

PhD research in the arts

Programme notes

Introduction

A work of art comprises a form of knowledge that is the result of a visual research process. Giving artists an opportunity to conduct PhD research will allow them to expand the scope of their work and will make it possible to clarify and present research and knowledge in a different fashion. A PhD programme also offers viewers a broader perspective of the artist's work.

In partnership with the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Art, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB) wishes to stimulate research and reflection of artists and art. The aim is to reinforce the link between art and science, and to properly reflect up-and-coming, innovative research and art practices in a changing artistic and academic landscape. It is the aim of NWO to further excellent research in the Netherlands.

By means of a call for proposals, the Fonds BKVB and NWO are making two PhD research positions available to offer artists a chance to obtain their PhD degrees. The projects will be monitored closely and will be assessed both while in progress and upon completion. Besides PhD research, the projects may also form the basis for further development and finetuning of the guidelines and criteria, from both an artistic and a scientific perspective.

Context

Artists have been conducting research since time immemorial: that fact is not new. In the history of visual arts, the educated artist, or *pictor doctus*, is a familiar figure. Jan van Eyck developed oil paint, Leon Battista Alberti wrote numerous treatises - his work on painting is still relevant - Leonardo da Vinci is regarded as the ultimate *homo universalis*, who investigates the world in all its facets, John Constable's cloud studies affected the development of meteorology, William Latham created a new type with his computer-generated 'Evolving Forms'. Research is inherent in creating art.

In recent times, this belief has led to a new development in arts education, enabling PhD research in the arts. On the one hand, the third cycle, as it is known, comes from the synchronisation of all the higher education, including arts programmes, based on the Bologna accords (1999). On the other hand, and more importantly, the emergence of PhD programmes in the arts mirrors the changes in the artistic and academic landscape, where traditional boundaries between disciplines and forms of knowledge no longer properly reflect innovative practices in research and the arts. The artist as a researcher has become a familiar phenomenon in the art world in recent decades.

A stimulus for 'PhD research in the arts' came from the 'CO-OPs Exploring new territories in art and science' research project, which was part of the research programme entitled Transformations in Art and Culture, which the Humanities Division of NWO subsidised. Over a period of eighteen months, seven teams, each comprising a visual artist and a scientist, conducted intensive partnership projects,

each researching a theme based on their respective interests. The partnership resulted in exhibitions, numerous public manifestations and publications, including the umbrella CO-OPs.¹ The ultimate goal of the research was to discover how theories and practices in art and science interact and how they can affect one another. The partnerships between artists and scientist proved to be productive and inspiring. 'PhD research in the arts' is the next step in this process, and focuses on the artist's own artistic and academic work.

Artistic Research Master

Because of the synchronisation of higher and academic education in three phases, based on the Bologna accords, the Master's programmes at academies for visual arts are similar to the Master's programmes that Dutch universities have offered since 2005. These intensive second-phase programmes are intended to offer the students a more in-depth understanding of their specialisations. Recent additions are the Artistic Research Master's programmes, three of which are currently available (University of Amsterdam, Utrecht School of the Arts and the Royal Academy of Art), and which are aimed at bridging the gap between art and academic research. This is stimulated by focusing on new forms of research, with the emphasis on research that is grounded in and aimed at the arts in practice. These Master's programmes explore the domain of 'research in the arts'. This field is defined as a new research domain, as a new paradigm (see also 'Specific nature').

Embedding

A PhD programme for research into the arts is nothing new internationally: in various European countries (the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium) and in the United States obtaining a PhD degree in the arts has been possible for a considerable time: more than fifteen years in England. Despite the differences in embedding, structure and final results of PhD programmes in the various countries, what they have in common is that they emphasise an exciting and original relationship between the artistic and discursive elements of the research. Since in the Netherlands only universities have the right to confer PhD degrees, the PhD research in the arts will be conducted at a Dutch university. Owing to its unusual nature, a PhD programme in the arts has a twofold basis, however: at the normal university and at the academy (*hogeschool*: university of applied sciences). As research within the complex of disciplines at the university, this is a new and previously undefined field, since the research will commence in the domain of the arts, in the practice of research into the arts.

¹ Interterritoriale verkenningen in kunst en wetenschap / Exploring new territories in art and science (Amsterdam 2007).

Specific nature of PhD research in the arts

Artists need research: that is apparent from their artistic and reflective productions. Art explores the way in which we see relate to reality, and shows us another way of experiencing reality. Art produces a different form of knowledge than the 'traditional' scientific disciplines, and that characteristic is precisely what gives rise to a new research domain. One vital aspect of research in the arts is that artistic products and processes form an integral part of the research. Critical reflection on the practice and theory of research in the arts plays an important role. This means that PhD research in the arts includes not only an artistic process but also a discursive, reflective process. Yet PhD research in the arts also is a unit. This new research domain no longer concerns a contrast between artistic and discursive methods of knowledge development, but instead deals with a combination of those two approaches as a specific way of increasing knowledge and interpreting reality. The two components are both equal. This also means that the link between the two dimensions must be thought out and substantiated. This combination involves the open, exploratory nature of artistic production coupled with the inventorising, analysing and defining nature of scientific forms of research.

The results of the arts research belong to the field of culture, and as such are related to research in the humanities. In its approach, it corresponds to the field of Cultural Science, in that its aim is to seek out and push back the existing limits and explicitly includes other fields of knowledge in the research. Like other scientific research, research in the arts focuses primarily on the forum of colleagues. The research includes an artistic component, with a scope that goes beyond the circle of academic initiates. As such, the final presentation of the artistic research must meet two requirements: the results must offer something to the academic community, while at the same time being important in the world of art and culture and appealing to a broader audience. Reflection on this twofold requirement should be an element of the research.

Supervision during the research

The twofold nature of PhD research in the arts also calls for supervision that matches its specific requirements. The supervision will devote special attention to the relationship between the discursive and the artistic dimensions of the research.

The research will be supervised by a professor at a Dutch university and a co-supervisor from the art world who holds a position at an arts programme. In addition, a broader supervision group should be put together for each project, consisting of experts on specific parts of the research.

Individual supervision - the role of the PhD supervisor and the co-supervisor

The role of the PhD supervisor and the co-supervisor is to create a suitable research environment for the PhD candidate and to ensure the quality of the research. They do this by:

- critically monitoring the progress of the research;
- ensuring that the research topic has sufficient depth and scope, and that possibilities exist for context research and for defining the limits of the research;
- providing the requisite research methods;
- ensuring that the PhD candidate retains a critical attitude toward his or her own research;
- ensuring that the theoretical and practical aspects of the research remain properly balanced;
- monitoring the preparations for and reflection on interim presentations and the final presentation, and the proper consideration of the balance between discursive and artistic production in order to be properly communicated.

By the end of the first year of research, at the latest, a detailed research report must be submitted that provides information about the progress being made with the research project. That report, which summarises the results of the process during the first year, must cover the entire research project (i.e. both the artistic and the discursive research components) and should include the following elements:

- a presentation of the research during the first year;
- a detailed description of the points of departure and the research questions and a substantiation of the approach adopted;
- a precise description of the envisioned results;
- a detailed planning and timetable for the further progress of the research, i.e. both the discursive and the artistic parts.

Based on that report, it will be decided whether or not the research will be continued. If the report is approved, a plan for continued education and supervision will be drawn up, with input from the PhD supervisor and the co-supervisor,

providing for further substantive and methodological assistance for the remainder of the research.

Assessment of the PhD research

A characteristic of PhD research in the arts is that it consists of a twofold project, consisting of an artistic and a discursive part. Each component of the research is subject to the criteria used within that specific discipline and that are fully compliant with the relevant international standards. Peer review by representatives from both the art world and the scientific world plays a vital role in this assessment.

The discursive part is expected to set out the research results in a clear, consistent and communicative form, in relation to the artistic part. The assessment will devote special attention to the relationship between the two components and to the interaction between those components, making the PhD research a whole and allowing it to be assessed as a whole.

The following issues will be taken into account in the assessment criteria for PhD research in the arts:

- the relevance of the research topic;
- the critical embedding of the research in the relevant artistic and academic discourses;
- the innovative character of the research, as apparent from the research question and the way in which it is conducted;
- the clarity and consistency of the discursive part of the research in relation to the artistic part;
- the depth of the research;
- the methodological substantiation for the research;
- the persuasiveness that the artistic presentation of the research possesses within the relevant disciplines in the arts;
- its presentation in texts that are convincing within the relevant discourses and peer groups;
- the assessment of the presentation as a whole;
- the questions and impulses for further research that it generates.

Organisation

The subsidised projects will be monitored, and will be assessed by a steering committee both while in progress and upon completion. That steering committee will include, at the minimum, representatives from the Fonds BKVB and the divisional board of NWO's Humanities Division. A separate assessment committee will be formed for assessing the proposals submitted for PhD research, containing expertise from both the field of science and the world of art. The compositions of the steering committee and the assessment committee will be published on the website.

Relevant literature

Michael A.R. Biggs. "The Role of 'the Work' in Research." Paper presented at the PARIP 2003 Conference, 11-14 September 2003, Bristol 2003.

Henk Borgdorff. *The Debate on Research in the Arts (Sensuous Knowledge 02)*, Bergen, Bergen National Academy of the Arts (2006).
http://www.ahk.nl/fileadmin/download/ahk/Lectoraten/Borgdorff_publicaties/The_debate_on_research_in_the_arts.pdf

Henk Borgdorff. "Artistic Research and Academia: an Uneasy Relationship". In: *Autonomi och egenart - konstnärlig forskning söker identitet ('Autonomy and Individuality - Artistic Research Seeks an Identity')*, Yearbook for Artistic Research 2008, Swedish Research Council (ISBN: 978-91-7307-135-2), pp. 82-97. Online at: <http://www.ahk.nl/ahk/lectoraten/theorie/download/an-uneasy-relationship.pdf>
<http://www.ahk.nl/ahk/lectoraten/theorie/download/an-uneasy-relationship.pdf>

Fiona Candlin. "A Proper Anxiety? Practice-Based Research and Academic Unease." *Working Papers in Art & Design* 1 (2000).

Marcel Cobussen, 'The Trojan Horse: Epistemological Explorations Concerning Practice-based Research', in: *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, 2007, Vol. 12. Issue 1. Online at: <http://www.djmt.nl/>

James Elkins (ed.), *Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, New Academia Publishing, LLC, Washington DC, 2009.

Stephen Wilson, *Border Watch. Artists working at the Frontiers of Research*, Thames & Hudson 2009 (forthcoming).