



Helsinki Conference Discussion Paper 01

Recurrent issues in the debates on doctoral level studies in the creative arts

Workpackage 1 SHARE Network 24th October 2011

What this paper does?

This is a short discussion paper (one of several prepared for the www.sharenetwork.eu conference in Helsinki 4th and 5th November 2011) based on the conferences and publications generated in the last ten years on the issue of the doctoral level award being used within the creative arts. The purpose of the paper is to indicate the general outlines of previous debate in order to help identify the points where the SHARE network can most usefully contribute to the debate and the themes that may prove helpful in identifying the many different alternative ways of developing creative arts doctoral level studies. It is to support further discussion.

Where has the debate on doctoral studies for creative the arts taken place?

There are many platforms and locations for the debate on the creative arts doctorate that range from the internal dialogues of teaching teams within higher education institutions to the discussions by higher education authorities and ministries of education in different countries. There has also been a noticeable level of debate within the creative arts themselves outside the academies. An important example of this is the series of debates that played out on the pages of the e-Flux journal. (See www.e-flux.com/journal) Prof. Chris Wainright of University of the Arts London has established an initiative to catalogue the conferences and the publications that have provided a platform for the development of the doctoral and research debate within the arts. (We have included the latest draft of this list in the conference pack also, and we would welcome information on resources not already listed there). Networks such as the European Artistic Research Network, EUFRAD, DOCartes¹, the AEC (especially the Polifonia Third Cycle Working Group²), DoCuMa have all been important enablers of the debate. The UK's research council also has been an important contributor to the debate with publications such as: the (2007) *AHRC Research Review: Practice-Led Research in Art, Design and Architecture* (Prof Chris Rust et al.)³ and the (2008) *Report on the 'state of play' in practice-led research in Art, Design and Architecture* for AHRC/CHEAD joint initiative.⁴ While journals such as *Art & Research*, the *Journal of Artistic Research* and *maHKUzine* have in different ways opened out the debate in a number of different directions. (See bibliography provided in Conference Pack.) We are also delighted to have a new book on artistic research, that will further this debate, by Prof. Henk Slager. This new work is published by the Finnish Academy of Fine Art and will be launched during the conference.

How has the debate evolved?

The debate on the doctorate in the creative arts (and on research in and through the arts) can sometimes appear to be permanently caught in an argument about first principles and basic legitimacy. The question "Can or should a doctoral research process be applied in the creative arts?" has surfaced again and again.

The debate began slowly to appear in the second half of the 20th century, but it has continued and intensified becoming especially prominent in the first decade of the 21st century. Today we have this wide range of perspectives. Some countries and some disciplines have now almost two decades of experience with doctoral level study through art practices and some countries and some disciplines are just having debates now about whether there is a need or a desire to develop third cycle or doctoral level studies.

This means that debate has not only repeated questions of first principle: What is a doctorate in the arts? Can there be such a thing? What does research mean in the arts? Should it be “taught” within an academic institution? What is art? How is “art” different from “science”?

Because countries such as England, Scotland, Australia, Finland, Portugal, Belgium and Spain (among others) – and because disciplines such as Theatre, Dance, Music, Design, Architecture, and Fine Art (for example) – have implemented a wide range of different models of doctoral level studies, there has also been the development of new issues and new questions in the debate. The debate moves from questions of first principle to questions of practical and concrete experience. In a sense the question of “what can a PhD be for the arts?” has moved from being a “theoretical” or “academic” question to being a “practical” question. The debate has moved from abstract arguments over first principles to practical examples of experiment in making doctoral projects.

Arguably then, a key priority in recent years has been to move the arguments away from questions of first principle – from overarching epistemological and methodological debates (What is knowledge? What is research? What is art?) – toward close discussion of concrete examples of doctoral work and artworks and practices that have an explicit engagement with ideas of research, knowledge, and enquiry. (What does this art practice do in this particular case? What knowledge is happening in this situation within art? What kind of knowledge-work does this particular artwork or performance “do”?)

Another development is that there has been a move to open up the ideological stakes of discussion so as to question the larger changes in educational policy and practices under the impact of neoliberal and economic arguments about the nature and function of higher education. This moves from a simple “us” (the good guys – the artists) and “them” (the bad guys – the bureaucrats) conflict towards recognising a more complicated world of multiple and co-existing professional identities and contexts. As artists (this includes curators, dancers, actors, writers, film-makers, animators, designers, architects, composers, musicians...) and as professional educators, often funded by public monies through the state, we are already working within systems of power, knowledge, competition and politics that make such simple “us-and-them” rhetoric too simple to capture the complexities of our working lives in cultural practice and education. As Tom Holert has argued:

“The problem is, once you enter the academic power-knowledge system of accountability checks and evaluative supervision, you have either explicitly or implicitly accepted the parameters of this system. Though acceptance does not necessarily imply submission or surrender to these parameters, a fundamental acknowledgment of the ideological principles inscribed in them remains a prerequisite for any form of access, even if one copes with them, contests them, negotiates them, and revises them. Admittedly, it is somewhat contradictory to claim a critical stance with regard to the transformation of art education through an artistic research paradigm while simultaneously operating at the heart of that same system.”⁵

The question becomes how we work with contradictions rather than simply pretend that we are completely free of these contradictions.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that there is a considerable emotional charge to the debates about the doctoral level of studies in the creative arts. This emotional importance of the debate should not be seen as a weakness or a problem within the debate, but rather an indication of the importance of all the different issues in play.

Whether one is for or against, or whether one is unsure what to think, it is clear that in some way the discussion of the doctoral level of studies in the creative arts touches all the key issues facing us in arts education in general. These are the issues we face both within the academy and the university - within higher arts education in all its forms – and within the world of arts practice in general beyond the academy. The Belgian critic Dieter Lesage captures the sense of passion in these debates when he writes:

“At art academies in many of the forty-six European countries participating today in the Bologna Process, the doctorate in the arts has become the subject of heated discussions. First of all, there is the existential question many people ask: Why should there be a doctorate in the arts, rather than nothing? Weren't we happy without it? It is no secret that many people see neither the socio-economic necessity nor the artistic relevance of a doctorate in the arts. There is fierce opposition to it from people within higher arts

education, universities, and the arts field—at least in so far as it still makes sense to draw a clear-cut distinction between higher arts education, universities, and the arts. [...] voices are heard opposing the doctorate in the arts. Against these voices—whether coming from the grumpy old folks who prefer to continue to live in a world that no longer exists and cling to the character of institutions as they once knew them, or from the jumpy young ones who already live in a world yet to come and fly at the character of institutions which they believe they know are no longer useful—I would like to fiercely defend the doctorate in the arts.”⁶

Clearly, those of us working within a network that is investigating the future of the doctoral level of studies in the creative arts in Europe are more likely to consider doctoral level studies as desirable. But we will also want to have our right to go back to these fundamental questions: What should, could, or will the doctorate level of studies be for? Who will it serve? What interests will it represent? How should it connect with the world of culture that is not institutionalised in the art academies and the universities but which lives and thrives in other institutional and non-institutional contexts? What kind of cultural workers and practices are we trying to facilitate or make happen?

What contribution can SHARE make to the debate?

The basic commitment of SHARE is that we stimulate an exchange of ideas and experiences about different models and different practices so that we can all learn from each other. The goal is NOT to establish a single fixed model that is supposed to work for everyone and for all art forms, cultural contexts, institutions, and national situations. The first step is to map what is already happening and to share the local knowledge about what has been done in different parts of the world. What worked for some? What did not work for others? Who is active where?

In our first annual conference we have invited speakers to help us build “global perspectives” so that we can each better understand our own local situations and build new perspectives into the future.

What conclusions will we reach?

We have seen that there has been a great deal of debate in the last two decades on research through creative practices. These debates have common themes – the role of writing; the role of artefacts; the role of performance; the role of original cultural works; the relationship with the mainstream art-world and professional practice outside the academy; the future of the specialist art academies, architecture schools, conservatories, and specialist arts institutions; the colonisation of creative practices by the humanities and/or the sciences; the instrumentalisation of the creative disciplines; the creative economy / cultural industries; the Bologna process; the nature of outcomes; the validity of doctoral awards and of research in creative disciplines; the epistemic particularity of the arts; and many more issues.

There is also debate about the reform processes that are driving educational change and whether these will undermine the resource needs and specialist environments required by the arts. It seems likely that we will encounter all these debates again and again in our work. However, it is important that we accept that many of these issues will not be resolved once-and-for-all. Rather, these debates which go to fundamental questions of purpose and vision are an important stimulus to creative thinking about the potential of education, research and new organisational formats.

¹ The docARTES programme is run at Orpheus Institute in Ghent, together with Flemish and Dutch partner institutes since January 2004. See <http://www.docartes.be>

² <http://www.polifonia-tn.org/Content.aspx?id=179>

³ For a version of this report see: http://artsresearch.brighton.ac.uk/links/practice-led/Practice-Led_Review_Nov07.pdf

⁴ For the executive summary see: http://artsresearch.brighton.ac.uk/links/practice-led/Practice-led-Research_2008.pdf

⁵ <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/40>

⁶ <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/45>