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‘The problem of a visually based theory of knowledge for the presentation of design practice as academic research’.

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Design has been traditionally seen as either a form of applied science or applied art. However, as this paper will show, the epistemological legacies of art and science provide models of knowledge insufficient for design which has consequently created problems in defining the nature of “formal” design knowledge and its relation to academic research.

The visual model of the mind has played a determinative role in the Western philosophical tradition, beginning with Plato’s eye of the soul gazing upon Forms or Ideas, to becoming enthroned as the basis for modern epistemology in Descartes’ vision of the intellect as the eye of the mind which by the light of nature is capable of perceiving ideas clearly and distinctly. Descartes’ perspectivalism allows consciousness to be modelled as a spectacle unfolding before a disinterested observer, one who is in the world but not of it. Descartes’ theory of knowledge adopts the general rule that the things we can conceive of clearly and distinctly are true and regards matter as something only knowable, if at all, by inference from what is known in the mind.

Descartes’ ocularcentric regime of clear and distinct ideas has come to dominate modern epistemology including the definition of what constitutes formal knowledge and valid research. Scientific investigation carries within it the inherent privilege of the capacity vision and light to gain rigorous access to valid knowledge. The transparent window of the scientific observation of evidence (from the Latin videre: to see) as the privileged epistemological tool assumes sight to be monocular, static, unblinking, and disembodied. The viewer is outside the viewed scene and captures an eternal de-contextualised moment that is cut off from the empirical world. This relation between autonomy and critique is also one of the fundamental claims of modern art.

To the degree that art achieves autonomy, it is in the position to critique other institutions, whether political, religious, social, economic, or commercial. Intrinsic to its identity is this principal of independence which enables art to hold itself apart from the commercialisation of late capitalism and provides the institutional base for its critique of the culture industry that would seek to reduce art, in Theodore Adorno’s sarcastic phrase, to a ‘well-meaning cultural commodity.’ As Adorno claims in his Aesthetic Theory,

Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this world too were an autonomous entity... By virtue of its rejection of the empirical world—a rejection that inheres in art’s concept and thus no mere escape, but a law immanent to it—art sanctions the primacy of reality.

(Adorno, 1997, pp. 1-2)
According to Adorno’s logic, no matter how avant-garde an artwork may be, it cannot exist outside the structures that enable its creation, yet it can only exist meaningfully as art insofar as it attempts to critique those structures. One does not need to be a committed Marxist to appreciate Adorno’s argument. It seems intuitively persuasive that artists should be free of whatever constraints others might wish to impose upon them and that art should be free to pursue its own path by virtue of its autonomy.

However design occupies a problematic status as an independent domain of knowledge due to the fact that while it draws on the traditions of science and art, it occupies shadowy position that seems to slip out of sight. This situation presents a series of issues surrounding the necessary transformation design knowledge into formal knowledge as design makes the shift from the “street” to the academy.

While design, as the technical means by which an artefact comes into existence, is seen as being absolutely essential to the creation of an autonomous work, it is also necessary that design should function as a transparent set of procedures to be deployed but not to be present in the content of the finished work. According to this thesis, design operates as the supplement of the artwork, in the sense in which Jacques Derrida originally proposed the term in Of Grammatology (1977). A supplement is that which provides something necessary to another, ‘original’ entity, but which is nonetheless considered to be extraneous to the original. For example, an orchestra score might be seen as a supplement to the music that it records. Without notes on paper, music would have no means of calling itself into existence, but the score is not in any way seen as an equivalent for the musical performance itself. Without the score there would be no way of fixing the musical arrangement; it is through its apparent transparency that the written score establishes the authoritative primacy of the music.

The concept of the supplement has been applied by Derrida to ‘the decorative,’ a category of form that is closely related to design. Design is certainly not able to be reduced to decoration. Decorated objects may or may not be designed, and objects that are designed may or may not be decorated. While the two terms are not isomorphic, we might suggest that whereas design is a supplemental kind of making, decoration is a supplemental kind of form. In The Truth in Painting (1978), Derrida gives an important example of the supplement in his discussion of the frame that surrounds a painting. Such a frame is not part of an artwork, but nonetheless conveys the sense of the painting’s importance. The frame works by cutting the work off from the surrounding world, serving as a visual and social guarantor of the work’s autonomy. But it follows then that it is the frame which in fact gives the art its freedom, its truth.

It would appear that design firmly inhabits the condition of the supplemental. A great painting deserves a beautiful frame, yet the work of the framer is not undertaken for its own sake, in a sense it is not even meant to be noticed. The work of the framer must not ‘upstage’ the art of the painter. To say that design is supplemental, then, is to say that it is always essential to the end in view, but as Derrida says, in the process of achieving that end “it disappears, buries itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy”
(Derrida, 1978, p. 61). In this sense design only exists in motion, through its effacement it points to something lacking in the artwork, something that the autonomous work of art needs, but cannot absorb into its makeup.

The problem associated with capturing design knowledge may also be seen as an instance of a relationship between two modes of formalisation which reflect a fairly familiar tension within the history of mathematics. Proclus, in his 'Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements' had already formulated a distinction in classical Greek geometry, between problems and theorems (Smith, 2006, p. 148). Theorems concern the demonstration, from axioms or postulates, of the inherent properties of a figure, whereas problems concern the actual construction of figures, usually using a straightedge and a compass. With the theorematic process, deduction moves from axioms to theorems, and the figure is defined statically in Platonic fashion, in terms of its essences and its derived properties. With the problematic process, by contrast, a figure is defined dynamically by its "capacity to be affected" – that is by the events that can befall a figure; sectioning, cutting, folding, bending, rotating etc (Smith, 2006, p. 149). For example, a circle is defined theorematically as a fixed essence, whereas roundness is a problematic figure that is inseparable from the dynamic process of rounding it undergoes.

While both methods of deduction produce the same solution, over time, theorematics has become more visibly associated with the 'rigor' of the famous royal scientific societies whereas problematics exists only in the capacity of technologies or applied science. This is because problematics does not claim an autonomous power like theorematic royal science, due to the fact that problematics subordinates its operations to the sensible and sensitive conditions of intuition and construction. Problematics is concerned with inventing problems whose solution is tied to a whole set of collective, non-scientific activities but whose 'scientific' solution depends, on the contrary, on the codifying 'law and order' of theorematic royal science (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 373-4).

This distinction between a scientific or a designerly approach can be understood as the difference between the transcendent imposition of a visual form upon a chaotic matter and the designer's approach, which follows the flow of matter through a process of interaction between the designer and the material. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between these two processes as that of a difference between reproducing and following.

Reproducing implies the permanence of a fixed point of view that is external to what is reproduced: watching the flow from the bank. But following is something different from the ideal of reproduction. One is obliged to follow when one is in the search for 'singularities' of a matter, or rather of a material, and not out to discover form… when one engages in the continuous variation of variables, instead of extracting constants.’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 372)

This paper will then proceed to present some possibilities for a “formalisation” of design knowledge that is not based upon a visual theory of knowledge but, following Alva Noe’s argument in his book Action in Perception (2004), is in contrast based on theory that perception is not something that happens to us, or in us, and is instead something we do.
References


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