[Book review of: Danny Butt. Artistic Research in the Future Academy]

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Contemporary art schools are often not content with delivering good (prospective) artists; they claim that artists, through their work, may be able to provide knowledge and insights in a manner that is no less useful than the kind of knowledge and insight proffered by universities. For this, they seek recognition, notably in the form of the right to award PhDs – a privilege hitherto reserved for universities. The idea is that candidates present an end-product that is the result of closely combining scholarly research with one or more artistic works of their own making in a so-called ‘creative practice PhD’ or ‘a PhD in studio art’.

Butt’s book investigates the rationale of ‘artistic research’, charts its historical roots both in North America and Europe, and proposes how it can help solve the identity crisis of humanities departments groaning under the scourge of neoliberalism. That being said, his monograph is in essence a reflection on the tensions arising from trying to incorporate artistic research into the university, with its traditionally strong focus on language and propositional knowledge. This is an issue with wider implications as, even in established academic disciplines, the pertinent question is nowadays raised of why, for instance, BA and MA theses should always need to be written texts. A thoughtful consideration of conditions under which visual and multimodal projects could be made academically viable (for instance in the form of ‘audio-visual essays’) would thus be more than welcome – not just to decide what may be the scholarly merits of artistic research, but also to see when and where any projects in which other modes than language (notably, the visual) prevail might replace or complement the traditional verbal essay or paper. What Butt promotes, however, turns out to be much more radical than finding a place for artistic research in academia, as is foreshadowed in his warning that ‘it is possible to understand artistic research as a form of inquiry that may fundamentally question the university’s role’ (p. 5).

A substantial part of the book is devoted to charting the historical development of ‘the university’ as an institution. The question of whether the perfection of useful skills (including artistic craftsmanship) or the acquisition
of scientific, propositional knowledge should be at the core of the curriculum, Butt demonstrates, is as old as the university itself. Another recurring issue is who or what is supposed to benefit from academic teaching and research. The Church – by creating good Christians? The State – by creating good citizens? Business & Industry – by ensuring graduates learn something with which they can earn money? Or is the pursuit of knowledge a value in its own right, a way to help learners become reflective, independent thinkers? And who is supposed to pay for universities? Butt discusses the changing views on the role of the university in different periods, and in different countries, robustly documenting his findings. But whatever its history, ‘what is striking about the transformation of the university in the past half-century is their [sic] conformance with the tenets of . . . neoliberal economic agendas’ (p. 37).

It is only halfway through his book that Butt attempts to define the field of artistic research. Ironically, most of what Butt discusses here appears to support the ‘sceptical’ position that he emphatically rejects, namely that ‘art is art and research is research, and neither domain benefits from their confusion’ (p. 80), as voiced, for instance, by Elkins et al. (2009). A conundrum for the artistic PhD, Butt points out, is the role of language, one of the main bones of contention being the minimum number of words that constitute the mandatory verbal reflection on the artistic work. Much more complicated is that ‘in the scientific model of knowledge, the use of language is wholly different than is customary in the visual arts’ (p. 83). Butt approvingly quotes art critic Robert Nelson’s (2009) complaint that in much artistic research ‘a key element of artistic teleology is lacking, namely the poetic’ (p. 77). Moreover, ‘findings presented through art are always a posteriori and are thus ill suited to the institution’s pursuit of truth and prescribed outcomes’ (Macleod and Holdridge, 2006, cited on p. 78). And few, if any, academic scholars would consider the habitual procedure in which artists reflect on, and evaluate, their own work acceptable. After listing and discussing all these seemingly insurmountable problems, the author ends with a conclusion that is as unexpected as it is baffling: ‘the role of science as the organizing paradigm for knowledge must be displaced’ (p. 86).

In the following chapters, Butt goes on to discuss philosophical perspectives on art versus practice by luminaries such as Kant, Deleuze, Spivak and Latour. He ends with charting the crisis of the modern university, fulminating against the pernicious influence of neoliberalism on its functioning. Instead of delivering critical citizens, the modern university churns out future tax-payers. Instead of dedicating resources to intensive, small-scale seminar teaching, it wastes these resources on activities such as contract and property management, security, endless internal and external quality review, and governance structures.

I fully recognize, and sympathize with, Butt’s bitter accusation that the university is selling out to commercial and political stakeholders, and am inclined to support the analogy he perceives between the crisis in the arts and
the crisis in the university. Both are under threat, as are, incidentally, medical care, the police, the fire brigade, the court system and independent media – because all institutions serving the common good by and large cost rather than earn money. It cannot ever be emphasized enough, of course, that only if public service institutions and agents operate independently, with minimal pressure from either commerce or politics, they can fulfil their role as safeguards for the pursuit of happiness and freedom in high-quality democracies.

Next, however, Butt makes an odd and unacceptable argumentative move: because of this analogy, universities would do better, he proposes, to abandon their focus on purveying language-mediated propositional knowledge and instead welcome artistic research, to shake things up and restore academia’s mission to educate students into becoming critical and original thinkers. The author here conflates two issues. The question of how universities can be protected from the highly undesirable influence by political and commercial stakeholders is a completely different one from the question of how, if at all, artistic research can mature into a robust, credible academic pursuit. Sure, it is good, even imperative, for the modern university to build better bridges between theory and practice, as persuasively argued by Elkana and Klöpper (2016). In addition, it will be relevant to study how knowledge, and the attitudes, ethics and emotions that are an inalienable part of that knowledge, can be conveyed by other than purely verbal means. But the suggestion that propositional knowledge, and learning how to use language to mediate that knowledge, should give way to artistic research that downplays the importance of language and of finding facts is nonsensical – and downright dangerous. Although in my own scholarly work I have always tried to show that, and how, visuals can represent and communicate important information (e.g. Forceville, 1996; Forceville and Paling, 2021), I strongly reject the idea that a complex and sophisticated argument can do without language. On the contrary: it requires its excellent command. Of course this language may accompany, or be accompanied by, information in other modes, such as visuals, sound and/or music, and we will benefit from further exploring how this can result in better ways of conveying knowledge, and how it can be used persuasively (see Tseronis and Forceville, 2017) – but it can never be replaced by these modes without losing the power to formulate and communicate knowledge and insight with the precision that is the essence of academic scholarship. So, in complete opposition to Butt, I believe that we should worry about the erosion of the average student’s command of language, and I advocate that academia reinstate verbal rhetoric into the very centre of humanities departments’ curricula.

‘Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,’ Shelley famously declared in ‘A defence of poetry’ (1921[1840]: 57), and I would be more than willing to replace ‘poets’ by ‘artists’ in general. I am also happy to grant that great artists no less than great scholars are capable of transforming people’s views of the world and people’s understanding of concepts and ideas.
I am not at all convinced, though, that this is best done by mixing the ideal of excellent scholarly research and teaching with the mind-changing insights and practices of excellent art, let alone by replacing scholarship by artistic research. Yes, art and academia, particularly its humanities departments, are under similar threats; and, yes, they could adopt similar strategies to battle these threats – but that does not mean they have the same goals.

There is an old joke, ‘how did the dromedary come into being?’ Answer: ‘the committee couldn’t choose between a horse and a camel.’ For Butt, even this compromise does not go far enough: he wants to get rid of the horses altogether and have only camels instead. I’m afraid that, with this book, Butt has seriously increased rather than reduced my scepticism about artistic research’s place in the university.

REFERENCES


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