



An inaudible dialogue

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What are the extents of an artwork, where does it begin and where does it end? To what extent are practice and research entwined as relational objects of thinking?

This text is based on my observations and reflections on the process of research (which I regard as a process of finding things out) and its relation to making things. It is written from a subjective perspective but this has been informed by a number of different viewpoints, ideas, artworks, theories, and not least, my own practical experience. An ongoing preoccupation has been the question of where exactly the artwork is, or perhaps more accurately, where the significance of the work lies. Is it in the object, in its relation to its context or to its viewer (as in an institutional theory of art), in this viewer's involvement with the work, or perhaps somewhere else? And in relation to the present context, can the process and methods that are characterised as “research” be identified with art making?

Research practice is, by its nature and definition, directed externally. The artwork similarly structures its relationship with the world, whether this is acknowledged or anticipated by the artist or not. It may implicate the viewer or indicate how it is to be regarded. So too, viewers carry their own worlds around with them, sets of acquaintances that refract the work, and make of it something else. An artwork may take different forms (a text, image, object, or event for example) but it seems to me that art is as much an activity as a thing, in terms of both making things and engaging with the things, places or people around it. As artists or viewers we participate in this activity and what we refer to as an artwork may only be an aspect of this activity, an artefact or phenomenon whose significance is bound up with the forms and processes that structure it but which also has a necessarily elliptical and dialogic nature. Choices are adopted in the artwork that differentiate it from its surroundings or from other works but, to borrow Howard Becker's phrase, it possesses a fundamental indeterminacy or incompleteness (Becker, 2001).

In order for something to be seen as an artwork, we must have some prior expectation of it and its surroundings. It becomes problematic to talk of the “work itself” as the thing (the image, object, event etc.) may be experienced under different circumstances or conditions, its different “viewers” bringing different prejudices, motivations or desires to bear on it. Later in his life, Duchamp talked of an art-coefficient, which he described as the initial

difference between an artist's intention and its realisation in the work. The initial intention might be distorted, refracted, magnified or amplified through a particular material process, for example, and this refraction might affect subsequent intentions, gestures or judgments. The point at which one decides that no further iterations are necessary might be regarded as the point at which "the work itself" coheres but this is only the beginning. The set of differences or, one might say, the internal and external dialogues that lead to the work, are subsequently magnified in the viewer's reconstruction of the work: the viewer creates another work based on the initial work, which remains as a source for further dialogues and experiences, further differences (Duchamp, 1957).

On a related but perhaps more polemical tack, Joseph Kosuth proposes a mode of artistic operation that somehow addresses the work's context, asserting that "the meaning of art is how we describe it" (Kosuth, 1994). For Kosuth writing in the early 1990s, the difficulty of distinguishing "the meaning of cultural forms outside of a network of power relations" could imply that art risks losing sight of its critical role and thus descending into pastiche, fashionable decoration or bombast. In response to this he proposes that art be reflexive, that it consider "the uses of its elements within the work and the function of that work within its larger cultural societal framework" and he sees in Wittgenstein's philosophy of the limits of language a useful model for structuring such an artistic method. What distinguishes art from informative language is that it not only describes or shows reality, but it can potentially describe how it describes. By inhabiting the gap between visual and linguistic forms, the work can somehow articulate that which falls outside the scope of language. This "unsayable" is the attribute which for Kosuth constitutes value. It is the element which, not being tied to the fact of the artwork, its material expression, relates directly to the artwork's reception or reconstruction by a viewer. The work punctuates the flow of discourse across its surface, and its meaning becomes apparent through this process. Artistic activity (perhaps over and above production) engenders viewer activity, the artist's role being, perhaps, to structure and question the nature, type and purpose of this activity. The work's meaning is revealed through the conjunction of viewer, work and world, in a process which is ultimately fluid, dynamic and mobile.

In the light of this, I recall a symposium at the Guildhall in London in June 2005, entitled "What work does the artwork do 2?", at which Art & Language presented a text in the context of a multi-element artwork, concurrently on show in the Guildhall gallery (Art & Language, 2005). They described their work - and the generation of this particular artwork - in response to the symposium title and to their reflections on Niklas Luhmann's writings on art as a social system, articulating an idea of practice (and referring to their actual practice) that is not solely concerned with agency - the work's effectiveness - but rather with what might be called the artwork's understanding of itself. What they described as a work's externality, its capacity to raise questions about itself and the institutions that house it, is necessarily determined by its internal structure and organisation. The work's significance does not reside solely in its context (as in an institutional theory of art) but in the fact that the artwork "knows about its context from within". It is secure in its own indeterminacy. It effectively arbitrates how it is encountered but the implication is also that the work that the artwork does or doesn't do is contingent on a broader concept of the artwork itself. During the discussion, Mel Ramsden of Art & Language expressed his concern about, as he saw it, the apparent, current disavowal of the idea of the artwork as a "singular entity", somehow distinguished from its surroundings. Hesitatingly, he invoked the idea of autonomy, proposing the artwork as a specific, internally organised thing that is not solely constituted by its relation to the institutions, conditions, audiences etc. external to it. A thing that is differentiated from and orientated within these surroundings such that it is able to tell us about them in some way.

And something that I've only recently come to realise fully is that artworks are interesting because they're singular, and at the same time they also remind you of all other artworks... The artwork is a figure on a ground - not a stable and established figure ground, but a shifting one - and you have to make up the relationship and construct it out of the contradictions that arise as you go on. And it seems to me that the more internally coherent, vivid and powerful art is - I hate to use this word because I'm sure some people in this room will jump on me for it - the more autonomous it is, the more it tells us about the background. (Art & Language, 2005)

The artwork is realised through communicative events, events engendered by it, surrounding it, and inflected by it. But drawing on Art & Language's and specifically their use of Luhmann's understanding of art as an autopoietic system (a term originally coined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, autopoiesis literally means autoproduction), that is, a self-referential, recursive system that is "operationally closed" and yet shares a "structural coupling" with its environment, the work itself poses questions and puzzles and by so doing differentiates a realised space from an unmarked, potential space. Those engaging with the work inhabit this space of possibility, and thereby determine it. The idea is of a reflexive artwork, a reflective practice that poses questions, a system that incorporates the relation between itself as a system and its environment into its processes, as Art & Language quote Luhmann, "in the form of a relationship between self-reference and hetero-reference."

That's the point of our practice of describing and re-describing – i.e. of attempting to generate hetero-reference or, under another description, dialogic aura. That's the way it works. This is a way that art can be integrated into the everyday: by accepting, describing and re-describing its own differentiation as form. (Art & Language, 2001)

To collapse this train of thought, such a reflective practice provides a useful example, at one end of the spectrum, at least, for those engaged in research practice. There is no distinction between the activity of making and the activities of thinking, describing, reflecting, writing and public dialogue. The artwork has no immutable status. It is an invitation to construct possible meanings, perspectives, ways of viewing the world, or "novel apprehensions", as Stephen Scrivener has suggested (Scrivener, 2002). The process of research is productive in that the artwork and whatever is said or written about it are pulling in the same direction. Their purposes are aligned. Thought and action operate in unison and in dialogue.

Artists are embedded in a matrix of institutions, allegiances and acquaintances and much of an artist's work is a form of engagement with, interpretation or repetition of the work of others or indeed of his or her own work, both acknowledged, tacit etc. The working process is a form of dialogue with these acquaintances and such conversations implicitly affect the character and direction of the work. In this sense, the notions of dialogue variously articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, Vilém Flusser and physicist David Bohm are useful not only when thinking about these acquaintances or the relationship between spectator and work, but also in terms of framing the relationship between differing sources or activities. In a broad definition, dialogue may be both externalised and internalised. It suggests an acknowledgement of the importance of the other person, of the other point of view. As a method, it reflects the very essence of difference in a broader social context, a characteristic polyphony described by Bakhtin as 'heteroglossia', the coexistence of a multitude of different voices, speech types and utterances that contribute to the fabric of a society (Bakhtin, 1934). In Bohm's notion of dialogue, which draws on Michael Polanyi's

thinking, shared meaning emerges from what he refers to as the “tacit ground” (Bohm, 1996: 16), a substrate both of the unspoken and the understood, an underlying sense which cannot be described but which is somehow known. Thinking is a tacit process and what we say explicitly is only a small part of what we think. The work - the thing that becomes externally manifest in order to realise or to communicate – emerges from this shared ground. It is embedded in a process and context, the constellation of ideas, thoughts, feelings and practices that inform it. This thing, depending on how it is used (framed, posited etc.), can function in different ways. In order to communicate its sense, in a broad sense of the word, it necessarily implies and requires engagement on the part of someone. Although the idea of a singular object or image that embodies an idea seems somewhat problematic, this thing may emerge in response to a train of thought and reflect the operations of that thinking. The idea is not present in the image, for example, but the image may create the conditions that enable an idea to occur to someone looking at it.

I would define art as an activity that extends human consciousness through constructs that transpose natural phenomena from that qualitatively undifferentiated condition that we call 'life' into objective and internally focused concepts... [Appearance is brought to the foreground and then suspended so that the visual functions as a document that exists to serve as a structural part of a conceptual system.] ... Whatever is visual in the work exists arbitrarily and its real existence remains as itself – 'in life' along with everything else – and separate from art or the purposes of art. (Huebler, 1992: 173)

I have a feeling he would be horrified to hear this but Douglas Huebler's definition seems curiously suited to the artwork's place or status in terms of research, as an aspect of an activity and a system, but not necessarily confined to it. This attitude lends his work a particular lightness, but in the present context, it implies that the non-informative object, whatever form that might take, does not have to be responsible for embodying or communicating anything beyond its own purposes, whatever they might be. It can just be what it is, something that is seen, read or experienced as any other thing in the world, and perhaps not only a world determined by the institutions of art. (Indeed, this is where the idea of research in the context of art could be interesting and productive, as a way of questioning these institutions.)

Research with a lowercase “r”, for me, delineates the totality of a practice. An artwork or an artefact may indicate an aspect (if not the essence) of the research which may then be accessed and articulated in greater depth elsewhere but perhaps a combination of work(s) in various forms can help construct a understanding of the research's trajectory. I am interested in what might be called a distributed work comprising a network of forms or elements, perhaps because this mirrors or replicates the gap described above within the very fabric of the work. Working across a number of “object-instances”, the gaps between things can act as a speculative, conjectural space for understanding, imagining, reverie, and so on. This involves accepting and incorporating the possibility for the unexpected, the unanticipated, and the unlegislated to arise. Research does not have to preclude the unknown and indeed, such intrusions may offer opportunities to distinguish the research as a working practice as opposed to a theoretical proposition (a proposal, for instance). Offering perhaps an expanded understanding of what an art practice might be, the entirety of the project is the product of the research, not just those things that have the conventional appearance of artworks.

A point of contention seems to be that art does not on the whole really concern itself with knowledge in the philosophical sense of a true, justified belief, or certain understanding. But perhaps it is not so much that art does or doesn't concern itself with knowledge, more

that as spectators or protagonists we don't really look to art for knowledge, in this sense of the word. Art today encompasses so many varying approaches that it seems unreasonable to claim it does not concern itself with conveying or containing knowledge in some way, or at least in some instances. Knowledge can be recovered from something, a text or a mathematical equation, for example. But these linear systems were developed in order to clarify and express experience, to make sense of the world. They are constructions that enable humans to store and communicate information and retrieve knowledge with (varying) degrees of certainty and agreement.

Vilém Flusser's philosophy is characterised by his repeated and polemical assertion that the history of western civilisation is aligned with the development – over thousands of years - of linear thinking, as manifested at first in writing and subsequently in mathematical notation. <sup>1</sup> He suggested that the development of written language was a progressive attempt to demystify the image, to break it up into parts and to lay it out in sequence, thereby leading to the development of a historical consciousness characterised by linear thinking, that superseded a symbolic, magical consciousness rooted in the image. For Flusser, in the pursuit of clarity over indeterminacy, writing developed as a means of determining the world unequivocally. Information can be encoded and decoded to become knowledge, in the sense referred to above, certain understanding. Images perhaps function differently. Unlike texts (as they are predominantly experienced), an image is not confined to a linear dimension. It may operate in a lateral fashion, offering a space to inhabit as much as a path to follow. It presents a wholeness, a synchronic totality that is animated by the observer. In this sense, for Flusser, images are magical. In contrast to the image's open surface, the text necessitates the eye's direction along a path in order to receive a specific, coded message. 'Linear codes demand a synchronization of their diachronicity. They demand progressive reception' (Flusser, 2002).

Depending on one's motivations as a practitioner - thinking, writing, looking, picturing, making and so on - share a common subject (the person doing the thinking, writing, looking etc.) but they remain, however, distinct activities, imposing particular demands and working conditions. Artists have on the whole tended to use means other than texts to reflect their experience and thinking. But just because one might reflect on an image or object or, indeed, a piece of writing, doesn't mean that that thing or activity, or its motivating principle, is necessarily explained or that the curiously shadowy processes, that escape consciousness or articulated thought – what Poe refers to as intuition – will somehow be unmasked or compromised. <sup>2</sup> Why shouldn't externalised reflection be productive?

As Jean-Marie Schaeffer claims, artworks are as much 'operating structures' as structured operations (Schaeffer, 1998: 48). They presuppose a context and an audience, whether this is consciously or tacitly acknowledged. They are not isolated, even though they may be made in isolation (and perhaps never experienced, remaining potential rather than actual, rather like the unknown masterpiece in Balzac's tale). Within this matrix, in the words of *Art & Language*, the artwork potentially differentiates a marked, singular, internally structured space from an unmarked space, that of everyday life. Perhaps within this unmarked world, the significance is not in the form of the artwork but in the relation between it as a rigorous, singular thing or event, the situation or questions it poses, and the experience it engenders. The work's rigour and vividness are aspects of how it operates in relation to the people, ideas, precedents, influences that contribute to its shape. One's locality, one's predispositions and one's environment (precisely articulated or vaguely sensed) necessarily nourish, sustain and distinguish the work. This shared territory enables the work to be seen and identified. If the context enables the thing to be

seen as a specific rather than a generic object, the fundamental indeterminacy of the artwork still remains and this indeterminacy enables it to operate in diverse ways. Rather than offering certainty, it offers a way of seeing and imagining the world. Perhaps this is why we generally do not look to art for knowledge. It may engender a state of mind, offer a world to inhabit, or suggest a realm of the possible.

In principle, my idea is of a research practice that engages with and absorbs things and interests outside itself but as well as an engagement with such things, it articulates or reflects on itself and its processes in relation to this environment. Perhaps my sense is as much of a research-led practice as it is a practice-based research. Texts enable different ways of seeing or framing practice and the approach to practice. They thereby affect the nature of practice. The directions of, the motivations behind the practice may likewise affect the nature of the research (those activities that aren't characterised as practice). A dialogue takes place between them. This may never be audible but might remain internalised. Crucially, the work's internality is directed outwards to the external world.

## Endnotes

1 Although, this argument crops up throughout Flusser's writings, see 'A New Imagination', featured in the online Flusser seminar hosted by Medcad/The Flusser Archive, <http://217.76.144.67/unesco/intro/index.html> [accessed March 2005]; a different version of this text is included in Vilém Flusser, Writings Ströhl, A. (Ed.), Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press 2002.

2 See Edgar Allan Poe on intuition: '... it is but the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression.' Poe, E.A., Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe London: Hesperus 2002 (1848): 21.

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Scrivener, S.A.R. 2002 'The art object does not embody a form of knowledge', Working papers in art & design, volume 2, 2002 [accessed May 2006]. "Drawing on the natural and artificial worlds and imagination, the artists generates apprehensions (in the sense of objects that must be grasped by the senses and the intellect) which when grasped offer ways of seeing and being."

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