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## The role of the artefact in art and design research

### Abstract

The paper opens with the definition of research made by the Arts and Humanities Research Board of the UK. This states that art and design research must advance knowledge, understanding and insight. The paper goes on to consider the role of the artefact in communicating this advancement, and whether artefacts have the capability to embody knowledge. Comparisons are made with archaeological and other museum exhibits, and criticisms of embodiment from museological studies are compared with claims for embodiment made by artists. The conclusion is that interpretation is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and that in order to communicate effectively control must be exercised over the extrinsic factors by providing a context. Although commonly achieved through words, this is owing to the utility of words for explicatory purposes rather than because words have primacy over objects in art and design research. It is therefore the content rather than the form of this context that is important.

### Paper

In this paper I shall discuss one consequence of a short but important statement in the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board's definition of research:

*The AHRB<sup>1</sup> definition of research provides a distinction between research and practice per se. Creative output can be produced, or practice undertaken, as an integral part of a research process... but equally, creativity or practice may involve no such process at all, in which case they would be ineligible for funding from the Board.*

There are two elements to this statement. The first is the distinction between research and practice. The second is the grounds for that distinction based on certain defining characteristics of research. AHRB identifies three groups of characteristics:

- It must define a series of research questions that will be addressed or problems that will be explored in the course of the research. It must also define its objectives in terms of answering those questions or reporting on the results of the research project.
- It must specify a research context for the questions to be addressed or problems to be explored. You must specify why it is important that these particular questions should be answered or problems explored; what other research is being or has been conducted in this area; and what particular contribution this particular project will make to the advancement of knowledge, understanding and insights in this area.
- It must specify the research methods for addressing and answering the research questions. You must state how, in the course of the research project,

you are going to set about answering the questions that have been set, or exploring the matters to be explored. You should also explain the rationale for

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<sup>1</sup> AHRB. The UK Arts and Humanities Research Board, Guidance notes. <http://www.ahrb.ac.uk>

your chosen research methods and why you think they provide the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions.

I shall use these groups to make a distinction between practice and research. I shall refer to them broadly as ‘questions and answers’, ‘context’ and ‘methods’. Much attention has been given to the third characteristic of ‘methods’ in a recent debate about research in art and design.<sup>2</sup> However, the principal feature of such research is not the employment of a particular method but the desire or requirement to create artefacts and to present them as part of the ‘answer’. In this way, art and design research is different from many other disciplines because it does not simply use objects as evidence, which is later, reported on, but attempts to present these objects as an argument for interpretation by the viewer. This implies the notion that the artefact can embody the answer to the research question and this is the problem that is addressed in this paper.

The first characteristic, ‘question and answer’, does not sit well with art and design. Although the practitioner may set some particular problem as a motivation to work in the studio, most creative activity seeks to problematise that which is familiar, or to raise questions or issues rather than to answer them. Outcomes need to be interpreted rather than simply ‘read’ and this undermines their perception as putative answers. However, if these questions are rephrased as: ‘how can X be problematised?’ and ‘how can Y be raised as an issue?’, then I believe that ‘question and answer’ can have meaning in relation to studio practice.

This brings us to the second characteristic: the contextualising issue of why it is important that these particular questions should be answered or problems explored. This is another stumbling block, particularly for the Romantic notion of the practitioner whose aim is the expression of the self. We need to differentiate between activities that are to do with the personal development of the practitioner and his or her work, and activities that are significant for others in the field. It is only an activity that is significant for others that can supply a suitable rationale for why it should be undertaken. Personal development does not make a contribution to the ‘advancement of knowledge, understanding and insight’, except in the most parochial sense, i.e. my advancement. A counter-argument might be that only through personal development will one be able to produce novel artefacts that will in turn make such a contribution. However, for these novel artefacts to have this effect the practitioner will have to broaden the issue to include the above characteristics and so we can regard personal development as a precursor to research rather than research *per se*.

Anticipating whether an activity will be significant for others is not a matter of clairvoyance. Part of the process of identifying the context involves finding out ‘what other research is being or has been conducted in this area’. Making a further contribution would therefore be significant to at least this group of co-researchers. Moreover, there may be an educational, theoretical, critical, or practical context for which there is an audience who should also find the outcomes significant. Note that the mode is obligatory: ‘should’ or ‘ought to’ find the outcomes significant. The task of identifying ‘why it is important that these particular questions should be answered or problems explored’, and for whom, cannot be answered by saying that this group will

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<sup>2</sup> Durling, D. & Fried-man, K. eds. (2000). *Doctoral Education in Design: foundations for the future*, Staffordshire University Press, Stoke-on-Trent, UK, pp. 18-30

find the outcomes significant, but by supplying an argument that shows that they ought to find it significant.

There is one further matter concerning the audience and that is its size. Many researchers have the idealistic notion that to be worthy of the name, research must have a large impact. Indeed, in the USA, research publications are assessed in terms of the relative importance or impact-rating of journals and the number of times an item is cited by another researcher. We have a similar notion in art and design, rating the value of an exhibition in MoMA<sup>3</sup> higher than an exhibition in the local library. Part of this assumed value is the rigour of the selection process. We do not value the latter because its lesser impact is a product of the weaker selection process and the smaller audience size. A useful question that may be asked in order to ensure that a research project meets the 'why' characteristic of the contextual question is 'who is the target audience?' Answering this question identifies the number and location of the audience and facilitates targeting the outcomes of the research in the appropriate exhibitions, journals, etc.

The issue of the dissemination of the outcomes is also a characteristic of research. If we believe that artefacts have the capacity to disseminate the 'knowledge, understanding and insights in this area', then we have a tacit notion of the embodiment of knowledge in objects. But we should first be sceptical and ask 'can objects embody knowledge, and if so, how?' Since this capacity of artefacts to embody knowledge is problematised in this paper, I propose that as a research method we examine the embodiment of knowledge in museum studies, and then consider whether this case study is transferable to art and design research.

All of the knowledge that we have of pre-literate societies comes from the interpretation of archaeological artefacts that have survived. However, key aspects of the argument are speculative. Let me take as an example the cave paintings at Lascaux. Opinion is divided about whether the paintings show a hunting expedition or represent a ritual activity in which animals are slaughtered iconically and symbolically as an auspicious prelude to the actual hunt. The reason that this important distinction cannot be reliably made is because the images do not embody information about their use, i.e. whether it is depictive or symbolic. This is not a problem confined to objects of great antiquity. For example, there is little material difference between a pair of chop-sticks and a pair of knitting-needles except the cultures in which they are found and the way in which they are used. This is even more apparent if one considers that there is nothing about their physical form that prevents them being exchanged and the one used for the purpose of the other.

Let us consider another more complex example. The Panathenaic frieze depicts a quadrennial procession through Athens to the Acropolis in the fifth century BC. The frieze originally adorned the Parthenon where its reception in the view of ancient Athenians cannot be exactly known. When Lord Elgin removed part of this frieze to London at the beginning of the nineteenth century their meaning changed. As a 'souvenir of the Grand Tour' they became the subject of aesthetic appreciation and were displayed accordingly for the benefit of connoisseurs. In the twentieth century the so-called Elgin marbles became the subject of post-colonial arguments about the ownership of cultural artefacts and their

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3 MoMA. The Museum of Modern Art in L.A.

appropriation. Issues of colonialism came to be seen as embodied in these marbles in a way that was not previously apparent. What then is embodied in the frieze per se? The fact that these different interpretations have come about with the passage of time suggests that while there might be intrinsic qualities to the frieze put there by Phidias, some of the meanings are extrinsic, being projected onto them through the culture or the way in which they are exhibited. This is a product of the physical properties that objects possess, and the way in which we classify them and apply labels, e.g. this is illustrative, this is beautiful, this is stolen.

We should be familiar with the way in which our classification of objects affects our understanding of them, and the knowledge that they embody. Foucault, in *The Order of Things*<sup>4</sup> and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>5</sup>, sustained a critique against our assumption that there are natural or obvious categories of objects in the world. Problematizing relationships and questioning implicit assumptions is a common activity in research. The whole notion of Foucault's 'epistemes', or indeed Kuhn's 'paradigm shifts'<sup>6</sup>, involves a change not in the nature of the external world, but in the perceived relationships of its parts, or the changing belief that some elements are more significant than others. Arguments and assumptions that are raised as a consequence of the analysis of objects must, post-Foucault, also include an account of the classificatory approach towards objects that allows that argument to be sustained.

The fact that objects can be included in an infinite number of different taxonomies shows that their rationale for inclusion or exclusion is not embodied in the objects themselves. This is one reason why one cannot have a research outcome that consists solely of artefacts, e.g. paintings, because the relationships between the paintings themselves, and between the paintings and other artefacts or activities in the world, are not intrinsic to the objects. This embodiment is what Wollheim<sup>7</sup> calls the 'physical-object' hypothesis, which he refutes partly on the grounds of projecting interpretative values: his key notion of 'seeing-in'.

The physical-object hypothesis is implicit in exhibitions where objects are left to speak for themselves. Vergo<sup>8</sup> differentiates between these 'aesthetic' exhibitions and 'contextual' exhibitions. The former have little additional information other than the objects, and the process of understanding them is largely experiential. In the latter the objects are complementary to the 'informative, comparative and explicatory' material. Vergo is critical of the aesthetic view wherein objects putatively embody knowledge, not least because viewers may not share the same social and cultural background on which the interpretation of the objects depends. More importantly, what one knows contextually about the object, or what one is told, affects one's reading or interpretation of the object, e.g. this is valuable, this is poisonous, this is a fake, etc. Being told nothing is not a neutral stance, but simply allows the viewer to project his or her prejudices onto the object. In aesthetic exhibitions the author therefore has no control over the object's reception. If the aim of research is to communicate knowledge or understanding then reception cannot be an uncontrolled process.

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault, M. (1974a [1966]). *The Order of Things*, Tavistock Press London.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, M. (1974b [1969]). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, Tavistock Press London

<sup>6</sup> Kuhn, T. (1970(1962)) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, University of Chicago Press, London.

<sup>7</sup> Wollheim, R. (1980 [1968]) *Art and its Objects*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge University Press, London, p.4

<sup>8</sup> Vergo, P. (ed.) (1989) *The New Museology* Reaktion Books, London, p. 48

This notion of projecting values and altering the passive notion of seeing into the active notion of interpretation, has a long history, e.g. Wollheim's concept of 'seeing-in'<sup>9</sup> and Wittgenstein's concept of 'seeing-as'<sup>10</sup>. Coupled with the thirty years that have been available to appreciate Foucault's arguments against natural taxonomies, it should hardly need emphasising that the process of visual communication and interpretation cannot rely upon objects alone<sup>11</sup> it is mentioned here because there is still a rump of practitioners who advocate the 'aesthetic' position but who, perhaps as a consequence of their beliefs, have failed to provide a satisfactory counter-argument.

The interim conclusion I would like to draw from the above observations is that our reception of objects depends on a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. Interpretation is an intentional act, in the phenomenological sense of actively creating a perception. It is not always clear which aspect is at work at any one time, and novel interpretations often draw attention to aspects that are embodied or aspects that are projected about which we were not previously aware. For example, the colonial attitudes we now see as implicit in the 1816 London exhibition of the so-called Elgin marbles were not apparent to the nineteenth century audience celebrating their rescue from destruction by the Ottomans.

There is another observation that we can draw from the new museology. It is a greater awareness of the effect that the exhibition venue and the juxtaposition of objects and contextualising material has on our interpretation of artefacts. Our interpretation can be actively manipulated by the way in which objects are displayed. Indeed the whole notion of display then becomes problematic because 'non-display' can be seen as a particular intervention. How can we differentiate between the elements of our interpretation, which are determined by the juxtaposition and presentation of the artefact in relation to others, and those aspects that are embodied in the artefact itself? What is this phenomenology of objects?

For the purposes of this paper I do not think I need to argue that there is no embodiment of knowledge in artefacts. It is sufficient to show that the context affects our reading of the object in order to demonstrate that objects alone cannot embody knowledge. This situation is comparable to the meaning of individual words. Although most of us have been taught that one way to approach an essay question is to seek the dictionary definitions of key terms in the question, we are also familiar with the feelings of dissatisfaction that arise from these isolated definitions. Words have meanings in the context of sentences, alongside other words, and in social contexts in which utterances are accompanied by actions. So it is that individual objects devoid of context become more-or-less devoid of meaning. Likewise, as they become contextualised they become more-or-less meaningful. Furthermore, we are aware that the interpretation of words and of works of literature changes over time owing to changes in the intertextual context. For example, in 1920 James Joyce's *Ulysses* was denounced as 'obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent and disgusting' by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, but by 1941 it was hailed by Levin as 'a novel to end all novels'<sup>12</sup>. This shows that words or texts do not have single unalterable meanings any more than do artefacts. This forms a counter-argument to those who object to the outcomes of art and design research

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9 Wollheim, R. (1980 [1968]). *Art and its Objects*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge University Press, London.

10 Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

11 Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London, pp. 1-22

12 Joyce, J. (1993 [1922]) *Ulysses*, Oxford University Press, London, pp. xli & ix

being a combination of artefacts and words/texts on the grounds that it gives words/texts primacy over artefacts: the so-called ‘heresy of paraphrase’<sup>13</sup>. On the contrary, it is the particular combination of artefacts and words/texts that gives efficacy to the communication. Neither artefacts alone nor words/texts alone would be sufficient. What is required is the combination of artefact [painting, design, poem, dance, etc] and a critical exegesis that describes *how* it advances knowledge, understanding and insight.

What is the consequence of this argument for the role of the artefact in research? We have seen that the object cannot be relied upon to communicate in isolation. It may be that several objects in juxtaposition can create a situation in which meanings are constructed and communicated, but in such cases it becomes part of the research question to account for how such configurations can be manipulated so as to communicate the outcome. This necessitates the unpacking of the way in which these objects operate and in turn generates contextual material. This contextualising is most likely to be expressed in words/texts although I am open to persuasion that it can be done in another medium. What is essential is not a particular medium but a particular content, i.e. it must step outside the outcomes of the research and explicate the way in which the research embodies its ‘contribution... to the advancement of knowledge, understanding and insight.’

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13 Wollheim, op.cit. p. 49

