a report on the

research into practice
conference

Friday 31 October 2008, at the Royal Society of Arts, London
http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/res2prac/

The Conference

The 5th issue in a series of bi-annual conferences hosted by the University
of Hertfordshire, Faculty for the Creative and Cultural Industries/Centre
for Research into Practice, was dedicated to discussing the role of
interpretation in research in the visual and performing arts. A description
of the conference theme, the program and abstracts can be accessed online
(see above). A selected number of presentations given at the conference
will be published in the online-journal *Working Papers in the Arts and
Design* in March 2009.

Introduction

In his introduction, **M. Biggs** remarked that one of the intentions of the
conference was to offer reflection on how to locate our own views on the
issue of interpretation and to address the question: what is it that we want
from and in relation to interpretation? And what, then, is it that we need to
consider in our research-making?

The issue of interpretation, Biggs added, is closely linked to the question
of: *what constitutes research*? Traditionally, research is expressed in a
specific academic form of language. The standard procedure hereby is the
making explicit of an idea, which then is argued for, and ultimately is

claimed to be a unique piece of intellectual property. It is an objectifying model in which evidence is used to substantiate a researcher's view. In contrast to that, Biggs continued, in the humanities and the arts there are more pluralistic frameworks of interpretation. It is more acceptable that the receiver is free to create his or her own interpretation; there is no such thing as a 'correct' or 'wrong' interpretation. Interpretation is not imposed; there is a diversity of co-existing interpretations possible. If we leave the interpretation open, the urgent question, according to Biggs, then becomes: can we still talk of 'research', or should this undertaking acquire another name?

Keynote speeches

W. J. T. Mitchell further reflected on this question in his keynote speech ("From Study to Studio to the World (and back again): Research in the Arts and Sciences"), asking: why do you have to justify 'research'? The debate on research, his answer, is dominated by bureaucratic language and certain oppositions that are characteristic of this language, as, for example, the opposition between certainty and ambiguity. This institutional meta-language, he said, produces the division between 'research' and 'non-research'. It stems from a business-school rationality that leads to what he polemically called 'bean-counting'. This dominant approach, celebrated in business and economics, has dictated notions of research as producing quantifiable output that can be measured and counted. Hinting at the current financial crisis and referring to the Chicago School of Economics, Mitchell (himself teaching and researching at the University of Chicago) declared this approach to have failed.

For **Griselda Pollock**, the second keynote speaker ("Am I Being Too

skeptical: Encountering Art: Past, Present And Future Temporalities And The Modernities: Solid/Post/Liquid"), this failure wouldn't necessarily result in better times to come. Referring to Zygmunt Bauman's book "Liquid Times. Living in an age of uncertainty", (2007) she observed a collapse of long-term thinking which forces the arts and research to produce immediate output in short-term projects that hardly have any long-term perspective for development. However, the formation of a language for interpretation, she emphasized, is a long-lasting process of organizing sensibility and is happening in a sustained mode of encounter with an artwork (as an example Pollock drew on her own encounter with the work of Anna Maria Maiolino). The artwork itself is mainly created in a life-long process, and is not a result of pre-calculated intentions. Creativity and art, she said, are about making things happen in another mode than as a repetition of a calculation that happened before.

Art, Pollock noted, is not the result of a single moment, it exceeds this singularity and exists in a double-space: it lives both *in* a space of creation and it goes *beyond* this space. The event-ness of the artwork is not exhausting itself in the actual, but has its continuation in the virtual. This temporality of the artwork has consequences for the process of interpretation: its terms and its language may emerge only long after the artwork has been made and long after the encounter with it has happened. In other words, the language for interpretation may not exist, yet, when an artwork is made; the language may only come into existence as the result of a long-term engagement and encounter between the work and the interpreter.

This, Pollock concluded, hints at a fault in the widely practiced system of peer-review, where a significant contribution to knowledge can only be identified as such if the language providing the interpretive framework already exists.

Panel presentations

Pollock's remarks shed a critical light on practices by artist-researchers who themselves attempt to provide interpretive linguistic frameworks for the reception of their work. **Ernest Edmonds and Linda Candy** demonstrated an example of this type of approach in their contribution ("Interpretation In Practice"). In their research on practice-based research they investigated work by visual artists who created frameworks such as classifications for measuring audience involvements, and who were naming the research questions they investigated in and through the artworks. The artists, Edmonds elaborated, were exploring ways of using the audience's experience as a kind of material; and they were making explicit what usually is implicit in an artist's mind.

Wayne Clements and Stephen A. R. Scrivener ("The Discourses Of Practice-based Arts Research And How Contribution Is Made") pursued the question: what is the nature of artistic research and what is the role of the artwork?
The authors looked at 15 randomly chosen practice-based PhD-theses and examined, whether these were stating research questions, whether they were elaborating on the context of the work, the methodology, and the future research possibilities. They concluded that, by and large, the answer was 'no' and that a framework for interpretation was often missing. While they didn't want to see artistic research to be constrained, they raised the question how a discourse could be evolved which prevented further fragmentation and whether a generalized discourse that is globally speaking 'about the world' should be tolerated.

Kantha Kochlar-Lindgren ("Art as research: Observation, Site and Social Innovation") voiced similar troubles as Pollock concerning the institutional force to produce output. In her experience, in conversations between various groups of interest (community, academia) what inevitably surfaces are the questions: what is the *result*? What do we *gain*? What do *we* get from it? To respond to these questions by talking about *process* is perceived to be naïf. So *what is it* they get? For K. Kochlar-Lindgren, the strength of artists lies in the creation of disruption by what she called "revelatory turbulence", and which she circumscribed as 'shaking things up'. What is at stake, she asked, when we are hanging on the perceptual, the sensory? As an artist working inside academia, she said, she noticed that institutions are scared of change and disruption, and that practice-based research is often driven by the demands of science and industry. So, K. Kochlar-Lindgren asked, how can faculty meetings have more *revelatory turbulence*? How can artists insert themselves into possible modes of change on multiple levels? How can they open up ourselves and others to the sensory field? K. Kochlar-Lindgren herself attempted to answer these questions by choosing not to read out her presentation but by improvising with text and by continuously moving in and through the space, thereby constantly changing spatial relationships with the audience, changing perspectives, angles, distances of nearness and farness, and by pointing at concrete examples, either created ad-hoc in the presentation, or retrieved from her own past experiences, lending the presence of her body to make her point.

A question from an audience member regarding her presentation revealed how problematic K. Kochlar-Lindgren's approach is even within the realm of practice-oriented research: "What would you *publish*?" The question was asked emphatically, and not without ironic undertones; it revealed one of the big dilemmas of research into practice: the dominant mode of dissemination is through written publication – and ultimately it is this

medium that sets the standards for measuring a researcher's success and for valorizing his or her *intellectual property*.

However, one could look at Kochlar-Lindgren's performative presentation also from a different angle: as an *extension* of a more conceptual approach, that is demonstrated, for example, in her written abstract for the conference, and as an opening up of cognition to the sensory field.

It is in the field of perception, anyway, that artists inevitably will have an encounter with concepts. **Clive Cazeaux** ("Locatedness and the Objectivity of Interpretation in Practice-based Research") argued with Kant ("Critique of Pure Reason") that all experience is rooted in concepts and that perceptions are constructs held together by concepts. Aesthetic judgments, therefore, are not subjective, but objective: they are always already based in concepts, *conceptually located*, as Cazeaux put it. Concepts, he asserted, are integral to aesthetic judgment; they make judgment objective; they shape our experience; they are determining. With Kant, Cazeaux argued for a theory of knowledge in which the self comes not first, but emerges as its result.

Gray Kochlar-Lindgren ("Writing The Results: Adorno, Aesthetic Cognition, and the Genres of the Academetron") would not accept a hierarchy of knowledge in which scientific concepts have greater value of truth than experience. Artists, he said, demonstrate rigor as much as scientists do, but simply of a different *kind*. With Th. W. Adorno, and following up previous statements made during the conference about art as being coerced by economic rationality to produce output, G. Kochlar-Lindgren argued that a business-minded culture and administration puts limits on art and on thought which are incommensurable with the *needs* of art and thought. How, he asked, can we slowly open up the space for performative research?

G. Kochlar-Lindgren pleaded for an alliance of art and philosophy, in which art is given priority. Philosophy may provide reflection; art, however, is capable to think itself.

Drawing on J. Bernstein's reflections about Adorno's work on aesthetics, G. Kochlar-Lindgren argued that art negates the world as we know it and that it creates space for the unexpected. In the arts we can find an aesthetic mode of cognition that cannot be reduced to the rational and conceptual. There is always a *more,* which is incommensurable with rationalist modes of thinking and which is not representable through interpretation or by a written grant application. With W. Benjamin, G. Kochlar-Lindgren emphatically embraced the notion of the auratic, of something that is intangible: the world appears to be here and accessible to us; through technical means of art, we create ways to relate with the world, but this relation cannot always be articulated. This, he claimed, is the essence of art: that it entails something *more* which we fail to capture in description. Aesthetic reflection is speculative and not based on (re-calculable) facts, as administrative requirements would presume.

How can these administrative requirements be changed? This project in itself is a micro-artwork, according to G. Kochlar-Lindgren. It is about planning the un-planned and putting structures in place where the unpredictable can happen.

Troy Rhoades ("Who's Afraid Of Red, Yellow, And Blue: Research-Creation And Interpreting-With Art") pleaded for an approach to interpretation that seems to come close to Pollocks notion of the *encounter*. For Rhoades, however, the key concept is *relationality*. The approach he favors is not conducted from a distance to the artwork, but in a process mode of interpreting-*with* the artwork and through the act of research-creation. It is a mode of making an interpretation in a relation of *becoming* and in a mode of *towards* – not a pre-conceived *goal*, but

towards what W. James called a *terminus*. In the approach presented by Rhoades, a research-creator decides on enabling constraints that facilitate this movement towards, rather than framing the interpretation before, during or after the artwork has been created. Rhoades was critical of interpretively framing the access to an artwork. Contextualization, e.g. by means of a catalogue, would mean to fix the artwork in pre-existing models. This sort of *pre-territorialization* would limit the viewer's possibility to build an unpredictable and new relation with the artwork and it would prevent him or her from seeing something originally new.

Closing session

In the closing session, **M. Biggs** raised the question of how to go on with this conference-series in the future. In which other ways could research findings be disseminated? What could be the next steps and what were their potential dis/advantages? Should the conference be expanded? Should there be only an online-journal that is accessible to everyone? Should there be collaborations between people who are interested in specific subjects? Out of a wide range of suggestions (more internet presence and blogging; a conference without presentations; more papers in rough-cut style; more reaching out to art practitioners; holding a conference on the issue of economics and society), **G. Pollock's** proposition to approach research as events and in a mode of encounter, preferably in collaboration with art organizations, seemed to make the greatest impact on the remaining crowd.

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