Research as cultural practice

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The inclusion of practice as a valid research activity within the academic community coincides with a significant cultural shift in which the dominance of the word in western culture has been challenged by the growing influence of visuality. As Nicholas Mirzoeff puts it, 'the world-as-a-text has been replaced by the world-as-a-picture'. (Mirzoeff, 1999: 7) Interestingly, one of the consequences of the establishment of the academic credentials of art and design is that it has been become clear that no world-picture can be either purely visual or purely linguistic. As a result, a broader understanding of the way in which creativity contributes to knowledge has begun to emerge. At the same time, it has become increasingly relevant to think about research itself as a cultural practice, rather than as an autonomous field of academic endeavour validated by the award of a research degree. The argument put forward in this paper is that there is a need to find an appropriate model for thinking about research as a cultural practice that is generated by, and through, the intersection with other cultural practices.

The significance for art and design of a model of research as cultural practice is that it provides an opportunity to question the centrality of models of research that are derived from, and dependent on, the familiar binary of theory and practice. The perceived tension between theory and practice continues to exert a strong influence in debates about practice as research, despite increasing questioning of the terms of those debates. A binary such as this sustains an alliance between creativity and practice in such a way that 'theory' can continue to be identified with activities that are not only reductive, but also in some way inimical to practice. This is a problematic approach because it is intent on restoring boundaries between disciplines and between ways of knowing. Further, it operates in opposition to the kinds of fruitful boundary crossings that have seen the emergence of key areas of study, for example, women's studies, cultural studies and most recently, visual studies, to name but a few. These cross-overs are replicated in creative practice areas and the boundaries between art and design are continually shifting.

The tensions inherent in this model inevitably find their way into current debates about the relationship between subject specialism and interdisciplinarity, as well as into debates about 'quality' in art & design. The recent subject benchmark statement for art & design provides an example of this. Although it refers in particular to undergraduate teaching, nevertheless it usefully reveals some of the problem areas in current thinking about knowledge in practice based subjects. The benchmark statement declares that

'Art and design' is the term widely used to embrace a complex, diverse and evolving constituency of disciplines which share important conceptual characteristics but which are differentiated in significant respects. Whilst it is the very nature of this difference which contributes to its richness as an area of study and practice, the different disciplines share numerous defining qualities.' (QAA, 2002: 3)

In its preface to the statement, the QAA also argues that subject benchmark statements 'encourage innovation within an agreed overall framework'.

Taken together, both statements contain revealing contradictions – firstly, between sameness and difference and secondly, between the objectification of knowledge, and innovation and creativity. The contradictions derive from the essentialist conceptual framework within which the practices of art and design are defined. This framework asserts that that shared conceptual characteristics cannot dispel disciplinarity, and that creativity and innovation are recognized as taking place only within an 'agreed' framework. These contradictions have implications for definitions of research that require some consideration. At the very least, they reinforce the notion that some forms of knowledge are more authentic and appropriate than others, despite postmodern scepticism towards universalising narratives and the organisation of knowledge into hierarchical categories. Knowledge hierarchies continue to provide a rationale for using models of research drawn from the humanities and social sciences, and from science, to help define acceptable research methodologies for art and design. It is not insignificant that in the UK it is the AHRB that provides funding for research, whereas the Arts Council seems more concerned with funding creative practice. Similarly, in Australia the Arts Council and the Arts Research Council make clear distinctions between creative practice and research.

In a critical response to the assumption that credible research models for art and design can only be found outside the field, Sally Morgan has argued that 'Art should not try to be science. Art should be art.'(Morgan, 2001:15) As Morgan puts it, there is a danger of 'skewing that field, of 'un-arting' art, and of denying the power and importance of a whole sphere of human activity, namely art itself.' (ibid) While this is a valid objection to the importation of potentially inappropriate research models from other fields, it has the unfortunate effect of re-establishing the defensive walls of disciplinarity in order to defend the notion of the particular 'truth' of art. Although there may be a certain logic behind the argument that art is not 'this' because it is 'that', it relies on the assumption that things can be known in and of themselves. Deriving as it does from a desire to overcome what Morgan, speaking as a fine artist, describes as 'our scholastic insecurity and our urge for academic respectability'(ibid), the argument is ultimately a defensive one that is forced to reiterate stale arguments about exclusivity.

The deconstructive turn of postmodernism has, however, generated a critical climate in which confidence in grand narratives and universal truths has been undermined, and the dissolution of discipline boundaries has further eroded that confidence. Claims for the exclusivity of fields of knowledge and their concomitant truths are increasingly disputed, not least from within feminist and postcolonial theory, from where it had been pointed out that exclusivity requires selective exclusion in order to create otherness. The lingering adherence to discipline boundaries, even if it is more piecemeal now than was previously the case, continues to create problems when it comes to definitions of research and articulation of the object(s) of knowledge. On-going debate around the relationship between practice and research reveals the unresolved nature of the issue. We suggest that one way forward in this debate is to think about research as a cultural practice that is generated by and through the intersection with other cultural practices, and that knowledge can therefore be understood as 'situated', as Donna Haraway has argued. Situated knowledge is no longer decontextualised and removed from the social and cultural relations in which it is embedded. It undermines any notion that knowledge can exist in a closed loop, in which the object and outcomes of the research are largely determined by the research model. To find a way of thinking about research as a cultural practice, we looked outside the field of art and design, at the emerging field of technoscience. This is not to suggest a reversion to a model of research drawn from science which extols the pursuit of 'objective' knowledge and truth. Rather, we are interested, firstly, in the way in which notions of objectivity and truth, as forms of dis-embedded knowledge, have been subjected to vigorous criticism from within science studies, and secondly,

in how this criticism has been enabled in part by the collapse of the discipline boundaries between science and technology.

Briefly, 'technoscience' is a portmanteau term that signals the gradual implosion in recent years of science and technology. As Donna Haraway has argued, technoscience is inseparable from the complex social and cultural structures within which it occurs, and by which it is shaped. It is, therefore, embedded. It is also a cultural hybrid in the sense that it brings together related sets of knowledges and practices that are, in turn, inextricably linked to other forms of social and cultural knowledge. It embodies a recognition that the interrelation between things means that it is increasingly necessary to work across discipline boundaries and in collaborative ways. This is its significance for our discussion of a model of research as a cultural practice. For Haraway, a key feature of technoscience is that it is heterogeneous, so that it can be thought of as 'a form of life, a practice, a culture, a generative matrix'. (Haraway, 1997:50) In escaping from the confines of 'the discipline', technoscience has also escaped from both its partial perspective and the unquestioned assumption that such a perspective can provide forms of overarching and totalising knowledge. The example of technoscience thus offers an alternative model of knowledge in which the different views of the world - such as those emanating from within art, humanities and science - do not have to be regarded as conflicting or mutually exclusive. This signals a move away from a notion of knowledge as a series of single, authoritative perspectives in which the social relations of power and dominance remain unacknowledged. Rather, knowledge can be thought of as consisting of a multiplicity of interconnected viewpoints, perspectives, social relations and cultural practices, more readily defined as 'situated knowledges', to use Haraway's term. [1] By regarding research as a cultural practice that works in relation to other cultural practices, the binary models in which one thing is defined by its opposition to another thing can more easily be questioned.

Our suggestion is that the emergence of technoscience provides a useful, if preliminary, model or perspective from which to rethink research in art and design. As is the case with technoscience, the boundaries between art and design practices have imploded in recent years, particularly through the impact of new media. This means that it is increasingly necessary to recognise not only the complex negotiations that take place between related sets of knowledges and practices, but also that such negotiations necessitate more expansive definitions of research than are currently available in existing models. The capacity to move reflexively between cultural practices is likely to become more central to a consideration of the nature of knowledge in practice based fields. This is arguably already the case in web-based work, which has produced significant cultural hybrids and draws on diverse methodologies and research processes. Collaborative working is foregrounded in web based work, with the result that hard and fast distinctions between artists and designers, producers and consumers are becoming less clear. The discipline - and disciplining - bases for these distinctions are, in many respects, unenforceable. On-going debates about research and the relationship between theory and practice can more usefully be subsumed into a broader discussion about the different ways of knowing that are available across a range a cultural practices, not just within art and design. The connections and divergences that are encountered as cultural practices intersect will necessitate an increasingly intertextual approach to research that will interrogate familiar ontological and epistemological categories. Such an approach will almost certainly undermine the notion that knowledge is an abstract category that has always to be 'discovered' in its purest form, as some kind of absolute. If, instead, knowledge is regarded as contingent and unpredictable, then research is more akin to a process of immersion, through which the very real complexity of that knowledge is both revealed and added to. The researcher becomes a participant rather than assuming the impossible perspective of an omniscient and detached seeker of truth.

The work of gatescherrywolmark [2] provides a 'live' case study as a means of exploring some of the theoretical and practical issues that arise from a consideration of research as a cultural practice. The partnership is collaborative and because it relies on both contingency and synergy, it is in some measure also improvisational. This allows it to be both on-going and archival in nature. The work includes video, digital images, and text, and the 'partnership' consists of a core of three practitioners and other interim collaborators who have been asked to take over projects at given points in the development of the work. The separate identity of the three original collaborators has not been explicitly referred to in any work that has

been published or exhibited, and this allows for the element of ambiguity that has become integral to the work of gatescherrywolmark. It also enables gatescherrywolmark to become an umbrella description that can include any number of collaborators.

The elastic possibilities of this kind of collaboration were first explored in the book Disruptive Signals (1999), in which gatescherrywolmark artwork and text were given to a designer who 'produced' and thus completed the project through the design decisions that were made. This stage of the project was not about achieving a desirable 'look' to the work, so much as it was about moving between research and creative practices in a collaborative way. To our surprise, though not to his, the designer found the idea of collaboration difficult to accept, preferring to see it as a design brief, and equally, the members of gatescherrywolmark found it uncomfortable to give away the final decisions about the organisation of text and image. The issue of 'ownership', too, became less easy either to quantify or to resolve when working with a flexible concept of collaboration. From the point of view of the issues explored in this paper, the most significant aspect of the process was that the knowledge framework - that is, the expectations, roles and tacit 'rules' that are usual in such situations - was undermined from the start. This produced an unstable situation that had to be negotiated by all those involved, because no single perspective appeared to dominate as different cultural practices intersected. It became clear from this particular experience that such intersections throw up unexpected and unpredictable issues, and that a different, and more flexible, kind of knowledge framework is required to deal with them.

The Disruptive Signals project led into the current project, which is partially web based and also involves an expanded collaboration, not least because one of the original members now works in Australia. The initial intention of the work was that it should be put on the web as an interactive piece that blurred the demarcation between producer and consumer by once again giving away ownership. It was envisaged that the work would then move freely through the net, and whatever changes made to it would become part of the work itself. The work would thus embody both disjunction and continuity, and research in this instance would be about exploring the nature of the accumulated accretions gathered by the work. Although the emphasis of the work appears to be placed on the flux and fluidity that are key characteristics of web-based work, in fact, one of the most significant dimensions of the work is its capacity to act both as a visual research diary and as an archive. As such, it is envisaged that the work would become a register of the shifting contexts for, and definitions of, knowledge.

Although a website has been developed [3], the work is still at a very early stage. It is already clear, however, that since the website designer is willing to view his work as a contribution to the collaboration, then the decision-making process has become more open-ended than was the case with the Disruptive Signals. This is also demonstrated in the video Logical Aesthetics, a work that consists of material created by gatescherrywolmark but assembled by Australian video artist Paul Mosig. The approach taken by gatescherrywolmark in its work emphasises that knowledge is made evident through the process of making, rather residing entirely in a final product or outcome. Thus, it is more appropriate to think of gatescherrywolmark as directing research rather than seeking to control a research output.

Such an emphasis not only requires a collaborative approach but it also allows collaborative decisions to begin to function as a form of dynamic critique, not only of the work, but also of the research process itself. As other collaborative inputs occur, the interrelationships between them will inevitably throw up issues and problems that we cannot anticipate, as well as throwing up new and different forms of knowledge.

This brief discussion of gatescherrywolmark is intended to provide an opportunity to explore the possibility of developing a research framework that does not rely on a notion of knowledge as an absolute that can be dis-embedded or abstracted from the network of social and cultural connections within which and by which it is shaped. If research is regarded as a cultural practice that exists in a state of connection with other cultural practices, then not only does knowledge remain embedded, but it also becomes non-prescriptive. This is important for all research, but for art and design, it validates a knowledge framework in which technical and cultural hybridity, chance encounters and unpredictable outcomes become cornerstones, rather than inconveniences to be smoothed away.

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