



At a loss for words? Hostile to language? Interpretation in creative practice-led PhD projects

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Debates about the relative merits of images and text can be traced back to Greek philosophy and have resurfaced regularly in Western traditions. In the context of practice-led PhD projects in art and design, writing is currently yet again pitched against creative work. This may be understandable, given that formal art and design research is an emerging field, whose practitioners still need to establish themselves within the academy.

However, the antagonism is often reproduced without much reflection: to reiterate the polemic, that theory and creative practice are hostile to each other, will buttress a belief that writing and theory limit the potential of creative practice-led PhD research. This belief, in turn, calls for a reduction of the role and scope of the written component of practice-led PhDs to a "thin text" (e.g., that of a catalogue), to unburden "the work" from the request to make it accessible to interpretation. In practice, this stance leads supervisors to advise candidates to keep their practice in the foreground, because theory and writing could suffocate it. It endorses resistance against even a preliminary and temporal anchoring of meaning. This seems odd when most PhD candidates are quite capable of expressing themselves in writing and often use this process productively.

This paper advocates a view of writing as a parallel creative practice in visual art and design, with its own generative potential. A more subtle and sympathetic approach to differences between language and image would draw on creative aspects residing on both sides. Writing can productively complicate the creative process, provide ambiguity and friction, and contribute to an enlarged mentality that stimulates the imagination and widens a work's scope. The ongoing and usually language-based moments of criticism and assessment would then also link more seamlessly with the final exegesis, and combine with process notes to account for the steps taken to arrive at the research results.