



Why is there the need for explanation? – objects and their realities
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An ongoing debate in doctoral research in art and design is whether the submission of a written thesis should be a necessary requirement, or whether it should be possible to submit practice work only for the degree. The problem arises because some people suggest that creative practice (artefacts, performance, etc.) is sufficient to communicate the outcomes and contributions of research, i.e. that they communicate knowledge (Durling, Friedman and Gutherson 2002: 7-18). However, there seems to be little evidence that this is the case, and arguments are mounting for an accompanying written thesis.

"The rôle of the artefact in art and design research" has been discussed convincingly by Biggs in a recent publication (Biggs 2002: 19-24). Biggs argues "that objects alone cannot embody knowledge" (23) because they need to be interpreted in order to communicate the knowledge and insight that is required of research. He demonstrates that this interpretation is dependent on both "intrinsic and extrinsic aspects" (23), i.e. artefact and context. Biggs concludes that

this contextualising is most likely to be expressed in words/texts although [he is] 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" (24).

In this sense Biggs does not advocate a primacy of words/texts over artefacts, and artefacts may well be understood in part to embody knowledge, i.e. implicitly.

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 (Biggs 2002: 23).

If we accept on this basis that artefacts/practice alone cannot advance knowledge because interpretation is dependent on context, we also accept that we need to explain

objects and therefore we need the written thesis in order to provide the articulacy and verifiability required of research. In general, this may answer the question of why there is the need for explanation of artefacts/creative practice. However, the question remains How do artefacts/creative practice and their explanation/interpretation relate?

How can artefacts be used as a knowledge base within research?

With regard to question 1, I examine the role of the artefact in relation to the nature of theory and practice and the requirements of (doctoral) research to produce explicit and communicable knowledge. This serves to problematise the complex nature of artefacts and the [potential] knowledge embodied in them in relation to the explanation (text).

In relation to question 2, I discuss in which ways and under which conditions artefacts can provide unambiguous evidence and thus some kind of reliable knowledge. I use the critical analysis of examples from my own thesis, in order to approach and illuminate this question.

How do artefacts/creative practice and their explanation/interpretation relate?

The differences in the nature of artefacts/practice and the requirements of research seem to be the reason for the need to explicate artefacts/practice in the context of research. On the one hand, artefacts/practice are open to interpretation. On the other hand, the requirement of (doctoral) research is to produce explicit and communicable knowledge. My focus is therefore on how these two aspects relate within research. The aim is to shift the understanding of practice and research as opposites to that of theory and practice as complementing factors within research.

Fawcett (1999: 1-25) provides a useful discussion of the relationship between theory and research. She explains theory as a set of concepts and propositions, which is generated and/or tested through research. Research in turn is defined as a formal, systematic, and rigorous process of inquiry. Both theory and research need to be contextualised and framed through a contextual model, i.e. the "perspective for viewing the phenomena that are within the domain of inquiry of a particular discipline" (3).

What is striking in this understanding is that no difference is made between practice and research as such. However, the restriction is that the outcome of research is defined as the generation and/or testing of theory. For research in art and design using practice this means – while the task of the research is to generate knowledge which is made comprehensible in the form of theories – the practice can be used in the research process and thus serve to provide data and evidence. This can be data and evidence both with regard to the process of creative practice as well as with regard to its outcome(s), i.e. artefacts in the widest sense (objects, writing, music, performance etc).

Using this formal definition of the relationship between practice, theory, and research as a basis, I want to illuminate more specifically the quality of the relationship between artefact/practice and theory/text. In this regard, Cummings (1993: 13-29) draws an interesting comparison. He looks at "things as they fall from the commodity loop into their rich and varied lives" (14) with the aim to illuminate how objects are "patterned with meaning and value" (14). He compares how things appear differently as commodity and as they are used, and how their relationship to representation changes. Recognising that the difference is brought about by a shift in context, he finds that

Commodity objects lend themselves to being severed from their material presence, they are easily flattened down into the economy of visual signs" (17-18).

Thus he concludes that they can become imbued with any meaning in a rather arbitrary way, while use cannot.

Use in its purest sense – not the gift – is the inverse of the commodity... A functional object has a metonymic relationship to meaning while in service, the effect and implementation of its function can be juxtaposed to produce a figure of meaning by contiguity. Outside of its immediate context, stripped of its function, in a museum, gallery or photograph for instance, an object operates more conventionally like a sign in a written language. It is conceivable to theorise away any absolute value of use and to erode distinctions based qualitatively upon function (22)...

However, there remains a certainty, that an object we may call a parachute either works or it does not. The simple test is to jump, plummet to earth and die, or your descent is arrested and you survive. It is possible to play with the semiotic difference of those actions, to luxuriate in the endless possibilities of signification, but there is a bottom line, a referent, some resistance... What I hope to make evident is that the relationship between form and function, or sign and referent, in use fails to be arbitrary (23).

There are three aspects implicit in Cummings observations that I want to elicit here:

Firstly, there is the thing itself, which obviously provides the basis for any reasoning about it. In research terms, we might say it provides the quest and object of inquiry. Secondly, dependent on the context, an object can be understood to have a different purpose and therefore it will be interpreted differently. Indeed, it seems that the farther the interpretation moves away from the physical reality of the object, the more the knowledge is created dependent on the context of the object and its interpretation.

Thirdly, the different purpose of the inquiry, and of employing objects for the inquiry, may determine the relation of the object to its representation. This may entail that different media of representation are appropriate for different purposes. For example, where use is at the basis of the concern of the research, the need for using the objects in question might require an appropriate medium that allows the experience of use and handling. Where we are exclusively concerned with the visual interpretation of an artefact, a visual representation might be sufficient.

According to Biggs (2002: 19-24) it is the quest, the context, and the interpretation that needs to be made explicit through words. However, the relation of the object to its representation through words also needs some consideration. It is again an observation by Cummings (1993: 15-16) which illuminates this:

The presence of an artefact, its relations, contexts, functions, and associations, in short its rich life, concretely exists and simultaneously participates in a discursive and 'textual space'... There is no autonomy for things however desired; an artefact inevitably grows a textual appendage...

Driving a 50mm self-tapping Supa Screw into a sheet of 5ply is not – as in this instance – only a textual appearance. That concrete performance may have taken place to construct the chair you are reading this from.

What I want to bring to mind is the dependency of a text on a set of procedures that elude, or at least resist writing. It would be a mistake to take a particular act of transcription, for the practice itself. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the specific, detailed and local realm of things. The description of the Supa Screw action unfolds within its own material

economy. Is it additionally glued, jointed, bolted or nailed, is it cupped, domed, chromed, or countersunk?... This potentially endless list of variables would allow you, the reader of the material text, to recognise if the chair is well/badly/carefully/sloppily/lovingly/mechanically made. What I want to underline in attending to this multitude of differences – which can be apprehended physically in an instant – is the impossibility inherent in transcribing the material syntax.

This passage illustrates the difficulties of representation of material reality (objects and processes). It also emphasises the differences in the nature of artefact and text. While in the artefact all the different layers of reality are merged into synthesis, language is only able to name and deal with one aspect at a time. This means the artefact is needed because of its complexity. This complexity cannot be grasped only through textual description but through experience of the thing itself. Where this experience is required as part of the understanding of the outcome of research, the presentation of the artefact/practice might be justified. In turn, because of the complex nature of artefacts, their presentation alone is not sufficient. Through the [explicatory] text it is possible to name and analyse, and to emphasise, one aspect of the reality of objects at a time, and thus to interpret them.

In summary, we can say that artefacts/creative practice may be understood as a phenomenon or substance that provides a basis for theory generation and that in turn is illuminated by this theory. In the following I want to illustrate the relationship between theory and practice (artefact) further, using examples. I aim to show different ways in which practice/artefacts may be used as a knowledge base from which to develop theory.

How can artefacts be used as a knowledge base within research?

Above, I have discussed the need to explain and interpret objects, because of their complexity. However, we have also seen that there is a 'bottom line', some material reality of objects, which seems to provide a certain basis for any interpretation. This begs the question whether this is the knowledge that objects embody and how this knowledge can be used as a knowledge base within research?

I propose that artefacts/practice can serve in three ways as a knowledge base within research. Firstly, artefacts/practice can pose a problem, which appropriately phrased in a question can offer a starting point for research (Biggs 2002: 20; Niedderer 2004: 17-18). Secondly, creative practice can be used as a method of inquiry which, if appropriately framed, can illuminate a process and provide data of different kinds (Niedderer 2004: 27-30). Thirdly, artefacts/practice may serve to provide data and evidence.

The scope of this paper does not allow me to discuss these first two aspects in detail. Instead I shall focus on the third aspect, which are the data and evidence (i.e. interpreted data) that support argument and outcome of any research. In particular, it is the role of artefacts as data and evidence, i.e. as a knowledge base that I want to review.

Cummings description of objects (above) has introduced us to the understanding that objects are complex in that they combine multiple levels of reality, e.g. material, visual, functional, symbolic etc. For the purpose of reviewing artefacts as a knowledge base for research, I explore some of the multiple levels of object-reality and I show under which conditions we can determine specific levels. I demonstrate some of these levels on the

example of one object which I have used in my own research. This object is the water glass (Illustration 1).

The water glass is one of the most basic and widely used forms of the drinking vessel that we can find in western culture. It is usually out of clear glass and has a simple, more or less cylindrical shape with a closed base and an open top. Because of its basic function, the glass is very versatile and can be used on many occasions. Most obvious seems to be its quality as a functional object, an aspect which Cummings has drawn upon and explained in his description of the Supa Screw.

Closely linked to an understanding of the water glass as functional object, is its understanding as design object. If we think of the water glass as design object, we may say that a standard water glass provides something like a norm of usage for cold beverages. It is designed to maximise comfort and efficiency within use concerning all aspects of function, e.g. size and volume, handling and safe standing. In this way it guarantees 'transparent' use.

As design object, the water glass also yields to semiotic interpretation. For example this particular glass may be understood as a sign for modernism, because of its minimal design and straight lines.

As a design object, further, it is likely to be seen as a commodity at the point of sale. In this role it might attract a different semiotic interpretation based on associations of purity, health etc (drinking pure water keeps us slim and fit).

However, dependent on the context, the glass may take on even more meanings:

Dependent on the context of use, the water glass may become a ritual object, e.g. when it is used in the ritual of the Holy Communion.

Removed from the context of (pragmatic) use and displayed in the institutional context of art (e.g. a gallery), it might be understood as an art object, e.g. an object trouvé in the manner of Duchamp.

This change of meaning through the change of context may well raise the question what meaning an object may have in the context of the examination of a research degree. Does it become meaningless when stripped of all its other contexts? It seems we would still recognise the glass as a water glass, although we might not know if it is supplied for use or for interpretation unless its purpose is made explicit through display.

Reflecting on how differently the glass appears within all the changing contexts, the question is whether there is any parameter in the object that stays constant and that may be understood as a knowledge base. It appears that the only constant is the recognition of the glass as a water glass. However, even this might be questioned.

On the one hand, there are many different shapes of water glasses available and these variations do not change the perception of the basic function of the water glass. On the other hand, the basic function of the water glass also makes it versatile. It can be used in [almost] any context and on any occasion, and although the name indicates a use for the drinking of water, it can be used for any other (usually cold) beverages such as soft drinks, hard drinks, wine, or milk. We might even use it as vase or ashtray or penholder. Nothing

in the function of the water glass suggests to do or not to do any of this. How then do we recognise a water glass as a water glass (even if it is used as a penholder, for example)?

One way is by naming, which we have already discussed in the form of text and context. However even this presupposes that we recognise something as what it is before we are able to name it. This brings us back to the aspect of (re)cognition. Although we are not able to say in detail how we recognise things, it is clear that our brain possesses very sophisticated mechanisms for discrimination. The classic example is our ability to recognise a familiar face among any great number of faces.

On the basis of this insight, I propose understanding the artefact/practice as the substance that provides data. These data need to be interpreted to serve as evidence and thus to support the argument of research. The interpretation is dependent on the context. The less the interpretation is related to the function of the object, the more the context becomes important for the understanding of the artefact or practice. Accordingly, the artefact/practice can supply data/evidence in terms of the characteristics of the object itself as well as in terms of social and cultural phenomena.

Conclusion

In this paper I have investigated the problem of defining the position and contribution of artefacts/creative practice in research. Drawing on existing literature, I have established the understanding that artefacts/practice need to be explained through contextualisation and interpretation as a basis for the discussion.

I have then investigated how artefacts/practice relate to their explanation/interpretation in the broader context of the relation of theory and practice within research. Finally, I have used the example of the water glass to illustrate the aspects discussed in the first part of the paper, and to draw some conclusions on the knowledge embodied in artefacts and on how this knowledge can serve as a knowledge base for research.

The discussion has revealed the context as one aspect that is central to the analysis and interpretation of artefacts in that it directs the attention of the user. However, it has also shown that the artefact/practice provides the substance for any interpretation. On this basis artefacts/practice can be employed as source for knowledge creation in a number of ways. I have discussed that artefacts can be used as:

Data/Evidence in terms of the characteristics of the object itself;

Data/Evidence in terms of social and cultural phenomena;

I have further indicated that artefacts/practice can serve as 'Quest', i.e. the object can cause me – in the first place – to search for explanation, thus initialising research;

Evidence of the making process; both in technical as well as conceptual terms.

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