Abstract

Research through Design is a process that has been absorbed into the mainstream but without consideration of what it fully entails. In this Conversation, we go back to the original sense of the term and look at how each of us might interpret and apply it in our work so that the notion of process is foregrounded. For some, this means taking the learning from processes that have not developed as expected. For others, it is about how societal or personal process itself may be designed. How can process itself be captured and presented? How can research whose primary material is inherently immaterial be adequately presented? The challenge is to find ways of presenting a dynamic narrative of research process, which remains accessible after the fact. The snap-shots and freeze-frames of still/video photography and artefacts produced and recorded during the research process are a trail of evidence left behind after the crime. How do we catch the research red-handed? In what ways can the dynamic immaterial research narrative be presented as its own 'artefact' rather than having to rely on second-hand documentation?

Proposed Conversation Title: The Ascendency of Process over Outcome: considering the challenges of how to present the object of research through design

Keywords: research-through-design; practice-based; practice-led; narrative; process

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2. Context of Conversation Topic

The research value of research-through-design (RtD) (Frayling, 1994, p.5) lies primarily in the research process. As Bruce Archer described the nature of RtD[1]: "There are circumstances

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[1] Disambiguation: The term "Research through Design" (abbreviated here as RtD) is used here in this general sense as outlined by Bruce Archer (1995) and Christopher Frayling (1994) among others, to refer to research activity "carried out through the medium of practitioner activity"(Archer, 1995).

where the best or only way to shed light on a proposition, a principle, a material, a process or a function is to attempt to construct something, or to enact something, calculated to explore, embody or test it" (Archer, 1995, p11). Artefacts designed and produced as part of this process can be aesthetically alluring, and have the potential to draw attention away from the research itself (Buwert, 2015). If not carefully presented and contextualised, artefacts produced as part of the 'through-design' of the research process can be uncritically misconstrued as embodying the research output itself.

The starting point for this conversation is the recognition of the ascendancy of process over outcome as research output in RtD practice-as-research: "that 'the doing' (the process) yields more new knowledge and insight than 'the done' (the outcome)" (Lambert & Speed, 2017, p.105). In this sense, RtD is entirely possible in the absence of physical artefacts.

We understand this in several senses. It is possible to research a process through RtD, when no material product is anticipated. And it is possible to design products as part of RtD where the design ceases at the point when sufficient insight is gained. In other words, the artefacts of design research need only be developed to the level of resolution necessitated by the research enquiry. This can mean very finely resolved aesthetics and a sophisticated embodiment, or less finely resolved or sophisticated embodiments. Artefacts arising from failed (or yet to be successful) experiments and processes can also represent a freeze-frame still image of a moment in a process yielding valuable insights. Ian Lambert's early (improvised) attempts at sand-casting using bubble-wrap as waste moulds, were unsuccessful, in that the mould did not complete, but nevertheless yielded valuable insights. Presented with the unbreached remains of the waste mould (fig. 1, left) the sequence of failures form the piecing together of stills in the narrative of making. These incomplete pieces only make sense when placed alongside the remaining waste mould, but the new knowledge and insights that have emerged are not things a researcher could have specifically gone in search of. They have emerged through a reflective process, where the failure has been celebrated rather than grieved, and possibilities have been opened up through risk-taking.

Fig. 1: (left) Incomplete attempt: bubble wrap as a waste mould for sand casting. (Lambert 2015); (right) PKI Research Lab in the Wild: deploying artefacts designed to engender conversations (Wilde & Underwood, 2018)

The capturing of mid-process artefact 'stills' resonates with Barber and Osgerby's *In the Making* exhibition (2014) at the Design Museum, where objects were displayed "interrupted mid-production" (Barber and Osgerby, 2014, p2). Presented as such, the objects yielded new ways of seeing and understanding making processes. The insights found in mid-process stills are not exclusive to material making processes. This same strategy can be applied to design processes that may have no materially embodied outcome, and the same challenges arise. Just as Lambert's failed mould artefact is evidence of process not the research itself, so photographs of engaged participant groups in papers employing participatory methods are only freeze-frame evidence of a moment in process (c.f. Wilde and Underwood, 2018; fig.1, right). How can the participatory process itself be captured and presented? How can research processes whose primary material is inherently immaterial (social engagement, behaviour, culture, futures) be adequately presented? In all these cases, the challenge is to find ways of presenting a dynamic narrative of research process, which remains accessible after the fact.

3. Conversation research question

How do we ensure that the presentation of the research in RtD is encountered as rich narratives of process rather than as individual freeze-frame moments isolated during or at the imagined end of a process? The snap-shots and freeze-frames of still/video photography and artefacts produced and recorded during the research process are a trail of evidence left behind after the crime. How do we catch the research red-handed? In what ways can the dynamic immaterial research narrative be presented as its own 'artefact' rather than having to rely on static freeze-frame moments?

4. Set-up of your session

The conversation will be structured as a roundtable critique of currently existing formats and methods for presenting RtD within academic frameworks. After a brief initial discussion from the conveners introducing the context and suggesting some starting points and challenges from our own experiences, the conversation will be facilitated in break-out sessions: each a round-table of its own, with one convenor facilitating at each table. Participants will be encouraged to speak from their own experience rather than in abstract terms. We will then have a collective conversation that expands, discusses, and thinks about how to leverage the impact of our discussions, asking what do members of the DRS community long for and how might this longing be responded to within existing structures (and can it? do we really need new structures?).

5. Type of space and equipment required

A room with chairs and tables that can be rearranged to facilitate round-table break-out sessions.

6. Dissemination strategy

The dissemination strategy will be to use the Medium.com blogging platform to present a report of the conversation session, as a stimulus to stage a continuing public conversation reaching beyond the conference event itself. Medium.com is an online platform that allows the creation of "publications" in which multiple authors can contribute articles curated around a theme. The conveners will create a Medium.com publication with a core article reporting on the key points raised during the conversation session. All attending conversation delegates will be invited to become authors for the publication, contributing their own perspectives and responses.

7. References

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About the Convenors:

Ian Lambert is Associate Professor of Design at Edinburgh Napier University and has expertise in practice-as-research and improvised making processes. With Chris Speed he was co-chair of the Research Through Design Conference in Edinburgh in 2017.

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Ann Light is Professor of Design and Creative Technology at the University of Sussex. She specializes in the social impact of technology. Her design work concerns innovation in social process, community wellbeing and sustainability, researched using participatory methods.

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