

Verbal transfigurations: when the daughters of the night dance in daylight

**Dr Ann Schilo
Dean Research & Graduate Studies
Faculty of Humanities
Curtin University of Technology
PO Box U1987
PERTH WA 6845**

**Tel: (08) 92663560
Fax: (08) 92663818
Email: A.Schilo@curtin.edu.au**

Verbal transfigurations: when the daughters of the night dance in daylight

*With the rise of creative doctorates in art schools in Australia there has been a concomitant concern over the relationship between theory and practice, between creative work and exegesis. Since the symposium *Illuminating the Exegesis at the University of Ballarat* in 2003, the majority of institutions have formulated their understandings of what constitutes an exegesis and established guidelines for their research students. Yet for many art students there still remains an uncomfortable relationship between what they do in the studio and the written word.*

This paper seeks an understanding of the various dimensions of theory since the development of creative doctorates. Through anecdotal study of the perceptions of students, it focuses upon the practice of exegetical writing, examining ways and means by which students negotiate their word phobias to articulate their ideas. It explores how writing can move them outside their comfort zones and cause them to reflect upon art, its histories, theories and practices. By transfiguring their ideas, 'those daughters of the night (that) have to be educated, presented' (Clement 1994, p34) nascent writers can eventually find voice.

Since the mid 1980s,¹ Schools of Art in tertiary institutions in Australia have had creative doctoral programmes in which the candidate is required to submit for examination a creative body of work and a supporting written document, usually termed the exegesis. Since the ACUADS symposium *Illuminating the Exegesis* in Ballarat in 2003, universities have tended to codify their expectations surrounding creative doctorates, and while there are individual organisational variations, for the most part, throughout the country there is a common consideration of an appropriate length for the exegesis and the nature of its relationship with the creative body of work. Yet while institutional understandings have to a large extent been clarified, many candidates enrolled in these programmes have difficulty negotiating these expectations. For art students there is a desire to write in an authentic voice that reflects the actualities of their studio practice with all its apparent messy creativity and serendipity as well as account for the theoretical and contextual fields that inform their work. The negotiations between these two modes of articulation, between visual and verbal understandings can at times seem overwhelming.

Through the use of anecdotal comments and experiences of current and former doctoral candidates, this paper sets out the issues faced by them in exegetical writing. It reflects upon the way such work can move students outside their comfort zone of the studio and into another realm where they can contribute to, and potentially shift the dynamics of, the theoretical engagement in the practices of art.

From my experience as a supervisor and postgraduate studies coordinator, I am familiar with the difficulties my higher degree by research students encounter during their candidature. From that initial proposal for admission through to their candidacy document and their final exegetical submission, many struggle to articulate their concerns. Central to the problems they face is their ability to enunciate their views in two languages. While most are confident in their primary language of vision, one that has been trained and honed over at least four years of undergraduate study as well as on-going practical engagement in exhibitions and the presentation of art works, for many the verbal articulation of ideas presents a challenge. Words just don't do for them what the materials of vision can.

For students immersed in the creative processes of the studio with its free falling of ideas, images and materialities, with the riffing between one state of envisaging and the next, the concept of exegetical writing can be an anathema. In part this is due to their perceptions of the

demands of academia and a view that it requires a particular formalised tone of expression. As one former student noted:

By my own definition of the world I polarised academia into preconceived adjectives such as cold, conservative, predictable, rational, disinterested, closed, intellectual. I loved ideas but bucked at the thought of having to present them in a way I thought academia expected. (Sabadini, 2007)

Given the traditional canon of art history and theory with its blend of Kantian disinterested aesthetic discourses and dry factual encounters with art and its historiesⁱⁱ, as well as the numerous translations of fashionable continental philosophy that pervade the reading lists of visual culture and contextual studies courses, it is little wonder that the various tomes that students may have encountered during their studies lead them to perceive academia bounded by a turgid preponderance of formalised language. In seeking to replicate or conform to the styles of the heroes of theory, they either resort to pseudo-intellectual pontificating or are rendered speechless.

In her exploration of the concept of syncope, Catherine Clement (1994) posits an ongoing dialectic within western philosophy between the will to order, logic and reason and those moments of rupture that ill fit the stability of rationalism. For Clement, syncope extends beyond its musical connotation as a delay in rhythm to variously include darkness, depression, a leap into the void, swoon, rapture, unsettling moments or displacements in time. Although the interests of this paper are not focussed upon the machinations of western thinking, nor do I pretend to fully apprehend the provocative nuances of Clement's argument, what draws me to her writing is her poetic license. She disrupts the conventional formality of philosophical discourse. Her writing style draws from journalism, popular culture and everyday speech. She plays with metaphors and imagery to create a text that engages the reader with the history of ideas. Intellectual concerns take on a new light, becoming both entertaining and interesting. Such a stylistic approach creates moments of syncope in the very reading of the text to produce a synergy between form and content.

In addition to presenting an alternative approach to articulating scholarly concerns, Clement also provides me with a metaphoric image for exploring the tensions that students perceive between the pleasures of the studio and the dread of the exegesis. While there is a risk here for me of over simplifying what is an engaged and complex reading of philosophy, as well as condensing her evocative text into a mundane binary, the attraction is her rendering of ideas poetically. Clement fills her text with references to numerous literary and philosophical works as she explores the unfolding narrative of syncope. I am drawn particularly to her evocation of complex relationship between night and day in which for her night becomes a realm where the social order can be disrupted, where one can lose oneself in abandonment and where limitations are banished. Day however evokes a cold light of reality that draws night's chimera into close scrutiny and formal order. Her metaphor echoes the perceptions of students in their negotiations of doctoral studies in the creative arts.

Many students see themselves caught in a binary between art and the exegetical requirements. As the same former student contends:

Art is wild and unknown and mysterious and messy.... It aligns truth in all sorts of strange ways that allow it to escape from itself. It cannot be contained..... The requirements of the university are external to the impetus of the work, impose an untruthfulness, an untruthful state on what I do. And how many stupid exegeses sit there? Unread because they don't touch people. (Sabadini, 2007)

For students revelling in the mysterious messiness of art-filled night, the glaring daylight of the university's demands appear counter to their views of the world. The exegesis looms as a linear progression of words, dense substances that lack the efficacy of vision, that contort the

fundamentals of studio practice. Words are seen to control, delimit, constrain and enforce regimentation upon the creative chaos of art. They are removed from the very 'impetus of the (studio) work' because of their 'inability to touch people'. And most of all the exegesis is seen as an imposition, both on the students' ways of thinking and time – time they'd prefer to devote to engaging in their first love, the 'twinkling half lights' of night. (Clement 1994, p24) How then to broach this separation? How do we enable students' 'ideas those daughters of the night' (p34) to be transfigured into daylight?

There are two interrelated aspects to this problem. The first revolves around the students' own sense of inadequacy when it comes to handling words and the second their perceptions of the university's requirements for an exegesis. It is understandable that students who have spent the majority of their education and working life focusing upon the refinement of visual sensibilities tread warily when faced with the seemingly insurmountable hurdle of 30,000 words. Whereas their competencies in studio techniques and visual thinking enable them to manipulate and creatively interplay forms and processes, words have the solidity of an impenetrable stonewall. For many, art is an unbounded language of ideas expressed through vision. Art offers flexibility and openness while writing is positioned as a fixed and determinate text. [Comments here that pg study is not compulsory and they write in ug - lack of recognition of breadth of writing](#)

The two following quotes highlight these polarisations. The first is an extract from a journal kept by a former student as she negotiated the demands of her doctoral study and the second from an email conversation with a designer friend and former art student.

I am stuck in my writing: everything comes out halting, fake, contrary to my nature. I seek...to just write, to find the way like I do with painting....I want to make and break off arguments, to connect bits to other bits, to weave an overall fabric that feels like being in the bush... I seek to write in an authentic voice. It is so hard to find. (Sabadini, 2007)

As you know writing has never been in my comfort zone. I have always seen it as fixed and fixing. Now I am more able to see it as unfinished and fluid. I am seeing how I can bend it and create the correct discursive connections, tone, length, urgency for each location..... I think I may be finding my voice. (Doherty, 2009)

For both these correspondents the tensions between art making and writing are played out through their desire to find voice. Interestingly for both of them, this quest involves the ability to overcome the perceived rigidity of the written form to write 'like I do with painting' and to see writing more 'as unfinished and fluid'. The finding of voice is an equivalent concern for students immersed in the push and pull of creative doctorates. How can they find the fluidity with words that they already find in their studio practice?

Initially the task involves learning not just how to use words effectively but to feel at ease with their shapes and syntaxes. Many of my students enter postgraduate studies with 'word phobia'. They are hesitant writers who, given the chance, will resort to the innate joys of their visual diaries rather than labouring away with the pen or word processor. From the very beginning, I try to instil in them a discipline of practice with words much the same as they willingly devote to visual research. As a colleague often exhorts at workshop sessions for new candidates on how to succeed in doctoral studies, 'Write early and write often'ⁱⁱⁱ. Just as they would readily schedule hours in the studio, I require them to set aside time each week to write – just 500 words at the start – on any topic. It may be a letter to a friend, a description of the day's activities, a précis of an article they've been reading. In these early forays with words the subject doesn't matter, nor do I wish to see this initial writing. At first, it's the activity that is important. Once the regime is in place then the students are asked to take it to another

level. That letter becomes focused on a topic related to a studio issue. That description takes on a more analytical edge about work in progress and the précis expands to a critical appraisal of a relevant theoretical concern. It is then that I ask to see some words on a page. If there are obvious signs that they are struggling to make coherent sentences, I refer them to our Learning Support Network where trained staff are skilled in assisting students with literacy problems.

There is more to this issue than overcoming the reticence to write and the development of literacy competencies. For students undertaking doctoral research, there is the desire to not only voice ideas in an authentic way, but to honour both the creative processes of art making and the intellectual endeavours that inform it, to find a path between vision and writing. In the negotiations between these two forms of understanding the world, there menaces the perceived demands of the institution and that overwhelming word count of the exegesis.

Yet, the exegesis affords them a means by which they can contribute to the theories of art in a significant way that augments their work in the studio. I do not wish to suggest that this is an easy task and that all graduating doctoral students will find publishing houses rushing to turn their exegesises into the next best seller in art theory and criticism. What the experiences of my students have shown however is that the exegesis provides them with a framework in which they can critically engage with the practices of art, to locate themselves within its discourses and gain insights into their own contribution to the field. On one hand its value lies in requiring the student to focus explicitly upon the questions that underpin their art practice, often in ways they hadn't considered before, and with unexpected results. As a former student, who had returned to postgraduate studies after an extensive career as a painter, related to me some years after graduation, 'I really hated writing that f** exegesis. I didn't see why I had to do it. But now, I realise how it has helped me. I think I'm more critical of my work and have become a much better painter as a result of that intensive focus' (Briggs, 2007).

Apart from these personal reflections into their practice, on the other hand, there is the potential to shift the dimensions of art theory and criticism, asks from what to what and to offer new insights into the creative arts. And this potential comes from the authentic voice of the artist who, through their particular perspectives born out of studio engagement, can shed light on hitherto vaguely seen, shadowy forms and undefined practices. The experiences of a current doctoral student are a good case in point.

Offered an invitation to present a paper at an International Conference on Italian Renaissance Studies, A. went into a tail spin of mad panic; she knew nothing of any value to say in the company of these eminent scholars. Perhaps it is not surprising then that the first draft of her paper sought to combine nearly every theoretical concern from Vasari's commentaries, Hockney's analysis of Ingres' drawings, the history of the Renaissance, 16th century treatises on painting, Sofonisba Anguissola's life story, twentieth century portrait painting, and all wrapped up in feminist perspectives. Little wonder that she thought she knew nothing and her first reaction was 'I can't do this'. As we workshoped the paper within the peer group,^{iv} A. started to realise that in fact she did know something, and that it was unique. From her perspective as a contemporary portrait painter she had intimate knowledge of the encounters between the artist, the sitter and the portrait. In the end her paper was a focussed discussion built upon her knowledge of studio practice. She was able to take to this conference a different way of considering Renaissance portraiture.

Now I don't mean to suggest this was a magical transformation from inarticulate painter to erudite scholar. For A. it was, and still is, a tremendous effort of writing and rewriting, of phrasing and rephrasing, of competing ideas and conflicting passions. However, this first taste of success (after her presentation the Chair of her session invited her to give a further

paper on the topic at a different conference in the United States) gave her confidence and the realisation that she did have something to say.

Although for many students the exegesis is seen as an impediment to their development as artists, this need not be the case. Once they recognise that the institution does not ask them to package their ideas in a formulaic drone borrowed from a mistaken perception of academic worthiness, but rather requires them to contribute to knowledge through particular understandings that are grounded in their artistic practice, then there is a certain sense of liberation. [Comment good highlight that visualities is their strength](#) They are not asked to repeat tired old phrases and well worn theoretical perspectives. Instead they are asked to locate their work within a context, to reflect upon the questions of importance to their artistic endeavours, to 'seek to write with an authentic voice' (Sabadini, 2007) Taken as an opportunity to extend already refined visual acuties into new dimensions, it can be a means by which they can address another audience outside the gallery circuit. Through both visual and verbal languages, doctoral students have the potential to speak in a voice that is true to their way of interpreting the world, to present ideas as artist scholars^v.

While artists may implore the wild abandonment of mysterious night and universities profess the cool restraint of calculating day, the binary between practice and theory, between art and words may stay unquestioned. Yet in the mutable lights of dawn and dusk, where the chiaroscuro of midnight studio chaos meets the knife edge clarity of noontide reason, where forms bleed into each other, here in the realms of the exegesis, where artistic practices meet writing, such verbal transfigurations enable ideas, those daughters of night, to dance in daylight.

References:

- Briggs, S. This quotation is based on a conversation at the opening of her solo exhibition, *Fluid States* at Heathcote Gallery, Applecross, Perth, WA. 2007.
- Clement, C. *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* trans. S. O'Driscoll & D. Mahoney, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. 1994.
- Doherty, B. Email correspondence April, 2009.
- Elkins, J. *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* New York, Routledge. 2004.
- Sabadini, A. *Circles* unpublished essay, Albany, WA. 2007.

ⁱ The first creative doctorate degrees were pioneered at University of Wollongong and University of Tasmania in the mid 1980s, followed soon after by James Cook University, Queensland University of Technology and Curtin University. By the mid 1990s, the majority of Universities in Australia offered higher degrees by research programmes with a combination of creative work and written component.

ⁱⁱ James Elkins (2004) draws attention to the lack of emotion in traditional art history in his book *Pictures & Tears*. It is a work that has strong popularity with current art students as it posits the importance of emotion in response to art.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eamon Murphy 'On a clear day I can see my thesis!' Humanities Research Skills Workshop, Curtin University 6 May 2009.

^{iv} The Writer's Circle was a peer support group that I organised while postgraduate coordinator in the School of Built Environment, Art & Design at Curtin University. It was a collective of doctoral students drawn from various disciplines and at various stages of their candidature who met monthly, or

when needed, to workshop candidacy drafts, thesis chapters, conference papers and journal articles. The success of the group can be measured not only in the number of papers accepted for conference proceedings and journal publications but also the camaraderie that has continued even after the restructure of the School in 2008.

^v I am indebted to a former student Chandrasekaran for this term. During a workshop discussion about the relationship between creative work and the exegesis he commented that he realised as a result of his doctoral studies he was becoming an artist scholar.