



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

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Artistically crafted novels, poems, films and 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 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 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 (Bachelard, 1964; Dastur, 2000), art-based inquiry (Eisner, 1991; McNiff, 1998), symbolic constructivism (Barry, 1996), action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), heuristics and their open-ended outcomes (Moustakas, 1990), reflective and collaborative practice (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983; Collier, 1999;), anomalous objects and odd experiences, 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

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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-place, 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. 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.