



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2009

Review of Artists with PhDs: on the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Arts

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Suggested citation:

Moser, Gabrielle (2009) Review of Artists with PhDs: on the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Arts. C Magazine (103). p. 52. ISSN 1193-8625 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1047/>

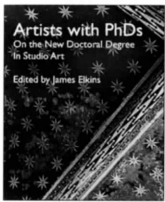
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ism to cinematic and tableau photography as a critical, post-conceptual return to the pictorial while Marina Roy offers an interesting examination of the status of arts writing in Vancouver. Focusing on Vancouver's changing art institutions, Reid Shier examines the shifting role of the artist-run centre and Michael Turner offers a compelling (and long-overdue) chronology of Vancouver's commercial galleries, outlining how the art market has shaped local artistic production.

Vancouver's ongoing critical self-reflection illuminates the fact that Canada's other art centres have only so far made vague or minimal attempts at encapsulating their own contemporary cultural production. Surely this is not for lack of distinguishing characteristics or a chartable history? Though several curatorial projects currently in development across the country are attempting to remedy this lack of introspection, *Vancouver Art & Economies* stands as an insightful reminder that the written word does in fact define how art is received and remembered. ►



**ARTISTS WITH PHDS: ON THE NEW
DOCTORAL DEGREE IN STUDIO ARTS**

Edited by James Elkins
New Academia Publishing, 2009
review by GABRIELLE MOSER

Monstrous, baffling and trivial. These are just a few of the ways that burgeoning doctor of philosophy (or PhD) programs in studio art are characterized in James Elkins' latest edited volume, *Artists with PhDs: On the new Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*. Comprised of 11 critical texts and 19 excerpts from completed studio art dissertations, Elkins' book first appears to be a denouncement of the growing academization and institutionalization of artistic practice. But, upon closer inspection, the collection of essays (which, according to Elkins, is only the eighth such book to focus exclusively on the development of studio art PhDs) demonstrates a range of nuanced critiques about the history, necessity, and usefulness of doctoral degrees in visual arts. The texts, culled from artists, art historians, and critics on both sides of the argument, reveal a vested interest from artistic and academic communities alike with regards to how artistic practice should be incorporated into the university. In addition, they often underscore contemporary art's important role in providing a venue for investigation and experimentation—a space where the status quo can be interrogated and possible solutions, no matter how provisional, might be offered.

Rather than engaging in a simplistic “for or against” argument when it comes to the development of studio art PhDs, Elkins wisely sidesteps these questions of legitimacy in order to delve into what is at stake in the creation and proliferation of these degrees. As he writes in his introduction, “The question is not whether the new programs are coming, but how rigorously they will be conceptualized.” Just as Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees — introduced in the United States following World War II — provoked opposition from artists and academics initially, but have since become ubiquitous, PhDs in studio art, Elkins argues, are on a similar trajectory towards accept-

ance. Now, while they are still being implemented in Canada and the United States, he contends, is the time to question how they might best serve students and practitioners. Accordingly, what his book includes is a series of cogent meditations on the implications of these degrees for students pursuing them and for the academy.

Judith Mottram's survey of studio art doctorates awarded by universities over the past three decades offers a practical inventory of the disconnects that arise when the visual arts are incorporated into existing university models; not the least of which are methodological differences between liberal and creative art students that can lead to questions of academic legitimacy, and difficulties indexing visual art doctoral research so that students can be made aware of one another's work. Timothy Emlyn Jones, a practising artist who is perhaps most critical of the studio art PhD, rightly interrogates the theory/practice dichotomy that is implied by most university rhetoric about the degrees, as though “you must switch your brain off in order to make art or design (or whatever) and then switch it on again in order to reflect on what you have made.”

However, as Elkins writes later in the book, many of the arguments about the art PhD actually reflect disagreements about the cohesion and function of the university as a whole. The most compelling articles therefore examine the role that the studio arts might have as a distinct discipline in the university, how they might respond to current post-secondary culture, and what they might have to offer to other departments and research programs. For example, one of Jones' proposed solutions is that visual arts PhD programs stop mirroring themselves on liberal arts disciplines and instead look to the methodologies used by the natural sciences, suggesting that the creative arts could benefit from incorporating observation, experimentation, and an openness to failure. By contrast, artist and critic Mick Wilson suggests that PhDs in art might have something to learn from artistic practice itself, particularly from forms of institutional critique exemplified by artists like Hans Haacke, which might open up avenues for criticisms of the university from within.

While many of the essayists in *Artists with PhDs* offer insightful analysis about the structure and implication of the doctoral degree in studio art, few address what the increasing number of programs being offered by universities might signal about the current political, economic, and ideological conditions of the art world. Instead, the question most often posed in Elkins' book is, “how do we respond to the development of these degrees?” when the more critical question is, “to what does the success of these degrees respond?”

While helpful in illustrating the breadth of work that is possible within PhD programs, the studio art dissertations that Elkins excerpts at the end of his book are rather anticlimactic. In a way, they demonstrate yet another hurdle that these degrees will have to clear in the future: that visual forms of research and production (and aural, olfactory, tactile, and other sensory forms as well) do not always translate well into texts. Presumably, artists choose to produce visual objects and experiences rather than text-based works because they represent the modes of expression best suited to the questions they are asking. So until universities can find ways to sufficiently document, critique, and disseminate the diverse practices that result from this questioning, the PhD in studio art is at risk of continuing to be misunderstood and underutilized. ♦