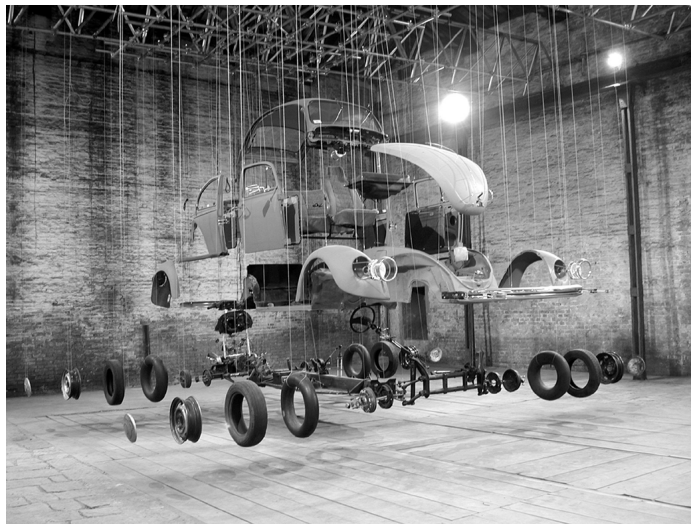


## CHAPTER 3

EXPLANATION,  
UNDERSTANDING,  
AND BEYOND

Damián Ortega, *Cosmic Thing* (2001). Beetle, 1983. Steel wire, variable dimensions. Installed in *The Everyday Altered*, curated by Gabriel Orozco. On display in the Arsenale as part of the Venice Biennale, *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, June 15–November 11, 2003. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto Gallery. Photograph by Graeme Sullivan.

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This chapter is introduced by an image. It is an artwork by Mexican artist *Damián Ortega* titled *Cosmic Thing* (2001). In pulling apart his own Volkswagen (VW) Beetle, Ortega manages to unpack a considerable amount of form, and in doing so stacks together a considerable amount of content. His aesthetic sensibility is anything but suspended, as it becomes a vehicle for his wry political commentary. The dismembered specimen is held in a ballet balance that becomes a social space where inferences are easily revealed. The exploded view is a bit like a three-dimensional political cartoon that doesn't need word balloons to make messages. This ubiquitous form of everyday life of a recent past, the VW Beetle, carries memories of a cheap get-around, hints of cultural repurposing, and traces of the postindustrial military complex as an original emblem of Nazi efficiency. But *Damián Ortega's* installation is also a theoretical system where the structural analysis clearly describes how the synthesis of parts comes together. What causes the car to work is partially explained by our knowledge of mechanics. However, the effects of driving have to be experienced to be understood. And here memories and prior knowledge of all kinds frame our responses as the immediacy of the visual impact of the floating Beetle takes hold.

As we can see from this brief encounter, several creative and critical capacities are invoked in visual experience. Like the gestalt of *Damián Ortega's* form in space, neither the parts nor the whole lose their mystery under the glare of analysis. Instead, something else is added as explanations are revealed, connections are made, and new forms of understanding emerge. These kinds of theorizing processes are at the heart of what it is we do when we create and respond to art and serve as the basis upon which the visual arts can be seen as a research practice. However, if an aesthetically grounded and theoretically robust approach is to emerge, then the methods used to study creativity, communication, and cultural commentary should be located within the domain of visual arts practice. To continue to merely borrow research methods from other fields denies the intellectual maturity of art practice as a plausible basis for raising significant theoretical questions and as a viable site for applying important cultural and educational ideas. While criteria for quantitative results are based on the probable likelihood of occurrences, and findings from qualitative inquiries are assessed by the plausibility or relevance of outcomes, the prospect of imaginative insight remains an elusive criterion for judging the significance of research. If a measure of the utility of research is seen to be the capacity to create new knowledge that is individually and culturally transformative, then criteria need to move beyond probability and plausibility to *possibility*.

The process of theorizing is a basic procedure of inquiry and hence a core element in research. We construct theories about how the world works all the

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time as we explain things and come to understand them. Some theories are based on how knowledge is applied to help solve problems. This kind of theorizing involves explanation, which is a logical process whereby observations are linked so that some are seen as causes and others as effects. In these instances, some perplexing issue or event is reconciled or resolved as we draw on known theoretical knowledge to help explain what we see. In other situations, theories are based on experience, which helps us understand more complex things. This kind of theorizing involves understanding, which is a cognitive process whereby who we are and what we know shape interactions and transform awareness. In these instances, intuition and intellect, grounded in context-specific circumstances provide an experiential base for constructing new frameworks of understanding. Therefore understanding is a powerful state of mind that allows us to see things differently. From an informed perspective we are able to form more adequate explanations and look with insight at other possibilities. It is argued here that the capacity to create understanding and thereby critique knowledge is central to the visual arts and that artists are actively involved in these kinds of research practices.

Debates about whether the goal of inquiry is to “explain” or to “understand” human behavior goes back at least to the 18th century. For early researchers, the intention was to explain human activity by adapting a similar paradigm as that applied to the study of the natural sciences. This contrasted to the belief among others that the purpose was to understand human agency and this necessitated quite a different, more naturalistic method of research. These perspectives were bound up in the epistemological arguments about objective knowledge and subjective experience. As such, explanations connect empirical observations to causal events and others can verify these outcomes. Understanding on the other hand is an adaptive process of human thinking and learning that is changed by experience.

Despite the emergence of qualitative approaches to inquiry that achieve a more adequate “goodness of fit” for the kind of learning seen in the studio and in the classroom, the need to construct theories that explain phenomena is still assumed to be the goal of research. The premise is powerful because if something can be explained then there is a high probability that effects are known in terms of their causes. Therefore a theoretically robust causal explanation means that we can make predictions and this can have significant implications. Consider the impact of a theory of learning that explains this aspect of human behavior: We would know what causes learning and could therefore re-create the conditions and predict with some confidence the outcomes. Many scientists of learning have been trying to do this for a long time. Yet the use of reductive methods to try to study and explain the workings of complex mechanisms of human thought and action

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is beginning to be seen as inadequate. Even a committed educational researcher such as Jerome Bruner ceased to ask the causal question, *How do children learn?* and began to ask, *How are meanings made?* It was this complex question that took him out of the clinical setting and into the “real” world in order to understand the culture of learning (Bruner, 1996).

If a purpose of research is to create new knowledge that increases our awareness of whom we are and about the world in which we live, then it seems plausible to argue that understanding is a viable outcome of inquiry. The possibility of gaining new understanding involves accessing, designing, and investigating issues of personal and public interest. Research of this kind is imaginative and systematic and includes the exploration of one’s tacit knowledge and the insight of others as both experience and reasoning come into play. Generally the goal of research is to describe, interpret, or explain phenomena, but if the desire is to see inquiry as having the capacity to change human understanding, then our sight needs to be set on a bigger picture. To assert that understanding is as significant as explanation as a goal of research is especially feasible with inquiries in cultural and educational contexts, and this includes most of the research undertaken in the human and social sciences. If this is accepted, then this quest for understanding sees individual and social transformation as a worthy human enterprise for “to know” means to be able to think and act and thereby to change things. It can be further inferred that the process of making art and interpreting art adds to our understanding as new ideas are presented that help us see in new ways. These creative insights have the potential to transform our understanding and as a consequence inform and extend the various descriptive, interpretive, and explanatory systems of knowledge that frame individual and sociocultural awareness. In creating new knowledge and contributing to new understanding, artists, art writers, and art teachers construct theories of artistic knowing and develop theories about learning and teaching art. Although these theories do not carry the explanatory signature of causality, they are grounded in the praxis of human engagement and yield outcomes that can be seen to be individually liberating and culturally enlightening.

Central to my argument is the premise that to better appreciate how visual arts can contribute to human understanding, there is a need to ground visual arts research within the theories and practices that surround art making. It is from this central site of investigation that other derivative practices emerge, such as critical and philosophical analysis, historical and cultural commentary, and educational experiences. This notion is a far cry from the stereotype that sees visual arts as a warm, fuzzy, and essentially private experience. Rather, it acknowledges the cognitive capacities that inform artistic making and thinking, and this claim is taken up in more detail in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, this assumption acknowledges the crucial role visual arts can play in cultural critique, historical inquiry, and educational development. It is the centrality of visual arts to human engagement that warrants the development of a theoretically robust foundation for research in order to extend the important role of art in institutional, political, and cultural settings.

## THEORIZING IN PRACTICE ●

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The role of theory in research and practice is mostly unquestioned. The process of seeking explanations of phenomena that can be captured in elegant yet powerful abstractions carries high status as a goal of inquiry. Equally valued is the acceptance that theories are provisional and are subject to continual change as more well-researched accounts and well-argued positions supplant less-convincing views. There is agreement that there are “big” theories that deal with the larger issues of life and the universe, as well as practical theories that service our need to explain and understand everyday occurrences. In addition to grand theoretical proposals and commonplace practical reasoning, we construct theories that help to rationalize the structures put in place to plan and implement all sorts of institutional policies, programs, and practices. Within a traditional research regime, inquiry practices are mostly theory-driven so that studies are designed in accordance with existing knowledge and results are seen to help fill in the gaps. In practice, the outcomes can be much more surprising and consequently challenge existing theories and take a field in new directions. The promise of new insights and the possibility of more compelling theories is why people do research, because this holds the prospect of improving the structures and actions we put in place to conduct our lives.

A similar kind of compulsion impels people to make art. It is believed that there is benefit to be had for individuals, communities, and cultures from the imaginative insights offered and the potential changes made possible. As with other disciplines with long traditions, there has been much theorizing done that seeks to explain what the visual arts are, why artworks are made, how they are viewed, what the cultural impact is, why and how art might be taught, and so on. In the minds of aestheticians the issues discussed generally sit within the scope of philosophy so that theories of art can in most instances be directly linked to broader genealogies of ideas, issues, and debates. The rules regarding the fashioning of statements and the specification of argument and logical reasoning remain the same whether talking about life or the visual arts. Consequently, theories of visual arts wrestle with varying conceptions of art and yield different kinds of theoretical descriptions. These can include

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analytical claims about concepts, content, and distinctive relationships among visual arts practices, empirical statements about visual arts based on information that can be collated and confirmed, and normative arguments about the value of the visual arts in various contexts and circumstances (Efland, 1995).

### Instrumental Theorizing: Means and Ends

Within institutional settings the kind of theorizing that is most common is the use of formal strategies that help direct reasoning and apply criteria for assessing the credibility of evidence and arguments. This is what Dennis Mithaug (2000) calls “constructive theorizing” because it helps to construct explanations about what, why, and how problems arise, and how discrepancies between what is believed and what is encountered are resolved. This is a generic process that describes theorizing as a form of problem solving and is evident in related practices such as the scientific method, logical and rational thinking, moral reasoning, and the like. As Mithaug notes, “the scientist searches for reasons to explain circumstances, the philosopher searches for reasons to judge their moral significance, and the policy maker prescribes adjustments to those circumstances” (p. 119).

Within scientific research, constructing theories using this problem-solving strategy is based on the premise that an inconsistency exists between what is observed and the lack of adequate explanatory theory. To find a more robust theoretical account the researcher follows the well-traveled path described in Robert Pirsig’s (1974/1999) motorcycle analogy for the scientific method I quoted in Chapter 2. A similar practice, of course, is well known in visual arts circles as the “design process”—and here I refer to the problem solving, product-based, market-driven design process of modernism, not the hybrid, high-tech morphed practices of contemporary design research (Laurel, 2003). The Bauhaus-inspired design process of modernism amounts to a procedural algorithm that begins as a design problem, proceeds through phases of experimentation and testing, and results in elegant solutions; this tradition of problem solving by design encourages a pluralistic aesthetic where there can be any number of “correct” design solutions. The cycle of inquiry involves the identification of a design problem that includes criteria for its resolution; the compilation of relevant background research about what has already been done; devising a plan of action; producing an object or prototype; and concludes with an evaluative stage where the product is tested against the problem conditions. If the result is unsatisfactory, then the cycle begins again.

The use of problem solving as an academic strategy has been given a new lease of life with the advent of doctoral research in art and design

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programs, particularly in England, Australia, and Canada, and I will consider these approaches in general later in this chapter in the section, "Art Practice as a Construction Site." In situating problem solving as the central research practice used in satisfying higher education degree requirements at the doctoral level, Stephen Scrivener (2000) lists several criteria for assessing whether a student has "arrived at the problem and its solution in a self-conscious and reasoned way." For Scrivener, a research student needs to have

demonstrated that there is a problem to be solved; shown that the solution to the problem will result in a new or improved artefact; shown that the problem is one that the World would like to see solved; demonstrated the usefulness of the solution; demonstrated that the knowledge exemplified in the solution can be abstracted (i.e., described and/or formalized); considered the general applicability and transferability of this knowledge; proved this knowledge (i.e., demonstrated that the problem has been eradicated or ameliorated by the solution). (p. 4)

The influence of means-ends theorizing using problem-solving protocols has, over the years, won high educational status in many fields. This is partly a reaction to a perceived emphasis on content coverage that, it is argued, remains unrelated to real-life applications. More commonly known these days as "problem-based learning," the principle of learning how to access and apply information in response to authentic demands makes efficient use of existing knowledge, locates the process of learning within professional practice, and allows for relatively easy accountability.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the strategy of problem solving requires an organized and rational approach to learning, for once a problem is encountered, the task is to retrieve all of the relevant data available, and access to information technology means that this is close at hand. This emphasis on knowledge acquisition assumes that the outcomes provide tangible, practical evidence of learning that requires a range of conceptualizing, analyzing, synthesizing, and generalizing skills. The emphasis on praxis and process learning is at the heart of problem-solving approaches to theorizing and these characteristics, of course, feature strongly in the conceptualization of participatory action research models of inquiry (Brown & Jones, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) and critical approaches to teaching and learning (Apple, 1999; Giroux & McLaren, 1989). Overall, theorizing as problem solving and its variations asserts that the learner is a practitioner and a researcher and is therefore responsible for goal setting in the form of problem-identification and capable of self-assessment as a consequence of the cyclical process followed.

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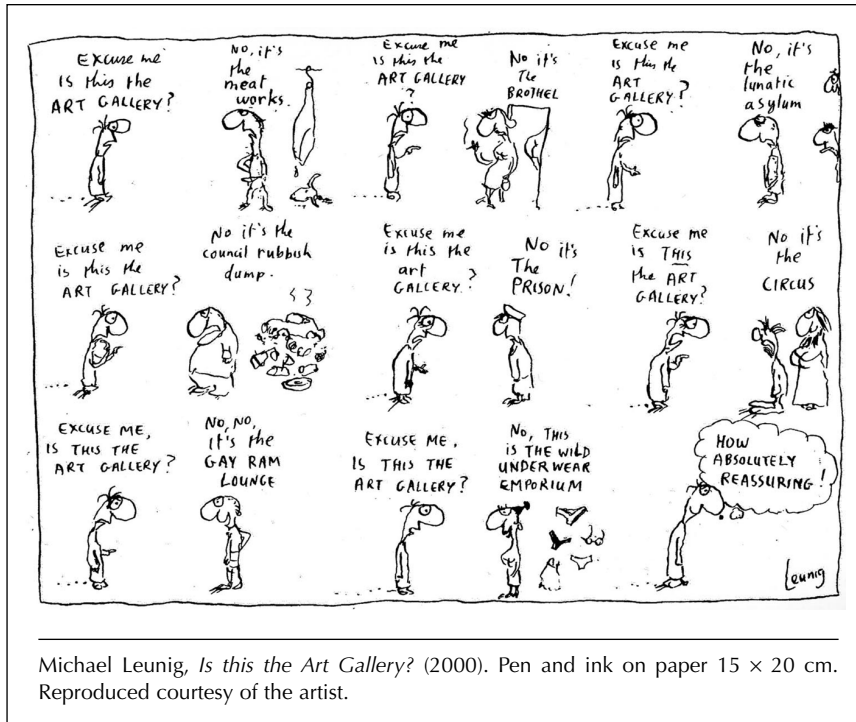
Irrespective of the particular protocol used for means-ends theorizing, be it problem-solving, practical reasoning, or inquiry-based teaching, the procedures for articulating the relationship between theory and practice generally remain constant. The analytical principle is based on logical reasoning and conceptual adequacy is framed by the consistency in the way the parts match with the whole so that there is an easy translation between means and ends, practice and theory, and vice versa. The heuristic value of means-ends theorizing, however, is more tangibly directed toward educational consequences as the components of theory and practice can be readily broken down into elements that can be developed as curriculum structures, teaching approaches, and learning protocols. Therefore, the benefit of means-ends theorizing is best seen as a way to translate conceptions into applied structures such as curriculum frameworks. This *theory-driven* approach leaves little room for theory *construction*, yet maintains a consistent interplay between low-level theorizing and implications for practice.

How versatile and robust is this kind of theorizing as a basis for claiming that visual arts practice has the power to construct knowledge that is plausible and trustworthy? Although we can be reasonably confident that structures and strategies can be used to theorize how visual arts practice might inform teaching and learning in educational settings, how might we conceptualize what we do in the studio or the classroom as a form of inquiry that has explanatory power and contributes to human understanding? To theorize about the visual arts in this way, one needs to consider the general domain of practice pursued by those involved. This description helps draw a sharper focus around art as a place where philosophies and practices can be located and investigated, developed and applied. Although the more formal kinds of visual arts practice might be seen in the work of artists and art writers, and in artworks and visual culture, Michael Leunig reminds us that these roles are incomplete descriptions of where we find art.

*Domains of Visual Arts Practice*

The domains of visual arts practice I identify describe the work of the artist, art writer, and the study of the artwork and visual culture. These areas reflect the different constituencies involved in the process of making art, studying art, and teaching art and the kind of research approaches that might be used. I briefly address each area of practice, beginning with the artist. The artist is the key figure in the creation of new knowledge that has the potential to change the way we see and think. Therefore the studio experience is a form of intellectual and imaginative inquiry and is a site where research can be undertaken that is sufficiently robust to yield knowledge and understanding





that is well grounded and socially and culturally relevant. The main research interest is to investigate how knowledge is created *in* the process of making art. Research in the visual arts therefore asks questions about the processes and products of artistic knowing. To do this the artist is both the researcher and the *object* of study. Many of the self-study protocols available can be deployed if the desire is to formally investigate and subsequently communicate the outcomes of an inquiry to a wider constituency (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Feldman, 2003; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Alternatively, the artist can be the *subject* of a case study (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989).

Art writers respond to the visual arts they see and offer insights that take the art experience to new levels of engagement and understanding.<sup>2</sup> As producers of new knowledge *about* the visual arts, critics, historians, and philosophers give insights into why and how art is made and interpreted, and ways it functions in society. The main research interest is to study forms, methods, and meanings by making interpretations about art. To do this the art writer makes use of the many idiosyncratic, theoretical, and methodological approaches available to study the visual arts. These studies are shaped not only by the purpose of the inquiry but like all areas of human engagement

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they are subject to individual, ideological, and institutional influences. Yet like any researcher, the task of the art writer is to produce work that is grounded in evidence that justifies the questions raised and supports the claims made.

The artwork carries its own status as a form of knowledge. Research of art subsequently communicates new insights into how objects carry meaning about ideas, themes, and issues. As an object of study an artwork is an individually and culturally constructed form that can be used to represent ideas and thus can be examined as a source of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Historical research provides an array of ways that images can carry meaning whether by means of description, representation, expression, or in symbolic form. More recent cultural discourse disrupts the relationship among the artwork, the artist, and the viewer and provides much more scope in the potential for meaning making that might result from encounters with works of art. This ensemble of influence factors allows the researcher to adopt many perspectives where the focus of study might be on the work of art itself, or other surrounding contexts that shape the way artworks take on cultural meaning. This is magnified by the expanding range of nondiscursive forms the art object assumes as artists craft new technologies into service.

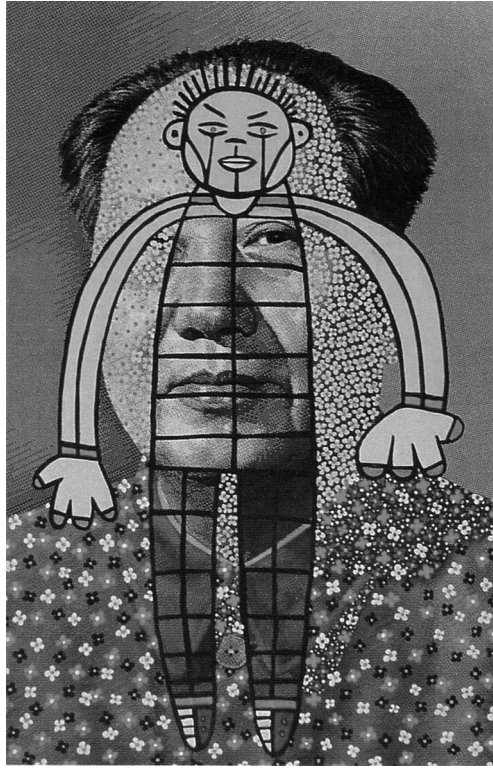
Researchers who study the way that art practice might function to assist us to better understand the contexts surrounding the visual arts will be interested in the communicative and political role of art. Here the approach is to seek understanding by conducting research *through* the visual arts so as to determine the many functions and purposes to which art can be put. Using visual forms as agencies to advance various social, cultural, and political ends has a long history and the pervasive impact of visual culture that surrounds us warrants critical study. The analysis of artworks, artifacts, and other mediated texts, and the circumstances surrounding their production and presentation, means that both the forms themselves, and the viewing public, are subjects of study. But to move beyond the realm of critique there is a need for researchers to produce knowledge that can be acted upon. This educational role requires the use of a range of critical processes that are not constrained by discipline boundaries, nor restricted to particular textual forms, but draw on a broad visual and verbal image base.

This framework for theorizing visual arts practice incorporates several of the dimensions of inquiry covered in the art education literature, especially debates about the importance of interpretation, the study of artworks, and the advocacy for visual culture.<sup>4</sup> What is not so apparent in the field is the study of the studio setting as a place of inquiry and as a site for sustained research that has the potential to yield significant knowledge. For some art

educators, the studio is a unique place for problem finding and problem solving, media exploration, and giving form to ideas of personal and social relevance. Understanding the studio art experience by doing studies of artists that reveal insights into the creative mind as an individual and cultural construct is a common approach used to model artistic learning processes.<sup>5</sup> For others, it is the educational consequences of the studio experiences that offer tangible outcomes, and these tend to change in relation to different sociocultural circumstances and political interests (Brown & Korzenik, 1993; Zurmuehlen, 1990).

The basic description of the research practices of artists in art, and research by art writers about art, and the domains of inquiry of the artwork, and through visual culture, helps to get a sense of how practices in the field can be conceptualized. Furthermore, by positioning the way the visual arts are created and studied in individual, historical, and cultural contexts, discrete and comparative approaches to inquiry can be proposed.<sup>6</sup> However, while the practices are extensive in carrying out inquiry “in” the visual arts, “about” the visual arts, “of” the visual arts, and “through” the visual arts, the premise presented here is that the studio experience is the core around which research centers. Within this context, the studio is seen as a site of inquiry that is not bounded by walls, nor removed from the daily grind of everyday social activity. Furthermore, studio art experiences are inclusive of the full range of ideas and images that inform individual, social, and cultural actions. These may spark inquiries into issues that subsequently take place within the orbit of the artworld or at the institutional level and these can investigate quite different areas and directions. These are some of the potential conditions that inform studio-based art practice and need to be seen as part of broader theoretical systems. Graham Blondel’s *Seeing Through Redfern Man* (2002) gives a visual hint of the kind of research that might be undertaken in his studio as he explores his mixed images *in* his streetwise cultural snippets and touches of serious humor. It is not difficult to consider how this studio search might be taken further as an inquiry *of* Redfern Man, or *about* the work as it might be interpreted in relation to various views, or seen *through* the context of particular ideological positions. Only when these kinds of issues are examined and the arguments are sufficiently viable to withstand scrutiny might it be possible to appreciate the phenomena that we see in studios where individuals are transformed by the knowledge and understanding gained through art making. Before examining this proposition in more depth, I would like to turn to another forum of discussion where others in higher education are addressing the question about the evolving relationship between visual arts practice and research.

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A chance find of a batch of commercial woven Mao fabric images, a visit to a high kitsch Mao/Cultural Revolution-bedecked restaurant in Singapore, a general interest in chinoiserie, and a 2002 residency as part of Beijing's Redgate Gallery international studio program all make for a paradoxically humorous but often quite serious commentary on both Chinese and Western cultures. Blondel believes that the not so "sleeping giant" of Asia is to have a pivotal role in shaping this century's history. Blondel's mixed images are a synthesis of collected material found on recent field trips to Paris, New York, and Tokyo. Along with paraphernalia gleaned from the streets of Sydney, be it reproductions of footpath chalk drawings done by dispossessed street people or that of supermarket derived detritus, are all blended together with his newfound Chinese images into very 21st century, near schizophrenic compilations.

Graham Blondel, *Seeing Through Redfern Man* (2002). Acrylic on woven fabric. 71 × 45 cm. Private collection. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

## ● THEORIZING VISUAL ARTS AS *PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH*

The genesis of the debate about the status of visual arts practice within the university setting can be tracked back to the early 1970s and 1980s in the United Kingdom when questions were raised about the status of arts programs in higher education within the context of microeconomic reform.<sup>7</sup> Within the wake of the global economic rationalist agenda this discussion soon spread to other countries. However, so did opportunities to reconfigure how the visual arts and design might become more directly connected to cultural production. There are three factors that shape the debates. Two of these are causal: One involves legislated change to institutional structures,<sup>8</sup> and the other surrounds the provision of government funding support, especially in the U.K., Canada, and Australia.<sup>9</sup> The other feature is something of an unintended consequence with vigorous questions being raised about the theory and practice of the

visual arts as an academic discipline and ways of conceptualizing studio inquiry as a form of research.

The changing circumstances that thrust art schools, art teacher education programs, and other studio-based professional courses into unified university systems occurred in most of the countries mentioned above, which caused something of an identity crisis. There was a curious clash of confidence as relationships were forged, structures reframed, and, in some cases, control relinquished to others. But there was an enthusiasm that jolted free past complacency that had caricatured the visual arts in higher education. Student learning could no longer be believed to result from the mere presence of an artist in the room. Art programs needed to be more than a private rite of passage of personal discovery. The possibility of new academic career paths within the university setting opened up for visual artists. They became eligible for professional support through research funding because those in universities teach and do research. Artists who work in art schools *in* universities also teach. But do they research? At issue was a critical question: *Can visual arts practice be accepted as a form of research?*

At the moment this discourse mostly involves a coalition of theorists and practitioners from Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, although there are representatives from some universities in the United States whose concerns center on particular discipline interests such as design, or in interdisciplinary research that spans the arts, humanities, and sciences. Although this body of literature is framed by a set of institutional conditions that are unlike those that currently confront theorists, artists, and art teachers in the United States, the content covered is very relevant. As described earlier, the role and status of the artist in higher education has been the topic of much debate, and the changing demands of professionalization indicate that this remains so. The College Art Association (CAA) seems comfortable that the discipline interests of art history and theory, and related visual studies programs continue to contribute to the production of cultural knowledge that advances credibility for the field. The position of the recalcitrant artist within higher education, however, remains less certain despite overtures that the lack of credentialed faculty at the doctoral level limits the full academic acceptance of the visual arts in higher education.<sup>10</sup> The enduring concern about institutional status is yet to be supported by a profound debate in the United States about the way the visual arts can contribute to broader cultural discourse and understanding that is the outcome of *what artists do*.

What artists do, of course, is to make art, and as an object and subject of study art has been well picked over by aestheticians, historians, psychologists, sociologists, critics, and cultural commentators for a long time. But what

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artists do in the *practice* of creating artworks, and the processes, products, proclivities, and contexts that support this activity is less-well-studied from the perspective of the artist. As an “insider” the artist has mostly been content to remain a silent participant, even if the inquiring eye of interested others has given plenty of insights into artistic experiences and activities. When circumstances require a more clearly articulated account of *what* visual art experiences, objects and outcomes are, and *how* they might contribute to the stock of human knowledge and understanding, the arguments often retreat to essentialist claims that are hard to defend, or offer well-meaning instrumental reasons that are easy to dismiss.

### Art Making as a Construction Site

*Practice-based research* is the term used in current discussions to describe the profile of “making” disciplines in higher education and is used in debates about the status of research in the visual arts, design, and, to a lesser extent, architecture, in higher education. The U.K. Council for Graduate Education report (Frayling, 1997) describes the characteristics of practice-based research thus:

[T]he *practice-based doctorate* advances knowledge partly *by means of practice*. An original/creative piece of work is included in the submission for examination. It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work.

Practice-based doctoral submissions must include a substantial *contextualization of the creative work*. This critical appraisal or analysis not only clarifies the basis of the claim for the originality and location of the original work, it also provides the basis for a judgment as to whether *general scholarly requirements* are met. This could be defined as judgment of the submission as a contribution to knowledge in the field, showing doctoral level powers of analysis and mastery of existing contextual knowledge, in a form which is accessible to and auditable by knowledgeable peers. (Emphasis in original, p. 14)

Arguments continue within and around the field of visual arts regarding the status of studio practice as a form of research and focus on two main issues. The first centers on questions of theory and practice and debates about what constitutes visual arts knowledge as seen within institutional structures (Brown, 2000; Frayling, 1997; Green, 2001). The second issue

concerns methodologies of visual arts research (Candlin, 2000; Gray, 1998; Gray & Pirie, 1995). Let me discuss the first of these issues.

Examining the theory and practice of the visual arts can involve a retreat to dualistic thinking that is similar to the focus on means and ends mentioned earlier. When considered this way, theory and practice are easily seen to support rationalist perspectives, where hierarchies of knowledge, discipline distinctions, and objective methods are favored. For Jenny Wolmark and Eleanor Gates-Stuart (2002), the trap of binary logic limits the potential of what visual arts research is, and they see the need to consider research as a cultural practice rather than a codified form of academic inquiry.

One way forward in this debate is to think about research as a cultural practice that is generated by and through the intersection with other cultural practices, and that knowledge can therefore be understood as “situated.” . . . Situated knowledge is no longer decontextualized and removed from the social and cultural relations in which it is embedded. (p. 2)

The notion that research is a cultural practice does not mean that there is any loss of specificity in establishing the relationship between theory and practice, nor the methodological demands of conducting research that is focused, rigorous, and trustworthy. Rather, the view that similarities rather than distinctions between theory and practice open up possibilities of how knowing in the visual arts can be conceptualized (Reilly, 2002).

In dealing with issues of epistemology, choices need to be made and argued about how knowledge is viewed. For instance, if the decision is made to adopt criteria for defining *the* knowledge—in a similar way to finding *the* truth—then this singular conception assumes that knowledge is based on true and justified beliefs and therefore equivalent instances need to be identified in visual arts. This objectivist position sits comfortably within a rationalist world but has a hard time accounting for the breadth and depth of knowing that is disclosed within hermeneutic and artistic traditions of inquiry. As is argued throughout this book, the tendency to refashion the foundations of a field according to conditions set in place by other disciplines offers false hope. Alternatively, if the claim is made that knowledge in the visual arts comprises different ways of knowing, this requires conceptual clarification to distinguish types of knowledge. Many theorists in the arts and education present arguments in support of this view and offer variations of Gilbert Ryle’s distinctions between *knowing-that*—or propositional knowledge (facts)—and *knowing-how*—or performative knowing (skills). For instance, Bennett Reimer’s (1992) educational argument for the arts is based on the distinctive cognitive character of the processes and products of

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aesthetic understanding that he defines as knowing *of* (*within*); knowing *how*; knowing *about* or *that*; and knowing *why*. For Reimer, addressing the epistemological argument is only part of the issue, for arts learning also has to be seen as a normative process that is central to claims about what it is to be human. To date, however, arguments that claim artistic ways of knowing to be a distinctive modality of human engagement that is set in opposition to other forms of knowledge construction run the risk of denying the complexity of what it is to know, to see, and to understand.

A question for those advocating practice-based research is not so much a concern for analyzing types of visual arts knowing and their effects, but the significance of art making as a site for knowledge construction and meaning making itself. For instance, some practitioner-theorists with a particular interest in design have an affinity with the early work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987) whose constructivist thesis of “knowing-in-action,” “reflection-in-action,” and “reflection-on-art practice” firmly centers the inquiry process on the practice of designing (Gray & Pirie, 1995; Scrivener, 2000). Others draw on contextualist approaches that are more directly informed by the physical and material properties of the object and the social conditions that occur “in a shared cognitive environment with common rules, which is also a physical environment, organized and transformed around artefact systems and the actions which produce and reproduce them” (Maffei & Zurlo, 2000, p. 2).

The search for a theory of practice has been less of a concern for artists, although there is a rich history of explanatory efforts to locate the essence or pretense of the imagination. The enduring tendency to partition Western thought into thinking and feeling dualisms relegated some artists in past centuries to the role of visual tricksters or sensory romantics. The more recent legacy of the modernist mantra that “form is all” rode roughshod over any theoretical attempts to suggest that there might be something more than meets the eye. For many artists, there is no need to talk about their work because no words can ever substitute for what the image can do. Another reason artists remain silent is because they are mostly content knowing that practical knowledge and the intelligence of creativity has been drastically underestimated by those outside the field of practice. Where others may talk of reflective action as a procedure or a protocol, artists’ practice, with less concern for functionalism, can be seen as a metacognitive and reflexive response to the impulse of creativity. Perceptions about artistic practice are therefore shaped as much by what others say as artists themselves readily mythologize it. This makes it easier for artists to pass on the job of defining and defending what they do to aestheticians and historians. But to delegate authority to others is no longer an option as the nature of artistic practice has



changed the responsibilities of artists as cultural theorists and practitioners. Greta Refsum (2002) describes these conditions.

Artists and the field of visual arts deal primarily with that which happens before artworks are made, this is their specialist arena, what comes afterwards is the arena of the humanistic disciplines. If the field of visual arts wants to establish itself as a profession with a theoretical framework it must, in my opinion, build its theory production on that which happens before art is produced, that is, the processes that lead to the finished objects of art. (p. 7)

The status of knowledge production in the visual arts remains a vexed question for many. A typical distinction asks whether knowledge is found in the art object, or whether it is made in the mind of the viewer. This debate is ongoing, and insightful accounts are beginning to appear that seek a more profound philosophical basis for situating art practice as a form of research within institutional settings. Neil Brown (2000, 2003), for instance, presents a realist perspective whereby artworks as institutional artifacts are seen to exhibit properties that are primarily objective, theory dependent, and knowable, which gives access to insights that can be intuitive, mindful, and discoverable. When seen in relation to the demands of research, Brown (2003) maps an extensive set of “symptoms of practice” that highlight different areas of shared emphasis between art making and research practice. Other positions take a broad look at knowledge that seeks to keep in dynamic tension the various constituent interests that surround art practice and research. If taken from the perspective of the artist, both knowledge production and the functions to which knowledge is put are best seen to be a dynamic structure that integrates theory and practice and contributes to our personal, social, and artifactual systems of understanding. For Mike King (2002), scientists and artists who are actually involved in the intense inquiry and engagement of practice within their different domains reveal how the theoretical edges between these practices easily soften in reality. For Stephen Awoniyi (2002), it is the polymorphism, or multiplicity of knowledge construction and the many forms of representation that it can take that reflects the integrated nature of theory and practice in art and design. A good example of the interdependent relationship among the artwork, the viewer, and the setting can be seen in conceptualizing studio-based visual arts research within higher education, as all these forms interact within an interpretive community. In this instance, knowledge embedded in practice, knowledge argued in a thesis, and knowledge constructed as discourse within the institutional setting all contribute to new understanding.

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*The Academic Artworld*

Another condition that influences how visual arts practice can be understood as an agency of cultural production within the academy is the mediating role played by institutional practices. Past research strategies that sought to identify generic artistic processes such as the psychological basis of creativity, or the structural foundations of visual symbol use, were mostly immune to the impact of social relations and regimes. As a framework for considering the way that visual arts is construed as an academic practice, Neil Brown (2003) describes the different identifying roles it has assumed.

Making art is variously represented in university postgraduate programs as a method of research, as the outcome of research, or as a research equivalent. As a method of research the visual arts are employed with increasing confidence as a mode of ethnographic inquiry into cultural objects and events. Considered as the outcome of research, artworks are represented as the product of poetic, technical, and other measures of cultural investigation. As a research equivalent artworks are accorded the status of research but only insofar as an imprecise analogy can be drawn between the value of innovation in art and science. (p. 2)

Although Brown sees these art practices as minor components of a larger claim visual arts can make as an institutional practice, they represent the various ways that research programs in art and design are structured and inquiries directed. Furthermore, these practices provide a perspective from which to review the way institutional arguments have been mounted to defend the position of visual arts research in the academy. For instance, the strategy used to determine what it is that artists do is to consider the kind of work undertaken in studios in university settings in light of prevailing views about research. For many, trying to understand what visual arts is about means comparing art practice with scientific research. Although plenty of games around definitions and outcomes are played out in various reports (Harris, 1996; Strand, 1998), all the while the edifice of what is described as “traditional” research looms large to shadow artistic research activity.

Two main strategies characterize the quest to confirm the academic status of studio-based research. The first involves assessing “equivalency” whereby the features of visual arts practice are set on a scale that is comparable to levels of scholarship associated with more traditional disciplines. For instance, a one-person exhibition might be assessed as equivalent to the publication of an article in a refereed journal. Yet there is an inherent folly

in assuming that practices from different fields can be validly compared if criteria are drawn from the disciplines of authority. In the case of the applied sciences, a prevailing emphasis on marketplace research mostly assesses outcomes in terms of product yield and economic return. This utilitarian focus, however, can be questioned as a basis against which to assess the outcomes of visual arts research.

The second institutional criteria used to assess the relative position of visual arts research in the academy is "benchmarking" or moderating. This is an evaluative process for identifying practices of merit based on the principle of peer assessment. The procedure involves the nomination of benchmarks that are local interpretations of what constitutes high-quality performance. Although this approach acknowledges diversity, it is labor intensive and requires considerable documentation to support assessments and to offset perceived problems of lack of objectivity and comparability. Research in university settings is also characterized by its dissemination to a growing audience of professionals who are in a position to evaluate the outcomes against agreed upon, if often unstated, performance indicators. In some cases, the criteria applied will be external to the discipline, such as the amount of competitive research funding secured or other similar institutional measures. Benchmarking, however, with its obvious similarity to the refereeing procedures used in the humanities and the sciences comes close to the peer review processes that are part of artworld practices. Like all forms of public adjudication, the criteria for assessment centers on the assumed congruence between the evidence presented and the interpretive decisions made.

There are two problems with this kind of reckoning. First, trying to expand a set of existing institutional categories to include a renegade membership (such as the visual arts) has little merit as ownership is always invested in the authority of someone else. What happens is that inherent values are transferred into a new realm and this denies the circumstances that granted status in the first place. What we cherish others may not. The second concern is the way the naïve notion of equivalence can be easily usurped. In the final analysis, equivalence is a concept that can readily be seen to endorse imitation, and mimicry or pastiche should not be part of the process. Yet the caution is clear: Conditional entry to the research academy is given to the visual arts as a domain of inquiry that promises a platform, but not necessarily a voice. Under these conditions we may construct our exclusion by playing a game according to rules that can only be changed by those who make them. It seems far better to publicly proclaim and profile outstanding examples of contemporary art that confound narrow prescriptions and exemplify the breadth and depth of visual arts research practice. For instance, the statements about the art of Maurizio Pellegrin highlight how his installation is at

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once an historical archaeology, a poetic and profound cultural investigation, and a lyrical disturbance of time.

### Reflections and Intentions: The Art of Maurizio Pellegrin

The Italian artist Maurizio Pellegrin has been exhibiting his installations and site-specific works throughout Europe, Asia, and North America since the mid-1980s. He lives in Venice and New York. The statements below are a sample of responses to his installations (Pellegrin, 1999).

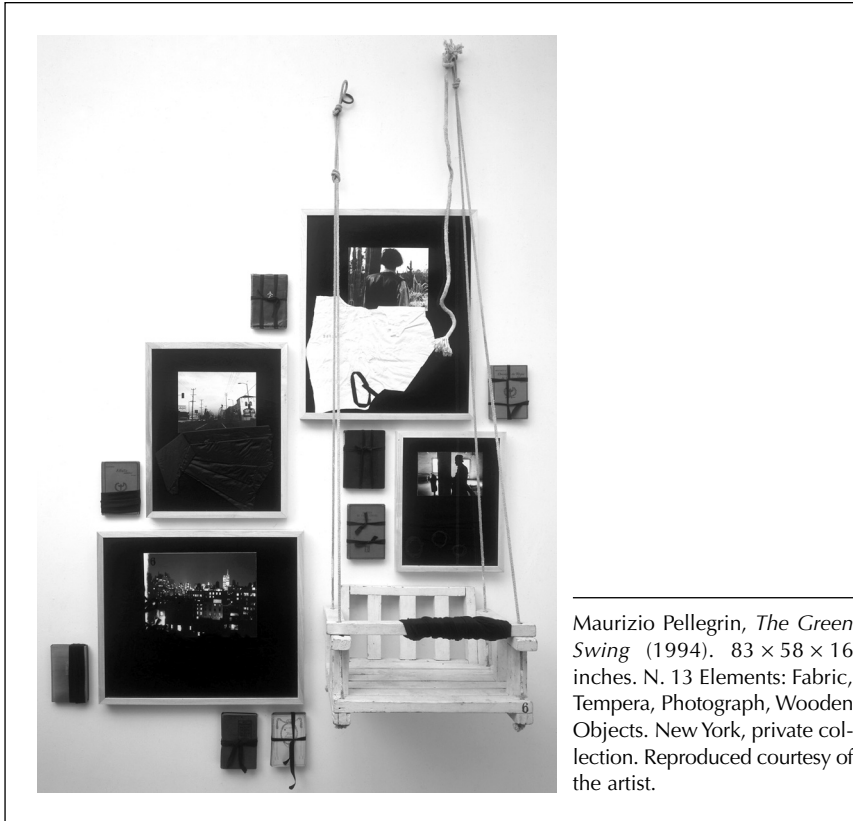
*Essentially, his picture of reality is decoupled from the clarity of structure that is one of the chief virtues of language. The fragmented nature of Pellegrin's carefully staged compositions echoes the frustratingly fragmentary nature of contemporary consciousness, where discrete experiences and events seem to coexist in a close but stubbornly detached proximity that makes any coherent overview difficult. In this sense, the artist's private cosmology is a solution that allows him to combine many elements into an identity that becomes a multiplicity of one.* Terrie Sultan, Curator, 1992.

*The objects which make up Pellegrin's work are always displayed in confrontation to contradictory images. This accentuates the development and transformation of the original meaning of each object. It does not imply that the meaning of things changes, but rather, that Pellegrin stretches the horizon beyond its earlier limits. The artist's constant reference to Venice, a place where he grew up surrounded by artistic masterpieces, becomes a familiar, common image. He places the spectator at the crossroads of perception: history and art on the one hand, and the object's individual history on the other, in combination with how this object conditions the art in its presence.* Francesco Bonami, Director, 2003 Venice Biennale, 1994.

*Maurizio Pellegrin's work focuses on new methods of communication. Each object in his installations has its own accent and dialect. On the wall, he mounts rigorously selected series of similar objects—leather belts, rubber stamps, balls, coils of rope—in combination with other items totally unrelated in terms of style, material and size . . . Pellegrin uses a number of methods to disrupt the simple reading of his poetic themes. A blindfold is a device used to mask the viewer, but Maurizio Pellegrin blindfolds his artworks instead. He wraps his found objects in black cloth to alter their contours and "also to contain their energy."* Jonathan Turner, Curator, 1994.

*What is that swordfish doing in a typical Venetian courtyard? Where do those Chinese chopsticks come from? Are those figures on the floor really African totems? Our few indisputable, Cartesian certainties, which regard the material world, made of familiar objects and landscapes, suddenly vanish, leaving behind only doubt, disorientation, puzzlement. Art is not anymore an element of comforting illumination, but of an ironic bewilderment which leave us defeated, inanimate.* Diogo Mainardi, Writer, 1999, pp. 16–17.

*Pellegrin, on the concrete level of making art, does not try to reconstruct a context, as a historian would do, but he constructs its form starting from the materials of memory. What come out is a score, not an execution; to do this belongs to the viewers, each one with his own individuality. In fact, the elements of the artist's composition appear like signs within the warp of staves: though they are graphically isolated, they interweave tensional relationships among one another thanks to their connotative energy inherent to each of them.* Igino Schraffl, Linguist, 1999, p. 21.



Maurizio Pellegrin, *The Green Swing* (1994). 83 × 58 × 16 inches. N. 13 Elements: Fabric, Tempera, Photograph, Wooden Objects. New York, private collection. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

## Thesis and Exegesis

So what do practice-based doctoral research projects look like? Part of the discussion about their structure and format revolves around the changing place of theory in higher education. Rather than occupy the high ground in a theory-driven enterprise, philosophers of practice have in recent decades moved amid the empirical underbrush to reinvigorate the nexus between theory and practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; May, 2002). Typologies of research indicate that the approaches tend to be either practice-centered, culture-based, or more formal kinds of research that have links to established discipline methods in areas of art history and theory, or in related areas of science and technology (Douglas, 2000). Within this range it is the various ways that art making is interpreted that is the most contentious, as the effort to align art practice with more codified research methods mentioned in the discussion of equivalency indicates.

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Old claims about where visual arts knowledge resides is at the heart of these concerns. Part of this translates to questions about how practice-based research might be conceptualized as a dissertation argument, and where this theorizing might be located: within the realm of the artwork produced, within a contextual form such as a related “exegesis,” or in some combination of the two (MacLeod, 2000). The formal designation of an exegesis as a required research component has raised the ire and support of many. For some, an explanatory exegesis is seen as redundant because it fails to acknowledge that art making can *be* research because it maintains a distinction between academic research and visual arts practice. For others, the inclusion of an exegesis that contextualizes the research is necessary because it acknowledges that visual arts theorizing is a diverse practice that can be articulated in many visual and verbal forms (Candlin, 2000; Webb, 2000). Nancy de Freitas (2002) argues that this form of “active documentation” helps to critique, confirm, and reconfigure theoretical positions and research directions, yet “in a practice-based research project it should not be seen as the research itself, but the method through which ideas can be developed” (p. 4). An example of institutional concerns and a flexible response to the issue of the “written component” of practice-based research is described in the following extract from the Green (2001) report on Research Training in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design.

It was broadly agreed that the written element should be more than a factual report, that it should define some critical and intellectual perspective and that it should not merely “justify” the practice. This debate on the purpose of the written component linked closely to that on contextualization. The group agreed that a definition of the research or creative context was a necessary aspect of the degree. Here, though, the group offered a range of interpretations. (pp. 16–17)

This review of practice-based research highlights current issues and debates among international theorists and practitioners seeking to reinstate the “artist-theorist” as a critical figure in higher education research. The circumstances surrounding institutional change and the potential to develop viable and visionary research practices are at hand. Grounding visual arts research within the practice of art making offers the possibility of advancing understanding of how research in the arts and the human sciences can be conceptualized. But pathways remain to be sketched in greater detail.

## THEORIZING ART PRACTICE ● AS TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH

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As we have seen, theorizing visual arts practice embraces a diversity of positions and perspectives. However, to propose a viable way to conceptualize art practice as research requires the construction of a robust and defensible framework for considering the relationship between the theories and practices that inform how art is made, and how it can be studied and taught. Such a structure would be expected to cater to different theories of inquiry and practices of visual arts in order to accommodate the range of content interests. A broad set of outlines would also serve as a reference for theory construction that is part of the research process as experiences, observations, and reflexive understandings are analyzed and interpreted. Consequently there are several good reasons for constructing a framework for theorizing visual arts practice that describes this interdependency of interests, issues, and approaches.

- First, the identification of a range of theories and practices underscores the notion that the visual arts is an eclectic and hybrid discipline that is firmly centered on art making, and also involves the constituent practices of art writing.
- Second, a flexible framework that can be adapted to suit different purposes, emphases, and scales, yet retain a dynamic relationship between the parts and the whole, will guard against the tendency to codify visual arts research practices.
- Third, such a framework serves as a forum that helps position debates in the field and related areas that inform visual arts research practices.
- Fourth, as new visual arts research is undertaken, it can be located and critiqued within dimensions of theory and domains of inquiry so as to ascertain how practice informs theory and theory informs practice.
- Fifth, as new research strategies emerge in other areas such as the use of visual methods, transdisciplinary projects, and computer-assisted research technologies, they can be assessed in relation to research practices in the visual arts.

Finally, a framework for theorizing offers the possibility that visual arts practice can be readily translated into other forms of research language if the purpose demands it. In this way the research culture remains grounded in the theories and practices of the visual arts, yet the outcomes can be communicated across disciplines.

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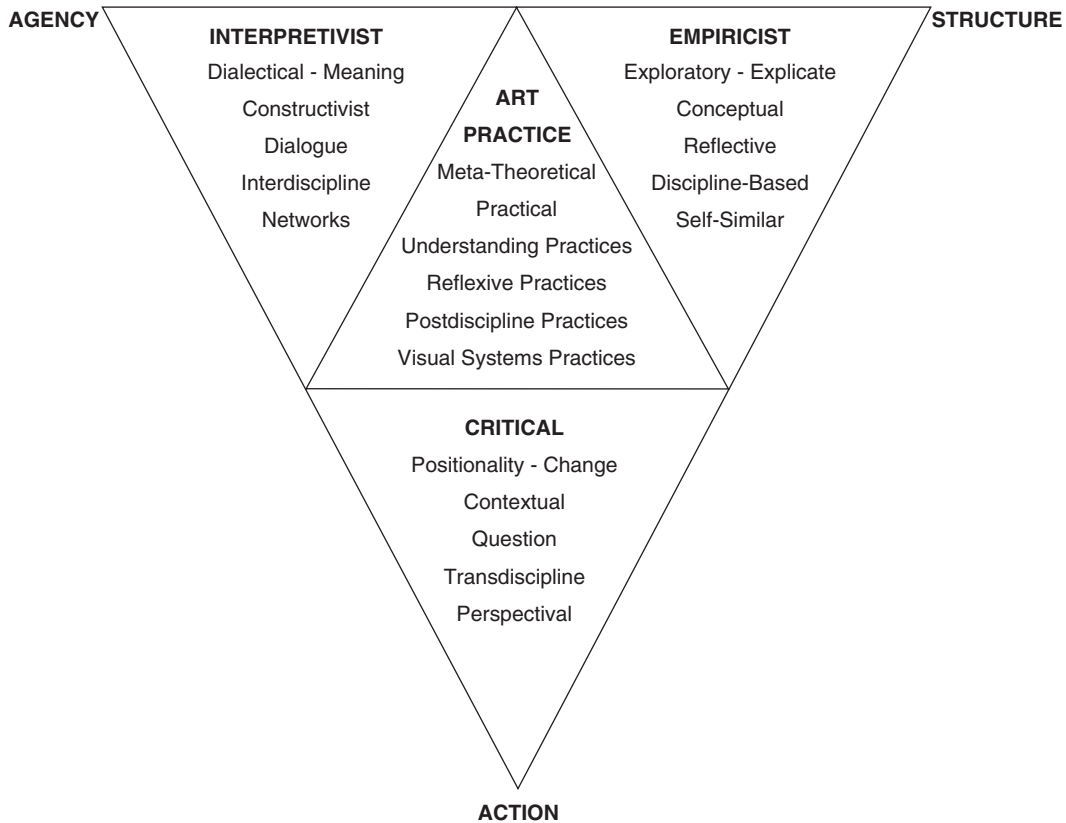
## A Visual Framework

Figure 3.1 shows the theoretical framework for arguing that art practice is a form of research. I describe its visual and conceptual features here and explore more detailed interpretations in later chapters as the focus changes to visual knowing and strategies of practice. It is important at this point, however, to emphasize that this conception of visual arts research should be read in an analogical way, as there is no intention to try and prescribe any theory, model, or method. On the contrary, the position argued in this chapter is that the quest for theory as it is currently understood in research can restrict rather than release the potential for carrying out inquiry that is not only timely and well grounded, but also innovative in purpose and design. The intent, then, is to offer a set of heuristic devices in visual and verbal form that present ideas about research. This comes from a critical analysis of visual arts research practices and related areas in the social sciences and humanities, as well as information drawn from research projects in which I have participated.

A further caveat is also relevant. There is a need to be cautious about describing any analytical framework that brings together related elements for the purpose of examining the relationship between theory and practice. Any systematic structure has the potential to usher in a new orthodoxy as preferred interests and methods function to normalize practices. To this end the boxed boundaries shown in the diagrams are presented in the spirit of bridges rather than barriers. Rather than borders and boundaries, the edges in the diagrams should be seen to more closely resemble the “folds” of postmodernism as described by Stronach and MacLure (1997) in Chapter 2. What is difficult to portray is the idea that although conceptual borders help to define areas of interest, they are permeable barriers that allow ideas to flow back and forth. This flexible condition is especially relevant to perceiving Figure 3.1, Framework of Visual Arts Research, as the components are shown neatly nested in a set of relationships. This association is also shown from a different perspective in Figure 3.4, Transformative Visual Arts Research: A Braided Relationship, a side elevation, with an exploded sectional view shown in Figure 3.5, Braided Framework (Expanded View). It needs to be remembered, however, that the forms shown in Figure 3.1 can be viewed as components that are bound together as a braided set of connected strands, or teased apart as separate threads.

Figure 3.1 shows four interconnected areas of visual arts inquiry. The center strand is *Art Practice*, which is the site where research problems, issues, and contexts originate. This placement is not meant to be self-serving. Rather, it captures the reality that the visual arts are grounded in the studio experience, yet practitioners move eclectically across boundaries in their intellectual and imaginative quests. Although this is the core from which research is undertaken, when seen in relation to the surrounding areas, different





**Figure 3.1** Framework of Visual Arts Research

perspectives and practices may emerge as inquiry twists into new positions and turns toward different sources. The border areas labeled *Empiricist*, *Interpretivist*, and *Critical*, are *domains of inquiry* and describe different research traditions and methods. These paradigms are well documented in the research methods literature (Alvesson & Sköldbberg; 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; May, 2002). The empiricist, interpretivist, and critical perspectives owe a debt to Jürgen Habermas (1971). He expressed his pragmatic interest in arguing that inquiry is socially grounded and drew attention to the need to broaden the scope of knowledge structures to include technical, contextual, and critical understanding. Raymond Morrow (1994) paraphrases Habermas's three-tier knowledge schema as follows:

We seek to know in order to control social and natural realities (the empirical-analytic interest), to qualitatively interpret and understand such realities (the hermeneutic-historical interest), and to transform

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our individual and collective consciousness of reality in order to maximize the human potential for freedom and equality (the critical-emancipatory interest). (p. 146)

In Chapter 2, I discussed the mixed heritage of empiricism as a paradigm and its pervasive impact in regimes of research in the social and human sciences. Following Morrow (1994, p. 32), I make a distinction between “empiricist” and “empirical” in that the latter term is often mistakenly used to describe quantitative research only, as if areas of qualitative research are somehow not involved in empirical discovery and verification. Although best represented in quantitative systems of analysis, the rapid growth of qualitative offshoots that open up sense-based strategies to practical reasoning give a sense of the methodological utility of empiricism. So I use *empiricist* to reflect a general focus on research that is mostly data-driven, where evidence is derived from experience of social reality and is collected in many forms and analyzed using a range of related methods and techniques.<sup>11</sup>

Another border strand is *Interpretivist*. In Chapter 2, I discussed some research conceptions that persist where perspectives and practices are seen in dualistic terms—objective and subjective realities being a case in point—and I want to restate my rejection of this binary thinking. My use of interpretivist is within the hermeneutic<sup>12</sup> tradition of Habermas (1971) and Paul Ricoeur (1981), and the constructivist perspective of Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1998) who fashion a form of inquiry that helps understand the uniquely human process of making meaning. Here the central role is experience as it is lived, felt, reconstructed, reinterpreted, and understood. Consequently, meanings are made rather than found as human knowing is transacted, mediated, and constructed in social contexts. These views indicate that research practice itself is a site for creating and constructing interpretations as meaning is made during the inquiry process.

From Ricoeur’s notion of textual interpretation comes the idea that when a written text is read it takes on a level of autonomy and “what the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author means” (p. 139). This serves the visual arts well as it opens up the interpretive space among the artist, artwork, and the setting as relevant interests and perspectives may reveal multiple methods and meanings that are enlivened by exposure to interpretive communities of art writers and theorists. As Arthur Danto (1981) notes, “in art, every new interpretation is a Copernican revolution, in the sense that each interpretation constitutes a new work” (p. 125). However, he reminds us, “you can call a painting anything you choose, but you cannot interpret it any way you choose, not if the argument holds that the limits of knowledge are the limits of interpretation” (p. 131). Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) provide an account of the hermeneutic-constructivist notion of understanding referred to in Figure 3.1.

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Understanding constitutes a creative, re-productive act, in which the researcher appropriates the meaning of the object, rather than mechanically mirroring it. The researchers carry around their own frames of reference, and inevitably make their interpretations in accordance with these. This is also the reason why interpretation always possesses only a *relative* autonomy, never an absolute one. (Emphasis in original, p. 68)

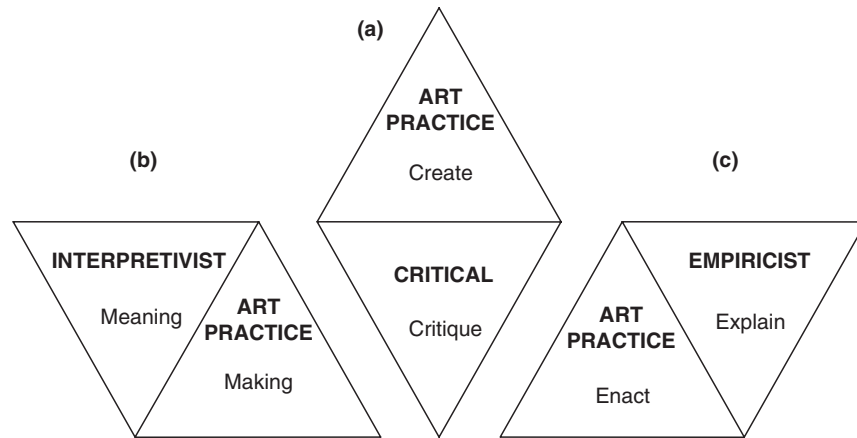
The final boundary component shown in Figure 3.1 is labeled *Critical*. This is a global term that draws its conceptual direction from the discussion of Doubting Doctrines given in Chapter 2. The broad purpose of critical forms of inquiry is the enactment of social change. Under the glare of a critical eye that breaks apart social structures that privilege those in control, the situation of groups marginalized by cultural characteristics such as their race, gender, economics, or ethnic identity is examined. Using methods such as deconstruction, the narratives and perspectives of groups mostly omitted from formally documented historical accounts, or who are denied access and voice within social structures, are revealed and re-presented. Opening up a dialectic aims to enlighten and empower individuals to challenge the circumstances that deny their entry so that “change is facilitated as individuals develop greater insight into the existing state of affairs (the nature and extent of their exploitation) and are stimulated to act on it” (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 215). Critical traditions of inquiry are, of course, a prominent feature of visual arts theory and practice, having been given a considerable boost by the revisionist perspectives of recent decades. In particular, the feminist critiques of art history and the critical analyses of gendered practices in contemporary cultural politics undertaken by artists as well as critics are especially revealing. These offer content direction and methodological cues for an expanded domain for visual arts research that looks to integrate critically engaged visual and verbal languages within the kind of framework shown in Figure 3.1.

## VISUAL ARTS RESEARCH PRACTICES ●

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The regions of Empiricist, Interpretivist, and Critical that surround Art Practice describe research paradigms suitable for adaptation in inquiry in the visual arts. There are also several kinds of practices described in Figure 3.1, and each offers a different perspective for designing and undertaking visual arts research. These elements are *meta-theoretical practical*, *understanding practices*, *reflexive practices*, *postdiscipline practices*, and *visual systems practices*. A brief summary of each of these is given below, along with references to the diagrams.

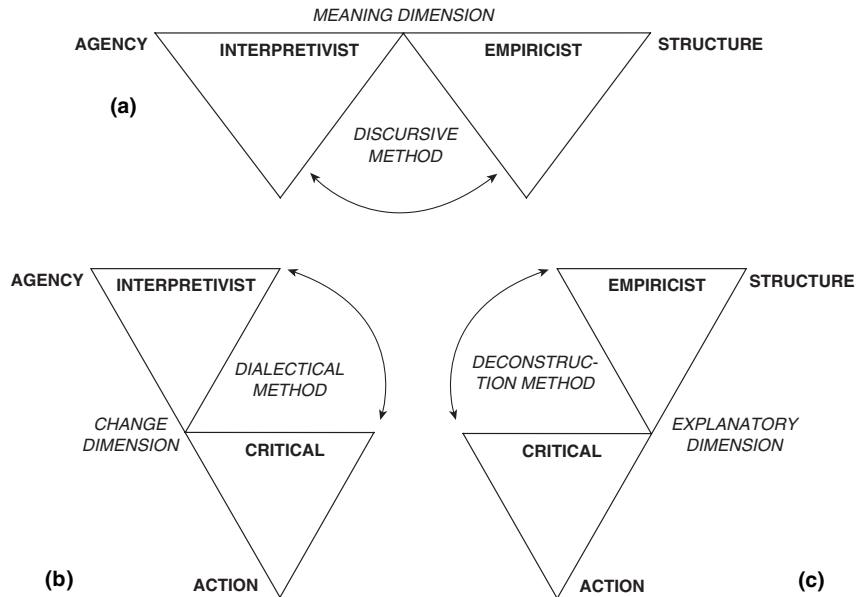
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**Figure 3.2** (a) Dimensions of Theory: Create-Critique  
 (b) Dimensions of Theory: Making-Meaning  
 (c) Dimensions of Theory: Enact-Explain

### Practices in Theory and Inquiry

A feature of the visual framework (see Figure 3.1) is that there are various *dimensions of theory* embedded within the structure that help to further articulate how studio art practice can be integrated as part of the research process. Theories serve as important points of reference in research as they embrace conceptual systems, explanatory structures, methodologies, and practical pursuits that offer insights into issues that shape fields of inquiry. For art practice to be considered research, artist-theorists need to engage directly with theoretical concerns that can be investigated in studio contexts as well as through other mediated forms and methods. Figure 3.2 isolates dimensions of theory that are related areas although each shows a different theoretical focus. When these dimensions are seen in relationship to each other, it is possible to get a sense of how art practice can relate to theory in other disciplines. Three such relationships are shown. Figure 3.2a, Dimensions of Theory: Create-Critique, links Art Practice and Critical, as theoretical interests are investigated through a cycle of processes involving creating and critiquing. Theoretical issues surrounding Art Practice and Interpretivist dimensions can be explored by means of making and meaning processes (see Figure 3.2b, Dimensions of Theory: Making-Meaning). On the other hand, the dimensions of theory that can be analyzed in the relationship between Art Practice and Empiricist (see Figure 3.2c, Dimensions of Theory: Enact-Explain) involve enacting and explaining strategies. The theorizing processes and practices described in Figure 3.2, Dimensions of Theory, are mere guidelines because different dimensions of



**Figure 3.3** (a) Domains of Inquiry: Discursive  
 (b) Domains of Inquiry: Dialectical  
 (c) Domains of Inquiry: Deconstruction

theory can be related in different ways to discipline areas depending on the purpose of an inquiry.

There are also inquiry practices that describe methodological approaches contained in Figure 3.1. These are *domains of inquiry* and the general characteristics of these are outlined in the discussion of the regions titled Empiricist, Interpretivist, and Critical. There are, however, more direct methodological implications that can be drawn out when these are seen in relation to each other. Figure 3.3, Domains of Inquiry, describes approaches to inquiry that are informed by dimensions of theory (shown as a continuum along the base joining the two edge shapes) that bring together two discipline domains by means of a method of inquiry. These wedges of inquiry and content areas are brought to bear on issues of art practice in the process of undertaking research. For instance, Figure 3.3a, Domains of Inquiry: Discursive, investigates the theoretical dimension of *meaning* as the empiricist focus on structure and the interpretivist emphasis on agency are reviewed through *discursive* methods. Similarly, Figure 3.3b, Domains of Inquiry: Dialectical, explores the theoretical interest in *change* as the interpretivist sense of agency, and the critical perspective of action, is analyzed using *dialectical* methods. The third example, Figure 3.3c, Domains of

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Inquiry: Deconstruction, examines explanatory dimensions of theory as the critical element of *action*, and the empiricist focus on *structure* are engaged using methods of *deconstruction*. Taking into account the diversity of content and methods within each of the domains of inquiry, it is easier to understand how identifying research problems in visual arts and exploring them in related disciplines is a matter of clarifying purposes and practices.

Figure 3.1 describes four other kinds of visual arts research practices: *understanding practices*, *reflexive practices*, *postdiscipline practices*, and *visual systems practices*. These practices are additional means by which visual arts practitioners can respond to issues of theory and practice through research.

### Understanding Practices

An understanding practice describes the way visual arts knowledge is framed, encountered, critiqued, and created during the research process as insight is achieved and communicated. There are at least four kinds of understanding practices that can be considered to be part of a theoretical framework for conceptualizing art practice as research. First, visual arts knowledge is *transformative*. This means that knowledge creation in visual arts is recursive and constantly undergoes change as new experiences “talk back” through the process and progress of making art. Second, visual arts knowledge is *constructivist*. This means that knowledge is produced as a consequence of integrating theory and practice and this praxis results in descriptive awareness, explanatory insight, and powerful understanding. Third, visual arts knowledge is *conceptual*. This means that knowledge is grounded in the practice of making that uses knowledge that is available through personal cognitive systems and culturally accessible domains. Fourth, visual arts knowledge is *contextual*. This means that knowledge that is produced by artists enters into communities of users whose interests apply new understandings from different personal, educational, social, and cultural perspectives. These features of visual arts knowledge are by no means definitive, and each aspect owes a legacy to paradigms of theory and practice that, under certain circumstances, may be used as explanatory systems, interpretive frameworks, or imaginative forms.

### Reflexive Practices

Reflexive practice is a kind of research activity that uses different methods to “work against” existing theories and practices and offers the possibility of seeing phenomena in new ways. Four reflexive practices are identified here. First, within the visual arts a *self-reflexive practice* describes an inquiry process

that is directed by personal interest and creative insight, yet is informed by discipline knowledge and research expertise. This requires a transparent understanding of the field, which means that an individual can “see through” existing data, texts, and contexts so as to be open to alternative conceptions and imaginative options. Second, in responding to empirical understandings, a visual arts researcher will *reflect* on information gathered so as to review conceptual strategies used and consider other approaches. This reflexive practice is meta-analytic in focus and reveals the plurality of new views, much in the same way a gallery curator does when reassembling a collection so as to present a different reading of artworks. Third, the plausibility of an interpretation of research findings will be determined in part by the capacity of the reflexive researcher to openly *dialogue* with the information. This means that significance of meanings derived from a process of inquiry is subject to debate and discussion as a dialectic between the researcher and the researched takes place. Fourth, a reflexive practitioner will *question* content and contexts as problematic situations are revealed within particular settings. Issues-driven inquiry of this kind not only identifies problems, but also opens up areas whereby participants become responsive to potential change. This emancipatory interest offers opportunities for those most directly involved in a common cause to enact artistic, social, political, educational, or cultural change. These versions of reflexive practice in visual arts draw on the notion of “reflexive interpretation” proposed by Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbberg (2000).

Reflexivity arises when the different elements or levels are played off against each other. It is in these relations and in the interfaces that reflexivity occurs. This approach is based upon an assumption—and implies—that no element is totalized; that is, they are all taken with a degree of seriousness, but there is no suggestion that any one of them is the bearer of the Right or Most Important Insight. (p. 249)

Figure 3.1 shows the interaction among different reflexive practices that Alvesson and Sköldbberg discuss. The prospect of conducting inquiry that is *self-reflexive*, *reflective*, *dialogic*, and *questioning* so that each informs the other has considerable appeal for visual arts researchers whose practice, in general, is investigative, multilayered, and eclectic.

### Postdiscipline Practices

Postdiscipline practice describes the way visual arts research takes place within and beyond existing discipline boundaries as dimensions of theory are explored and domains of inquiry adapted. The discipline perspectives that

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surround art making reflect ways of engaging with relevant theoretical issues and how appropriate methods might be deployed to meet research interests and needs. They also represent the major inquiry practices and cover the prominent empiricist, interpretivist, and critical traditions. In completing projects within the academic setting, the methods deployed by a studio-based researcher will center on art making and be surrounded by different discipline perspectives and practices. As shown in Figure 3.1, there is a *discipline-based* position that is embedded within the empiricist tradition of research. Within the interpretivist paradigm, it is through an *interdisciplinary* investigation of cultural texts that theories and practices are teased apart and meanings disclosed. Inquiry from the critical perspective, on the other hand, is more of an incursion as existing systems, structures, and practices are interrogated and changes enacted—this approach can be described as *transdisciplinary*.

When planning and undertaking research, artists also make informed choices about imaginative and intellectual approaches, just as they do when they create and respond to art. The process of making insightful decisions when carrying out research in art is not predicated on the assumption that there is a prescribed body of knowledge one learns and then applies. Notwithstanding the benefit of prior knowledge, at the outset there is little in the way of prevailing explanatory systems of knowledge within which new advances might be framed. Various theories of human processes, communal practices, and cultural agencies obviously abound, and these serve as both a grounded set of conditions and an interpretive framework around which inquiry is referenced. This is as basic to creative inquiry as it is to scholarly research. However, making informed choices about creative purposes involves selecting, adapting, and constructing ways of working and ways of seeing, and to do this one has to construct the tools of inquiry from an array of practices. When working from a base in contemporary art, the conceptions of the discipline are uncertain and the informing parameters are open-ended, yet the opportunity for inventive inquiry is at hand. In these circumstances, the artist-theorist is seen to be participating in a postdiscipline practice. There is little reliance on a prescribed content base; rather it is the deployment of a suitable methodological base that supports the questions being asked, which may take the researcher beyond content boundaries.

Although the university setting exerts its own institutional authority, the challenge is how to not only satisfy these demands, but also to maintain a degree of integrity about what constitutes visual arts research. It is in the area of research where these distinctions come into sharp contrast. A research problem will be broad yet also personally relevant. There is also a public consideration as the creation and communication of research outcomes becomes



an educational act that can have an impact on others. Even if an artist eschews public commentary or critical response, the artwork occupies a public space for others to encounter. As the artwork is subject to public discourse, it enters into a set of institutional relations and as such becomes part of an interpretive regime. Once the personal is made public, an exchange that involves others is underway.

### Visual Systems Practices: A Braided Metaphor

To appreciate the comprehensive yet flexible perspectives and methods involved in visual arts research, several approaches have been described. Each approach is identified in relation to its particular emphasis on theory or inquiry and in relation to content conceptions and discipline connections. There is, however, another research practice I want to present that is more holistic and encircles all the areas shown in the diagrams. *Visual systems practices* describe ways of visualizing and conceptualizing, and are presented as a metaphor for thinking about expansive relationships such as theory and practice connections, or concrete concerns such as the representation of visual knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

The overarching metaphor that best captures the idea pursued here—that visual arts research is both a complex and a simple practice—is the image of the “braid” (Sullivan, 2002). This notion draws from several sources, but the principal reference comes from Murray Gell-Mann’s (1994, 1995, 2003) conception of “plectics.”

My name for that subject [simplicity and complexity] is *plectics*, derived from the Greek word *plektós* for “twisted” or “braided,” cognate with *plexus* in Latin *complexus*, originally “braided together,” from which the English word complexity is derived. The word *plektós* is also related, more distantly, to *plex* in Latin *simplex*, originally “once folded,” which gave rise to the English word *simplicity*. The name *plectics* thus reflects the fact that we are dealing with both simplicity and complexity. (Emphasis in original, p. 47)

The idea that contrasts such as simplicity and complexity could exist in useful tandem echoes the organic learning metaphors used by educators such as Froebel in the 19th century who saw great merit in the concept of the “unity of opposites.” Similarly, of course, is the prevalence of the idea of oppositional balance in 20th-century formalist aesthetics. Another indirect reference is the connection the braided metaphor makes with the “field of

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metaphors” surrounding a clothes/body association of fabric and folds that Ian Stronach and Maggie MacLure (1997, pp. 27–30) use to describe limited images of postmodernism. Jean Dubuffet (1988) also uses the notion of a braided relationship to describe cultural responses to art. In his writings he is critical of the cultural elite and antagonistic toward art critics. He thinks art criticism is like strands of unraveling rope where meaning and the work are intertwined or disconnected so the same image can mean different things depending on the perspective of the viewer (or which part of the rope you are holding). Although Dubuffet sees this practice as a liability, it is also possible to see it as a context-dependent account that opens up the possibility of considering many perspectives.

There are four features of visual systems practices that can be connected to the metaphor of the braid: *complex and dynamic systems*, *self-similar structures*, *scale-free networks*, and *perspectivalism*. Viewing visual arts practice as a complex, interactive system that is distributed throughout the various media, languages, situations, and cultural contexts is a plausible account and is at the heart of the arguments in this book. Similarly, if research, like art making, involves asking “big” questions, then inquiries will invariably deal with structures, phenomena, networks of relationships, passions, and perspectives, and all manner of theories and practices that are part of our dynamic learning life. The belief that creative processes are complex associations of skill and agency that offers important insights into human understanding suggests that the research procedures used to investigate this potential need to be equally inventive yet suitably grounded in rigorous practices. But what are complex systems and how might they offer some metaphoric appeal to this quest?

Anyone interested in human engagement in a changing social, cultural, and global world brought into sharper focus by the critical cuts of postmodernism and the pervasive possibilities of technologies can't help but be excited. Amid this uncertainty and creativity there are dilemmas as past convictions come under challenge. For instance, the reductive paradigm that served art and science so well for so long no longer reveals the elusive truths thought to reside within matter and motion. Scientists and artists who are *really* interested in finding order within chaos and who see the micro and macro world around us as the lab or the studio are looking deep into material processes and organizing patterns with surprising outcomes. And these investigations often get carried out in the spaces between disciplines and without the safety net of codified practices. For instance, from the study of complex systems scientists are obtaining robust insights to suggest a need to rethink established canons as they are unable to explain what is now known to be happening. Although an agreement of what “complexity theory” is

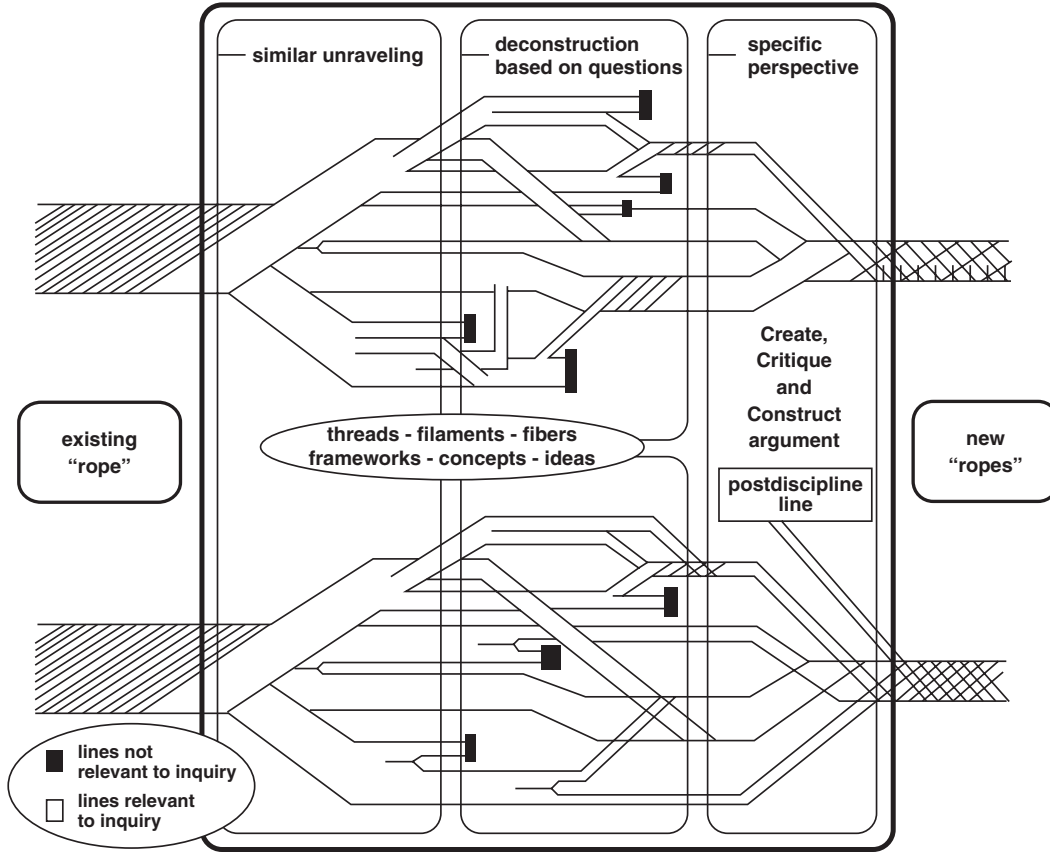


Figure 3.4 Transformative Visual Arts Research: A Braided Relationship

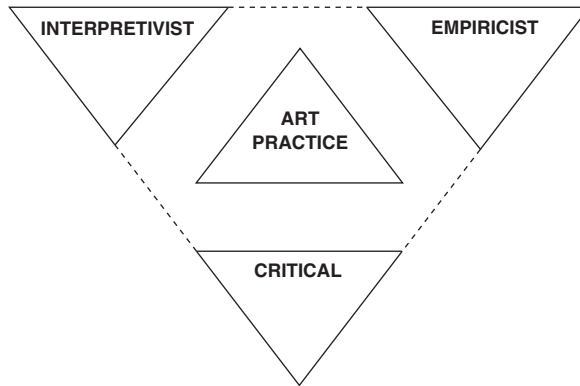


Figure 3.5 Braided Framework (Expanded View)

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remains elusive, Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield (1995) offer a rousing rendition.

Within science, complexity is a watchword for a new way of thinking about the *collective* behavior of many basic but interacting units, be they atoms, molecules, neurons, or bits within a computer. To be more precise, our definition is that *complexity is the study of the behavior of macroscopic collections of such units that are endowed with the potential to evolve in time*. Their interactions lead to coherent collective phenomena, so-called emergent properties that can be described only at higher levels than those of the individual units. In this sense, the whole is more than the sum of its components, just as a van Gogh painting is so much more than a collection of bold brushstrokes. This is as true for a human society as it is for a raging sea or the electrochemical firing patterns of neurons in a human brain. (Emphasis in the original, p. 7)

There are many artists who share the enthusiasm of Coveney and Highfield (Casti & Karlqvist, 2003). If we accept their definition as an exploration of changing relations among humans and their life worlds that is beguiling because small changes can bring unexpected outcomes in unusual ways, then we have a description of artistic inquiry into the human condition. Even more intriguing, however, is the prospect that an examination of these complex patterns and structures might not only reveal insights into the 20th-century theme of the human condition, but the 21st-century prospect of human design.<sup>14</sup>

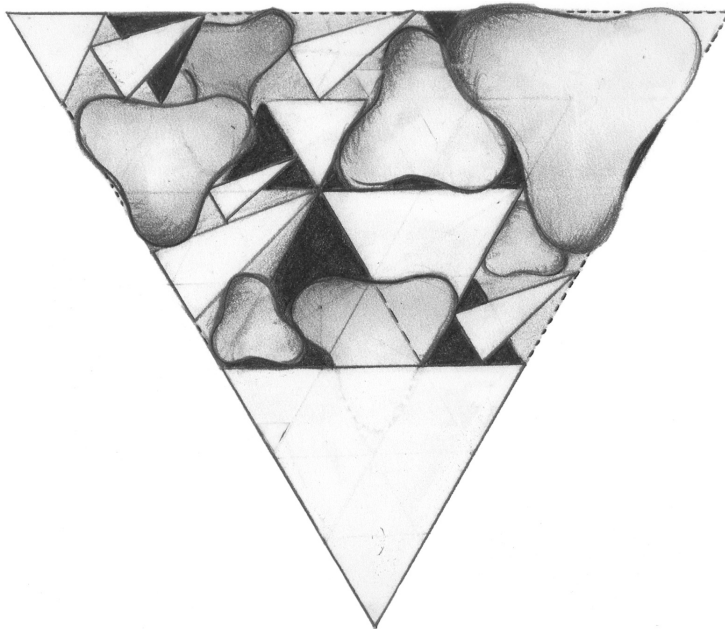
*Self-similarity* is another feature associated with science that has conceptual appeal in the visual arts as new ideas, structures, and relationships are considered as part of the task of defining frameworks for inquiry. Let me explain what I mean by *self-similarity*. Reductionism and Euclidean notions of space are powerful systems that guide inquiry in both the sciences and the arts. The assumption is that a change in scale brings about new kinds of information so that the more things can be reduced to their basic essence, the better the chance of figuring out how they work. But nature and humans resist such simplistic design. It is not so much an evolutionary move from simple to complex that holds promise, but rather it is the capacity to embrace both the simple and the complex at the same time. Self-similarity is a concept that has its origin in Chaos Theory and describes iterative patterns that appear both simple and complex, but generally look irregular. James Gleick (1988) explains:

Self-similarity is symmetry across scale. It implies recursion, pattern inside of pattern . . . self-similarity is an easily recognizable quality. Its

images are everywhere in the culture: in the infinitely deep reflection of a person standing between two mirrors, or in the cartoon notion of a fish eating a smaller fish eating a smaller fish eating a smaller fish. (p. 103)

Therefore if one ponders Chartres Cathedral in France, Antonio Gaudi's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, or Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, it is hard to identify a dominant structural form because the scale of these buildings is found in the smallest shape as well as the largest space. As Gleick would say, these buildings have "no scale" because they have "every scale" whereby "an observer seeing the building from any distance finds some detail that draws the eye [and] the composition changes as one approaches and new elements of the structure come into play" (p. 117). There is a self-similarity that is symmetrical across scale because when viewed close up or from afar, there are details that seem to draw the eye in ways simple shapes cannot. And for me, this similarity exists in all its simplicity and complexity at the micro level in the meeting of minds, and at a macro level in the meeting of cultures.

The concept of self-similarity shown in Figure 3.6 nicely captures the capacity of transformative visual arts to deal with issues and concerns at all



**Figure 3.6** Concept of Self-Similarity

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levels of theory and practice.<sup>15</sup> This characteristic means that visual arts research practice is independent of scale, which suggests it has a similar structure if undertaken in the studio, in the community, or within the culture. The basic triangular unit within this structure exhibits the properties of self-similarity because there is no underlying structure upon which more detailed systems are built. Instead, no matter whether viewed at the micro or macro level, the structure has similar properties and characteristics—it is both simple and complex at the same time. The claim I make here is that knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and values are aspects of human knowing that are independent of scale. Even though their inculcation within social structures conforms in general to hierarchical models, there is merit in thinking about these conditions as nonlinear and nonfoundational, but capable of new, emergent possibilities. As such, opportunities for research can be seen to be both informed by existing knowledge structures, but not to be a slave to them.

The other two visual system practices can be dealt with briefly. These are *perspectivalism* and *scale-free networks*. The first, *perspectivalism*, is readily understood in its various guises that alert us to the position of the “other” and is a widespread concept found in most contemporary domains of inquiry. In feminist studies, for instance, positionality has been instrumental in the critique of essentialism, and helpful in multicultural critiques in locating ideological leanings that “reveals the importance of identifying the positions and frames of reference from which scholars and writers present their data, interpretations, analyses, and instruction” (Banks, 1996, p. 6). Knowing that perspective frames our interpretations is also central to cultural discourse. Whether at the individual level, where our cognitive scripts shape how we understand things, or the mechanisms put in place in society that mediate what we encounter, we constantly confront positions that more than likely privilege certain perspectives. But to be able to critique and thereby control these circumstances is part of perceiving perspectives and being able to move beyond them as limiting structures. This is what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) paraphrase as a cumbersome term they call “perspectivization.”

This involves seeing familiar phenomena as strange, trying to differentiate one’s understanding of empirical fragments (conversations, body motions, artefacts) from the primary impressions acquired from participant observation, trying to see different kinds of pattern, switching between levels of thought, and trying to think in similes (metaphor). (p. 184)

Finally, the visual systems practices of *scale-free networks* describes a way of thinking about how phenomena are related that adds to our understanding of existing structural forms such as hierarchies, taxonomies, matrices,

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distributions, and the like. As conceptual organizers these structures serve as reductive devices that allow us to represent information to assist with easy interpretation. Most methods of representing large-scale phenomena subscribe to a hierarchical principle whereby parts of a system are indexed under broader categories. Yet not all phenomena easily conform to such a structure; therefore it is profitable to consider other forms of representation. As has been revealed from complexity theory (Eve, Horsfall, & Lee, 1997), complex systems do exhibit particular organizing principles yet offer more extensive ways of configuring relationships among things. What is particularly attractive to visual arts researchers is the concept of “scale-free” networks in the sense that complex phenomena, no matter how big or how small, have some elements that have both unique and universal characteristics. This is quite different from normal distributions that reflect random occurrences and probability characteristics that are so much a part of traditional quantitative research. It is not that any radical theoretical insights from complexity theory or chaos theory (which is anything but “chaotic”) will drastically change our conception of all the possible ways of investigating phenomena. However, the prospect that there are alternative conceptions that allow us to see things differently as we further our understanding of relationships and networks of connections, influences, and changes is intriguing for visual arts researchers to ponder.

**CONCLUSION** ●

This chapter argues that understanding is a viable goal of educational research and that explanatory theories of human learning need to be supplemented with transformative theories of individual and social action. It is further contended that these theories can be found within the thoughts, ideas, and actions that result from making art, for it is from a base in studio experience where the capacity to create in order to critique is given form. This posits the view that art practice can be claimed to be a legitimate form of research and that approaches to inquiry can be located within the studio experience. Therefore art practice needs to be seen as a valuable site for raising theoretically profound questions and exploring them using robust research methods. Furthermore, there is an extensive range of modalities and methods that can be used to yield critically grounded and individually transforming outcomes. From this perspective, artistic practice can be seen to comprise a critical coalition of practices that involve an ongoing dialogue between, within, and around the artist, artwork, and context where each has a role to play in the pursuit of understanding. But to appreciate the possibility of art practice