

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Hawkins, H;Hughes, R

Title:

Interlude: Supervising

Date:

2019-03-15

Citation:

Hawkins, H. & Hughes, R. (2019). Interlude: Supervising. Boyd, CP (Ed.). Edwardes, C (Ed.). Non-Representational Theory and the Creative Arts, (1), pp.263-274. SpringerLink.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/240703>

Interlude: Supervising

Harriet Hawkins, Royal Holloway, University of London

Rachel Hughes, University of Melbourne

In this short interlude two supervisors of practice-led/based PhD students working within Geography reflect together on the processes of supporting such work. This is a field of growing complexity, in which intersections exist between those dissertations that use artistic methods in their research, but don't create let alone submit any 'final' works to be 'judged' to be of PhD standing (or of making a PhD-level contribution to art), and those dissertations in which the thesis is composed of both a written component and the submission of art work or documentation of work, with both elements assessed. The thicket of terms around these ways of working, and the myriad forms between these two extremes, is increasingly dense. Ideas drawn from artistic research and debates about practice-based and practice-led work are being joined by various forms of disciplinary word play, from art-geography to the geoartist. In the discussion which follows, we are mainly focused on those PhDs that aim to create significant bodies of art work as part of their submitted thesis. While we have different kinds of experience of these PhDs and work in different university contexts, Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), both systems are supportive of practice-based/ led PhDs and the wider place of artistic research in academic research. This interlude was composed through a face-to-face discussion, followed up by an email exchange of questions as we explored similarities and differences in our experiences.

RH: In your experience, what are some of the reasons why artists or students with a creative practice enter a PhD program in Geography?

HH: The individuals I have worked with have, like most PhD students, joined the programme for a whole series of reasons, known and unknown to me and to them. Some have explored the possibilities of PhDs in more explicitly practice-based contexts (fine art, creative writing) before finding their way to geography. Some are at the start of their careers, some have established careers, others are towards the end of long and successful professional practices. For some the PhD offers time, space as well as financial resources, to enable a different kind of thinking about their practice, a chance to train in new skills that might open up new career paths, and the prompts to think through new framings for their work. For others, the PhD seems to be an important stepping stone, a response to the increasing need to have that box ticked for a job in higher education in the Arts, or in the case of some working in the field of art-science, a form of credentialing that might also be situated as part of a wider performance of self that is part of the creation of work. For many, geography seems to offer a welcoming and inspiring intellectual space, where they can find resonances with their interests and practices.

RH: I have rather less experience, and my main experience of supervising a creative-component PhD in geography, the first in our school, didn't start out as such. It was a case of theoretical developments in the discipline proving strongly resonant to her overall interest and to the ways in which she then desired to work.

Some of these theoretical developments had already caught her eye and caused her to contact me as a geographer, others I soon suggested, and yet others she discovered herself in her first year. In the course of reading this theory, and accounts of others' ways of working with it, and in accord with her own existing art practice, this student developed a practice-led approach to her research. What emerged was a very deliberate 'apprenticeship' in geography (which for this student was a second PhD), as well as in theories from outside geography that she felt could be productively brought in. So it was about an existing intellectual space and the intellectual spaciousness of geography.

RH: How have you come to say yes to these kinds of supervision requests in the past?

HH: For me supervising arts practice-based research was a natural evolution of my existing research, which had transitioned from an approach based on using art history and theory in answering geographic research questions, to beginning to collaborate with creative practitioners as part of research processes. From there it was an obvious movement to set up a PhD programme that enabled creative practices as part of a research thesis. Whilst to begin with I found I was working with a lot of practice-based PhDs who wanted to have a geographer supervisor on their team, over the last few years the growing breadth of geographers willing to supervise practice-based working means I now get to work more with practitioners who explore similar substantive fields of research.

RH: I didn't have a creative practice of my own. What was important for me was to continue to say 'yes' as the premise and practice of the research, and even my own role, changed over time and in response to what was going on. The golden rule of improvisation, being open, saying yes, was what I found myself doing. That's not to say that I left off from any constraining or guiding, but I did find that a large part of my role was to respond in a way that enabled something to emerge that neither of us had envisaged at the beginning. There's obviously something of that in all supervision and collaboration, but this was of a very different order, for me.

RH: What are the ways that (potential) supervisors can facilitate more of a continued safe space for this kind of work in departments or schools, and also wider university contexts?

HH: I feel like I got very lucky being able to begin to explore these ways of working with students at Royal Holloway, University of London. We of course have our own issues, as all departments do, but the history of cultural geography in the department means I think that there is a culture of being open and welcoming to all sorts of ways of working that might initially seem odd and perhaps not very 'geographical'. I have been really excited to see collaborations emerge between creative practitioners and physical geographers, as well as seeing some of our social science development orientated scholars begin to work with photographers as part of their research and to produce exhibitions. I think working in an environment that is generally supported is really important. Even as a PhD student just over a decade ago, and working between geography and art history, rather than between

geography and art practice, I still often got asked why what I did should be considered geographical. I think as supervisors it can be important less to protect students from these kinds of critiques, although that might be important, but more to ensure that they are prepared for them. After all, part of the originality of these ways of working for geography comes from their difference, and learning to defend this is an important part of being able to articulate its importance. Although it can sometimes get rather tiring to be always having to justify your presence, and I could imagine could get quite off-putting for some PhD students.

I would also observe that I have found it really valuable to remember that practice-based work is not just growing in geography, but that as a geography supervisor you can help to link practice-based students across a range of disciplines, within and beyond the arts, so in the UK sociology, history, archaeology, anthropology, to name but a few disciplines, are also seeing a rise in practice-based work. These disciplines don't perhaps use the term non-representational theory to locate why they value these practices, but some of the impulses I think can be seen to be the same. These kinds of connections can also help create links of groups of people who can all share issues around doing practice based PhDs in interdisciplinary contexts, I think this can be really useful.

I do think it is perhaps the responsibility of those of us working in this field to put the time into reflecting critically on what 'safe' spaces might mean here. It has been interesting to see how a lot of the intersections of geography and arts practices have started to attune geographers perhaps more carefully than before to the normative conditions and practices of their own disciplinary spaces, from departments to labs, to conferences, seminars, supervisions and journal pages. I think there are some interesting ways that to think about making a discipline hospitable to other forms of knowledge making might require making it a bit discomforting and unfamiliar to those who normally feel at home. This is both an opportunity, but also a responsibility.

RH: I absolutely agree: not all institutional contexts are going to sympathetic or conducive, although I would say that PhDs like the one I've mentioned can in turn help to change such contexts. I have been surprised at the extent to which just one creative-component work in the School's thesis library has effected a larger shift for our students embarking on research now, Honours (fourth-year) students included. Having said that, I worried constantly about each administrative or public milestone my student faced, despite the fact she was entirely capable and she never attempted any such hurdles without a shared sense that the work was great and ready. Perhaps, as you suggest, what I feared were the responses of those who would likely feel uncomfortable by, say, a 'completion seminar' in which very different form of knowledge was being presented. Again, to further share this case, an exhibition of the her body of creative work held in the halls of the School also did much to begin conversations and generate interest among our colleagues, with the downside being substandard lighting, security and public access to the exhibition! The basement of a university building being hardly fit for purpose when it comes to hanging paintings and installing sound art. But it was important for us to have it there, next to our lecture theatres and seminar rooms.

RH: What are the risks associated with collective or participatory practice for what remains an individual's PhD? Will we see co-awarded creative-critical

PhDs anytime soon, i.e. where the collective earns the 'qualification'?

HH: Interesting question, I know that this is an issue that PhDs negotiate, whether they come from an artist collective that has established working patterns that then become the subject of self-critique by one of the collective, or if they are co-producing work with "publics". I guess I think two main things around this. Firstly, might there be lessons from participatory action research for example, where co-production is also valorised, and so these kinds of issues must also be being considered there? Secondly, I would, I think seek to distinguish between an artist collective, and an artist working with participatory practices as these I think have slightly different implications in terms of how we think about the PhD given the debates about what the PhD is awarded for. To help with this I think it might make sense to appreciate what art world critical discourse would suggest. So diverse debates around relational aesthetics, participatory art and the evolution of debates around the post-medium nature of something we might call contemporary art all direct us to the need to resituate, sometime radically, what we think of as, I guess the 'artfulness' of art. So, perhaps most obviously for many the 'work' of art (both in terms of the labours of its production and the effects of its consumption) might not be in the finished object, it might be in the processes of bringing people together. These shifting questions around what 'art' is necessarily shift questions round what the PhD is on and how we value and examine it. So these might not always be about the examination of a co-produced final art work, but rather the practice might be evidenced in the documentation of the artist's role in creating the spaces and conditions for co-production to occur.

It can be really useful for geographers working in these areas to remember that the art world has often invested a lot of time and energy in thinking through these issues already. Sometimes the solutions we might find in other disciplinary and institutional contexts are challenging, asking us to confront tough questions about how, as a discipline, we make and value knowledge, but that is surely to be valued?

RH: Since I posed that question I've learned that co-awarded PhDs exist in disciplines such as Theatre. But I absolutely take your point about looking at earlier research practice, such as PAR, or listening to current debates around the valuing of art and taking these insights into our own discussions about how we value and award PhDs.

RH: A lack of training and methodological sure-footedness for both student and supervisor (and committee members) can produce... ?

HH: I am not sure I see these PhDs as lacking in training or methodological sure-footedness any more than another other group of PhDs. I think one challenge can be that the normal sense of out-of-placeness and the struggles that almost all PhDs face can be exacerbated by being a sometimes lone practitioner, or coming from another discipline. For me, as a supervisor without a solo practice and who did a PhD through a 'standard' (if there is such a thing) thesis, I am aware that I am perhaps less able to empathize and less able to predict some of the issues that might be faced during a practice based/ led PhD process (around for example relationship between practice and writing) as I did not go through it. But at the same

time all PhD students are different anyway.

I think this speaks to the need for carefully composed supervisory teams that are sensitive to what the role of the practice is. Practice in a PhD is a very diffuse thing, for some it is a research method that produces outcomes which might be part of an exhibition, but that practice is very much not being examined as worthy of a PhD, it is a means to the end of the thesis, but it is not the thesis in itself. Whereas for others, the practice is extremely important to the actual thesis, it stands alongside the text. I know very few practitioners who are interested in developing their practice that would not benefit from a practice specialist in helping evolve their work – it is a hard thing to do yourself. I think one of the most important questions geographers thinking about supervising this work can ask concerns the supervisory skill set needed to support the students aims. I have several PhD students with whom I have wonderfully open discussions around the extensions but also the limitations of what I, and a geography community, can bring to the evolution of their work. I tend to find some of the most interesting extensions of my thinking happen when everyone is operating on less stable ground, when footings are perhaps not lost, but just unsure, in these moments it feels like new spaces are opened up by questions like why does a viva have to work like that? What if I want my thesis to be a set of books? This is not throwing out disciplinary conventions for the sake of it, but it is to raise interesting questions that might or might not lead to different answers.

RH: In my experience, I simply had to trust my students' ability to think critically and creatively about her own art and process and organise her time (and mine) in response to this. There's trust in every supervisory relationship but, again, a more intimate kind of trust was needed; trust that wasn't contractual. I was very, very lucky. In terms of conventions of research presentation, we took some risks in the thesis. I then approached examiners who I felt fairly sure would be pre-disposed to appreciate the attempt to move away from such conventions.

RH: In your experience, who examines these PhDs and how are examiners chosen? What are the politics of asking artists to peer-review or examine such work? Is the whole idea of 'peer-review' of art a nonsense? What about the burden of examination falling to academics who've led this emerging field?

HH: There are for me at least two elements to this question firstly, the practicalities and secondly, the more philosophical questions, I guess, about judgment and what we expect work to do.

When we wrote the PhD regulations at RHUL for practice-based PhDs, we deliberately kept them open, such that there is an open negotiation about what composes the thesis: it will be writing of between 30K and 70K, and some volume of practice. There are myriad ways of thinking about that relation: for some the practice-based work is primarily the thesis, and the shorter volume of writing is exposition on it. For others the written component is seeking to be a piece of academic writing in its own right and is publishable as journal articles like any other geography PhD might be.

This mixture necessarily shapes who we try to get to examine these PhDs. We normally aim, given this is a PhD in geography, to find a geographer examiner in the topic of the thesis – say landscape and identity, or the underground – who will be sympathetic to the value of arts practices as making knowledge, and a practitioner examiner who can judge if this work is making a doctoral level contribution to the field of practice. I think this does demand a lot of the examiners. Well I find it demands a lot of me when I examine or when I review. I think it reminds me what examining or reviewing really is, which is for me, at base, a meeting the work where it is – in whatever form it is – and asking does this make an original contribution to knowledge in this field that is what could reasonably be expected in the time frame/ word length given? If not what is the most appropriate way for the creator, for the discipline, to help this work achieve its best expression? It is also I think an experience, again like all examining which demands a level of humility, that demands that you are really very open and honest with yourself and others about what you know and don't know, where your limits are. This I think is a valuable exercise for us all as individuals and as a discipline.

I think there are some wider questions raised here around the, I guess you could call them, 'literacies' that working with different forms and outputs of knowledge making raise. I have been thinking recently around De Certeau's term 'scriptural economies', and also Guattari's 'linguistic imperialism' as a way to reflect on how these kinds of creative ways of working require different skills or even require us to reskill ourselves in practices such as reading and writing, and might call to the fore some of the unquestioned ways we research and communicate. I think, as Alison Barnes (this volume) and others make clear, we should not dismiss text and the page. I think we can make them sites of disciplinary questioning in a way that they have perhaps not been before, and maybe explore how these forms of practice recast how it is we write and read geography, as well as how we think about other ways in which we produce and consume geographic knowledge. I think this is one of those neat intersections of creative practices and non-rep theories that has made them such powerful allies.

Again, it is well accepted within art that new ways of working generate new modes of analysis, judgement and forms of production and consumption- whether that be of painting, sculpture, or artistic research. As such, I think to suggest that peer-review is nonsense is not correct, to try to keep valorising the same things would perhaps be rather futile, but I don't think we are talking about things that can't be judged.. I think that the art world has long had forms of peer-review, they just don't look like the ones geographers might normally work with. The UK Research Excellence Framework make it clear that when thinking about art works as research outputs, their value was not to be linked to audience numbers, positive press reviews, or the high profile nature of the gallery the work was in, but was rather to be understood through a narrative based around research questions and contributions. This is not, unsurprisingly, without controversy. Furthermore, the evolving concept of artistic research seems to be raising some fascinating questions around what forms of judgement might be appropriate. The resurgence of a kind of scientism associated with research in the art world seems to be igniting debates around rigour and objectivity, and practices of working with hypothesis and ideas around data, that feel quite distance from how I think of cultural geographical research as evolving.

I think one important thing to remember is that given the ongoing link between the evolution of forms of art and open questions about the conditions of production and consumption proper to them, it feels like these are exciting live questions, and questions that many of the practitioners ask within their work and through their work, and questions that are interestingly posed of us. These are things we need to be careful to support our students in, not things we should seek to close down or be prescriptive around.

RH: Right. It's those unfamiliar forms of peer-review that we need to learn about, how they work or might work, what underpins them, and be open to experimenting with them, and advocating for them, when needed.

The Australian Research Council and our similar scheme, the Excellence in Research Australia (ERA), allows submission of what they call 'Non-Traditional Research Outputs'. These include creative works, live performances, recorded or rendered works, curated or exhibited events and portfolios. An accompanying statement, however, must spell-out the 'research component' of each such 'research output'. Of course the 'non-traditional' label is a misnomer in many ways... but in the current political climate one can't see that changing much.

HH: How do you think supervising these PhDs has impacted your own research practices?

RH: It has broadened my understanding and interest in working with creative-arts based methodologies, no doubt, but for me that's about collaborating. I recently commissioned another former student of mine – a filmmaker – to conduct some filmed observation for a joint project. While I might experiment with film myself in the field, I knew from supervising this student that she had really significant aesthetic and technical capacities that would be able to be immediately deployed for a far better research outcome, and quite probably produce things we couldn't have anticipated, which was indeed the case.

It has also significantly changed my own approach to research, so much so that I still consider myself to have been as much a student of my student as her supervisor. Part of my current research examines creative-arts 'projects' that seek to be reparative in the society in which they are developed and performed. I now look less at the 'product' of these efforts, the art work or performance event, and more at the practices, materialities and rhythms that have emerged out of what are always collaborations, even the apparently solo works, in this case in response to legal notions of harm and repair.

HH: I totally agree with the value of collaborations. I only tend to work with creative practices in collaboration with practitioners, unless part of the value of the project is in my learning-to-do, which is perhaps more as you were saying with your second point here about the process and what happens in the doing rather than in the finished output.

I think, through supervising these kinds of PhDs, I have become more open in how I approach all aspects of my research, from the fieldwork to the outputs. I get

reminded to question things, rather than go on autopilot, and think 'oh this should be a paper', but also to take more risks. I also feel like, but this could be a function of career stage and gaining confidence, I have learnt a lot from seeing how arts practices seems to be freer around experimentation and failure, and seeing each element of a project as being 'tested out'.

HH: Do you think the presence of PhD students working in this way has impacted on the wider research cultures of your department, if so, how?

RH: Absolutely. As I said earlier, the horizon is much wider for students coming along now. Very soon after the initial creative component PhD at Melbourne, there were a number of related developments that saw cultural geography gain far greater centrality in our school, not that I am drawing a causal link! This included the arrival of a new head of school and other new staff, some of whom have their own creative practice: documentary film-making, fabric art, etc. In the last two years we've also inaugurated an artist-in-residence programme, which has been hugely exciting, and has brought together artists and current PhD students and staff, including physical geographers and professional staff. I'm more aware of the creative work and scholarship in our university's college of art now too, thanks to cross-faculty PhD committees; I'm more likely to contact researchers in these parts of the university in future as a result.

HH: It's exciting to hear about the evolving cultures of these ways of working around the world. I think it is going to be really fascinating to see how these practices continue to shape the kinds of cultures we can create in our departments and the sorts of connections we make. It has been so inspiring to see our practice-based student creating new links across the university and so strengthening our links to our colleagues in other faculties. I am also appreciative of how within our own department it feels as if the presence of interesting students doing really different work is inspiring others. What I don't mean is that they all want to go out and be artists, but I think I can see effects of their thinking about how to approach their research, what they might produce, who they might collaborate with. It is, I think, another part of the exciting shift in research cultures we are seeing.