Magritte and the pea: anomalous artefacts and the contexts they create

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Introduction

Artistically crafted novels, poems, films paintings, and photography have the capacity to awaken us from our stock responses…(Eisner, 1995: 2)

Is the researcher responsible for establishing a context for the "correct" interpretation of the artefact?

In this paper we argue that artefacts lend themselves to multiple interpretations and that the role of the researcher can be to foster creative engagements rather than establish a context for “correct” interpretation.

We believe that a more open and exploratory approach to art and design research more closely reflects the ambiguities and eccentricities of everyday people and how they think and feel. This offers an approach to research practice that provides room for the participants to actively contribute.

By playing with anomalous objects and odd experiences it is possible to dramatically expand creative and interpretive engagement between people, providing platforms where diverse interpretations can be generated. We overview the notions of context-as-place, context-as-group and context-as-person, discussing how such notions represent a continuum where artefacts play multiple roles.

The two experiences we discuss in this paper – the Pea Project and A Surrealist Encounter – share some common threads: that people are highly creative beings and that almost anything, removed from its original context, can stimulate creativity and collaboration. For example, in the Pea Project (Burrows and Loi, 2002) we used an everyday garden-variety green pea in a range of different settings to stimulate reflective awareness, curiosity, creativity and to prompt collaborative engagements. In A Surrealist

Encounter (Burrows and Loi, 2004) we decontextualised a series of objects from a Magritte painting (1926) to elicit creative and collaborative encounters between strangers.

These two experiences are drawn from notions of phenomenology (Dastur, 2000, Bachelard, 1958), art-based inquiry (Eisner, 1991, McNiff, 1998), symbolic constructivism (Barry, 1996), heuristics and their open-ended outcomes (Moustakas, 1990), reflective and collaborative practice (Collier, 1999, Kolb and Moeller, 1984, Schön, 1983, Loi, 2005b), anomalous objects and odd experiences (Burrows and Loi, 2004), and the idea of everyday people as co-creators of meaning and art (Shotter, 1993). In both of these experiences elements were combined that were unexpected and unanticipated in the various contexts in which they were deployed. For example, peas on a plate are unremarkable whereas one pea offered by a stranger in the street is bizarre.

What am I supposed to do with it? What does it mean? One may well ask.

As France Morin (2000: 7) suggests “artists have the capacity to make a lasting positive impact on peoples lives by helping them to see for themselves the dignity, beauty, and sacredness of the activities of their everyday life: the creative spirit, a powerful agent of transformation, that lies within everyone” – the two projects discussed in this paper aimed at evoking a creative spirit in each and every person with whom we worked.

In this paper we use the above-mentioned examples to explore the notion of context in art and design research and to propose that there are multiple ideas of context that might inform, impact and affect the ways in which things are interpreted and how meaning can be created.

Context-as-space, context-as-group, and context-as-person are the three key dimensions of context we discuss. These dimensions and the relationships between them represent a continuum between private and public domains in which artefacts can play multiple roles and be interpreted in multiple ways. In our work we use this understanding of context to trigger collaborative, creative and reflective engagements.

This paper is divided into five sections covering: an introduction to the argument, an overview of theoretical and methodological influences, a discussion of the two projects, our multiple views on the notion of context and concluding remarks.

We believe that context significantly contributes to the ways in which people understand and respond to artefacts. In our experience such responses can be multiple and creatively charged if the conditions are sufficiently ambiguous and the artefacts anomalous in their contexts. This provides for a richer ground for research and for deeper understanding of people and their multiplicity.

Does research demand new types of context, and what would they need to be like?

The use of anomalous artefacts and odd experiences creates new types of contexts that elicit an understanding of people not possible via traditional research settings.

Theoretical and methodological influences

The two experiences at the centre of this paper are drawn from notions of phenomenology, art-based inquiry, symbolic constructivism, heuristics and their open-ended outcomes, reflective and collaborative practice, anomalous objects and odd experiences, and the

idea of everyday people as co-creators of meaning and art. In the following section we outline these influences and their relationships to the projects.

In our work phenomenology plays a key role. However, for us phenomenology is a rich array of sensibilities rather than a set of academic procedures detailed in a research handbook. We are inspired by the ideas of Gaston Bachelard (1958), Georges Perec (1997, , 2003), Norman Bryson (1990), Robert Irwin (in Weschler, 1982), Candy Jernigan (Dolphin et al., 1999) and the teachers and students of Reggio Emilia (Ceppi and Zini, 1998, Reggio Children, 1996).

Gaston Bachelard (1958: xi), the only formally-acknowledged phenomenologist in this group, says in the opening lines of his Poetics of Space that “one must be receptive, receptive to the image at the moment it appears”. The phenomenology described by Bachelard is the elementary phenomenology of the painter and the poet to whom things speak, a phenomenology of the soul that is attentive and receptive to the overtures of a poetic language. This is a receptivity that allows the artist or poet to see things as if for the first time and to reawaken that sense in others.

Bachelard's (1958: 107) phenomenology pursues “the original amazement of a naïve observer” while acknowledging that “amazement of this kind is rarely felt twice. Life quickly wears it down”. This is the kind of phenomenological awareness and receptiveness that we attempt to awaken with a pea or a stick – a phenomenology of opening up (Perec might choose a teaspoon to address a similar aim, Bryson a loaf of bread, Irwin a line, Jernigan a ring-pull, while for the children of Reggio Emilia a shadow would suffice). Simple objects help us to create contexts in which phenomenological inquiry becomes possible.

Perhaps unsurprisingly we are also inspired (and reassured) by ideas and ways of working associated with art-based inquiry and art-based research: the integration of art and art-making in deliberative and rigorous research endeavours as espoused by Elliot Eisner (1991), Shaun McNiff (1998) and Anton Ehrenzweig (1967).

For art-based inquirers art-practice and research are recognized as “inseparable and mutually dependent” (McNiff, 1998: 22), each informing and amplifying the other. We believe this is because there is a richness of expression and meaning-making afforded by art and art-practice that is inaccessible when one is engaged exclusively in more rational and logical ways of working such as those associated with traditional academic research. Ehrenzweig (1967: xii) argues that “all artistic structure is essentially 'polyphonic'; it evolves not in a single line of thought, but in several superimposed strands at once”.

In our experience it is this polyphonic quality afforded by art-practice applied in a research context that provides for richer, albeit more ambiguous and complex understanding of others. However, effective research practice often hinges on the tools employed by the researcher. This is further discussed later in this paper.

Eisner (2002: 9) observes that “the tools you work with influence what you think about (…) if the only tool you have is a yardstick you look for what you can measure”. Our tools are our hands, bodies and voices, the camera and projector, our art and the art of others: ways of working that we associate with art-based-inquiry. We believe these tools and ways of working influence both what and how we think-about-and-understand ourselves and

others – a shoe or a valise become keys for a Magrittean lock opening up the possibility of understanding the individuals without knowing what to ask…

What is it that transforms such ordinary materials into such extraordinary roles?

We see our use of materials as consistent with, and informed by, the symbolic constructivist approach as outlined by David Barry (1996). Barry (1996: 411) identifies symbolic constructivism as an elicitive approach to research employing non-routine art-like portrayals, including drawings, sculpture and photographs, “to catalyze alternative knowings of conscious, tacit, and nonconcious beliefs and feelings”. He identifies symbolic constructivism as a richer and less reductive means of understanding others, where meaning is intersubjectively constructed “arising from the interplay between inquiring parties”.

Our deployment of common-everyday-materials-made-eccentric-and-anomolous-by-context-and-use engender speculative and projective responses as it becomes evident to the people we work with that there are no correct answers or proper interpretations. We choose to work with things that are ordinary and banal but create contexts in which these everyday things become the focus of attention and meaning-making. In this way the humble green pea, or a stick or a shoe, become both triggers and sites for symbolic constructivist encounters where individual meanings are expressed and shared.

Heuristics research and their open-ended methods and outcomes (Moustakas, 1990) have also influenced our understanding of what it is that we do when we seat strangers around a table with a box and an ordinary-object-made-anomalous (Burrows and Loi, 2004). In our work we do not assume to know what questions to ask, rather we prefer to create spaces, places, groupings and tasks that will help people respond to each other and to express how they think and feel. In these contexts it has been our experience that people discover and reveal aspects of themselves that might otherwise remain tacit or hidden. Often people express surprise at their own responses, I didn't know I could be so creative or where did that come from?

At the heart of our work is a belief in the value of reflective and collaborative practices (Collier, 1999, Kolb and Moeller, 1984, Schön, 1983, Loi, 2005b). This could be considered a great strength or a significant bias because all of our research designs aim at fostering such practices both in the people we work with and in ourselves – both these aims are evident in the two projects explored later in this paper.

We note that holding a pea in one's hand while someone photographs it and asks questions about the experience creates a reflective focus that is perhaps unusual in modern-life – a single pea is after all such an easily over-look-able bit of ephemera, unless it is perhaps squashed into the pile of a new beige carpet…

When people are assembled together in a darkened room and watch projected images of their hands and the hands of others holding peas it also engenders reverie and reflection. When these same people are seated at tables and share their responses with each other while communally shelling and eating fresh peas a lively collaboration ensues – meaning is made and shared.

The research outcomes from these various contexts are revealing and interesting [are you now wondering how such data could be used and for what purposes? Or are you perhaps imagining the possibilities?].

Finally, we believe in the opportunities offered by the use of anomalous objects and odd experiences (Burrows and Loi, 2004) and the idea of everyday people as co-creators of meaning and art (Shotter, 1993). In our work anomaly and oddity are created by the contexts we create rather than an inherence of these qualities in the objects themselves. In fact we are suggesting that all things are potentially wondrous and intriguing, even that which might otherwise be overlooked, and that all of us can make meaning and art if the conditions are right. These two interrelated ideas help us to create reflective and collaborative contexts in which we learn about others.

Two projects

In the next two sections, we overview the Pea Project and A Surrealist Encounter as case studies to discuss our ways of addressing the question: does research demand new types of context, and what would they need to be like?

Pea Project

The Pea Project was an experiential and constructivist encounter directed at the development of phenomenological awareness and reflective practice in design students, management students, ourselves and, in later (2002), the participants of conferences in Sweden (Participatory Design Conference), England (Art of Organization and Management), the USA (Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference), and Australia (RMIT Teaching and Learning Symposium). In this section we summarise such experiences. 1

The Pea Project was initially intended as a classroom encounter for Industrial Design and Management students at RMIT University but grew into the broader domain of pedagogical research. The value of a pea in the context of a classroom or a conference is hard to fathom. Being asked to hold a pea in your hand while someone takes a photograph makes no immediate sense – participants were prompted to wonder: what is going on?

Our mission with the Project was to help others to see themselves and the phenomena of the world around them as if for the first time (Bachelard, 1958). Through our work we were attempting to stimulate an endlessly extensible series of questions that promote awareness and reflexivity in others and ourselves.

The pea project began with a class of about forty industrial design students. According to our original design one of us would approach each student asking them to take a fresh green pea from a pod; then the other would ask permission to take a digital picture of the student's hand while holding the pea. The intention was to create a comfortable but ambiguous atmosphere and students were deliberately not told what was going on, but asked instead to make their own meaning.

Once each person had received a Pea, they were asked to think about the encounter, and to write and reflect on their experience. Students at the time were using a reflective journal, to capture their thoughts. The following week, with no introductions, we presented PowerPoint slides of the images taken during the previous session: students' hands, holding peas. The slides were presented silently in a darkened classroom. Our objective

was to create a space were students could become aware of the beauty and diversity of their own hands, to see their own hands as if for the first time (Bachelard, 1958). Again, students were asked to reflect on their experiences – both during class time and in their journal. We emphasised that there was not a right or wrong response, just their response.

We were surprised at the richness of the responses and the stickiness of the experience for them – the students returned again and again to the pea and the hand, in their journals, in the classroom, and, as we later discovered, in conversations amongst themselves. The Pea Project revealed itself to be a multi-layered experience, where interpretation, action, reaction, and reflectivity collided.

We were encouraged to take the idea further and looked for a suitable conference where we could engage with our peers – we selected four conferences, hoping for one, however we seemed to tap into the imagination of many as we were accepted by them all. The revised version of the Pea Project, we decided, should unfold over each of the days of a three day conference.

On day one we offered peas to participants, photographed their hands and collected initial responses to the questions What did I see? and What is going on here?. Of the many hundreds of people we approached at the various conferences only a handful ever refused to participate – we were usually met with good humour, curiosity and intrigue – many people were keen to be photographed by the Pea People, as we came to be called.

On day two we conducted an experiential workshop in a space that we had modified and shaped to foster reflexivity and discussion. At the London conference chairs were taken outside the conference room and organised in a queue which started somewhere in the nearby corridor and headed towards the entrance of the room; gymnastic mats replaced the chairs; a sign on the entrance door asked participants to take off their shoes and make themselves comfortable on the mat; we switched off all fluorescent lights and placed an overhead projector in a corner as sole source of light (paper clippings were placed on the plate of the projector, creating patterns on the walls); surrounded the mat with participants' written responses to the project; and moody jazz music of Gotan Project complemented the space.

On day three we displayed our many images and participant-responses in a common area for all participants to share. The day three display of images was intended to create a public forum for those unable to attend the presentation and to stimulate further reflection. We also perceived that the images worked stand-alone, as a form of art installation – a work where the project participants became co-creators of the art opening up what Jipson and Paley (1997) call zones of possibility for intellect and imagination.

Our redesign of the pea project for the conference setting engendered rich individual meaning-making and reflection as well as spirited engagement and discussion among and between people. Our redesign addressed the various contexts constituted by the places, the groups and the individual people with whom we were engaging.

A Surrealist Encounter

We propose that contexts can be designed to foster reflective and collaborative practices, tapping into the innate curiosity, playfulness, and creativity of people (Thackara, 2000). In this section we describe our experiences with facilitating a workshop with thirty-six managers, where a collection of everyday objects and a surrealist painting by Magritte

(1926) became the triggers for people to play and create together. The workshop was billed as an 'intellectual and creative spa' where frazzled time-poor managers could engage with each other in a stimulating environment.

The workshop space was deliberately arranged to create an informal setting via the arrangement of tables and chairs and the use of indirect lighting. We divided the participants into groups of six and invited them to sit at tables mirroring the seating arrangement of a dining room. On each table we placed a lidded-box containing a single everyday object – in one box we had placed a stick, in another a single black male business shoe, another contained a net; in another a broken record; another contained a white scarf, while the final box was not a box at all, rather it was a small, somewhat battered, cardboard valise in which there was no-thing. Also on the tables were pieces of coloured and plain paper and cellophane, marker pens, string, and various bits and pieces with which to make and play – the kinds of thing more usually found in kindergarten and early-school.

In our introduction participants were advised that whatever they found inside their box was to be used collaboratively to create a story, a play or an artifact – the only direction we gave was that the collaborative outcome needed to have a positive flavour and would later be shared with everyone.

We gave each group an hour to play, discuss and create together. We watched on as people who had not previously met – business managers – played, laughed and collaborated as they made-meaning of their anomalous objects and gave expressive form to the meanings made.

Each group presented to others the product of their playing. Without exception these were creative and engaging responses, each offering in its own way powerful insights into the participants as they translated the ambiguity of the objects into stories and narratives. For example, the group working with the empty valise were at first disappointed to discover that there was nothing inside – why did all the other groups have something to work with while they had been given nothing?

However they quickly adapted to the setting and the task, creating and acting-out a silent play where the little cardboard valise became a vehicle for telling the life-story of a person from infancy to the grave. The enacting of this play moved many of the people in the room to tears. Other presentations led to laugh-out-loud responses as anomalous objects were transformed into elaborate stories or flights of fancy – each one the product of a genuine collaboration.

We followed the group presentations with a projected image of Magritte's surrealist painting titled The Threatened Murderer (1926). One by one various details in the painting were circled. A record on a gramophone; a fishing net held by a man in a bowler hat; the white scarf on the neck of the supine and naked female murder victim; a wooden club in the hand of a second man in a bowler hat; the black shoe of the apparent murderer; a little suitcase at his feet. The slides slowly revealed that such elements coincided with those objects previously found in the boxes that the participants had used to create their stories and artefacts. However, it was some time before someone made this connection…

The surrealist painting told a dark and negative story that contrasted starkly with their individual creations. This revelation opened up an animated group discussion as people grappled with the meaning. What do you want us to make of it? Someone wondered. What is all this supposed to mean? asked someone else. It means what you think it means… what you make of it – we responded somewhat cryptically.

As the discussion continued to unfold, aromas from the kitchen pervaded the space. Participants were invited to a nearby room arranged like a trattoria (traditional Italian family run restaurant) and asked to serve themselves from a buffet of home-cooked food. Animated and reflective conversations continued in an informal and friendly atmosphere while music was played in the background.

Our surrealist encounter proved to be an excellent platform to explore the innate curiosity, playfulness, and creativity of people when the conditions are right. The combination of anomalous objects and manipulation of the space-as-context engendered creativity and reflective thinking and encouraged active collaboration. Participants' observed responses to the workshop activities were rich in meaning, highly creative and varied in character – we observed:
playfulness and excitement exemplified by energetic interactions and laughter;
a sense of wonder, curiosity and intrigue as people played together;
a strong sense of engagement and interest;
the framing up of experiences in very personal terms;
animated discussions during and after the workshop;
participants wondered about our motives, with the expectation we had a single goal rather than a series of open-ended objectives;
they expressed intense reactions after seeing the full surrealist painting; and
unpredictability in participants' responses.
This final point is directly related to our resistance to preconceived ideas of how people will respond preferring instead to let events unfold. The use of anomalous and ambiguous objects fosters this unpredictability of response however we feel that this is a defining characteristic of the approach we adopted for these projects and adds to the richness and complexity of the experience and the data these experiences produce.

We propose that unpredictability should be seen as a positive facet of such research practices – unpredictability places the researcher in a playful, spontaneous and often surprising context where participants responses shape the remit of the research rather than the needs/aims of the designer/researcher.

Finally, we propose that this kind of work requires a deft use of stimuli to engage participants creatively with each other. This implies that the role of the researcher/designer in such cases is that of enabling possibilities rather than directing or prescribing outcomes.

Three notions of context

Michael Biggs (2003) points out that a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic aspects influence our reception of artefacts and performances. We agree with his view that context affects one's reading of an artefact –"the point-of-view and the critical and cultural apparatus that the viewer brings to bear on the artefact or performance" (Biggs, 2003). In light of this he proposes that if one wishes to minimise extrinsic factors (to increase the role played by the work, which can be crucial within research contexts) one "must try to incorporate some of the function that they perform into the work itself" (Biggs, 2003).

Biggs (2003) calls for a contextualisation of research artefacts, a contextualisation that is "most likely to be expressed in words although I am open to persuasion that it can be done in another medium". We are too open to such a persuasion and in exploring possibilities we have been playing with some ideas around the researcher's role in such contextualisations.

However, in the two projects here discussed we did not have an artefact or work in the art and design sense of the word, but everyday objects purposely selected/used to generate engagements and related practices. If there was an artefact that we contributed to as researchers, in the sense of anything made by human art, then it was the experience (and then, the sum of the artefacts made by participants).

Due to this, our focus was not that of minimizing extrinsic factors but that of amplifying, building on and playing with them. We had a strong interest in those extrinsic factors as we wanted to explore their roles in fostering collaborative, creative and reflective engagements.

In the Pea Project and in A Surrealist Encounter we purposefully de-contextualised everyday objects with the aim of triggering collaborative, creative and reflective engagements. A green fresh pea left a plate to became a gift offered by a stranger in the street; a business shoe left a man's foot to enter a box on a table of a management workshop; a broken record left a scrap box in the backyard to become a conceptual starting point for the design of children's books…

Our approach involved the act of transforming everyday objects into anomalous objects. This was done by relocating objects into new spaces, metaphorical spaces that afforded multiple interpretations of the objects. Interestingly, the word metaphor itself evokes this notion of relocation [Metaphor: literally meaning to carry over, to transfer – derives from the Greek metapherein: meta`: beyond, over + fe`rein: to bring, bear].

Metaphors foster a capacity to see from previously inaccessible perspectives and offer ways to come to grips with questions that may arise (Randee and Mealman, 1999). This occurs because metaphors are often suitably ambiguous to "permit some latitude in focus" (Clegg and Gray, 1996: 82), implying opportunities for different interpretations.

Consequently, an act which may appear on the surface as banal as displacing a fresh green pea from a plate to a hand can in fact offer opportunities for seeing things from previously inaccessible perspectives – for coming to terms with new questions and possibilities. Seen from such perspectives, metaphors foster acts of "making sense of insensate things" (Hillman in Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 84) and of "finding frames for viewing the world" (Morgan, 1996: 228).

Our designed de- (or re-) contextualisation of everyday objects has been used to generate odd experiences with the aim of fostering specific types of practices or engagements, while leaving to participants the space to decide which shape such practices or engagements could actually have.

By enacting our designed and purposeful de-contextualisations we identified (and then explored and played with) three different ways of looking at the notion of context. These three dimensions and the relationships between them represent in our view a continuum between private and public domains in which artefacts can play multiple roles and be interpreted in multiple ways.

Interestingly, we engaged in de- (or re-) contextualisations to discover new possible ways of looking at and playing with the notion of context and of contextualising what we do. These new possible ways are discussed in the following sections.

Context-as-space

Space in the arts has often been used as a contextual platform for exploration, experimentation and expressiveness – the work of Andy Goldsworthy (1994) or Antony Gormley 2 are good examples among many. In architecture there are similar parallels. A debated Australian example is for instance the Federation Square project, 3 where buildings appear to work against their surroundings while the square paving appears to work with the nearby river banks. In art and design research the role of the physical space as a context for designed artefacts is a similarly debated topic – the theme central to the 2006 Research into Practice conference constitutes a clear example.

In the two projects discussed in this paper we played with space to trigger collaborative, creative and reflective engagements. Of course, artefacts had a key role and were employed in relation to space (refer to our previous discussion on anomalous objects).

Reiterating what was said earlier with regards to the role of metaphors, we would like to stress how in these two experiences meaning and interpretations remained open. This is because we do believe that the researcher is responsible for establishing a context for the interpretation of the artefact but we also see a value in establishing the conditions for a multiplicity of interpretations. This second view depends of course on the circumstances in which the researcher is operating.

When we conducted the Pea Project at the Art of Management Conference, for instance, space was heavily modified to contribute to openness of interpretation (as opposed to directing specific interpretations). We decided to break down the notion of typical and taken-for-granted conference settings by heavily modifying our given presentation space, as discussed in the section about this project.

It should be evident from this example that as researchers we clearly established a context for the interpretation of the artefact and the conditions for a multiplicity of interpretations. 4 However, space is in our view only one possible context that can be considered by researchers. In the next sections we propose two further notions of context.

Context-as-group

We see the space between people as another possible context that researchers can work with. This view builds on concepts developed through previous studies on collaborative workspaces as complex entities where creative expression is defined by interactions between context, people, their practices and their relationships (Loi, 2005b); on adaptive educational environments as creative spaces generated through designed interventions (Loi and Dillon, 2006); and on the notion of Playful Triggers as tools to elicit collaborative practices (Loi, 2005a).

As previously observed, in our two projects the aim was to trigger collaborative, creative and reflective engagements. Within this context the space between people was conceptualised and experimented with as a fertile contextual ground where meaning and interpretations remain open and are shared. This notion is related to that of collective centring and collective sense making (Boyce, 1995, Boyce, 1996), where people collectively centre themselves on a purpose while constructing shared meanings.

When we conducted the Pea Project in Melbourne, we experimented with placing paper bags full of peas on tables as triggers to prompt interaction. When we facilitated the Surrealist Encounter we set up part of the room as a trattoria using a dining table metaphor to prompt informal dialogue and exchanges. In both cases we played with the context-as-group notion and used artefacts/spaces as key triggers to develop and modulate such a context. We believe that this space-in-between (context-as-group) represents a fertile and creative research ground.

The use of artefacts in the service of context-as-group (to prompt participants to engage with each other around shared tasks) requires however great care. Shared tasks require design and purposefulness to be effective, meaningful, and engaging. The researcher has a key role in creating these conditions. Moreover, s/he needs to be flexible, focussed and highly responsive to be able to deal with the notion of context-as-group as it unfolds.

These requirements were palpable during the Surrealist Encounter, when during the final stage of the experience we unfolded the Magrittean origins of the objects at the centre of the workshop. This crucial point, where the space between people (context-as-group) can be seriously compromised, requires a significant level of flexibility and responsiveness in the researcher who needs to adapt to the situation as it unfolds, without compromising the aims of the research endeavour.

As researchers we needed in such circumstances to be clear about each specific context-as-group to ensure our aims could be kept in focus, without compromising or negatively charging the created space between participants. We believe that design and research skills are required to develop artefacts that trigger responses as well as ways of deploying them and promptly adapting oneself to events, as they unfold.

Context-as-person

The intimate context of the individual person is in our view another crucial consideration for researchers. When individuals are seen as a context for research then research interventions need to create the conditions for that individuality to emerge.

The notion of context-as-person is tied to that of reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) as we believe that the researcher can operate within a context-as-person with the aim of

promoting and triggering reflective practices – practices which differ and are distinctive to each individual.

In the Pea Project the invariable diversity in responses to peas/hands was due to a simple yet ambiguous design that allowed enough latitude in focus for individuals to create and express their own meanings. In the Surrealist Encounter diverse conversations, ways of working and creations/performances were a consequence of a design where ordinary-objects-made-anomalous generated multiple starting points, deductions and reactions.

During the two discussed projects numerous stories emerged. Many people involved in the Pea Project were moved to tell a story, often deeply personal. One man, after seeing his hand on the big screen, said that he was struck by that image – it was as if, he said, he had never really looked at it before. He told a story from his childhood in a racially segregated city – instead of a nanny he was cared for by a black male-servant. One day he was sitting on this man's lap and curious, as all children are, he asked about the lines inscribed in the palm of his hand. Following these lines with his finger the man traced the letter M in the boy's hand. He said that this stood for the word Man, as in mankind, and that because everybody had this letter in the palm of their hands it meant that we were all part of the same community. The telling of this story was followed by a long pause as the people that he shared it with continued to listen to the silence created.

When looking at the notion of context-as-person, artefacts, space and the dynamic between oneself and surrounding others act as conduits/triggers for individual meaning making. It should be now clear that the nature of the relationships among the three notions of context we are here proposing is an intimate one. This is further discussed in the final part of this paper.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have used two projects to discuss our ways of addressing the question: Does research demand new types of context, and what would they need to be like?

We have stressed our view that context significantly contributes to the ways in which people understand and respond to artefacts and how such understandings/responses can be multiple and creatively charged if the conditions are sufficiently ambiguous and the artefacts anomalous. It is our belief that the use of anomalous artefacts and odd experiences can help in creating new types of context that elicit an understanding of people not possible via traditional research means. It is also our belief that this approach offers researchers rich grounds where deeper understandings of/between/by people and their multiplicity can be explored.

The two discussed projects helped us identify and explore three possible ways of conceptualising the notion of context, namely: context-as-space, context-as-group, and context-as-person. We believe that working with multiple conceptions of research contexts will encourage the heuristics-informed researcher to create more fruitful open-ended research designs.

Our attempt at describing these three contexts highlights their interrelationships and the central role of artefacts within such a complex web of relationships. In all our examples artefacts almost invariably acted as triggers/conduits for those three contexts to be

developed and explored. Moreover, each time we targeted the development of one of these three contexts with our design, the other two contexts were often affected.

For instance, our attempt at using artefacts to develop a context-as-group invariably impacted a number of contexts-as-person. Each design focussed on context-as-space influenced related contexts-as-person and contexts-as-group. Individual perceptions of context-as-space were consistently affected by our designs targeted at the other two spheres… This may sound a bit recursive – and it is.

At this point we are wondering: is it possible for researchers to concentrate on one of these three contexts without affecting the remaining two? Our experiences to date do not indicate such an option, or need – but we remain open to the possibilities.

Endnotes

1 A number of papers that elaborate these experiences are available at http://www.darialoi.com

2 http://www.antonygormley.com

3 http://www.federationsquare.com.au

4 Taking this role to an extreme, the notion of space-as-context could be seen as THE artefact to explore.

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to cite this journal article:
Loi, D. & P. Burrows (2006) Magritte and the pea: anomalous artefacts and the contexts they create. Working Papers in Art and Design 4

ISSN 1466-4917