Raiding the Past: Understanding the Present

Abstract:

Academic staff in art and design are often concerned at the level of research engagement by students; much of it tends to be over-reliant on internet search engines and magazines. This is also something that external examiners often comment upon. Many students lack understanding of the value of wider-ranging and deeper engagement with research at both primary and secondary levels, and there is a clear need to demonstrate the ways in which meaningful research can underpin and inform their practice, allowing both for stronger art/design outcomes and a richer understanding of the contexts in which they operate, both as lifelong learners and as future professionals.

This paper investigates the wide meaning and context of research in art and design. It also describes a project devised to promote and establish an understanding in undergraduate students about the need for wide-ranging and relevant research, away from the 'Google culture'. A symposium was held looking at the impact of visual culture in the 1960s and 1970s. This was an interdisciplinary event for second year undergraduate students within Fashion, Costume, Fine Art and Communication Design (Graphics, Illustration, and Advertising). There were four keynote speakers, each with specialist knowledge of the period. Students were then asked to produce outcomes based on the event and on further research that required them to reflect upon the visual and cultural significance of the period under investigation. A small exhibition of the most successful work was held to demonstrate to students the results of in depth research diversity.

What is research in art and design?

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines research as:
'The Systematic investigation into the study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions'

Research is a search for knowledge and new facts and applies to all academic disciplines including, science, art and history. The goal of the research process is to produce new and original knowledge and ideas. This mainly takes three forms; explorative, constructive and observational. From this, the data collected falls into two definitive types;
   • Primary - is the collection of original material and data
   • Secondary – is the collection and synthesis of existing research and data
Much written research involves;
'Conducting the study, collecting data and preparing the written document, including recording and interpreting the results. It is accepted that the written results of research are factual, limited to interpreting the data collected, and devoid of unsupported opinions and that they add something to the field.' (Flynn and Foster, (2009) p-7)
On commencing research a pattern develops beginning with the research question; establishing issues; collecting data; analysing data; taking action; evaluating the results of the action; formulating new questions. Research is either undertaken to prove an idea or uncover different approaches to exploring an idea. During the process of analysis new questions develop

Artistic research is often visual or practice based. Creative works such as photographs, paintings, designs or artefacts and the majority of other visual sources in the world: from nature to architecture, can often be considered the object of the research. This differs from scientific and written methods for research. The artist or designer uses research in order to inspire creative endeavours as opposed to developing new knowledge or theory. New knowledge or theory can however be developed through the visual solution.

Art and design constantly changes and the practitioner must always strive to create something new. Artists and designers have to dig deeper and search further for new inspiration and ways of interpreting this in their work. There are those members of the artistic community who disregard research as being at best unnecessary and at worst damaging to art. Esner (1972) puts forward the theory that training in art schools has not tended to develop analytical skills in the use of language and theory as the reason why research in arts is seen by some to be alien to the study of art. When he suggests that some art educators believe that creativity is incapable of being understood, he is talking about the ethos of the art department.

Art and design education is very much concerned with the visual process, through research, to idea, from production, to product. The points made by Vincent Thomas reinforce this;
'Creative activity in art, then is activity subject to critical control by the artist, although not by virtue of the fact that he (sic) sees the final result of the activity…. Thus we do not judge a work to be of art unless we believe it to be original if it strikes us as being a repetition of other paintings and poems, if it seems to be the result of a mechanical application of borrowed technique or style to novel subject matter to the degree that we apprehend it as such, to the same degree we deny that it is creative, to create is to originate.' (reference)

Visual research needs to consider influences such as; colour, print and surface decoration, details, structures and shapes, contemporary trends, textures, culture and history, this is not an exhaustive list. This all needs to be judged in the light of both definitive primary and secondary research. In art and design this can include the following;
- Primary sources – findings that have been individually sourced or collected. These could be objects that have been found directly from, for example, historical costume from a costume museum. Primary sources are generally recorded through drawings or photographs.
- Secondary sources – These are the findings of other people. These may be found in books, the internet, journals, and magazines. They are as important as primary sources of research and allow them to see and read about things that are not easily accessible.

Sources of inspiration can include –, books and journals, magazines, street and youth culture the internet, museums and art galleries, nightclubs and bars costume, people watching, travel, forecasting and trend agencies architecture, science, flea markets and second hand shops, artist and designer case studies, the natural world, film, theatre and music, new technologies. It's essential that the practitioner understands what both primary and secondary research mean and that a good balance of both is maintained. Primary findings draw upon abilities to visually record findings and secondary employs the ability to be inspired and investigate.

The fashion writer Sue Jenkyn-Jones made this sound incredibly exciting when she said:
'Fashion expresses the Zeitgeist, or spirit of the times, and therefore mirrors changes in society. In

their search for inspiration, designers must learn to keep their eyes and ears open: to visit shows, shops, clubs, cafes, galleries and films; to read magazines, newspapers and novels; to party and to listen to music; and above all, to people-watch and absorb the subtle and incremental aesthetic changes that take place in society. The key to creating new ideas is to jot down and mix the influences together in a sketchbook, then to blend this inspiration with your growing knowledge of fabrics, fashion details and target markets.' (Jenkyn-Jones, 2002, P-146)

Teaching students how to successfully conduct research is a challenge. This primarily relates to our contemporary social and cultural environment. We live in an instant culture in which it is easy to access visual information, through the internet. It has to be consistently emphasised to students that this is only secondary information and is predominantly some else's work.

It is also a challenge to help students understand the relevance of both primary and secondary research and how this can be analysed and developed into a successful art or design proposal. The illustrations below from fashion students demonstrate both successful and poor analysis of research. Both students have developed collections of co-ordinated outfits from their sketchbook references. Figure one, is a good example. The page from the student's sketchbook demonstrates fabric experimentation, a surreal photograph of a doll, experimentation with colour and texture, drawings of insects and her own rough notes and sketches of designs. The collection of garments demonstrates a clear visual connection to the research, in colour, texture, fabrication and even the silhouettes of the garments.

Fig 1

The work in figure two, is a poor example of research. The page from the sketch book is shallow and visually confusing. There is a postcard of an emaciated female figure that contrasts with the sketch of the healthier figure. There is also a photograph of the students own manipulation of calico that mimics the skeletal folds of the body in the postcard. The collection of garments does not really related to the research as it shows healthy voluptuous bodies in strapless corsets and dresses with healthy manes of hair. The idea for the collection was based on anorexia, a controversial enough idea however this is not clearly demonstrated through the research and the subsequent designs.

Fig 2

The Symposium

The overriding philosophy for mounting the Symposium was to promote the value and importance of research to undergraduate students in art and design. The 1960's and 1970's, has great currency for

students, for whom retrospective research is often relevant to their studies. In focusing upon these key decades it capitalizes on how the design industry revives art and design styles from significant past decades and makes research appear to be easily identifiable with for students. Students rarely fully understand depths of visual culture historically and often demonstrate a superficial awareness of this in their research, focusing on the most obvious stylistic references attached to a period and re-interpreting these in a contemporary way.   Four speakers were engaged who were experts on the 1960's/1970's and who through their work had made a considerable impact either during or about the period. Each speaker outlined the research methods they utilised within their work, and described how both primary and secondary research informed their outcomes.

The four key speakers were:

- Sylvia Ayton MBE, Chair of the Costume Society. Former business partner to Zandra Rhodes in the 1960's and for thirty years Head of Design at Wallis;

  Talk; 'My Love Hate Relationship with Couture'

- Professor Lou Taylor, Dress Historian Author of several books including 'Through the Looking Glass which focused on individual decades in dress and social history in the twentieth century;

  Talk: 'On Their Own Terms- an assessment of the development and impact of 'youthquake' fashions, 1958-68.

- Michael Bracewell, writer/cultural commentator, author of *Re-make/Remodel: Art, Pop, Fashion and the making of Roxy Music* (Faber);

- Dominic Lutyens, writer/journalist, co-author of *70s Style and Design* (Thames & Hudson).

The symposium also had several other key aims and objectives:

- The intention was to create a dialogue between students and staff across subject disciplines, to network and exchange ideas with creatives beyond individual disciplines.

- To promote and establish an understanding of the need for wide-ranging and relevant research, away from the 'Google culture'.

- To promote the link between the practical and the theoretical.

- To promote an interdisciplinary approach to design research.

A range of research methods was described and discussed. The speakers were experts on aspects of the visual culture of the period. Each approached research from a different standpoint of interest/expertise/discipline that included;

- Fashion design
- Costume/dress history and theory
- Cultural commentary/popular culture
- Design history

This breadth of approaches to research was an ideal platform from which to inform and inspire the students, and allow them to reconsider their own research methods. Distinctions between primary and secondary research and the value of each were outlined. This demonstrated the need for a more analytical and relevant approach to both visual and written work, leading to a more informed level of dialogue within both studio practice and theory.

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