Can grey ravens fly?: Beyond Frayling's categories.

Abstract

This paper analyses the effect of Christopher Frayling's (1993) categorisation of artistic research "research into art and design, research through art and design and research for art and design" on the debate surrounding the efficacy of studio-based artistic research as being valid within the university. James Elkins (2009:128) describes this as the "the incommensurability of studio art production and university life".

Through an exploration of the positive and negative responses to Frayling this paper seeks to explore the influence that these initial definitions have come to have on framing the scope of the debate.

The paper presents a range of responses and analyses them and focuses especially on the alternative frameworks that have been suggested and examines why they have so far not created a coherent and uncontested framework for practice-led research in the art and design field especially in relation to fine art.

Introduction

Sir Christopher Frayling's (1993) Research Paper no.1 'Research in Art and Design' has become a touchstone of university art departments as a framework for a coherent quasi-scientific methodology to apply to 'practice-based' or as it more commonly referred to now 'practice-led' research. It is my intention in this paper to examine some of the readings and miss-readings of his original paper and also to look at alternatives which have been suggested by successive scholars. In an increasingly market and research-led university education sector the status and validity of artistic research has never been more crucial and yet also, it seems, never more contested. As James Elkins (2009:128) describes it we may be facing "the incommensurability of studio art production and university life". It is my intention to show that not only are the original categories flawed but that the whole field has been over-dependent on this flawed framework from the beginning.

The on-going debate: 1993 – 2000

In Frayling's (1993) words there are three clear categories**,** 'research into art and design, research through art and design and research for art and design' Of these the most contestable from the outset is 'for' which Frayling himself commented on as 'research embodied in the artefact'. In other words the artefact itself is not commensurate with the academic idea of creating 'new knowledge' in itself. This has been the Achilles heel of the categorisation from its inception onwards and the most closely examined , disputed and argued facet of his categorisation ever since.

Frayling had brought together two different methodologies in creating his

categories. His first source was Herbert Read's (1944) book 'Education through Art' from whence he derived the 'through' category. Read proposed two categories 'through' and 'to' art .Frayling's 'through' maps to Read's definition of 'teaching through art' and closely defined the type of early postdoctoral activity at the Royal College which concerned itself as much with process as product. These early PhDs tended to be given in design related fields rather than fine art. That the paper itself was 'Research Paper No.1' shows how early in the process of establishing a post-doctorate arts education this was. The second and to me more significant and problematic source was Bruce Archer, a colleague at the Royal College of Art with a significant engineering background schooled in 'scientific methodology'. Archer was not credited with the coining of the categorisation at the time but he did publish his version in Co-Design in 1995 (Rust, 2009). His re-definition is clearer than Frayling in its dismissal of practice as research.

> The practitioner itself is (not) quite the same as research activity, however much research it may have been supported by...It is the quality of the research methodology which will be of paramount importance to the examiners.(Archer, 1995)

Two different philosophical backgrounds, one pedagogic (Read) and one scientific (Archer) were bolted together in the new framework. After Frayling published his paper Michael Ginsborg (Hetherington, 1994) at Wimbledon College of Art highlighted the coming divorce between practice where the verbal and explanatory secondary and the newer conceptual discourse-based practice and realised that this would leave 'non-verbalised' practice in a weaker position in the field of post-doctoral study. Here-in lies the ultimate demise of

the term 'practice-based' as it suggests that knowledge could be implicit in the art object. Wider conceptualisation and explication of artworks - the famous 'de-materialisation of the art object' - fitted neatly into the new research landscape.

'Designerly' ways of knowing.

Darren Newbury (1996) at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design went further in stating that,

> Whereas an artist or designer can simply present his or her
> end product, and refuse further explanation, the academic art or design
> researcher is obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which
> they arrived at that product.

By 1998 the fault lines were starting to show. 'Design' orientated praxis had little problem with the negation of the final artefact as they naturally allied themselves to a design/engineering methodology. Process dominated areas such as graphic design, ceramics and textiles for instance took to Archer's methodology. A need to create new markets post 1992 with the incorporation of polytechnics and the political dissolution of old independent art schools meant that not only a vibrant M.A. market but a PhD one had to be created and fine art was a growth area. Until the 1990's the Royal College had been one of the few institutions awarding PhDs. Judith Mottram (2009) has analysed the fine art percentage of these degrees and from 1986 to 1995 only 40 PhDs were coded as 'fine art'. Of these the majority were examining other practices and not the student practitioner's own. From 1995 to 2005 the number doubled and the number incorporating practice and 'self-reflective' practice

increased too (Mottram, 2009). As some institutions have not reported this accurately it is hard to gauge true numbers. Submission varied according to institution and could mean that a M.A. Or PhD could involve submitting a substantial text to almost no document at all. This problem was not just applicable to fine art and design academics also started scrutinising and rewriting Frayling's categories to suit when they found holes in his guidelines. Findeli (1998), Cross (1999) and Jonas (2007) all allied themselves with Archer's original science based approach but applied the thinking to design related procedures. Schon's 'Reflective Practice' (1983) was a key text in re-interpreting the categories into practical methods for students to use. By 2004 an operable RTD (Research Through Design) was thought to provide an epistemological means for the development of a genuine design research paradigm (Jonas, 2007).Thus designers felt confident that they had a specifically design orientated system based on Archer's original. So confident was this approach that Forlizzi, Zimmerman and Evenson (2007) published "Research through design as a method for Interaction Design". This 'designerly' approach to knowing was comprehensively analysed in Saikaly (2003) 'Design re-thinking: Some issues about doctoral programmes in design' and Frankel and Racine (2010) 'The Complex Field of Research: for Design, through Design, and about Design' which was given at the DRS conference 2010 in Montreal.

The New Millenium to the present: Beyond Frayling?

Fine artists however were increasingly frustrated by a busted 'paradigm' in their eyes. The more that practice-led and practice-based was contorted to fit the 'through art and design' strait-jacket the less it seemed to fit the fine art situation. Ranulph Glanville (1998) in 'Challenging the Scientific Paradigm for research and design' argued for a pro-design methodology separate to science. Fiona Candlin (2000a, 2000b, 2001) not only explored the historical roots of the fine art research 'crisis' (one which she identified very much with a UK system) but suggested that both politics and the RAE (now REF) and 'professionalism' of UK higher education management were key in driving the creation of more PhDs in fine art. The UKCGE report (1997) seemed to have only papered over the cracks over legitimacy and validity by defining 'practice-based' studio work as 'distinct in that significant aspects of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work'. Ironically Christopher Frayling was one of that report's authors. With this prompt the range of PhDs grew and the 'studio-based' practice proportion was usually set at 50% of the degree.

As an example of where fine artists were going by 2000 a case study is pertinent. Daro Montag's (2001) chapter one of his PHD thesis 'Bioglyphs' for Hertfordshire University 'Research through creative practice' is interesting in that he draws on Norman Peterson's 1984 document 'Photographic art media and disclosure' to suggest Heidegger's concept of 'altheia' as an alternative philosophical grounding. He also mentions Benedetto Croce and posits the

artwork as being 'intuitive'. Hertfordshire was coincidentally the setting for the 2000 'Research into Practice' conference which developed into the Working Papers in Art and Design online journal edited by Michael Biggs and showcased a range of responses from the Research into Practice conferences of 2000 through to 2008 (Biggs, 2000, 2008).

This tack is developed throughout the next decade as art departments increasingly referred to specific philosophers such as Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida and Heidegger. All were mined to confer knowledge back into the art object and tacit knowledge became a widely used term alongside the embodied knowledge from Merleau-Ponty's theory of 'bodily knowledge'. Biggs (2003) and Pakes (2004) citing Gadamer urged a return to the work of art as an object of research (this is cited in Borgdorff 2006).Embodied knowledge became something of a buzz-word. This however made little impact on the way universities treated fine art research. At present a practice that is already 'verbalised' and therefore 'communicative' and capable of transferring knowledge to others could be seen as being favoured over traditional practice although this requires further research to prove conclusively. Borgdorff (2006) asserts that practice is research in general including studio practice, as it articulates tacit knowledge, is communicable if documented and disseminated to the research community and wider community. This presumes a 'showing' of work but does not state if this requires to be verbalised too? Here in lies the weakness of the argument as it does not clarify exactly what 'document and disseminate' may entail.

Another exponent of 'Beyond Frayling' categorisation is the work of Kathrin Busch (2009) who regards the present categorisation as too scientific and instrumental to cover the fine arts which I would agree with. Drawing on Foucault's (1996) description of art as 'valid as an independent form of knowledge without obeying the criteria of scientific methods' she suggests four categories. Art with research (artists using scientific knowledge e.g. Constable's cloud studies), art about research (art that depicts scientific progress e.g. Joseph Wright of Derby, Turner), art as research (the work is the research e.g. dialogic, or performative - is embodied in the practitioner.) and finally art as science (art is based in theoretical knowledge - the design/science model). Busch (2009: 3) rejects the notion that "art can only be considered a form of knowledge if it conforms to scientific standards" however her categorisation seems overly dependent on referring to the scientific paradigm.

Against Practice as Research

The two most extreme anti 'practice is research' positions have been taken by James Elkins and Kenneth Friedman.

Friedman (2008) was very clear of his position in an online response to Victor Margolin who thinks 'distinctions need to be made between the different kinds of design practice so that degree programs geared to one or another practice can be developed'. Friedman is solidly on Elkins side though in believing practice is NOT research.

In many situations, education and learning proceed by practicing an **art** or craft. One can also learn the **art** and craft of **research** by practicing **research**. Nevertheless, one does not undertake **research** simply by practicing the **art** or craft to which the **research** field is linked.

(Friedman's bold emphasis)

Friedman (2008) goes on to define 'drawing' as a necessary part of research but not of itself research just as writing or reading are not research. In other words all forms of practice are constituent parts of a larger research enquiry but standing alone cannot declare them-selves as compromising the research. This defines the fundamental 'new knowledge' position. As he says, 'The problem I see with a great deal of research done by artists and designers is that they carry out their activities as artists or designers and re-badge it as research' (Friedman, 2008).

James Elkins brought most of his objections to this 'woolly' thinking together in an essay ' On beyond research and new knowledge' in a collection of essays he edited 'Artists with PhDs' in 2009 (second and revised edition due 2013). Here he analyses the proceedings of the 'Thinking through Art' symposium which was published in 2005. (Elkins over-view was originally rejected then published in edited form in the published volume). He was roundly rebuffed for that response by Michael Biggs (2006) as representing 'vested institutional interests' such was the rancour produced by the differing opinions. Both volumes are key texts in trying to find a path forward in the debate.

The Grey ravens?

Two recent symposiums have revealed the progress made since the Hertfordshire research into practice conferences and reveal how fine artists are using or abusing the variety of new methodologies. In March 2011 the playwright Dan Reballato gave a paper 'What if there is no such thing as practice as research' (Reballato, 2011) at Goldsmiths College, London. Then in September 2012 the 'Practice makes Perfect' Swansea conference had a variety of speakers offering variations on the 'realignment' described above and attempted in the past decade. A phrase used at that conference 'The Grey Ravens' i.e. neither black nor white suggested a useful term for the new 'grey' methodological areas that fine art PhD students are using to justify their practice-led approaches. A reference count during the conference revealed a surprising change in the range of cited philosophers. Most influential were the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, then Benjamin and Derrida. Nelson Goodman, Judith Halberstam and Julia Kristeva were cited too alongside Ricoer and Heidegger. Most interesting of all were the terms used to justify this new 'grey' theory and the terminology being used. 'Scavenger methodology', 'unstable', 'liminal', 'inter-textuality', 'inbetween-ness', 'layered', 'evolving', 'contingent' and 'inter-language' were all mentioned. Suggesting a post-feminist, alter-theory or methodology (coincidental to but allied to 'alter-modernism') may be forming but it hard to see a coherent pattern at this juncture. None seemed strong enough to shake off the more conservative academic view of the field as 'woolly'. There are some signs of more coherence arising from this area in the future. It may be too early to say that there is a consistent new approach to methodology yet but the work coming out of Amsterdam (Hoogenboom, 2007

and Borgdorff, 2006) especially in relation to how knowledge may be recorded or communicated gives some cause for optimism. Maybe the groundwork is being laid there for a more coherent and stable framework for artistic research in the fine arts.

Future methodology?

In my opinion the range and strength of debate suggests we may be at a turning point in regard to practice-based PhD level tuition in Fine Art. The struggle for research equivalence and worthiness within university systems means that fine art departments face a choice. They can continue to focus on 'verbalised' (in widest sense) students and utilise the wide and varied range of 'fine art methodologies' which I term above 'grey ravens' and try and build a coherent methodological foundation that not based on scientific approach if that is possible. Or as Elkins seems to suggest countenance other solutions. To evade the 'REF' trap and flourish art schools could even seek greater or total independence from the AHRC system. UK political changes to funding do open up these possibilities but this is viewed as almost treasonable to countenance in most art departments within university structures at present. Most art colleges have barely survived incorporation within bigger institutions as it is and such 'independence' may threaten their existence at all in an increasingly market led sector. However tough times may force tough choices. For now the 'grey ravens' are the best we have as a future 'Beyond Frayling'. What we do not know is how long they will last nor how far they will fly.

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