



Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art & Design

Royal College
of Art **Research Papers**

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Volume 2 Number 1 1996/7

**New Methodologies in
Art and Design Research:
The Object as Discourse**

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'The objects of the College are to advance learning, knowledge and professional competence particularly in the field of fine arts, in the principles and practice of art and design in their relation to industrial and commercial processes and social developments and other subjects relating thereto through teaching, research and collaboration with industry and commerce.'

Charter of Incorporation of the Royal College of Art
28 July 1967

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ISBN 1 874175 56 X

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Royal College of Art 1997

New Methodologies in Art and Design Research: The Object as Discourse

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The following is a modified version of a paper presented by Alex Seago and Anthony Dunne at the *No Guru, No Method International Conference on Art and Design Research* held at The University of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland, in September 1996.

Should researchers in art and design adopt and adapt methodologies developed in other academic disciplines, or should they concentrate upon developing original methodologies which recognise the distinctive quality of discovery in art and design? The answer to this question is complicated by the very wide spectrum of subjects currently being pursued under the aegis of art and design research: a PhD by thesis in, say, Design History on an aspect of costume will obviously employ very different methodologies from a PhD by project in Ceramics which explores the development of new glazes. In the key area of action research by project – particularly those projects in which the end product is an artefact which embodies the research – the need to develop and to legitimise original research methodologies seems essential.

While it is well documented that much original research across the spectrum of disciplines follows similar trajectories, a variety of factors seem to be threatening the self-confidence of some students pursuing action research by project. The most important of these obstacles seems to be the academic blueprint implied by the PhD qualification, its demand for originality, for methodological rigour in the production of explicit data, for a defence of the reliability and validity of the research methodologies employed, for 'transparency' of method, 'replicability' of results and the transmissibility of the final outcome of the research project. These requirements, of supreme importance to the legitimacy of the PhD qualification in academia, can clash with artists', craftspersons' or designers' suspicions about what might be termed the 'demystification of process' in creative work. In addition to this ideological conflict, action researchers by project in art and design face the familiar problems of finding suitably qualified and sympathetic research supervisors and of negotiating the economic and political discrepancies between the entrenched research cultures of universities and those of colleges of art and design in which the idea of research continues to remain vague and contentious.

The danger in this is that perplexed researchers in art and design will opt to play it

safe and, rather than risking the development and defence of really original hypotheses and methodologies characteristic of 'fundamental' research work, will choose (and be admitted into art school research programmes because they have chosen) academically acceptable and supervisable research topics with methodologies culled from established academic disciplines. Although most of these students will probably produce solid and worthy 'applied' research projects, most will be narrow in scope, usually rather dull and pedestrian and will probably be regarded as research of second- or third-rate quality by academic-dominated funding bodies. In short, as a result of what might be termed 'methodological intimidation', research work carried out in colleges of art and design stands a very real risk of losing those qualities of originality, iconoclasm, energy, style and wit which have characterised the best of art school culture since the 1950s. This paper will review the methodologies of some Royal College of Art based research by project doctoral students who have grappled with this problem and have as a result begun to develop unique research strategies.

A solution to some of the methodological problems which can be faced by the action researcher by project in art and design is offered in the work of Ian Ferguson.

A metalsmith/craftsman by training, Ferguson's research focuses on the traditional Japanese practice of fusing metals known as *mokume gane*. While his MPhil thesis concentrated on the history and development of the technique, his completed PhD represents a successful attempt to transcend the traditional 'hit and miss' techniques of craft production by applying and documenting modern methods of solid state diffusion bonding to the production of *mokume gane* craft objects. Co-supervised by the Royal College of Art's Department of Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork and Jewellery and the Department of Materials at the University of Oxford, Ferguson was initially faced with the problem of being accepted as a craftsperson in an academic scientific research environment while also satisfying the demand to produce work of high aesthetic quality in an art school.

Highly competent academic supervision in a research environment sympathetic with the intellectual processes necessary for the production of innovative fundamental research enabled Ferguson to develop a research strategy in which metallurgical research techniques were interpreted from the viewpoint of the *producer* of craft objects. As an experienced metalsmith, Ferguson's practical understanding of the behaviour of materials is considerable, but the *focus* of his research on the application of solid state diffusion bonding is radically different from a research metallurgist who would usually lack the craftsperson's understanding of the creative process. Ferguson's research is particularly interesting for the way in which it combines an understanding of the processes of *production of materials* with a very high level of craft skill in the *production of aesthetic objects*. As such, the *mokume gane* objects offered by Ferguson for the studio/project component of his *viva* serve as much more than simple samples of materials, adding instead a distinctive aesthetic craft dimension to his doctoral research.

Similar problems are faced by Les Johnson, currently enrolled in a PhD by project in the Royal College of Art's Department of Illustration. A graphic designer by training, Johnson is interested in the visual dynamics of black British popular culture, and popular music (reggae, soul, house, drum and bass, etc.) in particular. Since the early 1970s this field of academic inquiry has been deeply

influenced by academics working within the discipline of cultural studies, particularly students and ex-students of the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The standard CCCS approach to popular music has been to understand it in terms of consumption and specifically in terms of resistance to bourgeois hegemony. CCCS studies of the 1970s and 1980s by authors such as Dick Hebdige and Paul Willis which 'read' post-war British pop music and subcultural style in terms of 'resistance through rituals', tended to ignore the entrepreneurial elements involved in the creation of black pop music. Sensing that the experience of black music producers had, in a sense, been overlooked by most academics, Johnson sets out to reassess the sociology and history of black British popular music, focusing upon what he terms the forgotten 'little narratives' of production and entrepreneurship in black music.

While this could be interpreted as an innovative and interesting exercise in academic research, the project element of Johnson's research is wholly original, revolving around the development of an Internet website which both serves as a source of information about the history and sociology of black music but also, and perhaps more importantly, serves as a site for contemporary discourses about music, fashion and graphic design. Traditional academic research, and the PhD in particular, entails the development of the narrow expertise and exclusive jargon of the specialist. Whereas this is entirely appropriate and absolutely necessary in many areas, in the field of popular culture it can often exclude the constituency which possesses the greatest knowledge, leading to situations in which self-appointed 'experts' pontificate about popular culture in a language few but other academics can understand, thereby preventing any constructive discourse between academics and the consumers and producers of pop, including designers. Johnson's website, currently under construction, aims to bridge this gap by democratising and 'flattening out' the gulf which separates academic and popular debate, serving, both literally and metaphorically, as a site for popular discourse. As with most research degrees by project, however, one of the greatest challenges involves the coherent linkage of the written and studio aspects of the

project within a research context.

A more complex solution to the problem of combining academic research with creative studio-based projects is offered by Anthony Dunne who recently completed his PhD by project in the Royal College of Art's Department of Computer Related Design. Coming from an art school background in Industrial Design and having already been employed as an experimental electronic product designer by Sony in Japan, his detachment from more conventional academic research methodologies helps render his approach particularly useful as a blueprint for future design research strategies.

Dunne's research proceeds from the observation, originally posited by designer/theorist Ezio Manzini, that advances in electronic technology have 'given rise to a massive crisis of the object':

If a technical system undergoes a period of rapid change, the need arises to modify the criteria by which one recognises the artificial. This is the phase we are now experiencing. The transformation of materials, manufacturing processes, and technological knowledge has brought about a new artificial that calls into question the traditional recognisability of the artificial, as well as the entire system of space-time relationships that we base on that artificial. (Manzini, 1986, p.27)

Rejecting the electronic product designer's traditional role as semiotician, he attempts to map a new conceptual territory on which to explore the electronic as 'post-optimal object', turning his attention away from the familiar attempt to achieve 'optimum performance levels' and towards more fundamental philosophical issues. Whereas a conventional applied research project in this area might try to develop a specific utilitarian application or change of appearance for electronic technology, concentrating on problems such as production, practicality and performance, Dunne's research focuses on the relationship between electronic objects and the realms of poetry and aesthetics. The project attempts to re-examine the potential of closing the gap between art and everyday life by developing objects that fulfil more complex and abstract needs. Design is seen as a form of socio-aesthetic research towards the integration of aesthetic experience and everyday life through the development of conceptual products rather than working prototypes or models which attempt to simulate a final product designed

for mass production.

As a PhD by project, Dunne's work uses research through the design *process* to explore the development of an approach that allows the development of critical responses and a sceptical sensibility towards the ideological nature of design with the purpose of stimulating original aesthetic possibilities for new kinds of electronic objects. The ultimate aim of the research project is the development of electronic products which by 'making strange' or 'poeticising the distance' between ourselves and our artefactual environment, facilitate sociological awareness, reflective and critical involvement with the electronic object rather than its passive consumption and unthinking acceptance.

Dunne's methodological and theoretical stance bears a similarity to contemporary architectural attempts (see, for example, the work of Kei'iche Irie and Yutaku Saito in Miyake, Mommens & Taub (eds) 1989) to radically redefine relationships between structure, visual perception and space, and also to the work of the designer/theorists Ezio Manzini and Marco Susani who express a strong belief in the experimental function of contemporary design practice in order to counteract the contemporary obsession with styling for its own sake:

Today 'family line', 'identity codes' and 'guidelines' are the priorities applied by major industries to determine the design of aesthetic consumer goods . . . in many design studios a great deal of time is now spent changing a curve simply to make it different from that of a competitor's product . . . These techniques and tricks have always been used by industry and, at times, have even produced brilliant results. Now, however, they are transforming design into a meaningless and endless process of reworking. A great many creative and sensitive people . . . are no longer able to keep up with this 'creative vomit' . . . All the energy invested in work towards aesthetic, social and spiritual goods is translated into nothing more than transient suggestions borrowed from the world of art . . . For the vast majority of individual consumer articles now on the market aesthetic design is now limited to the outer surface of things . . . design needs to concern itself with deeper processes of material configuration rather than trivial innovation. (Manzini & Susani (eds), 1995, p.31)

Dunne's methodology comprises a sophisticated synthesis of a detailed review of developments at the fringes of contemporary electronic product design mediated through the insights of twentieth-century critical theory. Rather than aiming for transparency, as would

a conventional applied researcher/product designer, his attempt to enhance the critical distance between the electronic object and the human subject through the introduction of 'poetic' techniques of aesthetic 'estrangement' is reminiscent of the writing of Frankfurt School theorists such as Walter Benjamin or the methods of avant-garde theorist/performers such as John Cage, rather than those associated with university-based academic PhDs in applied electronic engineering.

The key methodological factor which separates Dunne's approach from that of a conventional applied researcher who would typically be involved in the fabrication of working prototypes, is his idea of using the process of invention as a mode of *discourse*, a poetic invention that, by stretching established conventions, whether physical, social or political, rather than simply affirming them, takes on a radical critical function, a material critical theory or what Dunne terms a 'parafunctionality'. Like Michel Foucault's concept of a discourse which crosses and challenges traditional disciplinary territories, Dunne's research methodology does not readily fit into traditional analytical categories, for an attempt is being made to generate a different conception of the role of design researcher/ intellectual. Rather than asking the familiar question 'What is good design?', the written section of Dunne's thesis attempts to provide thematic analyses of the electronic object (e.g. the use of estrangement, subversion or humour), with the goal of allowing refusal, curiosity, and innovation. To this extent Dunne's work offers a positive and radical model of the action researcher in design as a critical interpreter of design processes and their relationship to culture and society rather than a skilled applied technician preoccupied by the minutiae of industrial production or a slick but intellectually shallow semiotician.

The methodological strategies employed by the research projects reviewed above seem to offer some solutions to the problem of the role of the object/artefact in research by project. As experienced craftsman, graphic designer and product designer respectively, Ferguson, Johnson and Dunne acknowledge that there is a kind of tacit knowledge creative professionals possess which cannot be separated from their perception, judgement and skill. However, rather than arguing that a radically new

electronic product or a new method for producing metals can be constituted as providing new knowledge *in themselves*, Johnson, Dunne and Ferguson situate their discoveries in a research context. All three of these doctoral programmes have been conducted as systematic research activities and both contain explicit data. The record of the conduct of both programmes is 'transparent' in the sense that a future researchers could uncover the same information, rehearse the arguments expounded and, to a lesser or greater degree, produce the same result. In all three projects the data employed and the outcomes arrived at are validated and related to a review of previous research in appropriate fields. In short, if research in *any* discipline can be described as a systematic enquiry whose goal is knowledge, then Ferguson, Johnson and Dunne offer good examples of systematic and original research by project in art and design in which the object occupies a central place. All three pieces of research also raise the question of the role of design/craft in an academic context free of commercial values. In Dunne's case the electronic object produced as the studio section of the doctorate is still 'design' but in the sense of a 'material thesis' in which the object itself becomes a physical critique. In all three cases research is interpreted as 'conceptual modelling' involving a critique of existing approaches to production/ consumption communicated through highly considered artefacts.

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This is the fourth Paper in a series intended to stimulate research and debate in the areas of art, design and communication.