

## **Editorial and Discussion of Papers**

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### **Thematic Areas**

It was intended that the conference would explore the theory and practice relationship as an overriding theme, and other forms and effects of theory in practice and practice in theory. These are critical issues in a college of art and design - especially while it is developing a research program and postgraduate studies - when the proposition is frequently put forward that the way that creative practice qualifies as research, is by situating it within a theoretical agenda. The conference was not intended to be a showcase for either theory or practice, but an examination, by theorists and practitioners, of the places of intersection. The intention was to open dialogues between theorists and practitioners that might lead to new possibilities for theory and practice.

The conference brought together a highly diverse mix of academics and practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines. The multi-disciplinary nature of the event allowed for a collaborative approach towards the exploration of its theme. The diversity of the presentations and fields of discourse encouraged a way of thinking synthetically and thus for the delegates to adopt a correlating approach to theory and practice. For a number of delegates the conference provided exposure to areas of practice / theory not previously encountered.

Distinct advances thus have been made with regards to developing and facilitating an interdisciplinary dialogue. Many of the papers addressed and fostered a further understanding of how theory and practice are related. Some of the papers addressed the inseparability of theory with practice and their relationship to ethics. Others, again, expressed a critique of specific contemporary cultural discourses as limiting in scope with regards to the furthering of practice and research into practice.

In this way the conference advanced the debate regarding the role, function and problems encountered with regards to research in creative practice and specifically the fine arts. With the increasing propagation of a Ph.D. culture in Higher Education institutions, it is important to understand what effects and impacts the requirement of large theoretical components is having on the end product of creative

practice. A number of papers addressed this question and discussed the 'new' emphasis on research and the (possible) effects this might have on creative practice, and how practice and theory might evolve research methodologies. These contributions thus articulated, critiqued and so furthered the debate on the role of theory with regards to the emerging doctoral studies in the creative disciplines.

A number of practitioners demonstrated how practice-led projects can become a vehicle for the furthering of theoretical discourse and how these can address the developing methodological frameworks for research 'through', 'into', and 'led by' creative practice.

Another emergent theme was the non-static nature of theory. A number of the presentations demonstrated how theory itself is as dynamic and open-ended as practice, forever adapting itself to the changing circumstances of practice. Though the inherent truth of this is evident in the relatively recently emerged sciences (such as quantum mechanics, chaos and systems theory), the traditional and orthodox view of theory is that it provides a stable set of understood relationships, which can be applied to practical external lived experience. Some discussions and presentations demonstrated the dynamic coexistence and interrelationship between the theoretical and the practical; they are more than merely inseparable, rather, one and the same thing. We can theorise about a practical event or perform a certain practice according to a theoretical understanding, but at a more essential level these categories break down, and any action always has a theoretical and a practical dimension (for more on this see the specific discussion below).

Also, when discussing the relevance of theory to practice, it is of critical importance to define terms and meanings. This event made it clear that certain terms and discourses take on slightly different meanings according to the context in which they are applied. The papers and discussion sessions allowed for a reappraisal of terms, discourses, and vocabulary used with regards to the different disciplines. Thus the event furthered a critical reappraisal of theoretical vocabulary.

Perhaps not altogether surprising, another relevant and emerging theme was a reappraisal of the Kantian account of aesthetic judgments. Several papers made references to Kant demonstrating that the Enlightenment versus Romanticism debate is long from over.

The following discussion provides a brief introduction to some of the papers and attempts to place them in dialogue with one another.

## **Theory and Practice: Their Nature and Relationship; the Ethical Dimension, Validation**

A good place to start this specific discussion is with the relationship between theory/practice and ethics.

In his contribution Leonidas Koutsoumpos makes a number of provocative links between ethics / morality and theory / practice. He provides a useful etymological analysis of the terms *theoria* and *praxis*. For the ancient Greeks the distinction between theory and practice was not a separation between concrete actions in the political realm (practice), as opposed to theoretical, abstract knowledge that can be applied to that realm, '*Rather, it was an opposition (and tension) between what was strictly human [praxis] and what was divine in man [theoria]*'.<sup>1</sup>

In his discussion Koutsoumpos demonstrates how our contemporary understanding of theory is based on the reduced notion (rooted in Enlightenment thinking) of passive watching of, or reflection upon, practical action. The original Aristotelian concepts of *theoria* and *praxis* are much more entwined. Theory is participatory in practice and is not an abstract set of rules to be separated out from our actions. Theory and practice are two dimensions of the same process: '*theoria [...] is a participation in practice*'.<sup>2</sup> And further: "Theory and practice' is not 'reflection *and* action' any more, but rather '*reflection-in-action*'".

Koutsoumpos discusses another Greek term: *eupraxia*, which denotes an ethical form of practice. A form of practice, not formulated primarily to achieve an end goal, but with the '*doing proper*' itself as its primary purpose. His paper ends with a proposal to think of creative activity as operating in a field of play, the boundaries of which are defined by the four poles of theory, practice, ethics and morality. These poles do not operate as distinct and separate categories, but are more like gravitational force fields, flowing one into another.

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<sup>1</sup> Lobkowitz, N. *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx*, p.26-27 (author's emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> Coyne, R. and A. Snodgrass *Interpretation in Architecture*, London, New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006, p.112 (original emphasis).

This relationship between the notion of play and ethics is taken further in Terry Rosenberg's paper. Drawing on a wide range of sources (which include Heidegger, Latour and Kearney), Rosenberg provides a lucid discussion on the special nature of knowledge that is acquired through practice. He writes:

In drawing uncertainty into academic practice one can begin to see, in the tentative engagements of practice possibilities for a poetic criticality. Practice, with its uncertainties offers a way of 'engaging' the world poetically rather than 'knowingly' (scientifically or indeed in the epistemological models of the social sciences).

He proposes that ethical practice is inherently playful, and it is this poetic and playful nature of creative practice that needs to be further recognised, accommodated and valued. The product of creative practice might therefore be knowledge that is 'speculative, hypothetical and provisional' and would not comfortably comply with our traditional validating mechanisms. Rosenberg concludes:

There is clearly a need for 'new imaginaries of validity'<sup>3</sup> that not only reconstruct 'validity' or 'truth' as many sided, multiply perspectival, as shifting and complex',<sup>4</sup> accommodating 'other' epistemologies ('other' cultures of knowledge) but ones that are also expansive enough to celebrate the experimental and the uncertain; valuing and validating that which is not necessarily epistemological.

So making the case for a reinvestigation of the validating and legitimating processes to which creative practice is submitted.

### **The Research Assessment Exercise and the Legitimation of Theory; the Return to Kant**

Bettina Reiber's paper provides some insight into how current theoretical positions are legitimised in the arts and humanities. Reiber highlights the problematic nature of research in the aesthetic disciplines. By referring to Lyotard she discusses how the universal grounds for assessment, that used to underline aesthetic judgment, have been eroded by the contemporary climate of cultural discourse.

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<sup>3</sup> Scheurich, J.J. op. cit., p.85.

<sup>4</sup> Scheurich, J.J. ibid., p.85.

Aesthetic criteria - she proposes - have been replaced by criteria that judge the performativity of those who propagate research in the creative disciplines. Theory, she says, must of course stand up to logical examination, but the legitimisation of new knowledge has become primarily linked to the status and number of outputs of the author. The RAE weighs up the evidence by which the performativity of authors is measured, and thus not necessarily their qualitative contributions. Performativity here can be linked with market forces in a number of ways, for example: the changing nature of academic funding introduces a competitive element into the ways in which research is being funded and thus effects what kind of research is conducted; and secondly, funding councils and universities actively encourage economic benefits of research. Increasingly they assess the commercial potential of future research. What Reiber argues and concludes is that only theory grounded in, and evaluated by, aesthetic criteria can do justice to art production and so make art production fulfill a true social and political role. Thus implicitly she proposes a re-examination of the validity of aesthetic judgments, which, according to Kant, are not cognitive, but come about due to a sensation of pleasure born from the indeterminate play between the faculties of our imagination and our reason.

A return to Kant is also invoked in Michael Schwab's paper 'Artistic Research and the Role of Critique'. Schwab begins by examining the RAE's definition of research and the AHRC's requirement for the exposition of practice in order to demonstrate 'position' and 'critical reflection'. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin, Schwab goes on to demonstrate how knowledge derived from art is not the result of a logical critique or analytic or expository process, but comes about through reflection. For a critique to bring about a genuine understanding of the 'ambition'<sup>5</sup> of the artwork it must be based upon reflection. Unlike neo-materialist and structuralist propositions, which deny any grounds for subjecthood, reflection must rest upon some notion of subjecthood. Schwab concludes that without critical reflection by the producer, the mere application of a philosophical or cultural discourse to creative practice might well result in 'bad art'.

A re-examination of a locus for creativity is evident in Michael Tucker's paper on Shamanism. He too supports a reappraisal of universal principles and a re-evaluation of the notions of creativity and genius when it comes to art and to the teaching of aesthetics in fine art

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<sup>5</sup> See Benjamin, W. 'Zwei Gedichte Von Friedrich Hölderlin: 'Dichtermut' - 'Blödigkeit' [1914/15]' in Tiedemann, R. and H. Schweppenhäuser (eds.) *Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften Band I, 1*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, p.105.

education. Tucker is passionate about the romantic spirit in art, but suggests that this needs to be understood in a contemporary way. He proposes that a contemporary interpretation of the archetype of the shaman - an 'abstract Shamanism'<sup>6</sup> - might bring valuable insights, which could inform a more enlightened art education and cultural politics. Quoting the Scottish poet Kenneth White, Tucker proposes that it could transform: 'ecology, philosophy, poetics and politics (that way, we might get depth ecology, lightning philosophy, live poetics and, who knows, even enlightened cultural politics).'<sup>7</sup>

## **Theory, Practice and Poststructuralism**

James Williams' paper on Poststructuralism engages with the universal in a very different way. The paper discusses the complete entwinement between theory and practice, and the relativistic nature and open-endedness of the theoretical. To make or propose any universalising meta-statement about practice, must inevitably do violence to the specifics of the lived experience within which theory and practice are situated. The universalising tendencies of theory must ultimately be understood as just that, and must be suspended in the light of the specifics of the moment. In a deconstructive manner Williams demonstrates the assumed nature of the universal but without denying its operative function in the world. Even if we conclude that universals are constructed and abstract, we cannot deny that they still underpin the way we make value (and thus ethical) judgements.

Williams concludes his paper by touching upon the unsettling relationship between deconstructive practice and science. The paper is a good example of a poststructuralist position with regards to the questioning of the status, validity, legitimation and boundaries of any assumed theoretical position, be this held with regards to scientific or creative practice.

A similar deconstructive undercurrent is present in Fred McVittie's exposure of the metaphors and tropes employed by theoretical discourses. When communicating the findings of abstract theoretical reflections, or the concreteness of lived practical experience, we subject them to the metaphorical and symbolic nature of language. Thus when drawn into this realm of representation, theory might

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<sup>6</sup> White, K. *On Scottish Ground: Selected Essays* Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998, p.45.

<sup>7</sup> White, K. *ibid.*, p.42.

become as liquid and flowing as lived experience, whereas the latter may become fixed, static, and caged by its description.

The complexity of bringing criticality to practice, informed by a historical analysis, is discussed in Teresa Stoppani's contribution. She clarifies the theoretical position of the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri. For Tafuri, history is not a monolithically resolved whole, but a shifting and complex plurality, forever subject to reassessment. In this way the historian is actively engaged with the potential of history to provide avenues that shape the future of social and political change. Stoppani writes:

History is active, determined by the objects it analyses but also determinant of the realities it deconstructs and then recomposes: acting on a multiple and non-linear time, such history produces future, while it offers itself as an always provisional and intrinsically endless analytical construct.

Applying Benjamin's notions of the 'Author as Producer' the historian may inform the practitioner in the critical engagement with not only the work, but, perhaps more relevant, also the means of its production.

Stoppani is critical of recent formalist and self-referential work in late modern architecture (e.g. Eisenman, Libeskind), which attempts to break away from its socio-political context. In a time when we often hear about the loss of (or end of) history, Stoppani reminds us that critical re-radicalisation is always a possibility by re-evaluating history and unleashing its implicit tensions, in order to produce "dangerous" histories that challenge current architectural practices in their wider context.'

### **Theory into Practice, Practice into Theory**

A number of the presentations attempted to *enact* a theoretical position rather than to simply elaborate one. These presentations were part text / part performance piece. They pose a challenge for the editor who attempts subsequently to represent them in the form of this text. These presentations remind us that theory is also a form of practice that is no more immune to aesthetic and formal prerogatives than creative practice.

G rard Mermoz presented us with a discussion on the issues of accountability and authorship in relation to fine art. In his paper he discusses the evolution of his 'sonic postcard'. His intent, in making this specific work, was to maximise the possibilities for audience engagement with and participatory reading of the work; a theoretical position aligned to Barthes' notion of the 'writerly text'.

His paper thus provides a good example of how theory might be tested through practice; specifically he discusses how action research methodology was applied in order to evaluate the interactions between the artwork and its audience. However, most illuminating is the way his work evolved through its interactions with the platforms for dissemination and its audience. The work actively takes its cue from the external conditions it meets. This came about through the initial pre-text of making art accountable. Mermoz demonstrates that the research agenda, which demands this accountability, can be a catalyst for creative production and development. This is perhaps contrary to how many artists may experience research as imposed upon them, and as restrictive to their creative process.

This theme of author, text and medium is present also in Chris Murray's paper.<sup>8</sup> His discussion of authorship and the superhero comic genre provides an example of how theory might be hi-jacked to legitimise certain forms of cultural production. He implicitly warns us to be critical of taking theorisation at face value, as in the postmodern age this kind of legitimisation can be difficult to separate from commercial motives.

Susan Carden's paper provides us with the practical foundations, a craft basis, for theoretical thinking. She traces the origin of mathematical hypothesis back to very pragmatic experiments involving natural materials. She provides a very clear demonstration of the reciprocity between the natural world and its abstract representation in theoretical constructs.

The artist collective *De Geuzen* demonstrated how art can function as a dissemination platform and a testing ground for theory.<sup>9</sup> Their performance piece delivered and improvised during the conference

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<sup>8</sup> Murray, C. 'Holy Hypertexts! - The Pose of Post-modernity in Comics and Graphic Novels of the 1980s'.

<sup>9</sup> De Geuzen describe themselves as a 'foundation for multi-visual research'. See De Geuzen, 'A S ance with Guy'.

consisted of a series of interactions with a chat-bot, programmed to respond to questions with quotations drawn from texts by Guy Debord; in this way bringing Debord 'back from the beyond'.

Apart from the humorous and engaging performance, by asking Debord's 'opinions' on current (i.e. post-Debordian) issues (such as contemporary international terrorism), this kind of practice provides a new means for testing the relevance, effectiveness, validity and generalisability of theory transferred from an historical to a contemporary context.

### **The Nature of Creativity, Other Forms of Knowledge**

The challenge to and subsequent advancement of theory via practice is particularly well illustrated in a paper by Malcolm Quinn. Quinn develops an intriguing discussion on anti-theory and hoaxing and demonstrates how aesthetic practice in a sense is a more powerful tool than any historical-critical reflection on it will ever be (e.g. Duchamp). Quinn's main concern however lies with 'identifications' between knowledge and practice. His discourse is primarily psychoanalytic and his discussion situates knowledge production as operating between two market places:

[...] practice-led research in art and design exists in a unique space between the demands of the art market and the marketplace of ideas, where researchers can treat theory and practice as elements within a skein of knowledge/identification, the investigation of which calls for its own methodologies and exemplary texts.

The dynamic nature of both creativity and reflective theory is discussed in Sean Cubitt's paper. He says: 'Theory masquerades as logical...but it lies.' Cubitt discusses creativity as the product of a dialogue between physical environment, technology and the socio-psychological condition of the artist. Creativity can be understood as the process of making the unknown visible. Cubitt posits the role of theory as both contributing to the historical consciousness in the contexts of which creativity operates, as well as a means to raise awareness regarding the exploitation of creativity.

Cubitt ends his paper with a caveat; creativity, he says, is a precious resource and like all resources is finite: 'Theory [he goes on to say] is

not the enemy of practice. A practice unaware of its own exploitation is far more dangerous – to the practitioner.'

In her paper Katy Macleod examines the relationship between writing and the process of art production. The intimate connection between the two elements within practiced based doctoral research brings about a new entity she calls 'art/writing': 'This art/writing was conceived as a resistance to research conventions which hierarchise the relationship between the written and the visual.' In line with the current reappraisal of representational practices the paper discusses the materiality of writing and deconstructs the subjugation of art to writing.

This kind of 'art/writing' is 'writing' in a dialectical relationship with the process of making art. Macleod suggests that 'art/writing' might be a means to test, redefine, and resist traditional forms of art critique. In doing so it may uncover new forms of theorization which - she posits - might restore '[t]he authentic intimacies of art'.

The call for new theorization, methodology and evaluation of the specific epistemological frameworks within creative practice is echoed by Terry Rosenberg's analysis of how the creative disciplines engage with the production of knowledge.

We return here to the problem of how knowledge is legitimised. Many of the papers touch on the production of knowledge, theory and practice. As Williams implies in his paper discussed earlier: the production of knowledge in a science environment is not all that different from that of the arts. However in the final analysis it is the surrounding cultural discourses that legitimise the knowledge produced. However the nature of creativity is such that its preliminary context may be less defined than that of the natural or social sciences. It is this uncertainty and fuzziness of creativity, which - as Rosenberg suggests - must be valued for the unique and dynamic contributions it can make.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the papers presented here have a legacy that goes back to Enlightenment thinking and the Romantic reappraisal thereof. In the current educational environment, with a shift towards research modelled upon more rational and empirical traditions, this comes as no surprise. Romantic tendencies can be understood as a resistance to

this emerging research culture, whilst it is also an attempt to make sense of it.

We live in a time when culture is the dominant arena for the unfolding of political discourse, where the infallibility of science is questioned and the nature of creativity has become a new focus of philosophical and critical enquiry. As the educational arena of the creative disciplines comes further under the spell of a research-driven agenda, we need to question, examine, and at times resist the potentially systematic imposition of research models and methods imported from the natural and social sciences. Many of these will no doubt have valuable contributions to make to research in the arts; however, the performativity frameworks and assessment criteria attached to these may not always be suitable to evaluate the processes and products of creative practices.

In a neo-liberal climate where it is the global market that has become the negotiating principle between individual and society, person and state, it is of vital importance to scrutinise what knowledge is and is not validated and the mechanisms by which this is done.

It is important to provide platforms in which diverse paradigms, approaches and epistemologies can be explored, and where groundwork can be done for new methodologies of research. Perhaps, most importantly, these platforms need to be interdisciplinary, lest the danger arises that the discussions will become introverted, circular, discipline-specific and in a sense self-serving. It is from these tensions and apparent polarities arising between the diverse fields of theory and practice that new critical forms of enquiry can emerge.