Are ambiguous research outputs undesirable?

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abstract ° full paper

This paper supports the position that interpretation in the visual and performing arts is fundamentally different from other disciplines. It argues that 'interpretation' should not be constrained by the requirement of unambiguous language and that *practice-based* research should strive to demonstrate its findings by methods most appropriate to the mode of practice in question. More specifically it responds to the question: 'Are unambiguous research outputs in the arts possible or desirable?' and argues that ambiguous research outputs are both desirable and inevitable.

We have used this paper to discuss the problems associated with ambiguity in terms of knowledge and practice and what it is, more precisely, that might be ambiguous. Plato's dialogic device and the logic derived from fallacies of ambiguity provide models with which to question the articulation and validation of outputs and whether they are acceptable or not. Using fallacies of ambiguity, we explore the possibility that expectations of practice-based research might rely on principles originating in assumptions. In order to move methodologies in arts research forward, we advocate the need to recognise, firstly, the different locations of any ambiguity involved and secondly, where any assumptions deriving from fallacies occur. We distinguish between process and product and argue that the application of key terms and the question needs to be unambiguous; the research outputs do not.

If practice-based research, as an 'emerging theory of interpretation,' is going to establish different and valid forms of knowledge, we suggest that it needs to acknowledge its fundamentally different dynamic of doubt, differentiation and ambiguity. We consider the attitudinal shift that understands the notion of knowledge as fluid and suggest evidence of its application in examples of theoretical debate and practice. In order to argue the desirability of ambiguous research outputs, we discuss possible justifications for digression, simultaneity and the purposefulness of doubt. For example, in the wake of Derrida's general project, which questions how we comprehend thought, meaning and formulate what we call knowledge, we establish the legitimacy of ambiguity and doubt and its potential in practice-based research.

To that end we promote methodologies that fully utilise the potential of practice. In reconsidering the validity of research outputs, we must recognise what we assume as essentially validating an ambiguous practice-output: that practice must contribute to answering the question. If the research methodology follows a rigorous process, which outlines the framework, context and language used, then ambiguous outputs have to be seen as valid. We promote the hypothesis that art practice, as discursive expression and defined by its manner of presentation, can display a manner of thinking that makes a different, but equivalent, contribution to cultural debate (and to written analysis). Our ultimate aim is to proceed from the convention of interpreting art, as merely illustrating social, political and philosophical ideas discussed in other disciplines or situating practice within some context, to investigating practice (images, objects and performances) as provoking thought and discourse (philosophically, culturally, politically) and producing forms of knowledge. We emphasise the potential in utilising practice and ambiguous outputs to demonstrate thinking and assert that arts research should aim to demonstrate, through the considered use of both practice and verbal articulation, the 'field' of possibilities that is being questioned.