Introduction

If we consider the role of the art object in contemporary art there seems to be a confusing paradox. The art historian Charles Harrison states in 'Art in Theory' that the anthology be treated not solely as a resource to study art but that it be accompanied by 'first-hand experience of modern art' (Harrison, 1992). David Davies also stresses the importance of a 'direct experiential encounter with an instance of a work' (Davies, 2003). Yet despite this stress on the direct experience of artworks it seems that, as noted by Vickery, the conceptual or hermeneutic aspects of art seem to be those which are most valued within the contemporary artworld (Vickery, 2004). This paper will therefore explore the role of the art object in contemporary art, and in so doing begin to address the conference questions; what differentiates artefact-based transactions from linguistic ones? Do artefacts merely stimulate linguistic reasoning? Can an artefact do more than simply illustrate a concept? and ultimately, what is the role of the artefact in art and design research?

In order to achieve this the paper will draw upon a number of interviews conducted as part of my PhD research project. These include interviews with an art historian anon2, a critic, an arts journalist, an art journal editor anon4, a curator and a number of contemporary artists anon1, anon3.

The Art Object

I will begin by exploring the role of the art object in the contemporary artworld. The initial interviews conducted as part of this research were in retrospect approached with an understanding not dissimilar to what David Davies terms the 'common-sense' approach to understanding art and art theory. In this approach the belief is that it is 'necessary and sufficient' to have a direct experiential encounter with art. Such an encounter is 'necessary because there are appreciable properties bearing on the distinctive value of a work that are graspmable only in such an experience' (Davies, 2003). It is sufficient in that 'any properties of the work not graspable in an experiential encounter with the work have no bearing on a works artistic value' (Davies, 2003). The belief is that artworks posses
properties and knowledge ‘accessible to receivers who engage in such direct experiential encounters’ with them and that we may characterise such experiences as ‘aesthetic’ (Davies, 2003). In a recent paper Charles Harrison explored ‘Modernism’s supposed disestablishment in the transatlantic artworld of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s’ and in so doing quoted a number of people who had offered similar views of the experience of the work of art (Harrison, 2004). He referred to Bell, who stated that ‘To appreciate fully a work of art we require nothing but sensibility. To those that can hear art speaks for itself’ and to Greenberg, who commented that ‘Aesthetic judgement coincides with the immediate experience of art; it is not arrived at afterwards through reflection or thought’ (Greenberg, 1967).

If we consider these statements and believe that artworks are ‘distinguished by their aesthetic properties conferred on them by their creators’ it would seem logical to follow Andrew Harrison’s argument from the last ‘Research Into Practice’ conference in which he considered that we might need to view artworks as ‘objects of knowledge in their own right’ (Harrison, 2002). Similarly, it seemed appropriate to use the artists interviews I was conducting to probe artists’ intentions, as a means of elucidating insights into the role of the art object and its supporting theory. It was on this basis and this progression of thought that led me to write the abstract and propose a paper for this conference.

However, since writing the abstract for this paper it has become apparent that my thinking on the role of the art object, within contemporary art at least, has changed. Despite still believing that in others areas of art and design, such as textiles for example, the resulting object as an outcome of practice can be seen to evidence research in the field, I am unsure if I any longer agree that the same could, or should, be said for fine art. I will use this paper to outline my reasoning behind this thinking.

Something that came to light recently and affected my thinking was the awareness that the artists I interviewed did not see their work as an embodiment of their ideas and intentions. Instead they described the art object as part of the ‘art’ but not the sum of it. They felt they were not the authority on their own work and were in fact often not the best person to write or speak about it. The work was described as revealing itself to them as artists just as it seemed to reveal itself to less familiar viewers. These findings, and more recent interviews and texts have led me to review my position and consider the art object rather than an entity unto itself as something intimately entwined in art as a social belief system and activity.

It seems discussions surrounding the role of the text in practice based fine art PhD submissions often focus on understanding how the artwork may work. It is this question that also seems to be at the centre of the themes of this conference, particularly when considering the difference between aesthetic and linguistic communication.

I do not believe we presently posses a means of understanding the difference between artefact and linguistic transactions. I see this as something that would take a considerable amount of research, possibly from a cognitive psychology perspective, and I realise that this is something that as a discipline we may be hostile to. I also feel that there needs to be a distinction made between artefact and art object, particularly the contemporary art object.

A recent television programme broadcast on Channel 4 on the 14th November 2004 gave Jake Chapman an opportunity to give his opinions on the nature of contemporary art. The core idea seemed to be that the problem with contemporary art is that people seem to
believe it is 'reducible to looking', which he believes it is not, and that in fact it is 'nothing to do with looking, looking is a very small part of it, really it is to do with thinking' (Chapman, 2003). An article by David Thompson in the Guardian on April 15th also quoted Jake Chapman, as saying that the increasing sensitivity shown by the galleries to a wider audience for art could have a negative effect on 'the potential for serious, discursive art' (Chapman, cited in Thompson, 2004).

It is insightful to know that Jake Chapman sees contemporary art as discursive. It also seems, as Jake suggests, that it is too easy to reduce the experience of the art object to looking. A recent interview with an art journal editor anon4 suggested to me that forms of thinking about art 'can be entirely about discourse' or 'entirely about objects' and 'anything in between'. anon4 believes that art is a 'discursive practice above all' and says there is no problem with that but fears that the institutions have. An example anon4 gave of arts discursive nature was that 'when you put a frame around a picture that picture is in dialogue with other pictures by the same artist and other artists, it's open ended'. And anon4 does believe that the best art is open ended.

Kosuth considers that in 'art the means of expression is also not unlike language'. He exemplifies this in this quote,

Even accepting the common view that art's history goes beyond hundreds of years, it is possible to see that the 'language' of the art of the west has been painting and sculpture for some time. Up until the very recent past it has been assumed that if one wanted to speak as an artist he had to speak in the correct 'language'. That's how we knew he was an artist and what he made was art or meant to be art. Whatever was done, it had to be done within that language…in the past few years artists have realised that their traditional language is exhausted and unreal. (Kosuth, 1991:43)

In Roy Harris's book 'The necessity of Artspeak' Harris considers Kosuth's comments and concludes that Kosuth shows;

no inclination to address the fundamental qualities of what makes language in the traditional sense a distinctive mode of communication and whether these distinctive properties bear any convincing relationship to those of painting and sculpture (Harris, 2003: 130).

Harris proceeds to criticise Kosuth's argument by saying that his deployment of the notion that art forms are 'languages' is typical and 'although insistently repeated never advances beyond hackneyed metaphor' (Harris 2003, 129). Harris goes so far as to suggest that although Kosuth 'makes reference to linguists, including Saussure and Sapir, and even the Saussurean technical terms langue and parole', such references tend to be both 'fleeting and opaque' (Harris, 2003:129). Harris therefore suggests that whilst Kosuth's texts give the impression of 'engaging with linguistics in a serious way' they are in fact 'vague theoretical gestures in a linguistic direction, but nothing more' (Harris, 2003:129).

In a paper given at the 'Drawing Disciplinary Lines' conference in Leeds this May, Charles Harrison described the situation he faced when as a young art journalist he found he was 'no longer sure that the work itself had been responsible for (his) conviction of its value'. The work he was referring to was one of Morris Louis' 'bronze veil' paintings that he saw in Emmerich's gallery in New York in 1962. Harrison used this personal experience to reflect on the concerns he has about 'the apparent decline in the status and potential of abstract
art', and with it 'the emergence of an art that employed language as its medium' (Harrison, 2004).

There exists a well-documented history of the dematerialisation of the art object, as considered by Lucy Lippard (1973). Yet the changing role of the art object has left some questions unanswered and as Charles Harrison's paper suggested, he shares some of these concerns.

Andrew Benjamin's 'Object Painting' could be expected to offer us an interpretation of 'the question of the art object' (Benjamin, 1994). Yet in the first few lines Benjamin states that 'today the question of the art object seems a distant concern' (Benjamin, 1994). He therefore takes as his theme for the book a mapping out of the work the artwork does. In this he proceeds to describe the way in which art needs to be understood in terms of 'movement' and he attempts in the book to 'rework the ontology of the art object in terms of becoming'. Thereafter Benjamin's argument considers the art object as a 'becoming-object', a state in which art objects are 'inevitably concerned with their own objectivity and thus with its own being as art' (Benjamin, 1994). Although it is clear that Benjamin is a well-respected voice within the field of art and philosophy, I find this book difficult. There seems to be no getting away from the fact that it seems to skirt around the question of the art object and not address anything directly. I was left confused and feeling it was symptomatic of an art discourse dogged by postmodernist theory.

An argument presented by Vickery also complicates the role of the art object as embodying knowledge as such, in a different but clearer way. Vickery considers the art object through his observation that,

a work of art is no longer visually distinct from a non-art object... our contemporary concept of 'art' no longer bears any direct or necessary relation to any objective characteristics, any aesthetic qualities, artistic techniques or any kind of object per se'. (Vickery, 2002)

Therefore as Vickery puts it, art can only be described in terms of 'an activity'. He sees that this may appear 'to the uninitiated as arbitrary and self indulgent', and that it would indeed be were it 'detached from any system of values-embedded constraints' and if it had no 'professional technical constraints, such as Academy training or historic artistic conventions' imposed upon it. Vickery sees contemporary art as avoiding 'the condition of the meaningless or arbitrary' by 'being orientated within a coherent network of artistic practices, ideas, debates and modes of display otherwise known as the 'Artworld'. This leaves art as 'an 'Artworld activity, an institutional activity (and not a species of object as such)' (Vickery, 2002).

Such an argument makes a discussion of the art object irrelevant and focuses on art in relation to the discourse, modes of representation and elucidation that surround it.

Mitchell (2003) has posed the problem of understanding the means by which the media communicates. In which he considers that the answer to this is to address the location of the 'media'. In a sociological or institutional theory of art, where art is seen as 'an activity', and there is diminished value or relevance of the art object, such a question about the location or address of 'art' would also seem poignant.

Artspeak
I am now going to consider the nature of artworld discourses. Vickery's discussion sees the art object as existing in direct relation to a 'network of artistic practices, ideas, debates and modes of display otherwise known as the 'Artworld'. It seems that it is often the art world discourses themselves, which form the identity of art objects. This is also emphasised in an institutional theory of art, such as Danto's. If taken to the extreme, the only thing that provides the 'art object' with its identity is its theoretical explanation, as exemplified in this comment by Danto,

What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo Box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is (in a sense of is other than that of artistic identification). Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting. (Danto, 1964: 581)

If we consider Danto's and Vickery's arguments, they suggest we 'see' the Brillo Box as art because of a series of related concepts that structure our perceptual apprehension of the object. Vickery also considers Danto's theory and points out that Danto later revised his suggestion that 'a certain theory' of art simply conferred art identity on a non-art object, and thus avoids nominalism -'art is anything I say is art'. Danto's revision means that he is suggesting instead of artworks emerging from a 'certain theory' (Danto, 1974) they emerge from 'a circuit of 'theories' or interpretative processes. These would include exhibitions, debates, philosophy, history writing, and reflection on other artworks and his argument therefore implies that artworks gain an identity through participation in this circuit. The artwork itself is seen as an act of interpretation, a speculative reflection on the concept of art and the function of that concept within art world activities. The ability of a work to generate further speculation becomes the measure of its value.

The nature of Artworld discourses, often referred to as 'Artspeak', are brought into question by Roy Harris in his book 'The necessity of Artspeak: The Language of the Arts in a Western Tradition'. He believes that 'thanks to artspeak, more and more contradictions shelter under the traditional supercatagory, the question 'is it Art?' which is 'increasingly felt to be trivial, rather than important' (Harris, 2003; 203). Harris's argument is too complex, all encompassing and unfaltering to attempt to sum up here. Suffice to say that he feels there is 'something seriously wrong with the education system of a society that does not understand, and cannot be bothered to understand, its own artspeak' (Harris, 2003: xiii).

The trouble with Artspeak and art theory is that artists can employ it instrumentally. This was something commented upon by the anon4 who said 'you can get a situation as happened with Greenberg and could happen to another, but I hope not all powerful critic, which is people start to make art in the light of what he wrote'. This anon4 felt 'doesn't do for art anymore than it possibly does for the writer'. anon4 explains this further;

early Greeenberg was exciting it was dynamic it was tackling something and so was the art and they were in parallel and then there were these coincidences and crossovers and I am quite sure quite a lot of artists began to talk the talk of Greenberg because he was a power in the land but I don't think they made their work in a Greenbergian way but they could discuss it in a Greenbergian way, and the minute they started to was the minute it started to go wrong and the writing and the art became academic. Or perhaps that's not
the best word but it became the poorer the meaner the more instrumental, the writing became instrumental it served the art and the art served the writing and that is not healthy.

anon4 stresses that this is speculation on her part and it is an opinion and cannot be read as fact. Yet it already seems reminiscent of artists within the contemporary artworld who make their work in a post-modern way.

Artspeak and art education

I will now consider the role of 'artspeak' in art education. The need to validate what we do in art and design in terms of writing has been linked by many to the introduction of the art degrees and the 'professionalisation' of the discipline in the 1960's. The art historian I interviewed anon2 stressed that changes in the discourses surrounding contemporary art are intimately linked to art education and this 'professionalisation'.

Prior to the 1960's he thinks that artists would have 'gone to art school and they would have been encouraged to develop their own individual talents which would then if they had them be recognised by the taste makers'. Yet now he feels that 'art schools generally have made a lot of effort to help their students compete within the art world and gain attention'. He mentioned Goldsmiths as a typical example of this. He feels that students there are taught 'tactics of promoting themselves' and 'depending on what kind of work it is throwing up some kind of plausible theoretical support for it'; but he is aware that this is an overly cynical view of things. While the ideal might be that 'critical thinking about cultural production and the art world' would actually inform the work, he says he isn't entirely sure that is exactly the reason why so many art schools have adopted contextual studies. It seems that with the increasing significance of the discourse that accompanies and defines art practice, this training is invaluable. This reflects Vickery's exploration of Carl Andre's work, where he concluded that the artist's "creative intention" seems to have become of vital importance; and its institutional function becomes primary (Vickery, 2004: 2). Yet the artist anon1 would argue that there was 'no actual increase in professionalism' in the 1960's but there was;

a denigration of the idea that craft skills, a visual sense and visual intelligence was disparaged and that society should have recognised those skills and not have been ashamed of them and require that they be justified by a more academic aspect which is quite, logically where theory comes in'.

In anon4's opinion, 'the visual arts in this country gained recognition as a viable intellectual activity, supposing it ever got that recognition, very late in the day' and feels 'we have had a chip on our shoulder ever since… and so we have tried to prove we can be taken seriously and that means writing'. This anon4 feels is responsible for us 'dragooning art education into the form in which we recognise education and it's got to have degrees and it's got to have MA's and PhD's'

This means anon4 remains 'hostile to the PhD' in art and sees it as part of the realm of 'measurable criteria'. In this the balance of theory and practice required means they are often left 'acting as support for one another', which anon4 considers an unhealthy relationship. anon4 feels that 'in order to fulfil the criteria required by the university system it takes the artists engaged in that out of the loop'. The interview with anon4 also suggested a belief that PhD's in art are 'all happening for the wrong reasons'. anon4 is concerned that practice is being made to confirm to a particular agenda and sees the Research Assessment Exercise as a classic example of this. anon4 commented that 'you
may have produced the most marvellous thing but if it doesn't fit the criteria it can't be listed in your RAE and therefore your funds will be cut'.

The fact that research practice is measured and valued according to specified criteria is exemplified in the CRIAD paper, 'Artesign and the project series Room with a view: a case study of practice-based research in Art and Design'. This paper states that it will evaluate the Artesign project in relation to 'current criteria drawn from both the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and new developments in funding opportunities'. Does this mean that the practice that is supported and nurtured is not necessarily that which benefits the professional development of the practitioner or that which would have been made were there no RAE assessment?

An alternative to the current PhD system considered by anon4 sounds like it would take the form of an honorary PhD. This would involve artists who wanted a PhD being able to 'compile their peer reviews, exhibitions and artists statements from catalogues' and anon4 states we could call it what we liked. anon4 feels we shouldn't be putting artists into the 'straight jackets that the rest of us are in'. 'The rest of us' is taken to mean other academic subjects areas such as art history. What this seems to suggest, but is however denied by her, is a romantic view of the artist and or of notions of creativity. By saying art education should be of a very different nature to that in other disciplines, we are raising art to a privileged status.

This privileging could be based on 'belief that 'the whole point of art was to be able to think outside the box'. anon4 admits that ***** has always been 'interested in how artists think as an outsider' and therefore, when contrasted with the artist anon1 views on the artworld and art's ground breaking nature, there is an interesting contradiction. This is because anon1 himself a maker and closely tied to highly successful contemporary artists, such as Tracey Emin, he sees art as one of the most rule-driven activities and compares it with a game requiring tactical skill such as chess.

In the abstract I also noted that in art education lecturers often refer their students to look at the work of other artists. Yet it seems this commonly takes the form of the student looking at reproductions and texts in books and journals and not seeing the work of art firsthand. Thus we do not have the direct experience of the art object.

What next?

I am uncertain as to how I see a way forward from the position we are faced with. To see the art object as embodying and conveying knowledge is an outdated conception of art within the contemporary artworld. When writing about art so as to justify it as research it is difficult to avoid the text becoming instrumental. Yet to reject the PhD as a necessary progression of art education and rather to insist on art education that evolves out of practice itself is surely to put to much importance on a romanticised nature of artist, art and of creative developments.

It seems though that just as Harris declares Artspeak may be becoming vacuous, there is a will to return to, at least in critical writing, a consideration of the physicality of the artwork and to form. Both the interview conducted by myself with anon2 and an interview conducted by Judith Mottram with anon3 revealed this. anon3 felt that 'its extraordinary that you can do something like the Turner prize, which generates something like a two-inch thick wodge of stuff and no one, I don't think anyone even mentioned the colours that were in the work let alone how it might look like in a certain way'. Yet he also felt it difficult to talk
in this way because he feared it could be interpreted, as 'neo-conservative' as though he was privileging 'un-critical visuality over an idea' and he didn't feel his was the case. Being seen as Conservative is, as Vickery puts it, 'something largely avoided like the plague in the Artworld' (Vickery, 2002:13).

It seems however that developments within the field, such as certain books and conferences, suggest a shift may be underway. The announcement for the 'Rediscovering Aesthetics Conference' in Cork in July, for example, and the book 'The New Aestheticism' by John Joughin and Simon Malpas (2003), suggest a return to aesthetics. Jouglin and Malpas's book describes the rise of 'literary theory' as having 'spawned the rise of anti-aesthetics' which they see as having been responsible for cultural theorists 'having failed to engage with the particularity of the work of art, much less the specificities of aesthetic experience'. This book then introduces the 'notion of a new aestheticism', which it sees as;

"new" insofar as it identifies a turn taken by a number of important contemporary thinkers towards the idea that focussing on the specifically aesthetic impact of a work of art or literature has the potential to open radically different ways of thinking about identity, politics and culture'.

The press release that accompanies the book states that;

the appearance of a new aestheticism at a moment that is often termed 'post-theoretical' is a direct index of the extent to which, as 'theory' now enters a more reflective phase, there is an increased willingness among critics and philosophers to consider the ways in which literary and cultural theory often overlooked key aspects of its reliance on philosophical aesthetics.'

The book includes a wide array of contributors and seems to suggest that a post-theory movement is underway, though what form this may take it still uncertain. anon2 has linked a post-theory tendency to movements currently underway such as New Media art. However, due to the nature of much of the work, it seems unlikely New Media art would be linked to a revival of aesthetics. Even the YBA's could and have been described by some such as Vickery 'trenchantly anti-intellectual' (Vickery, 2002:7) and therefore post-theory, but not concerned seriously with reviving aesthetics.

In Summary

It seems that what I have outlined shows that we no longer have at our disposal a unified theory of 'art' which helps us to consider the role of the 'art object'. Therefore we seem to be at a loss to explain or to begin to understand the means by which the art object in contemporary art may act as a form of communication or embodiment of knowledge. We seem to be left with art theory which considers art an 'activity' and theorises the art object as 'becoming-object', elevated to its status as art due to the discourse and context in which it occurs.

The implications of this for practice based research in fine art seem to be that, were the writing to serve a similar purpose as writing does for contemporary art, it may act solely as validation for the art practice. Yet it is not clear given the apparent denigration in the contemporary artworld of the idea of 'visual intelligence', whether we can still consider this a viable explanation. If we are to argue that an artwork or practical research outcome can stand alone as an embodiment of knowledge, we need more exhaustive study into how
this may be possible. The fact that at present we are not in a position to explain how the practical outcomes we produce actually embody knowledge has enormous implications for an activity such as research, in which the contribution to knowledge is of paramount concern.

Having recently seen some of the outcomes of peers engaged in practice-based research, I felt that there was a somewhat arbitrary relationship between the theory and the practice. The practical body of work suffered accordingly.

The argument presented above shows that within the contemporary art world it is often the theory that acts as the determining factor as to what is classed as art. It is feared then that in the PhD study theory may act as validation for both poor practical work and poor research.

For the anon4 it seems the priority in art education would be for art practice to develop organically, without being constricted by measurable criteria. Yet such an approach also has its dangers, as it seems dependant upon mythologized terms such as 'creativity', 'artist' and 'art'; special qualities requiring freedom from imposing constraints. For me, the concern, if we were to abandon measurable criteria, would be how we establish value in both the work produced in art education and within the wider artworld. Vickery warned that art detached from any value system could easily be seen as self indulgent and meaningless. In the contemporary artworld, it seems to be the market that ascribes value. As I'm sure you will agree, dependence upon fashions and market trends is certainly no way to assess the work produced in art education.

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to cite this journal article:

ISSN 1466-4917