What is an exegesis?

An exegesis is a piece of written text (an essay) which accompanies a creative product (play, script, dance-work, painting, novel, score, CD, or other form). Within it, the maker of the artwork should critically examine his or her creative product in the light of contemporary theory and practice. You should critically reflect on and analyse what you did, and why you did it in creating your work.

Kroll (7) describes an exegesis as allowing the audience "to listen to the author speaking to herself before, during and after the act of creation." Whilst a conventional essay would focus on issues of meaning and interpretation, an exegesis focuses instead on the process and the intentions behind making the artwork.

In this act of "talking to yourself" you should comment on not just the practical but also the theoretical "academic" aspects of your work. You need to draw on relevant research publications and demonstrate your understanding of the principles and concepts relevant to the particular field. Kroll and others compare the exegesis to the preface of a novel, to a reflective journal written by an author or performer whilst they are engaged in making the work, to a director’s notes given in a theatre programme, to a painter’s catalogue essay, or to other more detailed writings. The artist explains the origins and development of his or her ideas and the research involved in shaping and refining the material. Your research would typically be conducted both through studio work (the rehearsal room as an experimental laboratory), and through reading and reflection.
So what should an exegesis cover?

Here are some questions to get you started—

• What is the purpose of the work? What do I hope to achieve?
• What ideas, emotions, concepts or feelings do I want to examine, analyse and evoke through making this work?
• What methodologies am I using in generating the material? Is there a particular style of acting, choreography, painting or other form which is central to how I make my own work?
• How will my work fit into a wider cultural context?
• What influences come from my personal background and culture (values, beliefs, ideas)?
• What works by which other artists, past and present, influence my art or my performance?
• What do I see as the strengths and weaknesses of how I make my work?
• Did I achieve what I set out to do in making this artwork?
• What obstacles do I experience in achieving my goals for the work? How do I address them?
• What limitations are inherent in the process, both technical and creative?
• Where should the work be performed (the physical location), and why?
• How does my work make an original contribution to the field? Would other artists be interested in following my example, and why?

As you address these and other factors, do not forget to connect your reflections to the literature.

How can you tackle an exegesis?

The process of writing your exegesis can be tackled in a number of ways. Typically, you should begin writing whilst you are in the process of actually designing your performance. You might however choose to only keep a reflective journal and then use this as the basis for later analysis, or create the art first and write second, or vice-versa: choose whatever method suits you best (Kroll 3). Write up your exegesis in essay format, with an introduction, body and conclusion (for essay writing guidelines refer to www.otago.ac.nz/slc click on "Writing").

There is no universally accepted model for exegeses as a whole, so you can be creative. Like a work of art, every exegesis is unique. It may be appropriate to include images, poetry, recordings, or other relevant materials. You should always consult with appropriate staff and experts regarding what would be expected of an exegesis in your particular case.

See also: the Student Learning Centre guide to writing a reflective journal

References