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Research in art education involves asking questions and seeking answers that allow us to better understand how to make art, study art, and teach art. In devising methods of inquiry, educators mostly seek to adapt practices from existing research traditions in the human sciences. For instance, in the early 1960s, art educators struggled to assess the theoretical robustness of the field (Arnstine, 1965; Ecker, 1965; Efland, 1964; Eisner, 1964; Kaufman, 1959). A central question asked was whether art was a discipline and whether it was possible to construct a theoretical framework from which explanatory structures of knowledge could be drawn. To do so meant to adopt the research protocols of science, as this was how knowledge about human thought and action was best believed to be revealed.

In later decades, the use of qualitative research methods in educational inquiry found strong support in art education (Bresler; 1994; Chalmers, 1981; Eisner, 1985; 1991; May, 1993; Stokrocki, 1997). Here the quest to ground the theoretical adequacy of art education gave credence to the teacher as a plausible source of knowledge and the praxis of the classroom and the community as a viable basis for theory. This grounded approach was seen to account more closely for the authenticity of art learning and teaching. As a result, as conceptions of art education changed so did the methods of inquiry. The reliance on expressive and psychological foundations of creating art broadened to embrace culturally grounded frameworks for interpreting art and this brought language-based experiences clearly into the picture (Parsons, 1992). Yet the continued need to confirm the theoretical status of art education remained wedded to the practices prescribed by dominant discourses in the social sciences (Sacca, 1989).

Despite the emergence of qualitative approaches to educational inquiry that achieve a more adequate “goodness of fit” for the kind of learning seen in the classroom and the studio, the need to construct theories that “explain” phenomena is still assumed to be the ultimate goal of research. I argue that “understanding” is as significant as explanation as a goal of research, and more so when outcomes are applied in educational contexts. If this is accepted, then making art and interpreting art become the basis for constructing theories of artistic knowing. This
quest for understanding sees individual and social transformation as a worthy educational goal, and this is what art educators seek as they develop theories about learning and teaching art. Consequently, if art education is to establish a theoretically robust foundation, then the research approaches deployed should not only be informed by what the social sciences have to offer but also must be grounded in practices located within the domain of art. To continue to merely borrow research methods from other fields denies the intellectual maturity of art practice as a plausible basis for raising significant theoretical questions, and as a viable site for applying important educational ideas.

QUESTIONING THE RESEARCH TRADITION
WITHIN ART EDUCATION

Despite the expansion of the methodological landscape, debates about educational inquiry continue. Although the postmodern critique of institutional practices revealed the problematic status of traditional boundaries—be they discipline divisions, arts areas, or cultural divides—many saw the need to reconcile the apparent incompatibility of the quantitative and qualitative paradigms (Jackson, 1990; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Eisner (1993) highlights this dilemma in his discussion of the tension between “what is individual and distinctive” and what is “patterned and regular.” He asks:

How do we avoid the verificationist’s constipation of conceptual categories on the one hand and the radical relativist’s free-for-all, anything goes, no-holds-barred nihilism on the other? Or are these really untenable alternatives that nobody really believes? Maybe so. (p. 8)

The emergence of qualitative methodologies as viable approaches to research in the human sciences has, of course, not been without its critics (Gross & Levitt, 1994). Cizek (1995) questions the “crunchy granola” character of qualitative methods that favors “thick texture” rather than scientific analysis. He asks:

If one accepts the notion that all understanding is contextualized, if all experience is embedded in culture, and if all knowledge is a personalized construction, and so on, than can any interpretivist claims be rejected? If not we are not only poststructuralist, postconstructivist, and postmodernist, but probably postscientific as well. (p. 27)

In many cases the arguments about the relative merits of different research paradigms seem to offer theoretical barriers rather than guidelines to cross borders. There is, however, plenty of evidence to suggest that the reality of research practice readily blurs these distinctions. Amundsen, Serlin and Lehrer (1992) adopt a “postpositivist” perspective and suggest that unlike the positivists’ past emphasis on observation and prediction, a realistic approach is to seek more global criteria such as simplicity and theoretical consistency. Salomon (1991) offers an approach to research that identifies discrete and interdependent elements within complex educational phenomena that subsequently require different modes of inquiry. Although based on different conceptions of knowledge such as the distinction between specific outcomes and multiple meanings, the “analytic” and “systematic” (p. 13) approaches serve to complement each other in data analysis. Salomon’s nested approach seeks to capture the complexity of learning environments, whereby the precision of analysis helps to maintain focus, whereas systematic data management ensures that outcomes are authentic.

Although the conceptual and methodological frameworks that shape the research landscape these days are clearly more flexible (Creswell, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), it
is necessary to review some underlying assumptions about research if a more comprehensive approach to studio art research is to be realized. For instance, to maintain the mythic mantle of the objective observer as being the only rational way of investigating phenomena denies the complex ways that humans encounter the world around them. Further, the way constructs such as causality, objectivity, falsifiability, and verification are reified within the research community continues to keep certain theoretical and methodological divisions in place.

Causality and Meaning

Within the scientific tradition it is readily accepted that things have causes, and although this notion may serve the natural sciences well, it is less convincing when applied to the human sciences. Identifying cause and effect has rich predictive power, but human nature remains tantalizingly obscure in revealing underlying causal structures or discrete patterns of behavior. For instance, when the decoding of the human genome was revealed to the world in February 2001, the result was unexpected. There was no neat underlying structure or causal network to be found. There was no coded map that fully explained the distribution of human attributes. It was apparent that the soupy pool of genes and protein was just as complicated as the unwieldy world of human encounters that confront us.

To assume that there are some psychobiological constructs that cause all human action is to place far too much faith in determinism. Social effects may be the result of multiple causes rather than a single cause, or be the product of human agency, for individuals have the capacity to choose how they might respond in social situations. There are obvious links in the way humans are shaped in part by their neural architecture and their interactions with socio cultural settings. But to focus on causes seems unnecessarily reductive when the more interesting questions center on the kind of decisions and choices people and cultures make that lead them to do the things they do. Even a committed educational researcher such as Jerome Bruner (1990) ceased to ask the causal question, “How do children learn?” and began to ask, “How are meanings made?” This took him out of the clinical setting and into the “real” world in order to understand the culture of education (Bruner, 1996). In a way, giving undue emphasis to the linear logic of causality is similar to assuming that an artwork is merely the consequence of artistic intention, when obviously there are an array of factors that influence the making and reading of visual images. To acknowledge the continual interplay between subjective and objective ways of knowing provides a plausible account of the interrelationships that shape human understanding.

Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity

The tendency to try to reside on either side of the objective subjective divide is to adopt an overly simplistic stance. For instance, to resort to extreme relativism is to ignore the idea that there are aspects of an objective world “out there.” Although we might view empirical reality through a personally constructed lens, there is no mistaking that we understand certain things better than before because of accumulated knowledge. Truth may well be provisional, but making use of what is currently known about certain phenomena is a very useful starting point. To neglect such information is to ignore the necessary distinction between knowledge and opinion.

A broader conception of objectivity is therefore required to deal adequately with complex realities. The positivist belief is only a partial account and needs to be supported by the intersubjectivity that characterizes how individuals and cultures construct meaning. By intersubjectivity, I refer to Michael Parson’s definition that there exists a realm of “shared symbolically mediated meanings” (1995, p. 12) that facilitate individual and community understanding. In
methodological terms this means there is a need to consider the observer and the observed as legitimate sources of knowledge. It is instructive to remember that it was Einstein who helped us understand that when interpreting events some things will remain the same, and others will change according to the viewpoint taken. Similarly, Heisenberg affirmed this uncertain relationship between the observer and the observed, and this is readily understood by anyone who understands the “push and pull” of painting where intervention, action and reflection have different consequences when seen up close and from afar.

Falsifiability, Verification, and Self-Confirmation

Another powerful construct used to confirm the robustness of scientific inquiry is the notion of falsifiability. Eloquently argued by Karl Popper (Miller, 1985), the basic principle is that there is more merit in trying to expose something to failure rather than trying to confirm its probable truth. Being able to subject untenable propositions to rigorous testing is a way to uncover those that do not stand up to analysis, and those that can be confirmed that are the best theoretical fit. The steely eye of the science community and the methodological safety net of hypotheticodeductive reasoning serve as an additional basis for monitoring and correcting the accumulation of knowledge.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that there are no traditions or practices in the arts, whereby theories are not subject to empirical risk. As Efland (1995) notes, visual arts is an “ill structured domain” (p. 143) and does not have the self-correcting features of prescribed methods and replicability that characterizes the formalisms of the sciences. If, however, we subscribe to the view that empiricism involves verifying things through observation, then those involved in the arts routinely put theories and practices up for empirical review through a self-confirming critical process. This is precisely what happens when the arts are seen as systems of engagement that include artworks, artists, cultural commentators, and educators. These agencies become arenas for debate and intersubjective agreement through the use of the self-confirming processes of peer review and historical legacy.

The conventions of quantitative research provide a clear structure for generating questions grounded in accumulated knowledge. Although it is readily acknowledged that hypothetical constructs must be measurable and testable, they need not lack imagination. Yet the quest for verification and the demands of control and reductionism often leave little room for speculative maneuvers. Kirk and Miller (1986) note:

When confirmatory research goes smoothly, everything comes out as expected. Received theory is supported by one more example of its usefulness, and requires no change. As in everyday social life, confirmation is exactly the absence of insight. (p. 15)

However, radical insights in science emanate as much from serendipitous events, happy accidents, or intuition as they do from following prescriptions (Feyerabend, 1991; Perkins, 2000; Weisberg, 1993). Situating inquiry that builds on previous research may be sound research practice, but scholarship is also about ideas. Obviously, in science as in art, knowing one’s craft heightens the awareness of not only what is probable but also what is possible. But hypothesis testing is not the only way to go about systematic inquiry. Confirming or not confirming a null hypothesis only really allows the researcher to claim that certain effects or relationships are probably the result of chance or not. Levels of statistical significance are customarily used as a numerical indicator of the odds. Yet, if the principle of subjecting predictions to the risk of empirical rejection is adopted, then there are several strategies that can be followed in arts inquiry.
The criteria for assessing the viability of qualitative findings are not so much a matter of whether an outcome is statistically significant, but whether it is meaningful. Therefore for those researchers seeking insight and understanding, the emphasis on discovery requires one to maintain an especially vigilant pose in dealing with issues of validity and reliability (Kirk & Miller, 1986). This involves sound reasoning, systematic analysis, and sustained focusing, along with the process of subjecting emerging findings to continual empirical challenge as new observations inform existing interpretations. As Bruner (1996) notes, the purpose is to achieve understanding rather than explanation, and in the process we construct meanings.

Isn’t this what thoughtful art critics do? In helping describe how art critics might assist others who feel a need to understand and assess art according to whatever prescribed criterion is set Arthur Danto (2001) explains:

I would be eager to point out the complexities of interpretation... and that the panelists should consider the art the way it is considered by a critic, from the perspective of what view is being visually advanced. Seen this way, it becomes a matter of finding plausible critical hypotheses and then seeing whether they could not [italics added] be true. (p. 33)

Probable and Plausible Conceptions of Reality

In many basic texts on educational research a foundation principle given for distinguishing qualitative and quantitative approaches is the difference in underlying conceptions of reality. Conceptions of social reality shape most of what we think, say, and do and are defined by assumptions about some of the most basic questions we ask when we inquire into human thought and action. When the question, “What is real?” is asked, answers will be framed by a range of ontological beliefs: A realist will claim a reality independent of individual interest or influence; a contextualist will claim reality is socially constructed and exists in many forms. In a similar way, concerns about how knowledge is acquired and communicated will raise epistemological distinctions about objective states and subjective experience. In another way, the manner by which individuals shape, or are shaped by their environment, reflects basic assumptions about human nature. These differing conceptions are most often seen as opposing perspectives positioned along various continua that highlight alternative ways the world is seen. Consequently, research outcomes are understood as instances of what is believed to be true.

In qualitative inquiry the criteria for assessing outcomes relies on their plausibility rather than their probability. Rather than explain phenomena in terms of differences in degree, the interest of qualitative researchers is to compare differences in kind. This rests on the premise that generalizing results from specific samples to the general population is not the only way to configure research outcomes. The plausibility of research findings grounded in observations of real-world actions, events, and artifacts relies on the agreement that outcomes can be interpreted as connections between the “specific and the specific.” In other words, what is seen to be real in one observed setting can have a parallel relevance in a similar situation. Eisner (1991) calls these kinds of outcomes “prospective” and “retrospective,” whereby “generalizations [made]
through art provide a heuristic or canonical image with which to see more clearly” as “they give you something to look for or to reflect on” (1999, p. 20).

The Possibility of Transformative Research

Although criteria for quantitative results are based on the probable likelihood of occurrences, and findings from qualitative inquiries are assessed by the plausibility or relevance of outcomes, the possibility of insight remains an elusive criterion for judging the significance of research. If a measure of the utility of research is seen to be the capacity to create new knowledge that is individually and culturally transformative, then criteria need to move beyond probability and plausibility to possibility.

The possibility of gaining new understanding involves accessing, designing, and investigating issues of personal and public interest. Research of this kind is imaginative and logical and includes the exploration of one’s tacit knowledge and the insight of others as both experience and reasoning come into play. Generally the goal of research is to describe, interpret, or explain phenomena; but if the desire is to see inquiry as having the capacity to change human understanding, then our sight needs to be set on a bigger picture. For instance, when Marvin Minsky and Seymour Papert were looking for images to conceptualize their ideas about artificial intelligence, they realized there was no single structure on which they could model their smart machine. Their “society-of-mind” theory made use of multiple structures and variable resources. Minsky noted that “you can’t understand anything unless you understand it in several different ways, and the search for the single truth–the pure, best way to represent knowledge–is wrongheaded” (cited in Brockman, 1996, p. 163). According to Minsky and Papert, for new knowledge to have individual and cultural significance, it has to be able to be negotiated and represented in different forms within the framework of a continually changing world. Therefore, creating knowledge that is informative and transformative is necessary if the theories and practices of educational research are to have personal and public impact.

My argument that the goal of educational research in general, and art education research in particular, should be the production of transformative knowledge is grounded on two premises. The first is that there is a schism of thought whereby institutionalized traditions make it difficult for many to move beyond the safety of accepted practices. In the mid-20th century C. P. Snow’s description of *The Two Cultures* (1959) highlighted this polite cultural clash between the humanities and the sciences as a dispute between the “intellectuals” and the “boffins.” In a more recent publication edited by John Brockman titled *The Third Culture* (1996), he chronicles a series of conversations among a highly regarded list of scientists. Brockman describes them as “third-culture thinkers” (p. 18) who seem to be filling the gap identified by C. P. Snow 50 years ago. What is intriguing to me is that there is no set agenda, no accepted canon, and no standardized way these scientists think about things. Just as many artists move with insight and imagination within and beyond boundaries, many scientists do the same. So the unnecessary reification of research practices is more a consequence of institutionalized thinking. I would argue that history, convention, power, and position are the kind of cultural blinders that limit the capacity to see and act in different ways.

My second premise argues that to better understand how art education can contribute to human understanding, there is a need to ground art educational research within the theories and practices that surround art making. It is from this central site of investigation that other derivative practices such as critical and philosophical analysis, historical and cultural commentary, and educational praxis emerge. The notion that art is a warm, fuzzy, and essentially private experience now extends to acknowledge the cognitive capacities that inform artistic making and thinking (Efland, 2002; Goodman, 1976).
A RATIONALE FOR THEORIZING STUDIO ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

The process of “theorizing” is a basic procedure of inquiry and hence a core element in research. We construct theories about how the world works all the time. Some of these are based on how we apply systems of knowledge to help solve problems and understand things. In these instances, our observations of some perplexing issue or event are reconciled or resolved as we draw on known theoretical knowledge to help explain what we see. In other situations, intuition, experience and tacit knowledge grounded in context-specific circumstances provide an empirical base for constructing new frameworks of understanding.

To accommodate the call for a broader notion of what the outcomes of research might be, three types of theorizing can be identified (Mithaug, 2000). First, constructive theorizing describes the conceptual and analytical process whereby theoretical explanations result from systematic reasoning based on the analysis of credible information. This kind of theorizing is most common within academic circles where established procedures are deployed to help direct reasoning and to apply criteria for assessing the credibility of evidence and the argument or proposition being advanced.

Critical theorizing is another approach that is based on the deconstructive practices used in postmodern discourse where theoretical structures seen to be problematic are critiqued. Underlying theoretical systems and received histories are challenged if they can be shown to maintain theories and practices that privilege particular positions, marginalize others, or deny multiple forms of discourse. The critical incursion is a process that acknowledges interpretive flexibility and is part of a system of thinking that renders texts of all sorts subject to reflexive analysis. Yet the process of critical theorizing is both a deconstructive and reconstructive process as the challenge to underlying theoretical systems and received discourse gives rise to new possibilities about how histories, ideas and practices can be re-imagined (Brown, 2003).

A third type of theorizing Mithaug (2000) identifies is practitioner theorizing, which I expand on in the remaining part of this chapter. Practitioner theorizing is a method commonly used in the field (the studio, classroom, community, Internet) where individuals and groups use a range of inductive and performative methods to find and solve problems, assess and enact change, and critique and create new practices. Practitioner theorizing, however, needs to be seen within broader systems of knowledge whereby the inventive insights associated with theories grounded in commonsense empiricism add to, and sometimes challenge, existing knowledge domains. “Folk” theories that we might absorb from authorities, influential sources, or homespun wisdom, therefore can prove to be insightful and novel. Yet they will remain naïve until located within a broader realm that is personally relevant and culturally valued.

The challenge of theorizing studio art practice requires the construction of a robust and defensible framework for considering the relationship between the theories and the practices that inform how art is made and how it can be studied and taught. There are several good reasons for constructing an analytical framework that describe the relationship between theory and practice.

- First, the identification of a range of theoretical issues and a breadth of constituent interests underscore the notion that art practice is a multidisciplinary endeavor that is firmly centered on art making.
- Second, such a framework can serve as a forum for considering debates in the field and ensuring that the boundaries that frame ongoing discussion are subject to continual review.
- Third, research studies that are undertaken can be located and critiqued within particular domains of theory and practice.
- Fourth, newer approaches to research such as the use of visual methods (Banks, 2001; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Pink, 2001; Rose, 2001) and computer-based qualitative data analysis (Fielding & Lee, 1998; Gahan & Hannibal, 1998; Tesch, 1990) can be assessed in terms of the domains of theory and practice in art education.
- Finally, a framework offers the possibility that art practice can be readily translated into other disciplinary forms of research discourse if the purpose demands it. In this way the research culture remains grounded in the theories and practices of art.

The need to be cautious about describing an analytical framework for theorizing art practice as a site for research is obvious. Any systematic structure has the potential to usher in a new orthodoxy as preferred interests and methods function to normalize practices. To this end it is essential that the goal of critical reflexivity is maintained and the boundaries shown in Figure 35.1 are seen as bridges rather than as barriers. I have high hopes that this dynamic stance could be readily maintained, and this should be the case as long as links to contemporary studio practices and critical cultural commentary remain central to any inquiry.

The structure described in Figure 35.1 connects the domains of practice and theory. The domain of practice describes the various constituents involved in the process of making art, studying art, and teaching art. The artist is the key figure in the creation of new knowledge that has the potential to change the way we see and think. Therefore the studio experience is a form of cognitive inquiry and is a site where research can be undertaken that is sufficiently robust to yield knowledge and understanding that is transformative, trustworthy, and socially and culturally relevant. The main research interest is to investigate how knowledge is created in the process of making art. Research in art therefore asks questions about the processes and products of artistic knowing. To do this the artist is both the researcher and the subject of study. Many of the self-study protocols available can be deployed (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 1997) if the desire is to formally investigate and subsequently communicate the outcomes of an inquiry to a wider constituency. Alternatively, the artist can be the subject of a case study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain of Practice</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Art Writer</th>
<th>Artwork</th>
<th>Visual Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Ends</td>
<td>Research “IN” art</td>
<td>Research “ABOUT” art</td>
<td>Research “OF” art</td>
<td>Research “THROUGH” art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Interest: Understanding “in” art by individual insight</td>
<td>Research Interest: Understanding “about” art by interpretation</td>
<td>Research Interest: Understanding “of” art by knowledge</td>
<td>Research Interest: Understanding “through” art by contextualization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Source: Self</td>
<td>Data Source: Others</td>
<td>Data Source: Objects</td>
<td>Data Source: Contexts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method: Self-study Case study</td>
<td>Method: Art criticism Art history</td>
<td>Method: Material culture study</td>
<td>Method: Cultural study Educational study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIG. 35.1.** Theorizing art practice.
Art writers respond to the art they see and offer insights that take the art experience to new levels of engagement and understanding. As producers of new knowledge about art, critics, historians, and philosophers give insights into why and how art is made and interpreted, and ways it functions in society. The main research interest is to study the forms, methods, and meanings of art by making interpretations about art. To do this the art writer makes use of the many theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches available to study art (Adams, 1996; Carrier, 2003; Harris, 2001). These studies are shaped by the purpose of the inquiry, but like all areas of human engagement they are subject to individual, ideological, and institutional influences. Yet like any researcher, the task of the art writer is to produce work that is grounded in evidence that justifies the questions raised and supports the claims made.

The artwork carries its own status as a form of knowledge. Research of art subsequently communicates new insights into the ways that objects carry meaning about ideas, themes, and issues. As an object of study, an artwork is an individually and culturally constructed form that can be used to represent ideas and thus can be examined as a source of knowledge. Historical research provides an array of ways that images can carry meaning whether by means of description, representation, expression, or symbolization (Minor, 1994). More recent cultural discourse disrupts the relationship among the artwork, the artist, and the viewer and provides much more scope in the potential for meaning making that might result from an encounter with a work of art. This ensemble of influential factors allows the researcher to adopt many perspectives where the focus of study might be on the work of art itself, or other surrounding contexts that shape the way artworks take on cultural meaning. And the range of nondiscursive forms the art object assumes is continually expanding as artists craft new technological means into service.

Researchers, who study the way that art practice might function to assist us to better understand the contexts surrounding art so as to exercise control over the visual information we confront, will be interested in the communicative and political roles of art. Here the approach is to seek understanding by conducting research through art so as to determine the many functions and purposes to which art can be put. Using visual forms as agencies to advance various social, cultural, political, and educational ends has a long history, and the pervasive impact of visual culture warrants critical study. The analysis of artworks, artifacts and other mediated texts and the circumstances surrounding their production and presentation means that both the forms themselves and the viewing public are subjects of study. To move beyond the realm of critique and to a state of empowerment, there is a need for visual culture researchers to produce knowledge that can be acted on (Freedman, 2003). This educational role requires the use of a range of critical processes that are neither constrained by discipline boundaries nor restricted to particular textual forms. As a socially constructed process, “visuality” is a pervasive form of cultural knowledge and among other things warrants research responses that deploy a suitably critical image base.

The framework for theorizing art practice incorporates several of the dimensions of inquiry covered in the art education literature, especially debates about the importance of interpretation (Berger, 1980; Danto, 1986; Parsons, 1992), the study of artworks (Barrett, 2000; Lankford, 1992), and the advocacy for visual culture (Duncum & Bracy, 2001). What is not so apparent in the field is the study of the studio setting as a place of inquiry and as a site for sustained research that has the potential to yield significant knowledge. For some art educators the studio is a unique place for problem finding and problem solving, media exploration, and giving form to ideas of personal and social relevance (Beittel, 1979; Nadaner, 1998; Zurmuehlen, 1990). For others, it is the educational consequences of the studio experiences that offer tangible outcomes, and these tend to change in relation to different socio cultural circumstances and political interests (Brown & Korzenik, 1993). Understanding the studio art experience by doing case studies of artists that reveal insights into the creative mind as an individual and cultural
construct is a common approach used to model artistic learning processes (Harris, 1990; Irwin & Miller, 1997; Krug, 1992/3; La Chapelle, 1991; Stuhr & Freedman, 1989; Taylor, 1989).

Another approach to exploring the studio experience is to identify connections between art-making processes and methods of inquiry that seek to confirm art practice as a form of research. Montgomery-Whicher (1997), for instance, draws parallels between the practice of drawing and the practices of phenomenological research.

The abilities and attitudes necessary for phenomenological research, like those required for drawing, can be described in visual terms. Just as people learning to draw learn to temporarily set aside their usual conceptual knowledge of their subject matter in favor of vivid perceptual analysis, researchers must learn to see “with attentiveness and wonder,” to see the everyday as worthy of attention, to see through surface appearances and worn-out clichés, to attend to what we ordinarily overlook, in short, to re-search. (p. 18)

Although this strategy helps highlight links among various studio-based learning processes with approaches found in certain research methodologies, a larger theoretical task remains. There is a necessity to construct theories of art practice that establish the legitimacy of the studio experience as a site that is capable of yielding plausible and trustworthy knowledge. In order to theorize about art practice in this way, one needs to consider the studio to be a place where philosophies and practices can be located and investigated, developed, and applied. The studio is also seen as a site of inquiry that is neither bounded by walls nor removed from the daily grind of everyday social activity. Further, studio art experiences are inclusive of the full range of ideas and images that inform individual, social, and cultural actions. Then there is a need to examine the kind of issues that arise at the institutional level and within the orbit of the artworld, as these can be quite diverse. These are some of the potential conditions that inform studio-based art practice and need to be seen as part of broader theoretical systems. Only when these kinds of issues are examined and the arguments are sufficiently robust to withstand scrutiny, may it be possible to explain the phenomena that we see in studios where individuals are transformed by the knowledge gained through art making.

Towards a Postdiscipline Research Practice

Can art practice be accepted as a form of research? That the studio practice of artists could share the imaginative scope, intellectual rigor, and systematic inquiry of the traditional sciences generate responses that range from acceptance, ambivalence to outright hostility. And these varied views come both from the broader academic community and from within the artworld. There is a general unease at the university level about how to accommodate artists’ practice as research, and the need to identify and clarify problems of definition, equivalent practices and assessment issues.

The dilemma of how to integrate the arts within the academy is of course not new. The institutionalization of art practice has a long and illustrious history (Hubbard, 1963; Singerman, 1999). In each era, the formal training of the fine artist invariably has created a schism between those within the institution who see a need to uphold the canon and those from without who challenge it (Chadwick, 1990; Efland, 1990; Nochlin, 1988). Many advocates of the training of artists see the marketplace of the artworld as the arbiter that offers professional success, with institutions being mostly responsible for technical training. Those who seek academic status for the profession invariably have to respond to the challenge of setting creative practice on a more grounded disciplinary foundation. As such, the university setting exerts its own institutional power. The challenge is how to accommodate these demands yet also maintain a
degree of integrity about what constitutes art as a field of study. It is in the area of research where these distinctions become the sharpest.

Two main strategies characterize the quest to confirm the academic status of studio-based research. The first involves assessing “equivalency” whereby the features of art practice are set on a scale that is comparable to levels of scholarship associated with the more traditional disciplines. Yet there is an inherent folly in assuming that practices from different fields can be validly compared if the criteria used are drawn from the discipline that holds the power. In the case of the sciences, the prevailing emphasis on marketplace research mostly assesses outcomes in terms of product yield and economic return. This utilitarian focus is an inadequate basis on which to assess the outcomes of art research. Perhaps, despite the acknowledgment that the arts and the sciences may share the same interest in the search for new ways of thinking about things, there can be parallel paths but no common road. Acceptance that a shared goal can be achieved by different means is a realization that is born as much from cultural maturity as it is from discipline interests.

The second institutional criterion used to assess the relative position of art practice in the academy is “benchmarking” or moderating. This is an evaluative process for identifying practices of merit based on the principle of peer assessment. The procedure involves the nomination of benchmarks that are grounded within local interpretations of what constitutes high-quality performance. Although this approach acknowledges diversity, it is labor intensive and requires considerable documentation to substantiate assessments and to offset perceived problems of lack of objectivity and comparability. Research in university settings is also characterized by its dissemination to a wide audience of professionals who are in a position to evaluate the outcomes against agreed on, if often unstated, performance indicators. In some cases the criteria applied will be external to the discipline, such as the amount of competitive research funding secured or other similar institutional measures.

Benchmarking, with its obvious similarity to the refereeing procedures used in the humanities and the sciences, comes close to the kind of peer-review process that is part of artworld practices. But what needs to be acknowledged is the existence of a multiplicity of artworlds (Young, 2001). Whether located within the domain of contemporary art, or within institutional settings, different artworld agencies will exercise somewhat different performance criteria. However, like all forms of public adjudication, the criteria for assessment centers on the interpretive decisions made and the congruence between the outcomes sought and the evidence presented.

Artists also make informed choices about the imaginative and intellectual approaches they use when they create and respond to art. The process of making insightful decisions when carrying out research in art is not predicated on the assumption that there is a prescribed body of knowledge one learns and then applies. Notwithstanding the repertoire of prior knowledge about relevant processes and products, at the outset there is little in the way of prevailing explanatory systems of knowledge within which new advances might be framed. Various theories of human processes, communal practices and cultural agencies obviously abound, and these serve as both a grounded set of conditions and an interpretive framework around which inquiry is referenced. This is as basic to creative inquiry as it is to scholarly research. However, making informed choices about creative ends and means involves selecting, adapting, and constructing ways of working and ways of seeing, and to do this one has to construct the tools of inquiry from an array of practices. When working from a base in contemporary art, the conceptions of the discipline are uncertain and the informing parameters are open-ended; yet the opportunity for inventive inquiry is at hand. In these circumstances the artist-researcher is seen to be participating in a “post-discipline” practice. Here there is little reliance on a prescribed content base; rather it is the deployment of a suitable methodological base that supports the questions being asked, which may take the researcher beyond content boundaries. In many cases, it is in universities where these opportunities may be best realized.
Studio-based programs at the university level that seek to move beyond the terminal exhibition as the principal form of documentation are required to meet the research criteria set by the parent institution for the completion of research degrees. This is most often seen to be the contribution of new knowledge to the field and is framed by reference to prevailing theories and practices. In the field of art education, this mostly means completing the academic requirements for doctoral study using established research protocols. In those institutions that confer higher degrees that incorporate a studio component the expectation is that a “thesis” topic might be investigated through studio-based inquiry. This is generally accompanied by an “exegesis,” which is a critical interpretation that provides a context for the work undertaken. The thesis and exegesis are thus seen to constitute a body of research.

In completing projects within the academic setting the methods deployed by a studio-based researcher in “surrounding” a research problem will be necessarily broad yet be personally relevant. There will also be public considerations if it is accepted that the creation and exhibition of art is an educational act that can have an impact on others. Even if the artist eschews public commentary or critical response, the artwork occupies a public space for others to encounter. As the artwork is subject to public discourse, it enters into a set of institutional relations and as such becomes part of an interpretive regime. Once the personal is made public, an exchange that involves others is underway. And if the artist-researcher, whether using self-study strategies or other research methods, gathers evidence that is grounded and defensible rather than merely confessional, then the outcomes open up educational discussion.

Like other forms of research, self-study invites the reader into the research process by asking that interpretations be checked, that themes be critically scrutinized, and that the “so what” question be vigorously pressed. In self-studies, conclusions are hard won, elusive, are generally more tentative than not. The aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle. (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20)

Part of the legacy of conceptualizing studio art practice as research is the opportunity it gives to reconsider the inextricable relationship between theory and practice. Assembling a variety of new historical and critical traditions of fine arts alongside equally diverse studio practices means that the alliance between the artist and the art writer is seen as a collaboration that interrogates the artwork in a speculative quest to explore the unknown. For the artist, the artwork embodies the questions, ideas, feelings, impulses, and images; whereby for the critic, the word becomes the vehicle to advance new realms of investigative possibility. In this case, the coalition between the visual and the verbal is both critical and supportive.

ART AS TRANSCOGNITIVE PRACTICE AND TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH

Many theories and approaches have been applied to study the workings of the creative mind (Gardner, 1982; Gruber, 1981; West, 1997). Initially seen as a human capacity contained within the inventive headspace of the gifted but socially mute individual, recent conceptions of the mind see creativity as a social construct (Goodman, 1984; Weisberg, 1993). As such, the outcomes of creative thought and action are seen to be different when positioned relative to existing ideas. The outcome of these kinds of inquiries continues to influence art education and

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1I am reminded of a radio interview with Gloria Steinem when she was asked how she “solved problems.” After pausing a moment, she responded that one doesn’t “solve problems,” rather a more comprehensive approach is to “surround problems.” This image nicely captures the approach used by artist-researchers.
our understanding of creative practices for imaginative thinking is at the heart of learning and teaching art. To better understand the cognitive coalition at the heart of the studio experience, there is a need to critique two long-term theoretical constructs, process and product, and assess them in relation to practices found in contemporary art. For it can be argued that what contemporary artists “do” provides access to foundational thinking in the field (Sullivan, 1993, 2002a).

At various times in the history of art education the prevailing belief has been that art learning should emphasize the process and at other times the product (Efland, 1990). One outcome of poststructuralist discussion was a critique of the merit of using binary opposites as conceptual organizers and the limits this tendency imposes on how the interdependency of structural relationships might be considered. Various dichotomies have been deconstructed such as objective-subjective, form and content, fact and fiction, cognition and affect, and female and male. A serious deficiency with the process-product dichotomy is apparent when the cognitive processes associated with artistic thinking are reviewed (Sullivan, 2000b).

A prominent position in art education is taken by the description of artistic thinking as primarily being the consequence of thought and action that is manifest in the creative product. Drawing as it does from analytical and Gestalt psychology as the defining paradigms, thinking in a medium is a useful description of this orientation. Research in the mid-20th century studied perceptual processes, as this seemed the most obvious way to approach what Arnheim (1969) labeled “visual thinking.” Later approaches took more of a systems approach describing cognitive functioning as a form of symbolic processing (Gardner, 1973; Sullivan, 1986; Winner, 1982), and in some cases different cognitive functions were associated with different media (Carey & Gelman, 1991). The extrapolation of these ideas relative to the creative processes in adults (Gardner, 1993) further emphasized that artists think in a medium.

Artistic thinking is also seen as a cognitive process that is socially mediated (Berger, 1980). This view has its genesis in social constructionism (Vygotsky 1986; Wertsch, 1985), European interpretive theories (Habermas, 1984; Ricouer, 1981), and semiotics (Barthes, 1968; Hodge & Kress, 1988). Rather than focusing on behavioral outcomes to study cognition, one tries to make sense out of the intrinsic way language is used to construct stories and meanings through art talk, or discourse, that derives from encounters with art (Barrett, 2000; Carrier, 2003). In art education this cognitive orientation emphasizes the process and is best described as thinking in a language (Parsons, 1992). In this view, knowledge of cognition is built on the basis of the way linguistic signs function and understanding emerges as a process mediated by social and cultural conventions. Therefore thinking in art and thinking about art is language dependent and understanding about art is mediated by artworld conventions and the lifeworld context of the individual.

Art as Transcognitive Practice

The importance of context as an agent that informs our understanding is central to many recent arguments about cognitive development (Efland, 2002; Harris, 1998; Light & Butterworth, 1993; Sternberg & Wagner, 1994). Different contextual influences include human involvement as well as situational factors, physical features, and other environmental and cultural cues. Perkins (1992) for instance, describes “distributed cognition” as a process whereby thinking takes place within an interactive system that includes the self and others, and the artifacts we use. Situated cognition, on the other hand, is sometimes called sociocultural cognition whereby reality is a social construct and understanding emerges as a consequence of commonsense transactions in language and in other forms of communication (Efland, 2002; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Inquiries into other factors such as discipline-specific influences and psychobiological
constraints appear to be offering additional insights into the cognitive ensemble that informs artistic functioning (Changeux, 1994; Frith & Law, 1995).

Describing cognition as mental and physical activities that take place within a socio cultural context requires one to abandon the idea that art learning is best located in the process or the product. Viewing art practice as displaying cognitive processes that are distributed throughout the various media, language, situational, and cultural products offers the possibility of a more plausible account of artistic thinking. The belief that process and product inform each other does not mean that we reduce things to their common elements in the manner of viewing two overlapping circles, much like a Venn diagram. Rather, there is the expectation that both process and product represent complex systems of skill and understanding. Therefore when the processes and products of artistic experiences interact, the connections are strategic and purpose driven, rather than being all encompassing or reductive.

Inquiries into contexts that inform art practice generally focus on identifying artists’ working processes (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Sullivan, 1996), or the products of artistic activity (Arnheim, 1986). These conform to the emphasis placed on either process or product described earlier. To examine a wider set of contextual factors that influence how artists think a study was undertaken with two artists who were invited to participate in a research project that culminated in an exhibition of their work in a commercial gallery (Sullivan, 1998). The aim of the project, titled Critical Influence, was to investigate approaches to contemporary visual arts practice so as to be able to better understand how artists’ think, and act in response to the challenge of preparing work for an exhibition. Other artworld agents such as the exhibition setting, the gallery director, a critic, and the researcher also wearing a curatorial hat, were all considered to be active elements in the artistic endeavor. As well as producing artworks for exhibition, each artist also participated in a qualitative case study over several months leading up to the exhibition that mapped the influences on their art practice. Information was collected in the form of a series of interviews with each artist, along with studio observations recorded in written, photographic, and video formats. Interviews were also conducted with those involved in the exhibition process, including the gallery director and an art critic, whom both wrote catalog essays.

The outcomes of the Critical Influence project indicate that in mapping the cognitive character of artistic practice there is a need to reject the process-product dichotomy, as it does not adequately account for the range of activities observed. It was more appropriate to meld the psychological view that describes art learning as thinking in a medium, and the interpretive position that describes art knowing as thinking in a language. The resolution confirmed findings of an earlier study (Sullivan, 1996) that described the cognitive coalition observed as thinking in a setting. This cognitive ensemble involves an ongoing dialog between, within and around the artist, artwork, viewer, and context, where each has a role in co-constructing meaning. This process is ongoing in a constructivist way and strategic in nature as meaning is encompassed and negotiated. I describe this as transcognition.

Transcognition is a process where the ‘self’ and ‘others’ are parallel and necessary agents of mind that inform each other through analysis and critique... The strategic interaction between the self and others occurs over time and involves iteration and negotiation as individual purpose is mediated by situational factors. During this time, concerns about process and product serve as a basis upon which practice is grounded. (Sullivan, 2002b, p. 9)

The outcomes of these studies of artists’ practice confirm the distinctive transcognitive way artists think and create. Further, the studies reveal insights about how activities that take place in the studio constitute a form of research that is responsive, reflexive, and strategic and yields actions that construct new realities. In this case it is spurious to compare artistic inquiry to
scientific inquiry, because even though the quest for human insight is similar, artists and scientists follow different paths. After all, scientists think about how progress leads to change, and artists think about how change leads to progress.

Art Practice as Transformative Research

During modernist times the prevailing construct was: “to see is to know.” This was grounded in an empirical understanding based on direct experience and was mostly achieved by participation in the grand tradition of cultural tourism. During postmodern times we live in a constructed visual world where there is little distinction between the real and the virtual. If we understand the constructions that shape what we see, then “to know is to see” (Rose, 2001). Therefore there are different ways of seeing and knowing the world. The critical task is to determine the social impact of these different visions and the creative task is to create forms of representation that have the capacity to reveal, critique, and transform what we know. This quest for understanding can be achieved by conceiving of art practice as a form of transformative research that makes full use of the potential of visual images to help reveal insights and understandings about issues of human concern. But what is the status of the visual image as a data source in research?

A review of recent research methods texts highlights a growing disquiet with the lack of a critically reflexive attitude (Brown & Jones, 2001; Scheurich, 1997; Stronach & MacLure, 1997). Although those advancing a perspective grounded in critical theory have advocated an emancipatory role for research for a long time (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McTaggart, 1997) many of those deploying visual methods of research are content to see these approaches as merely a way of expanding the range of data available for analysis (Ball & Smith, 1992; Banks, 2001). This renewed interest in how images might be used as data has a long history of debate, particularly in sociology and anthropology, regarding the status of still and moving images. For many, the use of photography and film is questioned, as these forms of data are too subjective and messy and resist systematic analysis. It is somewhat ironic that many researchers in disciplines that pioneered field-based research remain wedded to practices that see the image as a device for documentation and the interpretation of visual forms mostly as an exercise in content analysis (Prosser, 1998). For instance, the use of photography is still being presented as an illustrative travelog and this severely misinterprets what a photograph is.

Photographs of people and things stand for evidence in a way that pure narrative cannot. In many cases, visual information of what the people and their world looks like provide harder and more immediate evidence than the written word; photographs can authenticate a research report in a way that words alone cannot. (Ball & Smith, 1992, p. 9)

It seems that the telling quip that “cameras don’t take photographs, people do” is not fully understood.

What is missing from much of the visual research method literature is an acknowledgment that the interpretation of visual data is not so much about trying to describe visual content. Rather, the task of the researcher is to understand how those who make images—artists and other cultural communicators—and those who interpret images—critics and other cultural commentators—construct their meanings as they present them in visual form. Obviously the image-based researcher also creates and interprets visual data so a central consideration is to address the need to be critical in assessing how the researcher makes meanings.

The idea that subjective experience can be translated into objective knowledge is itself problematic for reflexive ethnography. Therefore an “analysis” through which visual data becomes written
academic knowledge has little relevance. Instead, ethnographers need to articulate the experiences and contexts from which their field notes, video recordings, photographs and other materials were produced, their sociological or anthropological understanding of these ethnographic contexts, and their relevance to wider academic debates. (Pink, 2001, p. 97)

This critical imperative implies that the visual image is more than a product that can be isolated and contextualized. The image is also constitutive of cultural practices, individual process, and information systems that are located within spaces and places; is evidence of mediated processes; and is indicative of visual regimes that may be tangible or invisible (Emmison & Smith, 2000; Rose, 2001; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001).

The pattern seen in areas of visual anthropology and visual sociology reflects a move in life science research whereby the visual image is being seen as a form of data representation that has particular properties and possibilities. As such, it is no longer sufficient to accept the visual image as merely an alternative form of data that is assessed in relation to the dominant modes of representation. Visual images cannot be understood by comparing them to words or numbers. Rather, a different set of theoretical parameters is needed to fully understand the way images reveal insights and understandings. This principle is accepted by art historians and cultural theorists who understand the dynamic, interpretive relationships among the object, creator, and viewers; and related cultural, political, and institutional regimes that influence how knowledge is constructed and made problematic; and how meanings are made (Bal, 1996; Heywood & Sandywell, 1999; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

To understand the role of the artist as a creator of visual images, and the potential to conduct research “in” art using studio practice, there is a need to consider the changing function of the artist. The idea of the artist as social recluse or a cultural lamplighter of genius is an inadequate representation. Nor is it reasonable to accept the image of the artist-teacher as someone whose creative expertise is merely a model to emulate. The contemporary artist adopts many patterns of practice that dislodge discipline boundaries, media conventions, and political interests, yet still manages to operate within a realm of cultural discourse that is both reflexive and coercive at the same time. The image of the artist as creator, critic, theorist, teacher, activist, and archivist partly captures the range of art practice today.

The artist-researcher is a notion that is not inconceivable nowadays, as the kind of practices that constitute what can happen in the studio can readily be placed within the discourse of cultural and educational research. This is especially apparent if the trends evident in research continue to move beyond the quest for explanatory paradigms as the long dominant positivist practices reveal themselves unable to cope with the breadth and depth of human action. This is evident if the changing role of the visual image is considered. Originally conceived as an object or icon representative of a time or place, or as an informational record, the associated research method defined the visual image as an instrument of culture, and the research task was to determine how it was used in explaining the way the world worked. More recently, however, visual images are seen as textual forms of all sorts and as sites for ideas that are taken up by an interpretive community. The research method defines the visual image as an agent of change, and the research task is to reveal how it helps us understand the transformative power of knowledge.

Researching art practice can therefore be seen as a viable way to reveal the kind of knowledge that is unique to artistic understanding. The approach to inquiry runs parallel to the ideas and methods from the social sciences that promote the critical application of visual research methods. For instance, adventurous social science researchers are beginning to use the visual image not merely to record or illustrate social texts, but as a means to create and critique new knowledge by applying methods that highlight the contested nature of visual cultural
practices (Rose, 2001). Others are not trying to make “truth” claims and instead are applying ethnographic methods as an imaginative and reflexive act that reveals new insights about others (Hine, 2000; Pink, 2001). Yet, although research practices in the visual arts are found in the studio, in galleries, in communities, on the street, in texts, or on the Internet, they have yet to find a rightful place within the academy. Therefore the question to be asked is whether it is possible to conceive of research projects in art that incorporate a range of ways of presenting, encountering, and analyzing information that is sufficiently robust to move beyond explanatory theory to produce new knowledge that is transformative? Is it possible to consider “the visual,” not only as a descriptive or interpretive form but also as an agent of transformation in constructing new knowledge, not finding it? Seen from this perspective, the role of visual data in research can be used to move beyond the contribution to explanatory knowledge production, and to a more ambitious state of transformative knowledge construction.

CONCLUSION

As an area of individual, social and cultural inquiry, visual arts has, for the most part, remained outside the mainstream of community debate. Although no stranger to controversy due to the capacity to divide public opinion, as a serious social phenomenon, visual arts remains mostly sequestered within a limited cultural and political orbit. At worst, visual arts is seen as elitist, at best visual arts is misunderstood. Even when included in schools and institutions of higher education, visual arts programs and art education courses struggle for acceptance as important areas of the curriculum. Existing misconceptions about the intellectual status of learning in visual arts means that the scholarly, cultural and social significance of art is grossly under valued. To redress this I explored the theoretical basis of artistic practice and position this within the discourse of research.

The approach taken examines visual arts as a form of inquiry within the theories, practices and contexts used by artists. The critical and creative investigations that occur in studios, galleries, on the Internet, in community spaces, and other places where artists work, is presented as a form of research that is grounded in art practice. Rather than adopting methods of inquiry from the social sciences, the research practices advocated here subscribe to the view that while similar research goals can be set, they can be achieved by following different yet complementary paths. What is common is the attention given to rigor and systematic inquiry, but in a way that privileges the role imagination and intellect plays in constructing knowledge that is not only new but has the capacity to transform human understanding.

A central claim made in this chapter is that understanding is a viable goal of educational research and that explanatory theories of human learning need to be supplemented with transformative theories of individual and social action. It is further contended that these emancipatory theories can be found within the thoughts, ideas, and actions that result from making art. This posits the view that art practice can be claimed to be a legitimate form of research and that approaches to inquiry can be located within the studio experience. Therefore, studio art practice needs to be seen as a valuable site for raising theoretically profound questions and exploring them using robust visual methods that have the potential to yield critically grounded and individually transforming outcomes. Artistic practice therefore comprises a critical coalition that involves an ongoing dialog between, within and around the artist, artwork and context where each has a role to play in the creation of meaning. With these provisions in mind it appears highly likely that a new era of art education research is possible for those who see studio art as transcognitive practice and visual methods as a central means for conducting transformative research.
REFERENCES


SULLIVAN


