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Artist Researchers: Gatecrashers at the University High Table?

Abstract
How can we describe art practice as research, while foregrounding the acknowledgment of the intellectual, imaginative and creative concepts inherent in visual language?

Creative work with outcomes such as exhibitions, still requires other stratagems to be acknowledged as *pure research,* as university and ARC grant criteria make clear.

My argument is for artist researchers in the university to articulate assertively that the speculative and conceptual rigour inherent in creative arts 'best practice' is not inferior to research conducted in other disciplines of the university.

I discuss the development of a cross-disciplinary project and the manoeuvres required to navigate the parameters of academic research. Although not centred on my art practice, the research is visual, based on the use and interpretation of photographs as evidence from a different culture.

My current project slips between a visual archive, a biographical re-evaluation and ethnographic research, based on the restoration and presentation of a collection of photographs taken in China (1923-1950) by my father, C. P. FitzGerald.

Negotiating funding from within a visual arts faculty of the larger university, has provided useful insights into the situation we are all concerned with – the acknowledgment of creative practice within the research culture of academia.

Biography
Mirabel FitzGerald is an artist working in printmedia and has taught in the visual arts since graduating from the Byam Shaw School of Art (NDD), London in 1965. She received an MFA (Research) from College of Fine Art, University of New South Wales in 1997. Appointed as lecturer at Sydney College of the Arts in 1979 and promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1992, she is currently the Associate Dean of Academic Administration responsible for coordination of staff and student matters, and liaison between faculty management and teaching staff at SCA.

FitzGerald has maintained an active studio practice exhibiting continuously since 1965. Her artwork challenges the scale of printmedia, by utilising older print technologies such as ink-rubbings and trace-marks, to record topographical surfaces of architectural structures. Through rendering the surface impression the evidence of history is revealed.

Presently, FitzGerald's research encompasses multifaceted projects in China. An archive of family photographs has provided a resource for exhibitions, publications and a new investigation into the interpretation of photographs from a different cultural perspective.

Artist Researchers: Gatecrashers at the University High Table?
> An artist is a person who lives in the triangle, which remains after the angle, which we may call common sense, has been removed from this four-cornered world.
> Natsume Soseki (1867-1916) *The Three-Cornered World*

This paper reflects on the experience of developing a research project in which a number of inter-disciplinary interests intersect, and my attempt to classify it within the existing funding opportunities available for university researchers. My current research project is not centred on my art practice, however it provides a stance to ask the questions:

How can we describe the practices of artists as research, while foregrounding the acknowledgment of the intellectual, imaginative and creative concepts inherent in visual language?
and
How can we avoid the opportunistic short cuts of couching visual research exclusively within the acceptable "priorities" of new technology, or by cladding it in textual/theoretical frameworks?

Both of the categories are more satisfactory within the strictures of university research – the first is *a priori,* innovative, and the other because it is better understood academically.

My discussion here refers to 'research' in the context of the academic research recognised within the limited definitions of the Australian Research Council and the University Research Quantum assessment process, arrived at as a formula set by government-sanctioned definitions. In the ongoing struggle to integrate the creative arts and the location of art schools within universities, the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools has formulated a policy on "research equivalence"[1] (or "publication equivalence") as an interim strategy for the recognition of the creative arts in the same context as orthodox academia. [2]

I acknowledge that this discussion has been thoroughly debated over the past several years and my excuse for re-examining the issues is that the evidence I present, with two references from 1993 and 2001, indicate that we are, if not going around in circles, at best standing still. How has the discussion changed?

From the perspective of the University of Sydney, of which Sydney College of the Arts is a faculty, visual arts research has been funded from internal research budgets. Following amalgamation with the University, Sydney College of the Arts registered a nil return for research quantum. This nil return has continued and as such the faculty receives no external research funding other than those grants secured by individuals from the Australia Council. Now as then, almost all of the academic staff actively produce artworks, exhibitions and publications and as a group participate in the process of collecting and recording research output.[3] However, with the shifting ground of constantly changing DEST criteria for what qualifies as research, and the removal of Category 'J' from the list of DEST funded activities, more and more faculties within the University struggle to have their research 'recognised'. This is a new battle for some but an ongoing war for the creative arts. While internal funding models have developed out of lengthy debates between universities and government [4], creative arts research remains the poor cousin of 'serious' research, and since Category 'J' is now funded internally, research output must fulfil the requirements of the University standards for research.

I argue that the core problem lies with the definition and interpretation of the word 'research'. In a paper presented in 1993 at *Ornithology and Art? A bird's eye view of conceptual rigour in Contemporary Art Practice,*[5] Merilyn Fairskye complains: "Why is theory seen as the senior partner in its relationship with artistic practice?" She continues, referring to a discussion that proposes:

…artists who prefer to remain 'unconscious practitioners' should still be able to qualify for research funding, as contributors to research, if they form a team with others whose task it is to provide critique and documentation throughout the project's development. The artist works in informal concert with critics, historians and curators. These sorts of interactions can be valuable and productive, but in terms of the current debate, one has to ask: Why is art more easily viewed as research when it is textual, when it involves itself in or is framed by theory?

The debate continues and it seems little has changed in the ten years since Fairskye's presentation. I reluctantly conclude that this particular issue will never be resolved. Perhaps, to paraphrase Soseki quoted above, it is that art practice does not fit the three-cornered world of the universities and government funding.

So do we accept this fact and work without resistance to stretch and bend our projects to meet the criteria set down by government-funded universities? Do we continue this debate, honing our arguments to research funding bodies hoping to persuade that 'difference not equivalence' is the way of a 'clever country's' future? Or do we reallocate our priorities, realising that the policies driven by government (and

the universities), reflect the society we live in, where the importance of culture is not highly valued on the national agenda, a situation that seems to be worsening under the present government.

Although encouragement and support in a tertiary education environment are available, the continued lack of acknowledgment by government agencies for research in the visual arts has a filtering effect, which disseminates widely throughout the university and colours the attitudes of those responsible for the allocation of grants and other forms of funding for which artist researchers apply. Until such time as government agencies recognise works in the visual or creative arts as 'research', instead of branding it "research equivalence" or "research-based work", universities will not value the research output of many academic staff who are employed as "artists, rather than as theoreticians or historians" [6].

Nigel Lendon contributed to this debate in a seminar for postgraduate students at the National Institute of the Arts, ANU in 2001, and concluded that:

> … it remains the case that the artistic outcomes of such processes (what artists do in their professional practice) are never self-evidently or independently able to be judged as "research".[7]

The ambiguity of Lendon's paper left me wondering whether, tongue-in-cheek, he was provoking us by arguing the authorised position of the university, or was he in fact having it both ways and separating "mute art" which "speaks a language one can't translate" and "cannot be read, by itself, as the product of research", from art that fits tidily into acceptable frameworks. He asserts:

> …when I encounter art I find myself doing so with a kind of longing for a higher-order aesthetic experience – I go out of my way to find the intellectual pleasure which enhances the pleasures of the senses. After all, the cultural construct "art" only exists in the engagement between a work and a knowledgeable audience. . is it so elusive that it's destined never to realise itself as art in the conventionalised, classical sense characterised above? Is its goal never to be understood?

I cannot but disagree with his view that "research is always wrapped in discourse" if we are going to stand by the validity of both visual art and music as 'creative research'. My response to these questions is that in the present age of information-overload, we are obsessed with categorisation and analysis. If art education is incorporated into the university, must all the attributes of *art* be analysed in the deconstruction of its *cultural* c*onstruct*? Art, like poetry, does not open itself entirely to unravelling questions and providing answers. Can we find our intellectual and sensual pleasures in the elusive nature of art, rather than in seeking its quantifiable data? Artist researchers working in the university must articulate more assertively that the speculative and conceptual rigour inherent to 'best practice' in the creative arts is not inferior to research conducted in the sciences and humanities disciplines. Rather than artists bending and shaping their visual practice to accommodate other research priorities, we should be mindful of research as characterised by:

> **originality**; having investigation as a primary objective; having the potential to produce results that are sufficiently general for humanity's stock of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, to be recognisably increased. [8]

Is it necessary to set up an antithesis between conceptual rigour and 'mute', semiconscious or even unconscious art practice? Contributors to this debate frequently suggest that artistic rigour can be quantified, is textual and its equivalence to other (academic) research practices can be identified in the specific practices of selected artists. John Cage understood this when he complained: 'Why can't someone who is looking at something do their own work of looking? Why is language necessary when art, so to speak, already has it in it?' [9]

I now move to outline my own research, the development of which has formed my critique of the 'bigger picture'.

My current research project, which found its beginnings in an archive of family photographs, slips between a biographical re-evaluation of my father's extensive travels in China early last century, ethnographic research and publications and visual outcomes, which include exhibitions.

Charles Patrick FitzGerald was born in England in 1902 and died in Sydney ninety years later. His curiosity about China, which developed into a lifelong passion, was sparked by two articles published in the London *Times* newspaper in 1917. They provided what FitzGerald described as "the turning point of my life, and gave it an unchanging direction".[10] He went on to write social and cultural histories of China and made a distinguished academic contribution to Chinese studies in Australia over four decades.

I lived in China for the first few years of my life and the influence of that culture has remained an important part of my background, although my sisters and I grew up in Australia. Leaving in 1949 I did not re-visit China again until 1993 when I travelled extensively through the regions documented in my father's books. This began an engagement, which has continued with several subsequent visits. In 1999 while visiting Yunnan, where my father had lived in the 1930s, I resolved to research and publish the photographs taken during his travels throughout China in the first half of the twentieth century.

As FitzGerald was one of many travellers absorbed by their "lifelong passion" for China his photographic record may not seem unique. What makes this collection of exceptional interest to scholars in the field, is that it provides the personal and immediate response of one who, through his scholarship, became a leading cultural historian and commentator on China and Chinese affairs.

My project has grown organically in a number of ways, sprouting new shoots in various directions as it develops. The original purpose was to document approximately eight hundred negatives and to print them as contact sheets for archiving purposes. From this grew the proposal to mount an exhibition of selected photographs to tour in China and Australia. It seems appropriate to include in the exhibition, two of FitzGerald's books that are significant to the photographs: *The Tower of Five Glories*, an ethnographic account of minority people in south-west China, and *Why China? Recollections of China, 1923-1950*, a memoir of his experiences there. Organising the Chinese translation and publication of these books, in part funded by the Australia-China Council, encompassed new research into inter-cultural negotiations including writing contracts. A bilingual book of FitzGerald's photographic images, extracts of his writings and critical essays by both Australian and Chinese contemporary writers and historians, forms another part of the project, which to date, has expanded to include two conference papers and a small exhibition of FitzGerald's photographs. None of these were anticipated at the outset.

My experience of negotiating such research from within a visual arts faculty of a larger university, has given me some insights. A Sesqui Research & Development Grant from the University of Sydney funded the first stage of this work. I learned, from "off the record" feedback, that, although enthusiastic about the biographical perspective I bring to the project, there was extended discussion by the assessment panel, as to whether a photographic archive could be considered within the parameters of research funding. This gave me pause to consider what visual artists are up against in the context of academic research culture.

A condition of University Sesqui Research Grants is that they support "high quality research projects that are likely to lead to external funding". Applications for funding must be made within two years of commencement of the internal grant. Apart from a grant from the Australia-China Council, whose funding base is limited, the only appropriate avenue for funding, outside sponsorship, seems to be the ARC Large Grant scheme. The nature of my project exempts it from Australia Council funding, in that the visual component is not based on my own art practice.

The expectation that an application be submitted for an Australia Research Council grant, has led to the development of another dimension of the project, which forms the substance of the 'original research' requirement. This comprises an investigation into the responses elicited from contemporary Chinese audiences viewing FitzGerald's photographs, juxtaposed with how Australian viewers 'read' the same images.

To exhibit these images in China, in the locales where they were taken almost seventy years ago, provides a unique opportunity to identify images that are not currently attributed, and to research the interpretation and significance of historic images to contemporary audiences. Data will be collected via hard copy surveys and an interactive CDRom and web-site (Chinese and English languages) which will accompany the touring exhibition throughout China and Australia. The digital media component will have a dual role in gathering responses and identification data and for this purpose will include the exhibition images together with all unidentified photographs from the collection.

The research also aims to further our understanding of how photographs are 'read' in differing cultural contexts, and how the "cultural lens" determines our perception. These questions are significant in the field of anthropology but also, and somewhat differently, in the visual arts:

> …two basic interpretive strategies currently exist – one which leads us to make inferences about photographs as art and as aesthetic objects, and a second strategy which causes us to deal with the photograph as a record of reality and to make ethnocentric judgements about its content. [11]

My research addresses the following questions:

> In what way do the viewers of these photographs derive significance and meaning?
> How are their responses determined by their knowledge, or lack of it, of their history?
> How are their responses conditioned by their politics and cultural framework?

While there has been much research on the 'truthfulness of the photograph' as an accurate recording of the world, this research focuses on how photographs are read and understood as bearers of cultural and social meaning. In a recent seminar Elizabeth Edwards [12] observed that most classifications of images are linguistically based. Her discussion, from the perspective of ethnography, invoked a dialogue, which is common parlance for visual artists, particularly in a teaching context. I was struck that she presented deliberations such as the materiality of photographs, the idea that their presentation, frame and context determines their viewing, and how the "thingness" of the image affects our reading of its content, as aspects that are frequently not considered in looking at images.[13]

Visual artists are well attuned to critiquing the reciprocal situation between the artwork and the viewer. As I worked with the photographs I realised that their importance to me, as evidence of past family history and as an insight into my father's early working life, is likely to be very different to the readings of contemporary Chinese and Australian audiences. I look at them noting his quality of observation; they are the photographs of a traveller with an ethnographic and historical orientation and are not *photographs-as-works-of-art*. I have had widely differing responses to their content from people in China and in Australia. In Yunnan I was able to visit places that I knew from images and descriptions of sixty years before. My interest in sourcing the images was shared by local residents who were able to further inform me about the photographs, frequently commenting on how many rural customs remain unchanged. There will be other interpretations with an understanding of a historicised vision. The Chinese will see familiar places photographed by a foreigner with a European perspective, whereas Australian audiences will probably see the 'exotic other'.

A final outcome of the project is a published book. This will chronicle FitzGerald's journeys, in part through access to his unpublished personal papers; incorporate the fieldwork research gathered through the exhibition responses, and re-examine and critique Fitzgerald's observations in relation to the photographic archive some of which will be included in the book.

Without the "original research" requirement for funding, this aspect of the project may not have been considered. Meeting the funding criterion made it necessary to 'create' a research 'angle' in order to support the remainder of the project. This is not to say that I am not committed to the "original research", quite the contrary. I make this point because it exemplifies the "bending and shaping" of visual art projects that can be so problematic, in order to meet the research needs of universities and governments.

The dynamic development of the project I have been working on leads me to propose that, like the nature of contemporary art itself, academic research can bridge disciplines and move between pragmatic outcomes, such as negotiating exhibitions and publications and developing speculative ideas. Our opportunities should be sought in openness to such an exploratory process, rather than in acquiescing to predetermined expectations and constraints. Again I quote Merilyn Fairskye who said in 1993:

> Artists are in a sense being treated like gatecrashers at the university's dinner party. They are being asked to show their I.D. before they're allowed to sit down at the table with everyone else. Perhaps the problem lies not with the guest but with the host.

We may now have been at the dinner party long enough to acknowledge the problem and move on. Aspects of our creative practice sit comfortably into the research framework and meet the "prime criteria of conventional university research"[14] but much of art practice does not. It is the practitioners who should guide the university into a broader recognition and acknowledgment of the specificities of art practice if we are to continue to be enmeshed in the university sector.

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1   Strand, D. *Research in the Creative Arts*. Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra 1998.

2   Lendon, N. *mute "research" and two false premises*. latest editions: 2001 postgraduate printmedia seminar; National Institute for the Arts, ANU Canberra 2001.

3   In 2002 staff research data for SCA recorded twenty-one solo exhibitions and forty-three group exhibitions. *Research Data Collection* Sydney College of the Arts, June 2003.

4   "Recommendation 11: Universities should develop mechanisms, appropriate to their institution, for distributing research funds in ways which recognise the importance of research and research equivalent activitiy in the creative arts and the need for their appropriate and continuing financial support." Strand, D. *Research in the Creative Arts* Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra 1998.

5   Fairskye, M. "Ornithology and Art? A bird's eye view of conceptual rigour in contemporary art practice", Seminars organised by George Petelin and Graham Coulter-Smith of QCA, Griffith University at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, May 1993.

6   Strand, D. *Research in the Creative Arts* Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra 1998 pp xvi.

7   Lendon, N. *mute "research" and two false premises*. latest editions: 2001 postgraduate printmedia seminar; National Institute for the Arts, ANU Canberra 2001.

8   DEET 1994:24, Lendon, N. Attachment 2, Research in the Creative Arts 24.5.00.

9   I am indebted to my colleague Merilyn Fairskye for helpful discussion and for the references I have made to a paper she presented in Brisbane in 1993.
Fairskye, M. "Ornithology and Art? A bird's eye view of conceptual rigour in contemporary art practice", Seminars organised by George Petelin and Graham Coulter-Smith of QCA, Griffith University at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, May 1993.

10 FitzGerald, C. P. *Why China? Recollections of China 1923-1950* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1985. p12.

11   Ruby, J. In a Pic's Eye: "Interpretive Strategies for deriving significance and meaning from Photograph*s" Afterimage* March 1976.

12 Archives Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

13 Edwards, E. *The Thingness of Photographs*, Transforming Cultures Seminar, Faculty of Humanities University of Technology Sydney, May 2003.

14 Strand, D. *Research in the Creative Arts* Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra 1998 pp xvi.

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