

Material thinking as document

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Significant method : a questioning of the importance of articulating method in practice-led research (a case-study).

Abstract

This paper takes as a case study a practice-led art project, whose research outcomes were submitted for assessment within the Master of Art & Design at AUT University in 2008. The submission comprised an exhibition of paintings accompanied by a 12,000 word exegesis.

The paper addresses two questions arising from examination panel discussions during assessment of a number of practice-based visual arts submissions for the same qualification (including this case study). The questions are considered in relation to the case study. Firstly, the question of how necessary it is to provide a written (or verbal) articulation of method and methodological rationale, or whether method might be inferred from an artefact as outcome. Secondly a question around the tension between the evaluative frameworks of the university and the wider art institution – particularly in relation to the constricted timeframe and constrained critical framework of a university programme of study.

The paper outlines the dilemma faced by a candidate having to structure a project and negotiate around these questions, and outlines particular areas of risk for both candidate and examiner. An extension of the dilemma is the possibility of promoting risk-averse and self-abnegating approaches to practice-led research in response to a concern for accountabilities of the other. The paper argues for transparent discussion of the issues, and accommodation of flexible approaches.

The exegesis In question can viewed online at the Scholarly Commons site in the AUT University library: <http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/handle/10292/469>

Roche, L. (2008) *Theatre of painting: a structural exploration of the forming of an image through paint*. Unpublished master's thesis. AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand.

This paper derives from a discussion during the assessment by panel of a number of practice-based visual arts submissions for postgraduate qualification. In the discussion a question arose about the significance (or otherwise) of a submission being able to demonstrate the application and articulation of a transparent and systematically rigorous developmental method. The question was not, at the time, specifically related to the project in this case-study. However a brief outline of the nature of this project (which was one of those being assessed at the time) will indicate how it serves to throw the question and its implications into relief.

The project here under consideration is fundamentally about method, and in particular about shifting the balance of agency from the artist to the materials themselves. The project seeks to generate images through a process of direct and relatively unmediated interaction between paint and its environment. Intervention by the artist is withdrawn early in the process so that the image derives from the attenuating effect of a singular applied force, the effect of gravity, the qualities of the medium, the nature of the substrate, and the climatic conditions of the studio environment.

Tightly circumscribed parameters of method serve to constrain the artist to a functionary role as facilitator-collaborator, by setting material conditions and procedural boundaries within which the paint will be induced to perform and within which an image (painting) will subsequently unfold. Agency for the unfolding of this image is displaced from the artist to the medium.

For example, through set-piece actions the artist applies an initiating force to set pigmented media in motion, then withdraws allowing the now closed system to play itself out as the actions attenuate to a state of exhaustion (equilibrium). The medium eventually falls into (relative) stasis and creates a picture. There is always nuanced difference in the force applied to the system (various angles and speeds of tilt, various heights of drip or pressures of squeeze) but otherwise the factors at play are the qualities of substrate (material, texture, absorbancy), qualities of the medium (pigment, solvent vehicle, colloidal tendency), weather (humidity, temperature), and the other constant collaborator in these works – gravity.

Interestingly the artist is usually not present at the time when the medium achieves equilibrium (which often happens at night), although there is no discernibly terminal point. In actuality the picture continues to unfold in time as bloom develops on the paint, a stain spreads, an edge curls, dust settles, pigment fades, fibres weaken, fungus grows, and so on. As the candidate states in her concluding commentary (p69):

“This project...does not set out to give paint an elevated status in a materialist sense. It simply considers and explores an alternative premise through which to circumscribe matter, that involves a rethinking of the notion of agency within the creative act. The project is about possibility, potential, small discoveries. It makes no claims and offers no conclusions.”

As a reflection of this withdrawal of polemic, the work presented has an aura of restraint and slow patience, with paint variously puddling, washing out or over, reflecting and washing back from a boundary, all with the compelling beauty of simple and restrained action. The performative concerns of the project are mirrored in the project’s title, *Theatre of Painting* – which encompasses various connotations of the theatre of action or operations, the performing theatre and operating theatre, theatricality. However in this particular theatre the artist is not directly concerned with the spectator.

While the abstract in the exegesis states that “central to the research concerns are issues surrounding the ability of media to articulate itself” (p.7) it is clear that the articulation being discussed is material as much as perceptual – that is, immanent to the image rather than being directed at the spectator. While the point is hard to miss, it is important to realise that the project concept is about method and that when the candidate tells us that “this exegesis is a profiling of method; a reflection of method as it has developed through the making of the work” (p.8), she is talking of the conceptual underpinnings and unfoldings of the project and not just about the method of execution. Importantly, by describing the exegesis as a reflection *of* rather than *on* method, and by talking of method as developed through making work, the candidate asserts the research as practice-led.

Clearly this project, as conceptually and methodologically pre-occupied with method, is deeply implicated in the question which forms the basis of this paper – whether evidence of developmental method is important? However my concern is with its wider implications for all practice-led projects – for candidates, supervisors, examiners, and ultimately for any situation where the qualification is deployed. It highlights issues of reliability and accountability around postgraduate qualifications in practice-led art research.

The assessment criteria against which this project was tested state ‘There should be explicit and/or implicit evidence that the project has been appropriately structured and developed, with coherently related aims, method, and presentation of outcomes’. The criteria also require that the submission should demonstrate ‘requisite breadth, depth, and rigour’. It is evident that considerable latitude is allowed for interpretation - latitude which is necessary for equitable assessment in relation to the award of equivalent qualifications across institutions.

In the assessment panel there was one external examiner and two examiners who had recently come to the institution, and so brought their predominantly external experience and perspective. It is important to note here that the assessments were conducted with due professionalism.

However, during free and open discussion within the panel [for the collective assessment event], and despite the assessment criteria, a division of opinion was revealed about the relative importance of method – as method might be evidenced in developmental work visually documented and contextualised in an exegesis. An extreme example given in this discussion was where successful imagery might arrive *de novo* without being shaped through sequences of developmental works. In such a situation it was suggested that methodological justification might be redundant (or a misrepresentation), and that the artefact itself could be taken as evidence of the appropriateness and rigor of whatever method was applied. The implication is that assessment could simply focus on how an artefact might open-up critical perspectives of some (any) dimension and extension. That is, the consideration of primary importance would be how, for the spectator-examiner, the work presented in exhibition actually *does work* as a work of art. Consideration of artist intentionalities and virtuous practices would accordingly fall away as secondary concerns. Methodological rigour would be evidenced by the *work* that the artefact (artwork) had done, and caused in the spectator. This reflects the way in which art is evaluated within the wider art institution¹, and so is consistent with a key objective of postgraduate study. It is also consistent with practice-led approaches to research, even if the research capability being developed is not directly accountable as transparent and transferrable methodology.

However the de-emphasising of method in assessment as a position is clearly problematic in situations (such as this case-study) where method is central to a project's concerns. It is also problematic where the (relative) unimportance of method becomes a default orientation a position which is then less likely to be tested for appropriateness to differing situations.

Any de-emphasis on method is certainly an issue in this case study where the project is both conceptually and procedurally about method – where resultant images reflect back on their relations of production and on internal concerns, rather than opening out into a world of external relations. The implication here is that imagery needs to be evaluated within the constraints and internal concerns of the project, and that other evaluative considerations might constitute a violation of the terms of the integrity of the project. For example, evaluation of the artefacts as works of art measured against an index of aesthetic criticality would effectively overwrite the project's own aims with purposes external to its concerns. Agency would then be displaced back to the artist and spectator – agency from which the artist has already, deliberately, withdrawn.

From the exegesis, it may be taken in this case as implicitly understood that the project's question extends to a questioning of where art lies in the image, in the artefact. The candidate places the examiner precisely in the dilemma which poses the question. This action radically constitutes the art in the project, and it is in respect of this that the examiner is obliged to re-orientate the perspective of assessment. Method is here placed at the fore, with constraint imposed on how the artefact may be considered as image and art in the context of the project, which in turn amplifies the question of agency which underpins the research.

Further, the project demands a re-orientation of critical perspective on the approaches taken to developing the project, decision-making, and the selection and presentation of artefacts as outcomes. It is immediately apparent that the written component has a role far more central than a standard exegesis – a role which is here inherent to the practice and a necessary key to the project. It is apparent that this exegesis is not a retrospective document but effectively constitutes a practice which is both integrated with and complementary to the painting practice in a conceptually driven project. It is not sufficient here to consider the exegesis as simply a contextualising document, even though it incorporates standard exegetical structures (clear documentation of developmental work and working method, discussion of how the project happened to unfold from initial premises, aspects of methodological rationale such as the criteria for selecting work for exhibition and for mode of presentation).

¹ As initially outlined by Dickie, G. (1997). *Introduction to aesthetics*, Ch.8. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This exegesis is simultaneously a foundational document for a conceptual project, a practice within the project, a reflection-in-practice where method arises (in part) out of exegetical development, and a reflection-on-practice. It deftly performs these roles without compromising the self-consistency of a practice-led project, even as it discusses how the project happened to unfold from initial premises, and as it outlines the criteria for selection of work for exhibition and mode of presentation.

So the exegesis leads as practice, and with practice. The headings in the first section are: *Visual documentation and structural approach*, followed by: *The work*. This section constitutes half the total exegesis, and by leading in this way the primary status of practice in this project is made apparent from the outset. Under a number of sub-headings the fundamental premises of the project are laid out and amply illustrated. A notable feature is the exceptional quality of the photographs which comprehensively illustrate the exegesis and also, through their self-concern, reinforce the centrality of practice in this research.

Following this section is *Points of reflection* containing a series of texts of approximately the same size which effect an integrated conceptual, contextual and methodological unfolding of the project through twenty-two points of reflective discussion. Then, as the project moves towards exhibition, we have *Section 4: Final installation*, followed by *Section 5: Concluding commentary*.

At the point of exhibition the exegesis provides a reflective thinking-through and contextualisation which demonstrates exceptional conceptual and structural integrity. It serves as a bridge to the practical work – a bridge which asserts a territorial distinction as much as it links to the art-making aspect of practice. The mutualism between these territories is evidenced by the exegesis' essential role in clarifying how the work presented in exhibition operates; "the images produced evidence this investigation as both enquiry and consequence" (p.7).

The exegesis in this case was not produced retrospectively, but was developed in and through the project as a working practice in itself – all aspects of the project reflecting in and off each other. The actual work made is reflected onto the conceptual framework of the project which in turn reflects back into the method of making. Essential insights arise for the artist while developing the project, and are provided for the spectator in a situation where the work exhibited cannot be expected to reveal its own context of production. However at no point does the exegesis overwrite or displace the practice. This is a finely judged document.

The multi-faceted and self-consistent nature of this exegesis suggests in itself an acute level of awareness and methodological rigour. However if method is not an important consideration for some examiners, my concern is that the considerable investment in such a document as this exegesis may be misplaced or even counter-productive. It may, for example, suggest (to such examiners) an over-investment of the project in methodological accountabilities at the expense of concern with the image itself?

A key premise for this project is the aim of displacing agency from the artist to the materials which will perform the unfolding of image and comprise the resultant artefact in ways more dependent on the properties of the materials than associated with the agency of the artist. It is the interaction between these materials, an initiating force, gravity, and forces in the environment which determine the final state and look of the image. The corollary of withdrawal of the artist is that aesthetic intervention is equivalently withdrawn, and that aesthetic considerations, subsequently inserted, are the responsibility of the spectator (*viz.* assessor). In the presence of an exhibition of coherent and aesthetically appealing work both the dilemma and the responsibility are acutely present to the viewer.

Given the carefully circumscribed nature of this project, it would be inappropriate to critique either the exegesis or the paintings on the grounds that they do not sufficiently account for the likelihood of a spectator reading the work through aesthetic filters - i.e. in ways tangential or even unrelated to the project's aims. For example, the candidate addresses methodological parameters around colour

to an extent appropriate to its (limited) significance in method. The candidate indicates that “colour is non-relational because of process. The pigments are applied in the order they have been left in after working in the studio the day before. The colours are not sorted.” (p35). The message is that the pigment’s behaviour in response to external influence is the issue rather than colour affect, and that chromatic and aesthetic qualities unfold simply from that behaviour.

Selection and presentation of images constitutes a re-intervention by the artist who is now caught in the same dilemma as the spectator (examiner). This re-insertion of agency both points to and amplifies the dilemma without declaring the perspective of agency as being either artist’s or spectator’s. In this way the candidate is able to maintain self-consistency within the project as she illuminates the question of where image and art might be located.

This question comes to bear on how the project should be considered and the presentation evaluated: as a conceptual art work involving performance, or as an installation/exhibition of paintings as works of art. It is clear that the exegesis is integral to the project in such a way that its proportional significance within the project cannot be quantified.

There is a concern that, from a perspective which sees methodological rigour as evident in and immanent to the work of art, a comprehensive and precisely articulated exegesis might suggest an over-determined, literal, or overly representational approach to art practice. This would clearly be an issue if the implication is then taken that the approach is essentially illustrational or design-oriented. A dilemma for a candidate in such a situation is how to mitigate the problem while still demonstrating methodological rigour. One strategy is through placing emphasis on how visual documentation can effect a form of visual exegesis, and this case study provides an example of how the quality of documentary images can be effective in this way.

As with all good research, this project opens up further questions such as the conundrum about how the paintings might be critiqued? Interestingly, although the project does not have a necessary concern with the conventional concerns of exhibition, the installation of outcomes does conform with ‘best practice’ exhibition strategy, thereby implying that the spectator might read (and critique) the works as Contemporary art images?

While the candidate clearly indicates her disinterest in the question of how significance and value might attach to the work as Contemporary art, this stated disinterest serves to force the question and to invoke the wider art institution. The work is measured against research criteria within a university context (as a sub-set of the wider art institution) and also introduced to the critical-evaluative dynamic of its superset. Each of these contexts operates in a different frame of accountability. In the tradition of Western art practices, the role, the *work* of art, is to engage with the critical dynamic of the wider institutional framework. The image unfolds as *work being done* over an extended and indeterminate time frame. However the accountabilities of a postgraduate programme requires that the *work be done* within its boundaries and at the point of examination. The postgraduate qualification is taken is a promissory note by the wider art institution. Art as research will ultimately be judged as Contemporary art, and it is clearly important that the promissory note should be redeemed in at least a high proportion of instances.

The objectives of postgraduate study acknowledge both critical contexts by reflecting them in the assessment criteria, and in the flexibility of the judicial process of examination. The examiner expects that works presented will do the work of art, immediately, and yet also engage with the extended polemics of Contemporary art.

Paradoxically, in this case study it may be taken that the simultaneous disavowal of such polemics while also directly engaging the spectator through exhibition lends this project a radical and critical edge.

Especially where a submission is of high quality there is, in my experience, a tendency for examiners to project the work into the wider art institutional framework and measure it against models-in-

contention for art of contemporary significance, or against an imagined line of historical flight into a future. The privileging of this evaluative framework is a compliment to the perceived standard of the submission, but it also involves risk in applying these standards. Questions arise around what is being measured – evidenced ability, or promise of capability, or the examiner's own projections? Is the measure against a 'going rate' for the Contemporary in art, or against an imagined future for Contemporary art?

Reflexive critique of the art institution remains an indicator of significance in the narratives of Western Contemporary art (where Contemporary serves more as pronoun than adjective). Value is as likely to be ascribed to transgressive approaches (transcending or eschewing extant evaluative frameworks) as to approaches which fit within (accountable) representationalist frameworks. Although an essentially anarchic approach might constitute effective method, it would be inconsistent to deconstruct and articulate it in the form of a methodological rationale. Good art does not necessarily derive from rational design, as normative tends to be antipathetic to art, as an artefact is distinct from its representation, and as an actual outcome might be distinct from the intended outcome.

In the context of the Contemporary, art acts as agency for sustaining a continual renegotiation of evaluative frameworks. To suggest that an examination panel (let alone a single examiner) can stand as proxy for that process, or that it could measure art against a sampling of its state-of-being, is to ignore its inherent dynamic and its being as a state of always becoming-other. The method which matters is the ability to sustain an opening up of new evaluative relations. In the time-frame of a degree programme, establishing and measuring value in such outcomes is not only beyond the capacity of an assessing panel but would, I suggest, have questionable validity.

If however the university's primary objective is to produce alumni who achieve prominence in their field, then in such eventualities a methodology will be judged retrospectively as appropriate. In which case the wider art institution becomes the ultimate arbiter.

Concluding comments

The questions in this paper derived from an examiner's perspective. However the impact is actually on the candidate who is obliged to structure a project and navigate between accountabilities in two institutional frameworks – frameworks which are not necessarily mutually compatible. A candidate may be required to make art by employing methods which are simultaneously mindful and heedless of such accountabilities. While candidates may be intuitively aware of the dilemma, in my experience it is seldom explicitly discussed with candidates or amongst supervisors or programme leaders (or examiners). In fairness to all interested parties it would seem important that there should be more discussion around the challenges of this issue, and that support should be given in this respect.

This case study demonstrates an acute awareness of these issues by deftly structuring a project and negotiating a path where risk is mitigated with a minimum of compromise. However projects such as this challenge the perspective which would relegate method to the margins of evaluative criteria. In so doing - in deviating from the norm, they put themselves at risk. The risk extends to the possibility of self-censoring and self-abnegation of practice-led research, by constraining the explorative reach of art research projects in a concern for safety in assessment.

While examiners may be sensitive to the dilemma they share with a candidate, I suggest it is important that the issues discussed in this paper be acknowledged and discussed amongst examiners during assessment.

We should not, for example, expect or promote as a general model that a seamless methodological rationale will be offered – whether prescriptively, retrospectively, or as a form of alibi. Where a candidate has provided material such as evidence of developmental work, then this should be acknowledged in the context of the dilemma and taken into account. Rather than further

prescription, I would suggest acknowledgment of the issues through open discussion, and an accommodation of flexible approaches taken by candidates.

In general terms, if we wish to assert the value of exploratory and challenging practice-led research then we should not attempt to shoe-horn an uneasy fit with normative models of research and frameworks of accountability. As examiners we should be careful to analyse the critical territory of individual projects without defaulting into habitual application of assessment criteria. In particular we should be wary of two dangers: the over-writing and displacing of a project through translation of its outcomes into our own narratives, and the self-abnegation of practice-led research when demands for accountability cause default into the languages and accountabilities of the other.
