

Echoes of Formalism: Art Theory and Creative Research

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At the 2009 ACUADS conference in Brisbane, Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste presented a paper entitled 'The Effective and the Evocative: Practice-led Research Approaches Across Art and Design'. The main argument of this paper was for an articulation of the differences in the role of the artefact in postgraduate art and design research projects. While both are creative and often practice-led research projects, the distinction was made between design projects being 'effective' and art projects being 'evocative' in nature. Hamilton and Jaaniste drew on Stephen Scrivener's (2000) work on navigating these essential differences from the perspective of the supervisor. It is not the intention of this paper to criticise Hamilton and Jaaniste's central argument but rather to look at some of the nuances of the general arguments surrounding creative arts research and the nature of their relationship with existing art theoretical discourse.

Scrivener (2000) provides a convenient foundation for Hamilton and Jaaniste to ground their argument, in that his initial goal was to clarify and articulate the essential differences between art and design research projects. This difference, both Scrivener and Hamilton and Jaaniste agree, is somewhat obscured by the fact that both kinds of projects are often practice-led in nature. In their paper, Hamilton and Jaaniste seek to extend Scrivener's work and map these differences further. However there are several other inevitable issues that are raised within this argument that relate to wider issues of research practices more generally, the production of knowledge and also the relationship of the artefact with knowledge production.

For Hamilton and Jaaniste the production of knowledge, albeit a particular kind of knowledge, remains a crucial component of the 'evocative' creative arts research project. That is, new knowledge, as a desirable research outcome, is considered to be embodied in the artefact itself and framed as such within the exegesis. This view however dismisses one of Scrivener's (2002) more unambiguous statements that is expressed in the form of an article title: 'The art object does not embody a form of knowledge.' In the context of Hamilton and Jaaniste's (2009, p. 11) paper, Scrivener is not presented as being as emphatic as his title suggests, rather he is said to 'have overlooked the knowledge connected within the artefacts of... creative-production research because he appears to assume that the term should be reserved for applied research.' Conversely, Scrivener (2002), rather than overlook anything, flatly rejects the possibility that

something called 'knowledge' could be embodied in the art object and claims that it is in fact not knowledge but intellectual and sensorial 'apprehensions' that works of art evoke in their audience.

Hamilton and Jaaniste selectively interpret Scrivener on the grounds that he uses a specific, or perhaps limited conception of what knowledge is. In principle, they agree about what the art object is and can do and the kinds of experiences that yield from it. But where Scrivener is unwilling to stretch the definition of knowledge to encompass these less philosophically 'true' elements, Hamilton and Jaaniste are prepared to acknowledge that these elements constitute at least a different kind of knowledge, tacit or experiential in nature.

Scrivener's (2002) arguments on the topic of research in the creative arts are among the more convincing, largely due to his desire for clarity in regard to the theoretical foundation of the debate. To take a polemic position against the common assumption that art objects embody a form of knowledge is productive in that it forces the debate to acknowledge certain assumptions about words such as 'knowledge' that are used frequently and often uncritically. But more importantly it argues for the goals of artistic production to remain true to the discourse in which they emerge rather than attempt to fit them into pre-determined research models from other disciplines. That is, to acknowledge what it is that works of art do is of intellectual, emotional, sensorial and social value and should be evaluated on terms that determine how effectively the work has operated in *this* context rather than that of another discipline.

It is not by random selection that Scrivener chooses the work of British artist Simon Patterson to illustrate his point about the art object's relation to knowledge. Scrivener (2002) quotes Patterson as follows: 'the idea of the viewer finishing the work is important...meaning is always shifting, anyway you can't control the meaning of a work.' This statement sits in comfortable opposition to the definition of knowledge given earlier in the paper as something more concrete and unshifting and is also intended by the subject to be understood as such by an audience (Scrivener, 2002). However, Patterson's statement does not communicate anything terribly unique about how artists understand their work to communicate. In fact, this kind of open-endedness and the assumption that the viewer finishes the work originates from the debates surrounding minimalist sculpture most notably in Michael Fried's 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood'. Fried (in Harrison & Wood, 2007, p. 838)) derided minimalism for this exact reason, pejoratively labelling it 'theatrical'. However, both directly and indirectly, the concept of theatricality has been taken up in a positive sense by artists, such as Patterson, but also theorists, Nicholas Bourriaud's (2002) *Relational Aesthetics* is one example which will be addressed below.

At its essence, Hamilton and Jaaniste's paper is an argument for a particular kind of status for the art object and the conditions of its reception. However, while it is not their intention, their insistence that the art object embodies knowledge can be easily interpreted as an echo of Friedian formalism. The key point of divergence between Fried and the minimalist artists such as Robert Morris was based on vigorously opposing opinions on the nature of the art object and the conditions of its reception. Morris was most articulate in his argument for the function of the art object, privileging spatial and temporal experience over any meaning derived from relationships occurring between internal parts of the object:

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive, because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he *apprehends* the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context. (Morris in Harrison & Wood, 2007, p. 832, emphasis added)

Scrivener is possibly more accurate than he realises in his choice of the word 'apprehension' to describe the nature of the experience of the art object. Similarly, the rest of this famous quote from Morris would sit comfortably in Scrivener's argument which demonstrates just how much these arguments have in common. Fried's (in Harrison & Wood, 2007, p. 845) attack on this aspect of minimalist art was driven by his appreciation of and allegiance to the modernist art that he saw as possessing an internal grace that he labelled 'presentness'. The idea that the art object can embody knowledge does a similar job in assuming that knowledge, like the purity of formalist meaning, is contained within the bounds of the work and is therefore not necessarily dependent on a viewer for knowledge to be generated. Knowledge, like Fried's 'presentness' is taken to be something that can exist independently of a viewing (or knowing) subject.

Cast in this framework of art theory, the concept that the work of art embodies knowledge can be shown to be subject to the same criticisms as formalism for the same reasons. Scrivener's argument is as much for an anti-formalist, relational concept of art as it is against the idea that art can embody knowledge, the reason being that they are, in fact, the same thing. Debates around the nature of research in the creative arts often involve debates around the relationship between art theory and studio practice; however, theories of art practice as research rarely acknowledge the fact that they are in many ways also theories of art. Conceptually, for example, Hamilton and Jaaniste agree with Scrivener, their disagreement is essentially semantic in nature. They would

all presumably have similar theoretical views on formalism, the viewer, theatricality and the art object, so why should this not translate into their theories of art research?

To approach this problem from another direction, the aim of much of the writing on this topic argues, as Scrivener and Hamilton and Jaaniste do, for art practice to be validated as a legitimate and rigorous form of research in its own right as distinct from that of other disciplines such as the sciences. To this end, Estelle Barrett (2004) attempted to clarify and justify the role of the exegesis in her paper 'What Does it Meme? The Exegesis as Valorisation and Validation of Creative Arts Research' which was later published in the influential book that she co-edited with Barbara Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. Like Hamilton and Jaaniste, Barrett (2004) makes a similar concession to the art object's perceived ability to embody knowledge, and similarly the same echoes of formalism resound:

Whatever their intellectual benefits, one could argue that conventional forms of criticism tend to focus on the finished product rather than material, intellectual and cognitive processes that produced it. The meme itself, or the internal representation of ideas that produced the artwork is then obscured by the vehicle in which it is carried. *I should like to emphasise that this is not a denial of the intrinsic and generative value of the artworks and their capacity, in some instances, to stand alone as an object of knowledge.*

However, I do believe there is a need for a shift in current perceptions of the role and status of the creative arts in the knowledge economy and that the exegesis is a crucial vehicle for effecting this shift. (emphasis added)

It is obvious that a formalist approach to the evaluation of art is far from Barrett's intentions here in her attempt to argue the importance of the exegesis in validating creative works within the knowledge economy. However, what is of interest here is the disclaimer-like language used by Barrett (2004), in spite of the surrounding argument, to keep the possibility alive that the work of art can indeed 'stand alone as an object of knowledge.' In art theoretical terms, this argument appears very anti-formalist in that it views the 'material, intellectual and cognitive processes' of artistic practice as crucially important to the validation of art practice as a research process. However, when the idea that the artwork can embody knowledge is presented as a concession within the greater argument, or as a point in need of specific defence, its contrast to that greater argument is in fact emphasised, as is its similarity to formalism.

Barrett's central point however, is an important one. This paper draws on Richard Dawkins' discussion of the 'meme' and uses it as a theoretical, or perhaps more accurately, a metaphorical framework through which to understand what the exegesis is supposed to do. As entertaining as

this metaphor is, in that it indirectly sets the theological origins of the word 'exegesis' against Dawkins' famous atheism, it is difficult to see any reason for it, as the central point that Barrett makes is stated adequately in the second paragraph when she states: 'the exegesis may be viewed both as a replication or re-versioning of the completed artistic work as well as a reflective discourse on significant moments in the process of unfolding and revealing.' The reference to Dawkins does not, as we might expect, illuminate our understanding of the exegesis. What it does do is, in fact, further complicate that understanding through a reference to science, a discipline that art research has had to differentiate itself from in the context of the knowledge economy. As Barrett (2004) herself states, 'Researchers are recognising that scientific inquiry is just one species of research', and one of the key devices art research has adopted in order to do this is the exegesis. Why then, is there a need to look to science as a means of clarifying what we do in creative research?

Barrett looks to other writers who have theorised the nature of research in science, emphasising the shift that has occurred away from positivistic modes of inquiry toward more qualitatively based acknowledgements of subjectivity and experiential knowledge. Drawing on this discussion, Barrett (2004) then describes the role of the exegesis as an illumination of subjective and experiential knowledge that is then discussed 'in relation to what is already presented in theory and general domains of knowledge.' The conclusion is then drawn that it is this 'relational' nature of exegetical writing that makes it so uniquely important and appropriate for art research: 'I would like to return to the meme analogy to suggest that the potential for innovation lies in this relational aspect of creative arts practice.'

From the anti-positivist shift in science through Dawkins' socio-evolutionary theory of the meme, Barrett arrives at the 'relational' as the unique and defining characteristic key to validating art research within the knowledge economy. This is done however without even a cursory reference to Bourriaud's (2002) concept of relational aesthetics. It is not the intention of this paper to promote relational aesthetics as the preferred framework through which to analyse creative arts research practices and their validity, nor is it to privilege relational aesthetics as a general theory of art, but to draw attention to the fact that there are perfectly adequate theoretical frameworks that exist within the discourse of art that could be better used to articulate and clarify what it is that the exegesis can do.

In the context of Barrett's (2004) argument, for example, a theoretical framework based on relational aesthetics would make obvious sense to the discussion of the importance that Barrett gives to the 'relational aspect' of art practice and the role of the exegesis both within this relational context and in illuminating it. Barrett describes the nature of exegetical writing as

relational on the basis that it 'illuminates particular knowledge and data derived from interacting with the environment (material and social) and then discusses it in relation to what is already presented in theory and general domains of knowledge.' It is precisely these material and social interactions that represent the site of meaning generation in Bourriaud's theory. Of course, Bourriaud is discussing the situation from the view point of the beholder where Barrett is discussing the conditions of artistic production, but the point that Barrett is making for the exegesis is one of communication. Communication, also a feature of Bourriaud's text, characterises one of the key features of the exegesis, but the specific kind of communication that the exegesis engages in is between these two states. Just as the conditions of artistic production involve experiential knowledge derived from particular environmental interactions, it is the same situation for the beholder of the work who, in the case of art research, is the examiner.

Further to this, Roderick Ewins (cited in Grieg, 2009, p. 3) has described the exegesis as 'a privileged communication with the examiner' in which case it would make sense to understand its function as one that accommodates, or even produces a unique 'micro-community', to use Bourriaud, or a relationship between the examiner and the artist or indeed the examiner and the work. The exegesis itself is a participant in this spatial and social situation initiated by the work of art. As they are in possession of the exegetical information, the examiner approaches the work in a context of dialogic inter-subjectivity, the communicative relationship is stabilised, to some extent, by the exegesis. Both examiner and artist understand the subjective, theoretical, social, political and also the institutional contexts within which the work, or the research project as a whole, was created and will be engaged with. In short the exegesis produces a unique and specific set of relationships that occur within a given space at a given time. Bourriaud's idea that it is in these spatial and temporal moments that artistic meaning is generated helps us understand the function that the exegesis can perform. In relation to Bourriaud's (2002 p. 43) suggestion that certain art 'turns the beholder into a neighbour, a direct interlocutor,' the exegesis can be seen as an active agent in this interlocution.

Bourriaud obviously has specific kinds of work in mind as he is writing, and it is likely that many works produced in research higher degrees will not necessarily be those kinds of work, however relational aesthetics, as a discursive device, has applications beyond this initial context written into it. As an aesthetic theory it could hardly be said to be ahistorical or timeless but for the same reason it does have a certain adaptability to other contexts. The discussion about art research is one such context. In fact it is particularly appropriate in this argument precisely because of Bourriaud's historicising strategy in positioning it as a contemporary development of situationism, conceptualism, and most importantly, formalism.

Art theory as a discipline is undergoing a period of change and renewal, much of which has been brought about by changes in attitudes toward its relationship to studio practice and the debates surrounding art practice as research. What this paper has argued is that, regardless of the nature of those changes as they play out in both a political and practical sense, art theory is an important component in discussions of the validity of art research for two main reasons outlined here. The first is to achieve clarity in the theoretical foundation of the debate, and the second is to retain the philosophical integrity of the discipline by using the local theoretical frameworks rather than resorting to those from other disciplines. If art theory can be deployed in this manner, that is, as the critical framework it is designed to be, its relevance as part of studio practice and purpose generally could be strengthened.

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