



Expressive artifacts and artifacts of expression  
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## Introduction

In general, artefact is a term that is used to refer to items created or resulting from human action and activity as well as a central concept in the study of practice. Practice is often seen as the production of artefacts, and artefacts themselves are seen in a simple light, as mere objects. Yet, artefacts embody meaning in various ways. The symbolic role that archaeological artefacts have had, and can still have, through ideology on the ethos of a given nation or ethnic group is but one example of the power of objects in human culture. At the individual level, the emotional relation of attachment is another instance of the scope and reach of artefacts in human existence. Hence, in studying practice, it may be useful to further investigate the concept of artefact.

Etienne Wenger has defined the concept of practice as a form of “doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do.”<sup>1</sup> Such a concept of practice aims to encompass both the explicit and the tacit: What is said and what is not, as well as what is represented and what is assumed, these are all considered as relevant to the study of practice. From this point of view, the language that is used to construct precise definitions of practice is an important element of research of practice. So are the tools, documents, images, symbols, roles, specified criteria, and codified procedures that make practice into a meaningful social activity.

Throughout this essay, I review the notion of the artefact and illustrate some aspects that, in my opinion, come to be embodied in it. My aim is to present a view of artefact as a network of concepts whose nodes are drawn from diverse disciplines. My proposal is that artefact is a conceptual tool that can be used when seeking to analyse how diverse aspects of human agency that are difficult to apprehend such as space, time, discourse, and history are gathered in the objects resulting from human activity.

The analysis I present is primarily centred on the production of artefacts as part of the art practice. In this context, my aim is to open up the space for discussion regarding the expressive and discursive features of artefacts. With this in mind I introduce the concepts

of expressive artefacts and artefacts of expression. The notion of post history previously developed by Michael Shanks is extended from the realm of archaeology into that one of art.

### Some variations on the concept of artefact

In *The Sciences of the Artificial*, Herbert Simon proposed that observing the complex, multi-dimensional relationships generated by artificial manufactured objects, could yield important understanding to a science of design. Simon who chose not to distinguish between the physical objects and the immaterial items such as symbol systems created by humans, defined a boundary between the inner environment as that which comprised the substance and organization of the artefact, and the outer environment as that which consisted of the surroundings in which the artefact operates. Simon proposed that the interface was the meeting point between these two realms. 2

A recent example of the study of artefact in archaeology is that one of Brian Shiffer who has proposed a theory of human communication based on the artefact. In Shiffer's view, humans use artefacts to augment the performance of the body. In the process of doing so, the body itself is transformed into an artefact. An instance of this type of behaviour is illustrated by Shiffer through the example of how the use of makeup by the human interactor enacts a transformation of the body into an artefact for the purpose of sending information to a receiver, during the process of communication. 3

Another recent proposal in this field is from Michael Shanks who has argued that artefacts are active agents possessing their own life-cycle:

The life-cycle of an artefact is accompanied by physical changes and processes. An artefact wears in its use and consumption. Marks upon it attest to events it has witnessed, things that have happened to it. It can deteriorate. The artefact ages. 4

From the point of view of design, Adrian Forty has remarked that artefacts do not have a life cycle of their own, but that their existence is determined by the people and industries that create them, as well as by the relationship of these people and industries to society. 5

Another interesting elaboration is that one developed by the philosopher Marx Wartofsky. He proposed a three-level hierarchy of primary, secondary, and tertiary artefacts. Primary artefacts are artificial entities created by humans, such as axes and clubs, and which allow them to alter directly the nature of their environment. Secondary artefacts consist of representations of primary artefacts and of the modes of action using them. Examples of second-level artefacts are pictures, representations and the different modes of action that enable humans to transmit skill and information and to reflect upon their activities. Tertiary, artefacts consist of a class of artefacts that can come to constitute a relatively autonomous "world" in which the rules, conventions, and outcomes no longer appear directly practical in nature. Such imaginative artefacts can influence the way we see the actual world. They can also act as agents of change for current practice. Examples of third-level artefacts are works of art, myth, worldview and theoretical models. 6

The psychologist and communication scholar Michael Cole has further extended Wartofsky's view and suggested that material and immaterial aspects of culture as well as their history are embedded in artefacts. This is because through the life of the individual, and in earlier generations, the artefact brings together successful adaptations of earlier times.

Most recently, the work of the Systems of Representation 7 group at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, has been working on a notion of artefact that can accommodate the multidisciplinary perspectives common to many design research problems. We have defined the artefact as any item, conceptual or material, created by a human being and assume that it can be described by a large, and virtually infinite number of descriptive features. These properties, which can be depicted as vectors, also define the position of the artefact in a multidimensional space. This conceptual framework has informed much of our development. 8

The work, that is carried on in the context of an art and design university is firmly anchored in ongoing national and international initiatives pertaining digitalisation of cultural heritage artefacts. One of our key questions is whether we can design architectures of information and information management tools that do not force fixed categories and labels, but serve the information in a rich but neutral form, leaving the final structuring up to the user? 9

## Art objects and artefacts

Describing how the work of art is constituted can be, to say the least, a daunting task. The aesthetic experience and reaction to art for example, is not fully accessible for scrutiny. Like in other disciplines, the methods used, and the artefacts studied vary according to cultural as well as historical conditions. 10 Additionally, within specialized communities such as those operating exclusively around the production of art, there is a myriad of qualifiers that place a work's position with respect to what seem to be continuously shifting boundaries marking inclusion or exclusion. Then there are new categories, such as performance art, and digital art, in which the object of art is not only intangible and ephemeral but can also be distributed in such a manner that no individual can ever experience the whole work.

In seeking to define what differentiates art objects from other artefacts, Arthur Danto has proposed that art is “a logically open set of things that share no common feature in order to be a member of the set.” 11 In this sense, artworks can be seen as a class of objects sharing so-called family resemblances. That is, members of a set so constituted may resemble one another in various ways, and there need not be a single collection of properties shared by all members. 12 Furthermore, there seems to be no fixed boundaries in the category of artworks, or artefacts that are objects of art. This class can, and is extended, so as to include new artefacts. Indeed a key component in art seems to be the stress on the creation of the new.

In spite the initial semblance of chaos the presence of art throughout Western history remains an immutable factor. Alongside this presence, and equally steadfast runs a richly woven tapestry of interpretation the threads of which should interest the field of research into practice. What allows certain artefacts to receive different interpretations at different points in time? Why is it that certain works are popular during certain periods and not others? And how much of the stature of the artefact is dependent on the act of making art —of creating a painting, a light sculpture, a multimedia CD-ROM, an interactive installation —as opposed to the network of meaning that weaves itself around the object? 13

## Artefacts, art objects and expression

Art objects express, according to Danto, because one of the main goals of art, “may be precisely not to represent the world, but to represent it in a particular way, or to cause it to be viewed with a certain attitude and with a special vision.”<sup>14</sup> The vision that is presented through art is the way that the artist sees the world. This may be related to why contemporary art objects are so closely linked to the idea of the presence of the artist.

The artefacts that the artist builds make use of a host of communication and rhetorical devices, to influence the disposition of the audience toward the subject being spoken about. The intention is to cause that subject to be seen in a certain light. Thus, the art object expresses what the artist wishes to communicate.

Danto has suggested that the structure of art works is, or is very close to, the structure of metaphors. The potential for expression of metaphors is tied to the fact that they are not mere representations. Their structure is related to features, rather than to the content of representation. For example, metaphors might make use of intentional contexts in which, according to Danto, descriptive terms refer “to the form in which the things ordinarily referred to by those words are represented.”<sup>15</sup> The power of expression of metaphors is tied to the form of presentation, which is in turn tied to meanings and associations in the social and historic conditions of the times.<sup>16</sup> This thereby seems to imply that the mode of presentation presupposes our accessibility to the concepts out of which the metaphors themselves are created.<sup>17</sup> That is, one way through which we gain knowledge of art is by studying and understanding the nature and structure of its metaphors.<sup>18</sup>

This view of art is also in agreement with Marx Wartofsky's concept of the artefact. That is, art objects are tertiary artefacts resulting from imaginative praxis in which mimetic re-enactment does not operate as a direct imitation.<sup>19</sup> Representation, according to Wartofsky, becomes “a receptacle for the expression and re-enactment of a wider range of cognitive and affective needs, intentions, and values.”<sup>20</sup> As an imaginative praxis, art produces artefacts that operate as autonomous worlds.<sup>21</sup>

The full significance of art works as autonomous worlds will remain a topic treated in a separate essay. Suffice to say that the term implies the degree of self-regulation and finitude of a system with the possibility of modelling by an observer. With respect to expressive artefacts and artefacts of expression, it is important to emphasize the innovative component of the practice: The artist does not seek to replicate the appearance of the world. This is true even with works dealing with appropriation of already existing materials. Focusing on the expressive components of such artefacts can provide insights that help clarify issues such as those of style as outcome of individual expression, or style as emerging from collective reaction and with no concerted intentional factor.

## Expressive artefacts

The concept of expressive artefact has been used in archaeology to refer to “artefacts that in many cases were intended to communicate, or to generate a response in the viewer.”<sup>22</sup> I want to maintain this use of the term, and taking it one step further also emphasize the intense, motivated action involved in the creation of art objects. Art objects do not merely happen. They result from the activities of actors operating with instruments within specific communities. Their features reflect the tasks that lead towards their realization. Artefacts created through engagement in technical pursuits, such as craftwork, and that produce

pleasure in the maker are one example of this type of device. 23 Art objects whose aim is to encapsulate and express an emotional state or idea are another kind of expressive artefact. 24

Objects of art that are expressive artefacts partly result from the intrinsic motivation that arises from within the individual who is fashioning the object. Leontjev proposed that the structuring of the mediated relationships between an object and its maker is dependent on at least two factors. One of these factors is a type of active reflection that manifests itself in the engagement between the mind and the body. In this state, the goal, objective, or vision of the completed artefact guides the flesh in the activity of making. 25 The other factor is a state whereby processes external in form and carried on with external materials are transformed into equivalent internal processes occurring in the mind, and with a conscious body in action. 26 Though primarily resulting from intrinsic motivation, expressive artefacts are also influenced by parameters, such as history and culture. Even when s/he works alone, as an activity the practice of art is a collective and social enterprise involving humanity.

Franz Boas presented an example of this type of expressive artefact when he described the making of a bead legging. This is an ornamental item made of leather and beads that is worn on the legs while dancing. According to Boas, in this item, the intricate pattern and symmetry in the arrangement of the beads, is not evident when the item is in use. Boas argued that though the aesthetic experience of these patterns is present for the maker while she is making it, this is not the case when the artefact is worn. 27 He proposed that although the making of the bead legging is an individual action involving one person, its maker, the distribution of the artefact into the community through its use and display in an activity such as dancing is not. According to Boas, through the activity of making the legging the craftswoman draws the community into it. Fuelled by intrinsic motivation, the hands of the craftswoman are also the hands of the community.

This is consistent with a view of art as an activity whose objects are produced in the context of a community that is a historically developing and changing phenomenon. It is also in accordance with the observation made by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew who pointed out that when we isolate artefacts taken from other cultures and admire them as art, it is important for us to realize that “while the early craftsmen made these works, it is we who have made them 'art'.” 28 How we regard these objects of art, therefore, provides insights regarding our selves and our communities.

Another example of the art object as an expressive artefact includes art objects that allow access to information about the unconscious. As an expressive artefact, the work of art is an externalisation of the artist's consciousness. It is “as if we could see his way of seeing and not merely what he saw.” 29 At the same time, as David Aldridge has remarked, “art has the ability to express the fact that we are dealing with the interface between unconscious and conscious material.” 30 That is, when we see an artist's representation of a sunset, such as in J.W.M. Turner's depictions of sunsets in Venice, we do not confuse these with the actual world. We understand that through these representations the artist sought to communicate something to us about his feelings and interpretation of these phenomena. Whether we accept and embrace certain interpretations, as opposed to others is a feature of a post-history that is created at the moment in which an artefact is labelled as art. This post-history is a fertile space of discourse.

Artefacts of expression

As artefacts of expression, art consists of materials or media that support, convey, allow or carry through an act of expression. Expression hereby involves not only emotion, but also an action and its result. John Dewey outlined the conditions, by which expression and emotion are crystallized in the work of art. Dewey noted that emotion and expression are defined by parameters such as causality, information and the passage of time. Causality manifests itself as activity, in the carrying forward into development and completion in the act of expression. 31 This is not an ad hoc activity, but rather it is informed by reflection that takes into account, for example, the value of past experiences. The activity of expression is a transformation by the gestures and representations brought into existence for the purpose of communicating something. 32 Time is the development of these events. The work of art, Dewey asserted, is “a construction in time,” the result of “a prolonged interaction” in which emotion acts as “an informing and orderly principle.” 33

As artefacts of expression art objects reveal how mechanisms of extrinsic motivation operate within the activity. The structuring of mediated relationships between object and maker is, in this case, dependent on how the process of reflection manifests itself externally. In order for a community to exist, for example, it is necessary to have an established set of parameters, such as concepts and values, which are re-enacted and implicitly accepted by the group members throughout their interaction with one another. Symbolic communication is only possible among members of a group who possess such a set of tacitly agreed upon concepts and values.

Art objects operating primarily through language are examples of artefacts of expression. The artefacts produced by Joseph Kosuth for his art work, *Synopsis on Categories*, that consists of using categories from the thesaurus to represent the multiple aspects of the idea of something, illustrates this notion:

I changed the form of presentation from the mounted photostat, to the purchasing of spaces in newspapers and periodicals (with one work sometimes taking up as many as five or six spaces in that many publications—depending on how many divisions exist in the category.)... The work is not connected with a precious object—it is accessible to as many people as are interested, it is non-decorative—having to do nothing with architecture; it can be brought into the home or museum but was not made with either in mind... My role as an artist ends with the work's publication.” 34

In this example, the function or nature of art, if there is one, can exist only in an art context that is established a priori. The viewer must be aware of Joseph Kosuth, the artist. From among all the other images and advertisements printed in the newspaper, he must recognize his work. “But is it art?” one might ask. Kosuth emphasizes that the aesthetic dimension and stylistic aspects are not of essence, since works of art are defined as analytic propositions that, when viewed within their context—as art, provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. According to Kosuth, the value of contemporary art does not reside within aesthetic issues pertaining style and aesthetics but rather in questioning the nature of art. “Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions to art.” 35

Another example of this art practice that I propose makes use of artefacts of expression is that one of *Group Material*, a pioneering group of artists who during the late 1980's challenged the Modernist characterization of art for art's sake and helped to further develop the notion of socially involved art. For example, they replicated the canonical notion of gallery and, by inviting community members from the neighbourhood to submit their art works, challenged the rules of inclusion common in the art world. 36

As an artefact of expression, art objects factor in the point of view of an observer, as well as that of the artist as observer of himself as he is engaged in the activity of art. As material manifestations of human action, artefacts of expression and expressive artefacts operate as external “webs of significance.” 37 They are not exclusive of one another, but rather point to the dual nature of artefacts and human culture as simultaneously internal and external, individual and collective, public and private, sacred and secular.

### Artefacts and post history

Trying to understand how something like the expression of feeling is organized, re-directs us to what is referred to as inner, tacit knowledge, intuition, subjectivity and other forms of cognition that are difficult to analyse and describe. 38 This is because the interaction of a viewer with the object of art is not a Stimulus-Response reaction but rather, a higher order process concerned with the structured and informed expression of feeling. Additionally, the creation of art involves not only the harnessing of expressive behaviour but also, its reception by a responsive audience. 39 Once accepted into the established framework that defines what is art, artefacts that are art objects undergo a privileged process of transformation whereby they become coveted items of desire in privileged places of honour at public institutions such as museums. 40

Time passes but the artefact remains in what has been labelled as a paradoxical state; a “duality of autonomy and dependency.” 41 Because it is self-contained, the object is autonomous. This autonomy, however, does not imply a complete closure. For the existence of the art object is also evidence of a heterogeneous origin contingent partly on the response of the audience and partly on the discourse it generates from the diverse art institutions. If divested from the networks of knowledge in which it is produced, the object reveals a vulnerability and dependency on content. This is a break between the existence of the artefact in time and the original objective of its maker(s) that can only be bridged through research and interpretation.

In addition to aspects pertaining doing and creating, artefacts such as art objects also have a post-history that is produced by art historians, critics and other scholars perhaps at different points throughout the artefact's life. In the case of art objects, for example, once assigned the label of art, the artefact is deemed as timeless, its context to be defined primarily by institutions such as the gallery or the museum. This post-history is also an important part of the practice of art and, in my opinion, of importance to the research into practice.

As the work of the historian, the archaeologist and the curator proceeds, it becomes entangled with the artefact and the art practice itself. The proposed interpretations might result in one-dimensional ideological flatlands, or they might open multi-dimensional dialogical arenas that enable multiplicity of discourse. An interesting example of this process has been the case of the art produced by many of the pre-Columbian cultures of America that is now on exhibition at major European venues.

In proposing a view of art objects as expressive artefacts and artefacts of expression I want to underscore the capacity of objects to generate networks of meaning that correspond to the original intentions of their makers but that also themselves are a response and bear the imprint of the context and community in which they exist at different points in time. These networks extend well beyond and include others beside the actual agent that fashions the artefact.

At the same time, it is important to question when and how should an art object be considered to an artefact of expression or an expressive artefact? Is it at the moment of appreciation, or simply when drawing methodological boundaries for the sake of research and study?

Some additional thoughts

Among the objectives of this essay has been a proposal of considering the 'objects' produced in the art practice as expressive artefacts and artefacts of expression. Future work includes further research and reasoning into the viability of these categories. An important question to consider is whether they should remain as separate or whether they are variations of one facet of artefacts.

Even conceptual art works can be regarded as a tangible manufactured object produced by a community that includes not only the artist but also a host of other participants who directly and indirectly have a bearing on the final meaning of the object and its so-called history. Being able to discern better the roles that these different participants play can perhaps allow us to better document the development of art itself. This can help to demystify both the role of the artist, the art critic, and even the audience. A more clear elucidation of then interaction of these participants can assist in the advancement of a research into practice that includes art-related disciplines. We can examine how key elements of the community in which the art object is created interact. We learn more about why and how the critic and art historian, for example, contribute to the acceptance and creation of art. We can investigate other aspects pertaining the conditions under which the object was created, the materials and technologies used in its production.

Conclusion

As a conceptual tool, the notion of artefact can indeed be used to gather the multidimensional aspects and elements of practice as they converge of the objects resulting from human activity. It can also provide a lens, or perspective, that allows us to better describe the boundary territory where discourse and community subject and object interact. In doing so, it help us to lay a more tangible foundation for a design discipline that seeks to study, analyse, and describe how multiple practices are embedded in the objects resulting from human activity.

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