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Are ambiguous research outcomes undesirable?

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PRESENTATION

This paper supports the position that interpretation in the visual and performing arts is fundamentally different from other disciplines. Specifically – in responding to the question: “Are un-ambiguous research outputs in the arts possible or desirable?” we argue that ambiguous research outputs are both desirable and inevitable – and 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.

Our context is *fine art practice* in the broadest sense, and which we understand as not necessarily resulting in an artefact or anything un-ambiguous. Our assumption is that any variety of practice will be a discursive construction that embodies values and theories and must conform to some order of language and structure (e.g. modernism, conceptualism), which (in the context of research) will always require the question: what is the premise for this structure and this practice? Ultimately, we promote the hypothesis that art practice, as discursive expression and defined by its manner of presentation, can display a kind of thinking that makes a different, but equivalent, contribution to cultural debate (and to written analysis, particularly in the way it can challenge assumptions and conventional expectations of meaning and objectivity). 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. The challenge for practice-based research is: what is that *knowledge* and how is that knowledge and ideology understood? This is potentially a huge project and, as we have found, a taxing one.

The paper submitted for publication follows the conventions of papers submitted for publication. It is concerned with identifying why “ambiguous research outputs” might be a problem and with demonstrating their desirability. We discuss the problems associated with ambiguity in terms of knowledge and practice and what it is, more precisely, that might be ambiguous. 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 that offer possible justifications for digression, simultaneity and the purposeful-ness of doubt. For example, Derrida’s premise of *differance* embodies apparently digressive directions, temp-orally and spatially, and asserts difference over identity and certainty; it insists that this disruption is present in any signifying act (visual or verbal). His expansion on *aporia* (unpassable path, impasse, not knowing where to go) introduces doubt - and incorporates plausible possibilities that are inconsistent or cannot be concluded.¹ Thereby as soon as one meaning is established, it is differentiated from others, which unlocks further possibilities that are different again. One cannot simply overturn an existing position with one that opposes it. The co-existence of different interpretations obstructs a logic that insists on “either / or” and signals the possibility of any number of modes of being, or diverse elements that may be simultaneous (tem-por-ally and spatially), but not oppositional. This approach to understanding insists on a shift in perspective that focuses on what else is possible, and encourages apparently incongruent or absurdly associated elements (visual or conceptual) to co-exist, rather than a reduction to binary opposition. As an example of practice and of interpretation, Derrida’s *Right of Inspection* (1989), demonstrates the reading of photographs as an active dialogue between the photograph and the reader that is changing and contradictory. His analysis of Marie-Francois Plissart’s photographic sequence takes the form of a contradictory speculation. He steers us away from a definitive account and demonstrates methods of looking and understanding through his questioning of implicit interpretations. His procedures for looking *perform* his thinking about meaning, and demonstrate the mediation of perception by thinking and association and what one sees as entirely imaginary, symbolic and inseparable from perception.

¹ (Derrida, 1993: 20).

Hence “there never was any ‘perception’”.² It is typical of the rhetorical performance that demonstrates his critique through the manner of his writing; his theoretical position is inseparable from his expression. His rhetoric holds the meaning in the very structure and expression of the writing (his practice) by using words as a place of ambivalence rather than definition. Referring to visual works as “mute tableaux,” he puzzles over the contextual mutability of words and their potential promiscuity, the impossibility of interpretation and the consequent “‘drama’ [in Plissart’s sequence] of the glasses, of the broken glass,” and “the multiple scene of the drinking glass that is shattered.”³

In this presentation, we refer to a fictional research output, which appears as a glass of water. The choice of a glass of water references its various use as subject matter from Chardin’s *Glass of Water and Coffee Pot* (1760) - Craig Martin’s *An Oak Tree* (1973) - and Neidderer’s use of the water glass to explore the role of artefacts as evidence in practice-based research (2004). We are taking the opportunity to explore the language of ambiguity, the ambiguity of practice and the potential of dialogue (after Plato and Gadamer) - the potential in speculative interpretation that (after Derrida) actively avoids resolution and refrains from ‘telling all the stories’ or explaining all the possibilities. – despite the desire to do so. Instead we attempt to open a field of possibilities in the manner defined by the representational structures of this presentation. We have been experimenting with the possibilities of rhetorical performance that parallels rational verbal discussion, with ambiguous non-verbal demonstration. There are at least three practices here – the visual demonstration of the glass of water, the scripted dialogue as performance and the combination of two in parallel. This presentation aims to establish the legitimacy of ambiguity and doubt. It argues that practice can parallel written discourse. That it offers a different perspective, a different knowledge and that it is inevitably ambiguous. Therefore we present the paper, to include dialogue, with the visuals working in parallel – differently.⁴

B: The glass of water says what it says in the way that it says it

A: So is it a speaking glass of water?

B: It has its own possibilities – its own rhetorical language – its own capacity

² (Derrida, 1973:103).

³ (Derrida, 1989: 18-23)

⁴ (after Plato, Gadamer, Derrida and Michael Kelly)

A: Are you saying it speaks for itself?

B: Yes

A: Well, there's no point speaking anymore ... [*Pause ... looks around*]

B: But I want to understand what it 'says'

A: For that you need a common language

B: I can still speak to you *about* it but I cannot speak its language. And I wonder how I can engage with it. So here's the glass of water ...

A: Which – this one? [*Points to screen*]

B: Yes this one [*Points to screen*] But I'm still not sure if this is the right sort of glass of water – or not

A: The right glass?

B: Yes, the perfect form of glass that I have in mind - ideally

A: I see. So, one that is not right would not ring true

B: No. I have tried a few – they seem like poor imitations

A: The one that is left would seem like a compromise. And you are seeking the truth....

And what sort of truth?

B: Well I haven't decided where it might be and anyway it is not appropriate to apply truth or falsity to 'art'. That would be a fallacy

A: But you are worried about it being right or not?

B: Yes – ultimately

A: Is that truth then a proposition or a disclosure?

B: I would say it's a demonstration

A: That demonstrates what?

B: The glass of water

A: But what does it represent?

B: Itself – not any other 'thing'. It does not imitate any 'thing'

A: Not anything? – Nothing at all?

B: It does not represent any 'thing'. It is not dependent on anything external to it. It is autonomous

A: So - on the one hand you're saying that you are seeking the right glass of water - and on the other hand you are saying that it speaks for itself. Then can't it tell you when it is right or left?

B: Yes. It will be compelling

A: For you or for everyone? We could go on arguing about whether it is the right sort of glass or not

B: You can't argue with it. Meanwhile it is there in my head and continues to sustain my understanding of its possibilities

A: And when you find it – can you prove that it is right?

B: No, but I will know

A: And what sort of knowledge is that? Can you measure it?

B: I could try to describe it – exhaustively. But I don't see that as appropriate. It has its own sort of knowledge - its own sort of measure.

A: So what sort of knowledge is that?

B: Well, a different sort of capacity is required. It is not scientific

A: What supports this knowledge?

B: It supports itself – it 'carries within itself a capacity of its own that involves itself.'⁵

A: Well then, what determines its form?

B: You do understand that whatever form it is, if I say it is 'art', it is irrefutable?

A: Does that hold true also for the photograph of the glass of water?

B: It depends on whether it is 'art' or not

A: What guides that? – is it history? Experience? Fate?

B: It will be compelling

A: For whom? If it's not art, it is an imitation and if it is art it is irrefutable - it is self-evident then?

B: Hmmm

A: How do I know whether it is art or not?

B: If I say so

A: So you're talking about a post Kosuthian aesthetics (post Judd)?

B: Yes. Kosuth made his argument in 1969⁶

A: So something does determine its form?

B: Yes

A: And as truth?

B: It depends on what sort of truth you are talking about

A: Hmmm

⁵ Hans- George Gadamer, 'From Word to Concept': the task of hermeneutics as philosophy'. Trans. Richard E. Palmer in Bruce Krajewski (ed.) *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2003

⁶ Kosuth, 'Art after Philosophy' in *Art in Theory* p.857 – post Judd – 'if someone calls it art, it is art' – art is a matter of definition "Art is what I say is art and I say *this* is art and so it *is* art" cited in *Out of the Box: the reinvention of art 1965-1975*, Carter Ratcliff, Allworth Communications, Inc., 2000

B: And anyway, if you accept that if I say it is art, then 'truth' isn't really relevant any more. Validation as truth is not relevant anymore. We are left with whatever meaning it generates

A: So it is not dependent on its aesthetic qualities?

B: Yes

A: But not dependent on what it looks like – its appearance?

B: No

A: I see.... where are the aesthetic qualities then?

B: In the cognitive apprehension it generates – the cognitive understanding

A: I don't think I have the same parameters for aesthetic qualities

B: Probably not ... [*Pause*]

A: Does it represent anything?

B: It does not represent a glass of water. It is autonomous

A: And as an autonomous object, does it have meaning in any sense relating to the practical world and ordinary life?

B: It cannot be separated from ordinary life. This autonomous object is also one that can be understood in the real world. It is transformed in your encounter with it

A: But this autonomous object is also one that can be understood in the real world

B: It is complicated – it is an encounter with the real object, the work of art and the fact that it is both those things. The possibilities of meaning are thereby multiplied

A: Yes – but my understanding is founded on what I understand already. It is doubtful that I will ever understand it

B: Well the point is - that we should not ever completely understand it – its capacity exceeds my knowledge and invokes doubt

A: I want to make sense of it

B: You can sense it

A: But I cannot make sense of it

B: That is because you see it as a work of art. You preface your response with expectations

A: You said that it was your art practice – your research

B: It is. You don't have to understand it in the sense of - this is this, or that is that

A: Well is it art or is it a glass of water?

B: It is art and a glass of water. It digresses spatially and temporally

A: That is absurd

B: Yes. Experience of it is a different sort of knowledge

A: How do you justify that as research?

B: Can one justify experience?

A: I guess you could by reflecting on your experience of practice?

B: Yes, but that is not the same. Experience is a different sort of knowledge from reflection *on* experience. My experience is simultaneously - psychical and physical. My reflection is psychical and cognitive

A: My interpretation is psychical and cognitive. Are they the same?

B: Do they need to be?

A: Where is the meaning then?

B: It is here and it is there - there is meaning – it is not definite – it is not the meaning. It cannot be entirely located. It cannot be separated from its performance – however that may be.

A: How can I interpret it then?

B: Your interpretation cannot be separated from your experience of it. Nor can mine

A: I can rationalise it. I can explain it

B: You can, but it won't be the same. It is the same and it is different

A: We could discuss the differences

B: We could. However, the glass of water demonstrates these differences without discussion

A: So - is it the right glass of water?

B: It's my sort of right

A: Now we're talking about an individual and subjective truth?