‘Comprehensible by June’?
Problems of interpretation of art in and as research in higher education in Ireland

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Abstract
The title of this paper is taken from an address by the former director of the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in Dublin to graduating fine art students, in which he acknowledged the unique pressures that bear down on art students: ‘many of the great artists were only comprehensible long after they died; you however, have to be comprehensible by June’. This issue of comprehensibility, is particularly problematic in respect of research in the creative arts.

The role of education has been acknowledged by commentators as crucial in the economic and social transformation of the Republic of Ireland over the past 15 years. In recent years, a major investment in higher education research has been made with specific reference to economic dividends for the state. In his 2005 budget speech announcing this initiative, the Minister for Finance declared:

The basis for future growth and prosperity is investment in the knowledge, skills and innovation capacity that will drive economic and social development in an increasingly competitive global environment. The higher education system must deliver people who will expand knowledge-based business located in Ireland. This will
require substantial change and quality improvement.

While the role of the arts in Irish life has traditionally been an honoured one, the treatment of the arts in education has never been a national priority. The ‘research agenda’ in Ireland, reflecting the international pattern, is the current dominant issue in Higher Education, and has brought with it a number of dilemmas for the creative arts education communities - e.g. the perceived imbalance between teaching and research imperatives, perceptions of preferential treatment for science and technology over the humanities and arts, and a sense of marginality in relation to stated national economic priorities. The domain of arts education has been particularly challenged by the advent of new research policies and the associated competitive funding systems. Three distinct but related issues have had severe impact on the capacity of the arts education community to engage with the new research scenario:

- the lack of recognition of the creative and expressive arts as a distinct disciplinary area for funding;
- the contested understandings of arts practices as legitimate research methods;
- the inherent dilemmas in arts disciplines themselves as to what, if anything, distinguishes arts practice from arts research.

This paper, presented from the particular perspective of visual arts education, addresses these issues with specific reference to the Irish experience in the past decade. The paper comprises three sections. In the first part, recent national reviews and initiatives in Irish higher education research policy - including an OECD external review, a major government-funded Programme of Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLI) and a targeted programme of funding sponsored by the Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) - are analysed in terms of their treatment of the arts. The emergence of a new research environment in higher education is described, with particular reference to the evolution of national policy, the perceived linkages between higher education research cultures and economic prosperity, and the related ‘restructuring’ agenda currently at work in Higher Education linked to new governance arrangements and competitive institutional funding. The Irish experience of educational restructuring is compared to the international experience and while common patterns are discerned,
some significant distinctions are also described, notably in relation to the absence of an overt ideological orientation in policy evolution.

In the second part, the implications of the changed national environment for the art education community and the responses of that community are described. A critical overview of research practices incorporating arts-based methodologies is provided. Some of the possibilities and problems that these practices present for art education are examined. The experience of the visual arts education community over the past ten years is described, firstly in relation to the development of a postgraduate practice in what was previously predominantly undergraduate provision. The subsequent development of Doctoral programmes in art and design is analysed in the context of the emerging research culture at national level and the fortunes of the art colleges sector in respect of research funding are described. The emergence of a ‘fourth level’ imperative in higher education is examined and the difficulties that the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) and other art colleges have experienced in addressing this new field are discussed. The difficult and contentious process that led to the recognition of the Creative Arts as a research category with its own integrity and rationale within the national research funding programme (PRTLI) is described. Finally, specific current research initiatives are presented as exemplars of what a burgeoning community in art education research can contribute to a changed educational landscape. Two broad themes are examined. Firstly, the evolution of a research community in arts education is examined in terms of the heated debate that took place and still continues within the art education community in Ireland as to what constitutes research as distinct from practice. The meaning of knowledge and the creation of new knowledge in the context of a creative arts practice is examined. A distinction is drawn between the concept of arts-based research methodologies and the concept of arts practice as research. This distinction is analysed in relation to current perceptions and misconceptions of the nature and purpose of research in the creative arts and an argument is made for the separation of these two concepts. Secondly, specific research projects and initiatives in arts research in Ireland are analysed in terms of their stated or implicit epistemological positions. Implications for future policy and practice in education research in general and arts education in particular, are presented.
Introduction

In an address to graduating fine art students who were submitting their degree projects for assessment in summer 2002, the then Director of the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in Dublin, acknowledged the unique pressures that bear down on art students: ‘many of the great artists were only comprehensible long after they died; you however, have to be comprehensible by June’ (Sheridan, p. 5).

Sheridan was identifying an inherent dilemma in art education: the extent to which objective assessment criteria can be applied to subjective creative processes. This issue of ‘comprehensibility’, has been addressed and largely resolved in art education through the practice of art education itself, the shared experiences of the international community of art education practitioners. The development of initial degree programmes in art and design is a well established, though relatively young phenomenon, with an equally well-established international practice at masters’ level established over the past fifteen years or so. Doctoral level studies have been a more recent development and the landscape is still evolving in this domain, with varied practices and protocols at work in different parts of the world. Research understood as the creation of new knowledge presents the visual art education constituencies with many challenges: it is particularly problematic in respect of the ‘comprehensibility’ of that research, not just to fellow practitioners but more generally to wider non-practitioner audiences and in particular to research policy-makers and funders.

Performativity, the arts and the process of education reform

The role of education has been acknowledged by commentators as crucial in the economic and social transformation of the Republic of Ireland over the past 15 years. National economic strategy recently has been shaped by the need to support a strong research and development culture within the economy, in the context of a globalised market and increased mobility of capital. In recent years, a major investment in higher education research has been made with specific reference to economic dividends for the state.

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Finally, specific current research initiatives are presented as exemplars of what a burgeoning community in art education research can contribute to a changed educational landscape. Two broad themes are examined. Firstly, the evolution of a research community in arts education is examined in terms of the heated debate that took place and still continues within the art education community in Ireland as to what constitutes research as distinct from practice. The meaning of knowledge and the creation of new knowledge in the context of a creative arts practice is examined. A distinction is drawn between the concept of arts-based research methodologies and the concept of arts practice as research. This distinction is analysed in relation to current perceptions and misconceptions of the nature and purpose of research in the creative arts and an argument is made for the separation of these two concepts. Secondly, specific research projects and initiatives in arts research in Ireland are analysed in terms of their stated or implicit epistemological positions. Implications for future policy and practice in education research in general and arts education in particular, are presented.

Ball (2003, p. 215) suggests that ‘an unstable, uneven but apparently unstoppable flood of closely inter-related reform ideas is permeating and reorienting education systems in diverse social and political situations which have very different histories’. This flood of reform is characterised by three inter-related policy technologies - market, managerialism and performativity. In looking at performativity, Ball suggests
that what is at stake is more than a technical formulation of policy but a more deeply transformative process of meaning. ‘It is not that performativity gets in the way of ‘real’ academic work or ‘proper’ learning, it is a vehicle for changing what academic work and learning are!’ (p. 226). In other words, educational success is increasingly being seen as an entity measurable in terms of specific pre-defined outcomes.

In the creative and expressive arts, the concept of performativity is particularly problematic, containing as it does connotations of ‘performance’, a concept integral to the meaning of many art forms. Performativity, as distinct from self-directed or self-enabled ‘performance’, is described by Butler as ‘a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s will or choice; further what is performed works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable’ (1993). The behaviour of the performer is determined by roles, expectations and criteria which have been set out prior to the performance and which delimit the nature of that performance. As such, the policy imperative of performativity is dangerously opposed to the integral self-performance of the artist and by extension, the artist-researcher.

In this context, the challenge for an underdeveloped arts education constituency in Ireland to establish itself as a significant presence in a rapidly changing environment of higher education and research has been great. Conventional understanding of research among policy makers and even among the wider academic community has not included the domains of practice in the arts. At best, there has been a limited recognition of arts-practice as a methodology to inform or facilitate the emergence of academic research findings, but, even then, the dominant discourse in national research policy formulation has been an instrumentalist one.

**Educational policy mapping in Ireland**

Since the early 1990s, there has been an unprecedented series of policy documents, legislation and initiatives in the field of education. The White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* (1995) was a landmark document, providing a coherent rationale and vision for education. The intrinsic values of education were recognised; ‘(t)ime spent in education is not just a preparation for life but is also a lengthy and important period of
life itself’ (p. 10). The White Paper endeavoured to outline an inclusive education policy which incorporated but was not dominated by a concern for economic development.

While the initial impetus for this policy renewal may have been driven by concerns for equity and inclusion, and for professional empowerment within the education sector, the structures and systems that have emerged are highly centralised and programmed. Recent official policy positions, notably the restructuring of higher education and the huge public investment in a national programme of research in higher education institutions have been much more overtly driven by national economic imperatives. The major policy steps taken in recent years are characterised by the recurring dualisms of autonomy versus centralisation, of academic freedom versus strategic priorities and of professional empowerment versus technical implementation. The dominant practice that has emerged defines education provision in terms of learning outcomes, of targets and of levels in various contexts. This is particularly true of recent policy developments in higher education, such as the new funding mechanism for third level institutions (HEA, 2006).

Some ten years after the publication of the Education White Paper, the Irish Minister for Finance announced a very significant initiative in relation to research funding for higher education and the development of an internationally competitive ‘fourth level’ research sector of education. In his budget speech (Cowen, 2005), the Minister for Finance declared:

The basis for future growth and prosperity is investment in the knowledge, skills and innovation capacity that will drive economic and social development in an increasingly competitive global environment. The higher education system must deliver people who will expand knowledge-based business located in Ireland. This will require substantial change and quality improvement.

This explicitly instrumentalist view of higher education epitomised the policy drift which to a certain extent had been camouflaged by the rhetoric of educational discourse. These same instrumentalist imperatives can be seen – less overtly but no less substantially – in the work of influential policy advisory groups, encompassing the
domains of senior cycle, further and higher education. For example, a very significant discussion document issued by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), proclaimed that … It would be a major policy error, with serious negative moral and ethical implications, if higher education and research system activities were subordinated to economic activities. …We refute any view that there is a choice to be made between so-called ‘utilitarian’ and ‘higher order’ objectives for education and research… we need to strive for a holistic education and research system which provides us as individuals, and as a society, with the means to make our contributions in the economic, social and cultural domains of our society, but which also provide us with the means to achieve our personal goals for self realisation and fulfilment’ (2002, p. 37)

Despite this strongly felt and unequivocally stated position, the general thrust of the first round of the major research programme launched by the HEA, the Programme for Research in Third Level institutions (PRTLI), was perceived, especially by art educators and researchers, as being led by considerations of technology, innovation and commercialisation.

Another report of strategic importance, *Ahead of the Curve; Ireland’s Place in the Global Economy* (Enterprise Strategy Group, 2004) was designed to ‘promote the emergence of an innovation- and knowledge-driven economy’ (p. 124). This report identified ‘world class skills, education and training’ as one of five sources of competitive advantage. The report acknowledged that its concern was only with the economic perspective on education. It confidently stated that the economic role of education was complementary to the social and cultural roles: ‘future enterprise will place a premium on well-rounded and creative individuals …’ (footnote, p. 73) It also recognised that its concentration on upper secondary and higher education did not imply that these are more important than other levels. Yet, in the flow of policy discussion of which this report was a major element, the economic imperative clearly took precedence.

Similarly, a landmark OECD (2004) study of higher education in Ireland had two key elements in its brief:
the need to ensure that the higher education sector can fulfil the transcending roles of developing students to their full potential and pursuing knowledge for its own sake while being open and flexible in meeting an increasing diversity of needs and demands associated with the knowledge society, lifelong learning, globalisation, meeting the needs of national and regional economies and of local communities, together with contributing to social cohesion and equity (p. 68).

However, the tone of the report was dominated by the second of these transcending roles. Thus, the report stated that ‘(a)ll the evidence we received from government departments and from institutional representatives pointed to the critical importance to the economy which Ireland accorded to the primary products of the tertiary education - qualified workforce and research’ (p. 44).

A central figure in the process of educational reform over the period in question observed that ‘national policy makers and administrators should see academic freedom and institutional autonomy as desirable features of higher education systems and not as problematic constraints’ (Thornhill, 2002, p. 20). Thornhill went on to assert what he termed the ‘ethical’ and the ‘efficiency’ arguments for academic freedom, advocating a ‘carrot’ rather than a ‘stick’ approach to higher education funding. Again, the key features of the emergent higher education system he describes include a competitive funding mechanism and a high stakes research capability.

Commenting on this cumulative build-up of policy discourse and governmental initiatives, a former Taoiseach (prime minister) contrasted it with the viewpoint of the Council of Europe (‘a less economy-dominated body than the OECD and the European Commission’) that ‘the academic mission to meet the requirements and needs of the modern world and contemporary society can best be performed when universities are morally and intellectually independent of all political and religious authority and economic power’ (Fitzgerald, 2006). He also noted that while the Universities Act (1997) established this autonomy for Irish universities, he doubted that ‘this guarantee of autonomy has been adequately safeguarded by our government … in their attempts to push one aspect of university studies as against another eg research versus teaching or business studies against humanities - politicians and civil servants are too
often influenced by short-term economic considerations, or even by transitory educational fashions, into distorting the system’.

There is a recurring refrain in much of the discourse of the need for balance, the importance of arts/humanities as well as science/technology and the recognition of holistic values in education. This is almost invariably a genuine and sincere expression of intent. Yet, the policy agenda, as manifested in research and in governance and funding issues in higher education, in curriculum and assessment matters at second level and in qualifications and credentials practices in all sectors is towards accountability, measurability and economic dividends. This constitutes a significant change in the ethos of debate as compared to that which prevailed in the lead-up the Universities Act (1997).

**Arts-research in Ireland**

In Ireland, in recent years the research environment in which higher education institutions operate has been transformed. A series of funding cycles within the national Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLI) has occurred. Since 1999 some €605 million has been committed to establishing research infrastructures, programmes and personnel in higher education institutions over four cycles of funding. Within the first three cycles of funding, however, not a single art college nor a single arts-based programme received PRTLI funding. This was not for lack of trying. After Cycle 3 in particular, the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) engaged in concerted discussion with the Higher Education Authority, the body under whose auspices the PRTLI programme is administered, in an effort to re-design the parameters within which funding would take place. Crucially, an agreement was reached that under Cycle 4, the Creative Arts would be recognised as a valid discrete domain for application - hitherto, applications had to be under such thematic streams as ‘humanities, social sciences or business. This was a crucial conceptual breakthrough. An important evaluation report on research infrastructure (HEA/Forfás, 2006) published around the same time gave an illuminating overview of facilities. This report highlighted the serious under-funding of creative arts and media in terms of research capacity and potential.
Under cycle 4, the most recent round of PRTLI funding, NCAD in collaboration with other institutions, was successfully awarded funding for the establishment of a research centre - the Graduate School in Creative Arts and Media (GradCAM). This has major practical as well as symbolic significance for the advancement of arts-based and arts-led research in Ireland.

Practice-led research at doctoral level is a quite new entity in Ireland. The development of policy and practice has been influenced by developments in other jurisdictions, notably in fellow member states of the EU. The particular developments that occurred in the 1990s in the UK have been noted as shaping the context within which similar evolution occurred in Ireland (Jordan 2004). The broader experience of the EU in general has also been significant with particular reference to the Bologna process. (ELIA, 2004). The distinctions between fine art and design experiences internationally have been noted in this context:

The art and design process as a problem-solving process can therefore be termed a research process. The question remains as to whether there are not always two processes that influence each other - the intuitive design process and the systematic process (Coumans, 2004, p.66)

However, the application of this concept of dual processes has been more difficult to resolve in fine art than in design

Within NCAD, and under the jurisdiction of the National University of Ireland which awards our degrees, doctoral research until recently had been seen as academic in traditional terms - thus, PhD theses in education, visual culture or history of art were presented in conventional humanities format. However, in recent years, practice-led research projects at doctoral level have been introduced within a research structure and presentational format that is still evolving. The standard model that currently applies is centred on the studio or practical component but requires an accompanying theoretical thesis of some 40,000 words. This again reflects the international experience (MacLeod and Holdridge, 2004). Already, however, a number of other modes are being proposed incorporating options such as visual essays or the written commentary as an integral element of the practical work. The implicit momentum is towards establishing the integrity of the practical work on its own terms.
Characteristics of arts-based research

While there has been a significant growth in the acceptance and usage of arts-based research methods in research fields ranging from the social to the medical sciences, these applications are generally seen and used as a metaphor for 'true' knowledge or as a means of illuminating that 'true' knowledge. Arts-based research methods are seen as interpretive lenses through which data can be viewed or accessed. While this is a valid and creative methodology it does not constitute arts research as such and it does not recognise the creative process of art as generating and embodying knowledge in itself. The knowledge generated through the application of these research methods usually remains enshrined in the codes and language of other disciplines within the humanities and sciences.

Arts research involves the creation of knowledge in a specific and unique configuration. It is concerned more with understanding than with explanation - the concern for the residual meanings of artworks, that might be transferred to application in other contexts ‘may be better understood as the results of a quest for understanding which allows us to see familiar things differently, rather than a quest for explanation which might allow us to see many things in their similarities’ (Thompson, 2006, p.3).

One school of thought suggests that the appropriate locus for the application of arts-based research is in those arenas of crisis or loss where conventional understandings are inadequate. The term ‘a/r/tography has been used to describe such a research perspective, envisaged as a conscious and enacted way of knowing and of living for artist, researcher and teacher. Springgay, Irwin and Kind (2005), in describing this approach, note that loss, shift and rupture are foundational concepts or metonyms for a/r/tography. They create openings, they displace meaning and they allow for slippages. Loss, shift and rupture create presence through absence, they become tactile, felt and seen (898).

Sullivan, however, proposes a more comprehensive model of arts-based research, founded in the essential nature of the knowledge embodied in the practice of the artist rather than in her situation or context. This position asserts the intellectual rigour of artistic practice, and is bound up in the recognition that contemporary artists
are increasingly engaged in conceptual enquiry, regardless of which particular medium they employ.

The intellectual and imaginative 'space' within which an artist works cannot be confined to pushing around pigments or pixels. Nor for that matter is the studio the only physical space where this occurs – productive artistic activity takes place in just about every setting imaginable, from the classroom to the community, the industrial park to the Internet, and the subway to the highway. The critical point is that messing around with thoughts has replaced messing around with media as a primary feature of artistic practice that shapes the creation of artefacts in their various forms.

Drawing on the perceived polarities of research modes in physics and in art, one commentator (King, 2002) recently posited a relationship and distinction between these forms of knowledge as follows:

If we say that physics is knowledge tested against sense-data (the verification principle of the Logical Positivists), while art is knowledge tested as sense-data (in the visual or other sensory works of its studio outcomes) then the following provisional definitions might serve to sum up the epistemological differences of the two domains:

- **Physics**: a knowledge embodied in its statements and mathematical formulae, tested against sense-data, based on principles of economy, rationalism and objectivism.
- **Art**: a knowledge embodied in its works, tested as sense-data, based on principles of profligacy, the irrational and the unconscious.

There are two dilemmas implicit in this discourse. One is concerned with the distinction between arts practice and arts research, while the other is concerned with the field of understanding between the community of arts-researchers and the other communities of research practice. Eisner, always a beacon in the field of art education, sounds a cautionary note about art as research:
It is critical that there be sufficient clarity to render a work useful to someone. Put another way, researchers who employ inventive ways of presenting what has been learned have the obligation to create something that a reader or viewer will find meaningful … we should not become so enchanted with novelty that we forget about matters of meaning and the need to communicate (2001, 139/140)

‘The art is in the tea’

Art education is a process and a practice of exploration and of creation at a number of levels. Within the NCAD curriculum, participatory art practice and community arts education has become a prominent presence. In reflecting on one placement in a collaborative arts practice recently, one student spoke of her experience thus:

It was a six week placement and I would say that a good month of that time was geared towards trying to get our expectations and theirs to meet. It became about us going in and simply sharing the few hours with them. We heard stories and played dominoes and to be honest that felt like the right thing to be doing. There was however the pressure to produce something. I remember talking to a tutor in a panic at week five, saying ‘But all we do is drink tea’. The tutor replied cooly, ‘Well then, the art is in the tea’.

In a manner of speaking the art was in the tea. I have since discovered the sacredness of the tea break in an institution. In our two hour sessions, forty minutes were taken up with who was to make the tea, making the tea, drinking the tea, clearing up the tea. I thought of Asian tea ceremonies and how they paled in comparison. The strange thing was that the tea was served in polystyrene cups. This was ill fitting. We decided that we would simply make each man a cup with a piece of information about the time spent drinking tea with him printed on it. This felt like the most appropriate thin to have done. They didn’t have to drink out of polystyrene any more and we found a way to acknowledge the preciousness of the time spent (NCAD student Jennie Moran in Carroll and Maguire, 2005, p.42).
This form of research - waiting, making tea, talking and making art almost retrospectively - does not sit easily with standardised procedures of research investigation. But like the scientific method which has come to shape the physical sciences, the process of art research is shaping itself through its practice, out of which its theoretical form is evolving.

In a recent conference in Dublin (Breaking Ground, 2008), participants reflected on a community regeneration project, involving the physical and social reconstruction of a specific site and within which an arts dimension was an active agent. In the process of engagement with the experience, two critical observations were made. Firstly, what were the parameters of the arts-dimension of the regeneration - or put another way, would it be more accurate to note that the real art was in the regeneration programme itself, the arts component being but a lens through which to observe and reflect upon the experience? Secondly, the point was asked in passing, but with good effect, as to whether the current pre-occupation with art as research (of which this essay is a part) may actually result in good research but bad art? These questions are part of a continuing debate within the practice of art and of art education. Although that internal debate remains unfinished and unresolved, it is necessary to extend the debate and establish the validity of arts-based research, however it is understood and disseminated, within the wider research community.

Eisner says that, in the arts, two qualities are essential for interpretation - sense (the feel of the work) and reference (what the work refers to). Too often, the artist is focused on the former, the researcher on the latter. The challenge now is to establish common ground and norms of practice between these two roles, for the art education community and for the wider research community.
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