



From Experience: The Arts PhD in Practice

5th March 2026 at RITCS School of Arts Dansaert

For this conference, we ask artist-researchers to consider: what was/were the motivation(s) to pursue a PhD in the arts? How has the actual experience of doing doctoral studies affected or influenced their practice? Have specific academic requirements and protocols modified their work process and, if so, in what ways? What obstacles, opportunities, and/or unexpected turns have been generated by working at the conjunction of two domains: the professional worlds of arts practice and the academic worlds of higher arts education and doctoral training? In so doing, we hope to build an opportunity to exchange knowledge and insight in the navigation of environments that are still relatively new. We also believe that considerations rooted in the actual experience of doctoral studies in the arts by different practitioners is essential to breaking new ground in the debate about the arts PhD and artistic research.

Organised by RITCS School of Arts & Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel/ Vrije Universiteit Brussels, University of Warwick, University of Stellenbosch, University of Gothenburg. All universities are part of the Eutopia network.

9:30 - 9:45

Introduction

9:45 - 11:05

SESSION 1: HDK-Valand / University of Gothenburg

Birgitta Nordström's presentation will focus on the needs of certain artistic ideas to receive institutional support. Her project "Holding, Embracing, Shrouding" which consists of weaving blankets for pregnancy loss, needed more than a studio - it required academia's framework, critical feedback, and access to maternity care. Beginning with making sample weaves, then navigating ethics reviews, clinical terminology and finding out a production model, her research enabled a study impossible outside academia. Yet this institutional framework came with individual costs. Distinctive features of earlier practice - like playful seriousness in weaving while facing death - faded under demands for academic articulation, alongside with the vulnerability in the topic of infant death. The driving force behind her own artistic practice was thereby lost along the way. Her presentation therefore asks; how do artists navigate this tension, and how can someone's creative force be rediscovered after a PhD?

Birgitta Nordström is a textile artist and a PhD candidate in Craft at HDK-Valand Academy of Craft and Design, University of Gothenburg. Her artistic practice and research focus on textiles related to loss and grief.

Gustav Thanes' presentation dives into how working with our hands shapes not just materials, but the ways we understand the world around us. Drawing from his own experiences as a blacksmith, his PhD explores how actions can be understood as a mode of thinking and how theory can be used to unlock the knowledge that grows from hours and years of disciplined, repetitive, technical training. Artistic practice can develop insight and lead to better decisions, Thane's research offers a conceptual framework, a theory that formalizes the acts of creation as academic knowledge.

Gustav Thane is a PhD candidate in Craft at HDK-Valand Academy of Craft and Design, University of Gothenburg. His artistic practice originates in tool manufacturing, material affordance, and the nature of skills and bodily knowledge.

11:05 - 11:20

Break

11:20 - 12:40

SESSION 2: The University of Warwick

Ianaire Aderemi's presentation reflects on her doctoral project navigating her creative practice and academic research through the forgotten Egbá Women's Revolt (1947). Her multi-modal PhD explores how film, performance, writing, gesture, and collective listening expand what counts as knowledge. Aderemi demonstrates how knowledge emerges through gaps, gestures, silences, and sensory experiences. Working within academic protocols invited constraint and possibility, demanding justification for embodied methodologies while claiming alternative knowing as valid research. Her journey revealed multi-modal PhDs aren't only about producing 'creative outputs' but documenting processes of becoming and examining transformative spaces where researchers can play, transgress, and rethink knowledge.

Ianaire Aderemi is a writer and researcher committed to amplifying and archiving untold stories. She holds a PhD in Literary Practice, a Distinction in an MA Creative Writing degree and a First Class Sociology degree from the University of Warwick.

Lara Barzon questions why some artists avoid framing their research as practice-as-research. Her doctoral project reveals how working through the body transforms both personal practice and theory production. For her specific contexts, making dance isn't about producing pieces or epistemology. Rather, it's an ontological practice; a way of existing and transforming reality and challenging dance's reduction to cultural object. Barzon thereby addresses the challenges of dislocation: while her practice and case studies emerge from Latin American and Southern European contexts, her doctoral framework is shaped by British academic traditions. This tension raises core questions - how do practice, doctoral research, and institutional frameworks allow mutual transformation across situated artistic genealogies and academic systems?

Lara Barzon is a live arts researcher and practitioner currently pursuing a joint PhD between the University of Warwick and the University of Ljubljana, awarded through the EUTOPIA European University alliance. Her research, developed through a practice-theory approach, investigates the figure of the cannibal as an aesthetic and political archetype to explore the entangled aesthetics and politics of decolonial practices in contemporary dance.

12:40 - 14:00

LUNCH

14:00 - 14:10

Short introduction by Orion Maxted (The Imaginary Institute) about day two of the symposium

14:10 - 15:30

SESSION 3: RITCS School of Arts & Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel/ Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Luca Piovesan's presentation reflects on his PhD journey and his long-standing struggles with philosophy. While artistic research theory is mostly grounded in philosophy, his practice has always been intuitive, embodied, and situated in doing - like playing accordion, and expanding its possibilities, as well as collaborating with composers. When entering academic artistic research, philosophical frameworks re-emerged as obstacles. Early doctoral years therefore involved grappling with theoretical literature that wasn't helpful to contextualize his research. What was needed instead was narrative methodology that could accommodate experience, vulnerability, and emotion. Piovesan's search led through decolonial thought, Indigenous epistemologies, and auto-theory, ultimately arriving at autoethnography - which became both his method and stance. His presentation will explore what this methodology offers and lacks within artistic research trajectories.

Luca Piovesan is a Brussels-based, Italian-born contemporary accordion player, sound practitioner, producer, and researcher interested in participatory art methodologies, working at the intersections of art, social engagement, and climate justice. For his PhD in the Arts at Vrije Universiteit Brussel/ Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel he explored the agency of his expanded accordion within co-compositional frameworks.

Ellen Vermeulen opens her presentation with a sense of disorientation, drawing on moments she witnessed during the PKK insurgency in Northern Kurdistan in 2015. After returning home with only four minutes of footage, shame followed; she didn't document anything substantial, like the two boys who were martyred by the Turkish state, or the PKK's recruitment mechanisms. She had filmed only to hide when feeling out of place. Those four minutes became a burden and a question: how to speak of the unspeakable, and, how to address absent images? She began writing, discovering the concept of hors champ; a space beyond the frame where the unfilmed haunts. Her doctoral research started to transform absence into force, and failure into form. Her presentation will focus on how artistic research offers an opening to dwell within gaps - allowing the unseen and the unspoken to resonate.

Ellen Vermeulen is a filmmaker, researcher, and teacher. Her work is characterized by a critical gaze and an in-depth exploration of social structures. In 2024 Vermeulen defended her PhD in the Arts with the title; "The boy under the portrait of the martyr. Narrative strategies to represent the circle of violence, when the need to visualize collides with ethical boundaries", at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel/ RITCS School of Arts.

15:30 - 16:00

Coffee break in RITCS café

16:00 - 17:10

SESSION 4: The University of Stellenbosch

Janna Khweis explores a PhD journey of contradictions and transformation, that started with the following reflection: "I am both colonizer and colonized. How do I navigate these aspects in research when I struggle to navigate them within myself?" For Khweis, working with communities demanded confronting who she was in relation to others - questioning assumptions, practices, and worldviews. Despite experience as performer, community musician, and educator, her research required her to find new ways of sharing creative control. The project, named Twuzuzanye by participants (meaning 'complete each other' in Kirundi), deepened collaboration not only with co-researchers but also with conflicting parts of herself - transforming research from studying "on" people to researching "with" them.

Janna Khweis [صويوخ منج] is a PhD candidate at Stellenbosch University. The study undertaken for the PhD project utilises community-based participatory methods and centres on collaborative music-making as a catalyst for social justice, inclusion, and reciprocity across diverse communities in the South-African context.

Mario Nell examines how South African higher education frameworks shape and are reshaped by artistic practice. While creative work is formally acknowledged as legitimate research output, recognition remains uneven and conceptually constrained. Institutional protocols, research metrics, and methodological expectations influence creative processes, prompting shifts in practice, heightened reflexivity, and interdisciplinary dialogues. Yet dominant evaluative models privilege Western European traditions, marginalising practice-based research from culturally diverse, community-embedded contexts. Nell argues for expansive, contextually responsive understanding of artistic research reflecting South Africa's plural practices and knowledge systems. His presentation asks: how can institutional frameworks transform to genuinely recognise epistemological value of diverse creative practices beyond Western-centric models?

Mario Nell is Professor of Music at Stellenbosch University. He has been a leading figure in advancing the recognition of artistic research in South Africa. In addition to his academic and concert activities, he is actively involved in various Community Music projects.

17:10 – 17:40

Voice from outside the symposium: Zofia Smolarska-Korkmaz

Institutionalising Arts and Design Research: Insights from Interviews with Artist-Academics in Poland and Flanders

Research funding and evaluation systems are deeply embedded in national higher education structures and science policy regimes. In the case of the arts, research policy reflects not only country-specific funding arrangements but also fundamentally different assumptions about the relationship between artistic practice and academic research. This presentation compares two contrasting approaches: one that recognises certain artistic practices as research and incorporates them into university-based evaluation frameworks, and another that maintains a strict separation between art and research, treating artistic work as incompatible with academic knowledge production. Drawing on qualitative interviews with artist-researchers in Flanders and Poland, as well as with academic administrators, the study explores how these two different institutional arrangements shape both the development and the legitimacy of practice-based research in the arts, and how these differences are perceived and experienced by artist-researchers themselves.

Zofia Smolarska-Korkmaz is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Warsaw, Poland. She currently works on the project "Practice-based research: investigating research practices, outputs and impacts in Belgium-Flanders, Poland and Switzerland", conducted in collaboration with Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).

