*Auditing research in the arts: constructing a model of the university[[1]](#footnote-1)*

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‘Universities currently suffer from three malaises: they are deadly conservative, not nearly as socially inclusive as they should be, and the research environments that they cultivate remain too enclosed.’

Chris Parr, ‘Universities must reconnect with the outside world, says UCL Professor’ *Times Higher Education* 4 May 2015.

In what follows, I will assume that practice-based research is a specific kind of research that contributes to our understanding of other kinds of research and which generates particular modes of art and design practice. If this is the case, how do we make effective statements about practice-based research? I will suggest that this is achieved by proceeding from the place of practice-based research *as such*, which means beginning by trying to identify what it is that is changed or transformed by practice-based research. I will suggest that an audit of research in art and design gives us scope to identify what it is changed or transformed by practice-based research in a way that cannot be done in the same way in artworld situations. With reference to our conference title of ‘Unconditional Love’, I claim that looking at what is changed or transformed by practice-based research will allow us to consider some aspects of the ‘unconditional’ that is at work in declarations of ‘unconditional love’. In turn, this focus on the unconditional may suggest some new terms on which research in the arts could be audited in the future. I offer a question in this paper, a question that aims to take account of the unconditional and to proceed from the place of changes and transformations brought about by practice-based research. This question is:

‘what will happen to art and to research when artists do research?’

This question could equally be applied to design and to designers, and could indicate either an anxious apprehensiveness or a excited curiosity on the part of practitioners about ‘the unconditional’ in the activity of research in the arts, that does not resort to the condescension of questions such as ‘can artists do research?’ or ‘can designers do research?’ Focusing on the question ‘what will happen to art and to research when artists do research? should tell us something about the kind of work that arts research actually does, rather then the kind of work we think it does or that we would like it to do.

So how does one make a statement about practice-based research in the arts? Let’s try one or two statements out.

First statement: Elizabeth Price, who was awarded the Turner Prize in 2012, was awarded a PhD through practice-based research in 1999.

Second statement: Samson Kambalu, currently a PhD student at Chelsea College of Arts, who is conducting his doctoral research through practice, has been included in Okwui Enwezor’s exhibition ‘All the World’s Futures’ for the 2015 Venice Biennale.

Both of these statements are factually true. It is easy to note and quite right to celebrate these achievements of Elizabeth Price and Samson Kambalu, but it is a lot harder to use them as the basis of a statement about art and design research. I could start by saying that art and design research is now part of the totality of national and global elements or determinants of art and design practice, but since neither the Turner Prize nor the Venice Biennale currently demand a PhD as a requirement for their exhibitions and awards, this is really not very convincing. Artists don't get selected for major prizes or international exhibitions because they have PhDs. If we happen to note that two very interesting artists have or are working towards PhDs, as I have just done, that does not mean that PhD research is necessarily what makes these artists interesting. Nor does it indicate that, generally speaking, we will find that interesting artists will have doctoral research either finished or in development. So, I would suggest, placing PhD research in the context of the Turner Prize or the Venice Biennale is not going to be a good basis for a statement about research in the arts.

So to progress the development of my statement about art and design research, I would need to locate a totality in which practice-based research in the arts has been *purposefully selected* to function as an element of that totality, which, as I have shown, has not been in the case of the Turner Prize or ‘All the World’s Futures’. As an example of a situation in which practice-based research in the arts was purposefully selected as an element of the totality, I am choosing the sub-panel report for ‘Art and Design, History, Practice and Theory’[[2]](#footnote-2) that was written following the publication of results of the recent UK government ‘Research Excellence Framework’ (also known as ‘the REF’), which audited and scored research across a range of science, humanities and arts disciplines in Britain between 2008 and 2014. The sub-panel report for ‘Art and Design, History, Practice and Theory’ is the official ‘voice’ of this totality in which practice-based research has been purposefully included (and here I quote from the report which notes ‘the increasing quantity and quality of practice-based research in REF2014’[[3]](#footnote-3)) But what kind of totality is it? From the evidence of the report, I would suggest that the sub-panel for art and design is describing a notional or model university, which, as I will show, contains traces of every kind of university faculty and research domain ranging from medicine to ethnography, but which is constituted by a common interdisciplinary methodology in which practice-based research in the arts plays an important role.

For REF 2014, the sub-panel for ‘Art and Design, History, Practice and Theory’ conducted a combined audit of research in all forms of arts practice and the history and theory of art and design, while staying within the established conditions of REF as a whole, which uses a hierarchy of ‘star ratings’ for the assessment of research outputs, published, exhibited or otherwise introduced into the public domain. These star ratings range from ‘world-leading in originality, significance and rigour’ (4\*) to ‘internationally excellent’ (3\*) ‘recognised internationally’ (2\*) ‘recognised nationally’ (1\*) and, at the bottom level, outputs unclassified as research.

Practice-based research was included within REF 2014 and its integration with other kinds of research was intensified, by conducting a combined audit of research in arts practice alongside the history and theory of art and design. The sub-panel report also drew attention to the fact that some elements of *every other sub-panel* in the whole of the Research Excellence Framework were included in the audit of art and design research, ranging from medical and engineering science at one end of the spectrum, to philosophy, history, anthropology and ethnography at the other. I want to draw your attention to four comments on interdisciplinarity in the sub-panel report. These are:

1 ‘a significant number of research outputs were of an interdisciplinary nature (although not necessarily identified as such by the submitting HEIs)’

2 ‘interdisciplinary activity has increased since RAE2008’

3 ‘A marked feature of the practice-based research was its embracing of interdisciplinary approaches to research production, a tendency that has clearly increased since RAE2008, and remains at the core of numerous emergent practices’

4 ‘The [art and design] sector is a leader in interdisciplinary research.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

I think that these four sentences could be used as the basis for a statement about research in the arts that introduces the ‘unconditional’ in a useful way, and begins to describe the elements of the ‘notional university’ I have described. Why do I think this? I think it is significant that the sub-panel saw more interdisciplinarity than the individual institutions did, I think it is significant that the panel thought that interdisciplinarity had increased between the audit in 2008 and the audit in 2014, I think it is significant that the panel saw practice-based research as important to this increase in interdisciplinary activity and finally, I think it is significant that, as was noted with the references to medical and engineering science, philosophy, history, anthropology and ethnography, the art and design sub-panel was ‘leading’ in its interdisciplinarity. Now we have the beginning of a viable answer to the question ‘what will happen to art and to research when artists do research?’ that includes changes to arts practices and to research practices within the movement between a research audit in 2008 and one in 2014. To look at this kind of statement in more detail:

a significant number of research outputs were of an interdisciplinary nature (although not necessarily identified as such by the submitting HEIs) and were in the form of collaborative, team-driven projects. The sub-panel acknowledged that interdisciplinary activity has increased since RAE2008, and is a distinct and probably growing phenomenon, particularly within areas of product and digital design, film, curatorship, media studies, conceptual and performance-based art practice. A significant proportion of interdisciplinary activity entailed collaboration and integration with disciplines outside of the sub-panel remit, most notably media studies, literature, history, and performance, and occasionally outside of the MPD [Main Panel D] remit, most frequently in engineering, medical and digital design. The sub-panel noted that the survey of submission intentions did not prove as helpful as hoped in determining the expertise of the sub-panel. It is advised that for future exercises, HEIs should be required to be more specific on the type of work they plan to submit.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I find this last sentence very interesting. The authors of the sub-panel report are advising individual institutions who submit to the art and design panel for REF in future to prepare for a double movement of the notional or ‘model’ university – firstly, the movement of other research disciplines into the history, theory and practice of art and design (that is, ‘collaboration and integration with disciplines outside of the sub-panel remit’), and secondly, the movement of activity that was previously contained by the history, theory and practice of art and design sub-panel into other research disciplines and other sub-panels (that is, ‘for future exercises, HEIs should be required to be more specific on the type of work they plan to submit’). It is also important to note that this double movement can be seen by the auditors of research who are comparing the current audit with the previous one, but apparently not so clearly by Higher Education institutions who have submitted to the current audit. This implies that a fuller answer to the question ‘what will happen to art and research when artists do research?’ cannot be obtained simply by looking at the subjects of the audit, that is, the staff within a monotechnic art and design university such as University of the Arts London or staff in departments of art and design within UK Higher Education institutions. The rather imprecise and general term ‘interdisciplinarity’ as this is used in the REF sub-panel report, is a way of describing a set of infrastructural effects of arts research and specifically identifies the way that practice-based research has worked on or changed other research disciplines between 2008 and 2014.

Focusing on individuals and their outputs or on institutions and their REF submissions is not sufficient, because the question ‘what will happen to art and research when artists do research?’ is a question directed at the changes brought about by a set of decisions to include practice-based research within the audit in the first place, to continue to include it within REF 2014, and to intensify this integration of practice-based research within other kinds of research by conducted a combined audit of research in arts practice alongside the history and theory of art and design. The result, as we have seen, was the inclusion of every other research discipline in the art and design panel in REF 2014, creating the notional university I have been describing. It is important to note that, I am not making a point about perverse incentives, where the auditing and financial incentivisation of arts research has led to more ‘intensive farming’ of arts research in individual institutions. It is probably accurate to say that these incentives have been created and that individual Higher Education institutions in the UK are doing more art and design research than they used to, but my focus today is not on the rate of production but on what this increase in the production of arts research has itself produced in the form of changes within and between other research disciplines.

We have also, perhaps, now begun to clarify some new terms on which research in the arts could be audited ‘unconditionally’, that is, in terms of the changes it has introduced to the activity of art and the activity of research, through new types of arts practice, new kinds of activity across or between disciplines, new methods and new domains or sites of research activity. Such an audit would, among other things, examine changes between one audit and another, to note the impact of arts research within other research cultures and research practices. It is also worth noting that REF 2014 was somewhat divided within itself in assessing and scoring two kinds of research activity – the individual outputs of researchers such as exhibitions, artworks, books, chapters, articles etc. and also the social and economic impact of this research within the public sphere. Higher Education institutions produced impact case studies for REF 2014 that demonstrated the ‘reach and significance’ of research within the public sphere. ‘Reach and significance’ roughly speaking, are indicators for how many non-academic social actors were affected by the research and to what extent they were affected. To give you an example from UAL’s submission to REF, we produced a case study with Professor Stephen Farthing that demonstrated the impact of his work with John Ruskin’s teach-yourself-drawing book, *The Elements of Drawing*, from 1857. Professor Farthing had developed a research council funded project with the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford that led to the development of an online drawing course using Ruskinian principles, which had 300,000 downloads from i-Tunes U. In the final assessment for REF 2014 for each Higher Education institution, 60% of the score was given for exhibited or published research outputs, 20% for impact and 15% for research environment, which is an assessment of whether or not an institution offers a good environment for research activity.

In the ‘notional university’ that I have been describing, there is no need to divide the scores for of research outputs such as artworks or exhibitions or performances from the scores for research impact and social value, because, as the REF panel report for art and design noted, the outputs of individual institutions are only fully legible when considered as a set of infrastructural effects on research across the board. It would be relatively easy to make strong and effective links between these intra-audit and infrastructural impacts of arts research and the extra-academic impacts that were generated by these changes within the cultures and practices of research. At present, however, many sub-panels within REF 2014 noted problems in making tangible links between research outputs from individual Higher Education institutions and their social life beyond the academy.

In conclusion, I want to briefly refer, by way of contrast, to two ‘conditional’ statements about research in the arts. The first is ‘research is a mistake for art’. The second is ‘art is a mistake for research’. If you think that research was a mistake for art, or that art was a mistake for research, the idea of being curious about, paying more attention to or accounting for this mistake would be anathema. If you think that research was a mistake for art, you might assume that that the very notion of practice-based research in the arts, whose advocates seek to justify its continuation by including arts research within the same audit culture as other university disciplines, have thereby introduced the worm of audit within the walled gardenof art practice. If you think that art is a mistake for research, you might assume that the very notion of practice-based research in the arts, whose advocates seek to justify its continuation by including arts research within the same audit culture as other university disciplines, has introduced the worm of art within the walled garden of academic rigour. However, I think that, where research in the arts is concerned, we need clarification of the kinds of statements that we might make as auditors, not better ways of resisting research audits. This is where the notion of the ‘unconditional’ can help. So how can the unconditional be used to clarify our statements on arts based research? Firstly, by abandoning the fatuous question ‘can artists do research?’ and its twin question ‘can designers do research?’ We can replace these fatuous questions with a better one, namely ‘what will happen to art and research when artists do research?’ Then we have begun to let the unconditional clarify our statements, because we are speaking from the position of art and design research as such, and the model of the university that it is in the process of creating.

1. This paper was delivered at the Society for Artistic Research Conference ‘Unconditional Love’ at Chelsea College of Arts, 1 May 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This report can be read at: <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/expanel/member/Main%20Panel%20D%20overview%20report.pdf> pp. 83–114 [accessed 3 May 2015]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*., p.84, paragraph 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.*, p.84-5, paras 8 and 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*., p.84, para 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)