

Editorial - Special Issue

Establishing Art Practice as Research at the University of Malta

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This special edition of the the *Malta Review of Educational Research* (MRER) focuses on an area of scholarship that is, by its very nature, very unstable. Locating the role of contemporary artistic practices within a variety of university-based research paradigms is not a straightforward process because the field of contemporary art is itself quite complex, heterogenous, context-specific and prone to change. While research in most other academic disciplines (such as medicine) is also prone to constant revisions on the basis of thorough experimentation, fieldwork and scientific scrutiny, contemporary art often deliberately defies or challenges expectations and preconceptions, making any assessment of creative or epistemological 'results' more difficult. Art today often questions its own criteria, hierarchies, conventions and, to some extent, its own relevance and existence in a society that is increasingly dominated by homogenising, consumer-driven notions of 'value'. In a very real sense, art can only critique this homogeneity by maintaining a condition of instability.

Yet, this initial quick sketch of the subject under study in this issue of MRER merely elucidates a situation that is generically evident in most cultural contexts in which this field is theorised; in short, it does not tell us anything about the specificity of our local discussion of the field. The University of Malta context reflects, in some ways, a relatively high degree of fluidity for three additional reasons. The first of these is that studies in fine art (or related areas of specialisation) are still in their infancy at the university, and are not supported by a solid foundation or tradition of fine art studies *outside* the university. The Malta School of Art in Valletta, for instance, has never been

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successfully transformed into an academy during its ninety years of existence, and one might debate the necessity or possibility of such a move in a post-Bologna Process age.

The second reason is that art practice has not yet carved its own autonomous space on campus. 'Space' here refers both to a tangible, physical footprint packed with essential furnishings and equipment and also to an intellectual dimension that is not excessively weighed down by constraints pertaining to other academic fields. To a large extent, artistic practice at the University of Malta still plays second fiddle to other fields, like education, architecture, and the history of art. This is not to say that interdisciplinary exchanges are unwelcome or unfruitful or even that the study of art can only take place within the parameters of a strict formalism or skills-based position; quite the contrary, imaginative renegotiations of taken-for-granted orthodoxies often happen at academic points of intersection that are characterised by tensions and unfamiliar linkages. In fact, this issue of MRER locates itself precisely at some of these disciplinary intersections, mainly because it reflects an existing scenario at the University of Malta, and also because understanding the status of artistic research at such meeting points is crucial. Yet, a dialogue between any two given disciplines can only be truly equitable if they are both supported by solid, independent foundations. An interdisciplinary chorus can only be truly congruous if art is also permitted to discover its own voice and make it heard.

Thirdly, artistic practice is now finally starting to find its place in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that were either recently established or are being planned for the coming years in different faculties at the University of Malta. This means that the field is currently passing through a period of transition that will undoubtedly leave an impact both on its autonomy as an academic discipline and on the status of artistic practice as a form of research.

A debate like that being initiated by this issue of MRER therefore forms part of a process of reflection, self-appraisal and practical recommendation that is mandatory during this period of academic transition. Given that the authors of the papers in this issue are all artistic practitioners who are, however, academically located in different faculties, it was felt that this academic 'separation' needs to be reflected in each author's thematic remit, which situates the role of artistic practice within their specific faculties or research interests. Simultaneously, art provides this collection with a bridge that links the different papers conceptually and/or methodologically. In fact, a key idea that runs through some of the papers is the importance of respecting the relevance and autonomy of artistic practice while simultaneously strengthening interdisciplinary perspectives in the academic programmes offered or planned by each of the faculties represented in this issue of MRER.

At the same time, the authors of the papers also have markedly different priorities and positions that emerge in their writings, especially in relation to what they see to be most lacking within the context of the University of Malta or at a national level and to their views on the relationship between critique and innovation on one hand and craft and/or tradition on the other.

The first paper by Dr Vince Briffa, who heads the department of Digital Arts at the Faculty of Media & Knowledge Sciences, is perhaps the paper that is most solidly located within fine arts practice, given that the postgraduate degree described and evaluated by its author is a Master in Fine Arts (MFA) in Digital Arts. Briffa focuses on the juncture of practice and theory in graduate studies within his faculty, relating this juncture to yet another: the significance of context and communication in the fields of art and design. Dr Ruth Bianco's paper contextualises research in fine art in the field of architecture, given that she lectures within the Faculty of the Built Environment. Yet, she argues in favour of a greater autonomy for artistic practice at the University of Malta, at the same time as she draws a path forward for artistic research in higher education that steers clear of pedagogical homogenisation by celebrating "a philosophy of interdisciplinarity". Also based in the Faculty of the Built Environment yet simultaneously immersed in a Cultural Studies paradigm, Dr John Grech analyses and criticises the absence of a proper platform for Cultural Studies at the University of Malta, and discusses its possible alliance with practical, creative research in the visual arts within the same context. Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci links his background in the History of Art department at the Faculty of Arts with the ambition of his faculty to initiate fine art studies, striving to combine a knowledge of history, philosophy and other disciplines with a thorough grounding in praxis which confronts rather than steers clear of the related questions of technique and craft. Finally, Dr Raphael Vella, who co-ordinates the Art Education programmes at the Faculty of Education, argues in favour of giving practice-based research a more central role to play in educational research, which is generally dominated by methodologies informed by the social sciences.