

# In Search of the Resilient Academic Experience: Dealing with Concerns in Artistic Doctoral Programs

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Design and Art PhDs are widely spread across Art Schools around Europe and the world. Doing a PhD in the arts however contains tensions between artistic research approaches, and overall academic setting and requirements. Students, and supervisors, are not always well prepared for the challenges that arise from these tensions<sup>1</sup>. This raises the question: How supervision of artistic research at doctoral level can foster unorthodox approaches and multimedia outcomes, while simultaneously enable doctoral students to navigate academic frameworks?

Based on data from a doctoral preparation course, this article outlines typical tensions and, highlights strategies to help navigate them. After a general introduction and the methodology section the article reviews existing approaches in PhD programs in Art and Design that help reflecting our case study. Chapter five presents the case study results and chapter six involves discussion and conclusion on future needs in PhD supervision in the arts.

*Keywords:* practice-based research, doctorate in the arts, supervision, academic framework.

1 Anne Lee, „How Can We Develop Supervisors for the Modern Doctorate?“, *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 5 (2018): 878–890, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1438116>.

## Introduction

This section introduces the concept of practice-based artistic research as a promising approach in and beyond academia and highlights related challenges that arise in art and design schools that want to spark PhD projects in Switzerland. It then introduces the research question and presents the different section of this article.

Practice-based artistic research has attracted the attention of artists, designers, and university researchers and development units since the late 1970s. They are associated with the kind of approach that can deal with ill-structured problems and the complex situation of the modern world (Simon, 1973). Artistic contributions have been celebrated almost as a universal remedy for the complex challenges of today's society.<sup>2</sup> The author emphasizes that it is the creative, artistic approaches that can bring renewal to traditional research because they "will often interrogate the limitations of our current knowledge to create alternative futures and potential ways of 'coping' in the world."<sup>3</sup> While a creative approach that aims at improving the way we cope within the present world may apply to numerous other scientific fields – such as engineering – artists typically contribute with a different set of practices, tools, and perspectives, for example, involving different data sets, theories, and frameworks. Also, and maybe more importantly, artistic research often has a focus on outputs that take the form of temporary experimental arrangements and are then not necessarily fit to be evaluated for their general validity or transferability. Instead, the promise of artistic research lies in the relevance of aesthetic evidence being more powerful and more precise than other scientific approaches when revisiting and reflecting a contemporary social phenomenon.

For artists and designers, scientific research activities can reveal new types of carrier opportunities<sup>4</sup> and increase the field of action by a "new and radical player in the world of art."<sup>5</sup> This new player believes in and values

2 Bruce Brown, „Introduction: The Creator Doctus Challenge,“ in *Creator Doctus (CrD): A Position Paper*, ed. Jeroen Boomgaard and John Butler (Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 2021), 8–20.

3 Brown, "Introduction: The Creator Doctus Challenge", 14.

4 Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), 83.

5 Mara Ambrožič and Angela Vettese, *Art as a Thinking Process: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (London: Sternberg Press, 2013), 119.

unconventional inputs, views, and methods that artists bring to the world in general and to research and development projects in particular. The attributes “unorthodox”, “radical”, and “unconventional” as a description for a promising work field for artists and designers also comes with the downside of uncertainty, leaving a lot of room for interpretation: It is, for example, often unclear what rules and assessment criteria apply within this radical playground and who is authorized to change them. Artists and designers that would like to take advantage of the proposed opportunity will need to be ready to engage in this uncertain and sometimes contradictory situation. This is particularly true for those who would like to depart on a journey of a practice-based artistic PhD in their attempt to link their artistic practice and ideas to research ideas and frameworks and for those who are preparing potential PhD students. They are left with tensions that arise from relating the practice-based artistic realm with the academic: On the one hand, is an emphasis on a form of research that is motivated, informed, and shaped by the experiences and knowledge the researcher has gained through their own artistic practice, where the outcomes can contain visual material, artefacts, and other non-text-based forms. On the other hand, a PhD is an academic degree that follows certain standards with requirements and regulations, a different habitus. Overall, this setting provides a different framework for research-based, artistic work. Both students and supervisors are not always well prepared for the challenges that arise from these tensions.<sup>6</sup> This raises the fundamental question: How can supervision of artistic research at doctoral level foster undisciplined approaches and multimedia research outputs while simultaneously enabling doctoral students to confidently navigate within and beyond the academic framework?

This article explores this question by analyzing observations and statements of students from a preparatory PhD course (PräDoc course) held at a school for art and design in Lucerne, Switzerland. We will first present the PräDoc course format, then we will discuss the way we aimed to help students to navigate these tensions with the PräDoc course and how data collection and analysis were performed. The focus of this article is therefore to present the case of the PräDoc course initiative to contribute with

6 Anne Lee, “How Can We Develop Supervisors for the Modern Doctorate?”, *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 5 (2018): 878–890, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1438116>.

empirical material to the creation of a more complete picture and provide instructive and helpful knowledge for lecturers and program developers.

The research question reads as follows: *How can institutional courses help prepare students for practice-based artistic PhDs?*

### 1. Practice based artistic research – a number of characteristics

When it comes to defining practice-based research, we are essentially left with contributions that describe what this type of research involves, for example, containing creative, experiential approaches diversity of methods.<sup>7</sup> From such a description artistic research can easily be confused with other disciplines (such as trial-and-error experimentation in the engineering field).

Having said that, it becomes clear that someone with a practice in molecular biology can perfectly well launch a PhD project in the field of artistic research – if they consider their outcomes as art and design work and can “impact the art world as it is impacted upon by developments in the art world.”<sup>8</sup> This classification may cause criticism, as it essentially relies on the individual positioning of an artist, which calls for further criteria by which we can recognize practice-based artistic research in art and design. So while a common definition may be difficult to settle on, we can list a number of characteristics that distinguish practice-based artistic research in art and design from other types of research. First, practice-based artistic research often intuitively connects the art and design field to other disciplines: It is trans-disciplinary, and it can “be situated at the crossroads between several fields of enquiry.”<sup>9</sup> This makes practice-based artistic research prone to open new perspectives, confront prevailing ideas and contribute through experiences and concepts foreign to a field.<sup>10</sup> A second characteristic is therefore

7 Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research Methodology. Narrative, Power and the Public* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).

8 John Verbeke, “The Intrinsic Value of Artistic Research”, in *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, ed. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA European League of Institutes of the Arts, 2013), 122–125.

9 *Ibid.*, 127.

10 Andris Teikmanis, “Typologies of Research’87”, in *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, ed. Mike Wolson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA European League of Institutes of the Arts, 2013), 162–169.

Helga Nowotny, “Foreword”, in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, ed. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (London: Routledge, 2011), xvii–xxvi.

that artistic research often contributes by making existing tensions and alternative futures visible in a pointed way, without necessarily already providing clear answer or solutions.<sup>11</sup> Marina Belobrovaja's dissertation, which approaches the political in art and aims at potentially question existing views and practices, can be mentioned as example here.<sup>12</sup> Hence, outcomes of artistic research often lead to questioning and reconsiderations of common-ground perspectives in that they make included discourses or social construction visible in a more convincing way than other disciplines do.

Another prominent characteristic is what we call the relevance of aesthetic evidence and related epistemic cultures. Different forms of visual and aesthetic presentation occupy an important place in artistic research and knowledge generation: Colors, types of colors application or processing of material, configuration of multimedia material, and arrangements of artefacts in a room are part of an explorative practice that aims to generate knowledge by ultimately shifting perspectives on a contemporary phenomenon.

In this article, we refer to these characteristics when discussing practice-based artistic research. And while we are fully aware that both the design and art fields have their own particular practice and attributes that are not fully comparable, we believe there is fruitful and meaningful common ground to discuss and reflect PhD preparation from both fields because they share a similar approach for how to go about research. In this sense the term "practice-based" not only refers to artists and designers responding to their environment – that is, social and societal challenges – but it particularly highlights artistic practice that informs the research design of PhD endeavors, that is, artistic practices providing particular methods, perspectives, and types of question asked and particular type of outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

11 Søren Kjörup, *Pleading for Plurality: Artistic and Other Kinds of Research* (London: Routledge, 2010).

12 Marina Belobrovaja, *Das unguete Gefühl, auf der richtigen Seite zu stehen* (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2019).

13 Hannula et al., *Artistic Research Methodology, Artistic Research Methodology. Narrative, Power and the Public*.

Rogers Henry and Inês Bento-Coelho, "The Glasgow School of Art A Guide to Learning and Teaching Practices for 3rd Cycle Research", in *Creator Doctus (CrD): A Position Paper*, ed. Jeroen Boomgaard and John Butler (Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 2021), 37.

## 2. Some thoughts on the methodology of this article

Due to the lack of extant scattered empirical insights, conducting a qualitative study appeared to be the most adequate research strategy. A case study approach seemed to us a particularly appropriate research strategy because it allows for investigating “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin 2003: 23).<sup>14</sup> We were interested in gaining insights from analyzing a concrete case in its “temporal and local particularity and starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts.”<sup>15</sup> The two studied courses took place within the context of an art and design school in Switzerland and each lasted two semesters in 2020 and 2021. The course is defined as preparation for individuals who are considering pursuing a practice-based doctorate in the fields of the visual arts. The two courses attracted mid-career individuals who have just completed a master's degree in fine art or design as well as individuals who are working in the mid-range academic staff of an art and design school in Switzerland and are pursuing the PhD degree for the next step in their career. On average, 12 students attended the course each year from all over Switzerland.

In a nutshell, the PrädDoc course can be described as led by an interest in both increasing awareness for the distinct features of artistic research and how it differs from other academic knowledge domains while not losing sight of academic requirements. In terms of content, questions of orientation are at the center stage of the course – that is, students specifically participate with this expectation in mind and ask their respective questions during the course meetings.

Secondly, in the course we are presented with a group situation. Group situations are well suited for documenting peer-to-peer dynamics and community effects.<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, the course puts great emphasis on encouraging students to pursue their own ideas and become aware of their own methods and expertise as artists while at the same time increasing their knowledge about PhD projects as a structured form of research project within an academic context. The goal is to enable students to learn about

14 Yin, Robert, K. *Case Study Research. Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1989).

15 Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2009), 21.

16 Kurt Lewin, “Group Decision and Social Change”, in *Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. Eleanor E. Maccoby, Theodore Mead Newcomb, and Eugene L. Hartley (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1947), 197–211.

existing frameworks, requirements, and procedures as well as to help them see how the academic framework can be expanded and how it includes opportunities to explore research interests in individual ways. This makes the course a suitable case to study the question of how institutional courses can help prepare students for practice-based artistic PhDs.

To collect data, we took diary notes during and after the course meetings. The notes focused on questions that arose, group dynamics, types of emerging topics, and group discussions.

As the overall aim of the qualitative analysis was to openly explore the aspects that can help prepare students for a practice-based research PhD, the collected material was not approached with predefined categories but instead approached from the bottom up, which allowed for the emergence of themes from the material (Lieblich, Tuval, Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998).<sup>17</sup> Notes were subsequently organized in clusters by two researchers – the authors of this paper – and then discussed to label and describe emerging key topics. These topics were selected by frequency of mentions and/or urgency of the uncertainty.

### 3. Existing approaches, institutional efforts and an ongoing discussion with regard to practice-based PhD in the arts

#### 3.1 *Three features of practice-based PhD in the arts*

We already learned about a number of characteristics by which we can distinguish practice-based artistic research from other forms of research but have not looked at features that are particularly significant in relation to preparing potential PhD students to navigate tensions that emerge from operating with unorthodox approaches in the context of academia. While explorative approaches, the status of the aesthetic, and the contribution with new perspectives maybe part of what defines artistic research, it is the non-text-based aspects, the trans-disciplinarity, and the direct interaction with the real-world environment that is highlighted as internal characteristic relevant to consider when teaching and supervision PhD candidates.<sup>18</sup> While the author (*ibid.*) emphasizes these three aspects in relation to PhD supervision, the core argument also applies to preparatory courses that

17 Amia Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, Rivka, and Zilber, Tamar, *Narrative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998).

18 Brown, "Introduction: The Creator Doctus Challenge".

accompany students in developing PhD proposals: It is these internal characteristics that impact supervision of PhD endeavors because they include inherent contradictions with the traditional, academic research framework. Reviewing these three aspects therefore seemed a suitable way to first approach the question of how to best prepare potential PhD students.

### 3.1.1 Non-text-based aspects

Since printing revolutionized the way knowledge can be distributed and stored, text-based forms have been developed and refined by universities, while the advancement of non-text-based forms mostly happened outside the university system.<sup>19</sup> This leaves practice-based research with the challenge of communicating more practical, experiential, personal, or tacit knowledge, which typically make up part of their outcomes.<sup>20</sup> These types of knowledge are more difficult to communicate as verbal articulation – generally required in academic contexts.<sup>21</sup>

Brown (2021) concludes that what artistic researchers – as relatively recent players to academic research – encounter, is a research ecosystem which is “heavily, if not almost exclusively, text-based.”<sup>22</sup> The takeaway from this for preparatory courses is that we need to better understand how to communicate non-text-based forms, such as images, artefacts, spaces, sounds, movements, installations, or combinations of these forms. And it is important to better understand different forms of visual and aesthetic evidence to find ways to better argue for them. A central question concerns the final output of a PhD and the question of what can be considered an appropriate blend of text and non-text forms.

To provide artistic practice-led teaching and learning material for PhD programs, studies have addressed systematization of how knowledge in the artistic processes can emerge in (sequences) of individual

- 19 Elke Bippus and Monica Gaspar, “Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts”, in *Inquiry-Based Learning – Undergraduate Research. The German Multidisciplinary Experience*, ed. Harald A. Mieg (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019), 229–237.
- 20 Kristine Niedderer, “Mapping the Meaning of Knowledge”, *Design Research Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2017): 4–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2020.05.004>.  
Estelle Barrett, “Experiential Learning in Practice as Research: Context, Method, Knowledge”, *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 6, no. 2 (2007): 115–124 (broken DOI-link)
- 21 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958; reis., London: Routledge, 2012).
- 22 Brown, “Introduction: The Creator Doctus Challenge”, 15.



experiments.<sup>23</sup> This is important because artistic research includes different types of using artistic process and artifacts as method of inquiry: “Many different ways in which the process of designing and making an artifact can be used as a method of inquiry in order to explore a research question.”<sup>24</sup> The authors show in the framework how theory construction in the artistic research evolves – that is, where and how it evolves, and where it gets solid. This includes a special role for experiments in theory construction, in that recurrent experimentation typically influences the research project as a whole, and it can influence the direction of the project – that is, in a re-formulation of the research question.<sup>25</sup> This could inform teaching early career PhD students because sketches in this case can highlight the traces or genealogies of projects in the making (Markussen, Interview, January 2022). Furthermore, it provides a distinction between three different types of knowledge that is generated in practice-based artistic research – (i) theory refinement (ii) theory extension, and (iii) theory merging. Barbara Bolt’s work<sup>26</sup> adds to this conversation with similar suggestions for performative paradigm in artistic research, when inviting PhD scholars to address questions such as: “What methodological shifts occurred through this process?” or “How did the research shift material practice in the field?” or “How do these new concepts shift understandings and practices in the field and/or in other discursive fields?”<sup>27</sup> Discussing knowledge generation in more concrete terms may help potential PhD students to discuss their artistic work in term of different types of knowledge contribution, and it may help

- 23 Eva Brandt and Thomas Binder, “Experimental Design Research: Genealogy, Intervention, Argument”, in *Proceedings of International Association of Societies of Design Research: Emerging Trends in Design, Hong Kong, November 12–15, 2007*: 10, [https://www.sd.polyu.edu.hk/iasdr/proceeding/papers/Experimental%20design%20research\\_%20genealogy%20-%20intervention%20-%20argument.pdf](https://www.sd.polyu.edu.hk/iasdr/proceeding/papers/Experimental%20design%20research_%20genealogy%20-%20intervention%20-%20argument.pdf).
- 24 Markussen, Thomas, Anne Louise Bang, Pia Pedersen, and Eva Knutz, “Dynamic Research Sketching—A New Explanatory Tool for Understanding Theory Construction in Design Research”, in *Proceedings of DRS2012: Uncertainty Contradiction Value, July 1–4, 2012, Bangkok*: 1126–1143, <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers/drs2012/researchpapers/83>.
- 25 Markussen et al., “Dynamic Research Sketching—A New Explanatory Tool for Understanding Theory Construction in Design Research”, 1133.
- 26 Barbara Bolt, “Mobilising the Performative Power of Art through Artistic Research”, paper presented at *SwissGradNet Discovery Conference No. 2, October 11, 2019, Lucerne*, [https://swissgrad.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SGN19\\_Speaker-Info.pdf](https://swissgrad.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SGN19_Speaker-Info.pdf).
- 27 Bolt, “Mobilising the Performative Power of Art through Artistic Research”.

someone trying to discuss their own artistic approaches in terms of knowledge production.

### 3.1.2 The trans-disciplinary aspects

Research in the last two decades has moved away from the belief that greater specialization is key and is now acknowledging the importance of trans-disciplinary research. Inter- and trans-disciplinarity is believed to inspire the type of radical (rather than incremental) innovation required to “solve some of the major problems facing society.”<sup>28</sup> While interdisciplinarity emphasizes the collaboration of different disciplines side by side, trans-disciplinarity suggest a research strategy that involves crossing disciplinary boundaries in a holistic approach – that is, the merging of methods and approaches and perspectives from various disciplines.<sup>29</sup>

Strengthening inter- and trans-disciplinary collaboration has become an important focus in research funding schemes.<sup>30</sup> This focus values practice-based artistic research, as art and design work typically engage with other knowledge domains and with people and communities outside of academia, and in doing so, they are inherently trans-disciplinary in nature.<sup>31</sup>

Our takeaway: While research has moved away from the idea of a lone researcher in their solitary bubble necessary, working in groups with a trans-disciplinary approach still need to be developed Brown (2021) and become important also for artistic PhD programs. Programs need to find ways of acknowledging and sustaining trans-disciplinary practices in the art and design practice. This needs to be considered in PhD preparatory courses in the arts. What characterizes the artistic practice-led perspective is that it assumes that most of what PhD students learn from each other: “They give each other feedback, comment and listen.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, safe and comfortable spaces – where you can ask “silly questions” were emphasized

28 Brown, “Introduction: The Creator Doctus Challenge”, 15.

29 E.g. Fern Wickson, Anna L. Carew, and A. Wendy Russell, “Transdisciplinary Research: Characteristics, Quandaries and Quality”, *Futures* 38, no. 9 (2006): 1046–1059, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2006.02.011>.

30 David Budtz Pedersen, “Integrating Social Sciences and Humanities in Interdisciplinary Research,” *Palgrave Communications* 2, no. 1 (December 2016): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.36>.

31 Brown, “Introduction: The Creator Doctus Challenge”, 17.

32 Notes from an interview with Thomas Markussen, University of Southern Denmark, January 07, 2022. The interview was held over Zoom.

by more than one of the respondents we approached for an interview. The representative of the A-Pass program, Nicolas Galeazzi, for example, emphasized that preparing students for a PhD endeavor includes the question of how to create a “shared space” where professors and students meet as equal partners.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.1.3 The real-live interaction aspect

“Interaction with the real-world environment” is highlighted as a third aspect that needs to be considered when preparing individuals for a practice-based PhD.<sup>34</sup> This is further emphasized by impact case studies of artistic research projects such as the 2014 UK Research Excellence Framework. But impact of artistic research projects may not always be measurable right away. Instead, artists and designers may undertake research with the intention to increase their understanding about a contemporary phenomenon without having a particular application in mind, and deployment of research may be more spread out over time and dependent on real-life opportunities. In this case, it may take many years to manifest itself, which raises the important question of how and if it can be captured and assessed in impact reports. Conversely, practice-based artistic research sometimes involves “reverse-engineering”, whereby practical interventions are followed by critical reflections and analysis. In such situations, the impact of the research often precedes systematization and articulation as research—unlike the traditional travel for example in life science, which will move from “lab to life.”<sup>35</sup> Trans-disciplinary research by artists and designers may in fact include partnerships with research beneficiaries and with users of the research rather than limiting partnerships with other academic knowledge domains. Brown to this end suggests considering questions such as “What has changed because of the research?” and reflecting on form of partnerships with students.

The next section introduces institutional efforts and highlights remaining questions.

33 Notes from an interview with Nicolas Galeazzi, a,pass - Advanced Performance and Scenography Studies Belgium, February 10, 2022. The interview was held in person in Zurich, Switzerland.

34 Brown, “Introduction: The Creator Doctus Challenge”.

35 Ibid., 16.

### 3.2 Institutional efforts supporting practice-based artistic PhD as an emerging field

Institutional efforts support the emerging field of artistic PhD research.<sup>36</sup> This particularly includes the development of frameworks and networks that can help advance practice-based PhDs in the arts and design world. The focus lies on creating a shared understanding, shared repertoire of practice, concepts, information and experiences and academic network and in community activities.<sup>37</sup> The Creator Doctus (CrD) project can be cited as an example and recent development in which programs start to assess and reflect their efforts more systematically rather than focusing on understanding the facilitation of a single practice-based PhD program. The CrD report particularly points out the different, country-specific conditions of such PhD programs and, more generally, the lack of recognition in education policy.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the CrD provides evidence for how practice-based artistic PhDs are dynamic and confusing even on an institutional level and how this can make orientation for people considering entering this field difficult. The emphasis on confusing dynamics also resonates with a comment from our interview partner of the NID, Prof. Dr. Shilpa, who coined for us the term “no fixed identity” to describe what a practice-based PhD at many art schools represents at this point.<sup>39</sup> Settling on the term “no fixed identity” opens the opportunity to work with an open-ended, fluid definition of what an artistic PhD can be rather than trying to define what exactly a practice-based artistic PhD is – which for many years has dominated the discussion in art and design schools.<sup>40</sup>

Institutional efforts also involve suggestions around what PhD students should learn – for example, acquiring an overview of theory and methods of artistic research and an understanding of how to build on them in their doctoral research.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in the abovementioned interview, the

36 Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*.

37 Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten, *SHARE handbook for artistic research education* (Amsterdam: ELIA European League of Institutes of the Arts, 2013).

38 Jeroen Boomgaard and John Butler, ed., *Creator Doctus (CrD): A Position Paper* (Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 2021).

39 Notes from an interview with Prof. Dr. Shilpa Das, National Institute of Design, India, January 5, 2022. The interview was held over Zoom.

40 Ibid.

41 Sarah Bennett, Bruce Brown, and John Butler, *A framework of Good Practices for 3rd Cycle Doctoral Awards, EQ-Arts* (Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 2021), 94.

head of the PhD program at the NID emphasized that “mostly in the beginning it is about becoming more analytical.”<sup>42</sup> Bennett and her colleagues<sup>43</sup> work suggests that PhD candidates must have “master level artistic research competences” and present both a convincing portfolio and “relation to community partners with which for example parts of the PhD will be realized.”<sup>44</sup> This description may serve as base line and targeting goal for preparation courses – as it indicates crucial criteria by which potential PhD candidates will be selected. This complements efforts from the 1990s that were more concerned with defining artistic and designerly ways of doing research and artistic knowledge contribution<sup>45</sup>.

### 3.3 Conditions for practice-based, artistic PhDs in Switzerland

Before we close this section with a brief overview of existing approaches that are relevant to our question, we would like to draw attention to the country-specific conditions for practice-based PhDs in Switzerland: It is important to highlight that art and design schools in Switzerland do not have the right to award doctorates. PhD programs or individual PhD endeavors therefore necessarily take place in collaboration with universities in Switzerland or abroad. This needs to be addressed and supported in PhD preparatory courses. Furthermore, Switzerland has seen the development of third-cycle programs at art and design school for the last five to ten years. This, in part, breaks with traditional design education, which according to Gaspar and Bippus<sup>46</sup> was directed towards training students as professionals – such as typographers, photographers, and graphic or product designers. In a reverse conclusion, this also means that design schools in Switzerland until not too long ago operated in the absence of an academic tradition and were only “upgraded” to universities of applied arts and sciences with

42 Shilpa Das, notes from the interview, January 5, 2022.

43 Bennett, “A Framework of Good Practices for 3rd Cycle Doctoral Awards, EQ-Arts”.

44 Ibid., 95–97.

45 E.g. Richard Buchanan, “The Study of Design: Doctoral Education and Research in a New Field of Inquiry”, in *Proceedings of Doctoral Education in Design, Ohio, October 8–11, 1998*: 1–29. Clive Dilnot, “The Science of Uncertainty: The Potential Contribution of Design to Knowledge”, in *Proceedings of Doctoral Education in Design, Ohio, October 8–11, 1998*: 65–97. Alain Findeli, “A Quest for Credibility: Doctoral Education and Research in Design at the University of Montreal”, in *Proceedings of Doctoral Education in Design, Ohio, October 8–11, 1998*: 99–115.

46 Bippus and Gaspar, “Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts”.

the Bologna Reform.<sup>47</sup> The authors (*ibid.*) acknowledge an absence of academic discourse on aesthetic practices and research at art schools in Switzerland – and consequently a swift institutionalization of research in the arts in the form of research institutes. Essentially, this means that aesthetic practices and related epistemic cultures are less prominent than these “top-down research institutes” – that is, often a researcher with traditional academic training is involved in artistic research project and institutes (e.g., in sociology, art history, film studies, or philosophy) (*ibid.*: 233).

While certain parameters and institutional frameworks have been developed in the field of practice-based PhD, a confusion and dynamic process of negotiation remains. Consequently, varying requirements of different universities for awarding a PhD degree further complicates the process of orientation for students. However, it is precisely orientation that will enable students to make informed choices from the available PhD programs. Furthermore, more fruitful research partnerships between institutions and PhD students can be expected from such informed choices.

#### 4. Results – Concerns and Uncertainties of the Prädoc Students

This section provides an overview of the most prominent concerns and issues students in the PhD courses raised. A conclusive summary then provides an overview of potential distress these concerns can trigger in the starting phase of an artistic PhD.

##### 4.1 *Can art in itself be artistic research?*

When does art become artistic research? How does artistic research differ from other types of research? Can't we continue making art and call it artistic research – for instance, if the work produced is based on collected archival material? These are examples questions raised in the context of the PräDoc course.

We list frequent questions that emerged and the respective tensions in the following paragraphs.

- The requirement of explicit research questions and a transparent research process is often at odds with the way artists typically work in their studio

47 Bippus and Gaspar, “Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts”, 233.

practice – that is, including improvisation and situational decision making that includes little awareness for its inherent guiding rules and research interest, let alone recognition for particular process steps. Sometimes there is a reluctance to work in a more explicit and reflective way. References used by artists, be they works by other artists or theory, are typically not made transparent in art, nor is the work explicitly positioned in a discourse or thematic field by the artist. These qualities of artistic practice typically include the sense that one's artistic practice would lose something if it followed academic rules – for example, its complexity, the parts that cannot be verbally articulated, its mystery, and even its identity, which is that it does not follow rules per se.

- Launching a PhD endeavor involves stepping into the realm of an academic community. This raises the question of whether and how an individual can simultaneously remain of the art world – its exhibitions, events, and market – and be part of an academic research discourse. Can they be recognized in both spheres at the same time? The question particularly emerges in terms of time, resources, and personal commitment, but also in terms of the artwork itself: Both spheres follow different set of rules and different requirements, and both spheres include differing values and beliefs, for example, in respect to what represents valuable outputs. To receive academic recognition, artists need to comply with these standards and beliefs. A question frequently brought up by the students was therefore: Could an artwork both successfully live up to standards of a practice-based PhD AND circulate within the established art system?

In summary, this first concern is about how the ambiguous relation between artwork and artistic research in an academic framework can be significantly unsettling for artists. Firstly, they may feel a sense of loss of identity from having to comply with academic requirements and standards process. Secondly, having to meet two different value systems can generate great pressure and/or anxiety about becoming irrelevant for either one of the two contexts.

#### 4.2 *Scientific standard*

Early career PhD students often have a narrow understanding of scientific work. From our observations this typically includes – but is not limited to – the following list of general ideas about academic work: citing a lot of theory; limiting citations to scientific publications; disregarding the work of artists and designers as point of reference for your PhD study; categorically sticking to writing in an impersonal way; and natural and social sciences representing the true authority and standard that needs to be met and satisfied also by artistic researchers. Hence research is considered less about a person developing their own ideas and more about formal aspects of writing: citation style, correct referencing, and complying with required structures or academic writing styles. As a result of these ideas, early career PhD students often feel they need to entirely align with these given standards in order to successfully complete an artistic PhD. Consequently, they lack knowledge and awareness for the research value of their own artistic practice: Their own artistic art work, observations or everyday experiences are less considered as a relevant starting point for coherent, scientific arguments. And typically, there is little awareness for how they use a variety of methods in their own artistic practice. Similarly, artists are often reluctant to refer to methods and approaches of other artists as legitimation for their own approach and research journey.

Instead, students often feel that they must use recognized academic methods to legitimize their research.

Academic research is also firmly linked to the notion of objectivity and, in a revers conclusion, artistic research is associated with subjectivity and sensitivity. In doing so, students fail to acknowledge (or recall!) discourses that question objectivity (e.g., feminist critiques of science) and that there are many approaches in academia that include a subjective perspective (e.g., anthropology), narrative (e.g., critical fabulation), and even fictional forms.<sup>48</sup>

Given these questions, students frequently downplay their own research ideas and their own artistic practice and perspectives. The relevance of their artistic research experience is underestimated to the point

48 E.g., Donna Haraway, “The Camille Stories. Children of Compost”, in *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke Press, 2016), 134–168.



of denial. Instead, much weight is given to standards from apparently more established research areas such as the social and natural sciences. Arguments from feminist theory and postmodern critique are only rarely considered as an argument for more diverse perspectives. It seems, in the context of the PhD, previous knowledge is disregarded or suppressed in favor of the “real” academic experience.

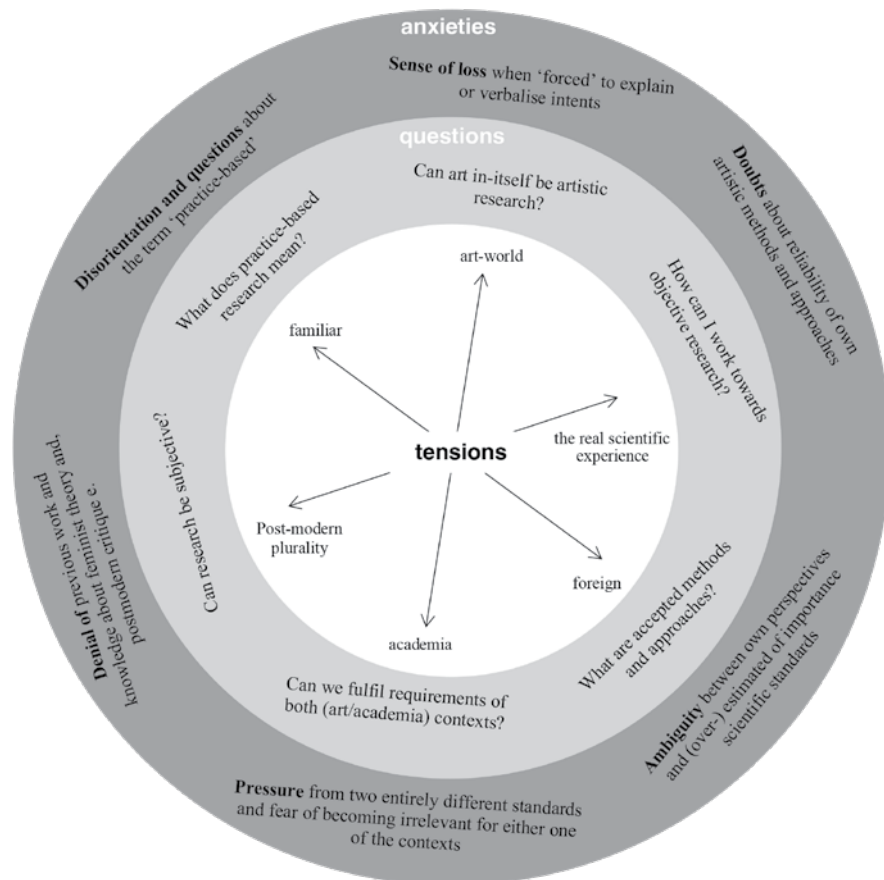
#### 4.3 *What does “practice-based” mean?*

A next prominent concern of participants in the PräDoc course is the question of what practice-based research could mean: At the Lucerne School of Art and Design, we use the term “practice-based” in the context of artistic or design research. This generally means that the research is grounded in and informed by artistic or design practice. Typically, students associate the term practice-based with the requirement to include a different, more visual, performative, or material outcome as part of their PhD thesis. This may involve writing the written element of their potential PhD thesis in a more poetic or narrative way. However, different ways of how practice can inform and change research remain an issue and are part of recurring discussions in the course.

Finally, students often don’t associate the term “practice-based research” with a particular set of methods and approaches solid enough to equip them with a certain knowledge and know-how to start exploring a particular phenomenon. A person finding it hard to label their own artistic process steps and make them explicit is symptomatic for the restraint towards their own methodologies. Consequently, artistic approaches and process steps are rarely explicitly mentioned as a point of reference or starting point for their research design.

In summary, we can state that the lack of a general definition of practice-based research as well as included methods and standards leaves students with little orientation and a variety of questions.

Figure 1 shows a combination of mutually reinforcing concerns – that is, lack of knowledge about institutional PhD requirements combined with having to consider entirely new nomenclature and learning to incorporate explicit reflection and verbal explanation as part of their professional artistic practice.



1. Wheel of tensions illustrating connected concerns and anxieties documented from two PräDoc courses (2020/2021).

### 1.1 How we address the tensions in our course

To discuss our initial question of how institutional courses can help prepare students for practice-based artistic PhDs and, for example, successfully navigate within and beyond academic structures, the next section discusses our approaches in the light of students concerns and sketches out complementing ideas.

### 1.1.1 Tension 1: *“Can art in itself be artistic research?”*

Making art and conducting artistic research – for example, in the context of a practice-based PhD – are two different things. In a PhD, the person is required to make their approach and their research question explicit, and they must be ready to communicate and discuss these aspects at conferences, in colloquia, and in other academic contexts. This type of methodological exchange is also possible in the artistic process, but it does not occupy an essential place: Artwork may be produced without the involvement of external peers or experts and discussed only later, for example, in the context of an exhibition, while research is dialogical from the start, and it necessarily unfolds within the framework of a particular research community. Individuals aiming at pursuing a PhD need to engage in this dialogical process of the associated research community and be involved in peer exchanges. This is something the PräDoc course needs to consider and provide room for.

### 1.1.2 Tension 2: *Scientific standards*

Complying with scientific standards is one of the first concerns potential PhD students have. From our observations, this particularly includes the written parts, such as the exposé and the written component at the end of the PhD. We will discuss these aspects below.

Exposé: Doctoral programs, especially in the fine arts domain, have different forms and guidelines for the application process. We therefore refrain from giving students a standard exposé template that they need to comply with. Instead, we go through a number of exposé examples and discuss application forms from different programs. This *tour de l’horizon* puts emphasis on the heterogeneity of existing templates, and it aims at encouraging students to broaden their understanding of different parts of an exposé. For the “state of the art” section, this involves highlighting artistic works and current exhibitions as potentially valuable references that can complement or replace scientific papers as references. For the research questions, this means highlighting them as a kind of problem statement or guideline that provides direction for an open-ended research journey rather than seeing them as something to which a person must necessarily find an

answer. Hence, putting emphasis on the development of the artists' own questions and interests takes center stage in the course. This includes guiding students towards putting more focus on accurate descriptions, precise wording, and consistent argumentation.

Scientific standards: In relation to academic research, students often have a strong notion of objectivity and, in a reverse conclusion, link artistic research to subjectivity and sensitivity. We saw that in doing so, students often fail to acknowledge other discourses that question objectivity in a similar way – such as feminist critiques of science and approaches that include subjective perspectives, narrative, or even fictional forms.<sup>49</sup> In the course we present academic approaches that incorporate subjectivity such as auto-ethnography and speculation.<sup>50</sup> Thus, focus is put on a discussion of various forms of academic research to also challenge a traditional idea of objectivity. The examples included in the course also help to emphasize intuition and trial-and-error approaches as part of methodological repertoire of scientific practice outside the art and design domain – that is, in scientific experimental setups in the engineering sciences. Conversely, we use the abovementioned examples to discuss how students can use methods and approaches from their own artistic practice as research approaches – that is, by making process steps more explicit and arguing for the suitability of the chosen approach to explore their research question.

### 1.1.3 Tension 3: *What does “practice-based” mean?*

We introduced the term "practice-based" as indicating research that is informed by an artistic practice that gives relevance to artistic artefacts as meaningful evidence in a scientific context. In the course we help students value their practice as a basis or point of departure when describing methodical approaches.

We also noticed that participants often link the term “practice-based” to the requirement of including a different, more visual, performative, or material outcome as part of their PhD – that is, incorporating a more poetic or narrative way in their written thesis. Our notes finally showed that students often link the idea of a PhD to reflecting on their own practice from a distance – that is, examining the artistic practice in relation to a theoretical

49 Haraway, “The Camille Stories. Children of Compost”.

50 Compare Saidiya Hartman's concept of Critical Fabulation (Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14, [muse.jhu.edu/article/241115](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115)).

concept. Instead, the course highlights that practice-based artistic research can consist of exploring a contemporary phenomenon with artistic means.<sup>51</sup>

## 2. Discussion and conclusions

From existing work, we learned that non-text-based forms of inquiry, trans-disciplinarity, and real-world interaction are aspects that are particularly significant in relation to preparing potential PhD students to navigate tensions that emerge from operating with unorthodox approaches in the context of academia. In other words, while these aspects may well be found in scientific research, potential PhD students often have a narrower understanding of what scientific research or scientific rigor is: While we can find non-text-based forms, trans-disciplinary approaches, and real-life interaction in scientific fields such as the social sciences and topology, for example, we find in our study that these type of research qualities are much less appreciated by early career researchers such as participants in the Prä-Doc course.

Instead, complying with scientific standards is one of the first concerns potential PhD students have. From our observations, this particularly includes the written exposé, the term practice-based, and the term artistic research, which raise many questions students may want to discuss within the framework of a preparatory course.

The description of our case showed that the course tried to provide peer-to-peer discussion and interaction that can challenge the narrative of the lone researcher and instead promote interdisciplinary skills – such as learning from different perspectives. The course operated with low-level interaction formats such as tandems or open discussion forums. Encouraging interaction and a sharing culture in the course potentially also supports interaction with various target groups and different environments. Tensions, however, remain. We see a need to develop more tools and a corresponding discussion that can foster the introduction of more artistically driven formats such as the dynamic research sketching framework<sup>52</sup> that can, in

51 Examples we use include Sanaz Sohrabi's *Spectral Images: Colonial Archives of Oil* or explorations of black whole phenomena by Olivier Rossel, <https://darkmatter.olivierrossel.com/>.

52 Markussen et al., "Dynamic Research Sketching – A New Explanatory Tool for Understanding Theory Construction in Design Research".

turn, foster interdisciplinary exchange and help students rely on their own artistic (sketching) practice as legitimate tool of inquiry. The authors<sup>53</sup> bring the significance of artistic techniques into focus to inspire dialogical atmosphere. We encourage further studies that can investigate how practice-based artistic formats can help deal with features specific to artistic PhDs and address the included tensions.

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53 Markussen et al., “Dynamic Research Sketching – A New Explanatory Tool for Understanding Theory Construction in Design Research”.

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Santrauka

## Akademinio atsparumo beieškant: problemų sprendimai meno doktorantūros programoje

Bettina Minder, Pablo Mülleris

*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* į praktiką orientuotas tyrimas, meno doktorantūra, vadovavimas tyrimui, akademinė paradigma.

Straipsnyje iš institucijos ir studentų perspektyvų pristatoma išsami ir gerai dokumentuota tarp doktorantūros studentų išplitusios problemos analizė.

Autoriai naudoja išsamią ir kruopščiai atrinktą naujausią literatūrą bei pateikia jų pačių atlikto kiekybinio tyrimo rezultatus. Aptariamas meno edukacijos Šveicarijoje atvejis atliepia ir daugelyje Europos šalių esančią situaciją. Autoriai pateikia tikslias problemų analizes ir vertingų įžvalgų apie iššūkius bei dilemas, taip pat siūlo naudingų sprendimų.