Some Notes on Past and Future of the (Practice) PhD

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This article traces the history of the PhD, the rise of the practice PhD and our experiences with implementing a practice-informed PhD programme between Vienna and Zurich, and it concludes with a reflection on some precarious parallels between the research , the methodology of a practice PhD and the decolonisation of research. Accompanying the article are images of our master's and PhD candidates engaging globally in field research, archive research, creative practice and institutional and noninstitutional collaborations.

#phd

#decolonisation

#postgraduate- research

#collaboration

#artistic -research

In this article, we briefly trace the history of the PhD, the rise of the practice PhD and our experiences with implementing such a programme between Vienna and Zurich, and we conclude with a reflection on some parallels between the research, methodology of a practice PhD, and the decolonisation of research. Our images show our students engaging across the world in field research, archives, creative practices and collaborations. We use the term practice PhD to acknowledge, but not dwell on, the interchangeability and differences between the terms 'practice-based research', 'practice-led research', 'research-led practice', 'performative research' and 'practice-informed research' and differences in the nomenclature of the granted degrees, including PhD, doctor of creative arts, doctor of arts and *Doctor Atrium*, for a more in-depth and differentiated survey on what these terms refer to Schwarzenbach and Hackett's (2015) publication on the practice-based PhD.

The proliferation of practice PhDs within the creative fields has become widespread in the last two decades, driven by university and government education funding models and the genuine pursuit of formalising artistic knowledge within an academic framework. As a terminal degree, the practice PhD logically followed the acceptance of film, media, design and visual and performing arts into tertiary education frameworks by establishing new departments within existing universities or institutions gaining university status. Within the European context, practice PhD programmes are often collaborations between an art and design school and 'traditional' universities, which grant PhD degrees. This is less common in the UK, Asia and Australasia, where most art and design schools were 'upgraded' to university status during the restructuring of the education sector in the 1990s and can award the degree themselves. Paradoxically, the US offered a PhD in fine art, which was replaced by an MFA before the original PhD was reintroduced (Schwarzenbach and Hackett 2015).

The appearance of a practice PhD as a form of artistic and academic validation in coalescence with the diverse experimental models of engagement, supervision and structure has produced a kaleidoscope of supervisory and institutional approaches applied to the process, raising questions of what knowledge is in this context.

> *Since it is clear that a sonic or visual artwork can sometimes transmit knowledge in non-verbal and non-numerical terms, we believe that any definition of knowledge needs to acknowledge these non-verbal forms of transmission. It also must include the idea that knowledge is often unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged, and cannot necessarily be conveyed with the precision of a mathematical proof. (Smith and Dean 2009, 3)*

The practice PhD attempts to formally acknowledge artists' work and other creative endeavours as a form of research equivalent to that conducted in the humanities and sciences by laying out an appropriate research framework that recognises that the creation, contextualisation and/or reflection of practice is equivalent while acknowledging that often 'non-verbal forms of transmission' (Smith and Dean 2009) are central to the research. A clear differentiation needs to be made between the mastery of an art form, such as calligraphy (in the Japanese or Arabic tradition), and the highly individualistic and diverse forms of artistic practice found in the 21st century that the majority of practice PhDs have until now focused upon. A brief survey of the PhD's historical development provides a starting point for approaching these questions. Some debate has ensued regarding the origins of the doctorate. George Makdisi, an American professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, has argued (Makdisi 1990) that the ancient Arabic system of *ijazah*, or authorisation, as a formalised knowledge transmission method, is the doctorate's originating framework. The granting of *ijazah* was made by the holder of a specific piece of knowledge (whether it be calligraphy, religious

law or history) to a student, thus authorising that student to transmit the knowledge further. This system is relevant as a precursor to the supervisor and candidate relationship and can be understood as a forerunner to developments in Mediaeval Europe. In the 12th century, the Catholic Church began issuing a *licentia docendi*, or licence to teach, systemised by the Third Council of the Lateran/ Canon 18 (Third Lateran Council – 1179 A.D. Papal Encyclicals 2021), requiring every Catholic cathedral to designate a scholar to train its clerics. 'Informal' schools were, in turn, established that would form the basis of some of the first European universities, including the University of Bologna (1088 CE) and the University of Paris (1150 CE). The canon declared, *'Let no one demand any money for a licence to teach, or, under cover of some custom, seek anything from teachers, or forbid anyone to teach who is suitable and has sought a licence'* (Third Lateran Council – 1179 A.D. Papal Encyclicals 2021), thereby instating the European ideal of free and accessible education until the present. In 1213, Pope Innocent III issued the University of Paris with a *licentia ubique docendi*, or universal licence to teach, formally recognising it as the second university to be established in Europe (after Bologna) and marking a new period of autonomy and secularisation of scholarship and certification (Licence to Teach, Licentia Docendi, 2021). By the 17th century, the term Doctor of Philosophy, or PhD, had emerged in Germany. However, it was not installed as a research degree until Wilhelm von Humboldt's educational and research reforms were initially implemented at the University of Berlin in 1810 (UNESCO 2021). The concept of the PhD as a research degree reached most of Europe, the US (Yale 1861) and the UK (Cambridge 1882) throughout the 19th century and forms the basis of what we now refer to as a Doctor of Philosophy. A practice PhD's research topic, aims and methods developed from the concurrent engagement of and distancing from the artefact of a candidate's artistic practice and are integral to defining, mapping out and completing the research. This simultaneous engagement with practice needed for creation and

the critical distance required for reflection (and writing) is arguably the reason why the standardisation of practice PhD research and methodology is elusive; however, it is this characteristic that reinforces the individual relationship between supervisor and candidate and allows for new strategies for the creation of new knowledge and alternate methodologies. By its nature, the practice PhD infers that the candidate has an established practice and artistic language upon which to reflect. The supervisor's role is not to destabilise that practice but preferably to set up frameworks for the candidate to reflect upon, write about and contextualise and position. At the core of any PhD remains the relationship between supervisor and candidate, paralleling the ancient expert and apprentice systems found across geographies and histories in the past. At its heart, the process centres on a formal transference of knowledge and knowledge structures from an individual well versed in them to the novice – a traditional concept that the authors aimed to transgress with the inception of a transdisciplinary practice PhD programme. Between 2006 and 2018, the authors, together with the former rector of the University of Vienna, Prof. Dr Wolfgang Greisenegger, directed and supervised a practice-informed PhD programme connecting the Zurich University of the Arts's (ZHdK) Institute for Design and Technology and the University of Vienna's Institute for Theatre, Film and Media Studies as an experiment in collaborative practice theory exchange. In many respects, this programme's innovations were shared across the practice PhD model's development internationally. The dual demands from very different institutions required adherence to academic protocols while developing strategies applicable to a practice PhD.

In countering the typical separation of practice and theory in academic and art institutions, our supervisory strategy encouraged a proactive course of investigative doctoral study for artists/designers – a necessary but often laborious and initially unlikeable phase of contemplation, examination and

contextualisation by the candidates themselves. This contemplation period often elicited feelings of disloyalty towards artistic practice and a sense that the creative act was being systematised and that such normative reflection had the potential to close any future artistic direction. To counter these perceptions, week-long doctoral research forums, international field trips and other forms of collaboration and dialogue proved necessary in this process of travail. In actively opposing the conventional singular top-down supervisory model, supervision was implemented by a team of three doctoral advisors (*Professors Greisnegger, Brejzek and Wallen*) working in extended sessions, generating a collective dialogue across the entire cohort of candidates and looking at research itself as a practice and an 'activity', as Smith and Dean (2009) argued:

> *Research, therefore, needs to be treated, not monolithically, but as an activity which can appear in a variety of guises across the spectrum of practice and research. (3)*

Due to the curriculum's transdisciplinary orientation, a diverse experience and knowledge set was needed to interrogate research topics towards outcomes that shred the boundaries of any discipline of art and design. This responsibility for response and critique was widened to actively include the whole cohort in developing and supporting individuals' reflective processes and formal methodologies. The programme's non-hierarchical collective-focused structure, with high-level contributions from candidates and supervisors alike, countered academia's traditional hierarchies by providing models of collaborative knowledge sharing and documentation. The programme functioned as an international network based on a diverse working concept of practice established by the programme. Its symposia, publications and artefacts remain as documentation of a successful experiment in counterstrategies for the reflection of practice within an academic framework offering prototypes to the vexed question of the methodologies and

structures of engaging with knowledge sets that lie outside Western philosophical frameworks both formally and intellectually. Against this background and with lessons learned, we begin to reflect on the urgent challenge across academic disciplines for the decolonisation or the undoing of colonialism in research in general and the PhD in particular.

> *Until we as First Nations and Peoples decolonise our minds, we as Aboriginal people will never truly achieve liberation and our problems we face today will persist. Until our thinking changes, we will continue to identify with European culture and undermine and doubt our own culture, the oldest and most sustainably developed culture on Earth. (Ghillar 2017)*

The project to decolonise Western thinking formalised through an academic lens that the university and its systems of recognition, methodologies, etc. rely on a set of precedents and assumptions that, built on the specific history and origins of academia, require a rethinking of what knowledge is and how it can be communicated and shared.

Australian academic Anne Brewster (2009) argued that '*the moment of intercultural contact is an embodied encounter between different and often incommensurable knowledge systems*' (132). This encounter, the authors maintain, has precarious potential for the future of the practice PhD, allowing for a multitude of expressions. In accepting the responsibility to recognise and remove colonial aspects from the academic lens, we see an opportunity for contribution from the emergent discourse surrounding the practice PhD. Rethinking and decolonising the traditional PhD by applying its continuing and evolving understanding of knowledge requires a critical and sustained dialogue with conventional scholarly frameworks. The inclusive nature of the practice PhD project acknowledges the diverse and highly individualised expressions of knowledge that are implicit in creative practice. It can thus, we argue, be expanded to embrace forms of traditional

knowledge that sit outside the Western tradition, allowing these pieces of knowledge and methodologies to be recognised and, even more importantly, documented and disseminated on their own terms by their own people, thereby energising conventionalised debates and practices.

Figure 1: LZHdK postgraduate students working on a European Cultural Capital project in Lithuania, together with the Vilnius Art Academy, The Wall, 2007. *Source: Lawrence Wallen*

Figure 2: ZHdK postgraduate students at a Nubian village on the Nile near Aswan, Egypt, 2009. *Source: Lawrence Wallen*

Figure 3: ZHdK postgraduate students working at the Korean–German
Institute of Technology in Seoul, 2008. *Source: Lawrence Wallen*

Figure 4: Dr Wolfgang Muench (currently at Lasalle, Singapore) moments before his Viva Voce, University of Vienna, 2018. *Source: Lawrence Wallen*

Figure 5: ZHdK postgraduate students working on a Venice Architecture Biennale Artimage and Luigi Nono Archive project, Prometheus. Sensing Architecture, 2008. *Source: Lawrence Wallen*

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Bio

Dr Thea Brejzek is a Professor of Spatial Theory in the School of Architecture at UTS and a former Professor of Scenography at Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland. Her research engages with the construction of performative spaces in and across theatre, architecture, media, and exhibition. From 2014-2024, Thea Brejzek was a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Bauhaus foundation Dessau and since 2022, Thea is the Co-Editor of *Theatre & Performance Design*. Recent Publications (co-authored with Lawrence Wallen) include: *Virtual Models in Theatre, Art and Architecture*, Bloomsbury: Making Worlds 2025 (in press,"Architecture, Model, Performance", In: *On Models, e-flux architecture* 2022; "Model & Fragment: On the Performance of Incomplete Architectures", In: *Worldmodelling, Architectural Design* 2021; *The Model as Performance. Staging Space in Theatre and Architecture*, Bloomsbury 2018.

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