

Picture This: Transforming artworks into exegetical texts to create new insights

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon my personal experience of completing a PhD as an artist-researcher to explore the dichotomy between the creation of artworks as research and an accompanying exegetical text. While there is an expectation that the artwork produced is innovative there are no such expectations of the accompanying text. Although the nature of contemporary, experimental and experiential art cannot be transformed easily into words, I propose that the relationship between artwork and exegetical text can be reconciled to produce an insightful outcome in both the creative work and the text.

The con-text of art

As Jan Svenungsson reminds us in his small but eloquent publication, “Today’s artists can’t escape explaining themselves, and they can’t escape writing” (2007: 9). There are numerous instances where art in its many manifestations is transformed into words, in art criticism, exhibition reviews or monographs, but in these examples someone other than the artist usually writes such texts. While it is certainly the case that artists are often called upon to talk about their work, more and more they are also required to put their words into writing and nowhere does this involve the level of intensity and complexity more than that of the texts expected of artists as researchers.¹ While Svenungsson, an artist himself, admits that he loves this alternative form of expression, many artist-researchers do not, and take on a distinctly logo-phobic attitude.

The issue of writing about or explaining their art is certainly a vexed one for the artist-researcher. An artist, not attached to an educational institution, can simply exhibit her work in a gallery or appropriate venue with no further explanation; her work does not require an exegetical text to vindicate its meaning or relevance. The artist-researcher however is required to explain, describe or somehow illuminate the ways in which the final outcome or exhibition was arrived at in order to substantiate it as research. Within the academy the language of art does not have its own voice, it needs to be transformed into another language—that of words—so that it can be verified. However over the past fifty years or so, art has become more overtly experiential making it not easily explainable or translatable into text. The comprehension of such work often relies on the ways in which it is experienced and perceived by its viewer, which may preclude explanation. While there may be little to distinguish the exhibition of art as research from art practice in general, the exegetical text that accompanies the research exhibition validates the purpose of the exhibition for the artist-researcher. But the role the text plays, which currently ranges from providing a description of specific processes to being a support for the research artwork, neither of which may help in clarifying the content of the work, often eschews elucidation (Carduff, Siegenthaler & Wälchli, 2009:

12). Without a clear objective for the responsibility of the text it often resorts to pseudo-theory, simplistic history or straightforward description without consideration of the contemporary, experiential role of art and the difficulty of art that cannot be explained or contextualised easily. In many ways the text required of an artist does not know whether it is supposed to be scholarly, artistic or both (Svenungsson, 2007: 62).

The onus of proof

For the scientific researcher text provides access to the logical and rational ideas of others and it is the means by which the scientist makes sense of and explicates her reasoned findings. The most problematic aspect of the text produced by an artist-researcher is that it should somehow explain or illuminate the thinking or mental processes associated with the artwork or demonstrate proof when quite often the artist herself may not fully understand what she has produced at the time. As they do for the contemporary artist Olafur Eliasson, things (a term used by Eliasson) may become interesting without the artist knowing why and very often the meanings only emerge once the project is finished. Eliasson believes that art has to be unpredictable to a very large extent and that it can turn out to be something very different from what was expected (Grynsztejn, Birnbaum & Speaks, 2002: 27).

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty the artist may never be in a position to fully know the meaning of the work created nor is it possible for the meaning of the work to be transformed “correctly” into another medium, such as words for instance. The medium of the artwork precludes it from being expressed in any way other than the work itself: “the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be more than a shout” (Matthews, 2002: 139). In general the exegetical text exists to provide a presentation of facts (as opposed to fiction?) and validation through documentary evidence that research, in its accepted definition, has taken place. And validation or proof it seems must always be in writing; images and visual documentation as is known can be deceptive. Nonetheless, there are also doubts about words as conveyors of truth. When asked if she thought images needed to be mediated in some way, and if so, might it be language that could express the truth, the artist Barbara Kruger replied that she was very suspicious about any claims to the truth at all and certainly suspicious about language as a claim to truth (Raney, 2003: 116). In general artists rarely consider “truth” in regards to their work, and acts of being inconclusive and creative with the truth are considered to be the prerogative of the artist (Svenungsson, 2007: 10), as may the idea that writing itself is intrinsically explicit in that, like imagery, it also has form or stylistic variety or idiosyncrasy, and therefore cannot be used as verification of visual matter (Candlin, 2000). However if the act of writing the text were considered in the same imaginative way as the creation of the artwork, opportunities for new insights for both artist and viewer could be gained; the text could be utilised to evoke the imagination in a way that is similar but different from the function of art itself.

The gap between (you and me)

An important aspect of contemporary, innovative art is that it is an experience, usually optical or aural but often a bodily one that relies on physical interaction with a viewer. For the American Minimalists of the 1960s the presence of the viewer and the space of the gallery became integral components of the context of their work, whereby the viewer was forced into an awareness of existence that went beyond the presence of any particular art object (Battcock, 1968: 32). Since this time, the viewer as an active participant in the installation or artwork has become an essential component of the creative work, and this presence is taken into account by the artist in both its making and presentation; in other words, the work cannot exist without a viewer. Artwork intended in this way, as an experience, does not have a singular, ultimate meaning; each viewer transforms the work presented into an individual experience through her participation in it. For such

installations it is not appropriate to explain or expand on such an occurrence using words or text and many artists question the relationship between artwork and text especially those in the form of didactic descriptions in the context of art that is overtly experiential. The artist Olafur Eliasson is one such artist who questions the use of over-prescriptive texts when he states:

How can I set up a practice of having people interact with the work in a way that doesn't formalise the process into telling them how to experience it? How can the piece be something one day and the next day something else? In order to leave that openness it's very important not to lock it up in a certain frame that determines how people see it (Eliason cited in Grynstein, Birnbaum & Speaks, 2002: 31).

According to standard definitions of research,² in the ways that they produce new and innovative outcomes, expand the parameters of media, generate new ideas and tackle specific questions, the creative arts are and have always been research (Carduff, Siegenthaler & Wälchli, 2009: 13). However in the context of art as research in the academy there is a dichotomy or gap between the making of creative work and then writing about that making, in essence they are really two separate projects. The problem is not in the writing per se but the rupture between the thinking and making, and the writing and telling. Yet it is just this gulf of difference or slippage between two very different languages, in this case of art and text that makes the subject of translation so fascinating, and so bewildering. It appears that the transformation from visual to words, from experience to text requires a form of bridge to cross the troublesome threshold³ in order to create a link between the new form and the old form (Montagu, 2004). Art as practice can do more than simply describe or make clear as words are apt to do; art can directly present research through itself, in the works created.

Less can be more

In museums and galleries visitors often spend more time reading the labels to the artworks than they do looking at the art itself and in many such institutions today didactic panels have become not only the norm but also a substantial component of the exhibition. However in many ways according to W. J. T. Mitchell less could be considered as more and artists and curators should curb the impulse to tell too much: giving the name of the artist, the date of the work and the materials or the medium from which the artwork is made is enough information. Mitchell gives an example in which minimal information was crucial to the reception and understanding of the artwork it referred to:

You look at a little bird skeleton one inch high, finely detailed—this marvellous little skeleton. And then you look at the medium indicated on the label: fingernail clippings. And then you look back again. Now, that's activation of something between word and image, between the materiality and the name of the material. And that produces a wonderful double take in which you ask yourself, why? How could he do it? Why would he do it? What does it mean? That's the kind of word- image relation I like: the one that activates curiosity, leads a person to fill in the gap with some kind of interpretation or speculation. What is clear however is that within this gap descriptions do not adequately represent the practice (Mitchell cited in Raney, 2003: 59).

In this example the relationship between image and text is perfectly played out and rather than providing answers, the combination of the two has evoked many questions for the viewer thereby cutting off conclusions and instead leading to a transformation of thinking. Didactic texts may give the viewer a false sense of knowledge about the particular artwork. The artist Roni Horn, who also speculates on the presentation of works of art with little or no information, echoes Mitchell's view when she states that "Knowledge is a funny thing: it often precludes experience. Usually no knowledge is better than some, or too much" (Neri, Cooke & de Duve, 2000: 22). Even if viewers have information, anything from a little to a great deal, they still have to deal with the work in front of them and for her minimal information is the preference.

Between the making and the thinking

The reasons an artist makes art may be many and various; one impetus may come from reading, another from looking and another from some actual experience, for example, but in general the artist starts from her own individual position or from her own personality and creates work that expresses something of which she may not be fully aware, the meaning being contained within the artwork itself. The work therefore could not be formulated in any other way beforehand and then be created into something that simply embodies an explicit meaning (Matthews, 2002: 140). In the making of creative work artists look and observe, borrow and steal, reflect and reinterpret and what is produced is an amalgam of this, of fact and fiction, logic and irrationality, reality and imagination. The work emerges through “doing”, through a physical engagement with materials and it can uncover the unexpected. Artists may work in seemingly chaotic ways, never sure where the artwork begins and ends being based on “hunch and instinct” (Raney, 2003: 6). Knowledge generated in this way may be made evident through the various processes that lead to the final outcomes, which in the main may more easily be documented visually, through drawings and photographs, than textually.

Artwork produced in the course of research has a life of its own, an autonomous integrity apart from a written text. Thoughts and ideas are worked out through processes of interacting with and handling materials with this new thinking operating in the space between art and interpretation that may be the gap between word and image in which artists and their viewers inevitably work (Raney, 2003). What is being asked of the creative project through an exegetical text is that it should have another identity, one that exists as an intermediary between the experience of the work and its evaluation. According to Paul Carter, the idea of “material thinking”, his term for the material or physical ways that artists work with media, leads into a gap or opening, “a realm ripe for transformation” (Carter, 2004: 183). This transformation through material thinking is centrally affected by collaborative exchanges, through give-and-take in which media-based distinctions fall away and all signs (image, dance, metaphor) are equally malleable (Carter, 2004: 187). Our experiences of the world depend both on what is going on and what we are doing in it, however it does not necessarily make sense nor can be it accounted for in a rational way and according to Barry Lopez:

Because you have seen something doesn't mean you can explain it. Differing interpretations will always abound, even when good minds come to bear. The kernel of indisputable information is a dot in space; interpretations grow out of the desire to make this point a line, to give it a direction. The directions in which it can be sent, the uses to which it can be put by a culturally, professionally and geographically diverse society, are almost without limit (Lopez, 1986: 127).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty brings the notion of “truth” into our embodied being-in-the-world. As such we perceive the world as the “milieu in which we exist” and this is the result of our active engagement with the world. He even goes so far as to pronounce that the arts “especially raise perception from immediate experience to a more universal level, to a ‘knowledge of truth’, in which we perceive a ‘universe’, of which our immediate experience and its objects are but a part” (Matthews, 2002: 137).

Artist-researchers can write words that correspond to what they know and experience, to what they produce and understand but their texts may never correlate with the perceptions of their viewers even when very clearly spelled out. According to the artist Bill Viola, when the word C-A-R evokes an image in your mind, it is very personal and the more literally and specifically that a writer describes the car, the more his or her specific image becomes defined in your mind. However it is never absolutely the same image that is in the mind of the writer (Raney, 2003).

A personal phenomenology

A vital part of my own research methodology is long-distance, wilderness walking and over the years I have made several extended walking trips that I consider essential to the artworks I have made as research. These include walks in such far-flung places as the Canadian Arctic, Newfoundland and Tierra del Fuego, the South Island of New Zealand and Tasmania, as well as more remote areas of mainland Australia. A number of the artworks I have made at the conclusion of such walks emerged directly out of the walks, not as documentary photographs or images of scenes witnessed on these walks, but a combination of these with other input from bibliographical, historical and scientific sources. My main inspiration, if it can be called this, was the natural, atmospheric environment experienced during the walk. As I walk in wild parts of the world not only do I take photographs, make notes and mentally record the world around me, but I also generate thoughts. The rhythm of the act of walking over extended days generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the traverse through a landscape echoes or stimulates a series of thoughts, which in turn creates an odd consonance between my internalised and externalised worlds (Solnit, 2001: 5-6).

I am not alone in this observation, the activity of experiencing the world through walking in this way having a long history. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Kierkegaard, William Wordsworth to Hamish Fulton, walking has been an inspiration and “a means of grounding one’s thoughts in a personal and embodied experience of the world” (Solnit, 2001: 26). My thoughts when I am walking connect me to what I know, to what I have already experienced and to what I have seen. Back in the mundane world I pursue my newly provoked interests through bibliographic investigations, through history and through literature and contemporary art. The work I eventually create is a synthesis and transformation of all these elements but in many ways it is without logic or a definable, traceable train of thought. Within each artwork I produce there is a history of its subject, with which many artists have engaged before me; I build on the ideas of those who have gone before and this history may be evident in the visual documentation of my working processes. My resolved artwork invites reinterpretation from the viewer in a wordless, reverse transformation, through artwork to thought-generation to walking. During this creative process no words or texts are exchanged, except perhaps the minimal information of the title of a work.

Art versus science, science as art

An example of the way that words may prohibit imaginative transformation occurred in the early nineteenth century. During this period of intense curiosity about atmospheric phenomena and the weather the English Lakeland poet, William Wordsworth, a seasoned walker himself, wrote “The Rainbow”. In response to Wordsworth’s poem, the visual experience of the phenomenon itself and also the scientific explanations for the rainbow phenomenon of the day, John Constable and J. M. W. Turner painted numerous renditions of rainbows, as did a great many artists at the time. Most of them accepted the science of rainbows, the splitting of light into its component colours through a prism, first proposed by Isaac Newton in the eighteenth century. However, not every artist or poet of the early nineteenth century was happy to have such a mysterious, natural phenomenon as a rainbow explained in scientific terms. Those who were aware of and encouraged the role of the imagination of others in the construction of their work were afraid that the rationalism of science would destroy this aspect of it, the poet John Keats being one of them. For him a rainbow reduced to scientific explanation ruined it as an enigmatic experience and he blamed Isaac Newton, wishing “confusion to his memory for destroying the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to a prism” (Wright, 1980: 191).

Art and rational science can be more acceptably reconciled however, and more recently in the twentieth century, artists such as Hamish Fulton and Olafur Eliasson have depicted rainbows albeit without the agonies of having to choose between the rationality of science and the beauty of nature. Hamish Fulton avoided any pictorial representation of the phenomenon when he used text only to

evoke a double rainbow through a doubling of the words for its colours. Fulton even gets it scientifically correct as in reality, the order of the colours of double rainbows are reversed in the outer and inner bows and Fulton acknowledges this scientific reality in the way he arranges his text on the wall. In just one piece of work he evokes a double rainbow that is both scientifically correct and stimulates the imagination of his viewer to mentally visualise the phenomenon. For Olafur Eliasson, a rainbow is a physical as well as a visual experience. When he combined a hosepipe, water and light to create “Beauty” in 1993, a “shimmering rainbow” in the gloom of an industrial warehouse, he realised for the first time the importance of the role of the viewer in completing his work, when he said, again scientifically correct, that, “if the light doesn’t go into your eyes, there’s no rainbow” (May, 2003: 22).

In my own representation of this phenomenon I too wanted my viewer to be physically aware of this trick of the light, as both an aesthetic and scientific experience. In my rendering I built on information gleaned from all the above examples including information about rainbow science and made “Sudden Shower”. My intention was to represent a shower of rain falling, just before it reaches the ground—a suspended moment in time—during an otherwise sunny day. The process I used was very simple, just short strips of paper, printed in the most basic way. The large-scale, stylised arrangement I created on the wall hid the colours of the rainbow printed on the reverse of some of the strips, which were revealed as reflections off the wall when a bright light was directed on them, like the sun through rain. As in the actual occurrence itself, my rainbow could only be seen when viewed from an oblique angle and again like the real thing some viewers saw it and some did not. My presentation of a phenomenological experience aligns with Merleau-Ponty when he proposes that it is the task of the artist to “unveil” the artwork for the viewer (Matthews, 2002: 136) and to make the viewer more aware of the ways we inhere the world as embodied, perceiving subjects. It is not the role of the artist to expound ideas in the way of science or philosophy but to create a depiction in order to evoke a fresh or unconventional understanding (Matthews, 2002: 137).

The intention was for my viewer to experience the work through a phenomenological engagement in order to mentally transform their interaction into a realisation and memory of the magic of seeing an actual rainbow. The last thing I wanted was to tell my viewers what was there and how to experience it. In this example, and the ones before, text is redundant and a didactic panel unnecessary. The relationship to the work is one of experience—experience, not only of the work in order to unravel it, but also to reflect on our relationship with the physical world and its wordless and irrational influence on the imagination in conjunction with a reference to science.

Writing to think

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological philosophy teaches us that by re-learning to look at the world through art we can get behind theoretical (textual) interpretations and describe the experience of the world itself and in this way we do not simply reiterate an existing fact or truth but bring truth into being. By taking this approach, we are in direct contact with the world and are actively involved with things themselves, not the intellectual contemplation of them (Matthews, 2002: 133). Words and text for Merleau-Ponty allow us to share rational and reasonable ideas and observations about the world because we share a common understanding of the rules of referential language. However for the artist-researcher who may “unveil” her subject by creating an image or artwork, not through discursive talk or text about the subject, what role can an exegetical text play to transform experience into a more common language to influence understanding? According to Pentikainen (2006: 1), “we narrate in order to understand”. Although we live surrounded by images and are influenced by them we use language to understand, explain and analyse them; we use language, which can also name emotions, give definitions, develop concepts and formulate stories (2006). For words to be more than the manifestations of rational thinking the text might hover in the space between words on a page and the imagination of the reader, both during and following the reading then it can have validity in this context. As Svenungsson (2009: 35) describes it, the artist Robert

Smithson does this by “conveying something of the great, wondrous promise of art: to experience life more richly, to see things more clearly, to feel sensations more intensely”. He does this, to enable his reader to understand that by using words as his tools he can recreate not explain.

It has already been established that during the working of an art project essential insights arise for the artist yet they are provided for the viewer in a situation where the work exhibited cannot be expected to reveal its own context of production. However, if an exegetical text is developed in and through the art project as a working project in itself, where all aspects of the project reflect in and off each other not as a retrospectively produced text, it may come closer to Smithson’s intention. However at no point will the exegetical text overwrite or displace the art practice (Jervis, 2009). In the 19th century the artist and theorist, John Ruskin strove all his life to educate the general population to see and through seeing—or perceiving—to understand the world in a new way.

To be taught to read—what is the use of that, if you know not whether what you read is false or true? To be taught to write or speak—but what is the use of speaking, if you have nothing to say? To be taught to think—nay, what is the use of being able to think, if you have nothing to think of? But to be taught to see is to gain word and thought at once, and both true (Ruskin cited in Birch, 2004: 95).

For Ruskin words in and of themselves were not able to transform perceptions of the world into understanding. His readers had to be taught to see before they could understand text. However, writing could be considered to be simply another way of thinking, a method of learning for the author to deepen understanding of what is being discussed, and herself as a human being (Pentikainen, 2006: 1), as it was for T. S. Eliot when he wrote, “Good translation is not merely translation, for the translator is giving the original through himself, and finding himself through the original” (1948). For Jemima Montagu, however, “The essence of translation is a mystery”, but it is this quality that drives forward new experiments, “from words to images, from images to sound, from sounds to words and so on”, offering a happily undefinable and unmeasurable crossing between cultures, ideas, values, beliefs and dreams (Montagu, 2004 npn). It is this contradiction and ambiguity regarding text that is crucial to good artists-researchers’ writing.

Conclusion

Whichever way it is regarded art is always meant to engage the imagination and the function of the imagination is to not accept words or facts as final, but to use them as starting points, or triggers, for speculation into further meaning. So, although it will not be an easy thing to do, the challenge for artist-researchers is to produce texts, which allow for multiple readings or ambiguity in order to engage the imagination. Creative texts have the potential to provide the essential trigger for a reader to transform simple words on a page that imply fact to an experience of being-in-the-world in the way of a work of art.

Notes

1. Art as Research is a term used in universities in relation to artworks produced for a PhD. Australia and a number of European countries have offered PhDs in creative arts since the early 1990s and in most cases the practical art project must be accompanied by an exegetical text of 20,000 to 40,000 words.
2. The standard definition of research is: creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. Any activity classified as research and experimental development is characterised by originality; it should have investigation as a primary objective and should have the potential to produce results that are sufficiently general for humanity’s stock of knowledge (theoretical and/or practical) to be recognisably increased. Most higher education research work would qualify as research and experimental development.

3. The English word, "translation" is derived from Latin and means literally a "carrying over" or "crossing over".

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