revised 12 October 1991 and 26 October 2008. For the most recent version of the policy, see *Guidelines: MFA Standards*, CAA, CAA, n.d., 29 January 2009, www.collegeart.org/guidelines/mfa.html.

³ See my paper 'Why a Ceiling? The visual arts should embrace the PhD', delivered as part of the session 'Has the Master of Fine Arts Outlived its Usefulness as a Terminal Degree?', Part 2', at the College Art Association's 90th Annual Conference, Philadelphia, February 2002. This session was chaired by Professor Bruce Borick, Department of Art, State University of West Georgia, US.

Academy of Fine Arts and the Malmö Art Academy have, for more than a decade, offered the PhD as the terminal degree in the visual arts.⁴

Given that art schools are riddled with contradictions, schisms and tensions, what kind of PhD program should be adopted once one accepts its validity? Outside the US, the debate has moved to a more sophisticated level, with widespread acceptance that the thesis may be of multiple forms, including painting, sound, performance, installation and text. Though even this is not without its critics, it seems generally accepted. What remains unresolved is the role of the text in the PhD. How long should it be? What form should it take? Is it an exegesis, which tends to describe the studio process, writing it up in the model of scientific enquiry, or text that attempts to place the studio work in a conceptual or historical framework? My own preference is for the text to be an elaboration on the research question, to be intertextual with the studio or creative work. By this I mean that there is one research question on which the candidate proceeds to work, allowing different ways or models of knowledge to illuminate and inform both the text and the creative or studio work, thus producing a genuinely integrated thesis.

It is a Herculean task for present-day art academics to persuade their university and artist peers of the complexities of the aesthetic, cultural and historical aspects of contemporary art and its teaching and research. Aside from questions of ignorance, indifference and parochialism, there is also the constant problem of the very competitive pecking order among the schools and departments of a university.

The key idea of a PhD as research training in visual art education is slowly gaining ground, though. It is indicative of the dawning realisation among the younger generation of artists who work in university art schools that a PhD should be encouraged for many reasons: it can give art students vital self-empowerment, professional recognition and a qualification, and, most importantly, new research horizons and opportunities, such as postdoctoral fellowships.

In Australia, where PhD programs in the visual or fine arts are considered research training and PhD candidates are treated as junior academic staff, with complete access to scholarships and research support grants, it is a strange fact that academics working in the visual or fine arts in

⁴ See 'Future-Proofing the Creative Arts in Higher Education: A Scoping Project for Quality in Creative Arts Research Training', *CreativeArtsPhD*, CreativeArts, 29 January 2009, <http://www.olt.gov.au/resources?text=Creative+Arts+Phd>. This scoping project was an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded initiative conducted in partnership between the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS), the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), the University of Melbourne and the Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), University of Sydney. The project leaders were Su Baker and Brad Buckley.

these universities have almost a zero success rate when apply for research funding if their project has a creative outcome.⁵This leads me to the second part of this chapter.

How the Australian Research Council (ARC) continues to fail artists

Given the emphasis on corporatising universities and commercialising research, today's art schools face a bleak and unpredictable future.

Since the forced amalgamations of art schools in Australia with universities in 1990 and the following decade-long drive to have them mirror the rapidly changing management and funding models of their host institutions, various problems have emerged; and, it must be said, various benefits have also been realised.

There is a flaw that these arranged marriages have brought with them as an unwelcome dowry, a flaw that has dramatically swung the balance against individual artists working in universities and art school faculties.

This flaw is funded research. Art schools and their academic staff – who are art practitioners – lead a shadow life in the eyes of their colleagues in other disciplines. In addition to this, and despite some recent (and much appreciated) attempts to ameliorate the situation, they are severely handicapped when applying for ARC grants.

Artists are behind the proverbial eight ball because the ARC funding model does not adequately address their creative and pedagogic attributes; to put it another way, creative work is not recognised as a legitimate field for funded research. It is almost as if C.P. Snow's 'two cultures' debate of the 1960s never happened.

To understand why the ARC continues to resist the recognition of creative work 20 odd years after the amalgamations, it is necessary to acknowledge the Anglo-Australian-US tradition of art education, in which the handmade or utilitarian is privileged over the discursive.

This residual prejudice – that art is essentially a manual activity or only about personal expression, and thus not a legitimate outcome of research – is at the core of the ARC objections to applications from artists.

⁵ For a recent discussion on research in the art and design school context see Henk Slager, *The Pleasure of Research*, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2012.

Since Oscar Wilde's time, art has also been acknowledged as a tool for criticising society; this precept is axiomatic in the visual arts today. Shouldn't funded research at university level reflect this? Somehow, the lexicon of what constitutes valid research still excludes all this.

What is the result of this 20-year embargo on the funding of creative work in art schools? As well as the obvious disadvantage that individual artists face through not having their creative work funded, a manipulative climate has grown up in which they are encouraged to develop research projects that do not represent their primary intellectual concerns as artists but do fit neatly into the ARC funding categories or the federal government's research priorities. Art school faculties are also being penalised in terms of block grants, which are tied to the successful awarding of ARC grants. Fewer ARC grants means a reduced level of funding to the faculty's overall budget.

The lack of research income is having a seriously debilitating effect on the core activities of art schools: to produce visual artists who are self-critical, and who are steeped in knowledge and understanding of contemporary art. Many are evolving into faculties that produce graduates who are mute as visual artists. Some of these faculties are being coerced into offering fee-paying courses that produce, paradoxically, graduates who merely service the corporate design and economic needs of globalisation.

If universities house, as George Steiner claims in his elegant memoir *Errata*, 'diverse, often rival parishes', where do art schools situate themselves in this more competitive pedagogic ethos? (Steiner, 1999) Are art schools better off being independent of the university system? Is this even possible today in light of what is happening in our universities in terms of their structures and commercialised research?

At their best, art schools are sites of experimentation, innovation, learning and the development of professional networks. All of this is invaluable creative and social capital that universities and society could tap into if they were more open to new cross-disciplinary research and pedagogic practices.

It is no surprise, then, that in the February 2004 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, an article about the creativity index, which uses a measure of technology, talent and tolerance combined as an indicator of a country's ability to achieve growth, rated Australia outside the top 15 countries. While the creative index has its critics, it is patently obvious that the ARC understands 'creativity' – or to use a more contemporary term, 'innovation' – to be the product only of engineering, business and the hard sciences.

In the same issue, the author of *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink, argues that the MFA is the new MBA, with big business looking for visual artists. Ironically, it is visual arts graduates who can give companies an advantage because 'the only way to differentiate their goods and services in an overstocked, materially abundant marketplace is to make their offerings transcendent – physically beautiful and emotionally compelling', he writes.

These are all signs of a changing world, a world in which creative work and artists play a vital and complex role, and where that role should be acknowledged in universities in terms of funded research. If we accept poet and writer Ezra Pound's idea that artists are the antennas of the human race, we cannot afford to ignore the important role they play in the creative, innovative, economic and social life of our post-Fordist society.

Until the universities and the ARC change their views about the funding of creative work and allow artists to come out from the shadows, Australia will remain a significantly lesser society.

I was struck recently by the Australian literary critic Geordie Williamson's review of a collection of essays by Susan Sontag. He draws our attention to the first essay, 'An Argument About Beauty', in which Sontag writes about how the beautiful 'stimulates and deepens our sense of the sheer spread and fullness of reality that surrounds us all.'

Williamson goes on to make the following point:

This is an elegant recasting of [an] old belief, shared by artists and scientists, that attentiveness towards the world is itself an ethical imperative. That this expanding perceptual delight also widens our sense of responsibility for those who share our world is the point of intersection between Sontag's political thought (which serves human freedom) and her thought that pursues private perfection (that is, aesthetic bliss) (Williams, 2007).

Ultimately, the challenge for artists who work in universities is to not lose sight of this ethical imperative.

And finally, what do artists know that others don't?

This question is always at the foreground for artists who seek to speak of their world in critical and probing terms. This suggests a basic willingness to find new ways of speaking about the present in continuing dialogue with the past, and a constant refusal to accept the current explanations of our contemporary condition. In a word, an artist worthy of the name is someone who sees art as an expression of 'untimeliness' (Agamben/Nietzsche) – neither now nor the past or the future – but whose creative output is significantly shaped by their own singular relationship to their own time.

Artists are engaged, through their artmaking, in a continuing conversation about the larger questions: aesthetics, culture, economics, ideology, sex, power, space, spectatorship, technology and time. Hence artists who endure have always known that understanding and discovery come through the process of making, that the creation or generation of new knowledge is embedded in the work they make, even if they do not always describe it in such terms. Creating new knowledge is predicated on a basic refusal to accept received wisdom; it relies on doubting everything. In this sense the artist is always a contrarian, and always coming to terms with the paradoxes of creativity and what it means to be contemporary (Agamben).

Research in art uses different ideas, techniques and methodologies than research in the humanities, physical and social sciences does. In art it is not just a question of identifying 'new untilled fields' (Beckett) of creative enquiry and production; it profoundly depends on the artist's intuition, hunches, creative instincts and sensory experiences. It also depends on knowing failure as an essential of artistic creativity (Beckett). Art can and does generate new knowledge as long as the artist maintains a capacity to question the more predictable explanations and norms of their world.

Paradoxically, then, where visual art research matters most is when it is avowedly suspicious of its own ideological, institutional and pedagogic definitions of research. Artists who go against the grain of what is considered research in the more traditional disciplines can generate exciting new paths of research activity and knowledge. These are the artists who are enthralled by the life project of art as pluralism, art as power, art as mirroring ourselves to ourselves.

In short, if art represents criticism, knowledge and research, and uses its own definitions and methods, and matters precisely because society deems it 'useless' (Wilde), then it behoves us to foster it within the university, which should remain a cherished sanctuary of open debate in our society (Derrida).

After all, artists can see, think, feel and intuit possibilities of research, knowledge, innovation and methodologies that may not be so evident in other disciplines. Artists are concerned with making the rest of society able to see, feel and interact with vivid new and uncharted domains of experience, knowledge and perception.⁶

⁶ For a wide-ranging discussion on the PhD in the studio context and research in visual art and design, see Brad Buckley and John Conomos (eds), *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artists, the PhD, and the Academy*, NSCAD Press, Halifax, 2009.

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