

**Julie Fletcher and Alan Mann**

**University of Ballarat**

## **Illuminating the Exegesis, an introduction**

This third volume in the *TEXT Special Issue Website Series* is devoted to the issue of the exegesis component of the creative or practice based thesis model as it has been developed in Australian Universities.

The 'creative thesis' model has become well established within Research Higher Degrees in a range of creative disciplines. This thesis model, of creative work plus written exegesis, emerged against a background of debate and contestation regarding art and research. Tensions between ideas of 'art as research' and 'art as professional practice' gave rise to a range of debates regarding the status of art practice as research, the recognition of art practice as publication equivalent, and even the appropriateness of Research Higher Degrees in the creative disciplines. These debates ran during the 1990s, and in some areas are still being debated.

In spite of this, however, creative arts Research Higher Degrees are firmly up and running, and the creative or practice based thesis is a reality. While the contestation and debates appear to have been resolved by university policy developments that have established the 'creative work plus exegesis' model, in practice, considerable uncertainty and some contestation remains. This uncertainty is often most evident among HDR candidates and their supervisors, manifesting, in particular, as a lack of clarity regarding the nature, role and expectations of the exegesis component of this thesis model.

In the belief that further clarification of the creative thesis model, of the nature and purpose of the exegesis, and of the relationship between the creative/practice and exegetical elements, are timely and important tasks confronting those involved in Research Higher Degrees within the creative/practice disciplines, the Arts Academy of the University of Ballarat established a small research project devoted to the creative thesis and its exegesis.

Within the Arts Academy, higher degree by research candidates and their supervisors had certainly expressed some concerns about the lack of clarity surrounding the nature, role, purposes and expectations of the exegesis. This was exacerbated by the fact that, in a smaller regional University, our Visual Arts HDR candidates sometimes require co-supervision from other schools. We felt it was essential that these co-supervisors, as well as our own students and supervisors, could be given a clear understanding of the creative thesis model: of the nature and purpose of the exegesis, and the relationship between the creative and the exegetical elements of this thesis model.

Against this background, then, we set out to 'illuminate the exegesis'. The questions initially motivating our research were questions being debated amongst students and staff: what is the role of the exegesis? What purpose or purposes does it and/or should it serve? What is, or should be, the relationship of the exegesis to the creative work? Should it be a separate theoretical

research project? Why do we have to write an exegesis at all? How should it be written? How do we train and support visual arts students to enable them to successfully produce this component of their thesis? How do we supervise and support students through the exegesis process?

We wanted to achieve, firstly, an overview of the range of ways the exegesis is being approached, and an overview of the range of opinion on how the exegesis should be approached. Secondly, we were interested in exploring the ongoing debates and discussions opinions around the subject of the exegesis, and providing a forum for candidates and supervisors experiences of the creative thesis and exegesis process. In practical terms, we wanted our research to identify an approach to the exegesis that we felt was most appropriate for the Arts Academy, to provide clarification for our students, supervisors and examiners, and the basis of research training for our higher degree candidates. Further, in order to provide a forum to stimulate conversation, discussion and debate on the creative thesis, we wanted to stage a one-day conference that would draw together contributions from interested staff and students from as many disciplines and institutions as possible.

In brief then, we set out firstly to identify the range of ways the exegesis component of Visual Arts higher degrees by research is being dealt with in universities across Australia. Rather than aim for conclusive and comprehensive data through a full survey of institutions, we decided it would be sufficient for our purposes to gather a 'sense' of the ways the exegesis is dealt with a search of university web sites: course listings, research pages, art school web pages, for information regarding higher degree course offerings, thesis components and requirements, and research training. Bearing in mind that institutions vary widely in the amount of information they make available on their web sites, the information retrieved from this search was not assumed to be definitive or complete.

We found, in this electronic survey of course descriptions, that quite a degree of variance is evident in practice, indicating underlying differences in the ways the creative thesis - and its components - are viewed. We found it interesting to look at the language used in course descriptions, for indications of underlying tensions or lack of clarity regarding the role and purpose of the exegesis. This comparative reading of course descriptions raises questions, and points toward areas of tension and potential uncertainty. For example, echoing in all these descriptions is probably the key, and single most relevant, question to consider in relation to the role, nature and purpose of the exegesis:

- Is art practice within the higher degree to be seen as research, or professional practice?

Other questions that emerge are:

- Is the degree seen as training for a research or scholarly career, or professional development as a practicing artist, or both?
- Are the scholarly and the creative dimensions of the project integrated? Do they exist in some kind of tension with one another?
- Is the creative thesis seen as an integrated thesis comprising creative and written components, or is the exegesis or dissertation, or even 'minor thesis' described as a distinct 'research' or scholarly project to accompany the studio component?
- What are the variations in weighting for creative and exegesis components and why?

By way of example, in a brief comparison of a range of requirements for the exegesis component of Master programs, at one end of the spectrum we have the minimal written requirement of a document of 'at least 1000 words' providing 'a description of the social, artistic and discursive context of the visual work' (1) and at the other end, a thesis of 20,000 words that 'synthesises research and creative practice' within an 'integrated project'. (2) It is notable that in the latter description, although the project is described as 'integrated', the implication in this phrasing is that *research* is separate from *practice*. This is reflective of a tendency evident in a number of course descriptions, suggesting, to varying degrees, some tension or opposition between ideas of art as research and art as practice. In these instances, the creative component of the work can frequently be cast as art practice or professional development, and 'research' as conventional scholarly - book based or library based - theoretical, analytical, or critical research.

For example, at one institution the Master of Arts is described as developing 'research skills', frequently as preparation for entry into a doctoral program, and is undertaken 'normally *by research* and may include a component of *professional practice*'. This degree requires a 'scholarly thesis' of 40,000 - 50,000 words, or a 'combination of a scholarly thesis and creative work'. In the second format, along the lines of the creative thesis model, the relationship between the 'scholarly thesis' and the creative work is not described, however it is noted that 'a brief explanatory annotation may be submitted as a support to the creative work submission'. (3)

At another institution (4) the Master of Visual Arts is described as 'an amalgam of studio-based research and the theorising of that research'. Reflecting this, the written component is described here as a dissertation (of 15-20,000 words) concerned with research relevant to the studio research objectives, which may address 'relevant contemporary critical debates and practices which inform and position' the studio work, or the relevant art historical context. (5)

At yet another institution, candidates' research projects are described as undertaken through 'supervised studio practice', and 'historical/theoretical research methodologies'. Assessment is by exhibition and a 'research paper' (10,000 words) which 'supports and complements' the exhibition. (6) Another offers a Master of Fine Arts described as consisting of a combination of thesis and creative work. The candidate must present for examination an exhibition of original artwork demonstrating 'technical accomplishment and imaginative resource', an exhibition catalogue including an essay of 4500-5500 words pertaining to the exhibition, *and* a thesis (not exceeding 25,000 words) on an aspect of art theory, history or criticism. (7)

In yet another combination of creative and research work, is the requirement of a combination of creative works (50%) and a written thesis or exegesis of 20,000 - 25,000 words. This thesis is described as the result of research that 'combines theory and practice' in an area of the creative arts. A minimum of 50% of the research is to involve theoretical study, which provides the 'framework' for the 'practical research' undertaken. (8) In this model, the creative work and the exegesis are not to be seen as separate and autonomous pieces of work, but together constitute the research outcome - *the thesis*. The exegesis is to be presented as a scholarly work, with a research question or hypothesis as the starting point, a literature review, a statement of methodology, chapters, fully cited resources and extensive bibliography. The written exegesis is required to 'describe the research process, and elaborate, elucidate and contextualise the work'. (9)

This idea of the exegesis as fundamentally a research report, that describes the research process, and 'elaborates, elucidates and contextualises' the resulting creative work, is even more fully articulated at an institution where the Master of Fine Arts is described as a 'research based studio program' comprising 'the production and ... exhibition of an original body of work within a clearly articulated conceptual and methodological framework'. This institution describes the thesis outcome as comprising an 'exhibition and documentation/dissertation in the form of a research report', in which a 'clearly articulated relationship between the domain of research for the documentation/dissertation and studio work is expected'. (10) The 'research report' is expected to comprise 'an outline of the research undertaken, a description of working methodology and of the work produced'. However, it may also include a written text which takes the form of 'a theoretical, historical (or other relevant) contextualisation of research and exhibition work', or 'a dissertation on a distinct field of research relevant to the studio work'. (11)

The generally accepted definition of the creative thesis is that where 'creative work plus exegesis' equal the thesis. Our survey of the practice has shown that this model is not uniformly and clearly articulated. The wide variance within universities and art schools in the description of this model of thesis and the use of the exegesis clearly leaves possibility for confusion, however it must also be said that this variety may also indicate increased opportunities for student choice and flexibility.

At the same time as surveying the practice, we undertook a literature search to establish an overview of the current debates and range of opinion on the creative thesis and the exegesis. By far the most significant contributions to the developing debates, we discovered, were to be found in the pages of *TEXT*. (12) While most of the published contributions come from the discipline of creative writing, they mirror many of the concerns likely to be expressed by those within the visual arts. While not wishing to review these debates in full, one example raises a number of key points, and in particular expresses the kinds of concerns we have heard expressed by our higher degree candidates and their supervisors.

In a paper entitled 'Eat Your Peas: The Creative Ph.D Thesis and the Exegesis', Ph.D candidate Gaylene Perry and her supervisor Kevin Brophy (Perry 2001) compare the compulsory exegesis requirement with the childhood experience of being forced by a parent to 'eat your peas' - with the obviously implied 'you may not like them, but they are good for you'. Mirroring a question frequently raised by visual artists, Perry asks why the creative thesis candidate should have to write an exegesis. Where visual arts higher degree candidates may protest that the training of their discipline did not provide for writing skills, creative writers share a similar concern. As Perry makes clear, creative writers may well ask why they are expected to move between creative and academic - analytical, critical or theoretical - modes of writing, and to demonstrate and prove their skills in both areas, when writers of conventional theses are not expected to be able to perform creatively as well as academically.

In beginning to identify what they see as problematic issues surrounding the use of the exegesis within the creative thesis, at issue for Perry and Brophy, are questions of, firstly, 'what constitutes an exegesis', and related to this, what is (or should be) the 'nature of an exegesis'. Secondly, there is the question of the 'relative weight an exegesis should be given in assessing a creative thesis'. Thirdly, they see as central to the 'problem' of the exegesis 'the notion that creative writers should be able to theorise their work'. Finally,

there is the question of whether or not 'creative work can be classified as research'. In Perry and Brophy's formulation, this final question, if answered in the affirmative, then comes full circle, re-questioning the role, purpose and 'stringent requirements' of the exegesis. If creative work is research, then why does it need to be justified, explained, or couched in research terms by an exegesis?

These debates are further entangled, in Perry and Brophy's discussion, with questions of research funding. If creative work can be classified as research, they argue, then 'applications for research funding should be open to creative writers, and perhaps the stringent requirements of the exegesis could be loosened.' (2001:89) Perry and Brophy's comments point toward an issue that we see as central to the 'problem' of the exegesis: the somewhat paradoxical problem of the definition of creative art practice within the higher degree context: art as research, or art as professional practice?

Strand's (Strand: 1998) definition distinguishes between 'research-based [art] practice, which is investigatory in nature and therefore eligible for research funding, and professional practice, which is not investigatory and consequently not eligible [for research funding]'. At issue here is how creative work sits within the University system. Perry and Brophy's comments suggest that the exegesis is a compulsory (eat your peas) component of the creative or practice based research thesis, that serves to legitimate creative activity within the university system. Implicit here is the idea that if creative research was really to be seen as *creative research*, then it should not need this legitimating device.

What is most at issue in the creative higher degree, we believe, is the nature of the research undertaking. Before we can adequately clarify the role of the exegesis within the creative thesis, we need to reflect on how art can be undertaken as research. Clearly, the creative higher degree needs to be understood not as research *about art* - the province of the theorist or the critic - but art practice undertaken *as research*. The key term in the definition provided by Dennis Strand (1998) is *investigatory*. In Visual Arts higher degrees, the emphasis, then, is on investigation. But this idea of '*investigation*' needs to be based in the *art practice*. Following from this comes the question of what is an exegesis, and what should it do? What purpose does it serve, and what should be the relationship between the exegesis and creative work?

The conclusion we have come to, for our purposes, is that if *art practice* is seen as the Iof a creative higher degree, then the exegesis can be conceptualised as fundamentally a research report that describes this research process. The research task or process can be seen as undertaken primarily in the studio, supported by fieldwork, library based, and other forms of research, as relevant to the research question and the methodology employed. The key here, is the idea that, in any discipline, the thesis presents the outcome - the results - of an independently undertaken research project. In the case of a creative thesis, the outcome of the independent research is a body of creative work. The role of the exegesis is to present the research framework: the key questions, the theories, the disciplinary and wider contexts, of the project. These things are not necessarily evident - to the examiner or viewer - in the creative work itself. The exegesis here serves to flesh these out, to make them explicit. (13) The exegesis, which 'elaborates, elucidates and contextualises' the resulting body of creative work, may be *more* or *less* theoretical and analytical, depending on the nature of the research question and the researcher. Finally, in this model, the researcher is enabled to produce an exegesis that, in outlining and describing the studio-based project, can

articulate the research *in the language of the discipline*: visual and practice based, with art practice at the centre of the research task.

A central - and the most public - part of the University of Ballarat Arts Academy's creative thesis/exegesis research project was the staging of a one day symposium entitled *Illuminating the Exegesis*. The symposium, held at the University's Camp Street Campus on March 28 2003, achieved its aim of broad and inclusive coverage and discussion, drawing together perspectives and participants from a range of visual, design, performing, literary and media arts disciplines. In excess of twenty papers were presented by higher degree candidates and supervisors, artists, practitioners, and academics, with keynote presentations from Dr Jeri Kroll, Associate Professor of English and Program Coordinator of Creative Writing, Flinders University, and Dr Robert Nelson, Associate Dean, Research and Graduate Studies, Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University.

The quality of papers and discussion was excellent, making a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversations around the subject of the creative thesis and its exegesis. The papers that follow have been selected from among those presented at the *Illuminating the Exegesis* Symposium.

## Endnotes

1. At Griffith University - Queensland College of Art, 'The Master of Visual Arts' in *Course Handbook*, 2001 Griffith University. Return to paper.
2. James Cook University's 'Master of Creative Arts' in *Course Handbook*, 2001, James Cook University. Return to paper.
3. 'Honours Master of Arts', University of Wollongong, [http://www.uow.edu.au/crearts/postgrad\\_mca\\_honours.html](http://www.uow.edu.au/crearts/postgrad_mca_honours.html) , accessed 29.06.01, last updated July 2000. Return to paper.
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9. The University of Melbourne, Faculty of Arts, School of Creative Arts, *Masters of Creative Arts Guidelines for Supervision* 2001: [http://www.sca.unimelb.edu.au/pgrad/mca\\_supervision.html](http://www.sca.unimelb.edu.au/pgrad/mca_supervision.html), accessed 3/09/01, last updated July 06, 2001. Return to paper.
10. Northern Territory University 0Course Repository 201, *Master of Fine Arts (MFA98)*: <http://Mindil.ntu.edu.au/ntu/>, accessed 29/06/01, last updated 12 August 2000. Return to paper.
11. Northern Territory University Course Repository 2001, *Master of Fine Arts (MFA98)*: <http://Mindil.ntu.edu.au/ntu/>, accessed 29/06/01, last updated 12 August 2000. Return to paper.
12. A list of papers published in *TEXT* and dealing with the exegesis and related debates is published in the special issue. Exegesis: Special Issue 3 Return to paper.
13. We are indebted here to the striking clarity of Deakin University's 'Advice to Examiners of Higher Degrees by Research: Doctor of Philosophy and Masters Degrees in the Visual and Media Arts', in *Guide to Candidature: Higher Degrees by Research 2000*, Deakin University Research Services, 2000, or Research Services <http://www.research.deakin.edu.au/> Return to paper.

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*Julie Fletcher is Research Assistant for Illuminating the Exegesis, in the Arts Academy, University of Ballarat, and is a PhD candidate at Deakin University, within the School of Communication and Creative Arts.*

*Allan Mann is Deputy Head of the Arts Academy at the University of Ballarat in Victoria, and is also President of the Print Council of Victoria.*

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**Editors: Julie Fletcher & Allan Mann**

**General Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady**

**[Text@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Text@griffith.edu.au)**