# if you might want to do an art research phd (with sxw)

*21 december 2005*

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turning over a new leaf, a maple leaf, offers a moment to think over what seems to work, and what i'd like to try to realize in a phd program of art research.   to make it worth the institutional work, such a degree program should be distinguished from a masters degree, from professional design / architecture training, and from an mfa art program.   it should have its own worth.  so here are some thoughts that may serve as the base for a phd program that i would like to establish.  i am very deliberately modeling my standards from the humanities phd because i think the arts & humanities provide us the most generous, ample and fertile space of practice in the university as we've inherited it from bologna and padova 700 years ago.

i propose to start with a few brilliant, talented, dedicated artist-researchers who might write exemplary dissertations, indexed by striking experimental works.   they will be radically different from one another, they will be risky, they will *not* be vocational.   that's why i'm speaking with a few people, some of whom i've known for many years, who i respect and cherish for what they've already done with their lives, about coming together with me in this new place.   and although this will be a considerable tax on my capacities, i think it will be valuable to discover the diversity, depth and power that phd level art-research might achieve.

this note is a letter to these prospective students.
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**why do you want a phd?**
- what could be worth doing?
- what's worth living?
- what's worth investing time?
  more generally, not just for a phd, can you say to what you might put 5 years, 20 years of your life?
- what would a phd offer a chance to do?   do you want
  - a chance to step back, reconsider a life, and relations to self, to history, and later, to the world?
  - a chance to let go of, and form deeply different ways of thinking and doing?
  - to enter a professional, life-changing mentor relationship?
  - to enter academy, to teach someday, i.e. to enter a guild of scholar practitioners?

**what is a phd?**
- what are some different orientations of phd (vs mfa)?
  it is not simply a longer, funded version of an mfa -- a common misconception!
  a phd entails articulation in *written language*, and the result will be a scholarly manuscript, a book.
  therefore it entails learning to think in a certain level of precision, exactitude, depth in *writing*.
  optionally, we might aspire to writing with some poetry, inspiration, or grace.
- systematicity: mastering a body of *literature*, to be found jointly with your advisor
- the superficial, hodgepodge writing typical of art "theory" discourse won't suffice: word salad goes stale quickly.

- novel contribution scope and depth
  theory (but i think tml art research should aspire to equally ambitious artifact + theory,
  though it takes twice the energy.)
    - prefer to narrow the scope rather than compromise precision, exactitude, depth, poetry

  doctorate of **philosophy**
    - generates critical knowledge -- tells us why we might prefer some way of being over
      another.
    - is other than engineering: not problem solving or developing tools, but this ability will
      be assumed and developed to an expert level during apprenticeship before beginning
      the dissertation.
    - is therefore not concerned with technology but *techne* in pre-socratic sense. criticism of
      technology, approach has to be sensitive to and sceptical of not technology or its effects,
      but of its framing conditions and latent ideologies.
      *patience* allows us to imagine outside technology's bounds, but also outside easy,
      unthoughtful concepts.
        - retains freshness, generous attitude but...
        - consequently detaches from reductionistic conceptual carapaces or leg-irons like a-
          life, complexity, computer networks, cognitive science, ai, market economics …
        - is sensitive to frame-conditions, to ideological frames, (not auto-reject): which
          means reductionisms of all sorts: digital, biological, informatic, linguistic,
          psychoanalytic
        - combines skepticism toward superficial easy "theory"  with historically informed
          theory
        - learns some deeper stuff, critically, then reshapes / fashions new way of being
          (personally, i take a long time to absorb a complex, reach as far down as i can, then
          fashion a synthesis that offers a deep, fresh take on the situation.)
        - timeframe. it should take time:
            - 1 year for student to unlearn conceptual habits (i assume they are smart enough
              to pick up technique, and come already with some technique)
            - 1-2 years to learn how to read and write, master a literature
            - 1 year to define a research area and a dissertation topic (in parallel)
            - 2 years to write
          you may grow through some of these processes in parallel, or you may be already
          past some of them.   your advisor evaluates this.

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**what are some domains for this sort of art research phd?**

**theory**
- concepts are *NOT* cheap: good concepts are as dear and as difficult to make as good things
- what's a good concept?
- imaginary is going somewhere beyond familiar continent, ultimately beyond sight of shore.
- theory is a way to make, evaluate concepts in the imaginary with as much discipline and
  rigor as matter-technology's "constraints" on making artifacts.

**art**
- for me is a way to create reasons to live
- yields ---> ethical-aesthetic gesture, ways of being with others:
  yields grace-ful ways to live for us and for not-us
- maybe it's true that one doesn't teach creativity, but teachers can inspire and make space for
  it.   maybe creativity emerges when you realize that you are free.  but then refinement is an

aspect of disciplined art.

**craft / technique**
- learning how to work in a *collective* fashion.  i'm building the tml drawing from the practices of the art studio,  the engineering laboratory, as well as the pre-industrial atelier.
- improvisation and invention over practice, rehearsal, experience
- letting go of habit, why? because it could be art all the way down: everythig is potentially subject to critique, everything could be put in play, so nothing lies black-boxed behind the skin of mere craft. even naturalized processes like physics of materials, computation, social structure may be in play.

**how to do this?**

**what might you offer?**
- energy and mass to help take a stand in the shifting political economy:
    - part of building a studio-lab: making joint work,
    - writing joint papers with me + others in group.  co-authoring is simultaneously a way to  learn and to publicly reward the mentoring relationship in the scholarly economy.
    - teach junior students in class
    - mentor understudies in studio-lab, or group projects
- alert me to new cultural contexts, make openings to new cultural and critical contexts

**what could i offer?**
- help get you permission from the world, institutions, and yourself to think freely *and* rigorously.
- provide judgment on depth and scope.
- provide judgment on what is a question, a field of discourse.
- determine where the deep waters are.
- determine what's feasible.
- alert you to theoretical and historical contexts, antecedents.
- open doors

**practicalities**
   *where*: arts and humanities (beyond fine arts?) fofa
- has produced interesting artists
- built academic strength in arts and humanities
- is in a people's urban university
- is in rich franco-anglo-multi mix
- are you willing to spend ___ years in montreal?  this requires a certain amount of in-person work, and at an intensity, below which the momentum will fall apart.
- *when*?  fall 2005?
- when to apply (now!) for phd program? (**december 15**)
- come as visitor or, later? as graduate student
- *who*?   dependents, symbiosis, life support
- *support*: grants
- i need from you
    - writing sample, that demonstrates the depth and style of your thinking in written language.    it can be critical writing or fiction.
    i'm looking for potential for depth, precision, freedom *and* rigor
    - cv, academic and professional curriculum vita.
    art cv's tend to list a lot of galleries or shows, but for phd, it's more meaningful to put writings and research projects up front.  in the context of the phd, a process of

study leading to / from an art piece or event is more important to me than the object.
- research statement, a 1-2 page executive summary that i could adapt into a grant that could help support you.   this is not binding because the phd relationship would grow outside what can be expressed in such a format.

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## phases of a phd with me

of course not everyone has to go through the same sequence if they've already got some of this coming in, but i think these are all important elements for the sort of art research phd that I would like to support.

### unlearn
unlearn conceptual frames (in course work), for example, let go of cognitivism, computational equivalence, commodity and utility rationale, market logic predicated on scarcity calculus.
unlearn practices, habits (in studio lab).  for example, let go of procedural programming, let go of ego-expression or ego-therapy as a mode of art practice.

### learn how to read and write
unlearn "word salad" habits (if any) endemic in art and architecture discourse.
learn to write (think) philosophically, critically, poetically -- this is the heart of what i can offer.
compose poetry in words and matter.

### develop intimacy with a body of literature
master a body of writing-thinking that can feed not just the dissertation but the rest of your life. in order to be worthwhile, this should take 2 unbroken years, at least.   (practitioners of art, poetry, literature in classical chinese culture would take 15-20 years to learn and apprentice in their art.)
perhaps drawn from multiple disciplines, but coherent to your own research

### (re)subjectifying **play**
write  and rewrite papers
sketch-work in all media, especially unfamiliar media
realize (art) studies, in the tml studio-lab

### **apprenticeship** in studio-lab-atelier
work on experimental tml projects defined by professor or senior students
work on public events -- but in this case, should be "hired" in a professional way
learn as understudy
everyone in tml should be able to cover for another, develop capacity for collective work in depth
advantages:
        intimately learn how to realize works beyond single-ego expression
        internalize accumulated tml knowledge, technique

### define research questions
critically review body of prior literature

critically review prior art
scope
divide between what we can do now, what waits for after phd
define calendar or milestones, landing spots so we can be happy when we obtain interim
achievements.  e.g. a show in school, an event in a public space, a publication
budget
enroll people, peers, team as necessary
answer the "so what?"
      why would others care about this work?
      what's the significance?
      what, how does it matter?
      ***how might it give life, not crush it?***
i'll ask you to answer this in order to live through your work in this world, but i would help
find or establish a sympathetic and knowledgeable audience.

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**ethical strategy** for tml
the tml stores group knowledge, a stew / apparatus structured by ongoing experiments, from
which members take what they need in order to make experiments, and to which they
contribute pieces of experimental apparatus that others can use in the future.   the apparatus
can be physical things, material samples, software, documentation, videos, reports,
procedures, etc.

this requires some discipline and etiquette.

the discipline is that when you make something nontrivially using tml's studio-lab
knowledge or capital resources, you should also make it usable by someone other than
yourself in tml.   if it is materials knowledge, then write it up as a report, and post it along
with samples and sources.   write and share reviews of conferences trips, films, performances
and exhibits in the tml.  for example, if you write a piece of software, then write a clean
usable interface, and document it so that a student two generations after you can understand
how to use it.  ditto with a material component.

*professional ethos*; i strongly want material practitioners, *artists and designers*, to adopt
**citation practice** from the scholarly community:  if you use a technique or an idea or a piece
of code from someone, you must explicitly name that person in your work.  this is not about
(for or against the notion of) originality, this is about rewarding and publicly acknowledging
someone for helping you, and conversely being tangibly rewarded for giving your
knowledge to a colleague.   here, tangible means social capital, reputation.

humanities scholars have developed over the past 700 years a very precise and refined
citation practice to trace by name and specific moment their flow of ideas.  why?  because
that's how we've learned to run a really-existing gift economy based on the circulation of
works and acts of imagination.   precision is necessary because knowledge exchanges (and
grows) in these small moments and denominations: the phrase, the paragraph, the 3 lines of
repeatedly useful code, the 3 square inches of a fabric switch that shows a different way of
thinking about connections, the hypothesis of a theorem, one video segment that provides
just the right texture to seed your synthesis.  of course, acknowledgments will be scaled to
the significance of the contribution relative to the final work, and may be thresholded or
filtered for the occasion with justification.

(social capital's etiquette depends on the field in which we exhibit the work:  for example, in
scientific practice, the students who do the work are listed in order of their contribution, and

the professor who proposes / advises the experiment and provides the setting is named last author.   in humanities or social sciences with 1-2 or rarely 3 authors, the authors are named in order of their contributed idea-weight.   in math it's the same, with some attention to naming contributions at the level of theorem statement, proof, and even a particular insight-step, because of the extreme density of the work.    smaller contributions are cited in acknowledgments and citations.   i introduce this into material studio-lab-atelier practice as well.)

in general we must acknowledge each other's contributions in this creative economy because that is the best, and at heart the only way we have to reward the sharing of knowledge, insight, art.

i ask you to develop and sustain on this ethos with me.

### social-cultural strategy

tml also holds aura in public culture.  this aura grows with each individual work that makes a good impression or contribution in some local venue, and so is larger than individual social capital.   individual projects, can be tightly scoped or preliminary, yet members can inherit and leverage accumulated, shared aura.

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### references

art practices
  http://sponge.org
  http://f0.am

to give some idea of the sorts of research that i'm pursuing or supporting, take a look at the tml's project pages:
  http://topologicalmedialab.net -> showcase | research projects

and read these papers to get an idea of the level and scope of writing
  http://topologicalmedialab.net/xinwei/papers/papers.htm

currently my attention is focusing much more on the critical studies of media arts and sciences because i think it's time to write down some of the conceptual questions, heuristics, learnings that underwrite the experimental art performance work affiliated with the tml and with sponge.   but i will welcome graduate students or post-docs to carry on the studio and lab work, and invite advanced students to write techno-scientific papers with me.

these are some of the people with whom i've worked:
  http://topologicalmedialab.net -> people

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### how

- classes: how and why.
- projects, three kinds
  - acculturation, can we become comfortable working together? weight of contribution is not as important as learning the process and research values.  can be web/video

documentation.
- someone else's project, defined by: professor, research fellow or experienced student; or group
- self-designed
- professional presence
  - papers co-authored with advisor, peers as a way to reward collaboration
  - papers with self as lead or sole author to establish presence, voice
  - ditto exhibits

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