

WHAT IS AN EXPERIMENT? A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Practice-based research is a distinctive form of intellectual inquiry in which creative works – images, musical compositions, video programs, interactive installations and so on – form the major components and submissions of the research project. Yet, whilst practice-based research is growing in academic importance, some doubts remain about the methodological integrity and robustness of the approach. In this paper I address this issue by proposing and theorizing a methodological apparatus based upon a new definition of the term 'experiment'. I suggest that by seeing the creative research project as a network of interacting material/ intellectual experiments rather than a linear progression from problem to solution, it is possible to meet the needs of the academy without disrupting the peculiar rhythm and structure of the creative process in art, media and design.

1. INTRODUCTION

In scientific inquiry the term 'experiment' has a precise, unambiguous and universal meaning. Researchers design, conduct and evaluate their experiments in order to verify or falsify a hypothesis or to arbitrate between competing accounts of the truth. An experiment is either a repeatable, controlled and systematic methodological process, or it is something else.

However, although the term 'experiment' is also widely used in the creative arts, there the opposite is the case. In art, design and media, experiment is used in an indiscriminate way: it is an imprecise shorthand for a wide variety of activities and outcomes. For example, it appears both in the everyday sense of 'trying something out' – for example, to experiment with a material, form or

process – as well as to describe work that somehow challenges orthodoxies in some way or other (be this in terms of creative processes or outcomes or cultural norms and conventions).

Whilst this lack of terminological precision matters little to most practitioners, for academics and students engaged in inquiry through creative production (practice-based research), there is more at stake (for a brief introduction to practice-based research see Power, 2011). In those cases, finding appropriate ways to describe and discuss the creative process is, intriguingly, both problematic and essential. Arguably, the problems are rooted in the difficulties that arise when one attempts to verbalize activities that embody forms of visual and material thinking, that are inherently resistant to linguistic description (see Macleod (2007) Merleau-Ponty (2000), and Polanyi (1969) for discussions of tacit, embodied and material thinking). And yet if practice is to be considered as a form of academic inquiry it requires us to find ways of articulating and opening up for scrutiny the uneasy mass of intuitive, open-ended and speculative material and intellectual moves that drive the creative process. In short, we need to find ways of talking about how artists and designers work that, at one and the same time, are sympathetic to the rhythm and texture of creative practice and meet the need for intellectual openness and scrutiny.

In this brief paper I aim to contribute in some small way to this endeavor. I do so by attempting to clarify the meaning of the term 'experiment' and suggest how it might be meaningfully used to describe methodological aspects of research carried out through creative practice. Of course, I do so in a way that seeks to meet both the disciplinary and institutional demands discussed briefly above. The paper is based upon the author's attempts to develop more robust practice-based methodologies on an MfA program in Communication Design. Examples of student work from this program are used to illustrate and develop the paper's argument.

2. WHAT IS A CREATIVE EXPERIMENT?

Put simply, I view an experiment as a *bounded material response* to a cluster of issues, problems or ideas that emerge during the development of an ongoing practice-based research project.

By material responses I simply mean things like image sets, video sketches, a series of drawings, a musical composition, a visual essay, a small collection of models, a set of sketch interactions (software) or some combination of these. These responses are bounded in the sense of forming a unity: that is they hang together as a group by the working through of some particular formal, material or thematic preoccupations. Significantly, as we shall see, experiments of this kind appear, at one and the same time, somehow *complete* in and of themselves and open or *incomplete* in some way. That is, their status is ambiguous; they are, simultaneously, a *whole* and a *part* (of a developing body of work).

To illustrate this idea I want to briefly describe an MfA student project. Over two years, Teema Meukthong carried out a photo(ethno)graphic study of the commercial redevelopment of the area in which he lives – Sam Yarn. This historic and tightly knit Bangkok neighbourhood grew up round a well-known and popular fresh market. In the early 2000s, the landowners began to displace the local community in order to redevelop the area for high-end retail and real estate purposes. Meukthong's project documented the period leading up to the effective dissolution of the community and before the new construction and so-called redevelopment took place.

On a superficial level the project can be seen as a continuum of responses: a stream of imagery through which the student moved from lack of knowledge and competence to insight and mastery. Yet, whilst this reading fits with the conventional and teleological picture of the research project – the move from problem identification to research design and implementation to findings – it is far from accurate and fails to capture the shape and dynamic of the project as lived.

Meukthong's project unfolded as a set of experiments – occurring sometimes in series and other times in parallel – each of which was motivated by emerging concerns or needs of the subject, the project and the practitioner. Some examples. One experiment took, as its focus, the graffiti that began to appear in flats and houses as families left the neighbourhood and local youths took advantage of the empty dwellings. Another documented the odd combinations of private cars and construction vehicles as they figured against the ground of the vast desolate plane of rubble where once the market building had stood. After a welter of black and white images of architectural remnants, a series of rich colour images appeared that documented local events and practices – for example, a muay Thai fight and the training of fighting cocks. And, in the midst of this, a piece of autoethnographic writing, attempting to make sense of the work, the place and Meukthong's complex and unfolding relationship to each (see figures 1 to 4 for

two pairs of photographs drawn from particular experiments by Meukthong).



Figure 1: *Sam Yarn Regeneration*,
Teema Muekthong, 2011



Figure 2: *Sam Yarn Regeneration*,
Teema Muekthong, 2011

It is important to note that the concerns that motivated each experiment were always multiple and complex: the thematic material sketched above might have been combined with a formal issue, technical challenge or methodological problem. For example, the visual possibilities of different film formats (or even film manufacturers) might be intertwined with the delicate problem of gaining the trust and confidence to photograph human subjects.

To summarise the argument thus far: 1) Meukthong's project is best understood as a network of overlapping and cross fertilizing experiments; 2) these experiments were motivated by the ebb and flow of the researcher's concerns (see Power, 2011 for a brief discussion of the contrast between concerns and problems); 3) the project was given its distinctive shape and direction by a dialectical tension between conflicting impulses within and between the experiments. As the impulses towards closure and openness, singularity and belonging, provisionality and completion played off against each other, the research was made mobile.



Figure 3: *Sam Yarn Regeneration*,
Teema Muekthong, 2011



Figure 4: *Sam Yarn Regeneration*,
Teema Muekthong, 2011

3. THEORIZING THE (CREATIVE) EXPERIMENT?

This peculiar understanding of experiment draws from the work of the nineteenth century German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel. In particular, it borrows and develops Schlegel's theory of the 'fragment' and extends it from literature to the visual arts.

For Schlegel, a fragment was a short, distilled and potent literary work – '*a small work of art*' – that was complete in formal terms but incomplete in its meaning. An example. In *Athenaeum* Fragment 383, Schlegel presented a fragment on the theme of wit:

Systematic wit must be systematic and yet must not be systematic. In spite of its perfection, it must seem as though it lacks something, like it has been torn to pieces. Such baroque things will produce great style of wit. (Quoted in Tanehisha, 2009)

According to Peter Osborne (2005), this tension between formal completeness and conceptual openness

was responsible for the particular significance and power of the fragment. For one thing, it gave the fragment the status of a project – something ongoing and uncertain – rather than an *already realized truth*. For another, it was responsible for an *impulse towards action*. In other words it triggered a desire to overcome the asymmetry between the formal and conceptual dimensions of the work and, in so doing, it led its author – or its reader – on to further work. For Schlegel, this new work – in all probability itself another fragment – would, in its turn, demand similar attention. Schlegel often talked of these little works as "*fragments for the future*" and this itself is suggestive of the role that he believed the fragment played in putting ideas and activity in motion, of connecting what we are doing now with what we might do next.

In this way, the Schlegelian fragments might best be understood as interlocking moments in an unfolding aesthetic network.

4. IMPLICATIONS: FROM PRACTICE TO PRAXIS

Let's reiterate this argument then and see where it takes us. In the context of a practice-based research project an 'experiment' has clear affinities with the conceptual apparatus and practical methodology that Schlegel termed the '*fragment*'. So far so good. But of course, this claim – like any other – brings with it a set of entailments. That is, it doesn't only serve to clarify the term in question but also suggests certain ways of thinking about the structure and dynamics of the practice-based research project itself. In other words, it has consequences. For example, like Muekthong, a designer or artist might conceive of their research work as an ongoing series of nested experiments rather than *preparation* for the production of a *finished* and *final* piece. These experiments are fragments in the sense that, although they are more or less complete on one of their two dimensions – the formal and the conceptual – they are incomplete on the other (the roots of this incompleteness are interesting in and of themselves but beyond the scope of this brief note).

This imbalance or asymmetry is productive in that it stimulates action and mobility – it requires practical and/or conceptual activity. In other words it urges (an albeit provisional) resolution. The consequent activity – material exploration, primary research, reading, making or modeling, visual thinking, writing – will serve to clarify some aspects of thinking – conceptual or material – but it will also problematise others: it will engender new asymmetries, new ambiguities, new things that are in need of attention. It will bring to light and motivate new concerns. And, in particular, it will facilitate moments in which researcher and her peers (fellow students and professors) are forced to articulate the inner workings of the creative process. In short, it will act as a motor for a *comprehended* and *articulated practice* that we might, using Marxist terminology, fruitfully describe as *praxis* (Fischer, 1973).

5. DISCUSSION

Accepting this peculiar understanding of the term ‘experiment’ achieves two things. Firstly, it focuses critical attention on the creative process and encourages it to be reconsidered in methodological terms. Secondly, it warrants the disruption of the conventional temporal and structural logic of the academic research project. This logic posits the project as a linear sequence of discrete activities, each one predicated on the reliability of its predecessor and each one vouchsafing the validity of the next. The alternative outlined here above, encourages an approach that is fundamentally non-linear, that blurs the distinctions between research and practice, that involves multiple parallel activities, that leads to a stream or network of ‘responses’ rather than a single ‘outcome’ produced on the basis of objective research that is discrete from and prior to practice. Hegel’s (1989) criticism of Kant is relevant here, “But to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim.”

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