Evolution: Art and Design Research and the PhD
Lisa Grocott

A Designer's Response

My reading of the "Evolution" conference draws on three statements made in the first morning panel session. These observations seeded for me (as the discussion unfolded) a different way of understanding not only how we might frame a PhD education but also how we might situate that education in relation to the disciplines within our University.

Before the conference it seemed that many of us (myself included) were pre-occupied with the fragile balance between theory and practice—specifically as it plays out in conversations about research and creative practice. Recognizing this counterproductive tension the conference program set out to trouble simplistic characterizations of theory-led or practice-led research. My sense is that the conference succeeded in shifting the focus to the potential of a doctoral program that explicitly resists being defined by a methodological orientation. **Bill Gaver**, who came to design from psychology, shared his ambivalence to fixing design research methods by arguing that, as designers, "*we don't have a methodology—we invent them as we go along.*" Other presentations illustrated the various contexts to which art and design research can contribute. In this space, Meredith Davis, who does have a background in design, chose to develop a PhD program that considers where design isn't, with the design researchers deploying social science methodologies to provide evidence of what design could bring to that situation. The overall pluralistic approach to art and design research that the conference captured deftly diffuses the binary tension between theory and practice.

This expansive notion of research was productively set up by **Mabel Wilson**'s reference to the act of defining the "*contours of a discipline,*" talking about how "*any field will produce its interiors and exteriors.*" At face value this is a statement I might have used in defense of practitioner-led research and the need for practice to not be marginalized within the domain of art and design research. Yet Mabel's presentation touched on her struggle to find an architecture program that understood the subject of race as interior to the field of architecture. In the context of experiencing how people and bodies of knowledge find themselves operating in the margins of a field, her salient point read more as a caution to the politics of defining disciplines.

This is particularly provocative since over the course of the weekend one came to appreciate the intellectual diversity that came with artists and designers seeking a temporary home in other disciplines' PhD programs. The implied compromise here is that in seeking refuge within another discipline the researcher limits the practitioner's capacity to advance the practice knowing of art or design. Yet over the course of the weekend it became apparent how the movement between disciplines, echoed in many of the faculty presentations, was as much an opportunity as a liability. Mabel's declaration that she simply asked "*what was the work I wanted to do and where could I do it,*" now liberates her

to "*move through, over time, bodies of knowledge,*" in turn allowing her research practice to not be static or weighed down by one discipline's orientation.

Brad Buckley's advice in the Friday panel discussion "*to not call a program a practice-based PhD*" indirectly asks you to think about the merits and limits of distinguishing a program by its pedagogical orientation. The presentations at the conference made it possible to see past the theory and practice camps, while simultaneously underscoring the contribution of research grounded in practice and the importance of critically theorizing the potential of thinking through making.

Together, Gaver, Wilson, and Buckley's statements begin to map a complex, fluid understanding of how practices evolve, disciplines develop and PhD programs grow up. This helps us see the relevances of intersecting with other disciplines and the value of developing a PhD program in the broader context of The New School. Given that we question whether design is a discipline, or at the least recognize that one of the attributes of design is that it operates more like an anti-discipline, it makes sense (in hindsight) that a PhD program in art and design would benefit from being promiscuous enough to open itself to the knowing other disciplines offer and mature enough to articulate the knowing our practices offer in return.

Lisa Grocott
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