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2020
Arts Research Africa (ARA)
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/29245

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/KXM5N

ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND RESEARCH: AN ARTIST-SCHOLAR PERSPECTIVE

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How do measurable methods of research move between theoretical critique, technical reporting, and creative practice? This question is explored with reference to Michelle's own practice-based PhD, the experimental animation, *Big Man*.

This paper aims to show the dynamic and complex nature of artistic knowledge. It hopes to illustrate how, within the context of practice-based-research PhD study, measurable methods of research can move between theoretical critique, technical reporting, and creative output.

In his essay, 'What is Artistic Research?', Julien Klein posits that serious creative practice constitutes legitimate research and that the research process does not only evolve from practice but that it is there and can be measured from the outset, from the "level of artistic experience."[1] In terms of a PhD-level or scholarly study, while artistic research is made visible in the final artwork, it can be further communicated, documented, explained, and contextualised in a written component. However, he asserts, if artistic practice as research is to have any relevance at all, the practice and creative output need to be recognised as the primary source of knowledge—in that such knowledge can only be acquired through creative or artistic experience. He posits that "artistic experience is a form of reflection" and, as with scientific research methods, it is a process that requires contemplation, interpretation, analysis, and elucidation.[2]

G. James Daichendt, in his book *Artist Scholar: Reflections on Writing and Research*, makes a good point in his discussion of the relatively short historical allegiance between the creative arts and universities. He reminds us that, while universities are now the standard institutions for training in the creative arts, the original homes for art education up to the late 19th century were the academies. In the academies, the need for artists to validate their work as research or to equate their work with or evaluate it against textual research methodologies was never a priority.[3] While Daichendt thus insists that the responsibly to overcome issues on the definition and evaluation of art-practice-as-research lies within the universities, where creative practice is seen as an academic discipline, he also posits that the artist/scholar should simultaneously be able to locate their practice within the context of the university setting. By this, he infers that, in this context, an artist should be able to explain their work critically, and stresses the usefulness of being able to explain one's work textually. He also points out that the requisite written component that is predominantly required to accompany practice-based research at the PhD level is not likely to change—but stresses that, how this component is approached is something that is open to debate.[4] To Daichendt, it is not a point of finding ways to make art practice conform to the scientific approach to research. In his view, the central aim of scientific research—to provoke enquiry to gain new knowledge is indistinguishable from that of creative inquiry. Citing the examples of ancient Greek poetry, Michaelangelo's turbulent genius, and Damien Hirst's animals in formaldehyde, the potential of artistic enquiry to challenge boundaries and to gain new insights, he argues, has been present in art-making since antiquity, and is just as potent today.[5] In 'The Three Configurations of the Studio-Art' PhD, James Elkins agrees that a practice-based research PhD should be supported by a discursive document and that this should critically reflect on the practice.[6] Elkins is quick to point out, though, that critical reflection in practice-based research in art should not be interpreted as simply a mixture of art theory and art history—but rather a sound elucidation of one's own artwork—situating it "within the critical matrix to which it belongs."[7] Daichendt and Elkins' observations were influential to how I approached the dissertation component for my PhD.

Before I discuss my approach to my dissertation, let me briefly explain the context of my film, the primary research focus for my PhD.

In his book, *Talk of the Devil: Encounters with Seven Dictators*, Riccardo Orizio observes that "big men" seldom atone. The experimental animated film *Big Man* posits a fictional situation (or wish fulfilment) where a *Big Man* is made to atone. The film is based on the second and fourth chapters of 'The Book of Daniel' of *The Old*

Testament. Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, has troubled dreams that can only be interpreted by the Hebrew prophet Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar refuses to heed the warning explicit in Daniel's reading of his dreams, so God sends him to live as a beast in the wilderness to atone for his sins. In the film, former South African Prime Minister, B. J. Vorster is cast as Nebuchadnezzar. Dr Beyers Naudé, theologian and anti-apartheid activist, appears in the role of Daniel. While the film questions "big man" politics in South Africa both during and post-apartheid, it has broader relevance in the underlying biblical narrative. In addition, the "big man" phenomenon, often associated with a characteristic of political leadership in Africa, is becoming a characteristic of world politics—and has come to describe more recent political phenomena such as "Trumpism" and "Putinism."

The film uses a variety of animation techniques, including stop-motion paper cut-out animation, digital, traditional hand-drawn frame-by-frame, cel animation, digital puppet animation, and paint-on-glass animation. The various creative approaches I explored were significant sites of experimentation and learning, and thus were an important aspect of my dissertation.

As seen in this brief break-down, the dissertation documents and critically reflects on the narrative, thematic, theoretical, visual, aural, procedural, and aesthetic aspects of the film from pre- to post-production. While these areas are listed separately, the dissertation comprised a somewhat more fluid intertwining of technical and procedural reporting as well as critical, theoretical, and historical reflection.

1. A detailed synopsis—detailing the biblical and South African historical narrative.
2. A detailed critical analysis of the notion of the "big man"—its anthropological, historical, and recent emanations.
3. A break-down and documentation of the visual and aural creative processes, including the approach to archival sound, archival footage, and archival imagery, storyboarding, pre-production documentation, and processes, as well as traditional animation processes and digital animation processes.
4. An analyses and illustration of the various visual, conceptual, and narrative influences and themes from individual experimental filmmakers, visual artists, and genres within art, animation history, and literature.
5. A contextualisation of the study within the history of experimental film and animation.
6. A contextualisation of the study in terms of South African art.



Figure 1. Still from 'The funeral of Dr Verwoerd, the South African prime minister assassinated last week, was held in Pretoria yesterday (Saturday),' 10.09.1966.



Figure 2. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Paper puppets from 'Prologue' (entourage and military guard), *Big Man*, black card, pen and ink and split-pins; digital drawing.



Figure 3. Still from 'The funeral of Dr Verwoerd, the South African prime minister assassinated last week, was held in Pretoria yesterday (Saturday),' 10.09.1966.



Figure 4. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Paper puppets from 'Prologue' (pallbearers with coffin), *Big Man*, black card, pen and ink, and split-pins; digital drawing.

I have singled out two instances from my dissertation for discussion, through which I hope to illustrate the nature of my creative research as a process that required contemplation, interpretation, analysis, and elucidation. The first is my exploration of stop motion paper cut out animation in the first scene of the film and the second my explanation of the use of metamorphosis in the last scene of the film.

Paper puppets: conceptualisation, visualisation, and manipulation

▶ These were used in the first scene of the film, which is a re-imagining of Hendrik Verwoerd's funeral and the subsequent inauguration of B. J. Vorster. This segment draws strongly on archival footage, imagery, and sound from the original event (Figure 1). While some of the process was pure experimentation on my part, it was informed by early experimental filmmakers. This scene was a hand-manipulated, traditional stop motion process (Figure 2).

Paper puppets, post-production

▶ Archival, newsreel feel
▶ Deliberate archaic style to separate change from the imagined past and present within the film (Figure 4)
▶ Authenticity: to the event and characters
▶ BBC News footage (Figure 3)
▶ Creative licence and rights

Frame-by-frame log: walk cycle for people

▶ Log—used in pose-to-pose animation—industry animation and production methods developing out of Disney Studios in the 1930s (Figures 5 and 6)

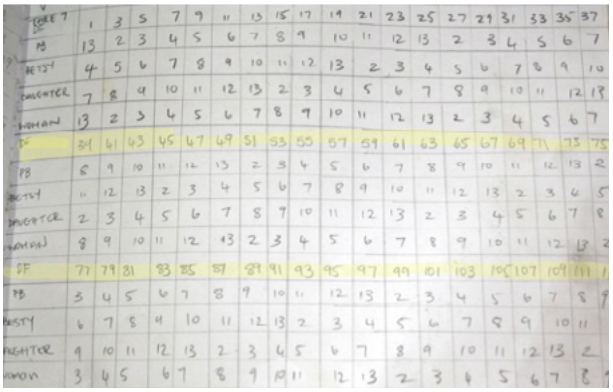


Figure 5. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Log showing walk cycle plotting for Betsie Verwoerd, two family members, and pallbearers in preparation for 'Prologue,' *Big Man*, pencil on paper.

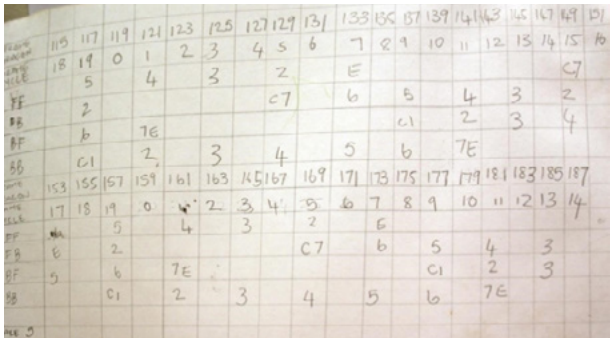


Figure 6. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Log showing walk cycle of dog puppet in preparation for 'Prologue,' *Big Man*, pencil on paper.

Walk cycles, research references (Figures 7 and 8)

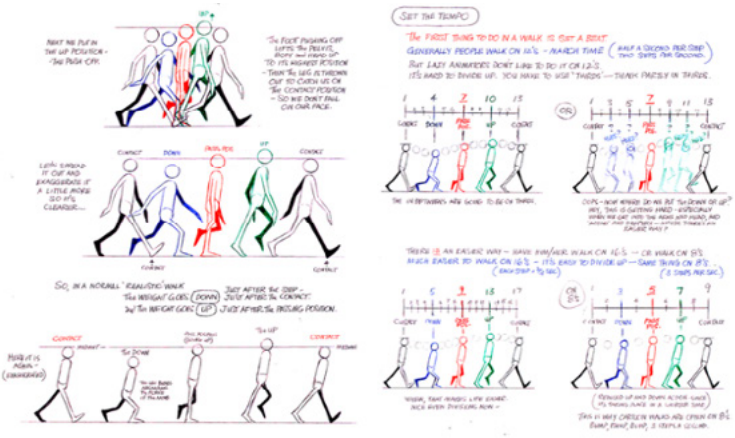


Figure 7. Richard Williams, pages 109–110, 'Set the Tempo.' In *The Animator's Survival Kit*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009



Figure 8. Eadweard Muybridge, Plate 2 in *Animal locomotion: An Electro-photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements, 1872-1885*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, v. 1, 1887.

Influence of Lotte Reiniger

- German filmmaker and pioneer of silhouette animation. Her best-known film is *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, from 1926—thought to be one of the oldest surviving feature-length animated films.
- Watched videos on her nearly a century-old process.



Figure 9. Lotte Reiniger at work on *Prince Achmed* using her innovative 'trick table' set up, 1926.

Influence of Berthold Bartosch

- *The Idea* (French: *L'Idée*) is a 1932 French animated film by Austro-Hungarian filmmaker Berthold Bartosch (1893–1968), based on the 1920 wordless novel of the same name by Flemish artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972).
- Worked with Reiniger—using early multiplane camera techniques—developed by Disney studios.
- Austerity of style and subject matter—reminiscent of the wordless novels of the time—often dealt with political, social content—suppression or freedom—was banned in Germany.
- Film historian William Moritz called *The Idea* "the first animation film created as an artwork with serious, even tragic, social and philosophical themes."[8]
- A thinker sits by a window, and an idea comes to him in the form of a doll-sized naked woman. The thinker puts the woman in an envelope and sends her out into the world. She finds herself at odds with authorities who attempt to clothe her, suppress her in variously violent and abusive ways as she persists in journeying through the world as an emblem of freedom and hope. She becomes involved with a young, working-class man, and he appeals to the people on her behalf; he is captured and executed, and his coffin is carried through the streets by the people. This scene influenced the conception of my funeral scene—its austerity and aesthetic. Presentation of be-suited, morally corrupt authoritarian figures—influenced the visual conception of the Vorster paper cut out.



Figure 10. Berthold Bartosch. 1932. Still from *Le Idée*.



Figure 11. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Paper puppets from 'Prologue' (pallbearers), *Big Man*, black card, pen and ink, and split-pins.



Figure 12. Berthold Bartosch. 1932. Still from *Le Idée*.

Paper puppet animation

▶A visual break down of two limited animation processes—influenced by both Reiniger, Bartosch, and the Russian animator Yuri Norstein but also adapted to my specific approach.



Figure 13. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Still from 'Prologue' (entourage at Heroes' Acre), *Big Man*, pen and ink; digital drawing.



Figure 14. Michelle Stewart, 2012, Paper cut-out puppet of B. J. Vorster, with additional segments showing direction of movement, black card, pen and ink, and split-pins.

The influence of Yuri Norstein



Figure 15. Yuri Norstein demonstrating his technique of animating with small pieces of celluloid (used in *The Overcoat*), 1985.

This idea of animating portions of the face within the face itself was influenced by a similar (but somewhat more complex) animation technique exemplified by Norstein, who is best known for his animated shorts *The Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975) and *Tale of Tale*s (1979). Norstein has worked with the traditional paper cut-out technique since the 1960s and continues to work with the process today, unaided by digital technology. Norstein's paper cut-out animation is meticulously crafted and detailed. Each puppet can comprise numerous movable celluloid parts, which allows for extremely realistic movement. In spite of his active refusal to use the digital platform to speed up his process, Norstein is still revered as an animator and is regarded as an innovator of the paper cut-out process: "His characters, mostly cut-out puppets, are delicate figures of texture and form, inscrutably built, existing in some fascinating limbo between two and three dimensions. He is first among equals in a long line of Russian geniuses of animation."[9] I was particularly taken with the way in which he animated the face of the central character in his 1981 film *The Overcoat* (Figure 15). In a short documentary on the film, he demonstrates this process.

Situating the study between practice and theory: an illustrative example

Metamorphosis, the changing of one form into another, is intrinsic to the medium of animation. Drawing on the influences and approaches of experimental animators and artists, I aimed to extend the traditional function of metamorphosis (as a device to simulate movement). Metamorphosis is an overriding theme of the main biblical narrative of the film (the mutation of man to beast) but is also visible as a conceptual, stylistic and expressive strategy. While this approach emanates variously in each scene of the film, this paper focuses on how the work and ideas of artists William Blake and Francis Bacon, and filmmaker Joan Gratz influenced my approach to metamorphosis in the closing scene of the film. This discussion illustrates one instance wherein the study is explained in terms of where practice and theory merge.



Figure 16. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Images of the various layers that made up the puppet used for B. J. Vorster's inaugural speech, card, paper, split-pins, pen and ink.



Figure 17. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Head segments created for B. J. Vorster's inaugural speech, card, paper, split-pins, pen and ink.



Figure 18. Michelle Stewart, 2013, Examples of mouth segments created for B. J. Vorster's inaugural speech, pen and ink on tracing paper.

Vorster/Nebuchadnezzar (after Blake's rendition)

▶ The visual mutation of Vorster in the wilderness as Nebuchadnezzar—beast-like, terror-stricken, naked, and debased on all fours—is a deliberate reference to the English Romantic painter and poet William Blake's engravings of Nebuchadnezzar (engraved 1795, printed 1805).
▶ Video

Beginning in 1795, Blake made four impressions of this image. It was these engravings that provided the initial visual spur for how to show the "fallen" Big Man/Nebuchadnezzar/Vorster character at his most abject. While Blake's image is a still, it implies metamorphosis in that it represents King Nebuchadnezzar in his final mutated form, as in the biblical narrative. Blake's prints are illustrations of the biblical description of Nebuchadnezzar in 'The Book of Daniel' at that part of the narrative where he is clearly beast-like and in the wilderness: "and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws."[10] Blake portrays Nebuchadnezzar as a naked, vulnerable half-beast whose fearful facial expression and wide staring eyes powerfully reveal his terror. It has also been suggested that Blake's portrayal of Nebuchadnezzar alludes to King George III. George III was a contemporary of Blake and was regarded by some during the first two decades of his reign as a tyrannical leader, although this view was in opposition to attitudes that dominated later on during his rule in the early 1800s when he became "a revered symbol of national resistance to French ideas and French power."[11] In his essay 'The Doom of Tyrants,' John Mee suggests that the idea of Blake's Nebuchadnezzar being an evocation of King George III is pertinent, particularly since the King had suffered a bout of madness between 1788 and 1789.[12] Mee further posits: "Nebuchadnezzar was a traditional image of the regal oppressor, but after King George III's attack of madness in 1788–89 recourse to biblical

archetype became a particularly appropriate motif for radicals seeking to attack the king."[13]

It was this image of Nebuchadnezzar that inspired me to imagine a naked Vorster in the same vein—hence the initial exploratory watercolour that preceded the film and that spurred the idea (Figure 19). In the film, this depiction further and deliberately echoes Blake's beastly image. I attempted to emulate the terrified, silent scream of Blake's image. This is a further reference to Francis Bacon's 'Screaming Pope' series and his exploration of the moral corruption within these images, but this is complex and detailed in another chapter.



Figure 19. Michelle Stewart, 2013, *Untitled*, watercolour on paper.



Figure 20 William Blake, c. 1795, *Nebuchadnezzar*, monotype finished in black chalk, pen and watercolour, coated with gum or size. Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

The film ends with the silent screaming head of the "beast-like" Vorster, mutating back into a portrait of his former self (Figure 21). From there, Vorster's head metamorphoses into each head, in turn, of all the subsequent South African heads of state from Vorster up to the ex-president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma. Traditionally, metamorphosis in film or animation has been used to suggest a shift into fantasy or into a psychological realm.[14] Similarly, the use of metamorphosis at this point of the film was intended to signify Vorster's altered state of mind and to show, at the end of the film, the change from one political dispensation to another, in the metamorphosis of one head of state into another.

The animation process in the 'Epilogue' scene moves from frame-by-frame animation to a combination of frame-by-frame animation and time-lapse painting. This approach was influenced by Gratz's 1992 animated film, *Mona Lisa Descending a Staircase* (Figure 22). In this film, she uses the clay painting technique that she pioneered, where she merges the works (mostly portraits and the human figure) of thirty-five famous artists using a combination of time-lapse, metamorphosis and frame-by-frame movement. Much like the paint-on-glass process I used, each frame in Gratz's film is altered and ultimately destroyed in the creation of the next frame.[15] Of particular interest to me was

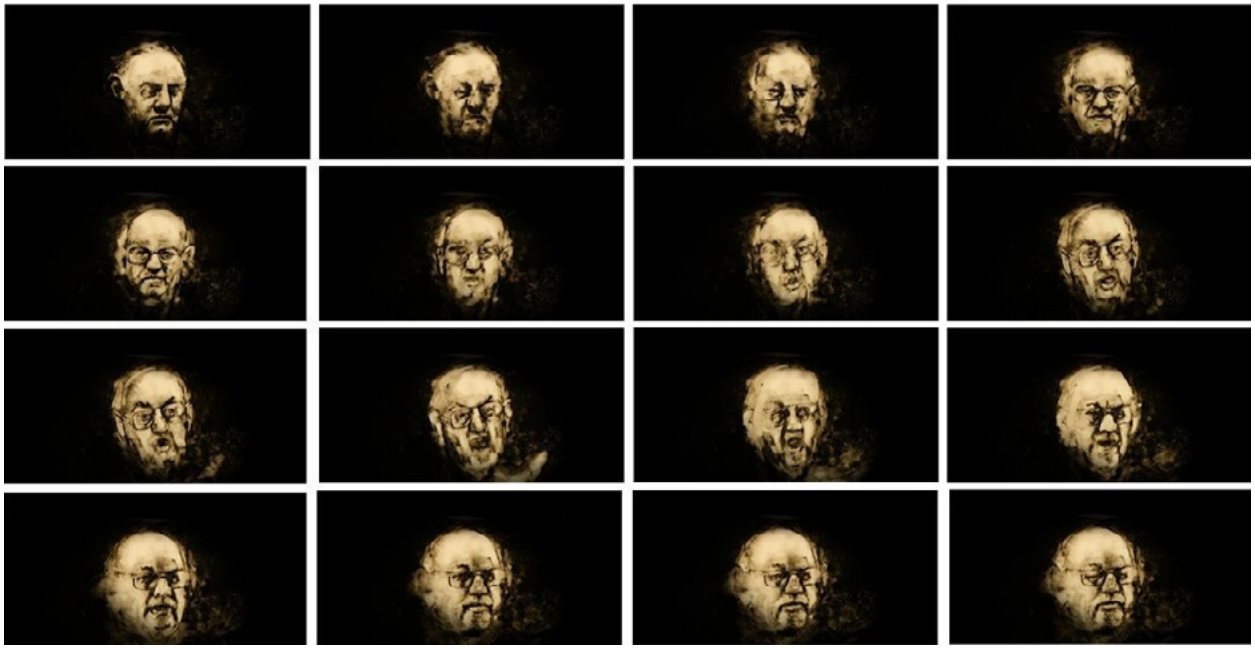


Figure 21. Michelle Stewart, 2013, paint-on-glass stills from 'Banishment', *Big Man*, gauche and glycerine on glass.

the way in which Gratz combined the merging or metamorphosis of one image into another with animated movement, adding another emotive, psychological dimension. Similarly, in the 'Epilogue' scene, the portraits of the heads of state not only transform from one to another, through a time-lapse approach but also include movement. This can be seen in P. W. Botha's wagging finger, the closing eyes of various heads, the changing smiles of F. W. De Klerk and Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki's hand movement, and finally Zuma raising his finger to his lips. The source images for the creation of the portraits were found media images. I referred to these to create the likeness to each head of state and to give me an idea of the nature of the movement I could incorporate. For the movement in-between poses, I used a mirror and observed and adapted my own movements.



Figure 22. Joan Gratz, 1992, stills from *Mona Lisa Descending a Staircase*, clay painting animation.

As well as being influenced by Gratz's approach to movement, I was also inspired by the implied movement of Bacon's painted portraits (e.g., Figure 23). His portraits, though static images, suggest faces in movement. The distortions of his portraits are not unlike the effects that can occur when blurred movement is captured photographically in one image. Bacon achieves a similar effect with the drag of his brush that cuts through, mutates, and blurs form. Movement in Bacon's work is further suggested by the sequential nature of many of his paintings, particularly those he presents in the triptych format. In these triptychs, movement is not only suggested in the dissolution and abstractions of the still image, but also in the sequential juxtaposition of the heads, which show changes in rotation and angle. Similar distortions and blurring of movement occur naturally in the time-lapse painting process. Bacon talks of the psychology of the face or head in movement—how he watched people in bars and was fascinated by faces and gestures in movement—tried to capture this in is his paintings—where faces appear distorted in a frozen moment—caught in movement.



Figure 23. Francis Bacon, *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne*, 1966, oil on canvas. Tate.

Picasso perceived the idea of a search as a vital, transitory, ongoing process, which does not stop with the completion of an artwork. He said, "I never do a painting like a work of art. It is always a search. I am always seeking and there is a logical connection throughout that search. That is why I number them [the works]."[16] Picasso disdained the academic notion of research and the emphasis given to the process of documenting the search or gathering of reference materials.[17] For Picasso, it was ultimately the knowledge one has found—as made visual in the artwork—that matters. Writing in 1993, Christopher Frayling saw potential in the "Picasso approach" but strongly advocated, in terms of the PhD study, the need for further debate.[18] Frayling's misgivings around the art object completely replacing the dissertation as new knowledge is still echoed by Elkins some years later in 2009.[19] Elkins does not at all discount the idea of the artwork as comprising and embodying the new knowledge but, like Frayling, suggests that much research needs to be done to define how such knowledge is assessed in the university environment.[20]

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Notes

1 Klein, 'What Is Artistic Research?', 5.
2 Klein, 'What Is Artistic Research?', 5.
3 Daichendt, *Artist Scholar*, 29.
4 Daichendt, *Artist Scholar*, 63.
5 Daichendt, *Artist Scholar*, 16.
6 Elkins, 'The Three Configurations of Studio-Art PhDs'.
7 Elkins, 'The Three Configurations of Studio-Art PhDs', 151.
8 Moritz, 'Bartosch's The Idea', 93.
9 Carter, 'Yuri Norstein and the Hedgehog at USC'.
10 'The Book of Daniel', 4:33.
11 Reitan, *George III, Tyrant or Constitutional Monarch?*, viii.
12 Mee, 'The Doom of Tyrants', 108.
13 Mee, 'The Doom of Tyrants', 108.
14 Furniss, *Art in Motion*, 78.
15 Purves, *Stop Motion*, 138.
16 Liberman, 'Picasso', 132–133.
17 Frayling, 'Research in Art and Design', 5.
18 Frayling, 'Research in Art and Design'.
19 Elkins, 'The Three Configurations of Studio-Art PhDs'.
20 Elkins et al. 'The PhD Degree', 120.

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