In between art and research: integrating two realms of knowing as a process of inquiry

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Abstract

This paper intends to contribute to the discussion concerning practice-led research by describing the knowledge and understanding accumulated during the author’s own doctoral study. The inquiry proceeds in the form of a hermeneutic circle, in a dialogue between the two practices - art and research.

1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, a lively discussion has developed about the relationship between art and research. In this discussion, the product of making – the artefact created during art or design practice – is conceived to have an important role in the inquiry process. This new approach has recently been internationally debated, developed and applied over the
broad field of art. At the heart of this discussion there is a question about the ways in which art or design practices meet the research practices.

In the case of my own inquiry (Mäkelä 2003), the supporting structure of the whole study is a creation process documented by three exhibitions. The research part of this study can be considered a retrospective review of the work process and the ceramic objects made during that process. It is a forum where contextualization of actions and closer examination of the meanings related to the process of making happen. Thus the thesis functions as a forum for the process of meaning-production, and as an active and innovative event, where the creative process and the artefacts created during it are conceptualized and put into words.

The production of artefacts is the starting point of the study, aiming to bridge artefacts and knowledge acquired through the process of making them to the theoretical discussion. In this study, the domain of the female body is intertwined in the study in several ways. The female body is the theme of the art made during this research process, as it is thematically the main focus of the theoretical discussion used for contextualizing and making sense of these artefacts. And finally, it is also a female artist-researcher who presents herself as the subject of this inquiry.

As this research project exploits two realms of knowing, art and research, these fields will be next structured as part of this inquiry. Together these fields form the circular structure comparable to the hermeneutic circle – which enables a dialogue between art and research. In the second part of the paper these two realms will be integrated via a concrete example by shaping a dialogue between the particular artworks and certain theoretical texts.

2 Bridging Two Realms of Knowing

The research proceeds as a dialogue between ceramic art and feminist research. The arrow in Figure 1 describes both the progress of the process as well as an increase in understanding. The inquiry begins with making. This means hands-on actions with clay and as a product of this process, artefacts arranged in the form of the first exhibition. As
indicated in Figure 1, each artistic work period is followed by a research period. In this case the artistic work periods and research-oriented work periods are repeated three times.

As an artist-researcher I have undertaken to build a bridge between art and research by following certain routes that have entered my own experience as a female artist and as a feminist researcher. Thus the speaker in this study is the artist-researcher who is reviewing her intuitive work process in retrospect. As the inquiry proceeds, the retrospective view will form a 'retroactive approach', which serves to integrate the art practice with such theoretical texts that can reveal particular aspects of the process of making or the subject matter, as confronted via contemplating and interpreting the artefacts produced.

The basic assumption of this approach is that by contemplating the artefacts and naming their central themes, it is possible to spot themes that are meaningful, or in some way revealed as central themes of the study. In this way the artefacts created during the research process can mark the boundaries of the themes to be studied further with the help of the research literature. In addition, the works of art inspire the researcher when writing about these themes. In this inquiry, the art pieces pointed
the researcher towards research literature that, in relation to these pieces, had something relevant to say e.g. about the construction of gender.

The retroactive approach consists of several backward glances. Therefore the knowledge and understanding acquired grows and deepens cumulatively. Consequently, the retroactive approach is formed during the research process, that is, while the thesis is being written. In this way the retroactive approach operates like the hermeneutic circle: knowledge and understanding advance and deepen as the spiral process of interpretation proceeds. (Mäkelä 2006, 78.)

I will next review my own study in more detail and in this way link previously expressed ideas to the concrete research practice. Thus the following section of this article is an example of the retroactive approach in action: how the particular art pieces and certain theoretical texts can be bridged at the textual level. The section will begin with a theoretical review where the meaning of visual images as a part of the postmodern - and subsequently also as part of the postfeminist - discussion has been raised.

3 A Case: Representations in Clay

3.1 The postmodern attitude

At the turn of this century art, aesthetics and culture are considered to form a territory where the postmodern with its oppositional features can truly produce alternative politics (Boyne & Rattansi 1991, 41). According to feminist researchers the origin of art is always political, as the (visual) artist always tends to affect the viewer by controlling gaze and presence. Contemporary art can thus be understood as a micropolitical territory: an area which allows transitional changes at the microlevel. (Rossi 1999, 11.)

I am interested in these transitional territories, which allow seeing and interpreting familiar things from a slightly different perspective than the
usual. When making new pieces, I play a kind of game with a viewer. This game is grounded in cultural codes. The key to my visual language is the already existing cultural female images, which I then reproduce, or recycle. Thus the images bring information about their origin to a new context. By using these borrowed images with my own handprint embodied in them, I make my own interpretation of these female representations.

The postmodern approach to making new images, for example the manner of using loaned images, has emphasized the position of the viewer as an interpreter of an artefact. The meanings of the artefact are not understood to rely only on the intentions of the artist, but are rather to be formed in an endless process of producing meanings. In this process the viewer, as a repeatedly newly-shaped subject, has a central position (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 86-102). When writing as an artist-researcher about my own artefacts, I have exploited this conception. Even if I have made the clay pictures myself, they appear to me as visual constructions with continually changing meanings.

3.2 Postfeminism as a political practice

The basic argumentation of postfeminist research returns to the critical thinking of Michel Foucault (e.g. Foucault 1990), especially to his thoughts about the power relationships in which subjectivity and gender are formed, as well as his ideas concerning possibility for resistance. According to Foucault, sexual and gendered identities are not assigned by the biological or essential nature of femininity or masculinity. To the contrary, they are formed in an endless process via strategic models and discursive practices. Gender is thus understood throughout as representational, and ‘reality’ can be reached only through descriptions and visual representations (de Lauretis 1987). Different gendered representations are on the other hand decidedly temporal, and the historical context defines what kinds of representations are possible to ‘practice’ at a certain time. (Rossi 2002, 111.)

As an artist, I am updating these culturally tied representations. With differently reproduced images I pose a question: What kinds of
representations of femininity are possible to present at this particular moment? Is it possible to reproduce and interpret, in this certain historical context, a familiar representation of femininity in a slightly different way from which we are used?

In the last two decades central postfeminist theorists (e.g. de Lauretis 1987, Butler 1990) have raised the discussion on technologies that produce gender. In the processes where gender is produced, gender is at the same time stabilized and unstabilized. The holes and cracks opened during the process of reproducing gender make the process itself unstable and at the same time a type of process that needs to be reproduced again and again. This process thus offers the opportunity to shake the process itself, as through and via these processes it is possible to avoid and break the processes that stabilize gender. Hence these processes are also a means to put norms which stabilize gender in a state of crisis. (Butler 1993, 10-12.) Judith Butler (1990) has emphasized that the main point is in the manner: how the action of reproduction is done (ibid. 148).

These kinds of reproduction – parodic and redundant representations, estranging imitations and carnival masquerades – have been called strategies for a new aesthetic resistance. The question concerns aesthetic commotion: a spectrum of different visual strategies through which especially female artists have tried to harass and shake the ways of looking, seeing and reproducing. (Sederholm 2002.)

3.3 Aesthetic commotion

Playing with female figures, printing them in clay and bringing them in this way to a new context, I assign myself as an artist in this aesthetic commotion. I am aware that when recycling cultural images, I also participate in their reproduction and recontextualization. In the first exhibition (figure 2) of my study, which will be the focus of this paper from this point onwards, I treated the experience of femininity via loaned images by using postmodern associations. In this exhibition the representations were based on cultural female icons – the images familiar to many of us.
Swedish art historian Yvonne Hirdman (1988) understands 'gender contract' as culturally heritable invisible relations, which slant the relations between men and women and their habits to act (ibid. 54). From a woman's point of view the question is about a certain straitjacket: a previously assigned, unfavourable bind between two individuals. This historical context also embodies the idea of the western woman who, while holding a position of being strongly the object of representation and knowing, has remained invisible, forbidden and valueless as a presenting and knowing subject.

Loaned images transferred to the clay tiles reflect the gender contract, according to which woman has been represented, and on the other hand has been able to be shown in a western culture. When brought to a clay surface, these figures did not accept performing only the role they had been assigned in their original context. Rather, they began a slow struggle to break free of this role. Through this struggle, they questioned the conventional gendered way to deal with subject and object positions. Instead of assuming only the traditional (female) positions to be looked upon, in the exhibition the clay figures also performed themselves as subjects, who played with the gaze.
The loaned images represented the slow transformation by mimicking the postures they had been assigned earlier in the patriarchal order. When needed, these images undressed, obediently closed their mouths and bashfully lowered their gaze. But at the same time, they began a tacit commotion against these postures. Through the craggy and choppy marks embodied in the images during the ceramic working process, the clay women - like Marilyn - revealed about themselves something which is usually kept silent in our culture.

Figure 3. Maarit Mäkelä: *Mirror play* (detail), serigraphy on earthenware, 1996.

### 3.4 Roleplaying Marilyn

This mimic business – reproduction and interpretation via conflict and floating representations - takes place as a subculture of the patriarchal order. The series of clay pictures is appointed the name *Mirror play* (Figure 3) and can be apprehended as a part of this subculture. The black-and-white half-length portrait of Monroe, used as a starting point of the work, represents her as one of the archetypes of femininity: strongly
made-up eyes with half-open lips, blond, carefully frizzled hair and fingers settled on the top of the breast to blanket the half-naked body. In the postcard of the photo (Figure 4), from where I have copied this picture for my works, Marilyn’s straightforward gaze meets the gaze of the spectator. She knows she is the object to be looked at, and has hence taken this particular position in the picture – perhaps to fulfil the norms according to which a (male) spectator wants to see her.

When brought to the ceramic surface - craggy, unglazed and rough earthenware - the sister figures of Marilyn are more complex than the original figure. In addition, when brought to clay, the outlines of Marilyn’s body have been strengthened by rugged, scratchy marks. The marks have been carved as part of the wet ceramic surface. The smooth feminine outlines have thus acquired new lines, which are partly atop the original lines, and partly pushed concretely under the original ones. Marilyn’s faces also transform during the artistic process. Even though serial nature is one of the central features of this work, each of the plates is also meaningful, as they embody different representations of femininity.

![Figure 4. Marilyn Monroe](image)

3.5 Clay pictures as representations of femininity
Teresa de Lauretis (1984) considers experience as a never-ending process during which subjectivity, or self, is constructed. It is not a question of women ‘with experiences’, but rather of femininity constructed by and through experiences. (Ibid. 159) Hence my subjective femininity is formed in the process, which includes my experiences as an artist acting in the fields of contemporary visual art and a researcher, who contextualizes this art. This femininity in the process is implicitly drawn and written on clay tiles during the research process.

According to art historian Griselda Pollock (1988) representation bears the wider meaning of analyzing something or some phenomenon, giving it meaning, and making it understandable in relation to other representations. As a concept, representation emphasizes the meaning-producing nature of saying, presenting, thinking, and knowing. (Ibid. 6) When understood in this way, the ceramic representations of women produced during the research process have a central meaning: not only do these works preserve the female experience but also analyze and comment on it. In this way personal experience has been woven in as an integral part of this study and as such, forms a central source of the process of producing knowledge.

4 Conclusions

In this paper I have introduced a case where series of three exhibitions structures the research process. This structure supports the separate work periods in the fields of art and research and binds them to the study. This circularly proceeding whole that consists of wider work processes is comparable to a hermeneutic circle. The circular form unfolds the progress of the research process and thus points at the steps of this particular inquiry. It also creates a dialogue between two fields - art and research.

The aim of this paper has been to outline the bases of the retroactive approach i.e. an act of interpretation, where the artist-researcher subsequently reviews her artistic work process and the artefacts created during the process. This includes the comprehension of a competent
practitioner, who exhibits a kind of knowing-in-practice, which is mostly tacit. However, starting with actual performance, it is possible to construct and test these kinds of models of knowing (Schön 1995, viii). In this particular review the artist-researcher relies on tacit knowledge when preparing for three exhibitions. Hence in this study tacit knowledge is pinned above all to the steps of the research where making takes place.

The core idea behind the retroactive approach is that the subsequent review of the process of (art) making and artefacts created during this process helps to create a connection between art and research practices. Thus the knowledge and understanding seem to be available by interpreting artefacts and/or the processes of creating them.
References


and Design, 60-85.


