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Double Indemnity: Practice-as-research

The double indemnity model of practice-as-research in Higher Degrees has constructed a co-dependent relationship between writing and making; it is founded on notions of twin expertise in both written reflection, and studio practice, as a 'double or nothing' approach. The practice-based PhD is therefore forced to share a single spine, and yet this is based on the premise that practice alone as evidenced in exhibition, or project, is too threadbare to survive the jeweller's glass of examination – that it is unrepeatable as evidence, and is quantified as art object and not as process, and will always require a second-stage activity of validation or writing up of the art experiment in written exegesis form.

Terry Smith in his book from 2012, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, offered several provocations that I use as a springboard in this paper. They are to do with not only questioning contemporaneity, but the mercurially changed term 'curation' itself which no longer identifies a singular profession, but a host of artists as curators, and curators as artists. Smith further summarises: 'This practice and the myriad activities associated with it has become itself a professional subfield under the title "independent curator". An increasing number of practitioners seek shelter under its bright-yet-fragile umbrella.' (Smith, 18). Given this melding between expectations of curation and exhibition making, the Universities are left to quarantine this gamut of activity that now only in part represents academic, or at least art historical, evaluation.

If the PhD in art-as-research is manifested by its 'final exhibition' as the means of transporting 'the studio' (a place of process activity of artworks in flux) out into the wider waxworks display of 'the gallery' – curated into stony immobility in the name of bestowing a provisional 'permanence' - then Smith identifies the grammar the gallery imposes, which Robert Storr wrote of as:

The primary means for 'explaining' an artist's work is to let it reveal itself. Showing is telling. Space is the medium in which ideas are visually phrased. Installation is both presentation and commentary, documentation and interpretation. Galleries are paragraphs, the walls and formal subdivisions of

the floors are sentences, clusters of works are the clauses, and individual works, in varying degrees, operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and often as more than one of these functions according to their context. (Storr, 'Show and Tell', 23).

As much as the metaphor strains for effect, it does serve to position the exhibition as being a language, and a language of interpretation. If the 'gallery exhibition' both documents and interprets, then there is no reason why it cannot do so independently of its assumed reliance on the tapeworm of written text we have so willingly swallowed. The gallery exhibition is arguably more than a shopfront of presentation; its architectures contain the capacity to structure a grammar of argument.

The analogy of 'double indemnity' lies in the Billy Wilder film lore – of a life insurance policy that doubles the payout in cases when death is caused by certain accidental means. The double-gain in practice based PhDs lies in the requirement to do two things equally well in tandem – art making, and art writing. Like the perfect payout crime in Billy Wilder's 1944 film – the perpetrator seldom gets away with it. It is not enough to do one thing expertly; the nature of the practice-based PhD requires this fence straddling, as both maker and writer. In his PhD at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2010, Daniel Mafé had this reflection to make on why the skill-set this demanded was in essence a contradictory proposition:

The fact that tension exists between written or spoken words and the art object reflects an issue central to many of the discussions within contemporary art, and indeed of art in general. This issue can be posed as a question: what, if anything, is the nature of the gap between affectively experiencing and then verbally describing an artwork? (Mafé, 106).

If the experience of 'the exhibition' is affective, does this not reflect a rift then in purpose between the curatorial intention and that of the art historian's? Terry Smith refers to an exhibition setting enabling 'The curatorial equivalent of making contemporaneity visible in the case of art and of capturing it in writing for publication in the case of criticism and history.' (Smith, 31.) He confirms again the provisional nature of curation – of forms offered up for critique, but not in themselves within the curator's purview as critique. To wit: 'curating *precedes* art-critical response,

audience appreciation, and the eventual assessment of art-historical significance.’ (Smith, 42). And that:

Critics and historians, in comparison, seek stronger, more definite statements about the nature and the significance of the art they encounter and study. Curators do everything necessary to bring works up to the point where they may become subject to critical and historical judgment. (Smith, 44).

The art historical dissertation readily aligns with identifiable forms of ‘historical research’ already inculcated through Humanities into the University model; it begins with interrogation of the past, as a means of ‘locating’ practice within contemporaneity. A PhD anchoring itself to study of Renaissance art compositional principles, or codes of depiction, for example – is already situated within the stream of historical analysis. The assumption that looking into a mirror backwards; ergo, that art historical knowledge of the past will ‘historicize’ contemporary studio art making, does not neatly fit many or most practice-as-research PhDs. The studio artist who detaches from this history approach is left arguing that the ‘new knowledge’ of their PhD in fact lies in the emergent methodologies that they have developed through process. The art making is always the silent partner; there to be bolstered by imported methodologies outside of itself.

Or, as Timothy Emlyn Jones frames it:

For art and design a particular issue arises here, for while it may be possible to explain how an object embodies new knowledge of the ‘knowledge-of’ kind, it is less clear how an object can be said in itself to embody a thesis or argument. It may be appropriate to consider the objects that constitute the conclusions of the project as equivalent to or in lieu of a thesis rather than as a thesis in themselves. Alternatively, it might be possible to argue that an object, particularly in fine art, does have such an active capacity, but such a case has yet to be argued and won. (Elkins, 39).

This requires a redefining of the implied parameters of ‘new knowledge’ expected from arts practice, to better identify the inherent capacity arts practice carries for ‘interpretation’ and pluralism of outcomes rather than singular conclusions. A position I have previously asserted is towards the need to treat the art exhibition as other than

hermetically sealed, in short: Judith Mottram writes towards the characteristics of recent PhDs in art and design that: 'There are also examples of theses which are apparently written to accompany studio work, but it is uncertain at times whether the contribution to knowledge is enshrined within the artworks or within the thesis.' (Mottram, 2009). This is the pivotal quandary of asking where does the legitimised research find its house. We assume too deferentially that knowledge resides in the writing, and not in the artworks or exhibition as the valid research outcome in and of itself. The University values written validation as research in a practice-based PhD because the 'gallery exhibition' as research outcome is seldom, if ever, re-entered for 'revision' in the way that a written thesis is. The exhibition is considered as a closed body of work, while the thesis is assumed to be malleable for major or minor revision. This failing of the exhibition as legitimate research outcome allows the nature of academic art writing to be distorted as a false yardstick of requiring art practice to undergo 'translation into text'. If art practitioners want equality between exhibition and writing, then PhD examiners need to bounce back more exhibitions for revision. (Overton, 2013).

Difficulties in treating the gallery exhibition as research outcome are both practical, and determined by the philosophy of which is seen to come first. To assess a body of artwork requires a commonality of accord regarding what constitutes a discipline. Yet, in 2014 we are in an art environment predisposed towards increasing spillage between the forms, and conscious interdisciplinarity. Painting, printmaking, design, photography, drawing and sculpture no longer occupy separate floors, but mill into free-range, hybrid arts practices where single discipline skills and histories are often reduced to just styles to be sampled, rather than agreed or teachable skill-sets. To which concepts of how the art school conducts training towards its industry, Donald Brook wrote in 1997 that:

Medical schools and Law schools are like this in some ways, but there are obvious differences, especially in the conditions of certification and registration. The notion of competencies (to which certification is addressed) and that of propriety (upheld by professional registration) do not yet get so firm a grip in the domain of art as they do in the traditional professions. (Brook, 1997).

This is by no means facetious; Daniel Wilson, in 2013, in referring to Kant's Third Critique, was highlighting 'the subjective basis for judgments of taste' (Daniel Wilson,

2013). The judgements regarding competence in art, and whether or not we are measuring beauty or taste, cut to the quick of the claims that can be made for the 'art exhibition' as reliable academic examination, and the extent to which definitions of knowledge as constituting 'repeatable knowledge' apply in art in the way that they do in other fields. As Higher Degree Research is now rapidly reconfiguring its Master of Arts towards AQF compliance, and straddling fences of coursework, research and also professional doctorate imperatives for a platter of DFAs and DCAs, we are headlong in another period of revisiting these questions not only of purpose – but of considering what types of 'art research' might be better suited to being PhD research. In particular, there continues to be a shoehorning of practice-as-research into University alignments. Australia had two key theorists who defined the boundaries of art-as-research by the late 2000s; Estelle Barrett, and Graeme Sullivan. Their stance towards practice differs greatly in the role accorded to 'process' as opposed to 'outcome'. Barrett shelves the art object to status of artefact; to be resurrected through written exegesis – albeit after the studio making has concluded. Sullivan's propositions allow more scope for practice-based research to function as a concomitant process; where the nature of art research is as a series of experiments continually interrupted by reflective writing, which in turn informs the next steps in the studio practice.

It begins with the presumption that art writing within the University art school model needs to attach itself like a limpet mine to the hull of some other disciplinary methodology; albeit social science, education, architecture, history, psychology or philosophy. In a Higher Degree Research workshop on 5th November 2013, Estelle Barrett emphasised the value of 'piggybacking on other methodologies'. In a paper in 2004, Barrett set out to discuss 'how the creative arts exegesis can operate as valorisation and validation of creative arts research'. (TEXT, 2004). Why does it need to? Validation implies an automatically unequal exchange. It is never positioned the other way around. In this same paper she states: 'To put it another way, the exegesis is a means of articulating a more profound rationale for institutional recognition and support of creative arts research.' (TEXT, 2004). Barrett is right in diagnosing this as a means of gaining visibility within a University structure, in terms of gamesmanship; but by 'more profound', I assume it to mean more profound than any affective claim of the exhibition *itself* as research outcome. This relegates art practice to being seen only as a ghetto that produces 'art objects', which then need to gain an after-life through critique. In which case we should make pictures of the writing, not writing about the pictures.

This consistently separatist view of arts practice that cleaves off from art writing is advocated further by academics such as Victor Burgin, Professor of Fine Art, Goldsmiths, University of London – who summarises that ‘there is almost universal confusion in respect to the status of the written component of the degree.’ (Elkins, 2009). In fact, he favours a Doctorate of Fine Art (DFA) for art based PhDs where the candidates, in his words: ‘have little aptitude for, or interest in, constructing lengthy written arguments.’ (Elkins, 74). This is not equivalence; it is reinforcing a hierarchy whereby a Doctor of Philosophy is only evidenced through the word; that only writing is proof of scholarship, and of capacity to test an hypothesis. Art and design outcomes can less specifically argue towards ‘knowledge claims’ as models that are repeatable, but rather for research conduct that results in a series of experiential choices, which add to the discourse, and change views and ideas in that field. Elkins concludes that we will only ever gain traction in art writing by ‘redefining Research so it is not dependent on the sciences.’ (Elkins, 121). Or as Henk Slager argues, that visual art research does not have a fixed methodology, but ‘entails a strong belief in a methodologically articulable result founded by operational strategies that cannot be legitimized beforehand.’ (Elkins, 122).

This schism that exists is in the nature of exegesis writing as legitimizing of Higher Degree Research, and as an action performed after the event – often posited as reflection upon that research outcome, but more often a process of mute translation into words – as interpretation and validation. As Daniel Mafé wrote regarding his PhD in arts practice in 2010:

I begin this thesis asking the question: what might be the value of the artist ‘voice’ as a research voice? The value lies in the creation and sustaining of openly emergent spaces for thought and critical (research) reflection through the tangible presence of the artwork in the research. (Mafé, 121).

It is useful to consider whether an artist’s ‘voice’ as a vehicle towards research has its own priorities or experiences, rather than merely trying to scrub all the spots off the leopards, and turn art makers into defacto social scientists. And the artwork is usually treated by the exegesis as if taking a shovel to a grave; to be turned over methodically for archaeological excavation, and explanation. This is less an uneasy

dialogue than a battlefield which has been vacated.

Terry Smith also raised comment on the nature of PhDs being undertaken now, which increasingly he sees as attached to study of the past. Much of which relates to the spectacularization of art that has overtaken the art gallery sector – the blockbuster, and the circus of walked experiences - and increasingly populist ways of showing work that Australian galleries, from the National Gallery of Victoria onwards, construct in education programmed, accessible didactics and thematic packages. The art gallery currently commodifies the spectacular, and its doctrine is a filmic aesthetic of moving image and interactivity; a shuffling parade of users completing circuits. According to Smith: 'The dominant art critics now are art critics in contemporary art history in Universities in America... the University based art critic in America.' – And that: 'One thing happening to Art History generally is a recursion to the 1960s... 50% of PhDs being done are being done on art of the 1960s.' (AAANZ, 2013). He attributes this to a fear of actual contemporary practice. Perhaps a logical outcome of postmodernism is seeking refuge in identifiable skills bubbling up from earlier art periods. But, it is also consistent with the views put forward by Victor Burgin of the innate conservatism within the University sector, where surveys and data collection are ready persuasions to arts-practice candidates towards those forms of scholarship in PhDs that locate themselves in the quantifiable past; enfolded in its literature and hindsight, albeit that of a relatively recent 1960s.

Nigel Krauth, Head of the Writing program at Griffith University, writes that:

With the migration of readership from paper to the e-page, there's a tide of change in publishing and writing outcomes. But university Creative Writing departments seem reluctant to deal with it. They're not yet thinking seriously about the fiction and nonfiction of the future. Not even the near future. They're not yet designing infrastructures for it. When paper publishing is a thing of the past, there's a danger they'll still be teaching writing for the past. Learning the skills of writing for the future already involves the novel as app. (*Real Time*, 2013, p16).

Further to which he wrote: 'Clearly now, the digital book can contain what was previously called research for, adaptation of and extension to the text. This is the new definition of the book – a multi-modal, multi-disciplinary, multi-artform entity. A

multigraph, not a monograph.' (*Real Time*, 2013, p16).

As the book form itself sails past academe and into antiquity, in what it can contain of discursive relationships between image, text and movement, let alone sound and video files – I suspect that the exegesis as academic form is out of time. Art writing at Higher Degree Research level at Universities is still writing towards the buckram burgundy thesis, intended to sit on the shelf of a library repository. It is written towards the presumed academic imperatives of print thesis, in an era when the non-print thesis – as multimodal object including sound, moving image, music, layers of voiceover, interviews – is not only possible but preferable if we are to evolve practice-based PhDs that galvanise their art research concomitantly, rather than merely taking the gallery exhibition and laying it out on a slab for writing's subsequent autopsy.

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