



The concept of knowledge

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The concept of knowledge in art and design is, or should be, no different from the concept of knowledge in other disciplines. It is the constant search for, and ultimately the acquisition and dissemination of, a body of knowledge within particular areas or parameters which signifies a specific discipline. While the particular form that this knowledge might take will therefore vary, both between disciplines and between specialist areas within disciplines, such acquisition of knowledge is universal.

Indeed, as the Principal of one of our oldest universities once said; "From the Scientists, social and natural, we derive our belief in the unifying force of the search for knowledge, and in the harmonies amongst forms of knowledge... we must eschew labels and bureaucratic boundaries and seek to see the truth from as many vantage points as humankind can summon. That search is the role of a great university."

Across all disciplines the search for knowledge essentially follows both a similar pattern and arises from the same source, namely to meet a particular human need, whether that need is to find a new drugs, new materials, or new insights into the human condition. In recognition of this fact, the UK "Research Assessment Exercise 2001: Assessment panels' criteria and working methods" published by the Higher Education Funding Councils included a definition of research as "original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding... and the invention or generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts and designs, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights..."

In this latter aspect, the visual arts can boast a history a long as humankind has been able to oppose its thumb and forefinger. We should not at this stage in our evolution therefore, be seeking to elicit academic credibility for our disciplines by borrowing the terminology of the sciences. We should be assuming that credibility with the same degree of confidence expressed by our colleagues in those other so-called "practice based" disciplines, such as chemistry, physics, law, and the numerous medical and biological sciences and engineering areas.

Why then, does our discipline generally find this so difficult to accomplish? Is this phenomenon a feature of a traditional lack of infrastructure for the support of formal research activities in art and design, or is it a symptom of something else? Does the fact that a large proportion of these activities tend to be conducted in isolation and off-site have any bearing on this issue? Was it always thus? What is the way forward? This paper attempts to explore some of these questions.