Examining a Thesis in the Visual Arts

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1. How do Higher Degrees by Research with a Visual Arts creative component vary in their expectations?
2. What constitutes a Thesis in the Visual Arts?
3. What procedures may be used to examine a Higher Degree by Research in the Visual Arts?
4. What form may be expected of the research question in a practice-led Thesis in the Visual Arts?
5. How is the quality of a practice-led Thesis in the Visual Arts determined?
1. How do Higher Degrees by Research with a Visual Arts creative component vary in their expectations?

Expectations differ from institution to institution and evolve in time within the community of scholarship. They also differ according to the nature of the degree:

- PhD
- Professional Doctorate
- PhD (Pub)
- MPhil
- Professional Master’s.

However, generally,
- Each Doctoral Thesis is expected to 'make a significant contribution to knowledge' in its field.
- Each Master’s Thesis is expected to demonstrate a 'mastery of the research methods' of its discipline in order to make a significant contribution to its topic.
- Each creative or ‘practice-led’ thesis has a written component.

But, each degree is also ruled by specific policies:
- Some specify a ratio of practical component to written component, or indicate a word count.
- They differ in their emphasis on where the significant contribution to knowledge is expected.
- They can differ in their examination procedure—number of examiners, requirement for a viva, etc..

The character of the studio component undertaken also affects how the examination is conducted.

2. What constitutes a Thesis in the Visual Arts?

- A practical or studio component
  and
- A written component—an exegesis or dissertation.

The studio component may be
- An exhibition of artefacts or images,
- A book of images,
- A performance, or site-specific installation
- A film,
- A script,
- A design,
- An online webpage, animation, or computer game,
  … or something entirely unexpected.

Furthermore, it may be primarily artistic (fictional or metaphoric), or functional, or documentary, in nature,
  … or any mix thereof.
The written component might be
- (Where policy permits) A Dissertation which addresses a question that informs the studio work, or …
- An Exegesis that addresses how the studio work engages with its central research question.

The Dissertation
- can, within a 'practice-based' PhD, be the primary contribution to knowledge and the studio work a mere appendix.
- In the Doctorate of visual Arts, the Professional Doctorate at QCA, while an exegesis is preferred, a parallel study 'unambiguously relevant' to the studio work can also be submitted.

The Exegesis is considered intrinsic to the ‘practice-led’ Thesis and may have the character of either:
- A ‘poetic’ text that complements the studio work, or …
- An academic text that directly supports the studio practice and reflects critically on its methodology and its relation to its context.

* ‘Practice-led’ and ‘practice-based’ are terms that are still being contested. Here, ‘practice-led’ will mean that a practical goal rather than gaining knowledge of an external phenomenon primarily drives the research.

2. What procedures may be used to examine a Higher Degree by Research in Visual Art?

Examination procedures vary in terms of:
- Whether the studio component needs to be witnessed on site
- The number of Examiners
- Whether the written component is read before, or after, the studio work is seen
- Whether the candidate meets the examiners and is asked questions …and, if so, what kinds of questions are permitted.

Visual Art Examinations at QCA, Griffith University
- A Thesis that can be viewed remotely, e.g., a book or web page, is sent to two examiners who remain anonymous.
- For a Thesis involving an exhibition, event, or installation, three examiners are sent the exegesis before they physically see the studio work. This is not necessarily so at some other universities.
- Until recently, the three examiners then came to view the work together and interviewed the candidate. (This was not a viva in the sense that the student could be interrogated concerning knowledge beyond what they had presented.)
- This procedure has recently been changed to three examiners viewing an exhibition individually without the student.
3. What form of research question might organise a practice-led Thesis?

Artists typically address a ‘theme’ or a set of issues; however, a single question should be able to incorporate these and express what they have set out to achieve.

A question that seeks empirical knowledge is often inappropriate for studio-led research and is better answered through sociological, psychological, or educational research that may, or may not, also incorporate a studio-based component. However, few artists have the training to conduct significant primary research of a quantitative nature.

A conventional research question, precisely articulated and delimited, would have the following general form:

What, or how, or why, does, or can, something (or a precisely specified number of things) occur in a particular time and place?

However, research led by practice should logically be organised around a philosophical or procedural question about practice.

Studio research should therefore ask questions of the following type:

‘What would be an appropriate strategy (or form of practice) for … (the artist as a specific individual with a particular history and social membership), in order to … (produce some effect), in relation to … (certain circumstances in a given time and place).’

or

‘How can (a certain form of practice) respond to, (comment on, or discover) (a particular phenomenon), given that … (certain circumstances may constitute a difficulty or contradiction in a specific context).’

or

‘What would be the necessary qualities of a set of works in a given medium, in a particular context, in order to … etc.’

Despite the central question being about practice, the exegesis also addresses a set of subsidiary, more-or-less conventional sub-questions related to:

Whether a particular set of circumstances exists and pertains to this form of practice.

What distinguishes this research from ‘conventional’ research, however, is that it is only a means to an end and not necessarily the ground-breaking contribution to knowledge. The argument concerning these questions still needs to be scholarly, well informed, and substantiated, but does not in itself need to be highly original or necessarily based on primary material.
4. How might the quality of a practice-led Thesis be determined?

Both a PhD and a Professional Doctorate can be ‘practice-led’, but …

While there is an expectation, within both degrees, that the Exegesis should contain a sustained argument, explain its concepts, substantiate its claims, and document its sources …

- because of its generally greater writing component the PhD tends to be ascribed more of a burden to critically examine the fundamental premises and practices on which it is based and to draw more general implications from the research;
- the Professional Doctorate tends to carry higher expectations of technical virtuosity and time commitment to the fabrication of artefacts because its less extensive writing requirement enables more time in the studio.

The specific criteria applied to the examination of a practice-led PhD may be explicit or implicit. For example:

The PhD at the University of Newcastle requires that the creative component must have the following attributes:

- it demonstrates a professional level of familiarity with and understanding of contemporary work in the field;
- it demonstrates a comprehensive investigation of the artistic form and creative content;
- the methods and techniques applied in the execution of the work are appropriate to the subject matter and are original and/or aesthetically effective;
- the creative work is presented in a professional manner;
- the creative work demonstrates a consistently high standard of literary, visual, digital, musical or performance literacy and quality;
- the research question/s has/have been identified and tested through the creative work;
- the documentation of the work (including catalogue/program material where appropriate) is thorough and scholarly and is of a standard that will ensure the work provides a reference for subsequent researchers;
- there is an appropriate and substantiated interface between the creative work and the exegesis;
- the creative work and the exegesis together constitute a substantive original contribution to knowledge in the subject-area with which it deals.
In contrast, examiners of a PhD in Visual Arts at Griffith University, are asked to respond to exactly the same criteria as for any other PhD. The ‘Thesis’ is treated as a seamless combination of the studio practice and the exegesis:

THE THESIS

In your opinion -
1. Does the thesis make an original and significant contribution to knowledge and understanding of the field of study with which it is concerned? □ Yes □ No
2. Is the standard of literary presentation in the thesis satisfactory? □ Yes □ No
3. Is the methodology applied in the candidate's research effective and appropriate for the thesis topic and the degree sought? □ Yes □ No
4. Does the thesis reflect competence in the survey of literature and documentation of statements □ Yes □ No
5. Is the thesis suitable for publication as a book or in a learned journal -
   5.1 in the form submitted? □ Yes □ No
   5.2 with modifications? □ Yes □ No

However, because these historically-derived criteria are logocentric and do not incorporate the specific values of the discipline, examiners tend to comment on the two components of the Thesis separately:

The studio work is commented on in terms of criteria such as the following:

1. whether its content, form, or technique demonstrates significant innovation within its genre of practice,
2. whether it is significantly relevant to its social context and to other visual discourse,
3. whether its process of creation has rigorously incorporated inquiry, critical analysis, and experiment,
4. whether it can effectively engage an intended audience,
5. whether its form of presentation demonstrates an appropriate level of professional accomplishment.

The exegesis is generally commented on in terms of the quality of:

1. Its articulation of the research question with which the studio work engages, and the nature of the visual practice and theoretical framework adopted for this engagement.
   a. An explanation of key terms within the research question and of the theoretical frameworks or methodologies adopted
   b. An explanation of how historical principles pertaining to the chosen genre of practice are relevant for engaging with the question.
2. Its account of why the research question is significant in terms of
   a. the debates that have taken place about it, or related themes, in the literature,
   b. forms of art practice that have engaged with the question or related issues. (This is a literature and image survey, i.e., a 'context survey').
3. Its identification of how the work to be examined will contribute something new and valid to the field described above, by means of a critical examination of:
   a. the work itself and its potential meaning in contexts that it will encounter,
   b. how it relates to the work of other contemporary visual artists who respond to this, or to a related, question.
4. Its *discussion of the process of its creation and development*, the strategic choices, direction changes, and breakthroughs that were made by the candidate in *consideration of potential meanings and contexts and the strategies of other artists*. (This could be termed the 'studio methodology' section).

5. Its conclusion and summing up of what has been achieved and what future directions may be suggested.

6. Its documentation of the work submitted and *notes on its gallery installation for examination*.

The *Doctorate of Visual Art*, the Professional Doctorate at QCA *Griffith University*, however, splits the criteria of written and studio research and explicitly requires the written component to be merely a *useful* rather than a *significant* contribution to knowledge.

1.0 **THE WRITTEN RESEARCH**

Does the written research demonstrate:

1.1 Inquiry into a clearly articulated question relevant to the candidate's field of studio practice?  
Yes  No

1.2 A comprehensive critical discussion of literature pertaining to its topic?  
Yes  No

1.3 Clear and appropriate methods for obtaining, evaluating, analysing, and interpreting data?  
Yes  No

1.4 A rigorously substantiated argument?  
Yes  No

1.5 A potentially *useful* contribution to knowledge in its field?  
Yes  No

1.6 A standard of writing, organisation, documentation, and presentation appropriate for this level of scholarship?  
Yes  No

1.7 Is the research suitable for publication in a public gallery or as a book in a learned journal?  
Yes  No

1.7.1 in the form submitted?  
Yes  No

1.7.2 with modifications?  
Yes  No

Please elaborate on your responses with respect to the written research in the space below. Attach additional pages if required.

Examiners of a DVA are further asked to assess the works of art according to a formal list of the studio research criteria:

2.0 **THE STUDIO RESEARCH**

In your opinion –

2.1 Does the content, form, or technique of studio work demonstrate significant innovation within its genre of practice? Please elaborate.  
Yes  No

2.2 Is the work significantly relevant to its social context and to other visual discourse? Please elaborate.  
Yes  No

2.3 Has the candidate's studio process rigorously incorporated inquiry, critical analysis, and experiment? Please elaborate.  
Yes  No

2.4 Can the work effectively engage an intended audience? Please elaborate.  
Yes  No

2.5 Does the execution and presentation of the studio project demonstrate an appropriate level of professional accomplishment? Please elaborate.  
Yes  No
SOME USEFUL TEXTS & LINKS:


