

We Speak Art and Design Here

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Background

The study of research approaches or orientations appropriate to design and creative practice is an evolving field of academic investigation. It is dependent on a shared understanding and critique of the range and significance of practice-based approaches and methods that are currently being differentiated in the creative disciplines. Acknowledging the current imperative to claim appropriate research paradigms, it is important to note that the development of these research capabilities must be embedded in pedagogical approaches, training methods and the curriculum of postgraduate programmes. Undergraduate art and design training is typically oriented towards the development of capability in making use of the realm of the imagination to perceive things differently and to present this different view to the world through the modelling and arranging of material forms. Art and design practice-based research involves the application of this imaginative capability through material form at an intersection with theory or philosophy. This is one interpretation of material thinking, with the critical issue being the interrelationship and parallel evolution of idea and material form, of abstract thought and physical artefact. A focus on material thinking may serve to disrupt notions of creative practice research methodology as either a prescriptive endeavour or merely a derivative of theory.

Another interpretation of material thinking can be expressed as an argument against Duchamp's claim, made late in his career, that all 'decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out' (Duchamp 1957: 138). This claim was made in relation to his idea of the 'art coefficient', the difference between an artist's intention and the realisation of it in the work, 'a difference which the artist is not aware of' (*ibid*: 139). A contemporary, material-thinking sensitivity within creative research in art and design might challenge that view. It could be argued that critical engagement and the strategic, reflective processes associated with practice-based research are generally expected to result in the work reaching a desired point at which the intention and the material representation are deemed to be contiguous. The trajectory toward success or failure in studio

processes would be integrated in a research document/report or exegesis incorporating visual and written texts.

The concept of material thinking is emerging as a focus mechanism for an approach to art and design research that could replace or transform the contested conditions surrounding the terms practice-based or practice-led research. It has the potential to function as a catalyst for new orientations consistent with a research paradigm that does not exclude poetic and interpretative dimensions. Definitions are currently in the making. Paul Carter's (2004) analysis of the concept focuses on what material thinking can do, such as: teasing out the complexities in creative processes; the articulation of tacit, local knowledge, and preventing the detachment of meaning from the matrix of production. Gibbons (1994) raised early concerns about the resistance of the academy to the kind of new knowledge that is produced through artistic practices which do not align with notions of objectivity, and notes that, within the scientific/objective paradigm, all other ways of producing knowledge are judged against that standard. Outside of that dominant paradigm, new knowledge may be unrecognisable. Biggs (2006: 199) argues for a polytheistic understanding and interpretation that mirrors the complexity of lived experience and a 'return to those forms of hybrid creative practice research which give us authoritative, poetic works of art.' It is important to emphasise that a material thinking engagement with practice is not about detecting systems in order to predict further creative work or guarantee its quality. The real value lies in a search for greater insight and depth of understanding of both the content and the creative practice.

Approaches and Orientations

A sample review of current topics of interest in recent publications and in e-mail discussion lists reveals two imperative issues emerging in the practice-based research debate.¹ Methodological approaches/orientations is one issue that is attracting a great deal of attention and the other is

¹ Wissler et al. (2004) *Innovation in Australian Arts, Media, Design: Fresh Challenges for the Tertiary Sector*, Rod Wissler, Brad Haseman, Sue-Anne Wallace & Michael Keane (eds), Post Pressed Academic.

MacLeod, K. & Holdridge, L. (2006) *Thinking Through Art: Reflections on Art as Research*, New York: Routledge.

Speculation and Innovation: Applying Practice Led Research in the Creative Industries, refereed post-conference publication, Queensland University of Technology, <http://www.speculation2005.net>

AHRC Review of Practice-Led Research in Art, Design and Architecture (June/July 2006), <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/AHRC-WORKSHOP-PL.html>

Research into Practice Conference (July 2006) *Working Papers in Art and Design*. <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/index.html>

related to supporting texts and analysis: the ways in which we speak and write about creative research trajectories, including the identification, naming and articulation of generative and working practices that underpin studio work. These are both issues that underscore active, operational/functional, performative and relational concerns as opposed to a focus on object based or descriptive results. A good example of this type of concern in creative practice comes from the architect Frank Gehry. In a statement prepared for the 1980 edition of *Contemporary Architects* (1980: 279), Gehry states:

I approach each building as a sculptural object, a spatial container, a space with light and air, a response to context and appropriateness of feeling and spirit. To this container, this sculpture, the user brings his baggage, his program, and interacts with it to accommodate his needs. If he can't do that, I've failed.

Gehry touches on that elusive but important factor in creative practice which lies outside of the studio but must also be brought into consideration.

Baker (2006) contends that art school education should 'enable' participants, 'enact' new forms of knowledge, and foster a stronger 'engagement' with the idea of an unknown but future-oriented cultural economy through experiential learning and agency. Her arguments are put forward in direct response to the debates associated with the creative economy. She draws attention to the instrumentalist attitudes evident in the 'push for a crude form of commercialisation, translating cultural capital into cash, driven by the desperate attempt to resolve the chronic funding crisis of cash strapped universities.' She places greater emphasis on the engagement with change that takes place through, around and in relation to creative/innovative activity rather than on the value or usefulness of art and design products/artefacts. As a research orientation, this is another example of material thinking.

If we accept Baker's proposition that art school education should endeavour to retain its core values and significance by concentrating on the activities, the enactments and engagements with creative thinking, then it is easy to see how important the knowledge and understanding that emerges from these active processes should be in the development of a research paradigm. Material thinking in art and design positions the researcher at the centre of a complex encounter with propositions that are physically constructed, not just mentally constructed. Conventional fieldwork, tests and trials, data collection, measurements and theoretical constructs may well be part of the research process, but inevitably it is the experiential encounter with the evolving artistic or designed material artefacts

that opens up unique possibilities. This is where the particular value inherent in this type of research thinking is to be found. The way in which we understand and utilise this form of experiential knowledge is the basis of a distinctive and valuable contribution that art and design research can make to other professional fields. It is important, therefore, to provide opportunities for art and design students to engage with their own work and their colleagues' work through analysis of the creative practices as well as the creative products. To be effective, this needs to be embedded early in the undergraduate curriculum. Equally important is the encouragement of practices that acknowledge the spectator experience in the life of an artwork or in the case of a design, the value ascribed by users.

The problematic issue of what constitutes new knowledge in art and design practices is discussed by Mafe and Brown (2006) in their investigation of how creative practice research might move beyond the limits of artefact production to consider more seriously the communication of new knowledge in terms of the specific understandings generated by the artefact. They suggest that this focus may assist artistic practice in the broader sense, not only practice conducted as research.

From this point of view, practice-led research can be seen as an exercise in "consciousness raising". It does this by empowering the creative worker and the surrounding culture in general, by allowing the voice of that 'alternative' logic of practice to be made accessible and heard. (Mafe & Brown 2006)

The tensions evident in current debates about creative research methodology highlights the need to make a distinction between two different forms of knowledge, that of reasoning and of sensibility.² This tension is exacerbated by a typically narrow contemporary perception of the function of art as visible style, desirable commodity, aesthetic experience and sophisticated entertainment. While some artists believe in the potential for artists and artworks to inform, educate and challenge society, this is not a prevalent view outside of the academy. Becker (1997: 22) remarks, in the American context, that few artists have been trained 'to see their function as parallel to that of the intellectual...' He goes on to assert that the reason artists remain marginalised in society is because the potential value of their contribution is not recognised. The artist Joseph Kosuth offers a solution when he argues for an art engagement that interrogates its own actions.

² The significance of this subject is evident in the focus of current research projects and conference themes such as the *Experiential Knowledge Project*, University of Hertfordshire, tVAD research group, Faculty for the Creative and Cultural Industries. <http://www.art-design.herts.ac.uk/ekc/ekc1.html>.

If the political responsibility of a cultural reflexivity (*why*) is not taught along with a knowledge of the history of *how* artists have made meaning, then we are doomed to be oppressed by our traditions rather than informed by them. (Kosuth 1993: 255)

Perhaps all research students should be encouraged to make a contribution to this discussion of potential value through a reflective analysis of their own projects. In any case, the marginality that Becker reports works both ways for artist/academics facing scepticism from within and outside the academy. As we align ourselves towards new paradigms of research and knowledge, we need to be coherent in the academic and in the professional worlds of artists and designers. This will be a challenge.

Speaking the Reasoning, Understanding and Sensibility

All successful research opens up new horizons which may be described as: horizons of thought and understanding; horizons of interpretation and judgment; awareness of ignorance; new horizons for framing further work and new conditions for discovery. In art and design research, reasoning and interpretation occur broadly across a wide range of spheres, including all matters relating to material, aesthetic and hermeneutic organisation.³ In these spheres, artists and designers have insight from within the inventing or making process that is not accessible to critics and theorists who construct their own meanings backwards from the artistic outcome.

Let us consider an obsolete definition of the verb *to reason*, such as that given by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: a) to take part in conversation, discussion, or argument and b) to talk with another so as to influence actions or opinions. The latter is an effective way of thinking about how artists and designers operate in an academic research context. Theirs is generally a research orientation that is not weakened by inconclusive thinking especially when such thinking focuses one's thoughts in order to understand an idea more deeply. Furthermore, art and design research approaches tend to value the trail of reasoning and the depth of interpretation over notions of fact or proof, especially since outcomes are also affected by audiences and users. While this may be considered a weakness in other research paradigms, I suggest that it is an area of strength characteristic of material thinking approaches which could influence research in other disciplines,

³ These spheres include all material, craft and technological matters, particularly where innovation is ascribed; conceptual development into physical artefacts, including approaches to stylistic innovation; physical/mechanical processes associated with studio or industry production; theoretical matters including human perception and response; ergonomics and anthropology; iconography; political and cultural significance; ethics and philosophy.

particularly those that have embraced grounded and phenomenological orientations to new knowledge.

This line of argument leads logically to the way in which creative research is documented and communicated. Since there is no single formula for research in any field, artists and designers must name their terms and speak a 'native language', taking full responsibility for how appropriately their research processes are conducted. Methods and objectives must be appropriate to intentions, subjects and propositions. For example, artists and designers are used to encountering tensions and contradictions in the development of their work and know that this is often where new insights are gained. Speaking about this type of research concern in the language of art and design practice, and with confidence, will not only help to shape an identifiable paradigm but will also strengthen individual research positions. Clarity and precision in the use of words and concepts is now more relevant than whatever generalised research definitions have been appropriated in the past or whatever explanations are used in other professional fields. As the contemporary 'native speakers', artist researchers must define the meaning of the words and concepts used. General definitions in dictionaries should not constrain this process. The quality of design and visual research thinking depends very much on the care with which genuine contexts and specific meaning of the creative inquiry are identified and described. The fundamental requirement in 'speaking' art and design is to make ideas comprehensible through visual and written texts from within the research process: for examiners; other researchers and most importantly for the practitioner/researcher.

In conclusion, let us enter the physical/material/spatial realm of the studio and consider a very simple aspect of creative research which is rarely given much analytical or explanatory attention. For a philosopher or historian, the configuration of the room, the layout of the writing desk or the material quality of writing paper or computer capacity would not generally be considered to have relevance to the intellectual discourse in production. However, for a studio-based artist or designer working with materials, the spatial configuration of the studio and the contents of the working space may be vital considerations in the research approach. These factors may result in particular critical orientations and formal effects. The tools at hand and in particular the proximity, organisation and manipulation of visual and other references (drawings and source material for example) can be central to the research approach. Artists instantly recognise this effect when they encounter the studio spaces and characteristic tools of other artists. Similarly, the particular industrial, technical or craft affiliations that collaborative artists choose will impact on their work and provoke distinctive responses that become encoded in the artworks produced. These material manoeuvres are a fluid,

subtle and sometimes invisible part of creative practice. An artist's attention to this aspect of practice can be valuable both for the creative process itself and for the articulation of their research progress. The identification and analysis of how material thinking is demonstrated in creative research practices and how it affects the material, aesthetic and hermeneutic organisation of this kind of work is a significant development that will move the practice-based (practice-led) debate forward. It is a theoretical development that must be led by creative practitioners working towards a deeper level of understanding based on local knowledge and spoken in a native language.

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