An alternative model of "knowledge" for the arts

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At “A Research Culture for Ceramics” conference before Christmas 2001, Stuart Evans offered this comment for debate and discussion: “You do not have to produce good art as part of a practice based degree, you can produce bad art”. I felt he had put his finger on something I had observed — a difference between the criteria used to evaluate practice based PhDs in the arts, and the criteria used to evaluate practice. Expressed in such a succinct and bald form, his comment made me wonder how this had come about? And whether or not it is a problem?

It seems to me that these issues are related to the difficulty we have in understanding practice in the arts in terms of research — the relation of research to studio practice amounting to new academic terrain: the concept “research” being traditionally associated with “knowledge”, and the relation between “knowledge” and studio practice being not at all clear. One way of managing this new academic terrain, has been to incorporate established research methods from other disciplines within the range of methods of practice based PhDs, and to rely on these to get the work up to standard — since being established, there is an established sense of what the standard is, and established assessment criteria. While of course there is nothing wrong with research methods crossing disciplinary boundaries — this is a well established practice within academia — there is an issue of balance: the confusion surrounding the idea of studio practice as research, the difficulty of knowing how to assess studio based work as research, can lead to an over reliance on established research methods at the expense of studio practice, a “belt and braces” approach which can turn studio practice into a Cinderella research method. The nervous over reliance on established research methods can make the overall design of the research project fragment, and this has led some to wonder “How many PhDs is an art practice based student doing?” If we are to achieve a better balance of research methods in art practice based PHDs, and save studio practice from being poorly served by the research impetus, we need to debate and clarify the relation of studio based practice in the arts to “knowledge”, and the extent and ways studio practice qualifies as research, if indeed it does. To do this we will need to define “knowledge” in the context of the arts. And in relation to this, consider what we mean by “research”.

Let us clarify the issue further. The possibility of satisfying the criteria of an art practice based PhD in spite of bad art implies an understanding of what good or bad art is. Such judgements are made all the time, by a variety of people and institutions: by gallerists selecting works to show, by panels judging competitions, and by practitioners throughout the development and production of any piece of work. The assessment of good and bad in art, craft, and design is not new to art education. The tutors of practice based students, including students taking research degrees, regularly make such judgements when assessing students' work. And the parity of these judgements with those made in other art education institutions is ensured by external examiners. In my experience, it is rare for there to be much discrepancy between the marks of the different members of an assessment team. While these judgements are made by individuals, they are not individual judgements. They are generated in relation to tacit knowledge of art, craft, and design. They are part of culture: it is sometimes possible to locate the judgements made by practitioners in time and place — to the decade, and sometimes to the year, and to a particular culture or country, even to a particular town. If they are part of culture, are they "knowledge"? Does the judgement of good or bad when valorised as adequate by peers, a judgement valorised in its social context, amount to "knowledge"? Can a "judgement" amount to "knowledge" at all, or is it of an entirely different order? What is the relation of "knowledge" to culture? Often passing unmentioned in research in the arts, are the known assured typifications of agreed and warranted institutional models 1.

To make headway with these questions, we need to clarify what we mean by "knowledge". This is not a question much considered in art, craft, and design — until recently that is. And it is likely that because it has not come up very often, ideas of "knowledge" that have been rejected, or subjected to heavy criticism in other disciplines, may persist in the arts. In particular I am referring to remnants of various forms of "objectivism". "Objectivism" is defined as "the doctrine that knowledge, morality, perception etc. exist apart from human knowledge or perception of them" (Pearsall and Trumble, 1996, 1002). This doctrine holds that our lived understanding and experience of the world are either irrelevant or not enough for "knowledge", which is dependent upon something more certain, and somehow distinct from human knowledge, sometimes imagined beyond, below, above, or beneath: a firm ground for "knowledge", which brings with it the possibility of certainty, of "objectivity" (in the traditional sense), and "true belief". Conceiving "knowledge" in terms of true belief has excluded that not built on this apparently firm ground — such as imagination and sensation which are central to the practice of the arts — from debate about the nature of "knowledge" 2. Nietzsche pointed out that there has been much hostility to the senses "The treacherous and blind hostility of the philosophers to the senses…" (1968, 253, [461]). In short, what I am saying is that traditional objectivist models of "knowledge" exclude (most) contemporary studio based practice in the arts from debates about "knowledge", and that the challenge to, and arguable ongoing demise of this idea of "knowledge" allows the contemporary arts to enter the debate. We need to engage in this debate to clarify issues of studio practice as research.

One such remnant of objectivism is the traditional definition of epistemology. A recently published encyclopedia defined "epistemology" as "concerned with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge", but qualifies "knowledge" as "true belief": "one virtually universal presupposition is that knowledge is true belief" 3. This in effect makes the concern of epistemology the "nature, sources, and limits of true belief". This objectivist presupposition of course precludes debate about whether or not knowledge is true belief; and excludes debate about knowledge conceived from other than objectivist perspectives which might be useful to the arts from epistemology. This traditional conception of epistemology has recently been radically undermined, both from within epistemology and without. Within the

discipline the principle strand of enquiry, the attempt to discover the grounds or foundation of "knowledge" has collapsed in its strong form (Fairlamb, 1994, 261; see also Rorty, 1980, passim). The direction out of the impasse, Quine proposes, is to see how the mind really works, and look at how knowledge is really produced. Quine comments that "The Cartesian quest for certainty had been the remote motivation of epistemology … but that quest was seen as a lost cause" (1969, 227).

The stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world. Why not just see how this construction really proceeds. (Quine, 1969, 227)

Giving up the Cartesian quest for certainty reframes epistemological debate in terms of life as it is lived, making it relevant and applicable to the arts. The implications are numerous: seeing how "the construction really proceeds" implies that biological, social, and other information will be brought into the debate. Quine felt that it turns epistemological debate into semantics and psychology. But the loss of faith in a firm foundation for knowledge also removes the basis on which epistemology construed itself as an autonomous foundational discipline, the "queen of the sciences" (because that upon which all the other disciplines depend since it provides them with a theory of "knowledge") (Rorty, 1980, 132-9), and strengthens its relations to other disciplines since they are what provide it with the material for analysis. It means that the arts can no longer accept epistemology's "one size fits all" definition of "knowledge". The partial collapse of traditional epistemology means that the arts no longer have any grounds for abdicating responsibility for their definition of knowledge. The arts need to take responsibility for their own definition of knowledge. If the arts back away from this challenge they risk having to work with definitions of knowledge that do not relate well to their working methods.

This is a step that a number of other disciplines have already taken. The natural sciences seem to have a head start in this respect. And recently the sociologist Niklas Luhmann has claimed for sociology the right and need to forge its own definition of knowledge, since only this he argues, will allow sociology full control of its own research methods, and enable it to forge research tools with the rigour it aspires to.

When working within the scientific system, one presupposes, with reason, a description of admissible operations, an epistemology. Like every other system, this one [sociology] must be able to determine its elements (here, the acquisition of knowledge) and attribute them to itself. Since the eighteenth century at the latest, this task has been viewed as concerning a special theory of reflection, a theory of the system within the system. No other authority, not even philosophy, can tell science under what conditions meaning is to be treated as knowledge or as the acquisition of knowledge. Science is autonomous in this regard… It makes its own laws, not randomly (as has increasingly been feared), but in observance of all the factual knowledge and all the constraints that one must take into consideration if one seeks to put together a self-description. (Luhmann, 1995, 478)

The traditional objectivist model of "epistemology" will not do any more. The arts need to participate in the turn towards natural epistemologies. This will allow the arts to take full control of its own self-descriptions, and debate the conditions under which meaning counts as knowledge in the context of its practices.

When considering debate about the nature of knowledge in context of studio practice, we must not forget studio practice itself, and act as though studio practice could not be part of the debate because positions are expressed other than in academic form, and in mediums

other than writing. Although the difference of medium makes it necessary to find ways of relating that articulated in various mediums to writing, to bridge the difference between mediums and forms of articulation, that raise issues of “reading” which are complex and cannot be dealt with in this context. It is however possible to briefly relate in general terms the above definition of objectivism, to that from which studio practice has been generated (to the extent there is some trace of this in the work), and the practitioners’ statements about their work, and gesture towards future avenues of enquiry. Remember that objectivism involves the belief that some grounds for “knowledge” exist distinct from human knowledge and perception — objectivism does seem to bear some relation to representations of the academic ideal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many studio based practitioners of the eighteenth century researched the variously named “Ideal”, “Taste”, “Beau Ideal”, or “Grace”; they searched for its characteristics, form, image, and for its origin or causes, and came up with “Je ne sais quoi”. Hogarth reports in The Analysis of Beauty (1753, 261) that enquiries into the causes of “beauty” had almost been given up through lack of progress, “and the subject thought generally to be a matter of too high and too delicate a nature to admit of any true or intelligible discussion”.

In his essay “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, Martin Jay explores the common association of perspective representation with Cartesian philosophy. Jay says that the use of perspective since its discovery during the Renaissance, and our ocularcentrism, or orientation to vision since that time has often been referred to as “Cartesian perspectivalism”. He takes issue with the assumed hegemony of the Cartesian frame for studio practice that this implies. The general view, he says, goes as follows: “Growing out of the late medieval fascination with the metaphysical implications of light — light as divine lux rather than perceived lumen — linear perspective came to symbolise a harmony between the mathematical regularities in optics and God’s will” (Jay, 1988, 5-6). Cartesian perspectivalism “… was in league with a scientific world view that no longer hermeneutically read the world as divine text, but rather saw it as situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher” (Jay, 1988, 9). In relation to this, Jay mentions Kubovy’s observation that perspective in Renaissance painting was often constructed from more than a single viewpoint, criticising as naive the assumption that “the rules of perspective established by its theoretical champions” were actually practised by the artists themselves (Jay, 1988, 10). Perception being normally binocular, and built of successive glances from multiple positions as the body shifts about. And Jay points out that interest in geometricalized space and a dispassionate, de-eroticised eye, correlates poorly with the seventeenth century painting from the low countries, which is often assumed to be an example of Cartesian perspectivalism.

If there is a philosophical correlate to Northern art, it is not Cartesianism with its faith in a geometricalized, rationalized, essentially intellectual concept of space but rather the more empirical visual experience of observationally orientated Baconian empiricism. … Like the microscopist of the seventeenth century … Dutch art savours the discrete particularity of visual experience and resists the temptation to allegorise or typologize what it sees … (Jay, 1988, 13)

Renaissance painting cannot be simply and straight forwardly identified with Cartesian philosophy as often assumed. Instead of the assumed hegemony of Cartesian perspectivalism, Jay proposes numerous differentiated “visual subcultures” in the modern era, incorporating various types of sensory information. While Jay does much to untangle the confusion, and point us in the direction confusion may be further untangled, there is a lot more work to be done before there is clarity in our understanding of the relationship

between visual cultures and discourses of “knowledge”. This confusion makes it difficult to assess the extent to which studio practice is permeated by objectivism, or has moved away from it. Though it does seem to me that the latter is the case.

In keeping with debate that has routed strong foundationist approaches to epistemology, and following Quine and other’s natural turn, I would like to call your attention to the etymology of the word “epistemology”. It evokes our sensuous relation with the world, taking us into territory familiar to those engaged in studio practice in art, craft, and design. It has the advantage of being broad enough to encompass debate about the nature of knowledge, without presuppositions about the nature of knowledge to stifle areas of debate. However building a model of knowledge around an image of our sensuous encounter with the world does presuppose the significance of this relation for knowledge; and this corresponds with Quine’s notion mentioned earlier that “The stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world.”

Epistemology can be defined quite simply as the “study or theory of knowledge”.

epistemology n. study or theory of knowledge. 1856, formed in English from Greek epistēemēe knowledge (Iconic Greek epístasthai understand, know how to do, from epi- over, near + hístasthai to STAND) + English -logy. (Barnhart, 1988, 337)

It was formed in English in the mid nineteenth century from Greek epistēemēe meaning knowledge. And the English suffix -logy, the study or science of something, as in sociology, anthropology, which comes ultimately from Greek légein to speak of something (Barnhart, 1988, 608). This suffix suggests speaking about, discoursing on something. It evokes the role of discourse in study, the impossibility of study without meaning and therefore language, and conjures a simple image, that of speech, speaking about something, in this case episteme or knowledge. Episteme, comes from “Iconic Greek epístasthai understand, know how to do, from epi- over, near + hístasthai to STAND”, “literally, to stand on top of, stand over” 4. To stand over or near, is to take your body and its sensory receptors close to something, to maximise information gathered. We get close to things when we need to inspect them, take a good look. To stand over or near to something suggests an act of deliberation; standing still, not walking or running, but standing, as if all the body’s energy were given to perceiving and thinking. Standing because perception and cognition take time; time to gather the information, and to work it through. Note that both epistēemēe and the suffix -logy imply acts: the physical act of standing over or near, and the act of speaking, discoursing. From an etymological perspective, “epistemology”, is to speak about the act of standing over or near.

“Episteme” has considerable affinity with the English word “understand”:

understand [OE] The compound verb understand was formed in the centuries immediately preceding the Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britain. It is composed, of course, of under and stand, and the semantic link between “standing under” something and “knowing about” it may be “being close to” it. (Ayto, 1990, 549)

A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary defines understand as to “perceive, … observe, notice, take for granted…” (Clark Hall, 1996, 373). The Anglo-Saxon meanings for under included “beneath, … before, in the presence of” (Clark Hall, 1996, 372).

Perception and cognition are also suggested by the etymology of “research”, a “careful search”, borrowed via Middle French from Old French “recercher seek out, search closely (re-intensive form + cercher to seek for, SEARCH)” (Barnhart, 1988, 915).

“Epistemology” as the “study or theory of knowledge”, speaking or discoursing, about the act of standing over or near, brings sensuousness, devalued in the old European philosophical tradition because common to man and animals, back into the debate about knowledge, divesting it of the old prejudice. There is no trace in this image of the Cartesian notion of “knowledge” as a pre-existent mirror of nature, that turned the attempt to know into reflection upon the reflection. We have no reason to presuppose that reflection pre-exists the act of reflecting. Nor is there any mention of that which is stood over or near, whether it is discovered, or uncovered, suggesting something pre-existent, or whether it is simultaneously uncovered and invented as Bergson insists:

But stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing. Discovery, or uncovering, has to do with what already exists, actually or virtually; it was therefore certain to happen sooner or later. Invention gives being to what did not exist; it might never have happened. Already in mathematics and still more in metaphysics, the effort of invention consists most often in raising the problem, in creating the terms in which it will be stated. (Bergson, 1946, 51)

The idea of standing over or near and carefully searching for something merely to be uncovered, has some affinity with the old idea that perception is passive, the eye a mere receiver of that which is out there. Cognitive science has been clearing this notion away, and conceives perception as active — the eye searches out features which can be built into a description — and dependent upon that which the body brings to this activity, established neural pathways generated in relation to culture, environment and other factors. An active notion of vision has affinity with Bergson’s idea that invention plays a part in raising problems.

Having clarified what we mean by “epistemology”, we can turn to the issue of how this might relate to studio practice in the arts. While objectivist notions of “knowledge” have little affinity with most contemporary studio practice, the etymology of “epistemology” takes us into similar territory. From the latter perspective there are many points of relation. Studio practice involves standing over or near many types of things, both literally and metaphorically. Some of the standing over or near in studio practice is commonly understood as research, some of it is less clearly research, and some of it is not research. The idea of research as a careful search for information in books and articles is well established. This usually involves physical proximity with the thing to be searched: such as reading the book on the table in front and carefully thinking about what has been written. Through a careful search of the literature an image gradually emerges of the problem and its context — the work that has already been done in this area. Though studio based practitioners may research in this way, they may also search for visual information in books, magazines, galleries, museums, and the high street; they may record the information by taking notes, or they may take photographs, make sketches etc. But these are not the only things a studio based practitioner in the arts stands over or near. Is there any aspect of the practitioner's practice of standing over their work that might also constitute research? And if so, what?

The practitioner “stands over” that which is being generated through their practice. It is common for this to happen quite a lot, and for long periods, and occurs both physically and metaphorically. Think of that famous footage of Jackson Pollock painting in his studio,

dripping paint over the canvas on the floor, his concentration on the canvas, though he is physically more active than is conveyed by “standing”. The practitioner may go through successive stages of planning, acting, reflecting, revising the plan, then acting again. They may move near to take a close look, or take some steps back to see what it looks like from a distance. Reflecting upon the work, the working process, and issues related to the work, while near to the work, and then later without the physical presence of the piece reflecting upon its internal double. An intense experience, a relationship with a thing that does not pre-exist the relationship, but emerges through doing, through the interrelationship of materials, that which the practitioner brings to the practice, and the context. Heidegger says the work of art has its origin in the interrelation of the artist and work:

The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. (Heidegger, 1956, 143)

The practitioner is changed by the experience of producing the work, it changes the way they think, the way they feel, the way they are.

To the Greeks techne means neither art nor handicraft but, rather, to make something appear, within what is present, as this or that, in this way or that way. The Greeks conceive of techne, producing, in terms of letting appear. (Heidegger, 1954, 361)

The thing emerges within what is present, both physically and in an immanent sense. The work does not merely emerge in the world, it simultaneously emerges in the practitioner who may see that which has been dimly felt as the work, may see clearly what they have been feeling, only at that point where it “feels right”, only as it emerges as a physical form. The making process can be a search. A very careful search. And it can reveal unexpected things, more or other than was searched for. However not all studio based making in the arts is such a search. Where a practice has become ritualised, repetitive, or safe — keeping to safe paths and well established territory — or is formulaic or batch production, it is not a careful search or research.

In conclusion, I will briefly summarise my main points. The arts need to clarify the extent and ways in which studio practice qualifies as “research”. Since “research” is associated with “knowledge”, this process needs to involve clarification of what counts as “knowledge” in the context of the arts. And for this we need to take into consideration both the agreed and warranted institutional models of what is good in the arts, the tacit knowledge of various types of arts practitioners, and debates about the nature of “knowledge”. Debates about the nature of “knowledge” have traditionally been the concern and preserve of epistemology. However, a traditional area of epistemological enquiry has collapsed, taking with it some of that which remains of the quest for certainty in “knowledge”, and this has implications for the arts. Firstly, since it is becoming apparent that the grounds for conceiving epistemology as an autonomous discipline are erroneous, the arts can no longer abdicate all responsibility for this aspect of their self-description. Secondly, the shift away from associating “knowledge” with certainty, towards conceiving it as contingent, and giving sensation and imagination a greater role, permits practitioners in the arts to generate a definition of knowledge which does not strive for absolute certainty. And thirdly, the arts experience and understanding of imagination and sensation puts them in a good position to make a contribution to debates about the nature of knowledge that may be of use to other disciplines. The arts need to discover and invent their own concept of knowledge, on their own terms, and in relation to their own practices, taking great care in crafting the problem, not because the problem is more important than the solution, but

because, as Bergson points out, the solution is set up in the way the problem is stated, the problem gets the solution it deserves.

Endnotes

1 My thanks to Chris Smith for this point.

2 For an explication of objectivism and its implications (and an embodied alternative), see Lakoff and Johnson (1981) pp. 159-225; Johnson (1987); Lakoff (1987) Book I, Part 2.

3 The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines epistemology as follows: “Epistemology is one of the core areas of philosophy. It is concerned with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge (…). There is a vast array of views about these topics, but one virtually universal presupposition is that knowledge is true belief, but not mere true belief (…). For example, lucky guesses or true beliefs resulting from wishful thinking are not knowledge. Thus, a central question in epistemology is: what must be added to true beliefs to convert them into knowledge?” p. 246.

4 From the entry for “understand” in Barnhart, p. 1185.

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