Research, Development Project or Art/Design Process?  
Contribution to Clarifying Terminology

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Introduction
Ten years ago, I was convinced that creative work within the fields of art and design – which in this paper will be denoted art/design work without elaborating their likenesses and differences – might be considered research, given that the artist/designer accounted for the thinking that went into the art/design project. Today, I am uncertain of this position although it is still accepted in some art/design milieus. This uncertainty has arisen due to a deepened understanding of the characteristics of both scientific and art/design processes. In 2003, a new postgraduate programme was established in Norway for art/design development projects in which the art/design product is to be the primary outcome. Such development projects are defined non-scientific, as equal, but different from doctoral programmes (Forslag 2000: 5). If artists/designers want to acquire doctorates, they have to carry out research projects in which theoretical knowledge production is to be the main outcome, not art/design.

This paper first clarifies terminology, elucidating differences between research in the established, scientific understanding of the term and art/design processes. Second, it shows alternative plans for art/design processes, suggesting how research may be integrated.

I Clarifying Terminology

In order to understand each other when we speak, the words or the terminology we use have to be clarified.

Research
The English word research is not unequivocal. Research may signify as different phenomena as to simply search for something, or to execute scientific enquiry (TNSOED 1993: vol. 2, p. 2558). In consequence, problems arise when using the word. The Norwegian language has two separate words for these different meanings: ‘forske’ and ‘utforske’, the first word defines (normatively)
scientific activities, the latter non-scientific. ‘Utforske’ may be regarded similar to ‘explore’, denoting activities that anyone may undertake, young or old, lay or professional, without indicating procedures of any kind. In this paper, research refers to scientific enquiry only. The task of research is to conceptualize observations, analyze data and build theory that explains the situation dealt with, and help predict future events. Central in research is finding ways of testing the validity of the new knowledge created (McNiff 2002: 7). Research projects are characterised by being: purposive, inquisitive, informed, methodical, and communicable (Cross 2000: 98).

Research and Science
The concepts of research and science are interlinked. Science stems from the Latin word scientia that means knowledge (TNSOED 1993, vol. 2: 2717). It is an umbrella concept that hardly can be defined. However, science has at least three basic characteristics, which are:

- precision
- generality
- intersubjectivity

Precision deals with clarity and specification of the topic treated. Generality is demanded when theories are put forward to secure a broader perspective than mere personal speculation. Intersubjectivity refers to the necessity of establishing shared concepts and terminology to allow discourse and critique to take place (Nerheim 1995: 11-12).

Research is the activity that provides the new knowledge that science – understood in a broad context including social sciences and the humanities – comprises and manages. However, considering research and science, the words of the late philosopher of philosophy Paul Feyerabend are challenging: “[…] the events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure […] successful research does not obey general standards” (Feyerabend 2002: 1).

Art/design
Broadly speaking, art/design concerns the human capacity to reflect through matter and form to express ideas and shape our environment (Kjørup 2000; Heskett 2002). In this context, it may suffice to say that especially design, aims at providing new conceptual and formal solutions to particular problems (Lawson 2002). Characteristic of art/design processes is that they are unpredictable, open-ended creative activities with innumerable possibilities. There is not one solution to a problem or a task, but many that may be equally good and satisfying. Some products or solutions are better than others, but none are false or true.

Theory
Theory stems from the Greek word theoria that means sight, contemplation or speculation (TNSOED 1993: vol. 2, p. 3274). Theory may refer to everyday thinking about anything, but in a scientific sense the above-mentioned characteristics must be present. A definition offered by the British art historian Eric Fernie says: “A theory is a speculative attempt to explain a number of apparently disparate factors […] theory should be made to work by being tied to practice and practice illumimated by being questioned by theory” (Fernie 1996: 366). The Norwegian art historian Ståle Sinding-Larsen says that theory related to art/design concerns what connections one thinks there are between different things. He writes: “[…] in its simplest form a theory is a systematic survey” (my translation) (Sinding-Larsen 1994: 20). Social scientist and
artist/designer Ken Friedman holds that: “In its most basic form, a theory is a model” (Friedman 2002: 1).

Theory for praxis
During the debate on theory development in art/design in Scandinavia in the early 1990s, the Danish philosopher Søren Kjørup suggested that artists/designers themselves start to build theories for praxis – ‘production aesthetics’ or ‘poetics’. Such theories should conceptualize, systematize and articulate the thinking and understanding that artists/designers execute throughout their making processes. Aesthetics in general relates to that which is perceived and explains what art/design is in philosophical terms, while theories for praxis arise from and point to the creative acts, their goal being to improve future art/design processes and outcome (Kjørup 1993: 35-36).

II Research, Development Projects or Art/Design Process

Art/Design Processes
Most art/design processes include phases of information seeking on the task in question (Lawson 2002: chapter 3). This information seeking can be short or long, shallow or deep. It may span from finding contingent books in the nearest library to lifelong study and research. Several factors are influential: personal interests and talents, the task, the resources given: economical, cultural, time, etc. However, crucial is the artist’s/designer’s personal notion of what may be sufficient to solve the given task satisfactorily.

Practitioners and Research
Sometimes practitioners – artists/designers included – become researchers. One reason why, is expressed in the book The Craft of Research: “Most everyday research begins not with finding a topic but with confronting a problem that has typically found you, a problem that left unresolved means trouble” (Booth, Colomb and Williams 1995: 49).

Faced with a problem that block further artistic/design work, the artist/designer has to find a solution or quit the job. If the artist/designer wants to pursue the problem, he/she may engage in research (Refsum 2003b). Without loosing his/her personal goal, the artist/designer has to acquire research skills in order to carry out his/her task effectively (Refsum 2003: 233a) (figure 1).
Hopefully the research findings will help the artist/designer continue his/her art/design process. If he/she does, such a process is what in Norway is suggested be awarded a *doctor artium aestheticarum* (dr. aest.). This doctorate demands academic standards, but incorporates art/design work ("Doktor kunst” 1999: 5). The candidate has to manage the double procedures both of research and art/design work (Refsum 2000).

**Development projects**

Art/design development projects, as established in Norway, represent a parallel to basic research, applied research and experimental development as defined by OECD (Forslag 2000: 5). Such projects expect more than art/design products of quality to be its outcome, demanding account of the process, and contribution to theory building within the field.

Projects in which the information seeking is extensive, or the research aspect is lacking from a scientific point of view, may fall in this category. Most graduates in the Norwegian art/design schools deliver some kind of development projects for their exam, pure making processes or research being the exception.

**Conclusions**

Researchers deal with solving research questions, providing articulated, reliable knowledge. Artist/designers also engage in problem solving of some kind, producing expressed ideas, artifacts and products. The two activities may have resemblance to each other, but are not and should not be synonymous since their goals are basically different (figure 2).
Figure 2 Alternative art/design processes

- Alternative one shows a craft based process carried out with a minimum of information seeking, relying on the knowledge the artist/designer already has acquired.
- Alternative two represents a development project in which information is sought.
- Alternative three illustrates a project that includes research, a “Dr. Kunst” project.
- Alternative four suggests a process in which the artist/designer leaves praxis for research.
In my opinion, the fields of art/design need all these alternatives (Refsum 2004). However, lacking is an understanding – let alone consensus – about their differences, characteristics and specific qualities. I think that a deepened understanding of this variety of praxis, which exists within the art/design fields, is required in order to adequately fulfill the task of being a contemporary artist/designer. One simply has to know what tools to use when and how.

Bibliography


