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Block 1 – 2.20pm

Arty-facts : The Role of Performance in the “Conventional” PhD

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Bruce Christianson is Professor of Informatics at the University of Hertfordshire. His research is based around the analysis of protocols for communication. As well as supervising research degree candidates and examining at a number of institutions, Bruce is Deputy Chair of the University of Hertfordshire Research Degrees Board, where he has been involved in the drafting of many sets of research degree regulations, and listening to complaints about them.

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Much has been written about various changes made to doctoral regulations in order to accommodate professional and practice-based doctoral research programmes. These changes are sometimes disparaged by those in more established disciplines as “special pleading”. Our view is to the contrary: that, far from being distracting, such changes generally turn out

also to be advantageous to “conventional” PhD programmes.

Here we shall discuss a particular case in point: the facility for candidates to submit (and for examiners to have access to) non-textual artefacts, which have been produced in the course of the research¹.

1. Even the “textual” component of a conventional submission may include diagrams, tables, photographs and other artefacts whose textual status is to some degree problematic; as well as text that can be interpreted as non-linear annotation to other texts that it redacts. When we speak here of “non-textual” artefacts, the reader must imagine that we refer to works such as sculpture and laser installations, which resist even at a stretch being classified as text.

For speed of exposition, we compare an imagined practice-based PhD in creative arts with a conventional (but also imaginary) laboratory-based science PhD. Of course, both are deliberate caricatures.

Some artists are theoreticians who proceed by analysing the work (artefacts and performances) of other artists. Our artist is not: he spends most of his time in the studio, creating artefacts that he uses to explore his particular research question.

Our scientist isn't a theoretician either: she spends most of her time in the laboratory, either happily building artefacts (or "apparatus" as she calls them) or engaging in performances (which she calls "experiments").

In spite of their disinclination to engage with theory "for theory's sake", the research questions with which they are engaged, and which will transform and guide their practice over the course of their candidacy, did not arise from their practice without a midwife.

Their research depends for its significance upon referral to a raft of textual material on the theoretical implications of practice, and this in turn requires them to position their work in a way that demonstrates a critical understanding of what other practitioners have done. Whether they know it or not, both our candidates are social beings who have learned how to perform their activity by participating in a community that values intercourse with a textually represented corpus of theory. Likewise their research, if worthy of a doctorate, will in turn have the potential to transform the practice of others: but to do this it will need once again to be appropriately grounded in that theory.

Their supervisors, being experienced, are well aware of these issues and worry that their students are spending too much of their time in the studio (or laboratory). Here are some of the things their supervisors say to them:

- you need to read more widely
- you need to be able to put your work into a critical context
- you should think about what other interpretations your results could have
- how do you justify your choice of methodology? (you won't get away with just saying it's what everybody else is doing)
- what epistemological assumptions are you making when you built that?

- what texts are you using to frame your work?
- what assumptions are you making about those texts?
- what is the significance of what you have done for other research questions?
(you can't just say you've answered the one you started with and stop there)

The supervisors are right, although what they are saying here is only half of the truth. Artefacts can speak for themselves, but doctoral candidates also have to demonstrate that they can listen, and respond, to what the artefacts are saying. It is they, and not the artefacts, that are being examined¹, and so the research degree candidate must at least be willing to tell one story on the artefacts' behalf.

At this point it is traditional for the scientist to object: analogies between laboratory science and studio art are all very well, she may say, but the essential point about science is that it can be falsified. The scientist is always being driven by the thought that someone might find a mistake in her work. Can art ever be wrong? Surely there is more to science than just aesthetics?

We believe that it is appropriate to re-frame this objection. The only experiment which fails is one from which nothing significant is learned. Unexpected outcomes are good news for research – and good performances (sorry, experiments) are designed not so as to 'force' a particular outcome but rather to ensure that the artefacts will be empowered to tell an interesting story with unforeseen potential implications. Performance is not simply a means of enforcing boundaries, but also a way of problematising and extending them.

The sin in Science, as in Art, is not to be wrong, but to have nothing of interest to say.

Of course, there are always other stories that could be told – and the theoreticians can get their PhD by re-contextualising the same artefacts so that they are persuaded to say something different.

It is commonly argued that the performative creative artist benefits from the discipline of being required to prepare and submit a textual dissertation to his examiners (who in this sense are his audience of peers) as well as the portfolio of non-textual artefacts. It is not enough to perform: to obtain their doctorate candidates must act as their own interpreters and

1. It is sometimes tempting to feel that one is awarding a doctor's degree to an exhibition, or to a laboratory installation, but ultimately it is the candidate who is supplicating.

make explicit a narrative articulating their thesis, justifying their methodology, and scoping the boundaries of their defence and its significance. For this, the textual dissertation is vital¹.

But this is not to say that the text is primal. The non-textual works may clearly be the essential part of the submission, with the examiners and candidate alike agreeing that the exhibition of these works prior to the commencement of the viva is “where the action is”, and the textual dissertation to be “merely the frame.”

We argue that this situation can be equally true for the performing scientist. Just as the artist can benefit from the protocol that requires a textual dissertation, so the scientist – and her examiners – can benefit from a regulatory facility which allows the candidate to mount an exhibition of experimental artefacts prior to the viva, or even to conduct a performance of an experimental protocol to an audience which includes the examiners.

Rehabilitated from their present role as a noise offstage, the non-textual artefacts produced during the course of the research for a “conventional” PhD can, via appropriately mediated access, take their rightful place in the examination process as an integral part of the articulation and defence of a doctoral thesis².

References

Biggs, M. and H. Karlsson (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, Routledge, 2011.

Diebner, H., *Performative science and beyond: involving the body in research*, Springer, 2006.

Aesthetics of Science, Special Issue of *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Volume 16, Number 1, 1 March 2002, Routledge.

1. However text can also be performative: arguments do not simply progress, they develop; and in some dissertations the self-reflective errata amount almost to leaving ‘track changes’ permanently on.
2. Our argument can be pressed further. Other disciplines have different types of artefacts – such computer programs, which can be exercised as well as being analysed as text. An extreme case is pure mathematics, where (on a constructivist view) a primary purpose of the (highly symbolic) text is precisely to give the examiners shared access to artefacts that are (modally) experienced as purely mental. When in 1648 the French Academie professionalised the arts by suggesting that they were intellectual rather than manual activities – arts rather than metiers – the immateriality rather than the substance of art was of singular importance in asserting its value, to the point that one academician proposed an art that was purely conceptual.