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the rôle of 'the work' in research

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abstract

The paper opens with the definition of research made by AHRB UK that art and design research must 'advance knowledge, understanding and insight'. The paper goes on to consider the rôle of designed artefacts, art objects or performance; 'the work', in communicating this advancement, and whether 'works' 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 and performances in art and design research. It is therefore the content rather than the form of this context that is important. Arguments in favour of 'the work' as integral to practice-based research should therefore address how the context is managed to facilitate effective communication through 'the work'.

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Let me open with an explanation of what I mean by 'the work' in this paper. I take the term from the expressions 'a work of art' or 'a work of literature', etc. It refers to an artefact, construed in the broad sense of an object, such as a sculpture or painting, or something intangible such as an image, or something non-persistent such as a performance. An artefact is anything 'man-made' in the non-gendered sense. These 'works' are the outcomes of normal practice in the arts. However, 'a work of art', etc. also connotes something that has achieved a certain cultural status. Thus my focus is not on outcomes that are simply the product of art classes, or that use art materials, and thereby become labelled as art; but rather on outcomes of socially accredited value. The reason for focussing on outcomes of socially accredited value is that the paradigm for arts research is, I claim, a work of artistic merit and a bearer of research content. I do not believe that arts researchers are trying to argue in favour of two categories: artistic merit or research merit, but for one: artistic merit and research merit. In the paper that follows I have therefore taken as my paradigm the case of the meritorious work that also meets the criteria for research outcomes.

I shall begin this discussion by considering the consequences of a short but important statement in the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board's definition of research:

'The AHRB 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 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 the recent debate about research in art and design, e.g. Durling & Friedman, 2000: §§18-30. However, the principal feature of such research is not the employment of a particular method but the desire or requirement to create 'works' (i.e.

designed artefacts, art objects or performances) 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 part of, or all of, an argument for interpretation by the viewer. This implies the notion that 'the work' can embody the answer to the research question and this is one of the problems that is considered in this paper.

The first of the AHRB characteristics, 'question and answer', does not sit well with art and design. Although the practitioner may set some particular problem as a motivation for work in the studio, most creative activity seeks to problematize 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 reception as putative answers. However, if these questions are rephrased as: 'how can X be problematized?', 'how can Y be raised as an issue?', then I believe that 'question and answer' can have meaning in relation to creative practice. This approach is not just peculiar to arts research. Most humanities research offers interpretations rather than answers to problems. This explains why the same questions can keep recurring in humanities disciplines without apparently ever being answered. To some extent they are unanswerable, which is perhaps what makes them into humanities questions in the first place. Furthermore, the approaches of humanities disciplines result in responses framed in terms of situated responses that have resonance in their time, but not necessarily indefinitely. Perhaps if we consider humanities disciplines as offering interpretations of problems instead of answers to questions then we might recognise something do-able in the 'question and answer' characteristic.

This brings us to the last of the three AHRB characteristics: the contextualising issue of why it is important that these particular questions should be answered or problems explored. This is sometimes another stumbling block, particularly to 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 creativity, and activities that are significant for others in the field. It is only an activity that is significant for others that can be regarded as research. 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. To illustrate this let us consider the discipline of arts therapies. It is the purpose of arts therapies to improve the well-being of the client through an intervention involving the client doing some kind of arts activity such as painting, music or drama, etc. Whether the client produces art, in the sense of 'a work of art' mentioned above, is irrelevant to the process. The activity is aimed at the personal development and self knowledge of the individual and not at the advancement of knowledge, understanding and insight into some issue shared by others. Of course, the client's case may contribute to the advancement of knowledge in arts therapies, but this would be an outcome for the therapist and not for the client. In addition, the client's productions may subsequently achieve the status of 'works' but this would be incidental to their original function in connection with improved well-being. Thus I would distinguish between (1) art as therapy (for the individual), (2) art as cultural practice (the production of works of art), and (3) art as research (meeting certain criteria under discussion). It is my claim that (1) and (3), that is, art as therapy and art as research, are mutually exclusive. I should emphasise that this does not mean that I deny that there is such a discipline as arts therapies research!

One might argue that (1) is a prerequisite for (2) and (3) because it is only if one develops as a practitioner that one can reach the level at which one can make a cultural and/or research contribution of significance. However, the definition of 'the work' and the definition of research determine that it is only when the outcomes are directed towards public consumption that they become (2) art as cultural practice and/or (3) art as research. To this extent, if the agenda of production is personal development as a precursor to the production of significant public outcomes, then it might better be described as motivation or self-development rather than therapy.

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* 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 a performance in the National Theatre higher than one in the village hall. One 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. But another is the audience size: performances in the National Theatre reach both a larger and a more distributed audience. 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 venues, journals, etc.

The issue of the communication and dissemination of the outcomes is also an important factor for funding agencies such as AHRB, although it is not one of their 3 indicators. One might regard it as implied in the notion of making a contribution since the contribution will go unnoticed if it is not communicated. If we believe that 'the work' has the capacity to communicate the 'knowledge, understanding and insights in this area', then we have a tacit notion of the embodiment of knowledge in objects and performances. But we should first be sceptical and ask 'can such works embody knowledge, and if so, how?' Since this capacity of 'the work' to embody knowledge is problematized in this paper, I propose that, methodologically, we examine the embodiment of knowledge in artefacts from the point-of-view of museum studies, and then consider whether this case study is transferable to art and design research.

Most of the knowledge that we have of pre-literate societies comes from the interpretation of archaeological 'works' 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 image-animals are slaughtered 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 the quadrennial procession through Athens to the Acropolis in the fifth century BC. The frieze originally adorned the Parthenon where its reception and its signification in relation to the accompanying performance 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 some of its meaning certainly changed. As a 'souvenir of the Grand Tour' it became the subject of aesthetic appreciation and was displayed accordingly for the benefit of connoisseurs. As a surviving artefact from antiquity it took on the role of

representing the performance and embodying and aestheticising our knowledge of it. In the twentieth century the so-called Elgin marbles became the subject of post-colonial arguments about the ownership of cultural 'works' and their 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 Formalists claim there are qualities in 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 and use them, e.g. this is symbolic, this is beautiful, this is stolen, etc.

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* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, sustained a critique against our assumption that there are natural or obvious categories of objects in the world. The whole notion of Foucault's 'epistemes', or indeed Kuhn's 'paradigm shifts', involves a change not in the nature of the external world, but in the perceived relationship 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 therefore, post-Foucault, include an account of the classificatory approach towards objects that allows that argument to be sustained. Problematizing relationships and questioning implicit assumptions is a common activity in research.

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 'works', e.g. paintings, because the relationships between the paintings themselves, and between the paintings and other 'works' or activities in the world, is not intrinsic to the objects. Objects or performances, etc. may have inter-textual references but that does not imply that the nature of the relationship alluded to is made explicit. Embodiment is what Wollheim (1980: §4) calls the 'physical-object' hypothesis, which he refutes partly on the grounds of our ability to project interpretative values: his key notion of 'seeing-in'. In the context of the present conference, there is no reason to suppose that the physical-object hypothesis is not transferable to performances.

The physical-object hypothesis is implicit in exhibitions and performances where objects are left to speak for themselves. Vergo (1989: 48) contrasts such 'aesthetic' exhibitions with 'contextual' exhibitions. Aesthetic exhibitions and performances have little additional information other than the artefacts themselves, and the process of understanding them is largely experiential. In contextual exhibitions and performances the artefacts are complementary to some accompanying 'informative, comparative and explicatory' material. Vergo is critical of the aesthetic view wherein artefacts putatively embody knowledge, not least because viewers may not share the same social and cultural background on which the interpretation of the artefacts depends. More importantly, what one knows contextually about the artefact, or what one is told, affects one's reading or interpretation of it, 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 artefact. In aesthetic exhibitions the author therefore has no control over the artefact's reception. If the aim of research is to communicate knowledge or understanding then reception cannot be an uncontrolled process. The interpretation of embodied knowledge presented in an uncontextualised way is an uncontrolled process.

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' and Wittgenstein's concept of 'seeing-as'. 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 'works' alone (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992: 1-22). 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 artefacts and performances 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 implicit about which we were not previously aware. For example, the colonial attitudes we now see as explicit in the 1816 London exhibition of the so-called Elgin marbles were probably not so apparent to the nineteenth century audience celebrating their supposed 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 venue and the juxtaposition with contextualising material has on our interpretation of 'works'. Our interpretation can be actively manipulated by the way in which 'works' 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 that are determined by the juxtaposition and presentation of 'the work' in relation to others, and those aspects that are embodied in 'the work' itself? What is the unmediated content of 'the work'?

For the purposes of this paper I do not think I need to argue that there is nil embodiment of knowledge in 'works'. It is sufficient to show that the context affects our reading of 'the work' in order to demonstrate that 'works' 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 and performances 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' (Joyce 1993: xli & ix). This shows that words or texts do not have single unalterable meanings any more than do 'works'. This forms a counter-argument to those who object to the outcomes of art and design research being a combination of 'works' and words/texts on the grounds that it gives words/texts primacy over 'works': the so-called 'heresy of paraphrase' (Wollheim 1980: §49). On the contrary, it is the particular combination of 'works' and words/texts that gives efficacy to the communication. Neither 'works' alone nor words/texts alone would be sufficient. What is required is the combination of 'the work' [painting, design, poem, dance, etc] and a critical exegesis that describes *how* it advances knowledge, understanding and insight, i.e. its instrumentalism.

There is also an ontological issue in the performing arts concerning the relationship of the notation to the performance. We expect there to be a difference between the work as annotated in a score, etc., and the performance of that work, which is an interpretation of the score. On the other hand, in a work of research we would expect the researcher to be unambiguous about both the evidence and argument, and the conclusions. The model for performance always incorporates this notion of interpretation, but it is the interpretation of the performer not the interpretation of/by the composer, etc. So whose work of research is it? If we took as an extreme case a form of notation that completely fixed the form of a performance of a piece of music so that all performances were the same, e.g. the player-piano, we would probably not consider that playing the music was any longer a performance rather than a document (Stravinsky 1975:150). This is not a problem confined to the performing arts but to any form

of presentation that gives scope for interpretation at the point of consumption. Now it might be argued that all forms of reception are interpretive, but I think one can see that traditional research papers are written in such a way as to be as unambiguous as possible, that is, to minimise the effect of reader-interpretation whereas poetry for example, is written to maximise it.

The interpretation of a work is not determined solely by intrinsic factors, but depends, to a greater or lesser extent, on the context in which the interpretation takes place: the point-of-view and the critical and cultural apparatus that the viewer brings to bear on the artefact or performance. Given these conditions, is there anything that we can do to increase the role played by the work? Could we describe a situation in which the intrinsic factors were maximised and the extrinsic factors were minimised? I think the response to that has to be 'yes'. In saying that the contextual presentation is one in which there is an attempt to control the conditions under which the interpretation is undertaken we are also saying that the contextual presentation contains elements that militate against interpretation. So if we wish to minimise these extrinsic factors we must try to incorporate some of the function that they perform into the work itself.

If we return to the museum artefact as a paradigm case, there are several points that immediately stand out as influencing the viewer's interpretational strategy. These include venue, the presentation or exhibition, the nature of the accompanying information, and the socio-cultural positioning of the activity of museum-visiting, The venue itself isolates the experience: entering the museum is not something one normally does by accident. There are cues in the geographical location, the architectural experience, the experience of entering and navigating the physical spaces. It cues us to the kind of experience we are about to have: a good time, an education, being bored, etc. The presentation or exhibition of the artefacts, possibly in glass cases, possibly with armed guards, leads us to appreciate these artefacts in ways that are distinct from the appreciation of similar artefacts in everyday situations: 'in the hermetically sealed case' as contrasted with 'in the washing-up bowl'. The accompanying information suggests an interpretational frame of reference that guides our appreciation in ways preferred by the curator: 'the last painting by Van Gogh before he killed himself', '…priceless', '…forged', etc. The socio-cultural position adopted by us may be by virtue of our education, of our social ambitions, our revolutionary contempt, etc.

When the 'Jade Suit' was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1980s there were huge queues to see this object from the C2BC. When I saw the artefact in its usual dusty display case in the Nanjing Museum in 1990, nobody was interested in the object precisely because it was from the C2BC. If we seek to transfer these extrinsic contextualising factors to the artefact we must find a way of providing the viewer with this information through the vehicle of the work.

In this regard, performances have an advantage because they are time-based. This allows a narrative to be constructed that takes the audience through a developmental process, modifying their perception. Whether this can be done by the same performance that we wish to prepare the audience to receive is another matter. I suspect it cannot: that we are describing a preparatory process that may be undertaken by means of a performance followed by the performance over whose interpretation we wish to have greater control.

What is the consequence of this argument for the role of 'the work' in research? We have seen that the artefact cannot be relied upon to communicate in isolation. It may be that several artefacts 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 artefacts operate and in turn generates contextual material. This contextualising is most likely to be expressed in words although I am open to persuasion that it can be done in another medium. Words are simply an efficient means of establishing a context. They do not have any primacy over 'works', nor is the contribution of works made redundant by words. 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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