

Artesign and the project series *Room with a View*: a case study of practice-based research in Art and Design

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the role of postdoctoral research in Art and Design practice in structuring and developing current research at Gray's School of Art, through one of a number of ongoing practice-based research projects*, namely the *Artesign* project.

In this context *Artesign* will form a case study. Its structure, performance and development will be evaluated in relation to current criteria drawn both from the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and new developments in funding opportunities such those presented by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB). Our current research context is structured in response to these two bodies – one established and one emerging.

The paper will focus on the issue of equivalence in the mechanisms for output of research e.g. work in a selected exhibition as equivalent to a paper in a refereed journal. The paper is a response to the RAE's invitation to debate criteria for evaluation from within the subject areas.

This paper is framed by the following assumptions, firstly that:

- the status of practice-based research within and across Art and Design institutions is situated in a continuum including individual practice, formal research for higher degrees, postdoctoral research, project-based research and secondly that
- research conducted within this continuum is understood to mean the engagement of the inherent processes of questioning, contextualisation, experimentation, evaluation, and dissemination as a whole process.

Two areas of current debate are acknowledged but are beyond the remit of this paper:

** Other examples include a fine art printmaking initiative - Hinterland – co-ordinated by Dr Jon Pengelly (Research Fellow in Printmaking), and the 3D Design Research Group, co-ordinated by Lenny Smith, Course Leader, BA Hons Design & Craft.*

**At the 'Research and the Artist' symposium (Ruskin School of Art, May 28, 1999) Pavel Büchler outlined the potential of research in relation to Art and Design practice for developing a unique experimental space for practice, precisely because of its inherent processes of questioning, contextualisation, experimentation, evaluation, and dissemination. Within the discussion he suggested that the outcomes for a research-based approach differ from those of practice alone.*

1. questioning, at a fundamental level, the validity of research in relationship to practice*
2. established areas of technological research in Art and Design which stand outside of but inform practice. (e.g. this would include some areas of research into materials and technical processes which are purely scientific; these areas, while valid, do not usually address the complexity of culturally-based questions that emerge in practice-based research, which are central to this paper.)

**For example, at the 'Research and the Artist' symposium (Ruskin School of Art, May 28, 1999) arguments against practice-based research for higher degrees were put forward, among others, by Jon Thompson research professor at Middlesex University; Charles Harrison of the Open University and Art and Language Group; Patricia Bickers, editor of Art Monthly.*

METHOD

Completed *Artesign* projects will be considered as case study material and focus on the *Room with a View* series which took place at:

- Duff House, Aberdeenshire, March / April 1998
- new work in response to the House and cultural context
- Officina Clemente, Festival of Open Monuments, Naples, May 1998
- documentation of the Duff House exhibition
- Officina Clemente, Naples, October 1998
- new work in response to the space and cultural context
- Galleria Terzo Millennio, Milan, April 1999
- new work in response to a major international design event (Milan Furniture Fair and satellite events).

The structure, performance and development of the research group will be evaluated against the following selected criteria:

- *evidence of a dynamic and supportive infrastructure for research*
- *well defined objectives*
- *the standing and curatorial policy of venues*
- *external funding level and sources*
- *significance - to include:*
 - level of innovation - intellectual, technical, aesthetic, functional;*
 - design responsiveness to market or user needs;*
 - degree of contribution to new knowledge*
- *range of output; artworks, artefacts, publications, etc.*

source: 1996 Research Assessment Exercise, Criteria for Assessment: Art and Design Panel, <http://www.niss.ac.uk/>

The following Strategic Priorities from the AHRB are not exactly criteria for evaluation but they are useful for strategic positioning and development for a research group like *Artesign*:

- *realisation of research potential*
- *innovative and creative research methods and concepts*
- *promotion of practice-based research in the arts*

- *partnership and collaboration*
- *special initiatives to target areas or themes*
- *accessibility and dissemination*

source: 1999 Arts and Humanities Research Board, Strategic Priorities for Research, <http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/>

ANALYSIS

This analysis is not exhaustive. The experience from the *Artesign* project is used to demonstrate and raise issues in relation to selected criteria.

- *evidence of a dynamic and supportive infrastructure for research* (RAE, 1996)

Artesign is located within an established research **infrastructure** - The Centre for Research in Art and Design (CRiAD), based within Gray's School of Art, The Robert Gordon University. CRiAD is a dedicated resource for supporting research in a number of ways:

- individual practice
- research for higher degrees
- research project group.

The School has a high percentage (70%) of active researchers and achieved a 3A in the 1996 RAE. Outputs include exhibitions, design artefacts/products, artists' books, public art commissions, academic papers, etc. CRiAD supports a number of research students and assistants registered for M.Phil and Ph.D through research training and supervision from within the Centre and the University. The projects/groups (*Artesign*, *Hinterland*, and the *3D Design Research Group*) have members with different levels of experience within the research-practice continuum, and are coordinated by experienced researchers, mostly at postdoctoral level.

Artesign is a research group dedicated to the development of research through practice. Its members, both current and past, embrace the whole spectrum of research, academic and support roles within the institution, from research reader (Carole Gray) to senior research fellows (Anne Douglas and Don Addison), full-time lecturer with Ph.D (Allan Watson), full-time lecturer registered for Ph.D (Anthony Rayworth), full-time lecturer researching by individual practice (Brian Glassar), application supervisor (Stuart Johnstone) and postgraduate student (Bruce Morgan). Each member makes a contribution to the structure and research activities of the group from their own specific disciplines and experience. These range from sculpture, photography, graphic design and publication, and furniture design. The overall coordination is carried out as part of the role of Senior Research Fellow in Fine Art (Anne Douglas).

Throughout the Art School senior research staff facilitate the research process across the continuum of formal research and practice by:

- leading by example – designated researchers are active practitioners
- creating and implementing systems for developing research e.g. helping to evolve projects, research training*, fundraising, distribution of research monies,* auditing of research outputs,* dissemination*.

Through its positioning in relationship to the Research Centre, it is clear that *Artesign* is well supported by the research infrastructure. Its members are eligible for research monies to include teaching cover, travel, publicity and access to international events/venues. The specific experience of the group ensures that projects are structured around the raising of new questions, contextualisation, experimentation, evaluation and dissemination i.e. research process. (This will be demonstrated through the description of discrete projects undertaken in the last 18 months.) *Artesign* works alongside other projects which are developing and evaluating models of practice-based research towards identifying new possibilities for research in the future.

• *well defined objectives* (RAE, 1996)

The group has an emergent set of aims and objectives which articulate an overall strategy. The initial *aim* is to explore the interfaces between design and fine art through:

- developing **new creative responses** to lifestyle as a cultural phenomenon (to include aspects of aesthetic, poetic, functional, metaphorical, technological, symbolic, and sustainable responses)
- **modelling and evaluating** the whole process from ideas generation through to resolved product placed within a market and in relationship to clientele/audience.

The *objectives* are:

- To develop a **viable framework** within which individual practitioners can explore the aims outlined above

This has emerged out of regular meetings involving brainstorming and slide presentations. The activities of the group function from a **project basis**, culminating in an experimental exhibition

* training: formal training for Ph.D is conducted through teams of supervisors and the University Research Methods Course, aspects of which are taught by CRiAD personnel. The Centre has developed a recently validated Research Masters Course (www.rgu.ac.uk/mres/) which develops research experience.;

* distribution of research monies: active researchers from the academic staff are invited to submit a costed proposal to a School Research Strategy Group prior to the beginning of the financial year. These proposals are selected in relationship to criteria identified by the RAE and their feasibility in relationship to academic responsibility;

* auditing of research outputs: individual research output is audited through a formal process which runs annually as part of the bidding process for internal funds;

* disseminating: within the institution through strategic discussion and planning, individual feedback, seminars, lectures, posters, teaching; and externally through facilitating attendance at and participation in national and international conferences, facilitating web presence (<http://www.rgu.ac.uk/criad/>), promotion, publicity of research.

and a new body of work framed by the project brief. This **project basis** provides discrete milestones, at which sets of objectives can be evaluated, in stages, creating an opportunity for informed long term development through a strategic plan.

- To develop **innovative strategies** within each project, which are responsive to different cultural contexts

An example of this is the first project Room with a View, Duff House. It developed beyond the existing model i.e. Private View exhibition at the Bowes Museum (1996). Where Private View curated existing works by placing them within the collection of the Bowes Museum, the *Artesign* project prompted the development of new objects made in response to the context and theme of heritage as an imaginative possibility. The fourth *Artesign* project, *Room with a View, Milan*, developed on from this model again, by involving two external international collaborators, Olle Anderson (designer from Sweden) and Laura Cristinzio (sculptor from Naples) and placing the resulting exhibition within the context of the international Milan Furniture Fair. By referencing the House it brought an explicit cultural dimension to this design event.

- To **place/contextualise** *Artesign's* activities within a regional/international context and to impact on those contexts

The projects aim to develop cultural dialogue through being sited both in Scotland and abroad, through developing international collaborators at all levels of the project, from making to administration (e.g. involving the British Council and the British Consulate in Naples in raising an audience), and through developing partnerships with regional cultural institutions such as Duff House itself, Scottish Sculpture Workshop and the local regional Council in the creation of new opportunities for practice.

- To develop **new output** from these innovative strategies
This output includes discrete bodies of work by each individual, publications both paper and web-based, comprehensive project reports and academic papers.

- To **evaluate** each project against criteria which follow from the aims, of cultural and professional fitness, appropriateness, professional significance and sustainability

Within the work of each individual, there are different responses to these issues e.g. Anthony Rayworth is experimenting with new client-designer relationships through a series of lights which evolve from a kit, whose elements are easily purchased from high street stores. He provides a kind of code which facilitates the client in determining for himself the shape of the piece. Carole Gray has used rapid prototyping techniques in a cocktail table *Shaken but not Stirred* to ensure that the piece is clearly located within technologies of reproduction. These pieces are tested out at such events as the Milan Furniture Fair and the TACTICS Seminar*.

* *Towards Applying Computer Technology in the Crafts*
Scotland, Gray's School of Art,
June, 1999

The objectives of each project are clearly stated with each project brief and subsequent report and are also within the public domain on the Group's web site and publications, such as the *Room with a View, Duff House catalogue** (1998). Aspects of the Group's activities are also reported through academic forums and published papers*.

* <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/artesign>

* ISBN: 0 901085 30 9

* *'From Image to Object: old signs, new meanings'*,
Malins, Ross, Burman, Gray,
CADE, 1999

- **External funding level and sources** (RAE, 1996)

The positioning of the group is measured by the proportion of external funding within a project. Funding sources include the Scottish Arts Council and EU Leader II Initiative, and funding in kind from the British Council, the British Consulate (in Italy), the Martini Group. This is in line with the AHRB strategic priority *partnership and collaboration* in attracting matched funding and support. External funding still tends to represent less than half *Artesign's* overall budget (i.e. not yet major but steadily increasing) and is targeted as an area for development.

- **External recognition** (RAE, 1996) is also an important factor through independent critical feedback and reviews (e.g. a feature article in the Milan-based journal *Modo**). Another significant measure of place is the level of *partnership* (not with other HEIS) but with cultural agencies on a regional basis, a criteria not specifically mentioned but one that might help to measure the *significance that the research has within relevant industries and professions*.

* *Modo: International Review of Design Culture*, 196, p14.
March/April, 1999

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE ANALYSIS

Up to this point the criteria we have discussed have been concerned with structural issues (infrastructure for research, well defined objectives, external funding). In relation to Artesign's activities these criteria are a valid means of evaluating our research activity. Difficulties arise in criteria related to output. Within the RAE, research ratings are determined largely from the submission by individual active researchers of four significant pieces of output. These can range from papers to exhibitions, artefacts etc. but must be rateable as of either regional, national or international excellence. Methods of determining significance include, for example

- *the standing and curatorial policy of the museum or exhibition venue* (RAE, 1996).

Our own activities within *Artesign* would suggest that there is little consensus about the status of specific venues with the exception perhaps of national institutions, the pursuit of which may or may not constitute research. For example, the venue for the first project *Artesign* project would be acceptable as significant, in being the outreach station for the National Galleries for Scotland. Conversely, the lack of status, in the sense described above, of the two Italian venues (Officina Clemente, Naples and Galleria Terzo Millennio, Milan) enabled us to realise the objectives we had set out within each project. These objectives were in pursuit of new knowledge about professional practice, not the confirmation of what we already knew. In the case of Naples, this was to demonstrate the *potential* of a space, which sat geographically and socially at the heart of the regeneration of Naples. Conversely, Galleria Terzo Millennio in Milan was hired by the Group in a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to study and to work within the given business and professional parameters of the Furniture Fair, to evaluate its potential as a platform for promoting new Fine Art and Design product. Where 'non art' spaces are concerned other indicators such as the innovative nature of the project's structure, the degree of collaboration, the level of external partnership funding, etc, become better performance indicators.

This raises questions about the role of venue as an indicator of significance. By creating parity between exhibition venue and publication platform, the role of the research process in practice-based research is undermined. Within the academic model a publication's role is to report the research by retracing the process by

which conclusions have been arrived at. Within Art and Design exhibition venues are increasingly the *subject* of research, not its reporting. These are two very different methods of harnessing the process of 'making public', one of which engages the process of verification, the other of which may or may not do so. This would suggest that beyond a certain level (i.e. outwith national institutions) there is little consensus about the status of venues within the Art and Design areas, and little conformity around their use. Both consensus and conformity in relationship to publication platforms within academe, are essential to determining a position - regional, national or international.

This raises a broader question about the equation of conventional art and design output with other kinds of research.

- *range of output* (RAE, 1996)

The placing of practitioners engaged in research within academe in the same position as that of professional practitioners outwith academic institutions must lead to a compromise that may be both inevitable and undesirable. The sole effort of professional practitioners is that of outputting work within a public sphere. The transparent process of raising questions, of evaluating, of contextualising any experimentation, of creating feedback, is not usually within the remit of this individual although there are mechanisms for doing so through the roles of critic, fundraiser, curator. The researcher within academe deals with at least three other agendas: practice, teaching and administration. How then might researchers keep professional practice as a focus for research, but usefully differ from the single artist dedicated to developing a position within the profession? How does the wide range of admissible forms of output evidence the research process*?

* Guidance Note 4 Panel Secretaries:
Sample Comments on 1996 Panel Criteria -
Practice as Research -
"This is a research assessment exercise. Those submitting practice as research should be prepared to make ... a succinct statement of the research content of the practice."

CONCLUSIONS

Artesign is a mechanism to frame these issues not a model to emulate. It is a piece of research in its own right. It frames particular professional situations in classical case study terms, providing an experience to view and to evaluate. The group sets out to interact with the real professional world but from an experimental standpoint, pushing known boundaries and evaluating performance through formal mechanisms. Therefore the role of its members within the education process has remained at the centre of its activities. Projects function not to develop the status and ego of individual practitioners as a single aim, but to develop insights into how the profession works which are communicable across levels from

undergraduate to doctoral levels. This is evident in the aims of *Artesign*, which are twofold:

1. to carry out creative practice
2. to make this explicit and accountable.

It therefore has to be evaluated against these aims, not only in terms of high level of professional performance, but also in rendering its development transparent and accountable, and accessible and transferable.

Current debates about research in Art and Design would appear to collapse the models of professional practice and of research into each other. At one time this might have been a useful approach in avoiding the problem of academicising practice in order to attract research monies. We appear to have grown out of this situation. With the growing number examples of doctoral research in the area of practice, the case is being made for a situation in which practice and research are complementary, but not the same. The difference manifests itself at the level of output but is fundamental to an approach. Practice which remains as professional practice is neither transferable not transparent, it does not have to be accountable but merely takes its chances in the real world of the profession. Practice for the purposes of research evidences the whole research process - it is transparent and is accountable through formal mechanisms*. The embedding of the research process into practice within academic institutions is clearly visible within the new strategic priorities for the AHRB . It is also visible within the recently published guidance notes on criteria setting for RAE panels.

* *Guidance Note 4 Panel Secretaries: Sample Comments on 1996 Panel Criteria - Practice as Research*

A major role of postdoctoral research offered here is that of developing practice-based research groups which are informed by experience of the research process, and evaluated in relation to the strategic priorities outlined by the AHRB and performance indicators outlined by the RAE. By involving a range of practitioners in a project, from within the institution and externally through partnerships, it ensures an outward-looking collaborative approach, and aims to structure an appropriate relationship between practice and research.