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Knowing Through Making: The Role of the Artefact in Practice-led Research

Maarit Mäkelä

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Abstract During the last decade, research in art and design in Finland has begun to explore new dimensions. Artists and designers have taken an active role in contextualising and interpreting the creative process in practice, as well as the products of this process, by looking at the process itself and the works produced through it. From this new point of view, the knowledge and the skills of a practising artist or designer form a central part of the research process, and this has produced a new way of doing research. In this new type of research project, part of the research is carried out as art or design practice. The central methodological question of this emerging field of research is: how can art or design practice interact with research in such a manner that they will together produce new knowledge, create a new point of view or form new, creative ways of doing research? In this article, the making and the products of making are seen as an essential part of research: they can be conceived both as answers to particular research questions and as artistic or designerly argumentation. As an object made by an artist–researcher, the artefact can also be seen as a method for collecting and preserving information and understanding. However, the artefacts seem unable to

pass on their knowledge, which is relevant for the research context. Thus, the crucial task to be carried out is to give a voice to the artefact. This means interpreting the artefact. During the process of interpretation, furthermore, the artefact has to be placed into a suitable theoretical context. In this process, the final products (the artefacts) can be seen as revealing their stories, i.e. the knowledge they embody.

Keywords Knowing · Making · Artefact · Practice-led research

Introduction

This article investigates the ways in which art can be understood as a process of inquiry. The idea of knowledge gained through art and design practices has been a widely discussed issue in the field of art and design research. In this article, the making and the products of making are viewed as an essential part of research.

In the last two decades, design research has searched through various modes of attaining knowledge and in this way laid down foundations for the discipline. Coinciding with the emergence of the discipline, there has been an ongoing debate about the role of art and design practices in the field of academic research. In this discussion, the product of making – i.e. the artefact created in art and design practice – is conceived as having a central position in the research process. In this context, the artefact can

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be, for instance, a painting, a photograph, a designed object, a composition or a dance performance. The way artists and designers connect themselves to the field of research has been referred to as practice-led research. The new approach has recently been applied, discussed and argued about internationally in the broad field of art – including dance, theatre, music, the fine arts, applied arts and design.

In this article, I will take a closer look at the practice-led approach and the central questions it poses in the fields of visual arts and design. The key question lies in combining art and design practices with research. The viewpoint adopted in this article approaches the question with a focus on practise. The central question framed by a focus on the product of making is: what is the role of the artefact in practice-led research?

Within the frame of practice-led approach, artefacts have been conceived both as answers to particular research questions and as argumentation on the topic concerned. What I suggest is that an artefact can embody a greater range of roles: as an object made by an artist–researcher during the process of research, it can also be seen as a method of collecting and preserving information and understanding. Thus, the process of making and its products are strongly connected with the source of knowledge. In this sense, we are facing the idea of knowing through making. For artists and designers – practitioners of the field – this idea is evident. It also seems to have an important role in the ideas expressed by a group of theoreticians who have been structuring the genealogies of knowledge for the field of design, and have thus created a foundation for the research carried out in the field.

In the following, I will first sketch out previously expressed ideas concerning the “designerly ways of knowing”. Secondly, I will evoke an ongoing discussion in the field of practice-led research dealing with the idea of knowing through making with particular focus on the role of the artefact in the process of producing knowledge. Thirdly, I will move from practice to theory and express a need for constructing an appropriate theoretical frame for examining the working process and its products more closely. Based on this argumentation I will, finally, extend my discussion to some of the central notions I encountered while preparing my own practice-led research. This research was carried out in the field of ceramic art and was recently defended in the form of a doctoral dissertation.

Designerly Ways of Knowing

In the late 1960s, Herbert Simon, a well-known economist, proposed that “the science of design” could form a fundamental common ground for intellectual communication across the arts, sciences and technology. He suggested that the study of design could form an interdisciplinary field, open to everyone involved in the creative activity of making the artificial world (Simon 1996: 111–114, 134–138; Cross 2001: 54).

In the 1980s, social scientist Donald Schön stressed the role of the practitioner, whose understanding and knowledge from a particular field corresponds to a perspective situated within the process of praxis. His thinking focused on the idea of a reflective practitioner. Schön proposed that research ought to be geared towards an understanding of the nature and origin of knowledge (i.e. epistemology) which is tied to the practice (Schön 1995: viii). More recently, these ideas have been developed by Stephen Scrivener, who has been one of those structuring the field of design research. He has moulded a practice-led research project – what he calls a creative-production project – on the basis of Schön’s ideas (Scrivener 2000, 2002; Scrivener and Chapman 2004).

Over the last 10 years, an understanding of the meaning of practice and the central role of the practitioner has been apparent in several discussions (e.g. Schatzki et al. 2001). In the field of design, theoretical pioneer Nigel Cross has argued that designers should concentrate on the underlying forms of knowledge particular to themselves. Cross pins this knowledge down to the practice of design, which he labels “designerly” ways of knowing, thinking and acting (Cross 1982, 2001: 55). Cross continued to discuss the forms of knowledge particular to the awareness and abilities of a designer. He states that knowledge of design resides in people (i.e. designers), in the processes and in the products themselves (Cross 1982: 223–225; 1999: 5–6). Part of this knowledge is inherent in the activity of designing: it can be gained by engaging in and reflecting on that very activity. Knowledge also resides in artefacts themselves, in the forms and materials. Some of this knowledge is also inherent in the process of manufacturing the artefacts, and it can be gained through making and reflecting upon the making of those artefacts (Cross 2001: 54–55).

Research in the context of art and design is still a much-debated subject at the beginning of the twenty-first century (e.g. Durling et al. 2002). The debate becomes even more animated when it touches upon the field of practice-led research – which can be regarded as one of the new ways of doing research influenced by the process of accumulation of knowledge described above. Annoyance surfaces particularly when the making of artefacts is argued as comprising a research method, and when the artefact is regarded as the aim of research – the embodiment of new knowledge (Scrivener 2002: 25).

An art-based, practice-based or practice-led – which appears to be the established term in use in the United Kingdom today – approach to carrying out research projects began taking shape in Finnish art universities as early as the 1990s (Ryynänen 1999). Until now, however, doctoral dissertations within this enterprise have been fairly small in number. The first practice-led dissertation in Finland in the field of visual art and design was completed in 1997 in the field of photography (Eskola 1997). At the moment, there are altogether 17 such dissertations, which are composed of a written part and an additional production: 9 in the University of Art and design Helsinki (UIAH), 5 in the Academy of Fine Arts and 3 in the University of Lapland.

Activity in the field of practice-led research has been largest in volume in the United Kingdom where pioneers have been engaged in developing the discourse for more than two decades. During the last few years, discussion on the possibility of carrying out research projects in the field of art and design as a practice-led enterprise has spread in Sweden, Norway, Hungary, Belgium and Spain. The pioneer work, however, has been done in the United Kingdom – and Finland.

Knowing Through Making

Practice-led research is characterised by a focus on issues, concerns and interests that are explored and manifested through the production of creative artefacts. This implies that, as an object of experience, the creative product is as important as any knowledge embodied in it (Scrivener and Chapman 2004: 2–3). The artefacts translate messages between concrete objects and abstract requirements. In this way, they

facilitate the constructive, solution-focused thinking of the artist or the designer – in the same way that, for example, verbal and numerical communication and thinking facilitates analytic, problem-focused thinking (Cross 1982: 225).

Artefacts are essential outcomes of artistic process, but in the context of practice-led research they have an even more important role. They function as a means of realising a thing which has to be perceived, recognized and conceived or understood. Painter–researcher Peter Chapman links the creative process and the artefact created during the process together inseparably: it is the making of the artefact, even if intuitive, which determines the direction of the practice-led research process. Without the artefact, there is just the assumptive theory, which is separated from the actual process of making. According to Chapman, the understanding of both the process of making and the artefact should present a body of knowledge (Scrivener and Chapman 2004: 7–8).

In conventional research, making is generally regarded as consequent to thinking – at least in theory. Thus, a series of experiments, for example, are carried out in order to test a certain assumption, i.e. to solve a problem or answer a question. In the field of practice-led research, praxis has a more essential role: making is conceived as the driving force behind the research and in certain modes of practice also the creator of ideas – such as, for example, painting (Scrivener and Chapman 2004: 7). In this way, invention comes before theory, i.e. the world of ‘doing and making’, is prior to understanding (Cross 1982: 225).

Works of Art as Bearers of Knowledge

Michael Biggs, one of those who has been engaged in developing the field of practice-led research, states that the principal feature of practice-led research is the desire or need to create artefacts and to present them as part of the ‘answer’ to research questions posed at the outset. In this way, the practice-led enterprise is different from many other approaches, since it does not simply use objects as evidence, but attempts to present the objects created during the research process as arguments. This implies the notion that the artefact can embody the answer to the research question. Biggs supports the view that objects alone cannot embody knowledge: as such, there is no embodied knowledge in the artefact until it is interpreted. He emphasises that this action is

staged in a certain context and that the context affects the way the object is interpreted (Biggs 2002: 20–23).

In addition to emphasising the importance of context, Biggs also takes up the question of the role of words in the act of interpreting. In his view, it is a particular combination of artefacts and words that gives efficacy to the communication. When acting as bearers of meanings, neither artefacts nor words alone are sufficient. He reverts to a definition of the research, made by a central funding body in the United Kingdom in the field of art and design, the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB). It proposes that what is required is a combination of artefact – for example, painting or design – and a critical exegesis that illustrates how the artefact advances knowledge, understanding and insight (Biggs 2002: 23).

When interpreting an artefact, it is, in a way, set into a certain context and this action aids in finding the words with which to reveal the knowledge it embodies. This action is also the point when the essence of knowledge gains yet more subjective features – after all, within the practice-led enterprise, it is the artist–researcher or designer–researcher who is interpreting the object in a context chosen by him or her. This is also one of the distinctive features for research projects carried out in a practice-led context. As the knowledge-accumulating process in such research projects is closely linked with the artist–researcher/designer–researcher, the whole research setting strongly favours a subjective viewpoint.

From Practise to Theory

There have been numerous opinions and suggestions concerning the essence of practice-led research and the direction this approach should develop in. Because this novel field, has to date, remained rather loosely demarcated, the single definition of such research made by the AHRB can be taken as one of the cornerstones of the ongoing discussion. According to this definition, creative practice is not necessarily research, but creative practice that meets certain criteria can be regarded as research. The requirements are that there have to be explicit research questions, specific methods for answering the questions and a specific context in which the research is carried out (AHRB 2001: 7; Biggs 2002: 19; Scrivener 2002: 33).

There are questions and answers characteristic to practice-led research, i.e. questions that arise out of, and

in a consequence to, practice. Some of these questions are pluralistic, i.e. they may be answered in a number of different ways. There is no preference for one set of methods over another, since finding multiple solutions is regarded as an asset, not a weakness. There is a dynamic relationship between the research context, question, method and audience. Variation in any of these affects the appropriateness of the chosen method. This is the reason that the method is the last variable to be determined in the practice-led research process (Biggs 2004: 12–19).

What then, can be conceived to be a method in this research context? Are we talking about the way in which we, as artists and designers, may use theoretical tools to be able to give a certain structure and find a suitable context for interpreting and handling our practice-led research projects? As stated earlier, in the field of conventional research, the act of making (i.e. practice) is generally seen as a consequence of thinking (i.e. theory). As practice-led research is characterised by focusing on issues, concerns and interests that are explored and manifested through the production of artefacts, should we, as artists and designers, begin to consciously build up our theorisation from the point of view that comes to us naturally, i.e. the perspective gained from praxis?

What I am suggesting is that we should formulate a plan for our practice-led research projects, a plan with specific research question(s) and a context for carrying out this research. However, instead of committing ourselves to using certain specific methods, we should be able to present a research frame, or rather the structure of a frame, in which it would be possible to carry out the practice-orientated journey.

As a practising artist, I have a clear vision about the artistic working process and its meaning for the artist. I have no reason to oppose the idea that the process of making is a creative one for the artist or the designer. During this creative process, the artist or the designer may re-arrange a number of ideas, beliefs and conceptions, and thus advance her or his knowledge, understanding and insight. Nonetheless, if we are carrying out the practice in a research context, we have to be able to find – or be capable and intelligent enough to construct by ourselves – an appropriate theoretical frame that enables us to examine this working period and its products more closely. In order to produce a more comprehensive view of the way such a task can be carried out, I will in the following offer a closer

examination of my own research project as a case study of concluded practice-led research.

Case Study: Memories on Clay

I will now move on to view the key issues of practice-led research discussed above in the context of my own research. The presentation will be arranged in a way which illustrates its compatibility with the AHRB indicators for ‘creative practice that can be regarded as research’ (i.e. demand for explicit research questions, methods and context). This is done in order to emphasise the point that even though operating within the novel field of research we – whether artist–researchers or designer–researchers – need at least some kind of a frame in which, or against which, to build up our individual research projects.

Methodological Experiment: A Dialogue Between Art Practice and Research

The central methodological question of my doctoral dissertation “Memories on clay: representations of subjective creation process and gender” (Mäkelä 2003) comes from the emerging field of practice-led research: how art practices can interact with research in a way that will produce new knowledge and form new, creative ways of doing research. The artistic methods used in this research consist of exhibitions and the creative working processes related to them. The research was carried out in the form of three exhibitions, which were on display in a gallery in Helsinki in 1996, 1997 and 2000.

The dialogue between the practice of art and research commenced after the artistic process, whereby the creative process and the artefacts created during it were set in a theoretical framework for interpretation. This action, as I see it, can be understood as one of the possible methods for carrying out practice-led research. I regard this conception as one of the central results of my research: a tool that I have labelled the ‘retrospective look’ (Mäkelä 2003: 23–28).

The written part of the doctoral dissertation, the thesis, can thus be considered a retrospective reading of the artistic working process and the art works created during the process. It consists of closer observations and interpretations of the working process and artefacts made during the process. A suitable

context for interpreting the artefacts was found in post-feminist research, where sexual and gendered identities are conceived as products of a continuous process consisting of different strategies – such as art practices (e.g. Braidotti 1994: 163–165; de Lauretis 1986: 9).

Research Context: Women’s Studies

My research is a practical test of the way certain ideas concerning radical differences of gender and femininity as constituents of the second sex – as outlined by French theoreticians of gender difference, namely Luce Irigaray (e.g. 1974) – can be taken into consideration in artistic work that produces visual representations. During my research process, I, as a practising artist, have therefore worked with a previously existing collection of female images: either culturally embedded pictures of women or photos taken from the family album of the artist. I have used the silk screen technique, and in the most recent work, video technology as well, to transfer the images onto a ceramic surface and copy them onto numerous clay tiles. During this process, the familiar prints radically change their shape, although the main themes still remain recognisable. These images bring their cultural meaning into the new ceramic pictures: Marilyn in her corporeality and Madonna in her saintliness.

In this particular research, a ceramic artist who has entered a creative artistic research process and a female artist acting in the field of contemporary art puts the question: how can “feminist” art, in this case ceramic art, change current representations of femininity? How is it possible to observe femininity or, rather, the different kinds of femininities through ceramic materials? How do memories, autobiographies and narratives produce, change and transmit possible female identities? How does remembrance and autobiography construct narration in the process of making ceramic art?

My doctoral thesis consists of three main chapters. Each of them has its starting point in one of the three exhibitions or the main theme of that exhibition. The three main chapters of the dissertation are thus like reports on the exhibition spaces. They discuss three spatial totalities, each of which has a particular order; in this instance, an order produced and effected by a female artist. The chapters thematise the exhibitions in relation to the works displayed, the display rooms and the other exhibitions in the series. Although the main

chapters can be regarded as individual units, they nevertheless form a thematic and chronological continuum – a narrative about the creative process which formed the basis of the dissertation (Mäkelä 2003: 38).

The first chapter of the study, entitled “The reproduction and mimesis of Other(ness)”, portrays the practice of art as a creative forum for action. Through a close reading of certain works displayed in the first exhibition, I reflect upon the way in which, by repetition and alteration of pre-existing images, I end up re-arranging and re-interpreting the things I experience and see. The chapter also includes quotes from written feedback received from other female ceramic artists. Chapter 2, entitled “The female body engraved in clay”, centres on corporeality and excreta, which maintains a close symbolic connection with the body even though already physically excluded from it. In this chapter, I portray the way in which I, as an artist, make use of the excreta from of my own body in my work. Bodily excreta are no longer part of the subject, yet neither are they objects completely separate from it – they are, rather, liminal and abject. The chapter includes excerpts from my working diary. In chapter 3, “Constructing female genealogy”, I developed a gap-filled story onto an autobiographical space. I have used personal historical documents for creating this texture, such as family photographs, letters and diaries kept by my forbears. I have also collected memories and family histories through interviewing my relatives (Mäkelä 2003: 38–39).

Clay Images as Recordings, Analyses and Commentaries of (Female) Experience

Teresa de Lauretis, the central theoretician in the field of post-feminist research, approaches experience as a continuous process whereby subjectivity – the self – is formed. In her view, we should not discuss women “with experiences” but rather womanhood constructed by and through experiences (de Lauretis 1984: 159). My own womanhood is thus constructed through a process which includes my experiences both from the field of contemporary art and as a researcher contextualising that art. Such processional womanhood is also that which is written and engraved into my ceramic slates.

The exhibition series is centred upon female figures transformed onto ceramic slates. Through the cultural meanings attached to these figures, the pieces both question and reach beyond the female body or rather



Fig. 1 Female figures transformed onto ceramic slates

the limits culturally constructed for it. This point of view emphasises the significance of the ceramic female images created in the research process: they become visual representations of womanhood created in a particular historical context out of the specific experiences of a female individual. In this research context, art should thus be viewed as the primary forum of

research. Artistic activity is not just a medium for gathering and producing knowledge, but also a method for analysing and commenting on the information thus produced (Mäkelä 2003: 93). (Fig. 1).

Conclusions

In this article, both the meaning of making and its products (i.e. artefacts) have been regarded as an essential part of research made in the field of practice-led research. The works created during the research process can be conceived of as answers to the posed research questions and artistic or designerly argumentation on the chosen topic. As an object made by an artist–researcher or designer–researcher, the artefact can also be seen as a method for collecting and preserving information and understanding.

However, the artefacts created during these research processes do not seem to present knowledge relevant to a research context. On the contrary, artefacts present themselves as mute objects, which do not reveal their stories until interpreted. The crucial task for each practice-led research project is, therefore, to give a voice to the artefact. This requires us to interpret an artefact in a certain context. This action seems to break the muteness of the artefact and give it a voice so that it can tell its story.

One of the key issues in an ongoing discussion in the field of practice-led research is the manner in which a dialogue between arts and design practices and research is brought about. When building up the interaction between these two fields, the chosen context for carrying out this task seems to have a crucial importance. In this article, I have proposed that a well-structured research process, which consist of artistic and research practices can be a natural way for both artists and designers to know, to research and to argue. In this way, the research projects carried out in a practice-led context can also increase the significance of the research carried out in the field of art and design.

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