



Editorial: the role of context in art and design research

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In our advance publicity materials we said that Research into Practice 2006 would “explore the instrumentality of the context on the reception of artefacts as constituting or contributing to research”. This is part of a series of questions posed since 2000 that represent our on-going problem analysis of the relationship of research and professional practice:

2000: foundational concepts in practice-based research
2002: the nature of knowledge
2004: the role of the artefact
2006: *the role of context*

Why did we focus this year on context? What did we mean our questions? Perhaps this can be answered in advance of hearing from our contributors by identifying some keywords that lie ahead:

The first is “context”. By this we mean the environment, the conditions under which research is produced or consumed. “Context” is broad and pervasive. We need to define the scope of the term or everything is context. Context can be both the physical environment; and the intellectual point-of-view, the conceptual framework within which we make interpretations and judgement. For example, this [Day 1 of the conference] is a context of a research conference. We might also be here in the context of a sales conference. The context would be different, and so would our expectations. I hope you did not expect the conference packs to contain pizza!

The second is “interpretation of artefacts”. Interpretation is our reception of events and artefacts, and how we make meaning from them. I expect you are familiar with the semiotic notion that “a sign... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce 1932: §2.228). So a sign comes into being as meaningful when it is meaningful to an individual, not because of some intrinsic property the artefact has outside of social communication. What social communication brings is not only the interpreting individual, but also the network of signs that forms a context for interpretation. This shows that the context that we perceive and use, the network, is just one of many possible contexts that are available in any given situation. As I said, context is not just physical situation, but intellectual point-of-view.

The third is: “instrumentality”. We are interested in examples of interpretation in which the context, or changing the context, has an impact on the interpretation. Instrumentalism, a term in Dewey's Pragmatism, would regard the context as a means in the process of enquiry. In any one context, certain outcomes are facilitated and others not. Changing the context changes what is facilitated. No one context can be regarded as preferable except in the pragmatic sense of facilitating our objectives, i.e. a preferred interpretation. This is a familiar [sceptical] position in arts and humanities research in which we seek not the truth but a preferred interpretation: preferred because it integrates other preferred readings into a coherent knowledge map. To this extent we have an interest in certain views, and therefore prioritise certain contexts of interpretation.

So in describing the conference theme we could have said [but we didn't because it is too long for an advertising slogan]... “How does the physical or intellectual environment in which work is produced or consumed affect our reception and judgement of it as a work of research, in

comparison with our reception and judgement of it as a work of art/design/etc.?"

We posed a series of questions on the conference website to provoke our target audience. Let me use a few of them again.

Is the researcher responsible for establishing a context for the "correct" interpretation of the artefact, i.e. is that also part of doing research?

Is research caused by a context of intentionality: in which the creator is acting purposively as a researcher? Does the maker determine what is research by their state of mind, and if so how is this embodied in the artefact so that it continues to be regarded as research by subsequent generations? This problem is embodied in the visual arts exhibition we will see tomorrow morning. Or is it not so much the intention at the point of production, but the intention at the point of reception? Does the audience determine what is research by their state of mind, by their attitude towards the artefact and its use to them? If so, the same artefact can be research for one audience and not for another. This issue is embodied in the conference itself, which asserts itself as a research conference: affecting the reception of the artefacts and papers it contains.

*Can research content be activated/deactivated by changing the context of reception?
Are certain types of context more research-friendly than others?*

To use Fine Art as an example: is a painting research when it is in the university gallery, or in the PhD, or funded by the research council? Is that what makes it into research? What is the research-giving status of a museum, which traditionally is a research environment, but whose objects are the subject of research study by scholars rather than the outcome of research activity by the makers?

Is the medium a context. We know that the medium affects the message (McLuhan & Fiore 1971), but is the medium constitutive of the research message? Those who claim that a creative output is only eligible for consideration as research when accompanied by a text, appear to be claiming some kind of essential capacity for the text that the creative artefact is missing without it. Those of you who know my opinions will know that although I agree that a creative artefact must be accompanied by linguistic content: it is not for that reason. It is not that text should be prioritised, but because text delivers certain required content that the creative artefact cannot do. In particular the creative artefact cannot place its content in a critical and historical context so that it can be demonstrated to be original and significant and therefore a contribution to knowledge or its interpretation. This requirement is, for me, one of the defining features of research.

*Is it the context that makes research into research?
What is signified by research being undertaken in the context of a university or by being done by those labelled as researchers, or being funded by a Research Council?*

Is it the showcasing of today's papers at this conference that makes them into research... a kind of public dissemination; or is it when the full papers have been double blind peer reviewed and published that they become research? Is there something post-production that is done to an output that elevates its status to that of research from mere creative production? If so, could this process be applied to almost any kind of output, e.g. the paintings of someone who professes scorn for research, or can it only be done complicity: to an output that the creator in some way offers up for this elevation of status, e.g. by the doctoral candidate? In other words: does it have to be *judged* as research? This is a reversal of the traditional question: "is all artistic research, good art?", and frames it as "is all art by researchers, good research?"

*Does research demand new types of context, and what would they need to be like?
What is the impact of traditional academic attempts at the recontextualization of research from other disciplines outside art and design?*

Are there certain subjects: that contain an intellectual infrastructure in such a way that they form a context for enquiry that better supports research than others? Perhaps we can have

research in astronomy because we think we are finding out something objective about external reality (the Positivist approach), whereas perhaps we cannot have research in art or improvised music (as opposed to research about art or about improvised music) because we are not finding out something objective about the external world; just looking at the same world differently? But then aren't shifts in the scientific paradigm exactly a case of looking at the world differently?

Is the essential context provided by argumentation: the context of an idea presented as an argument rather than an assertion? Or is it the literature review that places the argument in the context of others, thereby making clear its claim for originality?

Is decontextualization or disinterest, either possible or desirable?

This might be a way to make the problems go away!

My own position on this is that decontextualization renders a sign meaningless. Indeed, decontextualization prevents an artefact functioning as a sign. It would be both difficult and undesirable to remove context: it creeps back in subtle ways. Context can even be provided by a mere gesture.

If you were at home with a pizza box, it would have brought with it certain signs, the delivery, the smell, the anticipation. Its graphics would be oriented to encourage you to open it with a gesture like this...

Today you have already gone through a process of anticipation, of registration, etc. In our conference the graphics are oriented to encourage you to open it with a gesture like this, like a book...

At home you would be satisfied to find pizza inside.
Here I hope you will be satisfied to find papers inside.

References

Peirce, C. S. (1932) *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

McLuhan, M. & Q. Fiore (1971) *The Medium is the Massage*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.