

Breaking Water with Bare Hands: Reasons for a New Third-Cycle Trajectory for Research in the Arts

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40–43

This text presents the pilot started at Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam for a new 3rd cycle trajectory in artistic research under the title Creator Doctus. It lays out the considerations that led to the pilot and the steps taken so far.

#artistic research

#artistic practice

#thesis

#mid-career

#assessment

What seemed an exotic exception 15 years ago has now become general practice. PhD trajectories for artists were regarded with a measure of suspicion as a primarily Anglo-Saxon deviation because they implied treating art as an intellectual practice. This was viewed with trepidation in the Netherlands.¹ What could be seen five years ago as a feeble excuse for poor artists is now presented here in the form of the Creator Doctus as a new trajectory with unknown possibilities. After all, a PhD trajectory without the obligation to write a dissertation is based less on the incapacity of artists in their field than on the unexplored potential of art to critique research that follows other methods. The Creator Doctus project offers an alternative to the existing PhD trajectory because we believe it strengthens artistic research.

I cannot deny that the desire to spare artists the struggle with words inspired Tijmen van Grootheest, chair of the executive board of the Gerrit Rietveld Academy at the time, to promote this trajectory. However, in further elaboration of the plan under his guidance, as well as that of the board that succeeded him, the emphasis shifted to a form of research and a presentation of research results that do more justice to artistic practice and is therefore better suited to the culture of the art academy. It is not so much that an artist should not or would not be able or willing to write a dissertation – some are very keen to do so and are good at it – but university demands and expectations are dominant in that approach, overshadowing the specific and exceptional character of artistic research.² That specificity is mainly situated in performative, visual and auditory research methods and results that elude existing discursive communication and are not prepared to submit to all that we understand by the term logic. It is thus a trajectory in which precisely the quality criteria of the art academy and the field of the arts form the starting point, with peer review as the instrument.

But we still aren't there yet. Which criteria are peers expected to take into account? What is the expected quality of the research, and how does it differ from 'normal' artistic practice? For whom is this trajectory intended, and how does it relate to existing PhD possibilities? Initially, Van Grootheest introduced the term *meesterstuk* to refer to the final result, but this led to problems because of its ambiguity. In the sense of masterpiece, the term was too old-fashioned for the international context in which the new trajectory was to find a place. And in the traditional sense of works with which apprentices proved that they had completed their years of training successfully and had now earned the right to call themselves masters, the term was at cross-purposes with our aim of creating this trajectory to target artists who already have an established practice and for whom a longer research period could bring about an increased depth and change of direction in that practice. It was clear to us that the CrD is much less of a training course than the PhD. In so far as one can speak of training and supervision, it primarily targets the way in which an existing creative practice finds a new focus in research practice; the artist becomes a creative researcher/researching creator. While the PhD, as a third cycle, is intended to develop and highlight the acquired research skills to the full – in that sense, a dissertation is very like a work produced at the end of an apprenticeship, the CrD is intended to continue and broaden artistic practice within a research framework. It is precisely that framework that ensures that the trajectory is more than just support for an existing way of working. The core idea is that artistic research can best show its specific character by means of an embedding in society that follows a middle course between instrumentalisation and absolute autonomy. Therefore, the CrD candidate does not just follow this trajectory in an art academy. They are explicitly embedded, supported and supervised by a social institution. A social partner who pinpoints the research field or highlights a problem area elevates the research from studio practice to the public space.

However, the selection of a candidate with a well-established artistic practice has consequences for further elaboration of the trajectory. An artist is a freelance entrepreneur, dependent on assignments, projects, exhibitions, gallery presentations and so on. A long-term interruption to such activities is disastrous. However, precisely because we select an artist who already has a career, it is possible to reduce the research period to three days a week for three years. The pilot, which is currently running and consulting with international partners, should indicate whether this is sufficient not only for the achievement of a satisfactory result but also for the recognition of the trajectory as equivalent to a PhD.

The research is guided by a supervisor from the academy, a supervisor from the social partner and, if desirable, a university professor. After approval by the supervisors, the final results are presented to a committee for assessment and defended in public. In this respect, there is little difference from the PhD procedure. However, we still wondered how to prevent the discursive element from creeping into this ritual and gradually regaining the upper hand. How does the artist defend the work itself as research? Which questions can and which questions cannot be answered? Of course, the researcher/artist can explain the steps that have been taken in the research and list the choices and considerations. We have decided that a short written report should be enough for that. Those choices and steps can be called into question and discussed. But it is difficult for the artist to answer the question of whether the research has been successful; whether the result is right and, if so, what makes it right; or whether the work does what it wants to do without lapsing into a kind of apology that is unconvincing and does not make the result any stronger. We are now giving consideration to solving this problem by upgrading the role of the *paranimf*. In Dutch degree ceremonies, the term is used to refer to the two persons who are supposed to give support to the candidate. In practice, this

boils down to a passive ceremonial role during the ritual. We want these two persons to be able to provide a reaction to or reflection on the work as representatives of the future viewer and as an indication of the communicative power of the work and of the effect and affect that this research result produces.

Yael Davids is now halfway to achieving this. Both the Van Abbe Museum and the Gerrit Rietveld Academy are very satisfied with how it is going and with the progress being made. We are working towards the presentation of the first CrD diploma at the conclusion of the first public CrD defence. It is an exciting experiment, not only for us but certainly also for Yael Davids. An awful lot is still up in the air – it is still a pilot.

Addendum

A lot has happened since I wrote this text. Yael Davids has successfully concluded and defended her research. The results have been published: *Yael Davids, I Am Going To Be Your Last Teacher – A Workbook* (Roma Publications, Amsterdam 2023). A second CrD candidate, artist Femke Herregraven, received the CrD award in November 2024. The CrD trajectory was extensively explored in an Erasmus+ collaboration of 7 European Art Schools and the results of this collaborations have been published as Jeroen Boomgaard, John Butler (eds.), *The Creator Doctus Constellation. Exploring a new model for a doctorate in the arts*, Gerrit Rietveld Academie/EQ-Arts (Amsterdam 2021). In the meantime the Dutch government has given permission to the universities of applied sciences to start yet another pilot for a 3rd cycle, leading to an award called Professional Doctorate. This new trajectory has a lot of similarities with the format of the Creator Doctus, and Gerrit Rietveld Academie is now looking into the possibility of combining these two pilot programs into one that will allow artists to obtain an internationally recognized research degree in which artistic practice is central.

Notes

1. The myth that, in the US, artists can obtain a doctoral degree for their work is both persistent and false. Artists can certainly obtain a doctoral degree in the US, but not for their work. They obtain it in the humanities, social sciences or other disciplines but not in art. On the fraught relation involved, see Vytautas Michelkevicius, *Mapping Artistic Research. Towards Diagrammatic Knowing* (Vilnius Academy of the Arts Press, 2018), 192–97.
2. This is a critical issue regarding the form of cooperation between universities and universities of applied science that has now arisen in all kinds of places in the Netherlands. For example, while the PhD arts programme of the Royal Academy of Art (KABK) and the University of Leiden tries to strike a balance between academic output and artistic practice, in the ARIAS collaborative platform, the candidate artist must satisfy the dissertation criteria drawn up by the corresponding faculty of the University of Amsterdam or the Vrije Universiteit. In this case, artistic research is treated as a secondary research level and effort, beside or on top of the primary level.

Bio

Jeroen Boomgaard is a senior researcher at Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. Until 2022 he functioned as Professor of Art and Public Space at that institution. Until 2020 he was connected to the University of Amsterdam as head of the research Master Artistic Research.