



Editorial: the role of the artefact in art and design research

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editorial

The theme that is hopefully pervading this issue of the journal is "what is the role of the artefact in art and design research?" Being of an enquiring disposition that immediately raises two further questions in my mind: firstly, what does the question mean, and secondly how does this question arise?

In terms of determining what the question means, the key term is artefact. We need to be clear about what is meant by artefact in this question in order to fully understand the question. What we have done is to select the definition of artefact from the Oxford English Dictionary which is quite broad. It does not only include objects. We are therefore not only interested in objects that arise in art and design production such as sculptures, paintings, architecture, etc., but also ephemeral outcomes such as performances, and intangibles such as music. It is characteristic of the Research into Practice conferences that they adopt an inclusive approach to disciplines close to art and design, and to provide a shared platform for discussion between artists, designers, architects, musicians, performance artists, dancers, etc. So our question asks how do these varied types of object contribute to research, and what part do they play in the advancement of the discipline?

My second consequential question was "how does this question arise?" I propose that there are two contexts that give rise to such a question and I hope that we will be able to address both of them during this conference. It arises explicitly in the context of doctoral degrees. Some universities in the UK and elsewhere are beginning to adapt their regulations in response to demands from the art and design community. One can now find regulations that specify that a PhD thesis should be 80000 words, but in art and design, and other areas that offer so-called practice-based research, the word count can be reduced to 40000 words when the thesis is accompanied by a submission of artefacts. This has an implication: the initial 80000 word requirement referred not to an arbitrary 800000 words but 80000 words of relevant content. Therefore if as much as 50% of the word count is remitted in the case of artefact-thesis submissions we must conclude that the University considers that 50% of the relevant content can be communicated via the artefact. These artefacts are not just illustrating the thesis, they can be up to half of the argument of the thesis and of meeting the criteria for the award of the doctoral degree. I think we should be clear as a community what kind of content do those artefacts contribute and how do they do it. Is it possible for us to identify the kind of content that those artefacts are contributing that is particular to art and design because these sorts of regulations tend to apply only to art and design and yet we are not the only areas that produce artefacts. After all, physics students make experiments and test-beds, but they do not have special doctoral submission regulations.

This context also arises implicitly outside the degree context in funded research. In the UK the main funding body for art and design is the Arts and Humanities Research Board [AHRB] and they say that creative practice not *necessarily* research, but that creative practice that meets certain criteria can be regarded as research. The indicators are that there are explicit research questions, that it is clear what methods are being used and why, and that the outcomes of the research are disseminated to others. We can therefore conclude that creative practice that meets these criteria is

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research, and that therefore, more broadly, creative practice has the potential to be research.

We might consider that there are two conclusions here: do we mean that creative outcomes, the artefacts that form the conference theme, are communicating the research; or are we saying that the process of creative practice is research. These two claims are not the same in my opinion.

Another context that we can consider in the UK is the Research Assessment Exercise, a periodic national evaluation of research quality in the Universities across all subject domains. It is an important exercise that determines funding and prestige. They have a similar approach to AHRB in that they permit the submission of artefacts from creative disciplines for assessment of research quality. So I presume one selects artefacts that met these kind of criteria. As a result I think we make the following, cautiously worded claim at the outset of our conference: that some artefacts in some circumstances may provide evidence of the process or outcomes of research. I think we can be confident that the community believes this because it is indicated by being institutionalised in doctoral regulations, in criteria for research funding, and through the conduct of national research quality assessment.

What sort of process generates artefactual outcomes and how does it lead to such outcomes? I think we are quite familiar with a number of possibilities. We are familiar with

- thinking with objects, e.g. making models with Lego
- knowing-how and tacit knowledge, e.g. skills of craftsmanship
- embodied knowledge, e.g. dancing, juggling
- ineffable knowledge, e.g. religious and aesthetic knowledge
- experiential knowledge, e.g. colour experience.

Which of these, and the others that we might add to this list, are characteristic and potentially defining? Is it sufficient to observe that normally one must have artefacts in order to stimulate the experiential knowledge of colour perception? This observation does not seem to differentiate art and design from many other disciplines including physics. Although these observations are tempting as a starting point they will need some refining if they are to provide robust conditions for special treatment. If we deserve special treatment then we must provide reasons why. We need to argue that artefacts have got an active role to play, not just assert it. The fact that we make artefacts is not a necessary and sufficient condition on which to base special doctoral regulations or funding or assessment criteria. Other disciplines make artefacts too. If we do not know what this role is, or if we cannot argue it effectively here, than why should anyone else listen to our case?

It reminds me of the familiar joke that the definition of sculpture is what you fall over in the gallery when you are trying to look at the paintings. The implication is that sculpture is an inconvenience and interferes with the real subject matter. I am allowed to say this because I started out as a sculptor, and I can confirm that sculpture is very inconvenient stuff. Well, artefacts are inconvenient too. It is very inconvenient to have to send doctoral examiners a box of artefacts, or to mount a special exhibition, or to make archiving and retrieval facilities for them. It is very inconvenient to disseminate artefactual outcomes. If we want special rules for the inclusion of artefacts then we have to provide a robust defence of their role, and this is the forum for advancing that defence.