

Art Research as Creative Process

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Introduction

This paper seeks to recontextualise the development of art research within the mainstream of 21st century art. It valorises the artist's voice, being written by an artist who has considered his drawing practice to be a process of enquiry into consciousness since 1979.

The development of studio doctorates should be seen in the larger context of an emerging aesthetics of method that challenges the aesthetics of style that has dominated several centuries of art. This aesthetics of method has been emerging from a cultural preference for process over product since the 1950s, and it gained a new emphasis over the last 20 years from the development of art doctoral projects. These projects require the demystification of creative process as part of the PhD's normal explication of research methods, and thus they offer new evidence of what artists actually do, as distinct from what they are said to do.

The Problem

There is often said to be a disjuncture between the rationales of art and the academy, and it can be seen in the call for proposals for this conference session. Such differences may be real or imagined, or both. Another part of the problem is that what is meant by the term art in these discussions is often unclear and is certainly not unitary. When you say "art" you may be thinking of something very different from the person next to you. I want to assert that much art research is or seeks to be art, although not all art is art research. Some distinctions are needed here and this paper aims to make some of them as part of its argument.

Different Perspectives

In looking at how art research relates better to some rationales of art than others the distinction of Romantic and Classical sensibilities serves as an analytic tool.

By Romantic in this context I am not referring to an artistic style (such as derived from the gothic) but a rationale. A hegemony in methodology. This is the impulse to honour emotion and its expression, to value disorder as creative chaos and to seek the mysterious in the familiar. The Romantic savours the enigma and celebrates the unknown. This view sees intuition as both unknown and essentially unknowable. This is art as expression. This is also the sensibility that sees the artist as a special kind of person unlike ordinary people, and even when the principle of universal creativity is allowed as in Beuys' "everyone is an artist" the exclusivity of the artist moves up one rank to Shaman.

By Classical in this context I again mean a rationale or hegemony in methodology, not a style (such as in Greco-Roman motifs or proportions). This is the impulse to honour curiosity, intelligence and its communication, to value order as progress and progression and to seek the familiar in the mysterious. The Classicist resolves the enigma and seeks enlightenment. This view sees intuition as unknown, yet knowable in the fulness of time. Art as enquiry. This is also the sensibility that sees the artist as an identity within everyone, not just on the level of potential advocated by Beuys, but also in the reality that all children are artists in making drawings as a crucial part of their personality development and that all children (or most anyway) grow up to become adults, thus adding reality to what Beuys meant in his assertion of potential.

These are two dimensions of the one thing, and the distinction demonstrates its eighteenth century origins, although they can be traced back much earlier, albeit through eighteenth century eyes. I am highlighting the eighteenth century for it is in 1759 that Postmodernism emerges in "Tristram Shandy," (Sterne 1759) and runs parallel to Modernism through to our time. It is in the eighteenth century that the distinction of art and science emerges with clarity, art being identified with imagination, and science with enquiry. For the purposes of analysis this is a good distinction, but this distinction is, "the map not the territory"(Korzybski 1931). We need to look at the territory of experience and its consciousness again. The exaggeration of this art/science duality is helpfully dismantled by Medawar when he argues that ideas in science emerge as do ideas in art through imagination, not through scientific method: for how else would a hypothesis be obtained?(Medawar 1967). He goes on to argue that the distinction of value associated with utilitarian

knowledge and pure knowledge is based in English class attitude, and we would do well to look for whether this distinction is apparent in the art vs art research dispute too.

If science can be seen as necessarily imaginative (as well as methodical) then art can be seen as necessarily methodical (as well as imaginative). They are related when in the spirit of enquiry. In seeing art and science as familial in spirit, we should also see how they are different methodologically. Art has its own methods even when humanities or social sciences academics insist their methods should be forced on art. In clarifying art's methods, difference in the Deleuzian sense is the key concept; for it centres on Gramsci's distinction of "patterns of formation" (Gramsci 1929-35) rather than given or received reality. This places art research within the C20th tradition of experimental art. Deleuze's great contribution is the view that difference does not follow from identity, but that identity follows from difference (Deleuze 1956). This is the logic of art.

While the Romantic sensibility may see art research as inimical to a creationist view of art, the Classical sees it as crucial to evolutionary artistic doing and making.

Romantics may have difficulty accepting the rationality of research as creative process, but if intuition is regarded as intrinsically knowable - though as yet unknown - then it enters and extends the realm of the rational. However, there is a tradition of mystifying art process that serves the self-aggrandisement of the artist and the exclusivity of the art market which depends on the scarcity of product to maintain price, providing capitalism's benchmarks of value. It is as if the illusion central to artistic representation should hold as much for the artist as that which he or she portrays. Picasso is the epitome of this strategy. He argued against research and in favour of discovery without intent (Picasso 1923), yet a visit to either of the Picasso Museums in Barcelona or Paris demonstrate rigorous and systematic exploration of themes developed in progressive succession, with each work building on the previous one until some kind of resolution is achieved. Picasso's process can be seen to be both experimental and exploratory with any discovery hard won.

By contrast, a classical take on creative process supposes it can be comprehensible and its pattern of understanding opens the possibility that what is described may be shared: this is an inclusive perspective.

Creative Difference: becoming different and making a difference

To describe any aspect of artistic production as creative process is to invoke the dreaded C-word: Creativity. It is ironic that so soon after art turned its back on creativity as a preferred rationale, industry, business and government adopted creativity and innovation as keys to economic development. As a by-word for progress, the term Creativity is an essentially Modernist concept. In its parallel, Postmodern guise of difference, however it is still alive. The Creativity of the 1960s and 70s talked of a new kinds of thinking and problem solving. These were very truncated versions of what artists and scientists do and of course they are redundant now. The core factor that was lost on so many creativity "gurus" - and I use the word pejoratively - was that transformation comes out of changes of paradigm, states of mind, ways of being. It does not solve problems but redefines problems and their contexts. Transformation does not come from inspiration so much as iteration. The idea that creativity can be added to a situation without fundamentally transforming that situation is unrealistic. Creativity is about difference or it is not creative.

Here we return to Deleuze for Difference has to be subject to analysis if it is to be a workable premise of art, not just an honorific principle. Differences of temperament, personality, strategy, states of mind, and modes of intelligence need articulation, and this is my current research interest. Crucially, transformation in the subject requires transformation in the object.

Art has often been about that larger sense of transformation, and it is in this that art has so much to offer a society that seeks to embed creativity and innovation as a core value. As artists undertaking doctorates provide reflective accounts of their processes so they add to the discourse of research and the discourse of art. They draw the two together. I describe this process as creative difference since it centres on becoming different from one's self in order to make a difference that is significant to others, and I will leave it to a future paper to extrapolate that concept further. In this context, however, I argue that a profound question that transforms the questioner and his/her means of engagement will also transform the subject of enquiry. Here, research can be seen as a creative method, transforming not only research but also creativity as it is understood in the world of art.

The Language of Art Research

I have heard it argued that this matter of epistemology and methodology is merely the stuff of academics who can't draw or paint, and that these ideas should not be put forward because they confuse the pure spirit of so-called "free art." However, the active verbs in the language of art research are already widespread throughout curatorial statements in major art museums and galleries. To investigate; to question; to enquire; to explore; to examine can be found on the websites of Tate, MoMA, New York and Gagosian.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the purpose of establishing art research as art is not to raise the status of the outputs of research students, each of which must stand or fall by their own merits, but to benefit from the insights into the otherwise mysterious processes of art so gained.

Fine Art is coming of age as a university level subject. When art research students are true to their art and resist the hegemony of the research ethos of the humanities and the social sciences, they provide something that has been little expressed in the theory of art. They provide us with insider views of creative process that demystify the fictions put forward in support of an exclusive art market. At last the artist's voice is being heard in the discourses of art. What this voice tells us is transferable from art to the constituencies interested in creativity, such as industry, business and government. Whether they will listen is a different topic.

The principle of curiosity that underpins art research is a core element of contemporary art.

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