

## Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

### Supervising PhDs in the arts in an age of ‘global challenges’: a question of permissions

**Malcolm Quinn, Professor of Cultural and Political History, Associate Dean of Research Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon, UAL**

#### Abstract

UAL Research Season 2021 was dedicated to the theme of ‘Earth and Equity: integrating environmental and racial justice’. This short essay raises the issue of how we should supervise PhDs in the arts in the era of ‘global challenges’, suggesting that the question of ‘integration’ and the intersection of environmental and racial justice that ‘Earth and Equity’ offers points to the question of a ‘permission to research’, in which global challenges can be addressed by a focus on who has permission to engage in practice-based research in the arts and under what conditions.

#### Keywords

arts; research; PhD; supervision; global challenges; permissions

Questions about how to supervise PhDs in art, design and performance used to be focused on whether arts practice met the standard definition of academic research. Now they are more likely to be concerned with the question of whether and how research in the arts can be applied to tackling the challenges of global health, climate change, social justice and emerging technologies. The ‘Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research’<sup>i</sup> (Vienna Declaration, 2020), a policy document signed by a number of organizations and networks dealing with artistic research across Europe and aimed at political decision makers, funding bodies, higher education and research institutions, argues for the support of PhDs in artistic research as part of a new landscape for higher education, in which definitions of research are consolidated around global challenges. The declaration states that:

“Today there is a rapidly growing number of doctoral/PhD programmes all across Europe dedicated to AR [Artistic Research].”

“Excellent AR is research through means of high-level artistic practice and reflection; it is an epistemic inquiry, directed towards increasing knowledge, insight, understanding and skills.”

“AR also addresses key issues of a broader cultural, social and economic significance.”

“AR is well suited to inspire creative and innovative developments in sectors such as health and wellbeing, the environment and technology.”

At the 2021 EARN/NWO Smart Culture Conference, ‘The Postresearch Condition’<sup>ii</sup>, Florian Cramer (Reader in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Visual Culture at the Willem de Kooning Academy in the Netherlands) spoke against the Vienna Declaration. Cramer argued that the Vienna Declaration binds artistic research to institutional missions and standard definitions of research. At the same conference, keynote speaker Professor Irit Rogoff (Goldsmiths, University of London) defined ‘advanced practices’ in research in the arts as staging the social realms in which intervention becomes necessary (“hope lies in the not yet”) rather than passively mirroring social concerns. In the context of the ‘Vienna Declaration’,

Cramer and Rogoff opened the question of where 'permission to research' comes from – from universities and government funding bodies, or from artists, designers and performers themselves?

In this regard, it should be noted that practice-based research is not necessarily 'applied' research, rather it is research in which the question of a 'permission to research' is raised in the context of practices of art, design and performance. In this sense, the older question of whether arts practice meets standard definition of academic research, is reflected back into the new question of how we should supervise PhDs in the arts in the era of 'global challenges'. In this context, I would suggest, an approach to supervision in arts research should focus on how the student is tackling the question of their 'permission to research' in relation to the institutions, industries and fields of inquiry that they are engaged with, and also, how that permission to research is structured by other permissions and prohibitions that relate to intersecting questions of social justice, class and new technology. Rather than the PhD being nested within an institutional structure in which the 'global challenge' sits at the summit, the institution should learn to gather knowledge about these challenges from the permissions and prohibitions of research that the practice-based student encounters over the course of their PhD.

It also needs to be emphasized that this question of how to ask permission, as well as the conditions for asking permission, is central to research in even the most seemingly 'apolitical' academic disciplines. An example of this was offered on my Twitter feed on 21 February 2021, when my eye was drawn to the post 'Analytic philosophy at its finest' by Sean Crawford, a philosophy lecturer at the University of Manchester. Beneath the headline, Crawford had quoted a paper in *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* by Vann McGee (McGee, 1997):

This is not an overly ambitious paper. What I would like to do is take a thesis that most people would regard as wildly implausible, and convince you that it is, in fact, false. What's worse, the argument I shall give is by no means airtight, though I hope it's reasonably convincing. (McGee, 1997, p.141)

What drew my attention was that, without reading the paper or knowing a lot about analytic philosophy, I could tell that this was a statement about research. I can recognize this as a statement about research, I would suggest, because it manifests a situated and tightly defined curiosity about the opinions and values held by 'most people', but also because it does not offer a definitive statement but rather the opposite - it seeks permission to address the conditions under which 'most people' make certain kinds of statements. This emphasis on the conditions for making statements is manifest on Vann McGee's web page for MIT, where it says that, "Vann McGee's work displays a wholesome concern for truth and rationality, combined with a pathological preoccupation with paradox."<sup>iii</sup> The idea of a 'pathology' that is combined with a wholesome concern with truth and rationality, suggests that the most proper source of research in any discipline is in fact a preoccupation, a 'curiosity' that drives the wish to work rigorously and methodically towards a contribution to knowledge.

My own doctoral research at the Royal College of Art, completed in 2001, was concerned with this relationship between pathology and permission, insofar as it attempted to demarcate certain kinds of 'abnormal' conditions of historical investigation within the discipline of archaeology. These abnormal conditions of investigation, which took the form of an invented series of three conference papers, two delivered by me in the 1990s and another by someone else in 1889, were nonetheless offered as an address to a specific contemporary crisis of inquiry in archaeology. The permission to undertake the research, however, was not determined by the contemporary crisis but by my own curiosity about the historical conditions under which the discipline of archaeology had developed. In my viva examination, the abnormal conditions of my investigation led to one of the examiners asking me if what I had done in archaeology was art. Since seeking permission from art would have misrepresented my research, I replied that it had to stand as an account of archaeology that

archaeology could not produce for itself. This account of a fugitive investigative structure within academic archaeology was published as 'The séance of 27 August 1889 and the problem of historical consciousness' in the volume *Historical Archeology: Back From the Edge* (1999).

The reason I'm citing this chapter is to highlight the relationship between the abnormal investigative structure that I had constructed within academic archaeology (which could not provide me with a future direction in the discipline or any antecedents other than those I had chosen myself) and the potential for change in the conditions of discourse in archaeology that the editors of *Historical Archeology: Back From the Edge* identified in my chapter. My chapter, they argued, had the potential to affect the status of the other chapters in the book, because it "relativizes and questions the entire epistemology of orthodox history underlying studies, such as those discussed here, of the relationship between past and present as ultimately discrete aims." (Funari, Hall and Jones, 1999, p.16).

Doctoral research in art and design has been characterized by these kinds of abnormal, fugitive and precarious investigations, which sometimes draw strength from equally fugitive collectives or alliances. In her keynote address to 'The Postresearch Condition', Irit Rogoff claimed that this precarity, paradoxically, is also what marks out the best 'advanced practices' in arts-based research, which do not respond to the 'urgency' of a crisis, but instead, through a process of epistemic invention, reveal this urgency to be part of a more general social 'emergency' at the intersection of race, class, migration, climate change and social justice. The character of this emergency, as I have suggested, can be addressed by asking who has permission to research and under what conditions.

Rogoff's distinction between 'urgency' and 'emergency' offers us a clue as to how we might respond to the main focus in this paper, namely the question of how we should supervise PhDs in the arts in the era of 'global challenges'. If these challenges are treated simply as a set of top-down 'urgencies' that PhD research should be aligned with, then research itself may become stifled. On the other hand, if the question of a permission to research can be productively aligned with the question of the intersection of 'Earth and Equity', for example, then the issue of how the institution and the wider world learns from the abnormal, fugitive and precarious investigations of research in art, design and performance is brought to the fore. At the level of the PhD tutorial, a supervisory team can support students to articulate the relationship between the precariousness of their investigations and the possibility for a change in the conditions of the fields of inquiry with which they are engaged, all within the framework of a necessary social pedagogy. In this regard, the problem that Florian Cramer and Irit Rogoff identify with 'The Vienna Declaration' is that, with the best of intentions, it tries to make practice-based doctoral students in art, design and performance invulnerable, by aligning them with an institutional mission that sets limits on the scope of their investigations and in the process makes their research into a function of the institution. An alternative is for institutions to align themselves with the 'the permission to research' initiated by the curiosity of the practice-based doctoral student themselves, and the unique investigative structures that they build to accommodate this curiosity. In this way, the doctoral research in art and design that is initiated by a diverse and globally dispersed student cohort, can contribute to the development of an institutional mission, particularly the 'third mission' of knowledge exchange that complements teaching and research.

## References

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2022) *Vann McGee*. Available at: <https://philosophy.mit.edu/mcgee/> [Accessed: 21 December 2022].

McGee, V. (1997) "Kilimanjaro"<sup>1</sup>, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 23(1), pp.141–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1997.10715965>

Quinn, M. (1999) 'The séance of 27 August 1889 and the problem of historical consciousness', in P. P. A. Funari, M. Hall and S. Jones (eds.) *Historical Archaeology: Back from the Edge*. London: Routledge.

*The Postresearch Condition*. HKU, January 26–30 2021. Available at: <https://www.hku.nl/en/study-at-hku/hku-college/pre-phd-programme/the-postresearch-condition> [Accessed: 21 December 2022].

Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research (2020) [https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2020/06/Vienna-Declaration-on-AR\\_corrected-version\\_24-June-20-1.pdf](https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2020/06/Vienna-Declaration-on-AR_corrected-version_24-June-20-1.pdf) [Accessed: 21 December 2022].

## Biography

*Malcolm Quinn* is Professor of Cultural and Political History and Associate Dean of Research for Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon, University of the Arts London. In his role as Associate Dean of Research, he supports and develops the research activity of staff and students, the closer integration of research and teaching, UK and worldwide research collaborations and new ways to realise the cultural and social impact of research.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Vienna Declaration was co-written by the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), CILECT/GEECT (the International Association of Film and Television Schools), Culture Action Europe (CAE), Cumulus, the European Association for Architectural Education (EAAE), the European League for Institutes of the Arts (ELIA), the European Platform for Artistic Research in Music (EPARM), EQ-ARTS, MusiQuE and the Society for Artistic Research (SAR).