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Logos and Logic Under Seige: Performance and Research in the Performing, Visual and Creative Arts

Prior to the 1990 amalgamation of Universities and Colleges into a 'unified tertiary system', most arts trainers were outside universities, with funding structures appropriate for intensive teaching and practice rather than formal research, and those which were inside had made accommodations that permitted their survival. These were usually of three kinds:

- they existed primarily as arts scholarship - musicology, fine arts, drama studies;
- within a hegemonic relationship - drama lumped with literature under English, dance under human movement, fine arts and film under humanities, or any of them under education;
- as the 'Vice-chancellor's hobby garden' - with an upmarket version of the relationship in high schools, to provide music for the Graduation, and occasional art exhibitions and theatre production that would enhance the 'community service' reputation of the University.

The university funding structures, through DEET, did make a nod towards the performing and visual arts' differential and intense teaching needs, with their recommended funding scheme based on Humanities, that recognised the extra teaching needs of some of the arts, along with experimental sciences (though not those arts that were actually embedded in humanities or education).

In 1990 all tertiary arts training except for NIDA was unified - amalgamated to death in some cases, and with some considerable strain in all. For one thing, the funding systems were geared up differently, to serve what at first sight were different philosophical bases. The arts privilege motor and sensory skill formation; affective engagement and acknowledgment of the emotions; creativity and experiment; understanding and theory linked through practice; and hands-on teaching based on the notion of the master class. The bulk of the funding went on staff for teaching.

University knowledge on the other hand was based on two cognitive, positivistic and monologic traditions:

- the pre-Renaissance tradition of Logos - the passing on of the laws through the Word (singular) of the masters. Aspects of this include the 'heritage' tradition embodied in humanities;
- the post-Renaissance tradition of Logic - the process of establishing and validating fixed, objective truths about natural laws by systematic investigation, reference to which then forms the basis of further investigation.

These traditions directed that the funding went to researching the logos and the logic - teaching is mainly a way of directing people towards one or the other, and could be done in large groups, and if you are a student, skipped because you can read the books later.

During the last seven years the three options above have become unviable:

- Many of the artistic newcomers were too big to be incorporated or tamed under the hegemony of English or education or humanities;
- The 'hobby-garden' is no longer a valid option, because for one thing the funds for luxury courses have been cut consistently since 1990...and in the last year swingeingly. For another the inroad of artists has swelled the numbers to well over five per cent of the total tertiary pool - which is big money, one of the largest subject groupings in the whole tertiary system. Griffith's figure of over nine per cent doesn't even count all the staff and students in drama and theatre, creative arts, film and television and literature, who are all still embedded in other faculties.

There are still, of course, places for the traditional arts scholarship - but musicology and art history now have to face some quite new challenges to the very word 'research'.

Logos and logic are under siege in all faculties - even if the funding structures that support them are only chipping at the edges. Feminist, reflective practitioner, ethnographic, and action research, all deny the singular monologue. Not just text, but performance becomes the site for research, and that means research with a range of relative viewpoints - not only by and from the perspective of the audience, but by the artists themselves. The very arts transmogrify, shift and become Protean as they adapt to our multiple world with new aesthetic form, and find multi-media expression. Thus they become even harder to even examine with a singular scholarship. One might perform a nice variant cautionary tale on the Hindu elephant by using Griffith University's recent clowns-and-orchestra production of *The Marriage of Figaro*: if a musicologist, a drama studies scholar, a cultural studies scholar and a performance theorist examined it, would they even be able to converse about their findings, let alone find common ground from their scholarship? The heat of the reviews and the arguments the piece generated suggest not.

To make confusion further confounded for those who see University Research as a clear, linear concept, the word 'research' is one which has a real - and quite different - meaning for artists themselves. You don't write a play or a novel without researching subject and character. How different is that from scholarship? If artists and their art-making are a site for research and artists do research in their work, is art-making research? Is it some kind of equivalent?

So that is just the first challenge: what kind of scholarship is that making of knowledge and experience that we call art? The second is: how do we relate that to the University structure in which we all live (bar NIDA!)? What in fact do we have in common with other university practices? Is there perhaps more than shared high funding levels in the link with experimental sciences? The ARC lumps us together - and we often lump ourselves here too - with Humanities... However, do we really have more in common with the bookish and cognitive pursuit of truth through argumentation that characterises their mainstream, than with Occam's razor and the combination of imaginative leap, ruthless parsimony, dealing with chaotic contingency and painstaking detailed analysis and skill development that is the territory of science in the age of chaos theory and relativity?

And the third challenge is: what do we do about it? What can we do?

For those readers who, like most of us until recently, viewed university research as a Byzantine mystery quite alien to performers, a large amount of University funding comes for research, and is distributed according to the Research Quantum. There are three components, and Universities get money according to how high they score. The first component is National Competitive Grants, known in the Research Biz as NCGs. These comprise about one hundred bodies, mostly with names like the Australian Pig Foundation and Barley and Grain Growers Council. However, since two years ago, it has also included the Australia Council, whose role and value in the game is still being worked out.

The biggest of all these NCGs is the Australian Research Council (ARC). On the ARC there are thirteen panels, with Humanities, in which the arts are buried, number thirteen in a conspicuously non-alphabetical order that starts with Maths at number one. Competition for the money this organisation bestows is ferocious, and it has traditionally been the exclusive preserve of Logos and Logic. The Arts have a dismal record to date with the ARC - or should that be the other way round? In the past, if you put words like 'drama' or 'art' on your ARC application, it was unlikely to survive the first cull. However, there are chinks of light. The Humanities panel for the first time now has an artist on it - Geoff Parr from Tasmania - and has at least called for more assessors in the arts. The brand-new Chair of the ARC, Professor Vikki Sara, is for the first time a scholar from a new University (QUT) who has a background in the Arts - she was an actor, once - as well as her specialist field, molecular biology. In her first statement she stressed that she would be looking for more diversity in research. New-look research groupings, like QUT's Centre for Innovation in the Arts, are getting up a head of steam, stoked by multimedia arts, hybrid arts, applied arts, arts in non-conventional contexts, that are looking beyond the ARC as the only begetter of funds, and even maybe can find ways to challenge that monolith's monologic categorisations that dump us all at the bottom of number thirteen.

The next, much smaller, slice of the quantum is made up of points for publications; after a brief appearance of 'creative works' among these indicators, right down at J of course in the alphabetical order A-K, DEETYA has gone back to collecting only data on the traditional monologic indicators - commercially published scholarly books and refereed journals and conference publications. All other publications - including teaching texts, and publications by professional associations - are quaintly and dismissively known as 'vanity publishing' and no longer make it in these categories. HOWEVER, and this is important for the fight within each university, DEETYA calls them 'proxy categories' - it's **not** that the Universities **can't** count the rest, they say, but they are so messy and difficult to collect data on, and don't affect the final number much, they say. In terms of incentives for the arts, you could take out the 'r' in 'proxy'. This does make a strong imperative for us to lobby hard in our own universities to keep the J category recognised.

The last indicator is the number of graduated research higher degree students - again, a category that has an inbuilt bias against art-makers and practitioners. However, yet again there are glimmers of light: most universities now permit art making to be at least a part of a higher degree, so long as there's some good cognitive analysis there too. A few universities have gone the whole hog, like Wollongong, with their Masters and Doctors of Creative Arts.

So the final challenge is: can we reconfigure ourselves, in our own minds as well as the minds of the rule makers of this University game, so that we can get to play it on - to pursue the metaphor with appropriately corporate clichés - a level playing field and with static goalposts?

After all, the successful players base their game plan on quite reasonable, in some ways even democratic, rules: that the only fair judges of scholarship are peer scholars, and that there are identifiable levels of achievement that can be at least notionally agreed upon. The ARC is based on peer assessment, something we've used and bickered about in the Australia Council for years, but we've barely started to apply it in the University system. The Publications Index is (theoretically at least, and in practice in most universities now) based on a graded system for identifying the level of a particular achievement of knowledge. Again, the tertiary arts associations are just beginning to get around to thinking this through carefully, rather than with the hostile knee-jerk we all felt when it was first mooted to us. (What! Us...on a list...with points? Tush.)

Which brings us up to the present, where we can draw inspiration from two converging national initiatives, both in fact funded by DEETYA. At ANU, David Williams and Dennis Strand are completing a major Research Project in the Creative Arts in Universities, initially driven mainly by visual arts and design, with music joining in enthusiastically. As with Geoff Parr's successful ARC raid, the visual arts people look to be leading the intelligent assault on the system. In May 1997, leaders of tertiary performing arts departments - meaning at this point music, theatre and dance - and representatives of most of the tertiary performing arts organisations, met under the aegis of the VCA for a three day symposium. Griffith presence consisted of Simone de Haan - literally a key player, as he gave a keynote address through his trombone that seemed to perplex the DVC Research at Melbourne University - and myself, there kind-of by accident. The results of this meeting have been written up and are available on the net, via VCA. At this meeting there was much good discussion on all the above issues, with a generous and non-territorial ambience very noticeable. We were able to share some useful insights from other areas. Some of the music people are well on the way to coming up with a well-defined index of publication-equivalent performance indicators. The Australasian Drama Studies Association is wrestling with making peer-assessment a realistic proposition.

The most significant results for me were:

- a much clearer understanding of our common position and role in universities, and in fact the diversity of roles that must be protected and fostered in different-shaped organisations, in spite of the University's need to streamline and rationalise;
- that this commonality extends right across the range of those who profess themselves to be artists in universities, and must include film-makers, novelists and poets, computer artists and graphic designers, multi-media artists and arts educators, at least;
- some optimism that the bastions of monolithic and monologic privilege are not impregnable, and that the cracks can be widened by deft arts sappers with the right explosives;
- maybe the arts are, after all, a bit ordinary, and the special difficulties we dramatise for ourselves are actually no different from those that many other disciplines have had to face in other decades, in becoming part of the university system - such as engineering, education, veterinary science and human movement;
- as a common arts grouping we are a very considerable potential force in University life and funding: in raw terms well over five per cent nationally (my guess is over six, when the hegemonised brothers and sisters are counted), and in Griffith over nine per cent - again, probably closer to eleven. Think how many millions of dollars that is, in terms of operating and infrastructure costs. As separate entities we are no more than passive, powerless drops in the ocean, each art representing under one per cent.

We have to get clever and play together, within each university, and with arts providers in our sister universities. Maybe we can take and utilise the 'unified system' ourselves - to divide and rule (and then forget) is an easy option for university governance, and we have only ourselves to blame if we continue to let them use it, because 'them' is also 'us', now.

[Editors' Note: In this issue *TEXT* is conducting a national mapping of Writing courses in Australian tertiary institutions. Please fill in the electronic survey form ([click here](#)) and use the easy email return facility. For more information see *The Mouse*.]

Notes and debate generated from this article

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TEXT

Vol 2 No 1 April 1998

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

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