

The Language of Reflective Practice in Art and Design

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“Design takes the results of past production as the resource for new shaping, and for remaking. Design sets aside past agendas, and treats them and their products as resources in setting an agenda of future aims, and in assembling means and resources for implementing that. The social and political task and effect of the designer is fundamentally different from that of the critic.” (Kress)

“Design is as much an expression of feeling as an articulation of reason; it is an art as well as a science, a process and a product, an assertion of disorder, and a display of order.” (Margolin)

Introduction and Theoretical Context

In the introduction to *Design Discourse*, Victor Margolin points to “design’s broad role in society”¹ and argues for the need to “make a place for design discourse within the larger debates about social theory, notably those that center on the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial society, and from a modern to a postmodern culture.”² Yet in spite of the insights and provocations of postmodernism and poststructuralism which would have us re-examine some of the premises of modernism and structuralism, ways of thinking about and attitudes towards language and the acquisition of knowledge in many institutions of higher education today have remained defiantly rooted in notions of realism, empiricism, and a belief in the scientific method. This is reflected in the conventionalized forms of communication which continue to be privileged by the academy, and which are grounded in an outmoded and increasingly contested notion of representation. For students of art and design faced with, in many instances, the requirement to communicate in (conventionalized) written text, arguments and ideas which they feel already have been adequately expressed in a different material form or medium, the issues surrounding the representation of cultural values can be particularly acute. In this paper, I shall reflect on the “tensions, resistances, and alternatives”³ underlying and framing academic writing practices and preferences in art and design, and suggest that the notion of design itself, which incorporates both the process of designing as well as the (newly) designed product of that process,⁴ is a useful analytical tool for examining the problematics of re-presentation.

1 Victor Margolin, ed., *Design Discourse* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 6.

2 *Ibid.*, 7.

3 *Ibid.*, 265.

4 See, in particular, Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (Aldershot: Athena, 1995) and Gunther Kress, “Design and Transformation” in Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, eds., *Multiliteracies* (London: Routledge, 2000).

The structuralist legacy to the academy, a framing of ideas and arguments in terms of binary oppositions, dies hard. Thus, critical debates have centered on distinctions between process and product; form and content; “creativity” and “rationality”; argument and narrative; and “scientific” and “humanistic” traditions. Yet there also is evidence that some, at least, of these oppositions are being interrogated, if not entirely dismantled, in certain quarters.⁵ For example, Christopher Frayling,⁶ having presented popular images of artists and designers as well as of scientists, both real and fictional, challenges the assumption that research and scientific enquiry are absent from the artistic domain. Indeed, he takes issue with a range of (mis)representations and (mis)constructions: those of the expressive and intuitive artist; the boffin and the style-obsessed designer; and the notion of the research scientist whose subjectivity, unlike that of the artist, never comes into play.

Moreover, as Frayling points out,⁷ “critical rationalism, which relies on making everything explicit, by revealing the methods of one’s logic and justifying one’s conclusions, and which has at the heart of its enterprise a belief in clarity, has been under considerable theoretical attack in the last 10–15 years.” He goes on to argue that there always has been a cognitive as well as an expressive tradition in art, and suggests that “(d)doing science is much more like doing design”⁸ than one might care to admit, despite all the post-rationalizing about science. Furthermore, he contends that research like writing, doing science, designing, and creating art are all practices which can be situated in a social, technical, and cultural context.

Assumptions of scientific objectivity versus creative individualism are also critically examined by the UK Council for Graduate Education,⁹ which states that “It is no longer possible to polarize subjects as conforming—or not—to the ‘scientific method’”. A continuum from scientific research to creative practice would better reflect the realities of a situation in which differences already exist between the sciences and the humanities, for example, and between qualitative and quantitative research methods. It recognizes, nevertheless, the need to differentiate between “the presentation of works for a doctorate and for an exhibition;”¹⁰ the assumption being that works presented in an academic context require textual elucidation and critical (self-)reflection on the part of the researcher, as well as validation from the examiner who must be satisfied that the candidate has displayed “an understanding of the ways the practice is related to theory, in relation to the specific work being undertaken.”¹¹ Likewise, Frayling distinguishes between research *into* art, research *through* art, and research *for* art,¹² the first two categories reflecting the traditional roles of research and academically-oriented, practice-based study, while the third category emphasizes the role of maker, rather than researcher, and seems to dispense with the need to explicitly relate artistic product to the process of research. In other

5 Indeed, the essays in *Design Discourse* collectively address the philosophical debate between modernists and post-modernists about the nature of reality and construct design as a “central human activity,” 8.

6 Christopher Frayling, “Research in Art and Design” in *Royal College of Art Research Papers 1* (London: RCA, 1993): 1–5.

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

9 UK Council for Graduate Education, *Practice-based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design* (Coventry: Dialhouse Printers, 1997).

10 *Ibid.*, 21.

11 *Ibid.*, 22.

12 Christopher Frayling, “Research in Art and Design.”

words, what both the UK Council for Graduate Education and Frayling ultimately agree on is the fact that, at the core of the academic enterprise, is a search for knowledge within a reflective and systematic framework. This knowledge may take different forms and have different applications, but the task of the academic researcher and practitioner (as opposed to the creator of art) is to communicate the results of a process of enquiry, whether this enquiry be purely theoretical or whether it can be seen to have practical applications.

Yet the idea that the distinguishing feature of research practice in academic contexts is the ability to communicate the results of a process of enquiry is not as unproblematic as it might superficially appear, since we first have to establish what is meant by communication. In theory, if not in practice, communication can take many different forms: we can communicate through gesture and dance, and through visual and acoustic representations, as well as through written messages. However, as we have seen, what seems to underlie academic notions of communication and which acts as a kind of guarantor of acceptability is, ultimately, the printed text, which records in written form an analytical and critical process which is thereby objectified and subject(ed) to interrogation and critique.

While I would not wish to collapse entirely categories and distinctions which serve a particular (and perhaps necessary) purpose, I would, nevertheless, like to draw attention to the privileged position held by verbal over visual and other modes of communication in the academy, and to point out, following Gunther Kress,¹³ the implications of such a (seemingly natural) position:

At the moment, our theories of meaning (hence our dominant theories of cognition) are entirely shaped by and derived from theories founded on the assumption of the dominance of language. Meaning is, in fact, identified with "meaning in language." This constitutes a major impediment to an understanding of the semiotic potentials of, among other modes, the visual and its role in cognition, representation, and communication."¹⁴

Kress is a member of the New London Group, which began life in September 1994 when a number of friends and colleagues from universities in Britain, Australia, and the U.S. got together for a week in New London, New Hampshire to discuss issues revolving around literacy and pedagogy in a changing and increasingly global and multicultural world. He adopted the notion of design, which he saw as being appropriate for an era in which the privileging of the written over other modes of communication, such as the visual, could no longer be taken for granted. Kress believes that design points to a dynamic and transformative use of representational resources in the designer's interest. Indeed, he sees design as the "essential textual and pedagogic/political goal for periods charac-

13 Gunther Kress, "Design and Transformation," 153–161.

14 Ibid., 159.

15 Ibid., 160.

terized by intense and far-reaching change.”¹⁵ While design as a metaphor for planning, organizing, and bringing to term a project realized within a set of evolving parameters certainly is not a new concept,¹⁶ its re-activation and investment by Kress and others seem to offer a potential resolution of the critical tensions surrounding the philosophical debate between modernists and postmodernists insofar as it appears to take account of the multimodal nature of communication in the modern world, while respecting the specificity, or what Kress calls the “different potentials,”¹⁷ of the various semiotic modes. By recognizing the complex of interests (personal, cognitive, affective, and social) which informs the process of meaning-making, it permits discussion of the creative process in relation to notions of cognition. Conversely, it underscores the cultural context and subjective motivations of much scientific enquiry. As Kress puts it: “Design is...about the best, the most apt representation of my interest; and about the best means of deploying available resources in a complex ensemble.”¹⁸

It is within such a framework that I wish to reflect on the problems and possibilities of research in an academic context in the creative arts.¹⁹ Clearly, in the area of art and design, the visual is likely to play an important role, whether the MPhil or Ph.D. be “by thesis” or “by project.”²⁰ The emphasis, however, is likely to be on verbal/textual communication in the case of the MPhil or Ph.D. “by thesis,” while studio-based practical work will constitute a major element in the case of the MPhil or Ph.D. “by project.” Yet even here there is a requirement for a written element as well as the provision of documentary evidence of reflective practice. Such documentary evidence may include visual as well as verbal or textual illustrations.

Problems and Possibilities in the Creative Arts

The problem of the relationship between the visual and the verbal; between printed text, illustrative drawing, and/or (relatively) independent artifacts; obviously raises itself here. How does one, in the case of an MPhil or Ph.D. “by project,” demonstrate a “clear structural and intellectual link”²¹ between two aspects of a work deemed to be “visibly interdependent”?²² At one level we are dealing here with a problematic which holds for all research projects, that is the relationship between data and analysis of data, and between the creation of an experimental situation and commentary on the processes and results of enquiry. We might enquire further how graphic or visual representations of data relate to other textual interpretations. Yet, from another perspective, these apparently analogous situations miss the point if we posit, following Kress,²³ different semiotic potentials of different modes of communication.

Viewed from this perspective, the notion that the visual can easily be rendered in written form or that the textual can simply be translated into diagrammatic form becomes more problematic. To

16 Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*.

17 Gunther Kress, “Design and Transformation,” 157.

18 *Ibid.*, 158.

19 It was within the context of a series of seminars on research methods that I was invited to the RCA to contribute some workshops on the research process and writing in academic contexts.

20 Students at the Royal College of Art are able to pursue research at the masters or doctoral levels by one of two main routes: they may either embark on an MPhil or Ph.D. “by thesis” or in the studio-based disciplines “by project.” The difference between these routes is principally one of scope and of focus.

21 *RCA Research Degree Student Handbook 1999–2000*, 11.

22 *Ibid.*, 11.

23 Gunther Kress, “Multimodality,” in Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, eds., *Multiliteracies* (London: Routledge, 2000).

put it provocatively: imagine wordsmiths being required to paint their meaning or convey, through music, the gist of their argument? In other words, the privileging (to varying degrees) of the written mode of communication has serious and challenging consequences not just for students of art and design, but for researchers in general. How are coherent arguments to be constructed and clear links to be made in a multi-modal environment? What is to count as evidence in the context of studio-based work, given the privileging of what Clive Dilnot²⁴ calls linguistic status over archeological status? Indeed, just what status is to be granted to objects and artifacts independent of their linguistic and rhetorical realizations? For as Richard Buchanan²⁵ points out, arguments may be “presented in things rather than words”; ideas may be presented “in a manipulation of the materials and processes of nature”²⁶ rather than in language.

Perhaps one way forward is offered by the notion of reflective practice or what Donald Schön calls “design as a conversation with the materials of a situation.”²⁷ Like Kress’s notion of design, which exploits both the process of designing and the (newly created) product of design, Schön’s account foregrounds the dynamics of a process which entails the realization of a product. At the same time, it acknowledges the necessary interrelationship of (pre-existing) materiality and subjectivity as they interact in a dynamic and motivated context. Language, in this view, is seen as a means of articulating (and thereby) transforming a given situation through a process of reflective action. Schön sees no necessary split between drawing (doing) and talking (reflecting on doing) which, for him, are “parallel ways of designing, and together make up...the *language of designing*.”²⁸

The Language of Reflective Practice

The 1999 Turner Prize,²⁹ awarded at the Tate Gallery on November 30 during a live broadcast on Channel 4, included pre-recorded short films profiling the short-listed candidates and introducing their work. The artists who collaborated on the production of the films commented on their projects and talked about what they were trying to achieve. Given that the purpose of the Turner Prize is to “promote the display and discussion of contemporary art,”³⁰ there is nothing unusual about this. Yet it does help to challenge assumptions about inspired but inarticulate artists unaware of the multiple contexts shaping and informing their work. What was striking about this group of artists was their ability to construct a critical and creative (multimodal) account of their work for a general audience. Arguably, then, the Turner Prize has helped to dispel myths about creative genius and inspired activity, and has aided the promotion of notions of reflective (and transformative) practice. The conversations of the short-listed artists with the materials of their situations clearly demonstrated an understanding of design-as-knowledge.

24 Clive Dilnot, “The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities” in Victor Margolin, ed., *Design Discourse* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 140.

25 Richard Buchanan, “Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice” in Victor Margolin, ed., *Design Discourse* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 91–104.

26 *Ibid.*, 94.

27 Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 78.

28 *Ibid.*, 80.

29 The Turner Prize is awarded annually by a jury in Britain to British artists under 50 years of age for an outstanding exhibition or other presentation of their work in the preceding 12 months.

30 Nicholas Serota, *Foreword to The Turner Prize 1999* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd., 1999).

Yet the kind of language needed to articulate complex, multi-modal ideas and their realization is not necessarily going to be the same as for other kinds of research activity. Buchanan writes: "It is surprising to realize how far we are led into figurative language to express the persuasiveness of lines."³¹ It may be that the "self-evident empiricism"³² of the scientific method is not so self-evident after all, and that we need to show greater tolerance of a language which seeks to render what Kress calls "the processes of synaesthesia, the transduction of meaning from one semiotic mode to another semiotic mode, an activity constantly performed by the brain."³³

While the critical rationalist may feel uneasy with a language that appears to lack clarity, resists easy categorization, and insists on mixing modes, it may be argued that "thinking things differently"³⁴ requires a different kind of language, one capable of new conceptualizations and multimodal inflections. If we are to avoid the conclusion that objects speak for themselves and what artists produce requires no further commentary, and if we are to encourage the possibility of the "transduction of meaning,"³⁵ then we must be open to a language that reflects "the interaction of 'modes of thought' and conceptions of the significance and meaning of the phenomena we explore."³⁶ Such a language is likely to be multi-layered and metaphorical, metaphysical and qualitative, rather than transparent and one-dimensional. It will not seek to exclude the personal and the affective from the cognitive and the social but to acknowledge changes which "arise as a result of the interested actions of individuals."³⁷ Thus, Buchanan³⁸ can talk about rhetoric and design as architectonic arts, while Steve McQueen is able to articulate his interest in *Deadpan* and other works as being an obsession with holding or prolonging the moment. To understand McQueen, we need to "loosen our grip on the distancing effect of academic discourse and replace it with a more...embodied response to things."³⁹ In other words, it may be that the language of art and design is necessarily poetic, and that to write about metaphysical concepts and reflective practices requires a new kind of discourse, one which runs the gamut of technological innovation and rhetorical presentation, and can integrate the discursive, the pictorial, the persuasive, and the instrumental.

In order to determine the extent to which some of these assertions—that the language of the creative arts is necessarily metaphoric, multi-layered, and qualitative, and that the rendering of multi-modal projects requires access to a range of meaning-making resources—I shall turn to a small sample of written material produced by a group of postgraduate students of art and design. For the purposes of this paper, I shall concentrate on elements salient to the foregoing discussion rather than on lexico-grammatical, generic, or methodological issues.

31 Richard Buchanan, "Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice," 104.

32 Clive Dilnot, "The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities," 239.

33 Gunther Kress, "Design and Transformation," 159.

34 Steve Baker, "Thinking Things Differently" in *Things 3* (London: V+A/RCA, 1995), 70–77.

35 Gunther Kress, "Design and Transformation," 159.

36 Clive Dilnot, "The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities," 241.

37 Gunther Kress, "Design and Transformation," 159.

38 Richard Buchanan, "Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice," 108.

39 Steve Baker, "Thinking Things Differently," 74.

Design as Transformation

While the areas of investigation covered by the five students whose abstracts I examined are, in many ways, very different, ranging from risk assessment in the heritage hospitality business to concerns with the visual language of medicine, there appears, at the same time, to be points of contact and features common to an otherwise diverse set of projects. It would be unwise to make too many claims on the basis of a small sample of papers produced by students still in the early stages of their research. However, the written products provide evidence of modes of thought and presentational styles which may be considered representative articulations of complex, multi-modal projects. Several student projects were specifically concerned, for example, with relationships between media and the cultural, cognitive, and communicative effects of presentation in different modes.

One student, interested in the ritual power and effects of medicine, was keen to examine “photographic and video reconstructions of medical practices” which would “begin to reveal elements of a visual language which often is unacknowledged.” She went on to suggest that the power and effects of medicine are not only related to beliefs in “science mediated through scientific thought and language” but that “performative language” as well as “visual symbolism and codes” are also involved in the social construction of medical roles and practices. Underlying such a project seems to be a concern with the relationships between text, image, and context, as well as with modes of communication (the visual, the performative, and the discursive) and the (powerful) effects of particular sets of practices.

This concern with the process of meaning-making and how discursive and interpretive practices shape perceptions and understanding seemed to be at the root of a number of projects. Another “theme” was the relationship between materiality and apperception. For example, one project involved an examination of the voice of the artist, voice being used in this context to refer both to the acoustic and material properties of voice, its qualities and modulations, and to the manner in which the voice of the artist is received and interpreted by particular audiences within society, more specifically in relation to other voices such as the voice of authority, the critical voice, and the voice of the people. Here again, we are concerned with the extent to which different material features and contexts impact upon cognitive and interpretive practices. In particular, the student appeared to be interested in the constitutive effect of particular material bases, and how they interact with and inform cultural and cognitive practices.

Yet another student expressed an interest in exploring what he called “organic connections between musical and visual disciplines.” As a reflective practitioner involved in a collaborative project between musicians of the Guildhall School and visual artists of

the School of Communications at the RCA, he was interested in investigating the possibility of finding “a shared artistic language which has *resonance* (my emphasis) with wide-ranging audiences” and to explore “*new landscapes* (my emphasis) in music, art, and performance” (the MAP-making project). What surfaces very clearly here is the reliance on metaphorical uses of language and the transference of terms from one domain to another. This both reflects and is constitutive of a project concerned with cross-arts and cross-cultural work, and creates for the reader a sense of synaesthesia. As with the student for whom the concept of voice was ambivalent and multi-faceted, this student was concerned both with the “distinctive identities” of the acoustic and visual dimensions while, at the same time, recognizing their potential compatibility and mutability. He referred to the need to explore “the delicate balance between visual and acoustic [modes], identifying at what point one becomes subservient to the other...” Like the student concerned with the possibilities of the visual language of medicine, he was interested in revealing the potential of a collaboration between the “seemingly different cultures of art and design with the performing arts...” The transformative and creative potential of yet another medium, that of new technology within the arts, was of particular concern to another student who saw the development of computer applications and of rapid prototyping as (potentially) creating the conditions for a reunification of the “manual with the mental world.”

In all of the above, we can detect a particular response to the context of reflective practice. The research process and, consequently, the language or languages used to articulate that process is necessarily qualitative, dynamic, and reflexive (though to varying degrees) in each case. We are not dealing with fixed or stable entities, but with fluid and dynamic conceptions and interactions. The objects of study are multi-modal and have heteronomous rather than strictly autonomous modes of existence. For this reason, I would suggest, it is necessary to use language creatively rather than instrumentally, and to foreground notions of design and transformation rather than notions of analysis and critique (Kress⁴⁰). This is not to deny the need for theoretical and professional rigor, but to invite discussion and reconsideration of the creative as well as critical potentials of language and of art, indeed of the language of art. As John Wood,⁴¹ in a recent article in *THES*, puts it: “Scholastic knowledge tends to emphasize ‘knowing that,’ whereas design requires more ‘knowing how’”. In the interest of reflective and transformative practice, it is perhaps best to combine different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, modes of communication through the language of design.

40 Gunther Kress, “Design and Transformation,” 160–1.

41 John Wood, “Dreams, Dogs, Design” in *THES* (February 18, 2000).

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