



Beyond prejudice: method and interpretation in research in the visual arts

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volume 5 content
journal home pag
conference home pag
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to cite this journal article

McGuirk, T. (2008) Beyond prejudice
method and interpretation in research in
the visual arts. *Working Papers in Art
and Design* :
Retrieved <date> from <URL:
ISSN 1466-491'

This paper addresses the theme of interpretation within research in the visual arts, primarily through a discussion of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. In his seminal book *Truth and Method*, Gadamer critiques the process whereby "the human sciences' claim to know something true came to be measured by a standard foreign to it - namely the methodical thinking of modern science". This point has a resonance for our current debate concerning the aptness of the importation of research methods from established research cultures into the emerging research cultures of art and design.

This paper presumes that research in the visual arts should reflect the nature of those arts, their processes and purposes. The knowledge claims of the arts and particularly the fine arts are often compared on less than favourable terms with those of science. This phenomenon in both Gadamer's and Heidegger's view, might, be regarded as being due to a kind of categorical error. The aspects of truth that emerge from each field differ according to the ontological status of their modes of enquiry.

Science through its methods questions nature in ways that are highly effective and productive of useful truths, but which also involve concealed fundamental prejudices, anticipations and projections. These aspects of science, both Gadamer and Heidegger would argue, limit sciences scope in dealing with 'the real' in *all* its facets.

One of Gadamer's core insights concerns the finitude of our knowledge. This means that understanding according to his hermeneutics is always a matter of ongoing interpretation, a *dialogue* that precludes the kind of closure demanded by science. This essentially open approach to enquiry, which has its philosophical roots in the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, is a compatible model for research in the fields of art and design.