PAINTING AS INTELLECTUAL INQUIRY: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN THAILAND

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Abstract

Practice-based research is a novel form of inquiry in which artistic works form a major part of the research method and outcomes. Whilst the approach is widely accepted in many parts of the world it has yet to carve out stable footholds in Thailand. In this article we outline a model of practice-based research that seeks to reconcile the distinctive rhythm and texture of creative practice with the needs of the Thai academy. We do so by introducing and critically evaluating an MfA Thesis project carried out by the first author (the artist) and supervised by the second (the supervisor). This project comprised an extended series of theoretically grounded and experimental oil paintings through which the artist critiqued a particular trend within globalisation: the transformation of cultural icons into triggers for consumption. Through critical evaluation of the process and outcomes of this project we argue that fine art painting can be considered as a form of research provided that it is apprehended, comprehended and articulated in various ways. The paper is offered as a contribution to discussion and debate about practice-based research in Thailand.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is animated by a seemingly simple question: under what conditions might a fine art practice such as painting be considered as research?

For us, however, the question is far from straightforward. At the professional level, we are both art and design academics working in the Thai Higher Education sector. In this context, as others in similar positions will appreciate, the relationship between creative practice and research is an increasingly important issue. It is also a deeply troubling one. Educational reform and restructuring has transformed research into one of a set of non-negotiable quality indicators with important implications for status, funding, qualifications and careers (Nitungkorn, 2001). For art and design academics, research is no longer an option but a requirement. Yet despite this significant change, the meaning and value—the possibility even—of artistic research has received little attention at institutional or policy levels where, to compound our problems, the dominant models of research are normative and narrowly confined to conventional forms of academic inquiry. As others have found elsewhere, these are inimical to inquiry through creative practice (Borgdorff, 2007).

This paradoxical situation appears like an afterimage of the dilemmas facing the art and design sector in the UK in the early 1990s. Indeed, the latest cycle of reform in Thai higher education that began later in that decade internalised many of the assumptions, procedures and practices that characterised that

earlier and prototypically radical restructuring. For example, the Thai project set out to use Higher Education to address declining competiveness in a rapidly and profoundly changing world economy (Kirtikara, 2001). It did so through a portfolio of policy measures aimed at: 1) refocusing Higher Education's attention on issues of productivity and growth, for example, through an increased emphasis on applied research and knowledge transfer; and, 2) disciplining the sector through increasingly complex forms of quality assurance and assessment. Given this general impetus it is, perhaps, not surprising that the fine arts escaped the attention of the policy makers when it came to research. In part at least, it might also explain why the Thai art and design sector has been somewhat slow to construct an adequate response.

Interestingly, despite common origins, the situation in the UK and other Northern European countries played out differently. There, despite the immense difficulties that arose from the shift from art school to university, the art and design sector responded quickly, and with some vigour grasped the challenge of artistic research head on. This was made considerably easier because the creative arts were already recognised and valued both for their cultural and economic performance and potential (see, for example, Reeves, 2002). Given this, it made sense for arts educators, universities and policy makers alike to find ways of working through the knotty problem of research in the various fields of artistic production. They did so through the development of an approach widely known as practice-based research.[1] This novel approach to inquiry crystallized out of a series of difficult discussions, debates and disagreements between stakeholders. Its proponents set out to articulate a distinctive and robust model of academic inquiry able to accommodate and do justice to artistic processes and products. At the heart of this model was the centrality of the production—rather than the critique—of artistic works. Practice-based research was to be inquiry through, rather than about, practice. As Scrivener (2002) put it, "The proper goal of visual arts research is visual art."

Yet as Scrivener (2004) also noted, practice-based research was "contested territory". According to Biggs (2003), the typical practice-based doctoral thesis, for example, consisted of, "an original artefact in addition to or perhaps instead of a written thesis". Clearly, by emphasizing creative material works at the expense of written academic texts this novel approach to inquiry challenged the sine qua non of scholarly research. Today, far from being resolved, these issues continue to animate discussion and debate about practice-based research within and beyond the field. They do so, however, in a different, less defensive, context. To a large extent (and for a variety of reasons), in the places where it originated and the many countries where it subsequently took root, the argument about artistic research has either been won or a compromise reached. Evidence of this is clearly visible in a growing number of practice-based masters and doctoral degrees, arts professorships, international conferences, refereed academic journals and funding opportunities.

[1] Interestingly, the origins of practice-based research are not in the arts but in medicine. It is also useful to bear in mind that practice-based research goes by a range of names, for example, artistic research, practice-led research and creative production research.

The situation in Thailand is, however, somewhat different. We have already noted the marginalization of the fine arts in the version of educational reform adopted in Thailand and the lack, as yet, of a coherent response to this from within the art and design sector. We might also note two more obstacles to the development of a Thai take on practice-based research.[2] The first is educational conservatism. At the risk of oversimplification we argue that this is the result of a policy closed circuit. Firstly, a top-down, procedural and normative policy model that rigidly defines what counts as what and awards points accordingly (TQF). Secondly, institutional anxiety about falling foul of this system. Taken together, these factors promote a culture of compliance that renders alternative or non-conventional forms of activity invisible or unacceptable. The second is a genuine concern that the unconventional nature of artistic research threatens academic standards and norms. This manifests itself at institutional level in a range of anxieties about the methodological and epistemological credibility of practice-based inquiry (see for example Candlin, 2000). However, as noted above, this was also the case in the UK and other countries and yet these have now developed robust and accountable models of research through artistic practice. If practice-based research is to flourish here, then these obstacles are there to be overcome: the question is how?

The most obvious way is to make artistic research more like conventional research. This approach has advantages. For one thing, it repositions artistic research within the educational mainstream (in other words, it makes the problem go away). For another, it addresses issues of quality by removing doubt about standards (primarily by emphasizing methodological objectivity and textual outcomes). Yet despite these pragmatic gains there are also, we believe, losses, the most important of which are the very aspects of artistic practice that make it valuable in the first place: speculation, subjectivity, creativity, risk taking, material thinking and so on. Any form of practice-based research worth the name, must surely find ways to harness these qualities for the purposes of inquiry rather than squeeze them into norms and conventions developed for other, radically different forms of research.

Our approach on the MfA Communication Design/Visual Communication seeks to contribute to this process. But it does so in full recognition of the concerns and problems sketched above. In response to these, since 2005 we have been developing an approach to practice-based research that is, at one and the same time, sympathetic to the texture and dynamics of creative practice and the institutional needs of the academy. That is, it seeks to reconcile issues of disciplinary integrity with academic credibility. In the following section, we will introduce this approach through a critical discussion of a case study project carried out by the first author (hereafter Gangakate) and supervised by the second (Power). The case is interesting, we believe, in that it is—at one and the same time—an example of the approach and a contributor to its development. Many of the ideas and approaches now used across the programme emerged from or were clarified by Gangakate's work or discussions with and between his supervisory

[2] Another reason—beyond the scope of this paper— is a generalized and deep misunderstanding—and perhaps mistrust—of contemporary artistic practice and its socio-cultural role and impact (see for example, Ridthee, 2007, on the cautious official responses to Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Palme D'Or winning movie Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives).

team.[3] By discussing and evaluating this case we hope to answer the question posed at the outset of this paper: to establish the conditions under which a fine art practice such as painting might be considered as research in the Thai context.

2. A CASE STUDY: SUBLIMINAL OBJECTS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Following Borgdorff (2007), our starting point is the recognition that 'practice-in-itself' and 'practice-as-research' are not equivalent. For practice to be considered as research something must be added or emphasized. For our purposes, what is added is a set of concerns and approaches that focus the researcher's attention onto her creative and artistic process, outcomes and contexts in such a way as to call these into question and ultimately, alter them. Put simply, we argue that practice can be considered as research when it is apprehended, comprehended and articulated in various ways. Moreover, we suggest that these 'additions'—or, perhaps 'complements'—to practice not only reposition it as research but also provides a means of addressing the issue of academic credibility. This will become clear, we hope, through our discussion of Gangakate's Thesis project 'Subliminal Objects'.

In the discussion that follows we adopt a presentational strategy that enables us to give voice to both objective and subjective factors. We signal this typographically in the following way: Gangakate's personal reflection on the research process is set in *italics*; our joint critical evaluation or commentary proceeds as here, set in 'roman'.

2.2 BACKGROUND

I am a Thai academic and also a painter. I was educated in the US, and returned to Thailand in the early 2000s and took up a teaching position at KMUTT. When I began my MfA Thesis study, my fine arts practice was already well established. Then—as now—I worked with mixed media of highly textured and layered surfaces that often incorporated found objects. Thematically, my work explored a set of concerns about globalization, cultural imperialism and commodification. This, is an example of 'practice-in-itself'.

In 2008 I was sponsored by my university to undertake an MfA and chose to study with on the practice-based MfA at my own school, the School of Architecture and Design. The main reason for this was that it enabled me to pursue my interest in practice as a form of research. I was introduced to this concept soon after joining the faculty at KMUTT and I was intrigued by it. The MfA gave me the opportunity to explore the idea in depth by using my own practice as the vehicle for inquiry. Over the two years of my study I produced a series of large format paintings that took as their theme the commodification of Thai culture. The paintings were made by over-painting enlarged versions of tourist images (Figure 1). Whilst both the theme and aesthetic of this work carried forward my existing practice, the way in which

[3] Internal supervisors: Associate Professor Nigel Power and Michael Croft. External assessors Dr. Takerng Pattanopas and Dr. Brian Curtin.

I approached and evaluated my work was radically different. The differences in approach transformed the work, making it an example of 'practice-as-research'.

Figure 1. Gangakate, C. (2009). TITLE. DIMENSIONS cm. MEDIUM.

2.3 CONCERNS & APPROACHES

2.3.1 PRACTICE APPREHENDED

Before I began my research, my studio practice was already established. Over the years I had developed ways of working with materials, processes and ideas that enabled me to produce work that I was satisfied with and others seemed to appreciate. However, I didn't really spend time speculating about how I worked or why I worked in the way I did. I was working intuitively. However, when I began to consider my practice as research I realized that I would have to pay greater attention to my creative process. Crucially, this meant rethinking my process in terms of a research methodology.

Prior to this research, my paintings were executed mainly in oil and mixed medium on canvas or on Masonite board (see figure 2). Found objects would be adhering and layered with encaustic paints, building up heavy textures with monochromatic or polychromatic color strategic usage. Sometimes I would divide the space utilizing golden sections. Usually the spaces were broken down with composition of the 2 dimensional and low relief surfaces. Nevertheless I always ended up basing my decision mainly on my intuition. I rarely sketched prior to creating the painting, but rather worked spontaneously with aggressive brush strokes. The paintings were worked on until I was satisfied. Usually the work reflected my personal taste and mood at the time that I executed the work.

Figure 2. Gangakate, C. (2002). TITLE. DIMENSIONS cm. MEDIUM.

Considering my process as a form of inquiry forced me to pay far greater attention to both the way I was working and the thinking behind the choices I was making. To achieve this, I began to carefully document my process and record the various stages in the process photographically (see figure 3). By doing this I was able to gain critical distance from the work and began to develop more systematic ways of describing my process and making creative decisions. This proved crucial when I began to critically evaluate my work and write the final thesis.

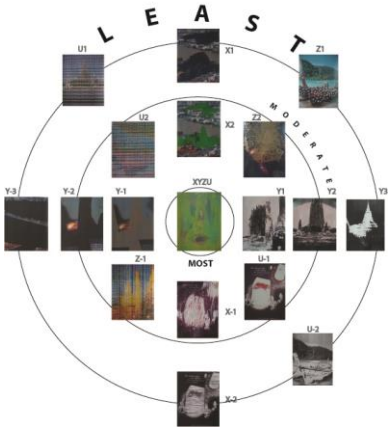

Figure 3. Reductive process

Some examples: 1) I developed a framework that I called the 'nine controls of composition' to use as a rule of thumb whilst making decisions during the painting process itself (see figure 4). This framework enabled me to conceptualize and think through decisions that were usually taken at more intuitive level.

INTENSITY	VALUE	DOMINATION
HUE	HUE	HUE
LINE	LINE	LINE
SHAPE/FORM	SHAPE/FORM	SHAPE/FORM

Figure 4. Nine Controls of Composition

2) I also began to use diagrams to map out the various factors that affected the aesthetic/ formal decisions I was taken (Figure 5). Both processes brought usually overlooked aspects of my process into view and enabled me to think through the decisions I was making and justify them to myself and to others.

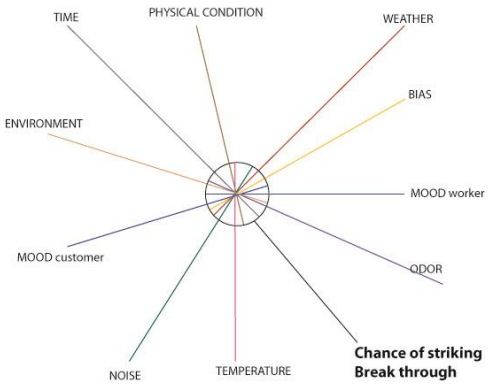

Figure 5. Diagram

Overall I found that these approaches led me to broader range of explorations and a clearer sense of the relationship between the medium and my themes. I began to see my process as a form of reductive visual research. I was working from broad to narrow and moving from the surface down through deeper paths. This reflective methodology laid down a course that brought the intuitive aspect of my practice into focus. I had never worked like this before. I found myself doing more sketches to seek out solutions for each piece of work.

In our view, the above discussion illustrates one condition that fine art practice must meet in order to be considered as research. Practice can be considered as research if there is a systematic, self-conscious and reflective approach to methodology.

2.3.2 PRACTICE COMPREHENDED

Theory has always played an important role in my work. In the US I became interested in Derrida and post-structuralist thinking more generally. I can say that these ideas informed my work but not consciously. They were part of the background to my work. This changed when I began to study on the MfA and was challenged to think of the relationship between theory and practice in different ways.

Early on in my studies I began to consider which theoretical perspectives were relevant to my work. Initially, I saw this in terms of the content of the work, for example, theories about the commodification of culture or cultural imperialism. Whilst these played important roles in helping me make sense of the themes I was interested in exploring through my work, they did not help me understand or guide 'how' I was working. However, whilst discussing some experimental works in which I over-painted advertising imagery so that some elements were visible and others obscured, I was introduced to the

concept of Sous Rature or 'Under Erasure'. This concept was originally introduced by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and later developed by Jacques Derrida. It is a textual technique that is used to call the accepted meaning of a word into question by striking it through, for ~~example~~, ~~nature~~, ~~being~~, ~~painting~~, ~~research~~. Put simply, to place something under erasure signals that it is necessary but problematic. The concept is disrupted but still visible.

I quickly saw the potential of this concept and decided to explore ways of extending it from the textual to pictorial realms. On the one hand this enabled me to conceptualize what was, until then, a largely intuitive activity (layering paint over found imagery). On the other, it began to suggest ways of working by raising important questions. For example: what types of images to select, which elements to obscure and which to leave visible; how much of an object was needed to be recognized; different ways of revealing the underlying imagery. Attempting to incorporate 'Under Erasure' at the heart of my method revolutionized both how I worked and how I made sense of what I was doing.

For example, in early experiments I placed a layer of string over the image before over-painting. As part of the string extruded from beneath the encaustic paint, I was able to pull it through the thick surface. The gesture of pulling the string introduced an element of chance, which added an element of unpredictability to the outcome. Nevertheless, aesthetically, I wasn't satisfied with the visual result. After a great deal of sketching I decided that I could control chance to a certain extent and, with enough planning and preparation, I could balance an aesthetic desire for unpredictability with the need to make particular parts of the underlying image visible. With this thought in mind I began to formalize each piece by producing sketches in at least two sizes. Initially, I would produce an A4 sketch to get an over all sense of the piece. Later with more thought given to the composition and more precise planning, I would execute sketches on A2 paper. Only after these steps did I feel ready to execute an actual painting (see figures 6, 7 & 8 for examples of the final outcomes). This systematic approach is another example of how my process became more methodological in character. It also demonstrates the way in which theoretical ideas informed formal, aesthetic and material choices. The interaction of medium, content and theoretical ideas transformed my 'practice-in-itself' into 'practice-as-research'.

Figure 6. Gangakate, C. (2009). One. 150 X 120 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas

Figure 7. Gangakate, C. (2009). Two. 150 X 120 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas.

Figure 6. Gangakate, C. (2009). Four. 150 X 120 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas

In our view, the above discussion illustrates a second condition that fine art practice must meet in order to be considered as research. Practice can be considered as research if it is located within, informed by and contributes to a broader intellectual context.

2.3.3 PRACTICE ARTICULATED: WRITING, PRESENTATION & EXHIBITION

Before beginning my research I did not write about my work. Whilst I thought about it a great deal, I never felt the need to sit down and critically evaluate what I did or speculate about how I might do things differently. Rethinking my practice as a form of research led me to use writing as an important way of making sense of the process as a whole. Writing was an important part of my reflective practice. It enabled me to think through decisions made and made it possible to synthesize theoretical, methodological and practical issues. In this way writing challenged me to explain my work, justify my approach and outcomes and the thinking behind them.

Similarly, presenting and defending my work also challenged me to articulate my process and practice. Describing and defending aesthetic decisions is never easy. Yet through a series of critical reviews with internal and external advisors I was able to develop more coherent and effective ways of discussing my process, practice and creative outcomes.

During the course of my research I also exhibited the work and took the opportunity to discuss it with a range of people in the gallery setting. This process was useful in two main ways. On the one hand, it helped me to gain a sense of how people perceived the work, to gauge my intentions against audience responses. On the other, it provided me with the opportunity to discuss the work and to encounter different perspectives on it. Both these factors played a role in developing a critical perspective on my research.

In our view, the above discussion illustrates the third condition that fine art practice must meet in order to be considered as research. Practice can be considered as research if it is the subject of reflective and critical writing, is interrogated by field experts and exhibited.

3 DISCUSSION

In this paper we discussed some ideas about the development of practice-based research in the Thai context. We began by noting some general problems facing practice-based researchers in the kingdom. In particular, we noted the barriers presented by institutional and policy anxieties about the methodological and epistemological credibility of the approach. Using the work of the first author as a case study we described how practitioner-researchers might address these concerns in a way that reflects the rhythms and textures of creative practice. In conclusion we would like to make two further points. Firstly, that the development of practice-based research in Thailand will be a long haul and require a whole series of bottom-up initiatives aimed at clarifying, particularizing and promoting the approach. We offer this paper as a contribution to this process. Secondly, the approach described here was successful in a particular institutional context. However, in our view, the emphasis on providing evidence for originality, rigor and cultural relevance can be modified and developed for others facing a similar situation both here and elsewhere.

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