Methodological Dilemmas and the Possibility of Interpretation

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An ongoing dilemma for practice-based researchers is the difficulty faced in positioning the methodology of studio-based traditions within the language and traditions of research communities in the academy. When the rationale for practice-based research was crafted in the later 1980s the strategy adopted relied on notions of equivalence. The challenge was to align studio research practices with the conventions of research outputs as defined by the social sciences. This was an understandable strategy at the time for it helped gain access. It was also an unwise decision. The rationale rested on defining research and the task of finding a common purpose whereby studio practices could be seen to achieve goals expected of any research activity. The definition of research endorsed by the OECD as referenced in the Frascati Manual was seen to accommodate the kind of research art and design practitioners engaged in. Although primarily used in science and technology as a guide for research and development serving sustainable economic growth, practice-based researchers were attracted to the definition of research used in the Frascati Manual because later iterations introduced creativity as an important feature of research. The quest for novelty and innovation was seen to complement the inherent creative capacities seen to be at the heart of studio based activity in art and design. The following definition of research from the Frascati Manual is often cited in the rationale of many practice-based research policy documents.

Research and experimental development comprises creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge. (OECD Frascati Manual, Fifth edition, 1993)

The lure of aligning with "creative work" was hard to resist. What was often lost in this search for an explanatory ally was the realization of what the Frascati Manual was. Developed in the early 1960s and subject to updating over the years, this document provides a set of guidelines for helping emerging economies organize their research and development initiatives. Hence the purpose was to promote active participation in technologically driven economies. The conceptual basis of the Frascati definition of research endorses the traditional distinction between basic and applied research. The primacy of creativity and novelty are highlighted as necessary criteria for generating knowledge that may prove beneficial in development and application, especially in innovative practices and industrial productivity.

It seemed a logical decision to frame practice-based research activity within this goal of creatively contributing to the "stock of human knowledge." Unfortunately it also meant that practice-based researchers were stuck with the construct and conventions that define research and development in the social sciences. In some areas this has proved useful, particularly for those in design and technology who see research to primarily involve the somewhat limited processes of problem finding and problem solving. It is little wonder that a couple of decades later practice-based researchers are having a hard time equating the research coming out of their advanced degree programs with measurements of research outcomes maintained by others within and beyond the academy.

The source of this methodological dilemma is relatively simple: artists are not social scientists. The challenge currently facing practice-based researchers is to adjust the parameters that define the kind of research undertaken in studio contexts so as to more adequately represent what it is that artists do when carrying out research. For those in the

social sciences it is probable or plausible outcomes that are sought, which are fully supported by evidence accumulated and grounded in carefully managed interventions. The pattern of knowledge construction is relatively simple here in that new insights are built on gaps found in existing information systems and structures. Novelty is mostly a product of invention and adaptation although those who look beyond existing parameters of course can open up radical new lines of inquiry. Those in the humanities pursue a conceptual inquiry approach where adequacy and consistency of thought serve to frame analyses and critiques. Theorizing here mostly surrounds linguistic and propositional strategies and outcomes look to establish more appropriate foundational understandings of human actions, conditions and consequences. Researchers who challenge socio-cultural and political regimes adopt more overt critical perspectives. The strategies employed often make use of theorized accounts of social phenomena that can be applied in other contexts to shed light on problematic situations.

Artists, however, are equally enthralled by the necessity to look anew at things as they are in giving form to the idea that a consistent feature of tradition is that past practices are continually changing. Eclectic by nature, the processes and procedures found in other disciplines are often pilfered by artists in ways that honor the notion that an outside perspective can offer new insights and open up useful collaborative possibilities. Art practice can, at times, be intensely descriptive, experimental, philosophical, historical, critical and explanatory, or just about any other exploratory stance one might consider. But a key feature is that from the point of view of research practice, the pursuit of knowledge works 'backwards,' in that artists create knowledge by moving from the unknown to the known. It is the possibility of new insights and understandings that intrigues artist-researchers. Central to this conception of research is the varying role that interpretation plays in the approaches pursued in practice-based inquiry.

An aspect of interpretation that is common across research traditions is that making sense of evidential material accrued from any inquiry involves some confluence between the forms created or collected, and the subsequent search for meaning. Irrespective of the discursive or non-discursive nature of the research activity or artefact, there needs to have a defensible basis upon which arguments and expressions can be framed. As Arthur Danto (1981) reminds us "you can call a painting anything that you choose, but you cannot interpret in any way you choose, not if the argument holds that the limits of knowledge are the limits of interpretation" (p. 131). Danto's caution is still relevant today and is echoed by Jerome Bruner's definition that the purpose of interpretation is to help us understand things, and understanding is, after all, a primary goal of any researcher. Bruner explains:

> The object of interpretation is understanding, not explanation; its instrument is the analysis of text. Understanding is the outcome of organizing and contextualizing essentially contestable, incompletely verifiable propositions in a disciplined way... The requirement, rather, is verisimilitude or "truth likeness," and that is a compound of coherence and pragmatic utility, neither of which can be rigidly specified. (1996, p. 90)

The varying roles of interpretation and the strategies used in practice-based research that build on the distinctions noted above will be reviewed in this paper. This analytical overview will be referenced to three sources that the author has been directly involved with in various roles as supervisor, curator and researcher. These interpretive sites include:

Samples of dissertation research conducted at Teachers College, Columbia University,
A series of exhibitions curated at the Pearl Street Gallery in New York, 2006-07,
A case study of examples of contemporary art from the 2007 Venice Biennial.