The Meaning of Art: discourse and theory in contemporary visual art practice

Research Description

This research explored the discourse and theory in contemporary visual art over the past twenty years. It considered the ways in which a range of theoretical approaches, for example, Marxism, feminism, psychodynamic theory, have contextualised and formed the discourses surrounding contemporary art. The aim of the research was to understand the principles and ideas that underpin contemporary art, and why it is not based on the techniques and body of knowledge that underpin traditional visual art. Research focused on the predominance of recent conceptualisations over previous models of thinking about visual aspects of artworks.

Research began with the content analysis of published sources, including contemporary art journals and interviews with a number of eminent contemporary artists. The next stage involved interviews with a range of interested professionals: eminent contemporary artists, art historians, journal editors, and gallery owners. The interviews were informal and unstructured – resembling a conversation rather than a formal interview. This mode of interview was dictated to some extent by the nature of the investigation, but also by the experience and attitudes of the artists, who were used to giving interviews to journals and tended to adopt a conversational style. As a result of this style of interviewing, the researcher found that interviewees attempted to involve her in their personal, often heated, discourses by using her as an intermediary. They also at times shared confidential, controversial material with her.

Research findings suggested a shared understanding of an appreciation of contemporary art based on things left unsaid, and the researcher concluded that the contemporary art world functioned on an unspoken agreement to play the game according to these unspoken conventions.
The Meaning of Art

Ethical issues involved

Confidentiality
The interviewees shared information that was often controversial. At times they wished this information to be passed on to other participants – a strategy adopted as part of the unspoken conventions described.

Potential harm to the reputation of the participants or third parties
Disclosing some of the material gathered during the interviews could perhaps be harmful to the reputation of those discussed or to the interviewees themselves.

Neutrality and maintaining the role of researcher
Participants often attempted to involve the researcher in their discourse.

Responding to the ethical issues

The names of all respondents, and any other professionals included in the discourse, were removed prior to publication.

Ethical questions for reflection

Research participants often attempt to draw researchers into a more personal relationship than that of researcher and respondent. In this study the researcher was at times used as an intermediary between respondents’ opposing views. This took two forms: firstly, participants attempted to use her as an intermediary in their arguments, and secondly, they shared confidential information, which cast other participants in a bad light.

- How far should a researcher be drawn into the personal discourse of participants?
- In this kind of situation, is it possible / desirable for a researcher to remain objective?
- Should a researcher respect the confidentiality of information that the respondents would in any case make public?
- In research with prominent interviewees, who may be identified from their position on particular issues, how possible/desirable is anonymity in the final thesis or publication.