



abstract ° full paper

to cite this journal article

Rahtz, D. (2008) Figures of Interpretation

Working Papers in Art and Design :

Retrieved <date> from <URL>

ISSN 1466-4917

The issue addressed in this paper is methodological, and concerns the modes of interpretation that arise in the relationship between the written text and art work in practice-led doctoral research. The theme of this conference raises the question of whether art practice-led doctoral research should provide the means for a clear interpretation of its contribution to knowledge or whether it is a defining characteristic of art work that it is open to different interpretations. In this paper I consider the idea that the act of interpretation that takes place between written text and art work is one which involves two distinct interpretative attitudes, and the possibility that a particular kind of knowledge is produced through the workings of their internal relationship.

I begin, following the art historian Richard Shiff, with the interpretative attitudes that correspond to the figures of the artist, the critic and the historian, and so to the practices of art, criticism and history:

art is the mode of belief, commitment and overt expressiveness; *criticism* (which includes theory) is the mode of doubt and irony; *history* is the mode of observation and dispassionate judgment. (Shiff, 1996)

For Shiff these attitudes do not necessarily correspond to actually existing artists, critics or historians. Depending on intellectual history and conventions, the attitude of an historian, for example, could be predominantly 'artistic', or the attitude of an artist could be predominantly 'critical'. Shiff suggests that we live in a time when the dominant attitude of practice, and of interpretation, is that of critical irony and doubt - the historian is aware today of the impossibility of objective historical knowledge; the artist is aware of the impossibility of unmediated self-expression. Postmodernist theory in general attests to these impossibilities. However, when an artist is asked to produce a commentary on their own work, as they are in practice-led doctoral research, potentially retrograde assumptions are being made about the objectivity of the mode required to interpret art work, and so about the subjectivity of the latter, which may be exacerbated if models of research are imported into practice-led research from, say, the sciences. Such models aim at a verifiable objectivity that is foreign to the critical doubt and irony that characterizes current art practice and discourse, and to which later theories of interpretation from Gadamer to Derrida correspond in their emphases on indeterminacy and undecidability.

In order to consider the interpretative attitude of critical doubt and irony within the broader terms of understanding and knowledge, I turn to Hayden White's (1978) suggestion that the understanding of fields of experience tends to proceed through a series of turns, or tropes, that govern interpretation. These are the four so-called 'master tropes' named as such by the literary critic Kenneth Burke - metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. According to White, these tropes may be found as stages of thought in the writings of thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud and constitute four metadiscursive figures of thought according to which a given 'reality' is shaped and given meaning. Whereas metaphor corresponds to the initial apprehension of a 'reality', and metonymy and synecdoche are both figures that arrange this 'reality' according to relationships between part and whole, irony is the figure that doubts the relationships established by other figures, and reflects on the possibility that what we think we know or understand is really only a product of the imposition of these figures. I consider the

interpretative attitudes that arise in the relationship between the written text and the art work in these terms, asking whether the interpretation of the art work is attributable to the art work itself or whether it is rather attributable to the modes of interpretation employed.