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Practice-based PhD in Art and Design: Britain and Japan

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The practice-based PhD in Art and Design is an increasingly important aspect of art education at the highest level in both Britain and Japan. The past ten years have seen unprecedented progress in research activities at British art colleges. Yet, despite consistent efforts made by art colleges to integrate theory and practice over the past two or three decades, art practice as research only started to play a major role quite recently. Previously, the distinction between art colleges and universities was clear; art colleges gave diplomas and specialised in professional/vocational education whereas universities offered BAs (Bachelor of Arts) and provided a more general all-round education.

However, during the 1970s, as a part of education reforms, many art colleges saw a shift from diploma courses to BA courses. Students were not only able to acquire a specialist skill; they also had the opportunity to receive a more general intellectual education. In order to safeguard this, initially, all art and design courses incorporated 20% art history. Although no longer compulsory, most courses still retain this proportion of historical and theoretical study. Also at that time, many small, independent art colleges financed by local authorities became part of polytechnics, usually created by the amalgamation of several local technical colleges. Therefore British higher education had a binary system with universities on the one hand, and polytechnics and colleges on the other. By the end of the 1980s further changes were necessary. Polytechnics and colleges matured considerably and argued for the same rights as universities. Mrs. Thatcher's government subsequently abolished the binary system and polytechnics became universities, funded centrally rather than by local authorities.

In the context of art education there were two major changes relating to research. First, PhDs in Art and Design were developed; and second, ear-marked budget for staff research became available to art colleges through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the creation of the Art and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), allowing art and design staff to make a bid for research grants for the first time.

Prior to the introduction of PhDs in Art and Design and unlike in most other subjects, MA (Master of Arts) was the highest qualification open to art and design students. This situation gradually changed around the second half of the 1980s and the number and range of MA courses in this field increased. Although the variety and ease of access boosted popularity among postgraduate courses, their value subsequently decreased making PhDs a more attractive proposition. As the debate on the integration of theory and practice was developed in the BA and MA courses, many fine art students wanted to pursue their theoretical interest further and again a PhD seemed the ideal opportunity. Many art tutors also became interested in pursuing PhDs for promotional reasons.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s a policy for practice-based PhD in Art and Design was developed, although the number of PhD graduates in art and design in the UK during the 1980s remained small as time was needed for the PhDs to take root. This was partly due to strict regulation in polytechnics and colleges. In order to avoid accusations from the university sector of setting up 'Mickey Mouse' PhD courses, regulations were considerably stricter than in the university sector and solid quality assurance procedures were built into the regulations. For example, a minimum of two, and often three, supervisors per student were required and the supervisory team were required to have supervised at least two successfully completed PhDs. These conditions were particularly difficult for practice-based subjects such as fine art. As the PhD itself was new in this field, there was hardly anybody with the requisite qualifications and often staff from other disciplines, such as art history, provided the necessary supervisory experience. Furthermore, the initial registration procedure, including the scrutiny of the quality of the supervisors, tended to be very tough; the idea being that a strict registration procedure should safeguard the completion rate. Unfortunately, it also had the effect of depressing student numbers. The result was a vicious circle; while the number of the PhD students was low, the number of qualified supervisors also remained low.

With the collapse of the binary system, however, this situation changed dramatically. Polytechnics became universities and PhD courses became the norm for all faculties including art and design. The number of practice-based PhDs increased dramatically from the early 1990s as did the number of qualified supervisors, thus breaking the vicious circle. At Chelsea, for example, we had our first PhD registration in 1991, but this year we have 24 students with 19 pursuing practice-based PhDs. The number of PhDs is expected to rise to over 40 in 5 year's time. At the London Institute, where Chelsea is a constituent college, the number of this year's research degree students is 135, again practice-based students forming the majority.

I should also mention that the British art and design sector is a very popular destination for Japanese students. The high reputation of contemporary British art and design, the English language and also the perceived safety of British streets compared to the USA, all contribute to this popularity. The London Institute is no exception. There have been over 700 Japanese students in the London Institute during the last few years. At Chelsea, for example, three out of the twenty four research degree students are Japanese.

In classifying research in art at PhD level, in my view there are currently two divergent definitions. The first was adopted in the 1992 RAE and accepts any artistic practice as research as long as it provides a 'new insight', therefore comparing an exhibition of paintings with a scholarly publication. Of course, this wouldn't include any exhibition; a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York has a higher ranking than a mixed staff show in the college gallery. Similarly, a book published by Yale University Press ranks higher than a book published by oneself. This definition has its limitations, but the criteria for the definition are uncomplicated and comprehensible. It also relies on a peer review system and as such has credibility within its own constituency and is particularly favoured by fine artists.

However, there are some associated problems; just as a venue such as MoMA does not guarantee the quality of the content in the same way that not all books published by the Yale have the same top quality. The greatest problem this definition faces is the lack of compatibility of criteria with other subjects. The RAE panel for English or physics may not understand the decisions of the art and design panel, for example. The common and essential factor, however, is the peer review process and a consensus among the subject experts to validate the judgment. As we have experienced three RAEs in the past ten years, this definition has more or less settled at least in the context of the RAE.

The second definition has a narrower focus and is applicable mainly for research degrees and funding bids such as those for AHRB research grants. Here the project-centred approach is paramount. First, one has to posit a research question, then examine the context, develop the investigation and analysis, and finally reach some kind of conclusion. This definition of research has almost the opposite characteristics of the first. Many artists have problems in getting to grips with it as many MA courses judge the achievement of their student on the basis of the final show, where the aesthetic merit of the exhibited work is all important. Yet with a PhD, aesthetic merit is only the starting point. A PhD course would most likely not take a student whose art work isn't up to scratch however; the artwork alone is not the only criteria. The PhD must show the process involved from the formulation of the research question through to the conclusion and it must also provide 'original contribution to knowledge and understanding' as with any other PhD. The greatest advantage of this definition is its compatibility with other subjects in humanities and science; a mixed panel of a university research committee would find it far easier to make decisions.

The definition of art as research remains fluid, but there is a general tendency to emphasize the importance of the art work. There is a discernible shift from the perception of art work as simply illustrative to the written thesis, to seeing almost the reverse situation where the written text is considered more of a commentary of the art work. However, I have yet to come across a PhD case where no text was provided.

The British scene of art research is undisputedly very active and vibrant having greatly expanded within the last five to ten years. The demand for practice-based research, however, especially in fine art, is international. Chelsea receives many overseas applications and the debate to introduce such PhDs is increasing in other countries. Many countries have introduced doctoral courses in art and design, though

it seems that Britain is way ahead in its scope and also in its level of debate. The Oslo School of Art, where I was a consultant to the doctoral programme, received their first PhD student of art and design only two years ago, for example.

Compared to Britain, the activity in Japan in this field is modest. The Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music (Geidai) has been awarding practice-based PhDs - quite astonishingly - since 1977. A number of local authority-funded Universities, however, such as Hiroshima City University introduced practice-based PhDs about three years ago. To my knowledge, there are at least three other universities from this sector in the same boat. Private art colleges such as Osaka Geijutsu Daigaku and Kanazawa Zokei Geijutsu Daigaku have also followed suit and, out of the two leading private art colleges, Tama Bijutsu Daigaku began their doctoral programme in 2001 and the Musashino Bijutsu Daigaku plans to introduce it soon.

On visiting Hiroshima University at the time of the PhD examinations, I discovered that in Japan, PhD courses are divided into two: the first part being the MA, lasting for two years. The MA is also confusingly referred to as the first part of the PhD Degree. The transfer examination follows the MA and students enter the latter part of the PhD course; the PhD proper, lasting for three years. I was surprised at the lack of general portfolio examination or slides/CD-ROM presentations for the transfer examination, with only two pieces of studio work required for submission. There are also a number of formal examinations, such as languages and essay writing under exam conditions. Compared to Britain, the majority of PhD students are internal as opposed to students from overseas. At Hiroshima University, for instance, 90% of PhD students are internal students. In Britain, on the other hand, this is not automatic. At Chelsea for example, the ratio of students who came from Chelsea courses or are teaching in Chelsea is currently 56%. Furthermore, I haven't come across any part-time research degrees in Japan, whereas in Britain this is the preferred option for fee-paying home students. Perhaps the largest difference between Japan and Britain - in terms of the set-up of practice-based PhDs - is the quality assurance system. In Japan there seems to be no formal training of supervisors which is probably my single greatest criticism of the Japanese system. The fact that supervisors are also examiners creates quality assurance issues. Britain is unusual in not having an atelier system where students are tied to specific professors. In Japan this can create a situation where the 'top student' is not allowed to graduate easily, whereas a foreign student who is regulation-wise and insists on pushing ahead is allowed to submit far quicker.

In conclusion, the PhD in Art and Design is a growth industry internationally and I predict that in another ten years it will be considered as normal as a PhD in Art History or English across the world. Japan is currently attracting a significant number of Asian PhD students and the art and design sector is no exception. I believe it is vitally important for Japanese art colleges to improve their quality assurance measures in this field and perhaps Britain could offer a helping hand. We should not be complacent in our own quality assurance so that we don't betray our own Japanese students, among others, studying in this country.

Ms Lesley Millar

During the twentieth century in the West, the notion of the revelatory value of the untutored eye's insight, irrespective of skill, gained credibility. Japanese artists would consider it inappropriate to separate skill from the quality of aesthetic experience. Finished pieces are dependent upon the highest level of material understanding; of accumulated skills and knowledge. The concerns are with the beauty of studied simplicity and harmony with nature. Their work presents a collective condition of harmonised colours, lines, textures and forms which serve to transcend genre. It is the sense of appropriateness which governs choices, bringing together established ways of working with the most original applications and innovations in a symbiotic relationship; following rules and observing norms to perfection, then breaking or moving away without losing contact with their original meaning.

As a rug weaver and with thirty years' experience as a teacher and maker of textiles, I have experienced the satisfaction of making a textile that fulfils its function. As a tapestry weaver, I have worked within a narrative tradition enabling me to address issues beyond the materiality of the textile. I have overwhelming sympathy for and empathy with both craft skill and the current debate concerning those issues underlying 'cloth'. I believe them to be as inextricably linked as the warp and weft. It also somehow explains why I have become so passionately committed to the dialogue, resulting from my involvement during the last ten years in the curatorship and organisation of textile exhibitions between the UK and Japan. These three interlinked activities - making, teaching and curating - have resulted in a practice-based research project at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design, supported by The Daiwa Anglo Japanese Foundation and the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB). This project examines cultural differences as expressed or observed through textile practice in the UK and Japan.

Textile is a particularly apposite medium for research of this kind into cultural differences. As has been noted on many occasions, textiles occupy a wide aesthetic territory, seemingly without a fixed borderline. Techniques and materials move across and between cultures, nations, art, industry, design and architecture yet the same piece of cloth can be a functional fabric, a fashion accessory or a sacred garment depending on the context. Within an Anglo/Japanese context, textiles are also a useful medium to study difference. The textile industry has played a hugely important role historically within the economies of the UK and Japan, and both countries have had to find ways to cope with the decline of that industry. Although my project and my experiences are textile-specific, based on experience working with textile practitioners both in the UK and Japan, it may well be that more general extrapolations are possible.

I would like to introduce my project and then discuss some of the issues raised by it in relation to my understanding of English art education. The project, 'Through the Surface', contains many aspects which could have relevance to the way in which we understand and approach cross-cultural learning within art education, specifically in an Anglo-Japanese context but also in broader terms.

From English secondary art education onward, the methodology taught and applied is one of research, development and synthesis: gathering information, bringing elements together and assembling them; almost a collage activity. Liz Nilsson, for example, created a piece which was part of my first exhibition, 'Revelation', and is titled 'Cow Tit'. Skin and cloth are inextricably linked as skin and second skin. The huge brassier is screen printed latex impregnated with horse hair. Latex has been used to represent the fetishisation of the body and this work was inspired by Nilsson's preoccupation with body image, particularly her own during pregnancy; sexual stereotyping; distancing and objectivity; and also drawing on her research knowledge into the history of the brassier. All this can be inferred from the work, and in order to make sense of it within a textile exhibition, it is necessary to understand the many layers of reference contained within the work.

The exhibition 'Textural Space' also had huge appeal in this country across a broad range of interest groups but particularly with practitioners involved in textiles such as students and teachers. The appeal was multi-faceted, but the common thread was its textural traceability. As we look at the work we are aware of what it is and how it was created, through the texture of the form; not just its surface quality but

also the sense of the person making it. From point A to point Z, it is the texture of the object and the invitation for us to engage with that objectness which draws us in. This engagement has remained with those who saw the exhibition, something reinforced recently. Jay Merrick, the architecture correspondent from 'The Independent' had given Textural Space an astonishingly wonderful review at the time, and in the recent April edition of 'Art Review' he wrote apropos the proposals for the Twin Towers Memorial in New York:

‘...It may have looked fragile and empty, but the concoction devised by the Think architectural consortium for New York’s World Trade Center site was clearly the most enthralling single structure offered to the redevelopers...I saw Think’s tower before they did. There it was, hanging in the Sainsbury Gallery at the University of East Anglia more than two years ago in the riveting ‘Textural Space’ exhibition...The creator of the piece was the Japanese paper-fabric artist Chika Ohgi. Its very long and loosely rectilinear form hung like a slim lantern and, from a distance, seemed composed of a chaos of ivory Pic-Up Stix.. Closer up, the angular gaps between the fabric’s translucent threads were compelling – and, to me, of obvious architectural potential. “Can it be long?” I wrote at the time, “before Chika Ohgi’s beautiful ‘Water Pillar Towers’ are reincarnated in the façades or even structures, of skyscrapers?”’

This is an acknowledgement from a Western commentator, of the innate structural harmony achievable through tacit understanding of materials as clearly demonstrated by a Japanese textile artist and which a Japanese student would recognise and engage with. However, initially this same student may find it more difficult to engage with discussions around the context of an idea as demonstrated by Liz Nilsson’s brassier. This fictitious Japanese student would not have had the training within the two-way interrogative process of English art education from GCSE onward in which teachers and students question the student’s intentions and whether the outcome reflects these intentions. This can present difficulties for those who have emerged from a more didactic system in which the teacher is never questioned.

Students in this country are expected to create a context for the processes in which he or she is engaged and through that evolve a ‘something’, the form of which is most likely to be created by its appropriateness to the context rather than by relying on an individual inner aesthetic sense developed over time. The skilled intuition of ‘how things ought to be’ could be identifiable as sheer facility, with which we are not particularly comfortable in the UK. Yet to a Japanese student who has no trouble with the notions of ‘hard won skill and knowledge’, a dismissal of facility would be something of a mystery.

The absence of a sketchbook is also noteworthy. I had been aware through my interviews with ‘Textural Space’ artists that very few textile artists keep a working sketchbook in the customary manner, although there is certainly a private notation carried out. A Japanese artist commented that “in Japan, words are an extension of oneself; words mean everything. The weight of the word is heavier in Japan; you are accountable for everything that you write.” She went on to say, “In the West you are also accountable for what you write but you always have an implicit disclaimer. This is me now but tomorrow I may think differently. And this is why sketchbooks are difficult for us, having to put down something not finished for view, having to show the changes.” Susan Sontag has written, “A significant role of the artist may be in the future to keep alive the idea of seriousness.” One can see the Japanese student subscribing to this wholeheartedly, whereas the English student would be concerned that somewhere within this overt seriousness suspicions of ‘pretentiousness’ may lurk and certainly within the peer group that would never do.

The two approaches have much to offer each other and I hope I have created a forum for textile practitioners from Japan and the UK to meet, exchange and make. Young textile practitioners from Japan and the UK travel to work with established practitioners from their opposite country. The emerging/established aspect is particularly important in avoiding a feeling of competition, but equally this is not a pupil/teacher relationship; each has something specific to give, such as freshness and maturity. I have also tried to make pairs from those working in different areas of textile practice, seeking to bring together compatible interests/sensibilities and in this way, again, avoid a sense of competition. “Through

the Surface' is already underway and the thinking and making processes of all the artists are being regularly recorded in an online journal.¹ The hope is that these journals will provide the documentation of the creative processes of each participant.

The first of the collaborations has been taking place in Chester and is between Maxine Bristow, who perfectly exemplifies the English approach, and Kyoko Nitta. Superb contextual research underpins all Maxine's work. Her drawings and workbooks are wondrous sources of inspiration and record. Last year she was one of the short-listed artists for the Jerwood Applied Arts Prize: Textile and her work always refers back to its textile nature and textile history. She is exploring those elements within the built environment which are vital to its functioning successfully but which are unnoticed through familiarity as with door handles, light switches, guardrails or hidden within the building structure as with conduits. Her partner from Japan, Kyoko Nitta, is exploring pockets, in particular pockets as conduits. Both are exploring boundaries, but their methodology in reaching that outcome is very different, as Maxine, Kyoko and I discovered.

After Kyoko had been here for a couple of weeks, Maxine called me to say that she was very concerned. It seemed that Kyoko had not brought any research material with her, that her studio space was still the clean white studio space she had moved into at the beginning of her stay. Maxine, whose own workspace is an ever changing kaleidoscope of visual and textual research, was worried that Kyoko was unhappy and unable to work. Quite the reverse, Kyoko was delighted to be in her clean white space, which was for her a space for new ideas, unaffected by previous experience. When I asked her why she had not brought any materials from Japan she said quite clearly that she wanted to come with a completely open mind about what would be the outcome.

Again, Maxine was giving Kyoko lots of written material to help contextualise what they both might begin to make, not realising firstly that poor Kyoko spent all night reading and translating it, and secondly that this approach was starting at the wrong end for Kyoko. Another Japanese textile artist explained that the Japanese start with the materials and use them to work towards an idea. The English begin with the idea and research towards finding the materials. And so once the stuff, the materials came out and onto the table, everything changed and ideas came flying. If we look a little further at these materials, their techniques, their making, we can easily slip into making assumptions about similarities, which indeed exist, but there are also differences to be revealed. Both Bristow and Nitta each employ different, but equally painstaking and time consuming techniques, and both find this a linking point within their work. History is implicit in both approaches; Kyoko Nitta is using a highly specialised Laotian fish net knotting technique and Maxine is working in needlepoint. Both take months to finish a single work using their two techniques. Needlepoint is a craft which up until now has not figured highly in contemporary textiles in a gallery setting but has a long domestic history. There is no intention, however, to link the outcome of the making process to the history of the technique.

Having identified some of the differences between the two approaches to the creative process, particularly with textiles, it might be useful to conclude with some strategies which can be put in place to enable the young student from Japan to fully engage with some of the pathways on offer and for the student from England to benefit from the cultural input from the Japanese.

The Surrey Institute has a large number of Japanese students throughout the University, particularly within the Foundation course. The Institute's International Office runs an introductory session in Japan which is not a didactic session but more a workshop as a practical demonstration of teaching at the Institute. This coupled with the counselling and guidance offered by the Institute's Japan office means that those who come via this route, rather than applying individually, are much better prepared.

The Institute also has a student mentorship scheme where new students are formally put in touch with degree students who have completed the Foundation course. The President of the Students Union is also encouraged to programme events which will include all the students, not just those who want to party to beyond the limits of excess.

¹ www.throughthesurface.surrart.ac.uk

To increase the confidence of Japanese students during interactive learning, the Foundation course students are split up into learning support groups of eight, with Japanese students placed in all groups. Within the groups, all the work is subject to peer review and each group selects the best answer to the problem. Interestingly, more often than not, the Japanese solution is selected. These strategies, and many others, are intended to increase students' confidence, enabling the student to fulfil his or her potential.

I would like to conclude with two examples of creative strategies and responses. The first refers to a young Japanese girl from the suburbs of Tokyo, who had no international connections but whom, from the age of thirteen, decided that she wanted to come to the UK to study and with great determination persuaded her family to allow this. She arrived, aged sixteen, alone at Heathrow with a little spoken English but almost no English reading skills. With enormous resourcefulness, the young girl made her own way from Heathrow to the school she would be attending by reading the pictogrammes; the signs. The architect Richard Rogers wrote 'In the disconnected forms of a street in Tokyo, where to a westerner the only apparent unifying visual factors are the vertical signage banners, (there is) a beauty emerg(ing) out of the chaos' As a result of this student's first experience, she became fascinated by signs and eventually went on to study semiotics at University.

Finally, here is an extract from a piece given to me by a young Japanese student beginning his art education in this country in which he so eloquently describes his cultural and creative dilemma entitled 'Get rid of prejudice: destroying my stereotype':

"this is going to be something really hard to explain but it is all about the prejudice which people seem to have about myself and the stereotype I seem to have created over a few years of art work...Now, I think it's a chance. In a new environment with new friends, I feel like destroying my stereotype which is now, to me, very boring and not exciting. It is also a good timing to think about doing something completely new, something completely different from what I have been doing...so after showing my identity as an artist, I want to become quite a different person, not mixing up *me* as an artist and *me* as a person but influencing *me* as a person by *me* as an artist. This plan will really let me think what to do for the next year or so in which I must show what now I call my neo-stereotype, *neo-me*. Recently I have been very much influenced by Gaudi and my trip to see his work in Barcelona. Another factor must be the war in Iraq in which I saw the indescribable horror and sorrow of Iraqi people and...it was a shock to me to see many artists protesting against the war while I was doing nothing. Finally, it is worth noting that I am still deeply interested in the interlocking patterns which I have studied in Japan. Considering these three completely different factors here is the *neo-me* formula by which I wish to destroy the stereotype I used to have: Gaudi + social influences + interlocking patterns = neo-me!"

Contributors

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The Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation

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