

How artistic
research ends

— Danny Butt

RUPC #7

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We know how artistic research begins, more or less: the new mode of specialist study in the humanities filters from Germany to the US in the nineteenth century and then into the massive growth of anglophone universities through the European colonies in the twentieth century. Integration and rationalisation of higher education systems, combined with pressures to achieve value from declining research investments in a new managerialist culture in the late 20th century, bring about a raft of research assessment regimes from the 1990s onward. As Eric Ashby describes it in the 1960s, where once the university was cultivated as a garden flower, of no more significance to the prince or bishop than the court musician, the modern university is expected to be a yield-bearing crop.¹ In this trajectory of artistic research, the intellectual question of what knowledge is held in the art object, a question implied by conceptualism and post-Bauhaus practices, is perhaps in play behind the scenes but remains more of a boutique curiosity. For the education and innovation policy-maker, the calculus is blunt: all research must be assessed in order to make funding decisions, but in a nationally integrated system only one assessment instrument will be developed to fit all disciplines. Therefore, all scholarly activity that happens in universities will become research. Artistic practice in the university becomes research regardless of its adherence to historical frameworks of knowledge in the scientific sense, or its connection to an art world conception of what might constitute a research-driven practice.

As James Elkins is always quick to point out, the primary drivers of artistic research here are economic, bureaucratic and administrative.² I discuss this story in a recent book.³ But what happens if the administrative drivers radically change, with neoliberal austerity measures placing severe constraints on new graduate programmes in the humanities, creative

arts and social sciences? As existing programmes undergo rationalisation and consolidation, what if the already declining research funding for the arts will no longer be a major part of the economic calculus in universities? What if government, rather than making more or less good faith attempts to rein in tertiary education spending through effective modes of research assessment, decides it can't deal with the problem and an easier option is to stop funding creative arts, humanities and social sciences research entirely? What if, in other words, artistic research ends? I will propose four likely ends for artistic research: a cut; a cultural shift; a cramp; and a coup.

But firstly to return to how we arrived at the current conjuncture. The growth and diversification of universities in the twentieth century brought all forms of knowledge into the academy as legitimate objects of study. Industrialisation, colonisation and the improving mindset of modernism then turned anglophone universities from places of cultural reproduction into centres of knowledge, innovation and human capital development. As humanist practices expanded and diversified, they would be incorporated into a research framework as they both incorporated language from the social sciences. Research, until the 1960s overwhelmingly dominated by military and agricultural priorities, would expand in turn. Let's look in more detail at this transformation in scale.

The end of the Second World War brought a social problem: a large number of military men with nothing to do. The US government's solution, soon to be copied by other nations, was to send them to universities. The 1944 GI Bill of Rights contributed to university and college enrolment growth, which went from 1.36 million in 1939 to 2.08 million in 1946 — over one million of whom were veterans.⁴ Widening participation through the 1970s also became a policy solution to youth unemployment in the former British empire during a period of economic downturn. Participation grew from 10 to 30% in most EU countries between 1960 and 1990, where the number of students multiplied nine-fold.⁵ To put those

figures in historical perspective, overall tertiary education participation in Europe doubled from 0.46% of the student age group in 1860 to 0.88% in 1900, and 2.07% in 1940.⁶ In Perkin's terms, the leading countries upped the participation rate of the student age group in tertiary education dramatically from under 10% in 1960 to 50% or more by 2000 — in the UK this went from 9% to 60% over the forty year period.⁷

During this growth, the university as an elite institution producing the managerial class begins to give way to a broader narrative of access and human capital development, and in the 1990s, as many state systems moved research funding from education to innovation portfolios, some European countries doubled their Ph.D. output in a decade. In Australia, for example, numbers rose from 8563 enrolled Ph.D. candidates in 1988 to almost forty thousand doctoral candidates in 2004.⁸ This growth of higher education had brought a massive expansion in those studying and teaching art, not only in the UK with practices to be assessed as research, with almost one million students studying the visual and performing arts at post-secondary level in the United States in 2012, and almost one hundred thousand in Australia.⁹ Just as art has come to be seen as a part of a creative economy, naturally entrepreneurial, art education has itself become a major industry.

In the early 1990s, I never thought that my creative work would have a home in the university system or considered it likely that I would work in tertiary education. However, I experienced a set of confluences over the same period that relate to the situation in universities, and I now see my own example as relevant to the trajectory of artistic research. I was the first person in my family to go to university, and dropped out of my undergraduate education in sociology in 1991 to move to Sydney and play in a band, and then soon moved to New Zealand, where the experimental music scene was intimately tied to the visual arts. As someone who grew up outside the city, the visual arts had until then been something

of a mystery, but it seemed something I could learn by doing (the idea of a ‘practice’ was only just emerging), and my self-education in cultural theory gave me a role in the hybrid discourses of criticism. In 1992, the arrival of the world wide web, and my participation in a burgeoning new media scene — firstly in artistic, then commercial projects — brought a new status for information processing skills that I would later characterise as research.

Running a web development startup required two skills: learning the emergent discipline of user interface design (which involved ‘user testing’ as an important principle) and the unprecedented ability to track a startup ‘business culture’ in the dotcom era (where one could copy the operational modes, discourses and presentation strategies of US-based firms in an unprecedented way). These two modes — both a kind of research outside the academy — brought a new leverage for what I would today describe as method. I had started teaching digital media and design at a technical institute, and rode the development of the ‘creative industries’ to build research infrastructure to support the integration of art and design academics into NZ’s first Performance Based Research Fund in 2003.

In my autobiographical narrative, the growth of artistic research is indivisible from my participation in artist-run initiatives and the dotcom sector in the 1990s, and this leads me to reflect on artistic research as a kind of gentrification of artistic methods and the artistic imaginary. In the research frame, rather than simply producing something, artistic practices should aim toward broader significance, in a public or audience reconceived as scholarly, that is to say, elite and global. To do so, it should ideally propose questions and answer them through some kind of systematic method, and, as Derrida reminds us, the etymology of method comes via the Greek *hodos* — a path that becomes a meta-path. In artistic research, one should turn a *path* into a *road* (if not a ‘*roadmap*’), to potentially create an asset that can be

monetised in a larger, fully international information economy. We could also see here the fortunes of artistic research as linked to the growth in the biennial circuit, with its interest in informational and discursive practices, and the expanded economic claims for placemaking that the large scale international exhibition involves. But this is more speculative.

The 1990s linked promises implied across all three domains: artist-run initiatives, new media, and artistic research. In all three cases, these practices navigated outside the dynamics of state support and nationalised capital, mirroring the transnational flows of brands and finance. What was common to the university art schools during the artistic research era was a period of policy emphasis on growth and innovation. As art and design schools found themselves in universities where they had to battle for resources and meet targets alongside other disciplines, some problems for art and design departments became clear: firstly, the lack of large-scale research income that was becoming the default measure of research performance in other disciplines, and, secondly, a system of casual staffing that involved professionals with no particular relationship to the institution, as opposed to the standard disciplinary focus on the employment of graduate students and thus the development of neo-feudal institutional pipelines of research mentorship. A solution to these problems was the growth in doctoral programmes, and in particular the PhD and a certain 'scientification' of knowledge in the arts.

All through the twentieth century, a discourse within the fine arts is highly conscious of being on the back foot inside the university compared to its scientific peers: in the United States, the early twentieth-century debates in the College Art Association advocate for the Bachelors Degree in Art to embrace the 'more scientific' mode of learning through drawing, alongside the East Coast's traditional emphasis on artistic knowledge as being held through viewing.¹⁰ In the 1930s, the Museum of Modern Art director Alfred H. Barr called for the

development of further MFAs and doctoral programmes to integrate studio teaching and art history, so that artists and historians could forge 'a more complete understanding of Modern Art'.¹¹

Therefore, in order to understand what is happening to artistic research in the university, we should firstly understand what happened to the scientific knowledge paradigm, which underwrote the development of universities through the twentieth century, specifically through the funding of research. Nowotny, Gibbons and Scott's *Rethinking Science* places the beginnings of the loss of faith in science at the unforeseen early 1970s oil crisis and 1989 end of the cold war,¹² and it is most clearly exhibited today in the failure of scientific consensus on climate change to substantially drive policy change in the face of amateur scepticism. On the other hand, science has become a 'common cultural currency', as Thrift describes it, explaining everything from gender relations and human behaviour (previously non-scientific) to the nature of the cosmos.¹³ As science tended toward more statistically-driven means to stabilise reality, so too we have all, in a certain way, become scientists through various means of technological sensing and self-tracking — testing hypotheses, adjusting our measurement instruments, creating new models of life. And scientific practice today is not a high church above the secular world, but is justified through an ethic of neo-liberal productivity for capital, characterised by a transition from winning prizes to winning grants. As the entry costs for curiosity-driven research skyrocket, grants are oversubscribed, and returns are expected to be larger and to be found more quickly. As Fuller succinctly describes it, the 'nationalist mentality prone to interpret scientists' cross-border associations as potential acts of espionage or treason has yielded to a less consistently stoked paranoia about unprotected intellectual property and unexploited economic opportunities'.¹⁴

Just as theology gave way to science as the authorising principle of the universities in the nineteenth century, at the end of the twentieth century science has lost its authorising function to finance. Science is no longer the dominant enterprise in the university as it was at the beginning of the artistic research debates: the major field of study for postgraduate students today is business and commerce, constituting a full quarter of Australian enrolments, compared to under ten percent for the natural and physical sciences.¹⁵ This shift in university enrolments makes sense, for, as Marina Vishmidt has noted, education ‘has become one of the most highly commodified and instrumentalised sectors worldwide and debt slavery and “employability” are the real products of most universities’.¹⁶ Students are ultimately seeking education in the financial principles that strictly govern their potential futures in a way that was not the case for those a generation earlier.

Scientific research is most challenged by finance not as an academic discipline or in the market competition for students, however, but by finance’s new role as the dominant governing ratio of the university’s internal organisation. Methodological distinctions between the arts, sciences, and commerce are rendered moot through the evisceration of discipline-specific research infrastructure and the occupation of university research by a new generic set of operations under the ever-expanding category of ‘overhead’: risk management; commercialisation; construction and property services; intellectual property; contract management; security; insurance; service-oriented architectures; organisational reviews; stakeholder management; monitoring and compliance; occupational health and safety; space utilisation charges; governance; business intelligence; and portfolio management — to name but a few domains of practice that will be familiar to any university administrator.

There is little of interest to say about the growth of these new domains in the university, except that they are

impervious to academic knowledge of the type generated in research, scientific or otherwise. Yet these infrastructural forces today structure the possibilities of ethical engagement within the academy, and bring about a new terrain for artistic research which it has so far rarely engaged with.

In his 1985 book *How Experiments End*, Peter Galison's case studies in microphysics show how experimental practices can operate relatively independently of the higher-level theoretical justifications that sometimes support them. But at a certain point, experiments are abandoned as a scientific community converges to adopt a particular discursive repertoire that rules out the need to explore alternative explanations, which is the search that drives experimental practice.¹⁷

One can see the relevance of this mode of analysis for how artistic research might end. Many practices that have emerged from students in this artistic research paradigm would not necessarily be much different than a sustained project outside the academy. Yet, the academic mode requires that practices be placed into a purportedly global archive of equivalence, exerting a certain kind of pressure for integration that disrupts the internal development of subjective relations to materials, and also the more customary local sense of artistic practices. It becomes an authorising institutional discourse that even for the most hermetic practitioner sorts material experimentation toward specific outcomes that can be accounted for within a global academic framework.

This disciplining is of no particular concern while artistic research continued to grow: the very artificiality of the frame can produce interesting new responses. But if, as I have suggested above, our immediate future will see a contraction of investment and opportunity in the area of artistic research, combined with an institutional logic which is not derived from academic disciplinarity and that *this* is the 'convergence', rather than any discursive convergence in practices, that requires us ask how artistic research will maintain its

historical trajectory as it attempts to salvage existing infrastructures and the opportunity that it seemed to provide.

As I suggested, to me there are some clear directions that indicate how artistic research ends.

Firstly, and most obviously, government funding for artistic research in the former West will continue to contract as it has for the humanities and social sciences generally. This is the cut. Tertiary education is reconfigured as a private good, rather than as a public investment in a national managerial class for human capital development. If you want an artistic education you will pay for it yourself. Knowledge-based artistic practices become the preserve of the elite, a dynamic that is reflected in the difficulties university-based research finds in making meaningful engagement with new social movements looking to build independent infrastructures.

The prestigious institutions, such as my own, will be insulated from financial shock through the philanthropy of alumni and other patrons. Perhaps through the influence of large-scale international exhibitions and heavily planned seasonal programming for specific audiences, programmes of artistic research will come to rely on intensive capital investment from this same highly concentrated class of patrons, who are either donors with existing personal relationships to the sector or corporations looking to brand-wash their otherwise unaesthetic activities. It may be that future programmes of artistic research are directly integrated into recurring funding associated with biennales and similar large-scale international exhibitions.

Such a move would be in concert with the increasing restrictions on the ability to undertake scientific research inside the university system, where patronage is key, and a good idea and a stellar academic track record do not necessarily lead to research opportunities. To claim a democratic impulse for artistic research in this scenario will be something of a stretch. More likely is the continued proliferation of theatres of participation via 'socially engaged' works that

stage figures of inclusion without ever threatening the coherence of art's class-bound frames of affect management and developmentalism.

Secondly, we may see a decolonisation and globalisation of artistic research where it becomes structured by very different epistemological and ontological concerns. Many have noted the geospatial distribution of artistic research among the UK and its former colonies, and Scandinavia, which more or less tracks in the institutions that have extensively integrated research assessment and nation-state funding through the twentieth century. 'The Humboldtian model' of the university that has dominated the modern university imaginary emerges from cultural nationalism, a concept of limited value in the global and post-multicultural era. In the anglophone case, we can view cultural nationalism as essentially a structure to support legacies of wealth extracted through settler colonial legacies of cultural and economic management. We are now in a different political-economic situation for both 'gown and town', as patterns of global university investment and the financial structures of external infrastructure it seeks to provide human capital for are now thoroughly global.

This pressure on a European (Euro-American) frame for artistic research may be seen from two cultural domains: firstly, internal to settler colonial nations, the rise of indigeneous and decolonial research practices asks for a recalibration of the purpose and audience of artistic inquiry. Against the extractive model of research, where an individual is held to discover information and becomes authorised to disseminate it in a network of prestige, the development of indigeneous research explicitly formulates a community outside the academy as both the source and agent of knowledge to which the cultural worker apprentices themselves. This suggests entirely new audiences and review mechanisms for artistic research in this paradigm.

From the perspective of globalisation, the growth in networks of Chinese-language scholarship in particular points

to the decline of European languages as the default for the international mediation of knowledge. Not only are the demographics overwhelming, networked media now allow a generic research publishing infrastructure to be immediately localised. Over the last ten years, within the intergovernmental sector, which provides much of the more deliberative justification for research, the levels of dissatisfaction with the default European languages as adequate is growing.

While these two forces are very different in their drivers, both point to a dissipation of the Kantian cosmopolitan European as the ideal type of student. Not only was this never a truly global entity in the way it imagined itself to be, the constraints on international mobility currently being enforced through global securitisation point to all kinds of reordering of academic bodies. It may be that the audience for artistic research becomes more effectively localised, especially among linguistic communities with knowledge traditions that differ from the European heritage. Perhaps here research redefines what constitutes a 'stock' of knowledge, from an open-access database in the cloud to a more self-consciously materially and culturally located practice, which may no longer look like research as it has been understood, particularly with respect to the implicit proportionality of artistic research's reach.

Thirdly, the entire concept of research may turn out to bureaucratised artistic practices to the extent that it can no longer be a viable frame for practitioners. Here I am not talking about a kind of theoretical bureaucratisation that concerned Picasso, Duchamp or today someone like Elkins, where art is made less interesting by being conceived as research. More mundanely, the situating of any practice inside the university today mandates adherence to managerial policies and procedures discussed above that govern every part of the artistic process from conception of the idea as intellectual property; to materials handling; to audience interaction; to the preferred supplier of catering; to marketing and branding; to sales and economic exchange. As

noted previously, these constraints challenge the university as a space of innovation, as the university becomes an entity that enforces risk management ratios which are conceived outside the institution itself in best practices mandated via insurance and compliance. I think of this as a kind of cramp.

Fourthly, and perhaps recapitulating all of the above, students who have been sold into debt bondage may decide that a destruction of the universities is the best way to collectively free themselves from the university as a creditor, in which case all of us, and our research, may well be first against the wall. This would be the coup. An anecdote which does not make it into the book involves Maggi Phillips's writing on dance workshops where one of the participants discusses the value of the university space where the creative arts can also ponder, in a truly philosophical sense, the nature of their own death:

should it come to the point where we all realise that dance is a moribund form that we ought to exterminate, that would be something that would also come out of the academy. It is not necessarily simply an act of preserving something or endlessly extolling a particular set of aesthetic values. It's as much about interrogating and putting [the discipline] up to radical scrutiny, so that's why we should have [PhDs].¹⁸

Perhaps today we need to take this one step further, in the spirit of methodological reflection, and consider whether the academy can ask itself hard questions about its necessity to exist in the new paradigms of knowledge that are emerging in the post-internet environment. In Edinburgh in 1582, Berlin in 1810 or Johns Hopkins's graduate school in 1876, new times resulted in the construction of new institutions of knowledge, that described themselves as universities but set future scholarship in a new direction. My sense is that this is the exit that artistic research is looking for.

- 1 Ashby, 'The Future of the Nineteenth Century Idea of a University', 8.
- 2 Elkins, 'On Beyond Research and New Knowledge'.
- 3 Butt, *Artistic Research in the Future Academy*.
- 4 Funk, 'The Development of Professional Studio Art Training, in American Higher Education, 1860–1960', 154.
- 5 Geuna, 'The Changing Rationale for European University Research Funding: Are There Negative Unintended Consequences?', 609. Trow and on Higher Education, *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education*.
- 6 Perkin, 'History of Universities', 175.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Pearson, Evans and Macauley, 'Growth and Diversity in Doctoral Education: Assessing the Australian Experience', 357–358.
- 9 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 'Enrollment in Postsecondary Education, by Level of Enrollment, Level of Institution, Student Age, and Major Field of Study: 2011–12'.
- 10 Funk, 'The Development of Professional Studio Art Training, in American Higher Education, 1860–1960', 60–63.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*.
- 13 Thrift, 'The Place of Complexity'.
- 14 Fuller, *The Philosophy of Science and Technology Studies*, 76.
- 15 ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2005. Education and work, Australia, May 2015. ABS cat. no. 6227.0. Canberra: ABS.
- 16 Krauss, Pethick and Vishmidt, 'Spaces of Unexpected Learning 2'.
- 17 Galison, *How Experiments End*.

- 18 Phillips, 'Artists, creativity and knowledge: a challenge for doctoral change', 226.

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Notes

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Acknowledgements

The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

- how cultural knowledge is shaped by and against the global forces which articulate Australia's place in the world;
- how developments in digital technologies alter the protocols for inclusion and exclusions within public cultures;
- how new practices of mobility impact on the constitution of public knowledge and cultures; and
- how public space is created, managed and accessed, specifically within networked urban environments.

The Research Unit plays a role in facilitating scholarship, enhancing research opportunities and enabling collaborations between creative industries, cultural institutions, research institutions, academic research centres and public communities. It houses a number of collaborative research projects across various disciplines, such as: education for a multicultural society; digital networks and participatory public space; art as a platform for global culture; transnational cinema practices; aesthetic cosmopolitanism; mediated public spaces; and cultural citizenship.

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The term 'artistic research' shadowed the growth of graduate study in studio arts in the late twentieth century, including the integration of many art schools and polytechnics into a tightly integrated and networked higher education sector, and an accompanying interest in art's relationship to traditional academic disciplines. As the art education sector grew, the key debates were concerned with what the future of artistic research should look like as it expands. However, given the impact of neoliberal austerity measures and funding cuts that have resulted in programme closures and declining enrolments, we now consider the likelihood of artistic research contracting. What if artistic research is now approaching the end of its university life, a fate shared by the humanities and critical social sciences? This essay considers the potential ways artistic research may end.

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