

## **Monstrous Thinking: on Practice-based Research**

Cómhar, 7<sup>th</sup> ELIA Biennial Conference, Dublin, Ireland, 24-26 October, 2002

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### **Chairpersons:**

Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge (University of Plymouth)

### **Editorial Abstract:**

This editorial introduces papers given at a Symposium entitled 'Monstrous Thinking: on practice-based research', which took place at the seventh annual conference of the European League of the Institutes of Art, in Dublin, 2002.

The practice-based research indicated in the title of the Symposium refers to the relatively new culture of doctoral art practice. Debate and discussion has been ongoing for several years into the nature of this form of doctoral research, to try to understand how it operates, and how to locate it within the broader framework of academic research degrees. The international panel of speakers at the Symposium contributed a series of dynamic papers which raised important issues and provoked much interest in and around the (monstrous) thinking which not only surrounds this new culture, but is at the heart of its practice.

Timothy Emlyn Jones gave an historical overview of the commonality and difference between doctoral education in Art & Design and other disciplines and offered potential for new precedents. Lucien Massaert recommended the advocacy of a structuralist framework employing philosophical, topological and psychoanalytical approaches to develop a rigorous mode of thinking in art, aesthetic research and thinking.

Siun Hanrahan provided an exploration of the exchange between art and research and how that which is generated, challenges and enriches both and adds to our means of making 'sense' *of* and *in* the world. Peter Dallow posited the premise that practice-oriented approaches to research into the creative arts are well-suited to examine how the aesthetic knowledge embedded in practical knowledge is deployed in arts practice doctoral research.

Two further speakers explored questions, themes and issues arising from their doctoral and post-doctoral practices through their chosen topics: Heidi Tikka on *spaciality and spectatorship* and Trish Lyons on *mimesis in practice*.

The Symposium has generated much interest, both in Europe and internationally. The debate is still ongoing, for what we all wish to say is not yet being said.

### **Speakers:**

#### **Timothy Emlyn Jones**

Dean, Burren College of Art, Ireland

Timothy Emlyn Jones has worked in a number of art schools and universities including the Glasgow School of Art, Wimbledon School of Art and the University of Wolverhampton. As an artist he has exhibited internationally and is represented in several public collections.

#### **Heidi Tikka**

Professor, Media Lab at the University of Art & Design in Helsinki, Finland

Heidi Tikka is also a practising media artist. In her installations she frequently questions the place of the spectator within the work. She is currently writing her PhD dissertation.

#### **Lucien Massaert**

Creator and Co-ordinator, Postgraduate Research in Art Practice and Theory, The Brussels Academy of Fine Arts, Belgium

Lucien Massaert is also Founder and Director of the aesthetic review *La Part de l'Oeil* since 1985, and since 1997, of the publishing house of the same name. He has published a dozen papers which mark the stages of an attempt to develop a structural theory of the plastic arts.

#### **Peter Dallow**

Lecturer in Visual Culture Studies, School of Contemporary Arts, University of West Sydney, Australia

Peter Dallow has a background in media arts practice and creative arts research and has just completed his first novel.

### **Trish Lyons**

Senior Lecturer in Sculpture, Camberwell College of Art, London, UK

Trish Lyons completed her PhD on the Mimetic in Fine Art Practice at Central Saint Martins, London Institute, and has exhibited widely. She is currently investigating the potential applications of biomimetics in art and design practice

### **Siún Hanrahan**

Lecturer, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

Siún Hanrahan is also an artist and writer and completed her PhD, combining sculpture and philosophy, in 1997 at the University of Ulster at Belfast. She has exhibited in the UK and Italy and presented papers and essays internationally.

### **Endnote: Thinking through art**

Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge

Our own research (Macleod 1996-, Holdridge 1998-) began by examining the relationship between the written submission and the submitted artwork in order to discover how an art practice doctorate might compare with a conventional academic thesis as written text. The research has since gone far beyond its original enquiry to embrace how art functions as knowledge, its distinctive characteristics and qualities. Above all it has demonstrated that art employs powerful ways of thinking which have wide implications both in and beyond the academic frame. Current research is being drawn together in a forthcoming book, 'Thinking through art: art/philosophy/language', Swets & Zeitlinger (Taylor & Francis), 2004. The book includes several of the ELIA strand speakers and it will illuminate the different ways in which artistic vision precipitates new thinking. Its intention is not to define such vision, but to reveal how artists and academics have cast light on how *thinking through art* leads to new thought.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, artistic vision has been curiously silenced by the more fashionable discourses of linguistics/semiotics, new art histories, psychoanalytic theory, et al. The impact of this on art has been devastating. It has led to the neglect of any deep consideration of what it is to *think through art*. However, the new breed of artist/researchers ('monstrous thinkers') undertaking doctoral study, have elegantly demonstrated that reflexive enquiry into the realisation of artworks, does envision thought. This is thought which is both ontological and philosophic. It may also include hermeneutics, aesthetics, phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory, psychology, cultural and political theory. It is not a new art history, nor new critical or cultural theory; it is very precisely *thinking through art* which is as yet unclaimed by any one discipline. It has been constructed by artists and academics, all of whom are researching beyond the current boundaries of their disciplines.

It is not for the faint hearted, because an artwork's significance is not to be found simply in the work, an interpretation of the work, the artist's intentions or any extant theory. This new thinking operates in the space between art and interpretation. Hence the hermeneutic philosopher and the aesthete may also provide strategic thinking about the context of current culture. However, this is emphatically a culture determined by artistic practice and thought, which in the context of doctoral study, becomes theorised practice. Our mutual researches take us on a route beyond conventional theory/practice or current art theory debates. Recent publications on 'what art is' reference art theory, aesthetics and art history. However, although such publications discuss thinking *about* art, there is no other current material in the field which explains this thinking *of* art.

The theorisation of practice therefore, does not produce 'theory' in the sense in which it is generally understood. The theory proposed by artist/researchers is more in the nature of a hybrid. It uses extant theory, its own art principles, their relation to historical precedent and the materially realised ideas released through the artwork. We might say that this constitutes an interactive and fluid dialogue that is more than the sum of its parts. The clue to any understanding of this is that artist/researchers' theoretical constructions are not embedded in the word alone. They are generated by word, artwork and in many instances, gesture. We could, perhaps, characterise theorised artwork as provoking a complex dialogic conversation of artist, act, viewer and artwork. Each has its own provenance but it is in relation that we can conceive the new objects of thought being generated. One artist researcher describes this as 'relational objects of thinking'.

The artists commissioned for the book open up the ways in which they think through the activity called art.

In their disinterested, advanced research, artists provide evidence of a difficult ontological status where subjectivity cannot be dismissed. We all need to reckon individually with a complex world and if possible, an ethical positioning within it. The acutely critical reflexivity of

artists' thinking encourages us to make this a possibility. The theory that we propose here can be seen in the nature of a 'living theory'; it comes out of material practice and subjective criticality that has been objectively realised.

Art thought is indeed critical thought. It is not critical or cultural theory, nor is it art history. Its criticality is engendered by thinking which hits against discipline boundaries and the determinations of the written word. It is challenging in its hybridity and reflexive in its discourse, which returns to both the author/artist and the viewer what has been made. We have necessarily drawn on philosophy and critical theorists of language to tease out the depth of meaning embedded in the work which makes a clear case for the steady contemplation of art and how it functions in the world as *thought*.