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What impact are higher degree research programs having on emerging trends and themes in contemporary art?

Theory, practice and reality: curating and graduate degrees

Before I start, I'd like to say that my remarks today are drawn from my experience as a curator of contemporary art, and lecturer in art history and art curatorship. As a curator working independently and within art institutions, both in Australia and overseas, I have worked with artists at all stages of their professional lives: from emerging artists just out of art schools, the dreaded 'mid-career', and established artists with a wealth of experience. And as a teacher at undergraduate and graduate level in the fields of contemporary art and art curatorship – so both theory and practice-led research – I too am involved in the process of professionalization of artists and art professionals via higher degrees.

I've been asked to speak about the influence of practice based higher degrees in my experience working in art galleries and museums.

Much of what I have to say today will be familiar to many, and no doubt will have come up in various forms in some of the preceding conference sessions.

1. The first point I would like to make is in relation to the number of 'artists' we are producing.

The number of students who are enrolling in undergrad and graduate art degrees is exponentially greater than when we were students. And now, from the moment these young students enter art school, they are encouraged to see and think of themselves as practicing artists. Professional development subjects and studio based teaching both encourage this position.

This is a radical change from 20 or so years ago. Artists then felt they had to 'earn' the right to call themselves by that name. And often this didn't occur until many years after art school.

So, there's an assumption from these younger cohorts that they should be able to make work, have shows, receive money for these activities, and that these activities are, and should be, valued in society. But we know, that it's not quite that simple, for all the rhetoric and the stats that arts policy wonks peddle.

It does raise an interesting question, however. If every person coming out of art school sees themselves as a practising artist, with a right to make a living from that chosen profession, is this a belief that we can, or should, endorse and perpetuate? And should these young practitioners see it as a right? It's a fact that only a minority of students of practice-based undergrad or higher degrees are going to wind up as practising artists. Should we as responsible teachers work harder at thinking about the skills that they are acquiring along the way; the importance and value of these skills; and how they can be transferred, used, and employed in other areas? After all, we need educated audiences, and wouldn't it be interesting if we saw more of the critical and creative thinking that we foster in art schools in the wider world?

Again, I say this as a teacher in Melbourne University's Masters in Art Curatorship – where the number of students is also going to outweigh the number of available jobs.

We're equipping these students with valuable skills, enabling them to develop these further in nurturing, challenging and exciting environments. They're also developing networks: of fellow students, and to lecturers, academics, artists, curators and art professionals both in Australia and internationally. This is invaluable. They're learning more about how the art world works, of art markets, patrons, curators, uber curators, stellar artists, the value of institutional shows, and of taking risks and making mistakes. Shouldn't we do a better job at selling the importance and value of these skills to those beyond the arts?

2. The next question I want to think about is what impact these higher degrees have had on my own work as a curator in art galleries and museums?

Higher degrees have now become the norm. An MA or MFA is a pre-requisite, a PhD in studio-practice increasingly common.

On a recent selection panel for studio artists that I sat on, only 1 out of 100 applicants had no formal art training. Nearly all had an MFA.

Students are far more skilled in professional development. They are much better versed at talking about their work, to a whole range of audiences: from fellow students, teachers, external critics, curators, grant applications, and the list goes on. From a theoretical perspective, they understand the context and the critical framings within which they make work.

What this all means is that it's not enough now just to make work. The written component of higher degrees, whether dissertation or exegesis, forces students to write better, more clearly, and consider their work within a broader context, whether critical or art historic. These writing skills are valuable to their work as an artist, and for anything else they may decide to do.

As we know, the written component is only one part of the equation for a practice-based PhD. And the practical component can take a variety of forms. What the PhD offers practitioners is a universally recognized qualification that carries weight and respect across a range of disciplines. You need stamina, determination, and a good idea to successfully complete a PhD.

Both within and beyond the university context, the degree is useful for people trying to understand what artists actually do, in all its forms. A word of caution, however: in fitting practice into this well-established academic model, we don't want to limit, or inhibit, a creative process. I don't think there's much of a risk of this. Artists are nothing if not incredibly creative, with a necessary degree of sustained determination. They have always challenged, subverted, and made the most of institutional and non-institutional frames.

3. Lastly, it's not uncommon to hear the sentiment that for many artists, higher degrees (MFA and PhD) are a form of financially supported studio time. That the practice-led PhD makes work too theoretical, and that post a practice based degree, there needs to be a period of de-theorising, and just getting back to making work.

In some cases, this is not an unfair criticism.

Certainly, some artists have entered – and no doubt will continue to enter – higher degrees with this motivation. For me, there's nothing wrong with seeing some higher degrees as a form of subsidised studio time. I fear, however, that as current policy reduces the number of APA's for higher degrees, fewer will have this opportunity.

And some artists do finish an MA or PhD highly theorized, and needing to put it aside and just get on and make work. After a sustained period of 3 or 4 years of thinking and working on an increasingly narrowing topic, it is only natural that the candidate needs to move on and do something else at the end. The PhD is not an end in itself: it's really just the beginning.

But this criticism of studio-based degrees as subsidised practice doesn't address the fact that any higher research, whether practice or research, offers many opportunities beyond making work. It's also a chance to develop incredible expertise, to make a new contribution, to work with a range professionals and experts who will challenge you to see things differently, and to develop a series of skills that are widely transferable.

So to conclude. I've raised three simple questions. The professionalisation of the art world, in part through education and the rise in practice-led degrees, has played and will continue to play a hugely important role. Even if they call themselves artists from the moment they walk into art school, we are developing artists with vastly more knowledge and networks than in the past. It's not necessarily always going to create brilliant work, and it can sometimes be accused of creating a 'house style', but for those artists who have a spark of something to start with, it sure hones their skills.

Thank you.