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A Discrete Continuity: On the Relation Between Research and Art Practice

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Abstract

This short article discusses the nature of research and art practice and makes a case for the necessary intermingling of these activities. It does not attempt to define a space for art to operate as research, quite the opposite: research is an operating structure for the process and production of, among other things, art. It is regarded as integral to the processes of thinking, making, and reflecting, and it is important to note that curiosity, creative enquiry, and critical reflection underpin much that is considered research in various fields. The author asserts that these processes are not necessarily discipline-specific although particular disciplines have specific procedures and goals. It is argued that "provisionality" is central to what art can offer other disciplines; it can make a virtue of incompleteness. The author suggests that art open itself up to quizzical scrutiny and help others to recognise that research has long been, and will continue to be, a driving force within its makeup. The article posits an expanded notion of the artwork that is essentially provisional and reliant on spectatorial involvement.

Keywords: art & design; image-making; text-making; technical image; representational forms; provisionality; context of inquiry; Vilém Flusser; Juha Varto

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1. Introduction

This article discusses research in terms of art practice. It draws on some philosophical ideas from Deutsch, Flusser, and Varto and the author's experience as a practitioner to propose a way of thinking related to the modes of practice/reflection associated with art-making and text-making. Each of the latter could be regarded as a discrete point within a continuum of thought. Similarly, a characteristic of art--and perhaps of artistic research--is the sense in which it is necessarily open-ended. The uses to which art is put and how it operates are many and various and I would assert that "provisionality" is an important aspect of what art can contribute to other disciplines; it is fundamentally incomplete and requires a spectator's input in order to exist or function. In this sense, spectatorship is a process of constructing a meaning, a world or a story from a fragment and is an activity that is essentially private. Moreover, misapprehension, misreading or *misprision*--to use literary critic/theorist Harold Bloom's term--may be as important and valuable as an apparently accurate reading (Bloom, 1973, pp. 19-45). In a related sense, Marcel Duchamp's claim that "the spectator makes the picture" also points to the shared nature of this activity where an artist contributes only a part of what constitutes the "work." Of course the artwork can remain as more or less consistent object or experience for others to engage with but the point is that it is never complete in itself (Duchamp, 1975, p. 105; Duchamp, 1989). A more appropriate perception is perhaps to regard the "work" as more extensive than the artwork itself, an expanded notion that is provisional and dependent on the spectator.

The artwork illustrated in Figure 1 is based obliquely--as is often the case with art-making--on my engagement with Flusser's thinking. The work is a response to ideas

about entropy and probability that one often encounters in his writing. I am uncertain how the words that are found on the set square's hypotenuse originated ("Trajectory of infinity") but they predate my exposure to Flusser's writings. The inclusion of this work here is intended to set a context for the words that follow. It does not aim to offer certainties or answers but is intended as a speculative "tool" for thinking or wondering, and to act as a counterpoint to the text.

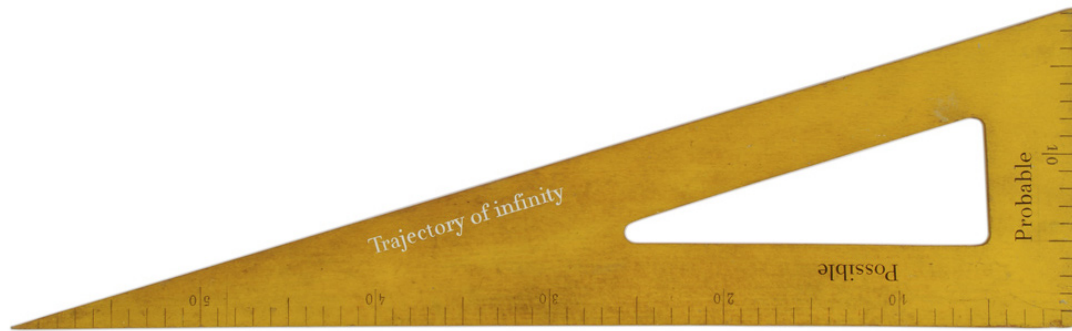


Figure 1. *Speculative Object*, Tim O'Riley, 2008 (sign paint, set square, 60 x 20 x 0.4 cm)

2. Representational Forms

Rather than the continuum of everyday experience, physicist David Deutsch discusses the long-accepted sense that matter at a quantum level is made up of discrete bits or quanta. One does not move continuously between elements of matter but negotiates them through separate jumps. This posits a conundrum about whether movement itself can be continuous, a problem that Deutsch uses to assert the existence of the "multiverse," an infinity of parallel universes. "In short, within each universe all observable quantities are discrete, but the multiverse as a whole is a continuum" (Deutsch, 2001). Stressing the importance of movement between points seems apt in the context of artistic research: the sense in which a work's significance or meaning is derived as much from the gaps or interludes surrounding it, and the continuity of the time and experience of the viewer, as from the artwork itself. Likewise Vilém Flusser, the Czech philosopher, maintained that, when imagining, we step back from the world into ourselves; we distance ourselves from the world in order to comprehend better the context we are in, to orientate ourselves in the world (Flusser, 1988). There is a necessary move from a state of immersion to one that creates distance.

It is worth looking here at Flusser's thinking about what he called "technical images" in some detail. Pictures are a means of fixing the products of imagination. They make them communicable and accessible to others. But pictures also serve to obscure the objects they represent or at least they jostle for attention with other objects in the world. Pictures are surfaces over which the eye wanders as it pleases. A picture does not offer a conclusion but presents a wholeness or synchronic totality animated by the observer. In this sense, for Flusser, images are magical. Like the world around us, they do not give explanations. They present states of things and allow for contradictory interpretations. But if we step back from the world into ourselves in order to see the context we are in, to see the wood in spite of the trees, in doing so we lose the specific nature of the thing. It becomes hidden by the image.

Throughout his work, Flusser argues that this predisposition to imagine, to think in images, and to relate to the world through images was characteristic of a symbolic, magical consciousness radically altered through the invention of writing. 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. This results in a new experience of time, a linear

time as opposed to a circular, cyclical time. Flusser maintains that with writing, history begins and with it, the consciousness of history. Like images, texts also remove us from the world but at a further level. Writing provided more certainty in observation and communication. In a sense it demystified the image; it determined it. But writing too obscures the image embedded within it, distancing humans still further from the world they inhabit. Progressive reliance on the text as a means of negotiating the world effects a shift away from idolatry to textolatry.

For Flusser, the victory of texts over images, of science over magic was not conclusive, however. The linearity of written language was too uncritical when applied to the rationalising functions of an emerging scientific approach. Therefore the bits or pixels (picture elements) that constituted writing and that were torn from the image, had to be processed formally; they had to be calculated. Flusser saw calculation as the highest expression of historical consciousness. “Only an imagination that has been thoroughly calculated can be considered explained” (Flusser, 2002, p. 112; Flusser, 2005). Until Newton and Leibniz, the numeric code remained entangled in the alphabetic code and calculus was developed and refined in order to enlighten, to provide a surer means with which to grasp the world, and to explain and disenchant the image. Mathematical notation provided a means of determining the nature of the world precisely and without ambiguity, but in time such texts became abstract to a degree that they too obscured the world. In Flusser’s sense, human beings became functions of this mode of thought. On the basis of this theory of representation, in perhaps his most famous work, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser proposed the idea of technical images, images that were taken from the world but whose primary, unwritten function was to embody the scientific texts from which they were developed (Flusser, 2000). Photographs were the first instance of such images. As scientific texts became increasingly complex, distancing human subjects from the world they inhabited, it was necessary to develop images from these texts that could somehow reconnect their viewers or readers with the phenomenal world. For Flusser, this was the reasoning for and meaning of photography. Moving on nearly two centuries, we are surrounded by such images and it has become increasingly important to understand them, not only as seemingly transparent windows on the world but more so as visualisations of technical process. But the technical image as it is now configured (via computer, for example) can also offer a way forward. If imagination signifies or necessitates a retreat into an interior world, this can be embodied and projected onto the exterior world using new forms of technical images. For Flusser this constituted a radically new imagination, one intertwined with language (Flusser, 2002, 2005).

So the movement between thought, image, and text is brought into relief by new representational forms and by extension, so are the practices of research and art. The physical context that provides the ground for an image, for example, can become part of the work. The intellectual or emotional context provided by the viewer can equally be absorbed or conversely determine a work’s impact. Movement between these realms mirrors the movement between, for example, an intellectual context provided by research and the lateral spaces of the image or artwork that resist being pinned down to an argument. Likewise, the latter can suggest a different shape or direction for research.

3. Science and Art: Accuracy and Incompleteness

Research can be many things but at heart it is an active form of finding out, of prompting a reaction or an engagement with spheres beyond one’s immediate experience. The terms practice-led research, practice-based research, and artistic research are commonly used within art education when discussing research level study. While they are useful in terms of recognising the value of practice as part of the research process in the fields of art and design, one could perhaps question how useful they may be in the

longer term. After all, practice is an integral part of other forms of research: medicine, archaeology, or experimental physics, for example. My intention here is not to separate out creative practice from other forms of research, as I believe creativity, uncertainty, and doubt--values and states that one habitually associates with art--necessarily exist in other fields. (I hesitate to use the term, *creative practice*, but by it I generally mean art or design. I believe art practice and design practice share a great deal but each has specific ends and as my background is in the field of art, I will limit myself to this area.) Art does not maintain an ownership of these states. Perhaps where it differs from, for example, scientific research can be found in the processes to which it is subject or in the purposes to which it is put. One comes to it with different expectations.

Science and art share much at a root level; it is when determining and applying process, and evaluating rigor, quality, or purpose that perceptions of them differ radically. There is often an inquiry that forms part of what is conventionally referred to as practice. This could be described as research with a small "r" (cf. Frayling, 1993; O'Riley, 2006). It is an intrinsic part of practice in whatever sphere that activity is located. It is the search for something outside one's everyday realm, whether that thing is a process, an idea, a place, or a phenomenon. This continuously feeds into what one does and how one thinks. It can change the realm's extent.

Intuition, rather than contributing an overview, can offer insights into a thing, glimpses of an unanticipated realm or glimmers of a question or solution. John Keats countered what he disparagingly called "consecutive reasoning" in relation to science with imagination and intuition as competing means of arriving at truth, highlighting the gap, or even opposition between knowledge of a thing and the intuitive sense of a thing (Keats, 1817/2002, p. 60). For him the latter is testament to the persistence of an intelligent sympathy for lived experience. As Walter Jackson Bate puts it: Poetic truth, precisely because it is glimpsed only intuitively, can never be seen and known with a clarity and accuracy sufficient to satisfy the exacting demand of the logical faculty; there is always about it an air of 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' and 'half-knowledge.' (Bate, 1939, p. 16)

Art does not hold sway over the methods that one often associates with it (creativity, uncertainty, doubt, etc.). Similarly it also does not do justice to the practice of art to limit it to the visual. Art occupies multiple realms and its outputs might be verbal, visual, textual, aural, performative, or any combination of these. The processes that lead to these outputs are likewise multifarious. Sometimes they are consciously understood and articulated. At other times the shadowy processes of intuition are at play and it is far from certain how decisions are made (Poe, 2002, p. 21). Where one talks of an adequate reading of a text, one might equally speak of a *competent regard* for an artwork. That is, just because an artwork might be visual, does not mean that its meaning is plain to see. A meaning might appear to be available but the work's effectiveness is due to how it marshals debate, engages thought, or provokes imagination (cf. Kosuth, 1994; Schaeffer, 1998, p. 48). A work's significance resides in how it offers itself to be read, in what thinking or associations it enables, or in how it functions. In this sense, activating the work and retrieving possible meanings requires a competent regard.

Creativity, of course, is not confined to art practice. It exists in many forms. Einstein's "happiest thought" came to him while he was sitting in the patent office in Bern, looking out of the window: "If a person falls freely he will not feel his own weight" (Einstein, 1922/1982, p. 46). It was through subsequent work and reflection that he arrived at an initial formulation of perhaps his most famous idea in 1905. This was perhaps inevitably incomplete and after his first groundbreaking publication, ten further years were spent revisiting, incorporating, and refining until he had arrived at the general theory of

relativity. Although scientific approaches often involve “consecutive reasoning,” they can also involve intuition. The latter could be deemed to offer a starting point, a possible question, or perhaps the hint of a solution, but knowledge in this domain rarely if ever comes without hard work and application. In addition to the significance of asking the right question, a scientific approach can be as much concerned with how a process is laid bare, made retrievable, and its function agreed upon.

Art also involves hard work and application but one could argue that an artwork’s resonance draws on the fact of its incompleteness. While the methods of science try to establish agreement and determine the accuracy of process, art can offer provisionality as a virtue. It does not necessarily attempt to determine a thing by description through theory and experiment but can propose ways of seeing. It acknowledges the viewer’s subjectivity in determining what the work becomes, as in Duchamp’s now ubiquitous utterance, “the spectator makes the picture,” or Paz’s reading of Duchamp: “the work makes the eye that sees it--or at least, it is a point of departure: out of it and by means of it, the spectator invents another work” (Paz, 1990, p. 86).

4. Practice and Research: An Enmeshed Relationship

It seems obvious to state this but verbal, textual, conceptual, and material as well as visual processes are used in many forms of research, regardless of discipline. Likewise, art as it is practiced has multiple forms, many of which are of course visual but some of which are textual. Thinking, doing, and reflecting are part of all disciplines and recognising the shared nature of curiosity is perhaps more productive than demarcating boundaries or constructing borders. Different disciplines share a multiplicity of approaches but they also have particular contexts, objectives, or purposes. Obviously disciplines have methods that suit these purposes and this could be an origin of differences in how ideas are formulated, expressed, shared, and depending on the context, validated.

In other words, art does not necessarily aim for evidence that can be agreed on but instead offers ways to see, and possibilities for thought or emotional engagement (Scrivener, 2002). Perhaps the goal of research in this area should primarily be to support and to enable the possible in terms that suit it (art) all the while recognising means with other disciplines. As Wilson states: “Importantly, we can learn from the field of practice that research is an integral value and inherent task for art and design, rather than an externally imposed requirement. Equally we can remain alert to the importance of not collapsing the distinction between research and practice.” (Wilson, 2005, p. 3)

Art should not try to ape the methods of science to give it legitimacy in the eyes of academia. It will on the whole fail to be science and it is likely to fail as art. And anyway, perhaps the methods associated with art can provide something distinctive. By this I mean not only reflecting on its material processes and studio environments but also the trains of thought that lead to decisions, or the ongoing process of considering and assessing what has been achieved while a work is being made, developed, or performed. Such processes could be better understood and articulated (cf. Elkins, 2005).

Making, thinking, or doing could be regarded as cognitive acts. If textual and visual research shares a common subject (the thinking individual engaged in the research) perhaps these activities can be seen as manifestations of an underlying process. At root, they refer to a binding activity. They may be different manifestations or ways of expressing an underlying process but they share a common source: for example, to make a thing involves constant thinking that is sometimes overt but frequently tacit. No convincing practice can exist without a degree of criticality of both itself and the context in which it operates. Likewise, thinking is rooted in practical experience. I would assert

that the relationship between these activities, between research and practice or image-making and text-making, is fundamentally intertwined: they are relational objects of thought (Macleod & Holdridge, 2005; O’Riley, 2005).

Some might argue that this is an idealised picture, that there are actually discrete activities between research and practice that can at best be temporarily bridged and between which one can only articulate a relationship. If one follows this train of thought, such activities occur in parallel. They are not overtly connected but could be related through some kind of dialogue, either overt or unspoken. But this establishes an intrinsic separation. Such spheres are only connected through their separateness. A different view could posit a more enmeshed relationship between research and practice, where the former is an intrinsic part of the latter and vice versa. That is, practice is imbued with the rigor, criticality, knowledge of context, and questioning associated with research; and research is in a sense determined by the drive afforded by practical thinking, experience, enactment, and embodiment. As before, the context and purposes of a discipline can determine how it is formulated and communicated. Science has its methods and so, likewise, does art. If curiosity is at the root of research, some (if not all) creative practitioners personify the paradoxical challenge to strive after something specific, without necessarily knowing precisely what this is; to realise the as-yet-unknown in a particular form, and hopefully to recognise that something unexpected and possibly new has taken place.

5. Conclusion

“There are two aspects of imagery: imagery as a practical means of thinking, as a means of placing objects within categories; and imagery as poetic, as a means of reinforcing an impression.” (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 8)

Where does this leave research within the field of art? What can art offer research in other areas? This short article has discussed the possibility of a transparency of the research in practice and the practice in research. These two activities are seen as relational objects of thought, elements of an underlying whole. Whereas curiosity and speculation or rigor and method are aspects of all disciplines that may differ in their purposes and so in their modes of operation, perhaps art can offer incompleteness as a defining virtue. Image and language are intimately connected through developments in media, which transcend purely illustrative or descriptive relations. They are more fundamentally intertwined.

Drawing on Flusser’s thinking and Deutsch’s terminology, the process of making art and the process of research are both discretely continuous and continuously discrete. If when imagining, one steps back from the world into another realm, there is a pause or rupture in the continuous, direct experience of phenomena. This enables one to reflect on and necessarily distance oneself from the world. The to and fro between interior and exterior spaces and experiences is a constant process through which the world becomes sensible and understandable, and through which one defines one’s self. Far from a retreat into imagination, it is a strategy for making sense of and engaging with the world. In a discussion of artistic research, Varto obviates the need to distinguish between objective and subjective (or posit a separation between observer and observed) in terms of stressing the continuum of experience as the space in which knowledge emerges: “Time is, then, a context of interpretation, where being (as objects, events) can become understood” (Varto, 2009, p. 66). The context obviously determines an inquiry’s nature and language but there is an inherent flow of thought across disciplines that fundamentally connects things and acknowledges the general character of inquiry. The motivation to look for a specific thing outside one’s practice does not deny the coherence of the context in which one works, but looking for something

particular potentially enriches that arena. This thing can inform or ultimately change what one does and I propose that one's practice can likewise inform the direction of the looking, the search, and the research. This is ideally a dialogical relation; what is beyond or outside of the practice, enriches it, and vice versa.

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