

Socially Engaged Practice-Based Research: A PhD Pathway for Artists

A conversation with Alan Grossman and Anthony Haughey, led by [Till Bödeker](#) and [Peter Tepe](#) | Section: [On ‚Art and Science‘](#)

Abstract: How is a PhD program for artists in English-speaking countries organised? The PhD by Prior Publication of the TU Dublin serves as an example.

The *Centre for Socially Engaged Practice-Based Research* (SEPR) from the Technical University Dublin (TU Dublin) offers two different PhD pathways to creative practice practitioners: a four-year full-time and a two-year part-time programme. While the full-time, structured programme requires candidates to complete modules, the part-time *PhD by Prior Publication* pathway does not. A candidate in the four-year programme is obliged to write an original thesis of 50,000 to 80,000 words as well as producing several accompanying works of creative practice; in the two-year *PhD by Prior Publication* pathway, a thesis of 20,000 to 30,000 words is expected, whose quality is to be comparable to that of a full-time practice-based PhD. New knowledge has to be generated in both cases.

In this interview with Dr Alan Grossman and Dr Anthony Haughey, two academic staff members and PhD supervisors at SEPR, we want to concentrate on the unique aspects of the two-year part-time *PhD by Prior Publication* pathway. It offers established creative practitioners (filmmakers, visual artists, journalists, amongst others) in Germany novel opportunity to obtain a doctorate on the basis of their established and publicly-disseminated creative practice. In the middle of their career they can write a thesis in which they reflect on their creative practice/written publications in the last decade, both theoretically and methodically.



Centre for Socially Engaged Practice-Based Research

Do applicants apply directly for one of these two pathways or do you decide which one is suitable for which PhD candidate?

Commonly a prospective candidate/practitioner will intuitively know which pathway is suitable for their doctoral study aspirations. There is of course a significant difference between conceptualising an original doctoral research project and proposal from scratch on one hand, and on the other, assembling and revisiting a decade-long series of creative practice outputs and/or written academic publications for the purpose of submitting a thematically-coherent body of work on a particular object of study. In a number of instances and via an introductory conversation, we spend necessary and valuable time with a candidate, working through their creative practice profile, the dissemination of their works, public

exhibitions and academic publication history to determine the relevant pathway.



[Angelika Boeck: *Imagine Me* \(2007\). Photo: Angelika Boeck.](#)

From a creative practitioner perspective, what are the minimum requirements the candidate must meet in terms of exhibitions and publications in order to participate in the programme? Could you give an example of what is insufficient?

It is the regulation of Graduate Studies, TU Dublin that a PhD by Prior Publication applicant submits a minimum of four published/exhibited works completed over the past decade, which have circulated in the public domain. Typically, we encourage between four to six outputs. Each candidate will present with a unique configuration of outputs, specific to their practice trajectory, regardless of medium; the result is a combination of creative practice and published works, whether in book chapter form or journal articles. In some cases, the quality, sites of public exhibition and reception of the creative works, provide a more-than-adequate foundation for the application. Clearly, a PhD by Publication application portfolio that is overly reliant on self-published works, without peer review or commission, alongside low-profile exhibition outlets, will not be deemed qualitatively adequate. These decisions are made by an external reviewer, whose task is to appraise the quality and range of outputs. It is important to note here that the role of an external reviewer (outside the university, recommended by the candidate and supervisory committee) is to evaluate the four to six submitted works in terms of their inherent research quality and impact on audiences. In other words, do the totality of the publications, used widely here,

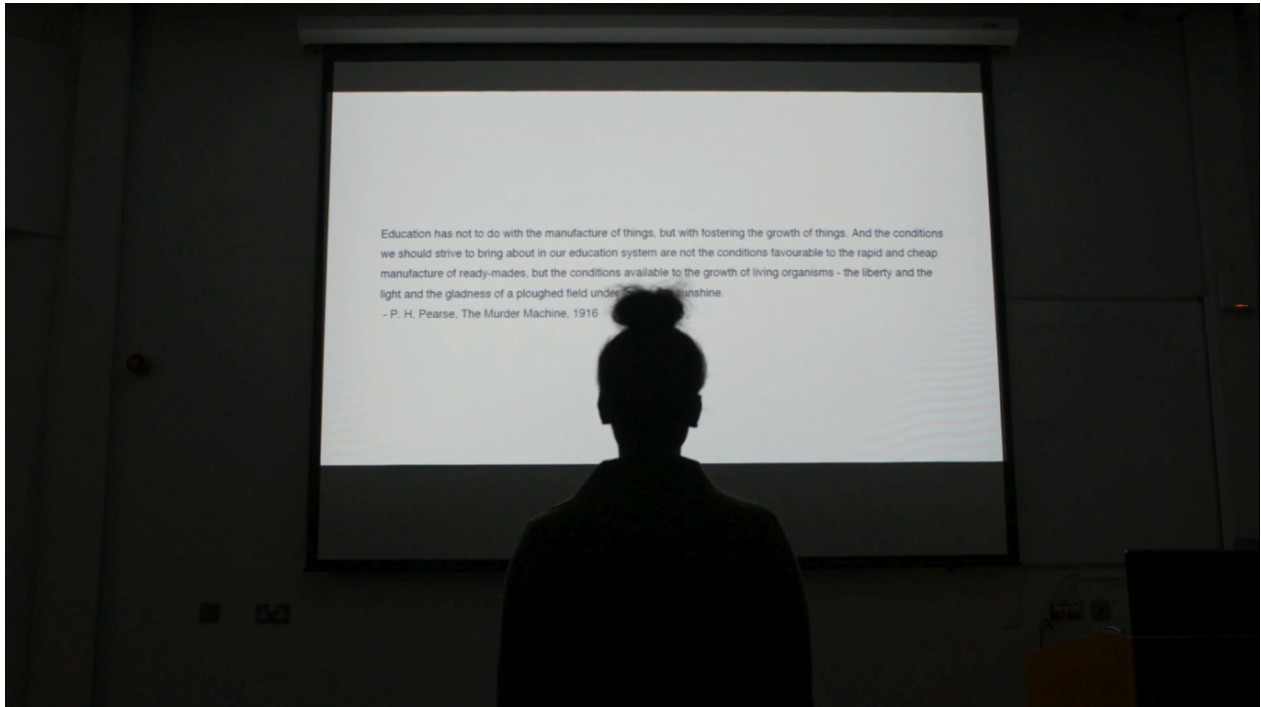
amount to the equivalent of conducting a traditional PhD over a four-year period? If the answer to this question is yes, then the candidate is given the green light by the external reviewer to commence the writing of the thesis, subject to an internal evaluation committee recommendation by members of our Faculty of Arts and Tourism. In short, it is a two-stage process, beginning with the appraisal of the external reviewer. Typically, it takes candidates between 3–6 months to assemble their application package.

Do all publications of an applicant count, for example, poems written by a visual artist? Or are there only academically-relevant publications which form the basis of the planned doctoral thesis?

By *publication*, we refer to any form of written or creative practice – whether a body of poetry, an installation, film, an architectural build or photographic exhibition, amongst other print or mediated outputs – that have been brought into the public domain with the requisite supporting documentation surrounding reviews and critical appraisal. Where relevant, depending on the practitioner’s profile, traditional peer-reviewed academic journal articles, book chapters or monographs, should ideally be included if they enhance the legitimacy and theoretical and methodological rationale of the PhD by Publication application. The range of outputs profiled in the application form the basis of the planned thesis. Since the thesis reflects critically on the various works submitted in the application, any new material produced during the course of writing the thesis cannot be included in the thesis itself.

The name of your Centre suggests that a commitment to socially engaged creative practice is reflected in the thematic concerns of doctoral work: is this a prerequisite for being included in your programme?

The *Centre for Socially Engaged Practice-Based Research* (SEPR), formerly the Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, is fundamentally dedicated to working with doctoral candidates, regardless of pathway, whose interdisciplinary work (across the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) engages with a range of contemporary social, political and cultural transformations that echo across transnational boundaries with particular local inflections. Thus, the varied immersive and mediated fieldwork practices of doctoral projects are encouraged in their reach to foreground questions of agency, participatory, collaborative/dialogical forms of production and collectivised identities across diverse communities of interest and place. This of course is a very different trajectory to the individual artist working within the confines of their studio-based practice.



[Anthony Haughey: Video Still from *Manifesto* \(2016\).](#)

So, to be clear, a visual artist's socially engaged trajectory of work, regardless of its topical and disciplinary parameters, will be subjected to a deeper inquiry in the thesis itself?

Yes, that's correct – the thesis affords the opportunity for the practitioner to deepen and focus on a range of theoretical, aesthetic and methodological concerns, absent in and across the various outputs. On this point, we should stress that it's vital for the thesis to engage with what was *not said* in the various works published; what was not adequately theorised? What could not be represented? Otherwise, what's the point of re-visiting the works completed via writing? It cannot be to merely collate and reproduce the very same contingencies, aesthetic choices and so on, but rather, an opportunity for the practitioner to re-conceptualise their distinctive practice in new and unpredictable ways. So, in essence, via the written thesis, the candidate is adopting a Janus-faced position in relation to their creative practice; namely, simultaneously looking back to the past, while casting a critical eye onto future iterations of their practice, achieved through acquiring a reflective – and theoretically -nuanced voice in the writing itself.

Can you provide by way of illustration the nature of the social engagement of artists who apply to the programme? Relatedly, a few examples of some of the thematic concerns addressed by candidates in their theses, would be instructive.

To date, there have been a wide range of applicants across numerous disciplinary fields whose socially-driven durational practice has been conducted both in and outside Ireland. These include amongst others: socially engaged artists, experimental and documentary filmmakers, public art coordinators, graphic designers, site-specific fashion designers and visual artists experimenting with cross-platform modalities of representation. One graduate, for example, engaging in a collaborative arts practice within a Dublin-based youth organisation, foregrounded in her thesis the lived experiences of systemic inequalities – how truth speaks to power and politics – via a series of transgenerational projects. This resulted in a critical examination and response to power relations at a personal, community and societal

level, contributing new transdisciplinary knowledge across the fields of socially-engaged art practice, youth work and education. Another very recent graduate – in this case a gallery-based experimental filmmaker working longitudinally with *dissident* Irish Republic paramilitaries – posed a question about how collaborative art practice can provide an alternative form to the consensual political sphere, by way of producing spaces of agonistic discourse and encounter. A few examples of current doctoral theses include: an interrogation of the invisible work and role of public art coordination – how, for example, do public art coordinators contribute to building a pluralist participatory democracy? Another, that of an Indian community-based filmmaker in its late application phase, examines questions of belonging and identity, alongside the formation of transcultural identities among the Keralite migrant community in Ireland, via a series of short, exhibited, low-budget participatory films. For a full range of current and previously completed doctoral theses, we would advise interested candidates to browse our Centre website (www.dit.ie/sepr).

Are successful applicants who apply for the two-year programme able to start immediately working on their PhD thesis? Or is there a requisite training involved prior to commencing their study?

There is no mandatory training involved prior to or following formal registration. The PhD by Prior Publication application process – from deciding on the submitted outputs/projects, to writing *Project Descriptors* for each of the artefacts, alongside an accompanying 2000-word *Framing Statement* – effectively represents the beginning of conceptualising (both theoretically and methodologically) the contours of the thesis. Put differently, this process initiates the writing of the by preparing the candidates to engage selectively with the topical concerns and theoretical constructs of the projected thesis. When the application of the candidate has been both externally and internally approved, s/he is then formally registered into the programme.

Do you pursue a particular thesis objective with visual artists in the programme, which is perhaps different to other doctoral work conducted across the humanities, cultural, literature or film studies, art history and philosophy?

To begin with, many candidates in both their creative practice and thesis writing draw significantly from some of those disciplinary areas you identify, and further afield. Doctoral inquiry regardless of discipline across the humanistic social sciences does of course follow common conventions, albeit with slight variations in terms of length, structure and duration; significantly, regardless of minor differences, the overriding commonality is to produce an original contribution to new knowledge. Certainly, this is the case and expected standard for candidates pursuing a *PhD by Prior Publication*. What distinguishes this written thesis from traditional doctoral theses is precisely the fact that the research has been completed in the form of disseminated published works during the past decade. A further distinguishing feature is that candidates are asked to reconceptualise their creative practice, to pose new methodological and theoretical questions with a view to reveal new insights and knowledge through their writing. In short, the thesis focus is the creative practice itself – its interventionist role in reconfiguring and contesting any set of power relations and representational practices across the broad field of socially-engaged art and media practice.

Is it possible to make general assumptions about the criteria by which an artist's thesis is examined? How the thesis imparts critical reflexivity by the candidate is a different criterion to the question of how and whether the thesis results in new knowledge, scientific or otherwise.

That is a good question and there is no straightforward answer. It partly does depend on the disciplinary background and particular interests of the examiner and his/her expectations as to what constitutes new knowledge. That said, to date, all our candidates have passed their oral examinations, conducted by internationally-renowned and located academics/practitioners. In reply to your question, we would argue that critical reflexivity evidenced in the thinking through and writing of the thesis is testimony to the production of new knowledge. The latter cannot be realised without the candidate embracing the former by way of acquiring a new lens/prism through which to evaluate their practice, its conceptual underpinning, methodology and impact on diverse audiences.

One salient feature of the SEPR programme is co-supervision, namely, the supervision of the doctoral thesis by two lecturers. Why is this the case and what are the advantages of such an arrangement? In Germany, a doctoral thesis is traditionally supervised by one person. An additional lecturer typically comes into play as a second reviewer only when the work is fully or largely completed.

Given the specificity and typical interdisciplinarity of creative practice and practice-based research at the doctoral level, we take the not-uncommon view that no single supervisor has the requisite expertise and can/should manage the weight and demands of supervision alone. The configuration of co-supervision depends to a large extent on the particular trajectory of the candidate in question and (where relevant) the supervisory team is made of two or more scholars from different schools/departments. It is further in the interest of the candidate that s/he avail of the highest-quality supervision and to this end, we have a responsibility in establishing the most suitable match. We further encourage our doctoral candidates to forge informal links – external to the supervisory team and university – with other scholars who in turn, can complement the expertise available to the candidate.

In Germany, it is common for lecturers to be allowed to supervise theses only after the so-called ‘habilitation’ – a major scientific work completed following the doctorate, which includes a special examination procedure. How is this regulated in Ireland and the English-speaking world? What requirements must be met here in order to be a doctoral supervisor?

There is no such requirement in Ireland nor the UK. In the US, there is an altogether-different system in place, focused on a PhD dissertation committee. A new doctoral supervisor in our university must have co-supervised a thesis to completion with another experienced supervisor before occupying the role of a lead supervisor. So, in essence (and this relates to your previous question), another reason for joint supervisory arrangements in our Centre, is to mentor junior staff members through the doctoral supervisory process.

Alan Grossman and Anthony Haughey, thank you for the interesting conversation.

Picture above the text: Anthony Haughey: *Citizen Exhibition* (2013). Photo: Anthony Haughey.

Tags

1. Alan Grossman
2. Angelika Boeck
3. Anthony Haughey
4. Artist PhD
5. Peter Tepe
6. Till Bödeker