

Adaptation: Turning the Tables on Our Magnificent Obsession

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Biography

Denise Ferris is an educator and art practitioner and Head of the School of Art at the Australian National University. She has lectured and supervised at ANU SOA since 1987, holding roles as Honours and Graduate Convenor. She was the Associate Dean (Education) for the College of Arts and Social Sciences, and long-term elected member of the ANU Academic Board. In 2011 she was the recipient of an ACUADS Distinguished Teaching Award. As a photographer her research interests move from considering the sublime and confronted winter landscape of the Australian Alps to examining motherhood's historical and contemporary challenged visual representations.

Abstract

Art and design schools located within universities, in research schools, faculties or in a unique ANU way – colleges – are only too familiar with changing to suit the university's academic environment. To name the ways creative practitioners shaped have themselves to fit would make a long paper. Rather let us turn the tables and focus on the university's adaptation to the pedagogy and the research of art and design schools. Reviewing their progress so far, I offer an obvious illustration and one more influential example.

A fairly predictable example is *Exquisite Corpse*: understanding anatomy through visual arts, co-taught by academics in Art and Medicine, using two-dimensional and three-dimensional materials in the Medical School anatomy laboratory and the studios at the School of Art. Less predictable is an annual scheme for artists funded by the Vice Chancellor that fosters collaboration between practicing artists and researchers from other disciplines. An early career School of Art researcher/practitioner is supported, with limited funds for materials, to work with a chosen colleague from another discipline at the university for up to one year.

Links emerged with Law, Chemistry, Applied Maths, Biology, Economics, Archaeology, Physics, Computer Science, Sociology, Climate Change, Earth Sciences, Environmental Science, History and Psychology. Progressing understanding of art and practice-led research across the university, the program sows inter-disciplinary thinking between collaborators, generating new research networks and collegiality across the campus. As practical exemplars these and other intangible shifts register the discernible influence of schools of art and design demanding our place in contemporary universities.

Keywords: collaboration; interdisciplinarity; practice-led; research; investment

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The School of Art into Colleges in the Australian National University

This paper will make use of examples from the School of Art (SOA) in the Australian National University (ANU). SOA has ten studio disciplines as well as the Centre for Art History and Art Theory. In a university there is potential for art and design to influence the education and research of other disciplines. However, art and design disciplines have been heavily shaped by mainstream academia and can also be marginalised. Among some university colleagues, art and design practice will always need to be argued as knowledge and practice-led research legitimised.¹

As a school of art and design we have adapted to the university. Our nomenclature is aligned with generic T&L and research terms positioning practice activities in the vocabulary of academia. While the contested definitions, practice-led practice-based research is an authentic way to express studio process, translating art and design in the university necessitates the term 'research'.

Outputs that are 'non-traditional' remain opaque to other researchers and at multidisciplinary committees, even in the Humanities and Social Sciences, studio

disciplines are often called upon to please explain. While scrutiny can promote understanding, among 'conventional' disciplines assumptions about discipline hierarchy must be tirelessly contested.

In the face of staff ambivalence and resistance, SOA teaching and learning delivery has been modified, and not just because of budget necessities. At an institution keen on interdisciplinary degrees, the studio practice courses have changed shape, duration and unit value in order to articulate with courses, programs and degrees across campus. While our accommodations have student load advantages, traditional timeframes and expectations for practice subjects are tested.

For the increasing numbers of students wishing to undertake ANU Flexible Double Degrees studio timetables must articulate with mainstream lecture subjects. The student cohort attending art and design schools has also changed. The single Major student in art or design is in decline. 40% at SOA are enrolled in courses across a range of disciplines, from Astrophysics to French. Those are just some adaptations by art and design schools.

This is not a call to beat them or join them, and it is not a question of competing with other disciplines or submission. There is something much richer that can occur between disciplines and is valuable to entire sectors as well as individual researchers. That space is collaboration. From most university art and design schools there are many cross-disciplinary courses to offer as examples of connections with other disciplines, and most importantly other researchers. These examples are a good start to identifying people you want to work with, to pushing the boundaries of understanding and to testing the systems that sometimes cause collaborative teaching to be difficult to negotiate. Where courses reside and where load is counted, aspects of silo funding can be the most basic hurdle to negotiate.

What impact have the SOA studio disciplines had on others at the university?

The first example, perhaps obvious due to the traditional connection between medicine and illustrated anatomy, is *Exquisite Corpse, Insight into the Human Body*. Co-taught by art and medicine academics, the recent intensive had 50/50 art and medical students understanding the body through representation.

The *Exquisite Corpse* elective is not concerned with realistic illustration but more broadly analyses and represents the human body in diverse materials and styles, grappling with the mechanics of the body's systems. The results are far from predictable, spectacularly diverse, providing an introduction to anatomy through visual arts, using an *integrated* approach. Students gain knowledge and visual comprehension, developing communication skills relevant to *both* disciplines, naming and representing the body's structures.

The application of visual arts processes to communicate an acute understanding of anatomy is a particularly challenging for those who are unused to making and translating through materials. This form of outcome and evaluation would be conventional for art students, but for medical students there is a strong cross-disciplinary effect with both kinds of disciplinary knowledge, gained on both sides.

The indicative assessment determines that both the medical and art students know what they're talking about with the body, describing the structures of the human body, relationships and functions with appropriate anatomical terminology. Projects, the culminating exhibition, visual and reflective diaries and online learning, contribute to the final assessment.

The Trojan Horse: visual artists into other disciplines and finding collaboration

The ANU Vice-Chancellor's College (Visiting) Artist Fellows Scheme (VCCAFS) (name change imminent) was established in 2012.² Funded by the Vice-Chancellor, I believe it is the first of its kind in an Australian University aiming to develop and sustain a mutual understanding of collaborative working practices at ANU. The Scheme promotes interdisciplinary research relationships across the University's Colleges, and demonstrates the burgeoning cross-campus integration of visual arts, design and practice-led research. A long-term Scheme objective is the development of trans-disciplinary ARC funded projects in which practice-led research and creative design logic are to be embedded.³

Over the last four years the Scheme has placed six Visiting Artist Fellows across all eight ANU Colleges for up to one academic year, and has provided a small stipend and materials funds. The prospective Artist Fellow prepares the grounds for collaboration, identifying a field and researcher, and acquiring the collaborator's

support negotiates the relationship's success. There is an annual exhibition of the Fellow's work and collaborations have continued long after the residencies have terminated. The exhibition's catalogue includes project statements from each collaborator and images of artworks produced by Artist Fellows. Extracts from the 2016 catalogue relate the collaboration's impact and the considerable benefits of the Scheme.

Vice Chancellor's Artist Fellows and their Collaborators: Research Allies

Liz Coats, a painter, produced artwork and conducted colour tests, collaborating on the physiology and function of colour vision with Krisztina Valter, Head of the Retinal Cell Damage and Repair Laboratory, John Curtin School of Medical Research. One research activity involved postgraduate vision science students active in a workshop 'Painters and Colour Vision,' where Matyushin's claims for a 'third intermediary' colour or 'linking' were actually tested on participants. Valter says: "Science students learn about colours as a physiological process in the retina but do not necessarily contemplate how colour affects us".⁴

Matt Higgins working in chemigrams and cameraless photography, collaborated with Elmars Krausz, from the Research School of Chemistry. They examined the barriers between scientific fact and artistic creativity but acknowledged their shared curiosity for the enchanting secret world of hidden chemistry in photography.

Scott Keogh, Head of the Division of Evolution, Ecology & Genetics, Research School of Biology suggested sculptor Stephen Holland make a snake crown. This headwear for the President of the Australian Society of Herpetologists (ASH) was to become an integral part of the national scientific society's traditions. The researchers' mutual interest in elapid snakes and evolutionary biology provided the opportunity to support and embrace "an in-house artist' intent on understanding reptile and amphibian connections to the human mind, and realising that in an artwork."⁵

Photographer and filmmaker Ivo Lovric's joint interests with Law College academic Margaret Thornton led to the production of a series of posters raising awareness about the effects of around thirty years of neoliberal reform on the Australian university sector. Their collaboration through ongoing discussion about communicating complex ideas succinctly, have led to subsequent presentations.

Thornton says, "... the economy of style of the poster genre allows such matters (methodology and argument) to be sloughed off and for the artist to move immediately to the heart of the matter."

Carolyn Young's photograph *Carrion Insects from a Kangaroo Carcass* visualises Philip Barton's research from the Fenner School of the Environment and Society on the role that carrion plays in supporting biodiversity and the insects affecting carrion decomposition. Adrian Manning, Research Leader of the Mulligans Flat–Goorooyarroo Woodland Experiment, positions this place as an 'outdoor laboratory' at the interface of research and practice, engaging Carolyn's practice about woodland restoration. Manning notes, "... data, reported in academic journals, and the beauty we see in Carolyn's photographs ... Both communicate to us the astonishing diversity and wonder of nature in grassy woodlands, but in very different ways."⁶

Evaluating the VCCAFS aims and the meaningful effects of collaboration

The evidence from these 2015 Fellows and their collaborators indicate that the Scheme's aims were met. Those aims must however accommodate experimental work in progress, and not just 'finished' outputs and major pieces. The 'results' are not just the artwork exhibited, but also the intangible effects. The impact of the research understanding of both collaborators is intangible. It can be spoken about and felt, but not necessarily exhibited. These collaborations brought about embraced partnerships, new conceptual strategies investigated on both sides, research excitement on data and picturing, fresh ideas evolving from association, and mutual respect.

A significant recognition of the benefits of interdisciplinary activity and a profoundly greater understanding of disparate disciplines was evident. Researchers from non-visual disciplines enthused that these artists had shown them the power of visual media to express and reveal the intrinsic nature of things.⁷ Researchers re-evaluated their own disciplines: one said this alliance did "confirm that practice-led research is as vital and viable in the Humanities as in art itself."⁸ Artist Fellows affirmed the value of informed research to the ongoing elaboration of their practice and conceptual approaches.⁹ These statements verify the proposed benefits that are having an impact for the university.

The entire VCCAFS process—devising a project, identifying a collaborator, reviewing submissions, pursuing research in the field and in the studio, articulating findings in an exhibition and text—establishes a community of practitioners and researchers, students and scholars, specialists and an audience engaged by interdisciplinary research. Despite the limited funding investment the collaborative researcher's accounts verify the significant benefits of the VCCAFS to both parties. We could imagine that this signals a shift in the university's future research paradigms is achievable. What will it take to push this possibility to the next level of wider recognition of the potential and then action?

Growing collaborative models: evolving the VCCAFS

The documentation in the exhibition catalogue could be expanded to reveal the collaboration process more comprehensively, and it could be positioned as a scholarly publication. Additional data or references from the non-art collaborator could contribute to co-authored refereed publications on practice-led research and trans-disciplinary collaboration. Insights from all of the researchers could be compiled into a University book showcasing this singular scheme, ensuring more colleagues across campus and in other institutions are aware of this Scheme's success. Such an output, which could be of a hybrid kind with exhibition and publication, will constitute a benchmark for both collaboration and practice-led research.

This scheme, if it could be funded, could be generalised to any researcher wishing to cross discipline boundaries and move away from conventional research.¹⁰ Resources for all collaborators are necessary and funding over a longer timespan to offer genuinely reciprocal outcomes and reporting evidence can be a future objective. Additionally, in trans-disciplinary and collaborative research, the outcomes may not be artworks in exhibition, but could include journal articles, ARC seeding projects or other forms that progress research activity. This potentially cuts to a significant objective—the external measurement of the combined research and collaboration value.

The case for larger and broader support of cross-disciplinary research has a higher chance of being realised if there is a strategic incentive to all parties including the University's objectives. This is strategic alignment for new research paradigms and not just 'support for the arts'. It is agreed support that radiates across all disciplines is

less precarious when widespread. Professor Tim Senden (Research School of Physics and Engineering) notes, “we will need to build a new case for Central support and evolution and outcomes will win it for the program”.¹¹

A new VCCAFS application model could shift the emphasis within collaboration by testing the artist-host nexus further, establishing the mutuality of partnership and setting high expectations of collaborative investment by researchers. Aside from the VCCAFS selection process, the formation of new research teams ‘lifts the bar’ by having serious intentions for research in a shifting ERA environment. The expectations for participation in the Scheme and the participant selection can press this recognised potential for the cross-disciplinary partnering of researchers.

With substantial experience on the selection panel, Professor Senden has also suggested new ways of evaluating the research pairing. These include having collaborating partnerships present a one-page summary of their proposals in person, on video, or by paper before the appointed evaluation committee. Importance is placed on the commitment of both researchers, and through a negotiated presentation both parties advocate for the proposal—the teamwork begins. All partnerships could have two committee ‘champions’ who defend their assigned partnerships, and the panel reaches consensus.

Conclusion

Collaboration is defined as both, “working together” and “working with the enemy”. The latter definition reminds us of current competitive tertiary funding realities. The desire for collaboration and institutional impediments make both definitions resonate. However, these collaborations register the discernible influence of schools of art and design demanding our place in contemporary universities. There our collaboration outflanks our adaptation.

Notes

¹ Practice-led or practice-based research remains contested terms, abundant discussions about establishing the legitimacy of practice and the contribution of knowledge by art and design are published. See:

BOLT, B. (2011). *Heidegger reframed: interpreting key thinkers for the arts*. London; New York: I. B. Tauris.

MCNIFF, S. ed. (2013). *Art as research: opportunities and challenges*. Bristol: Intellect.

BARRETT, E. and BOLT, B., eds.(2014). *Material inventions : applying, creative arts research*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

² Dr Julie Brooke and Professor of Art Practice-led Research, Anthea Callen were instrumental in gaining support and establishing the scheme in 2012 with the first exhibition in 2013. Since then modifications have been made and proposed changes are examined in this paper.

³ Resources provided for the Fellows

- Office/work/desk space, a phone and a computer will be made available by the receiving College
- Annual stipend per Fellow of \$5000
- Materials cost up to \$3000
- Catering/expenses associated with setting up an exhibition and publishing a catalogue.

⁴ Valter, K. 2016, *VCCAFS Catalogue*, Canberra: Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Art, pp. 11-12.

⁵ Scott Keogh, *VCCAFS Catalogue*, *op. cit*, p. 19.

On mutual respect, Keogh is glowing, “I encouraged Steven to attend a national scientific conference I was hosting. Steven did a gallery show and even presented a talk to 200 scientists. I am quite proud of this as it was the first ever art talk at our conference...”

⁶ Adrian Manning, *VCCAFS Catalogue*, Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Art, 2016, ISBN: 978-0-7315-3090-8, page 29.

⁷ Brockwell, S 2014, *VCCAFS Catalogue*, Canberra: Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Art, p. 22. “Collaborating with Ursula has opened my eyes to the many ways visual media can express and reveal the intrinsic nature of not just archaeology but archaeologists themselves.”

⁸ Adjunct Professor Bronwen Douglas, *VCCAFS Catalogue*, Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Art, 2015, Nicola Dickson, College of Asia Pacific & The Pacific department of Pacific & Asian History Page 19

⁹ The concept of history she articulated offered me a conceptual strategy to imaginatively engage with and re-present the past. *VCCAFS Catalogue*, Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Art, 2015, Nicola Dickson, College of Asia Pacific & The Pacific department of Pacific & Asian History page 17

¹⁰ Professor Tim Senden, Director, Research School of Physics and Engineering, email correspondence re proposals for 2017 VCCAFS, 14th September 2016

¹¹ Professor Tim Senden, Director, Research School of Physics and Engineering, email correspondence re proposals for 2017 VCCAFS, 14th September 2016