



## Editorial: the concept of knowledge in art and design

Dr Michael Biggs  
University of Hertfordshire, England  
mailto:m.a.biggs@herts.ac.uk

volume 2 contents  
journal home page  
conference home page  
copyright

### editorial

I do not intend to summarise the main points from the speakers' papers. I do want to establish the nature of the question, why it arises, and some reference points that might aid navigation through the day's proceedings.

This year's theme is "**what is knowledge?**"

We are not interested in the question in the context of traditional epistemology: it is not the philosopher's question, although may be a philosophical question. Rather we ask: "What is "knowledge" in art and design?"

The question is not "what do we know in art and design", such as its history, but "what do we mean by the term knowledge in the context of research in art and design?"

Why should one ask such a question?

We share an interest in research in art and design. It is the mission of Research into Practice to examine the nature of practice-based research in art and design. If one examines the concept of research one encounters concepts such as "the forefront of knowledge", "the advancement of knowledge", and "making a contribution to knowledge", and the questions arise " how can one advance art and design ", "what is a contribution to knowledge"? Before one can answer these questions one must know what is the nature of the knowledge that is being advanced.

Research into Practice asks the questions that precede an attempt to answer them

The question "what is knowledge" is the traditional territory of epistemology but concepts in this field are sometimes problematic if we attempt to import them directly. For example, we might initially want to say that there is only one type of knowledge, the type discussed by epistemologists, in which case we have to think what corresponds to the epistemologist's "true justified belief" in the field of art and design. The fact that this is difficult might lead us to conclude either that there is no such thing as knowledge in art and design, or that the knowledge that we have is different. That is to say, knowledge may not always be true justified belief.

If we say there is no such thing as knowledge in art and design we may be putting all art and design researchers out of business, unless we also have an alternative description of what the field of art and design contains, and the relationship of research to how the field is advanced.

If we say knowledge in art and design is of a different kind to true justified beliefs, then we have to say of what kind of knowledge it is. This in turn might lead us towards Ryle's distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that. For example, we might begin with a discussion of the value of knowing-how in a practice-led discipline like art and design. But is practice-based research only going to lead to advancements in practice? Can practice-based research only contribute to advancements in knowing-how?

We might want to take an alternative approach and consider that the language in which these questions are framed is itself inappropriate. By saying this I would certainly not want to suggest that terms such as knowledge, argument and evidence should be dispensed with altogether. But it is the lesson of post-modernism that the

**to cite this journal article:**  
Biggs, M.A.R. (2002) Editorial: the concept of knowledge in art and design. *Working Papers in Art and Design 2* Retrieved <date> from URL <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research/papers/wpades/vol2/intro02.html>  
ISSN 1466-4917

language one uses to describe and frame the situation influences one's problem analysis. For example, Foucault reframed the historical concept of madness as an instrument of power rather than an instrument of health. Such observations raise anxieties about the relationship between concept formation and problem analysis. This is particularly pertinent in culturally situated domains such as art and design. Such observations about the relationship of language and concept formation may also be useful in explaining why styles and interpretations change while the basic material objects or evidence remain unchanged.

But do we feel comfortable when we say that artefacts constitute evidence, on the scientific model, and that when the paradigm shifts the causal nexus within which we describe artefacts and evidence also changes giving rise to new interpretations based on the same material evidence? If not, what is the evidence on which we base any argument in art and design?

Perhaps we feel inclined to reject this use of language to describe the activities in this field. Not that it is groundless, but that this voice establishes a set of rules that are inappropriate in terms of what we actually do within the practice of art and design. After all, how many practising artists set themselves explicit problems to answer? The interpretation of artefacts takes place in a cultural and social domain and the value of an artefact is not solely determined by its intrinsic properties or its contribution to socially recognised problems. The way it is consumed affects its interpretation.

This cultural reading would appear to prioritise the critic over the artist. Is a researcher really a critic or commentator? When somebody studies for a PhD in fine art are they training to be a critic rather than a leading practitioner? Students have said to me that they are concerned that doing a PhD might make them into worse practitioners. Is it the critics who advance knowledge in art and design?

This takes us to my final rhetorical question, the way that practice advances knowledge. What is it that is discovered and advanced through practice that is of benefit to those who experience the outcomes? It is one thing to learn or teach how to improve practice, a kind of technological improvement, the betterment of knowing-how. But what aspect of practice enhances knowing-that and how is that communicated through the artefact?

Have we somehow conspired to arrange matters so that knowledge is always what we say about something rather than what we show about it? If so, it would account for the difficulty of using objects as constituting or communicating knowledge. Is the problem that the whole concept of knowledge and research arises out of words rather than actions, or do we simply have too narrow a range of examples, i.e. only lexical examples? Have we defined ourselves into a corner?

The core for me is a constructivist problem. Have we created our concept of knowledge through examples and peer recognition?: to which I think the answer is no. Or does our concept of knowledge arise as a result of the rationalist debate, as an abstract entity that is conceptually constituted rather than manifested and embodied in examples and experience? Does epistemology not only study the nature of knowledge but construct the concept of knowledge in the first place? This would certainly explain the apparent priority of the word over the artefact.

I am reminded of the anecdote about Samuel Johnson who was out walking with Boswell when he was told about the ideas of the philosophical sceptic Bishop Berkeley. Berkeley had shown that all our knowledge of the external world derives from sensory experience. Unfortunately, the evidence from our senses is unreliable, therefore we cannot "know" about the existence of matter. On hearing this, Johnson turned to a large stone and gave it a sound kick. "I refute it thus", he said. Was that a refutation, an argument presented through the use of an artefact? If it was, then we are all back in business.