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Looking for the real in visual art research

Abstract:

In its brief academic history, practice-led research in the visual arts has been considered by many as highly problematic, fraught with unanswered questions and lacking clear concepts, criteria and models. In current literature on this new research area, the subject's desire is defined as a crucial element in art practice yet at the same time it is considered problematic and conceptually obscure and, as a consequence, it is under-theorised in visual arts practice-led research. This article positions these problems and limits as productive lines of inquiry which may be advanced by redirecting toward the discipline of visual arts certain questions asked by Jacques Lacan of psychoanalysis: Can the question of the subject's desire be left outside the limits of our field? What would art research have to be in order to take the problem of the subject and of desire into account? To address these questions, the discussion centres on Lacan's theoretical developments to Freud's theory of fantasy and, in the concluding section, proposes a practice-oriented approach in which the production of knowledge in art research would be conducted in a transdisciplinary alliance with psychoanalysis.

Biographical note:

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Visual arts – Practice-led research – Freud – Lacan – Psychoanalysis – Subjectivity – Desire – Fantasy

1. Holes in the field

In its brief academic history, practice-led research in the visual arts has been considered by many as highly problematic, fraught with unanswered fundamental questions and lacking clear models and concepts, and even worse there has been little success in addressing these problems since its inception in the 1980s.¹ Questions debated concern whether an art practice and its productions are forms of knowledge, and if so, what the nature of the knowledge produced might be, and how such knowledge might be transmitted (Borgdorff 2006; Candlin 2000; Scrivener 2002). While epistemological questions might seem to dominate the dialogues, there are indications of an interconnected uncertainty around the subjectivity of the artist in the research process. In the frameworks proposed for research in the visual arts, some of which I will discuss next, the problem of knowledge implies the question of the subject, and specifically the question of the subject's desire.

The epistemological problems in art research are a focus of Graeme Sullivan's *Art practice as research* (2005); for Sullivan the inclusion of visual art practices in the university provides a vital opportunity for those in the discipline to consider how visual arts might contribute to knowledge (82-3). Notwithstanding the many debates since the 1970s on the issue, in Sullivan's view this opportunity has been missed, and instead the fundamental questions have reached no resolution or conceptual clarity (xiv). To Sullivan, such questions are crucial to the formulation of research in the visual arts, and in general concern how the theory and practice of visual arts might function as an academic discipline, and how to conceptualise a studio inquiry as research according to principles of validity, objectivity and the production of new knowledge (82). Questions about the knowledge involved in artistic thinking should, according to this approach, include the issue of 'how mental images are given creative form', but this is a process that 'remains obscure' in current art research (124). This conclusion is relevant for two reasons: the knowledge product of art research cannot be considered separate from the researcher's psychic processes; and the currently obscure relationship between artistic production and subjectivity might lead to one of the unique contributions to be made by art research.

Unanswered questions and untheorized processes appear to be insistent features of the writing on research in the visual arts. Christopher Frayling, for example, is well positioned to be able to assess the progress and current state of the field, since his 1993 essay 'Research in art and design' laid the conceptual groundwork for many of the later debates on how visual art practices can be conceptualised as research. However, Frayling's assessment of art research in 2006 was that 'there are still many confusions surrounding the idea of art as research', such as: the problem of distinguishing between research and practice in the visual arts, the question of whether research should afford a communicable knowledge, and which established research models might be applicable to the visual arts (2006: xiii). Other writers agree with Frayling on the lack of progress in addressing and understanding these issues, referring also to their uncertainty and frustration with the prevailing questions and continued debates (Mottram 2009: 10; Biggs & Büchler 2008: 7). In this context art research can be characterised by both its questions and problems, and by an

excess of uncertainty generating further debates, questions and theories, with the aim of filling gaps in the body of knowledge.

This focus in art research on the problematic status of knowledge can be found in a recent publication, *The Routledge companion to research in the arts* (Biggs & Karlsson 2010), where the foreword confirms the continuance of debates particularly on the question of ‘whether epistemological potential is inherent in the production and reception of art’ (Schwarz 2010: xxvii). Likewise the editors attribute this lack of progress in part to the failure of previous scholarship to provide theoretical certainty – as in, ‘a firmer platform’ and ‘specific assertions’ – and therefore to provide the ‘tools that could improve rigour and quality’ (Biggs & Karlsson 2010: xiv). Is there any connection between the difficulty in establishing the validity of research in visual arts and the unresolved questions concerning the subjectivity of the artist-researcher?

One approach to these two areas has been to delimit as much as possible the more problematic question of subjectivity while giving consideration mainly to the production of knowledge in the research. This model can be exemplified by a set of generic and discipline-specific criteria for academic research in the visual arts, proposed by Biggs and Büchler (2008).² Although the criteria have not yet been able to resolve the disagreements and conceptual quandaries, they can most obviously be used in realizing Biggs and Karlsson’s later appeal in 2010 for ‘specific assertions about what this phenomenon [of arts-based research] was, or was not, so that subsequent scholars would have something definite to agree with or to criticize’ (Biggs & Karlsson 2010: xiv). Three of the four discipline-specific criteria are closely related; together they concern the justification of the non-linguistic aspects of the practice through the use of text, and that consideration be given to the role of form (or medium) and rhetoric for the efficient and effective transmission of the research (Biggs & Büchler 2008: 13-5). These discipline-specific criteria are in effect variations of the same problem: how to communicate the knowledge product of the research in a textual form for its dissemination and reproduction.

In contrast to these language-based criteria, the fourth criterion concerning the function of experience is given less explanation and perhaps for this reason is also presented as less valid or at best of ambiguous validity. As Biggs and Büchler observe, even though experience could be ‘the most important contribution of the object’ of art practice, it is also ‘a problematic component in research because ... it relates to the individual’s personal experience’ (2008: 15). Their ambivalence becomes more apparent when the writers then explain that the motivation of creative practice may derive from subjective experience; however, they ‘do not recommend that this subjective experience be maintained as the actual focus of the research activity’ (16). In fact, it is the indefinable nature of subjective experience which makes it an obstacle to including it as a valid criterion for art research because, according to the authors, experiential content cannot be clearly defined or communicated. Moreover they propose that if subjective experience is ‘taken as an indicator of the presence of something else that is effectively of interest, it is still unclear what that something else is’ (16). Biggs and Büchler allude here to processes similar to those identified by Sullivan with regard to a lack of knowledge about ‘how mental images are given creative form’ by the artist who, in the majority of cases, has

the role of researcher in art research. Biggs and Büchler's model for discipline-specific criteria tells us that the objects of art research may be evaluated as research, but only when there is accompanying additional textual exposition, whereas the subjectivity of the researcher jeopardises the validity and rigour of the research product. If the researcher's subjectivity is one of the most problematic and least understood aspects of art research, how can we conceptualize the possible significance of this obscure 'something else'?

Rather than excluding the question of the subject from that of the knowledge produced in art research, James Elkins maintains that 'what is at stake is no longer how the dissertation might contribute to the understanding of the subject [that is, the research topic], but how the dissertation might illuminate an interest the student has developed' (2005: 18). Elkins however acknowledges the difficulty of this model: for researchers to articulate and investigate their own interests or desires in relation to their practice, they need to 'know exactly why they want to see a given image or master a given body of knowledge' (18). Unlike Biggs and Büchler, Elkins proposes that research in the visual arts should develop models which *start* with the subjectivity of the artist-researcher, but in accordance with those authors he acknowledges the problematic nature of this approach with respect to the difficulty for artist-researchers to both have and produce knowledge about their own relationship to their practice. In each model where the researcher's subjectivity is located either at the periphery or as a significant trajectory of the research, the place of the subject in the artistic practice remains obscure. Elkins' model does indeed produce a firmer platform and specific assertions with which to address the obscure function of experience in art research. That is, on the basis of Elkins' proposal we can ask how art research would be conceptualized as an investigation into why and how certain images, objects, processes and systems of knowledge are preferred over others. How could the researcher have some knowledge about the desires which guide and determine her artistic practice?

2. Subject of the signifier and subject of the real

In the endeavour to define and validate art research and its contribution to knowledge, the proposed criteria and models come up against certain limits related to the subject's desire; it is defined as a crucial element in art practice and at the same time as problematic, conceptually obscure and under-theorised in the field. These problems and limits are potential lines of inquiry which may be advanced by psychoanalysis and its notion of the subject of desire. Psychoanalysis has had a significant influence on how subjectivity and desire are conceptualised in disciplines in the creative arts, humanities and social sciences, and indeed much of the popularity of applied psychoanalysis can be attributed to its revival, via Jacques Lacan, in postmodernism and poststructuralism. Moreover the vibrancy of applied psychoanalysis has made it possible in more recent years to assess its interdisciplinary currency and major contributions. For my purposes here, such evaluations from cultural theory offer the initial coordinates with which to formulate

a conception of subjectivity for art research that is both constructed by and yet also exceeds discourse and orders of representation.

The core area I will explore in this discussion will be the psychoanalytic fantasy through which, according to Freud, the entire ‘manifest personality’ of the subject finds its shape, and which for Lacan, ‘is the means by which the subject maintains himself at the level of his vanishing desire’ (Freud 1914: 151; Lacan 2006 [1958]: 532). Freud’s early theory of the interpretation of the symbolic formations of unconscious desire, which has been hugely influential in art since its inception, was in his later work reconceived in terms of fantasy as a structure which determines the subject and his symptoms. Thus, starting from his 1914 essay ‘Remembering, repeating and working-through’, Freud’s theory and therapeutic technique shift in emphasis from the interpretation of symptoms to the construction of the fantasy. Lacan made important developments to Freud’s initial discoveries, emphasising the logic of fantasy as an imaginary solution to a lack in the symbolic order. That is, fantasy implies the real – as I will discuss later – in its response to an experience which cannot be elaborated in signifiers, a dimension for which words are always inadequate. An artifice or structure which screens the real, fantasy contains a remainder of the real, the Lacanian *objet a* as the cause of desire, an affective tie which marks the limits of discourse and ‘by which the subject maintains himself at the level of his vanishing desire’ (Lacan 2006 [1958]: 532). The Freudo-Lacanian theory of the subject might well address Elkins’ challenging condition for the research to take into account the art researcher’s position and desire in relation to the research. In addition, this theory may shed light on certain factors that are significant to the function of subjective experience in artistic practice, thus offering some definite claims about this important but problematic aspect of visual art research.

Earlier I identified questions about, and problems with, the definition and validity of art research: does it, for example, produce a communicable knowledge and if so, what is the nature of that knowledge? And in relation to this knowledge product, what is the position of the researcher? Cultural theory has addressed such problems in the general context of the individual subject’s formation by and within social structures and discourses, the achievements and future directions of which have been evaluated by Charles Shepherdson. Referring to the role of psychoanalysis in theories of subjectivity, Shepherdson identifies ‘one of the important problems in contemporary intellectual life’: the question of whether everything is ‘a “discursive construction,” a product of the symbolic order; if not, how can we speak of an “outside” without returning to a naïve realism?’ (1996: 3). There have evolved three theoretical positions towards this problem, which provide different responses to how we conceive of the construction of subjectivity in social structures:

in the first, we find an emphasis on the ‘symbolic order,’ and certain theories of ‘social construction’; in the second, we find a reaction against ‘post-modernism,’ and a return to ‘positive’ and ‘empirical’ investigation, together with a return to biological, genetic, and endocrinological accounts of consciousness, behavior, and sexuality; in the third area, we find an effort to think *through* the ‘linguistic turn’ – not to react against the formative power of representation, but rather to think its *limit*. (Shepherdson 1996, 4)

With the concept of the real, Lacan's work conceives of the limit to the discursive construction of subjectivity and the social. The real, according to Shepherdson, has been recognised as making a 'genuine contribution' to contemporary theory 'if it [theory] is to pass beyond certain inadequate formulations of "cultural construction"' (1996: 53). As cultural theorists Butler and Žižek have agreed, poststructuralism 'must provide a more adequate account of what remains "outside" discourse, what is "foreclosed" from the symbolic order – since "what is refused or repudiated in the formation of the subject continues to determine that subject"' (Butler referring to Žižek, quoted in Shepherdson 1996: 54). Copjec makes a similar assessment with regard to the dominance of particular writings by Foucault which have, she argues, motivated 'the unfortunate turning away from the notion ... of a surplus existence that cannot be caught up in the positivity of the social' (1994: 4). Lacanian psychoanalysis too has its misinterpretations, according to which, for example, it defines subjectivity as a construct solely of the symbolic order. The impact of the concept of the real in cultural theory, fostered by writers such as Shepherdson, has however largely dispelled this linguistically centred misreading.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, subjectivity has a real and not only a symbolic dimension, and thus the subject's cause of desire refers to a remainder of the real, as the lack and excess of meaning which motivates desire. Lacan credits Freud with discovering the difference between the symbolic and the real, in particular Freud's work on the unconscious and fantasy, which produced the distinction between a reality which can be known, remembered and attached to signifiers (the symbolic), and a reality which is outside of understanding and memory, in the real (Freud 1914: 148-49; Verhaeghe 1999: 132). Through concepts such as the real, symbolic, imaginary and '*objet a*', Lacan brought about a renewed focus on Freud's theory of the fantasy and the object. The *objet a* allows a theoretical distinction to be made between the subject of the real and the subject of the symbolic. Rather than designating an empirical object, it refers to the gaps where desire is produced. It can be described as a little piece of the real, beyond the law of the signifier and yet determinative of the subject's desire (Shepherdson 1996: 18; Lacan 1998 [1964]: 22-23, 118).

One of Freud's first accounts of the concept that Lacan will later term 'the real' can be found in *The interpretation of dreams* (1900). For, although Freud shows that dreams and the unconscious function according to the laws of the symbolic, and are able to be interpreted using linguistic devices such as condensation and displacement, the unconscious also has a nucleus beyond signifiers which is unable to be reached by interpretative, symbolic procedures. This unknown centre is first referred to in the midst of Freud's interpretation of his own dream where he acknowledges that '[t]here is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable – a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown' (1900: 111, n. 1). In the same text, Freud describes the dream's centre of non-meaning as 'a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream' (525). Regardless of the work of free association, of remembering, and interpreting, Freud finds a part of the unconscious that cannot be

reached through any of these means ‘and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge’ of the meaning of the unconscious formation.

Freud’s discovery of the gaps in meaning and knowledge may appear to run counter to the so-called centrality of the signifier in Lacan’s theory; a misconception which Lacan refers to when addressing his seminar audience in 1964, beginning with the statement: ‘Most of you will have some idea of what I mean when I say – *the unconscious is structured like a language*’ (1998 [1964]: 20). This linguistic structure, Lacan continues, would seem to assure ‘us that there is, beneath the term unconscious, something definable, accessible, and objectifiable’, as though each unconscious formation can be exhaustively interpreted and the subject, therefore, is wholly determined by discourses, the symbolic order (21). The symbolic order, however, only accounts for one part of Lacan’s conception of the subject, as he then goes on to point out:

But when I urge psychoanalysts not to ignore this field [of the signifier], which provides them with solid support for their labours, does this mean that I hope to include the concepts [drive, transference, repetition] introduced historically by Freud under the term unconscious? No, I don’t think so. The unconscious, the Freudian concept, is something quite different. (21)

While the movement of meaning and the mobility of desire provide analysis with material for interpretation, Freud’s work goes further to take into account the gaps and repetitions of the subject’s speech; and for Lacan these ‘quite different’ modalities would prefigure his theoretical distinction between the subject of the signifier and the subject of the real. Insofar as the subject of the signifier is determined by the symbolic order, the question as to whether there is something of the subject that is *not* determined by the symbolic law can be logically addressed with the notion of a cause, as that which ‘is to be distinguished from what is determinate in a chain, in other words the *law*’ (22). Lacan defines the cause of the subject as an ‘unrealized’ real which leaves a scar on the unconscious: the real ‘is always something anti-conceptual, something indefinite ... In short, there is cause only in something that doesn’t work’ (22). In this way, Lacan’s theory of the subject encompasses not only the Freudian unconscious of the signifier, affording the interpretation of dreams and free association, but also the ‘nucleus’ of ‘psychical resistance’, located initially by Freud and theorised later by Lacan as a dimension of subjectivity ‘belonging to the real’ (68).

Freud’s second theory takes into account this un-symbolizable dimension of subjectivity formed on the basis of experiences ‘not understood at the time’ (Freud 1914: 148-49). Since they are unable to be linked to signifiers, these experiences are the basis for unconscious fantasies with their own specific ‘processes of reference, emotional impulses, thought-connections’ (149). Lacan’s work advanced these ideas into a coherent theoretical system in which ‘the place of the real ... stretches from the trauma to the phantasy’, because with each we face the problem of the limits of representation (Lacan 1998 [1964]: 60). The real of the body and the drives are able only to be partially represented by the signifier, for ‘the real has to be sought ... behind the lack of representation’ where, as an ‘irreducible, traumatic, nonmeaning’,

the real functions as an absent cause, to induce the advent of the subject in the processes of identification with and alienation to a symbolic Other (60, 250-51).

The real and symbolic dimensions of subjectivity in Lacanian psychoanalysis provide a conceptual framework for other fields of research to account for the question of the subject's desire. In *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, Lacan begins his seminar with the question of the subject's desire and specifically that of the analyst's desire, asking: 'Can this question be left outside the limits of our field, as it is in effect in the sciences ... where no one questions himself as to what there must be in the desire, for example, of the physicist?' (1998 [1964]: 9-10). Science normally refuses this form of desire, with its affective ties and passionate attachments, because to a certain extent its uniqueness to each subject refers to the limits of symbolization. On the other hand, the question of the place of the subject's desire in the production of knowledge has a contribution to make to the problem of how to conceptualise reality and subjectivity, beyond the limits of linguistic idealism and naïve realism (Shepherdson 1996: 3, 20). The notion of the real, as the fundamental lack in a symbolically ordered reality, puts into question the two alternatives of an external reality made up of stable objects and of a world solely determined by the limits of language.

In the definitions and models for art research discussed above, the factor of the subject's desire in the research process has not been wholly excluded; indeed some scholars acknowledge its significant impact on practice while also raising the problems it presents to the wider system of academic research, often dominated by a scientific model of empirical investigation. The questions from psychoanalysis and cultural theory regarding the subject and the limits of symbolization may, therefore, be redirected towards art research: can the question of the subject's desire be left outside the limits of our field? And what would art research have to be in order to take the problem of the subject and desire into account?

3. Psychoanalytic art research: 'Construction around emptiness'³

In a recent model of applied psychoanalysis in art research, Joanne Morra addresses the conscious and unconscious desires of the researcher in relation to the knowledge product. Through its openness to the operations of the unconscious, this approach facilitates a complementary model, one that is located within the latent references to fantasy (though it is not mentioned by name) in Morra's method, and which may further assist in addressing the questions of the subject and desire in art research.

Morra's psychoanalytic model for art research focuses on Freud's essay 'Remembering, repeating, and working-through', in order to propose a number of conceptual equivalences between the process of undertaking a psychoanalysis and that of practices within visual arts research. More specifically, she addresses the question: 'what equivalence can be made between the work undertaken while in analysis – what Freud calls working-through – and what we do in viewing, thinking about, writing about, and curating art?' (2008: 50). On the basis of working-through and related psychoanalytic concepts, the main equivalence concerns method in which,

repetitive and ritualistic habits ... support and facilitate the work of analysis: the process of remembering, repeating, and working-through. The working-through of analysis is encouraged also by free association ... [and] the transition from a repetitive form of resistance to a 'motive for remembering' the repressed material, which is the aim of analysis. (50)

From this perspective such psychoanalytic tools are directed towards the therapeutic aim of overcoming resistances to a (past) repressed thought or desire that can then become conscious, as Freud plainly outlines in the very first paragraph of this particular essay (1914: 147-48). In the same way, the research conducted by art researchers is, according to Morra, 'always a practice that connects us to our personal history and memory, that elicits anxieties and pleasures in the present, and that offers us the promise of future knowledge' (2008: 61). Hence the 'researchers' in Morra's case studies – Georges Perec, T.J. Clark and Tacita Dean – conduct their research by utilising 'memory, associative drifting, daydreaming, and contingent impulses' in order not only to direct the research in terms of method, but also to 'motivate' and focus their own relationship to the research (55).

Drawing equivalences between disciplinary discourses may conceal important differences, but if acknowledged these disparities may to different degrees extend each discipline's boundaries (Callard 2003: 297). One difference between the process of working-through in an analysis and in art research is that in Freud's paper he is very clearly discussing not only theoretical findings but also clinical techniques. In other words, the therapeutic methods used by an analyst with the patient are, in Morra's approach, transformed into a situation where the researcher takes the place of the patient in relation to the research practices (looking at, writing about, curating, making art), which in turn seem to take on the role of the analyst. Morra's psychoanalytic model for research in the visual arts performs the clinical technique that in 1914 Freud summarised as the approach he had used up to that time. It consisted, he said, 'of discovering from the patient's free associations what he failed to remember', and thus the 'aim of these different techniques ... is to fill in gaps in memory ... [and] to overcome resistances due to repression' (Freud 1914: 147-48). In Morra's model, the work of art research operates according to the method set out in Freud's summary, providing the conditions for the researcher to 'overcome resistances' to the forgotten and repressed material which is activated through the research. In Lacanian terms, the theory in this passage defines the subject of the unconscious as entirely a symbolic formation, wholly constituted in the discourse of the Other (the laws of society and language), and thus for which free association affords the interpretive source.

The second, less obvious difference between Morra's psychoanalytic model for art research and the one Freud presents is closely related to the first, for it concerns the significance this particular essay of Freud's has in the context of the major theoretical shift he made at the time (Verhaeghe 1999: 134). For the subject of the signifier described by Freud in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph is, in the next few passages of the text, contrasted with an aspect of subjectivity that cannot be symbolised, and which thus required important changes to his existing theory of resistances.

After summarising his previous approach, Freud goes onto describe a ‘special class of experiences ... for which no memory can as a rule be recovered’ (1914: 149). As I discussed earlier, these experiences refer to a dimension of subjectivity that belongs to the real, were never conscious, and as such are not available to the operations of forgetting and remembering. After his explanation of this class of experiences, Freud returns to the summary of his previous theory of resistances in order to explain that, with regard to these experiences beyond memory, a new technique is required: ‘Under the new technique very little, and often nothing, is left of this delightfully smooth course of events’ (149). As Paul Verhaeghe ascertains on the basis of his extensive comparative study of Freud and Lacan, Freud’s 1914 essay marks an important change in his theory and clinical practice by introducing the new concept of the unconscious fantasy, which the new clinical tool of working-through would construct, rather than interpret, throughout the analysis (Verhaeghe 1999: 134).

However, Freud does not use the term ‘construction’ in this paper and instead some few years later in the essay ‘A child is being beaten’ (1919) he unambiguously connects construction to fantasy when he is discussing, again, the aspect of the fantasy and subjective experience which is beyond signifiers:

This second phase [of the production of the fantasy] is the most important and momentous of all. But we may say of it in a certain sense that it has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. It is a construction of analysis, but it is no less a necessity on that account. (1919: 185)

The fantasy is an attempt to symbolise and make sense of the subject’s experiences but, as a screen for the real, it contains missing pieces which are unable to be reached through free association. Instead, the subject’s repetitive acts and thoughts refer to the fantasy’s structure, while its missing pieces require construction on the basis of necessary, logical inferences.

Rather than focusing on the interpretation of symptoms, the work of analysis in this ‘newer technique’ would entail ‘conjuring up a piece of real life’, as in the construction of the unconscious fantasy which shapes the subject’s ‘manifest personality’ (Freud 1914: 151-52). This is not to say that free association and interpretation are discarded, but as Freud notes, once the focus on resistances and remembering is replaced by the unconscious fantasy and the compulsion to repeat, ‘very little ... is left’ of his earlier theory in which psychic reality consists entirely of its associations to signifiers. The first theory of free association and the unfettered movement of desire can be highly productive in visual arts scholarship, as demonstrated by Morra’s analysis of working methods used for research in both visual art practice and in art history. Might the second, vastly altered theory, of the repetition compulsion and the construction and working-through of fantasy, make a similarly valuable contribution to research in visual art practice?

With the new focus on fantasy, Freud’s theory retained its concern with unconscious desire and its various manifestations such as symptoms and dreams; yet these now became the repetitive indications for an underlying psychical pattern. Shortly after the 1914 paper, Freud described the fantasy as a psychical reality in which ‘every desire takes ... the form of picturing its own fulfilment’, while at the same time

furnishing ‘the path open to every repressed fixation’ (Freud 1916: 367, 371-72). Freud defines these fixations of/in desire as specific positions which are repeatedly produced in day and night dreams and which provide the form of the symptoms (371-72). In 1920 Freud connected the compulsion and fixation of repetition to a painful experience in the subject’s history, which could not at the time find representation and hence the subject unconsciously repeats a scenario, consisting not of the fulfilment of desire, but of a form of suffering which finds satisfaction beyond the pleasure principle (Freud 1920: 16). In this sense, fantasy consists of a structure or network through which desire both moves and also becomes fixated into positions beyond the pleasure principle where a form of suffering, or *jouissance*, is sustained through repetition. Combining Lacan’s terms with Freud’s second theory in this way serves to underline Verhaeghe’s argument that Lacan’s work realized the practical consequences of Freud’s theoretical shift from interpreting defensively distorted contents to constructing the primary fantasy as a basic structure that shapes both the subject and her symptoms (Verhaeghe 1999: 146, 162). In this way Lacan conceptually developed Freud’s second theory of the fundamental fantasy, particularly with respect to the function of fantasy for the subject in terms of the real, symbolic and imaginary dimensions of experience.

Art research employing Freud’s first theory follows the endless movement of desire through memory in order to work through resistances, and as Morra says, this is analogous to the various tasks or forms of work ‘undertaken in the research process’ (2008: 48). With Freud’s second theory and its Lacanian developments, the interpretation of sources as a model for the work in research may be extended to take into account the network of fantasy through which desire shifts and in which *jouissance* becomes attached. In its current state of formation, the academic discipline of visual arts has the opportunity to reassess the relationship researchers have with the knowledge organising their research and this would, as I have suggested elsewhere, entail the recognition that knowledge is accompanied by desire, fantasy and *jouissance* (Holmes 2009: 153).

In the related fields of aesthetic theory and literary criticism, Fredric Jameson has made a case for the text or aesthetic work to ‘be seen as that indispensable mapping fantasy or narrative by which the individual subject invents a “lived” relationship with collective systems’ (Jameson 2003: 38). In this way Jameson brings Althusser’s – already Lacanian-oriented – concept of ideology into the realms of aesthetic production and reception. For this purpose, Jameson returns to Freud and Lacan to address the problem ‘of the insertion of the subject’, or more specifically ‘the difficulty of providing mediation between social phenomena’ and psychological phenomena (3). As Jameson observes, Freud explicitly addressed this problem in ‘Creative writers and day-dreaming’ (1907), where he referred to the methods used by artists to transform the elements of personal desire or fantasy in their practice into a collective, representational form. Like Freud, Jameson rejects a psychoanalytic model of aesthetic criticism which attempts to directly explain the social by the psychological; rather he proposes that Lacan’s three registers are ‘able to think these discontinuities [between the individual and the collective] in a radically different way’ (Jameson 2003: 10). For example, as a conceptual framework the mapping of

fantasy affords an analysis of how an art work or an aesthetic theory can either emphasise or block the imaginary. The former may take the form of an ‘attempt to restore the authenticity of lived experience and sensory plenitude’; the latter, the form of a refusal of audience empathy and identification, thus exposing discontinuities between the observing subject and the collective, symbolic order (28-29). The significance of Jameson’s theory lies in the recognition that the symbolic and imaginary levels of the individual narrative or fantasy are only able to approach the real in an ‘asymptotic fashion’, and for this reason ‘we must distinguish between our own narrative of history – whether psychoanalytic or political – and the real’ as ‘the diachronic evolution of History itself, the realm of time and death’ which resists symbolisation (34, 38). By maintaining the distinct status of the three registers of subjectivity, Jameson’s psychoanalytic model includes the subject in aesthetic production and reception, whereby the artwork may be conceived of in terms of the mapping of the individual fantasy by which the researcher’s practice invents a symbolic and imaginary relationship to social networks.

Earlier I outlined how art research scholars view the position of the artist-researcher to be significant and yet problematic to the research and its knowledge products. In response I have proposed that the psychoanalytic notion of the subject of desire could contribute a potentially transdisciplinary method for taking account of the researcher’s desire within the knowledge field and in relation to the knowledge products. In psychoanalysis, fantasy affords a structure for the subject’s desire and on this basis organises the subject’s relations both with the symbolic order and to whatever escapes that ordering. In Lacan’s work, the cause of the subject’s desire, or the *objet a*, originates in and materializes the failure and limits of the symbolic order. While the fundamental fantasy cannot be consciously known, it can be reconstructed on the basis of its various manifestations in symbolic-imaginary relations, and in its real dimension through its links to *jouissance*, anxiety and desire.

In a transdisciplinary alliance with psychoanalysis, art research might consist of the researcher exploring and producing knowledge about the imaginary, symbolic and real dimensions of her practice as it relates to the research project and its potential audience. A true alliance would bring together psychoanalysts and art researchers for the purpose of studying different contexts of application over a number of different possible sites, providing the resources for researchers to undertake their own psychoanalysis where, as exemplified by Morra’s psychoanalytic model, it is often not included or available, and facilitating the production of a body of work which parallels and works through the research project. The research process may begin with the imaginary and the ways the identity of the researcher has been sustained by the practice, particularly in terms of unquestioned ideas, methods, values and norms. These will be approached as an imaginary series of as-if answers to areas as yet unaddressed, and would be explored through a body of written and visual work whereby these imaginary aspects are given a symbolic structure. In this sense, the researcher would gain knowledge about the social relations and discourses which make sense of and organise the various imaginary solutions upon which the practice has been based. Where these two areas in the research encounter certain limits or obstacles for the researcher, further investigation would be conducted using the

coordinates of *jouissance*, desire and anxiety to address the areas in the research project which are linked to, and at the same time irreducible to, imaginary and symbolic formations.

An analysis ends, according to Lacan, with the working-through of the analysand's pathways of identifications so as to locate a gap between the signifiers of the Other and his own unique desire (Lacan 1998 [1964]: 271-73). This distinction of the end of analysis provides the closing response to the question of the subject's desire in art research, for it addresses the criteria of Elkins and of Biggs and Büchler while at the same time suggests a definition of art research as both the interpretation of a practice in symbolic-imaginary terms and the construction of the fantasy around the limits of meaning. Art research could thus make an important contribution to an epistemological inquiry into the collective and subjective functions of fantasy in the practices of visual art, as distinct from, but necessarily related to, the fantasy formed in the art work as a finished product.

Endnotes

1. Historically speaking, visual art is one of the younger disciplines in the university. For example, in the UK, art and design subjects were included in university degree systems in the 1960s, and universities began offering research degrees in visual arts practice in the 1980s (Mottram 2009: 10-11).
2. The four generic criteria for research are: to have focused, explicit questions and to arrive at answers or responses to those questions; to be conducted in the context of a body of knowledge within a community of researchers; to use methods relevant to the questions; and to demonstrate an awareness of the appropriate audiences for the research (Biggs & Büchler 2008: 9-12).
3. Referring to the Thing at the centre of the real, Lacan describes art as a symbolic 'construction around emptiness ... [which] designates the place of the Thing' (Lacan 1992 [1959-60]: 140).

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