

**"PHD-MAKING  
IS MY ART PRACTICE."**

SARN :: Swiss Artistic Research Network

SARN - Swiss Artistic Research Network represents artists and researchers from the seven Swiss universities of the arts. Based on the idea of enriching the debates and practices of artistic research in Switzerland through open exchanges, group activities (workshops), publications and symposia, SARN wishes to represent and integrate the points of view of the artistic community in general (artists, institutions, universities, public authorities and foundations supporting culture and arts) and to promote the specific contribution of artistic research in Switzerland and internationally.

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NOTES AND INSIGHTS ON THE ART  
PHD-EXPERIENCE IN SWITZERLAND

# SWISS ARTISTIC RESEARCH NETWORK WORKSHOP BOOKLETS

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For some years now, completing a PhD at Swiss Art Schools has been a possibility. In the meantime, several artists have graduated, and in the upcoming years a significant number are expected to follow. It is difficult to characterize the PhD's unique characteristics since there is a large variety conceptually and content-wise. These PhDs were organised in exceptionally diverse structural constellations, given that the current education policy does not yet allow an art school to grant dissertations without the 'support' of another university. This occurs despite of the presence of competent staff and professors who have completed doctorates or artists with strong experience and knowledge in the artistic research field within the art schools. Consequently, the Swiss Artistic Research Network will work towards an equal scenario where universities will have the permission to grant PhDs independently. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the strengths of the current situation when developing a new arrangement.

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PhDs completed in art schools in Switzerland right now are embedded within customized constellations. Artists who want to embark on doctoral studies often have to undertake an exhaustive research to find supervisors and structural contexts which can provide an adequate frame for their studies. However, there are representatives from different, well-established disciplines, who are explicitly interested in the field of artistic research and are willing to bring their own

disciplinary knowledge in exchange with practice-oriented or use-inspired questions and procedures by supervising a PhD in the arts. For this reason, the disciplinary and structural demarcations are transgressed and with this inevitably the constitution and the self-conception of research is constantly questioned and continually negotiated.

Lastly but equally as important, the reasons to obtain a PhD in the arts is a question addressed in a more fundamental manner than in disciplinary oriented dissertations. PhD students face this issue not only because of the incomplete and therefore exigent structures they encounter. It is also vital with regards to the professional perspectives linked to achieving a PhD in the arts. These open questions and aspects must be considered since they contribute to the critical reflection of the current research culture in the academe in general. It appears as though PhDs in the arts definitely give a comprehensive input to this.

# "PHD-MAKING IS MY ART PRACTICE."

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## NOTES AND INSIGHTS ON THE ART PHD-EXPERIENCE IN SWITZERLAND

### INTRODUCTION

In the webpage "Doctoral Studies/PhD" of the CSAS (Conference of Swiss Art Schools) we read the following: "Swiss universities of applied sciences are currently unable to award doctoral degrees in their own right. Candidates seeking to pursue doctoral work in the arts may nevertheless do so within the framework of various national and international cooperation." The announcement synthetically and clearly frames the current context of the PhD in the arts in Switzerland. Firstly, it offers a view into the assignment of art research to the field of applied sciences and, consequently, to the realm of applied research. Secondly, it highlights the absence of an art institution that is able to autonomously grant a third-cycle degree from within the art-field. Lastly, it circumscribes the reality of several doctoral programs that, through partnerships with Swiss and international Universities, have started working on diverse models of PhD in the arts.

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At the time of writing, a common project is underway, trying to bring together a number of Swiss Arts Universities and install a Swiss graduate network of artistic and design

research. This project reflects the ongoing efforts to create possibilities and realise PhDs within Swiss Universities of the Arts. Although initiated by individual art universities, these doctoral experiments are still based on the cooperation with another academic institution which has permission to confer a doctorate.

The presence of these initiatives shows that now there are a few options opening up the PhD curriculum to artists with an art degree. However, at the end of 2013, when the Swiss Artistic Research Network decided to send an open questionnaire to artists doing PhDs in Switzerland, most of the interviewees had been involved in their research for only a brief period of time. We felt that discussing their expectations and experiences was crucial in order to find ways to frame, understand and also make visible the art PhD-work in Switzerland, a phenomenon in fast development, but as yet in a very experimental stage. Furthermore, beyond the specific problem of the PhD, the question of an institutionally framed third-cycle also touches upon ways in which the promotion of art schools' assistants and collaborators may play out in the next years.

5 The questionnaire compiled by SARN-members Priska Gisler, Julie Harboe and Federica Martini included an open set of questions aimed at identifying the contexts and the rationales with which the artists would describe their research for a doctoral program in Switzerland. The goal was to learn more from the situations of research-artists and PhD candidates, and also to analyse the current and potential contexts of the PhD in the arts. This was based on the doctoral research the artists were then conducting and on their initial assessments and suggestions as they saw fit.

Considering that the Bologna Reform played a major role in the development of art PhD programs in Switzerland, attention was given to the artists' educational background and to their training or experience in artistic research.

This short overview regarding the situation of the PhD in the arts in Switzerland wishes to contribute information about current art doctoral cultures and their institutional contexts in the academia.

The presentation of the findings resulting from twelve written-based questionnaires to artists and doctoral candidates provide the basis for the reflections and questions outlined in the following pages. The analysis of a collection of subjects, methodological reflections, problems and suggestions from the survey, brought to the foreground the existence of different art doctoral cultures in Switzerland, and provided the grounds for analysing the upcoming institutional perspectives.



## PHD CULTURES IN SWITZERLAND

Mapping the PhD question in the arts implies following the radical changes of art education in the wake of the Bologna Process since the 1990s. In a broader European timeline, several terms may be traced back to the 1960s, with the introduction of theory in art courses, followed in the 1970s by the establishment of studio art degrees in the UK the opening of the first BA in the arts. In critical terms, Neil Mullholland (2013) suggests that the “accreditation and systematisation of the art education” starts despite the impact of “complimentary studies and the explosion of intermediality”, as early as the 1950s. However, it is in the 1980s only that the notion of practice will be used in an artistic sense, echoing the first practice-based PhDs awarded in the UK in the mid-1980s (van Der Lem 2001).

7 The conceptual path to the Swiss third-cycle and PhD may be equally re-connected to the shifts mentioned above. For Swiss Universities of Applied Arts and Sciences, the 1990s marked the passage when different higher education institutions were merged and art curricula entered the academic sphere. Shortly after, in 1999 Switzerland joined the European Higher Education Area (Gaspar et al., 2016). Finally, in 2005, following the application of the Bologna system, the former Kunst- und Gewerbeschulen were officially transformed into Universities of the Arts. The question of a practice-based PhD further emerged in terms of granting equal status to third-cycle research in universities and schools of art and design (Borgdorff 2006).

The first experiments in writing art PhDs related to the landscape of discursive and post-studio practices, emphasized by the research turn in art academies. Along the lines

of the doctoral debate, controversial questions over the academisation of art and the professionalization of artists' careers, contributed to shape the discussion around the Bologna Reform. In this respect, according to the *Forschung an Schweizer Kunsthochschulen* (2008) report, the impossibility for Swiss art schools to grant PhD degrees would be counter-balanced by research-oriented Master programs. Nevertheless, the opposite is also true, as the research-based art MA programs are compensated by the impossibility for art schools to grant independent PhDs thus organically developing a sustainable and long-term approach to research.

The lack of autonomy of the Swiss third-cycle in the arts plays a major role in defining the nature and scope of current doctoral schools. Therefore institutional collaborations and diverse funding systems are the only viable option for artists to gain practice-based PhD degrees. In this regard, the common concerns over the continuity of practice and theory of MFAs and PhD-programs may be perceived as a Swiss specificity. Within this frame, discussions on the art PhD have, at least in this pioneer phase, referred to a multiplicity of existing international academic models, and particular regional, trans-regional and national collaborations. This aspect plays out either in trans-disciplinary partnerships between art schools and universities, such as in the case of the Bern Art University, or may develop within a regional University of Applied Arts, as in the case of the Hes-so. Other Universities in Applied Arts, such as Luzern and Basel, position themselves in-between.

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Thus far, we can deduce that the prevailing approach outlined in the answers of the questionnaires, is one of a doctoral work produced in connection between a Swiss art school and a national or international university. In addition,

it seems to be the case that doctoral students are deeply connected to the activity of related research departments. Henk Borgdorff and James Elkins have worked with the concept that there now exist several PhD cultures which they identify on a regional or national basis. In the case of Switzerland the heterodoxy of the PhD in the arts is reflected by several elements, that incorporate the wide palette of research practices developed in different Swiss art schools (Borgdorff 2006; Elkins 2008).

Parallel to artists doing practice-based PhDs with specific foci, we observe programs such as the Art & Science Pro Doc (2010-2014), where artists and curators do theoretical PhDs in the context of a disseminated doctoral school organized by Swiss universities (Bern, Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne, Zurich). In ECAL, Lausanne, ECAV Sierre, FHNW Basel, HEAD Geneva, HLSU Luzern, the PhD is supported as a form of “personal research” or “life-long learning” in connection to teaching and assistantship positions or through the affiliation to institutional research projects. In the case of research projects, the exhibitions, workshops and symposia there organised provide specialised alternatives to doctoral schools in connection with the theme that is investigated. Other doctoral schools and platforms have emerged in the HKB in Bern, where PhD candidates are part of a joint Graduate School in collaboration with the University of Bern, or through several international academic partnerships in the case of ZHDK Zurich. Most of the time, art schools include both the visual arts and the design field and, in the case of Bern, also music, theatre and literature. The question of the practice-based PhD is developed by every school across all disciplines. However, the focus of our questionnaire was clearly addressed to artists doing practice-based PhDs.

## PHDs IN THE EXPANDED ACADEMIC FIELD

The cultures of PhD in Switzerland cannot be seen independent from recent international developments in studio- or practice-based PhD in the arts and in design (Borgdorff 2006; Phillips 2010). The question (or problem) of a third-cycle in higher art education has entered the picture of European art schools at the beginning of the 21st century, as a later evolution of the Bologna Process. The double attention devoted to shape higher educational programs and bridge them to research has justified for an approach that first looked into and restructured BA and MA art degrees, and eventually gave prominence to the PhD question. This European path, which equally applies to Switzerland, shows its criticality when situated in the context of what Dieter Lesage calls the “expanded academia,” a field that emerged in the aftermath of the Bologna Process (Lesage 2009).

Lesage sees the “expanded academia” in relation to the absence of a “clear-cut distinction between higher-art education, universities, and the arts” (ibid.). Since the Bologna Process aimed at eroding the distinction between the three of them, the “expanded academia” has thus far failed to define specific roles for its applied research. If these specific roles are necessary in the transdisciplinary contexts that artistic research consciously pursues and adopts in the frame of the duality between theory and practice.

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In particular, when it comes to practice-based research produced in the context of PhD in the arts, Lesage advocates that the question of the specificity is related to the assessment method. If some PhD in the arts programs stress the importance of the portfolio, the request for a “written

supplement” in most of them raises the question of the evaluation of practice-based doctoral research – a problem that resonates with general issues about the assessment of artistic research and, more broadly, of new disciplinary fields. Lesage (2009) argues that the centre of the research should be the ability to express oneself in one’s artistic medium: if a writer would propose a novel as a practice-based doctoral thesis, would s/he be required to submit an additional written supplement? Also, what would a novel entail if understood as a contribution to research? How would we evaluate its quality?

If the question of the medium is key in art practices, when the reflection on the medium meets the art PhD, the priority of the text seems to occupy an important share of the discussion (Caduff et al., 2010). Where the text is not considered in itself as an artistic medium but as a tool to describe an artistic research or, with other words, when the text is identified with the scientific part of a PhD in the arts, the issue may further concern how the ‘scientific part’ of a PhD in the arts should look like (Busch 2014). According to the answers collected in our survey, the Swiss situation with regards to text and art PhD varies greatly. Some of the artists interviewed point to their obligations to produce a written part. In general, the importance of the text varies in accordance with the project and the approach to transdisciplinarity. One artist expressed this in relation to the connection between art and theory: “If an ‘artistic work’ is considered as a tangible result, it is therefore the form that the ideas developed in the research process may take,” thus suggesting that once established a research question and a methodology, finding the medium that corresponds to the artistic research question is part of the research itself.

The questionnaire reveals that, within the international context, in Switzerland, the format of the art PhD seems more connected to the Bologna practice-based research model than, for example, to the US, the UK and the Asian studio PhD. In the Bologna Process the attempt is directed at considering research as a creative practice based on an autonomous methodology but still leading to the production of art. Elkins recalls that the studio PhD is based on the double assumption that once the visual arts are meant as research, they are also recognized as the ability to produce new knowledge. In a primarily transdisciplinary perspective, this approach aligns with recent trends that consider the contact between different methodologies and disciplinary gazes as a necessary condition for research through the means of art (Queloz and Schneiter 2013). The question would then not be how this new knowledge fits the studio practice, but in what kind of context notions of practice transcend disciplinary framings, therefore avoiding to define art research itself as a new discipline (Dombois et al. 2012).

One approach to this question would be through the format. Elkins does not conceal the fact that historically a main motivation at the base of studio art research and the PhD was financial. Moreover, he observes that one main resistance to studio art in the Academia is related to the forms through which the new knowledge is made public and assessed. Iain Biggs (2009) sketches out this trajectory in the dialectics between a studio art PhD that is misunderstood as a chance to train artists in research, and its potential to rather empower artists to deepen their work poetically.

Another opposition is brought forward by the dialectics is between writing on art or as art, in addition to the reflection on art as research. Considering the Glasgow School of Art model, Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson identify four possible outputs for PhDs: “A work (artefact); a work with commentary; a work with dissertation; a thesis” (Biggs and Karlsson 2010). The four formats reflect different perspectives on how theory may complement practice or under which circumstances art is considered as research and, therefore, a dissertation may be considered as art (Ibid.).

The prevalence of submission requirements including text is based on the assumption that a written thesis may “inform art practice, be equal to the artwork or even be the artwork,” and more or less implicitly stipulates that only written research may be assessed by academic and artistic standards. Interestingly, as Fiona Candlin suggests, if we consider that the “artwork has been, and is still successfully judged outside of an explicit relation to text, so why does the practice-based PhD destabilise what are established and educationally viable modes of judgement within art departments?” (Candlin 2000). In the line of Robert Filliou’s self-portrait *Bien fait, mal fait, pas fait* (1973), we note here that the question of the assessment of art PhDs is not only articulated in terms of academic or non-academic research, but also relates to the context of academic and non-academic art (Filliou 1970). Following Filliou, we may imagine that the art PhD develops in a context of “permanent creation.” In this perspective, the assessment of an art PhD as art practice seems to resist the orientation to results, and to call for revisions to the request of a finalised conclusion, in favour of poetic precision and open-ended questions.

As a consequence of this, the possibility for a work to be a doctoral thesis in itself may be rooted in the fact that “unlike other previously contentious forms of art practice,” the PhD in the Arts does not result in “a change in medium or subject matter that nevertheless remains within the parameters of the art college, but is a shift in the way that the art object is legitimated as such” (Candlin 2000). The PhD, then, may be envisioned as a form that traverses different economic, systemic and social models – and as a way to practice art that produces knowledge and as such creates a hybrid space that is partly institutional, partly not, and connected to the art world yet aloof from it (Wilson 2009).

As Steven Scrivener (2000) suggests, art research may be considered as applied research and adopt methodologies based on technology oriented problem-solving research, where the research output is indeed an artefact. This position, that reveals similarities between art and design PhDs, calls for adapting applied research protocols, through rewriting the vocabulary of art, substituting “problem solving” for “response” and relativising the notion of a “new” production with that of “original” in a specific context. In this spirit, a PhD thesis may be an artefact that firstly is produced; second, is original in a cultural context; third, responds to issues, concerns and interests; fourth, manifests these issues, concerns and interests; fifth, reflects a cultural preoccupation with its issues, concerns and interests, sixth to human experience with its artefacts; seventh, highlights artefacts over the knowledge that is, however, embodied by them.

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If Scrivener’s (2000) argument enables to include tacit knowledge in the art doctoral research process, it also re-frames the need for self-reflexivity in terms of practice,



potentially eluding or under-representing those discursive artistic practices where knowledge, archives, story-telling, and novels are the “artefact” in question. Reflecting the possibilities and effectiveness on knowledge production by artistic research, also leads to reconsider – as pointed out by Badura et al. (2015) – its impact on the art field itself.

## A SURVEY ON ARTISTS DOING PRACTICE-BASED PHDs IN SWITZERLAND

From the early stages of the SARN constitution, questions have come up concerning PhDs in the arts. After having existed as an informal association, SARN was established as an official network of representatives of Universities of the Arts and other stakeholder in the field of artistic research in Switzerland in 2011. The fact that the instalment of an art PhD has been a topic of concern since its very beginning, led in 2013 to the conceptualization of a survey on "Artists doing PhDs in Switzerland." This latter was drafted and sent out to artists known to the network at the end of 2013. The questionnaire was composed by a set of open questions, thus leaving it open as to how much information and detail the respondents would be willing to provide. The survey contained questions addressing education, PhD research topics, methodology, funding and general experience in the research process.

Twelve artists have participated in the survey, nine are women. One person had already finished a PhD at the time of the survey. Most artists interviewed had started their PhD between 2010 and 2012, with one early start from 2008. When cross-checking how many respondents had finished their PhDs since the time of the survey in 2013 (i.e. 2016), we found one person only through an online-search.

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The following is a brief overview of some of the answers. When reading one should consider these responses are a rare and precious insight into an experience that is still being shaped into becoming a PhD. The respondents are living and working in a field that should be considered as recently emerging in Switzerland. Therefore, the interpretations

should be perceived as tentative, although they do provide insight and contribute to bringing forward the debate on an important and political issue. In sections we will introduce the context of the PhD-work in the arts (education, motivation etc.), then we consider the PhD-work itself (supervision, themes and questions, methodologies etc.), the infrastructures (disciplinary setting, finances), and in a final section we will look beyond (networks, artistic residencies along or as alternatives to a PhD).

## Context of doctoral work

### *Education*

The artists doing PhDs in the (vast) field of artistic research who accepted to respond to our survey, have been studying in a variety of disciplines: Fine Arts, Media Arts, Fashion Design, Industrial Design, Communication Design, Design, Architecture, Philosophy & Fine Art, Social Sciences & Arts, Composition and an MA in Transdisciplinarity. Five interviewees hold a BA in Fine Arts, and six an MA in Visual Arts. With two holding a double-degree in the Humanities/Social Sciences and the arts.

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### *Motivations, justifications to do a PhD*

The reasons why the respondents would decide to do a PhD may vary widely. The desire to go deeper, to find artistic and theoretical solutions is articulated clearly by some of our respondents. For a PhD allows access to – as one artist wrote – “resources, venues and communities [that] would otherwise not be accessible” and we also read that the work on the PhD was considered a “long-term investment in a 4-year degree program [which] creates a context for an in-depth

investigation.” This allows us to speculate that a PhD in the arts is not at least a possibility for (relatively) autonomous work, and for the chance to extend the phase of studies in a manner that can be chosen freely.

### *Inter/National partnerships*

A considerable number of the artists responding to our questionnaire are very internationally oriented. Some have studied abroad and now live and work in Switzerland, others went the other way round, grew up and studied in Switzerland and are now writing their PhD elsewhere. Also, at least three quarters of the artists responding are in PhD-programs precisely because of their own strengths in collaborating with universities outside of Switzerland. Austrian and UK institutions are the most involved in the supervision and partnerships of Swiss art PhDs. One artist is a part-time and distance learner in a stand-alone PhD-program in the UK.

### *PhD training*

The different PhD trainings our respondents are attending seem to offer similar opportunities and – according to our knowledge – differ only in some minor details that make lives of PhD-candidates easier or more difficult.

An overview of the activities mentioned in the questionnaires include:

- Research seminars and workshops of various length (from two to four hours or two days). Often one artist is presenting his/her work and the group will then discuss progress. The research seminars are taking place monthly up to (only) twice/term. They take place in Switzerland or in the country of the partner-university.

- Research seminars/colloquia with (given or self-organized) texts that are read and then discussed (around twice/semester, lasts several hours).
- Presentations and lectures with guests from abroad or the institutions affiliated (GS).
- Meetings with supervisor, or one supervisor from the Swiss institution and one in the partner institution.
- Meetings with self-organized PhD-groups
- Non-obligatory attendance to further seminars etc. offered by the universities.

Although we don't know a lot about how time-consuming the activities are, the differences in workloads between UK and Switzerland seem substantial, whereas it seems to be aligned between Austria and Switzerland.

Some of the interviewees expressed wishes to improve their current situation. One respondent would like to have focused seminars for several days two or three times a year in order to develop central issues and bring students forward. Another, for example, writes: "I would like to have a group but I have not). To discuss methods, problems etc. ... I am quite on my own with all that." Others, however, are actively looking for events that match their interests, as somebody recounts, "I regularly participate in PhD workshops, conferences and seminars that are relevant to my research at other Universities and research centres around Europe." One respondent is currently lacking a research-group at her/his (applied) university of the arts and therefore expresses her wish to have such a group.

We did not include questions relating to content in this instance. Therefore, in a further study, it would be of value to learn more concerning what the arts PhD candidates are proposed in the seminars and lectures they are required to attend. How do the reading-lists look like, what is considered as necessary for them to learn by persons responsible for the PhD-programs, have standards and even 'classics' emerged in the meantime?

## PhD work

### *Supervision*

The supervision in all cases was not taken over by only one person but shared by several members of the PhD programs or related faculties and tended to be interdisciplinary. Some of the supervising-team (of experts) do have matching competencies, however, this is not the general case in most of the PhDs. Many supervisors do come from art-theory and art-history, others from artistic practice, and in two or three cases came with a slightly different expertise in social anthropology or sociology. Only in some cases the more art-theoretical expertise is matched by an experience in artistic practice. This outcome reflects the proximity of artistic research to fieldwork (see for example Hal Foster's "artist as ethnographer", 1996) and the wish to reflect on theory through artistic practice.

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### *Themes, research question*

Despite one answer declaring the non-existence of research-questions in artistic research, and another artist declaring that the research theme was still unclear, the respondents displayed an extensive band of themes and research questions. All of these fields of research are generated

from and paired with reflections on one's artistic practice, and often bridge art with a plurality of disciplines, bringing for example art to be considered as an architectural gesture or approaching mental imagery through design. Some research questions shift notions such as that of the paratext or of human-animal relations in the artistic field. Others inscribe academic categories such as Renaissance, Romanticism and American Psychiatry in the 1960s-70s in the field of interest of artistic research. Some proposals are more applied-research, and aim at observing artistically metamaterialism in textile, or communication design for long-term care. Apart from the variety of research questions, one of the artists interviewed rejected the very notion of research question as such, pointing at the fact that in an art PhD, as in any other approach to art practices, critical insight on the words and terms of the research are part of the research itself.

### *Methods and methodologies*

In about four cases the research methodology is inspired by the social sciences or the humanities. Therefore, it is no coincidence that also design-research methods are mentioned, since historically, they were borrowed often by the social sciences and reveal a series of similarities with them nowadays (but also some differences of course). One respondent writes along the lines of a humanities' methodology: "I need to make my set of references transparent, show how I constitute my argument."

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Many artists, however, remain somewhat blurry about their methods and methodology. They suggest that the methodology "must be developed as results are realised," "working on/ defining the methodology is part of my research," "I follow the spirit of Roland Barthes' lecture 'Le Neutre'."

The chosen methods development in these cases is considered as part of the research process. Hence, knowing what kind of methods and methodologies they used in the end and how they reflect upon them, could be an interesting question for a follow up study.

Another artist writes that “my research methodology simultaneously engages reflexive and generative research processes” and states s/he is “working with a combination of material, medial or empirical research apparatuses.” This answer indicates that the articulation of the apparatus may also require further scrutiny when researching the framework of Art PhDs. The same person labelled her methodology as “radical empiricism [...] a research strategy wherein the conditions for experimentation are invented via the very process of designing perception systems.” An interesting topic to explore would be how the chosen method of approaching the research is elaborated in the PhD in this case.

#### *How are artistic practice and research combined?*

In most cases, an inventive handling of a complex, and if one dare to say unusual, research situation is sought. In this respect, the variety of how artistic practice and research work are brought together is quite extensive.

On one hand, artistic practice and competencies seem to inform the research process. Artistic work is used to explore or test something necessary for the PhD. We find this in statements such as when somebody says that art is used “to test theory experimentally.” How this researcher is actually using experimentation must – in the brief form the questionnaire allows – remain undefined, although it would be interesting to identify. However, this person also specifies: “I am



working in a manner wherein artistic and academic processes are not mutually exclusive but firmly integrated." Thus, we might assume s/he does not use the term 'experiment' in a strict scientific sense. One person uses a "combination of technological, scientific and artistic practice. Nonetheless, the art practice will inform further procedures in the laboratory as well." In these cases the experience as an artist is used as an enabling force to deal with the topic of the PhD.

On the other hand, artistic practice is hampered or distracted by PhD-research. One individual confessed that "it [research work] is sometimes annoying, but makes one see with different eyes. It is slower but deeper."

The PhD in some cases is simply converted and understood as art or a way of doing art, with a respondent declaring that "PhD-Making is my art practice" or "I see myself doing the PhD project as an artist, hence it is an artistic research and work." With people making statements as follows: "[artistic and academic work] inform each other rather naturally"; "I see myself as an artist who's working with theory," "I develop my artistic work within my PhD" the tinkering and blurring of lines becomes especially prominent in this respect.

In the future, these insightful answers might be explored thoroughly by expanding and indicating the potential a PhDs in the arts has. Do artistic PhDs lead to 'better', 'deeper', 'experimental,' or to the same artwork? Do they lead to an artwork, or to the constitution of artwork and an archive of questions to come? How might artistic PhDs be infused into the art-market? Can these PhDs enrich the higher-education environment and, thus, be helpful for artistic education? It is these kinds of questions that are difficult to pose in a

complex debate over whether and how far artistic competences can be learned – but they need to be posed if we wish to find answers on how to structure and further develop a third-cycle in the arts.

### *Juggling PhD-demands: Practice and theory*

It appears that the PhD-candidates usually choose the format of their work themselves. The answers also reveal that in most cases a decision is (has to be) taken about how much text and how much practical work will be produced. At least, this makes artistic and written parts seem to be two indispensable elements in all the dissertations of the persons participating in the survey, although the extent each of these parts will take may vary. The answers to the question, however, do not allow us to know more precisely as to how far the decisions over the distribution between text and practical work are taken freely or whether they are a product of a given situation that is seen as unchangeable anyway. In this respect, we feel that a comparison among the institutional guidelines, many of which are still in the making, would provide an interesting development of this study on the Swiss PhD. In one case, the work will be written only and in this example writing is understood as an (artistic) practice. Others, whose written parts will prevail, will add something practical. In one example, where about 180 pages of written text are expected, it is the aim of the doctoral student in addition to “design artefacts.”

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One individual speculates over the – maybe – expected assumption that the written part will be “an explanation and a reflection of the development of research” and comes to the conclusion that “the written part of the PhD will describe and illustrate the different methods used.” Or, as this person puts it more poetically, it will be “a mapping of the research

journey." Others seem less clear about the role of the written text by noting that his/her written part will be relating to the practical work reflecting on the written part.

Several artists are more progressive in this sense with statements such as that written text and practical artistic work "actively complement each other" or "my practice and my research mutually intensify each other." Finally, one individual is the most explicit about this: s/he is using the term "research-creation" instead of "artistic research" in order to "clarify the integration of theory and practice in my research and the range of potential outcomes that this can produce." One person says that in his/her case, "[t]he final form is open – to find it - is part of the research itself."

Looking over and analysing these varying statements, it becomes clear that the relationship between theory and practice as well as the question of how written and more empirical/practical parts are juggled is complex. The emerging field of artistic research is yet not unified enough to have a series of theoretical texts available – as might be the case in other disciplinary fields. We assume that with the experience of completed PhDs also in Switzerland, the discourse might become stronger, more evident and configured.

#### *Duration of PhD-process*

The artists participating in the survey were not very heterogeneous regarding the assumed duration of their dissertation. The majority believe that it would take them about three to four years to finish their PhD. Others are more cautious and tell us that the expectation to finish a PhD seems to be around 3 years but for them it is already clear that this won't be enough time. One person says that six years will be necessary for writing a PhD.

It is important to mention that the duration of the PhDs completed within a Swiss Graduate School will take considerably more time because of the additional ECTS students are asked to complete in order to graduate at a Swiss University.

## INFRASTRUCTURES

### *Trans/disciplinarity*

One of the more important results of our brief study is related to disciplinarity, i.e. the areas in which the artistic PhDs can be written by researchers based in Switzerland. This is comprehensible considering art practices often cross disciplinary threads and use a diverse type of methods and media from a wide range of fields and in addition, artistic research is still an emerging field that has not yet gained disciplinary status. However, climbing down in the practicalities of doing a PhD in the Arts, this situation imposes a series of problems to solve. The academic disciplines welcoming artists to do a PhD hardly coincide with the artistic and design fields in which the PhD-candidates have completed their Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Art Universities. A typical example of this is the designer who will complete their PhD in art-history or the artist who is working with social-anthropologists.

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Thus, the transdisciplinary PhD-frame was firstly often induced simply by the institutional constellation of supervisors at hand. We assume that the transdisciplinary work of PhD students in the artistic research context is linked to the range of scholars able and willing to supervise the respective candidates.

Secondly, transdisciplinarity is a topic because of academic reasons: Although most of the PhDs seem to be situated in a stand-alone individual project, some of the individuals answering were doing their work in a transdisciplinary research setting (at least the three GSA-respondents filling in the questionnaire). One person is situated within what she calls the field of “art & science” and therefore understands her work as interdisciplinary by nature itself.

Lastly, transdisciplinarity is a topic at hand due to methodological reasons. An individual highlights the advantages of crossing and working beyond disciplinary boundaries also by stating that the issues of mediality and materiality provide a critical context from which to examine research questions from a transdisciplinary perspective.

While most of the respondents answering are situated in a rather inter- or transdisciplinary context, responses to the questionnaires generally address trans-, inter- or disciplinarity as a critical term that needs to be challenged through the research itself. One artist believes that the field of artistic research per se is “non-disciplinary,” while others wish to profit from a more clearly defined field. An individual articulates that – after many encounters and experiences with and in transdisciplinary constellations – to come back to “a little more disciplinarity would be useful.”

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### *Finances*

The financial situation of PhD-work in the field of artistic research is rather precarious. Only a small fraction of the respondents have been (partly) funded for their work on their dissertation. In a few cases, at least the hosting institutions

were willing to cover conferences, symposia or exhibitions. The remaining respondents had to support themselves by other means, i.e. additional research positions at an Art University, research support or other jobs to earn a living.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a prevailing opinion that PhD-work should be paid for, especially in relation to the requested attendance to doctoral schools (see Duration of the PhD process). In one case a respondent states that they weren't funded at all (we don't know precisely what this means) and they would be happy to even have their conference costs covered. Others articulate how helpful it would be for them to receive some financial support in order to be able to dedicate more time to their PhD.

## LOOKING BEYOND

### *Artistic residency and the art PhD*

Art PhDs may be perceived as a possibility for funding longer-term artistic projects that are research-oriented. Art residencies as well, increasingly establish programs that are based on seminar situations, research-oriented art projects and therefore might provide an option for artists to pursue research-based work. While residencies are not able to bestow titles and degrees, the structure, orientation and financial support they provide, seem to parallel existing art PhD programs. In one question the respondents were asked to evaluate the pros and cons of artistic residency programs in comparison with a PhD. While the artistic residency might be a 'well-known' component in an artistic career, the PhD is not as of yet. Thus, how would people judge one against the other?

Although many respondents didn't fill in this question, some artists subsequently named more advantages for a PhD. Corresponding to the answers, in a residency program the frame and the content are often given. One chooses the residency, according to one's own interests, capabilities and artistic identity. The difference in the PhD, as one person wrote, is that it enables one to choose and develop a specific perspective against the background of a long-term development of one's own work. The advantages of the university as an institution are also mentioned: "The institutional outlines help me to focus and confront me with different discourses." Thus, the PhD at a university is different from a research residency program insofar as it contextualizes and positions the research in an academic and institutional context, allowing a more long-term way of working and following one research question.

### *Networking*

Generally, the answers to the questionnaire lead to the conclusion that PhD-work is undertaken mainly as individual work for one's own career. One respondent even considered it "an egotrip." Also, a few mention a desire for more collaborative forms of dissertation. However, others voice the wish for more interconnectedness and more exchange among those writing their PhDs. Another respondent was looking for a stronger net between persons from the humanities or the social-sciences and those in artistic research situations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Several questions are still left open after this first survey on practice-based art PhD in Switzerland. While finalizing this essay and analysis, many institutional and practical aspects are changing quickly in the critical reflection on a research-oriented third-cycle for artists in Switzerland. This essay offers a snapshot of an ongoing experiment at a specific time, between 2013 and the end of 2016. Presently, several other models are emerging, sometimes more organically, related to the notion of practice in both design and in the arts or, on the other hand, to the network of regional and national collaborations which Swiss art schools rely on. These new experiments are rooted in the observations that we described in the previous pages. Their articulation is not necessarily linear, but it presents a series of contemporary attempts, findings and alternative approaches to research that has shaped the field and multiple identities of the art PhD in Switzerland.

If our study presents in particular data that concern the Swiss context, it would now be essential to observe the potential connections and exchanges of the PhD in the arts in a broader geography of practice-based art research in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Decentering the post-Bologna European and the UK/US models at play in the construction of art PhDs in Switzerland would allow us to learn from different practices or to verify the persistence of others. Furthermore, it would enable the inclusion of a wider range of art school and art research cultures for the assessments of PhDs.

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If the Bologna Process provided an essential institutional frame for the development of a third-cycle, art doctoral schools would not have the need to confine themselves



within this setting and may welcome inputs and practices inscribed in non-institutional frames that constitute an essential aspect of art research (Wilson 2016).

For recent graduates in art and design, a fundamental drive to do a PhD is the hope to expand visions, resources, connections with venues and communities, beyond what the artists would encounter when diving into the art and design fields and scenes both local and national. In this respect, it may be interesting to see how the question of the art PhD is introduced within the art and design MA programs, and how this may be integrated with teaching art research methodologies.

One observation when reviewing the questionnaire is that the frames and contents provided by existing doctoral programs vary greatly. There seems to be no homogeneous structure in general, albeit there can be identified a tendency to adjust to graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences.

One of the possible diagnoses of our brief survey-analysis is the possibility to go deeper and connect theoretical with practical questions in order to develop an artistic career out of a long-term perspective. This makes a PhD in the arts very attractive for a broad range of candidates, particularly in terms of funding more experimental and continual work.

Another conclusion we can draw from the questionnaire regards the apprehension over the considerable time invested in PhD research. This may be an effect related to the condensed time currently dedicated to the completion of BA and MA degrees, but it may also be explained by the

instability of the institutional PhD-organisation. As observed above, this precarious condition is both institutional and financial, as it reflects the structural situation of art universities that lack the right to grant the degrees themselves. Some of the respondents to the survey note, that the advantages of the current transdisciplinary setting in art doctoral schools partly compensate the absence of a transdisciplinary art and design PhD degree. A consequence of this could be that the PhD contents are extremely manifold and also that the methodological choices seem somewhat meandering along a vast band.

Finally, one crucial aspect concerns the evaluation of art PhDs. The risk to inscribe this reflection only in terms of accountability of the research would have an impact on the experimental approach to methodologies, media, forms and formats, as well as to the possibility to work collectively, when the research or the art practice requires it. Our wish in starting the reflection on Swiss experiences of art PhDs with a questionnaire addressed to artists, aimed first at participating in a self-assessment and in documenting this pioneer phase towards an art third-cycle. On the other hand, in conversation with artists doing PhDs during the work on this survey, the bottom-up approach was further justified by the institutional approach that Swiss art universities have proven towards PhDs, which is one oriented to learn from the research undertaken by the artists involved in their programs.

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*"PhD-making is my art practice." Notes and insights on the art PhD-experience in Switzerland*

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# QUESTIONNAIRE

PRISKA GISLER  
JULIE HARBOE  
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## "PHD-MAKING IS MY ART PRACTICE."

This questionnaire is addressed to artists based in Switzerland doing practice-based or theoretical PhDs here or abroad. It aims at surveying the contexts, subjects and methodologies developed by artists in PhD programmes at present.

### A. Background education:

1) Have you received a Bachelor degree? At which university/school, in which discipline?

2) Have you received a Master degree? At which university/school, in which discipline?

3) In case you received a Master degree in the visual arts or any other artistic discipline, were you asked to complement your education with a specific curriculum?

4) During your studies, have you received specific teachings on artistic research methodologies?

## B. Duration, structure and organisation of your PhD Programme:

1) How many years does your PhD programme last? Are extensions allowed? On which basis? Do you think that this time is enough?

2) Do you attend research seminars or a doctoral school? If yes, how are they structured? If not, do you think it would be useful? For what purpose?

3) Do you receive funding to participate in conferences, symposia and exhibitions that are relevant for your research subject? If not, what kind of support for sharing your research in the making do you think would be relevant?

4) How is the supervision of your PhD organised? Whom do you talk to, who is coaching you? Is a professor from an art school involved in the coaching ?

## C. Topics and methodology of your PhD research:

1) What is the subject of your research? What is your research question?

2) Are other PhD candidates or members of the research staff working on similar subjects? If yes, how is the collaboration organised? If not, do you think it would be interesting to imagine a more collaborative-collective approach in artistic PhD research?

3) Is your work integrated/coordinated with research projects of the school/university? If not, do you think it would be useful for your research to be inscribed in a research group?

4) What research methodology are you employing for your PhD? Do you receive any specific requirements in terms of research methodology, or is working on/defining the methodology part of your research? Is trans-disciplinarity encouraged in your programme?

5) How do you see the articulation of theory and practice in your PhD programme? Are you supposed to produce a separate written part and an artistic project, or can you select the presentation format of your PhD? If you can choose, what format do you think to adopt?

6) Can you say something about the position of your artistic work within the PhD project? Do you elaborate an artistic work within your PhD project? What does that mean to you as an artist?

7) How do you balance your artistic work within the academic work/exigencies of your PhD?

3 8) If your artistic PhD programme is developed in collaboration with a University, does this have any impacts on your PhD?

## D. Funding

- 1) How is your PhD funded? Or what is the approximate cost per year which you pay the School/University?
- 2) What is the difference, in your view, between a research artistic residency or a grant/award and an artistic PhD programme?

## E. Experience

- 1) What kind of experience do you make with the program? Have your expectations been met by the program so far?
- 2) It is a challenging experiment and gets me into new terrains of reflection. Have you had disappointing experience with your program so far? In what ways?
- 3) Suggestions for future PhD programs?

*Feel free to give short and concise answers.*