

Understanding a Conflict

Research as a Problem-solving Tool for the Practitioner

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Abstract: Artists and designers regularly experience problems that hamper their work. Sometimes, research may be the tool that helps them solve their trouble. The author's doctoral project serves as an example. It was motivated by a conflict concerning an artwork made by the author that was set up in a Roman Catholic parish church as a preliminary solution before a commission could be afforded. The artwork seemed to provoke one third of the congregation. As tensions grew, it had to be removed, and a future commission was let out. Caught in such conflicts, artists or designers first, may ask themselves whether they have acted wrongly. Second, they may ponder about outer circumstances, in this case, the underlying premises for embellishing a church. The author turned focus from the local to the principal level, asking what ecclesiastical patrons wish in matters of embellishments today. The Roman Catholic Church has written directives on art and design. However, the question arose: what do these directives mean in relation to future art or design work? A literary inquiry revealed that no one yet seemed to have answered this question. To find an answer, the author decided to research herself. Role models were found in theology. The basic research methodology became one of hermeneutics. First, a broad theoretical foundation had to be established, including definitions of terminology. Second, the relevant sources, i.e. theological texts, were found. The author was advised simply to 'read' the texts from the perspective of a practitioner, without pretension of a proper interpretation. The research findings seemed to support that there was nothing wrong with the preliminary embellishment. However, the directives emphasize one aspect that had been underestimated: the significance for the user. The artwork failed in having significance for a substantial group in the congregation, therefore, it was refused.

Keywords: *Practice-based research, Commission, Conflict, Ecclesiastical*

Introduction

This paper argues that art and design practitioners, who regard themselves as practical people, sometimes when stuck with practical problems, may benefit from doing research as a means of developing their competence as practitioners. The paper takes point of departure in the author's personal experience and doctoral work. It reflects retrospectively on how a practical problem may lead to research, which thus becomes a problem-solving tool for the practitioner.

When speaking about practice-based research in art or design, one has to consider its relevance and usefulness. Research stems from a necessity or curiosity to know something, and if lacking, there is little need to research. Art

and design practices involve complex processes, in which many problems arise that offer research opportunities. The challenge for practitioners, who desire to do research, is to balance between established research traditions and their own interests and goals. They constantly have to keep focus on their own questions and avoid being trapped by premises set by other interests and fields. On the one hand, practitioners ought to be careful in finding adequate research tools that can help them solve their research problems. On the other hand, they should be cautious not to go beyond their professional competence and capability.

The author’s doctoral project provides an example of how a practitioner may become a researcher due to practical problems. The motivation for doing research was ignited by a conflict concerning a preliminary embellishment commissioned from the author, in a Norwegian, Roman Catholic parish church. The artwork provoked one third of the congregation and the artist was asked to rework it. Since the artwork was preliminary, the artist refused, arguing that the embellishment when finished would become acceptable. However, as tensions grew, the art-piece was removed and the future commission let out.

Trapped in such conflicts, practitioners need to find out why things went wrong. Starting introspectively, artists and designers may scrutinize themselves pondering whether they failed to do their job professionally or not. Taking an external perspective, the complexity of the commission will have to be investigated. Before accusing oneself of incompetence, practitioners should ask if the conflict was rooted in contradictions within the commissioning party that might blow up at any change in *status quo*. Another question is whether the commission held some unspoken premises that the patron failed to communicate to the artist or designer. In any case, artists and designers need knowledge and arguments to act constructively and to defend themselves, their professionalism and position.

The paper first, deals with practice-based research on a general level. Second, it presents the author’s doctoral project, finished in 2000, as an example of a practice-based research project that helped provide an understanding of the conflict that triggered the research, thus becoming a problem-solving tool for the practitioner.

1. Practice-based Research: General Aspects

1.1 Motivation

One may question why practitioners desire to do research. A simple reason is explained in the book *The Craft of Research*; here is said: “most everyday research begins not with finding a topic but with confronting a problem that has typically found you, a problem that left unresolved means trouble” [1]. Professionals often face practical problems to which they find no immediate solutions. From such problems questions arise, the answers to which may help solve the initial practical problem (fig. 1).

However, to find answers to the new questions raised sometimes involve research tasks, defined by what it is that the questioners do not know, but

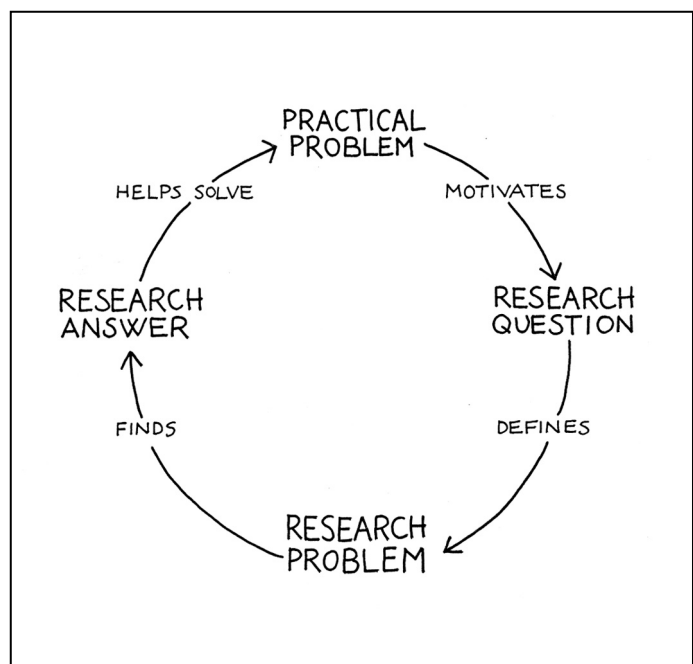


Fig. 1 Practical problems generate research problems, diagram drawn after Booth, Colomb, and Williams [2]

want to know. If no one seems to have answered their questions, and the practitioners want them answered, they have to research themselves. Caught in such situations, some artists and designers become motivated to start researching in order to solve their practical problems. At present, many artist and design practitioners desire to do research; they feel an urgent need to find ways of formulating their experiences and answer questions that somehow block the practical work they want to pursue.

1.2 Topics

Art and design, the latter in particular, are interdisciplinary and integrative processes that constitute professional fields and intellectual disciplines [3]. Dependent on the task, art and design may draw knowledge from any discipline. Consequently, research in the fields of art and design undertaken by practitioners may look into everything that somehow provides new knowledge that may influence future art or design processes. If art or design processes are taken as point of departure when considering practice-based research tasks, the theme will relate basically to either the presuppositions for a work, or to its physical actualization. The first aspect deals with premises, contents or intentions of the work to be, it may be of ideological nature or concern future function or use, defined as the task that the object is intended to fulfil [4]. The other aspect treats the actual planning of a concrete work: its materials, technical solutions, composition, form, and implementation. Anything connected to these aspects may represent research problems. Art or design processes end in finished artworks or design, which in themselves constitute new empirical material that may be studied – to some extent this also holds true for the person who produced it. Artists and designers often study each others work in order to find role models or inspiration for their own art or design work. Besides, the producing artist or designer may describe the thinking that went into their own artwork or design, and reflect upon the process. Set in a wider context, it may become part of research.

Seen in relation to fields of knowledge, questions concerning the contents of artwork and design are close to social and philosophical sciences; while questions connected to its actualization, relate to natural and technical sciences; and studies of finished artworks or design are nearing fields of history and the humanities.

1.3 Research and Science

The question today is no longer whether artists or designers should research, but how they approach their research problems and realise their research. The term 'research' has two widely different meanings in English. It may simply signify to search for something that is pointed out beforehand, for instance something that is lost, or it may mean scientific inquiry [5]. Art and design practice often involves research in the former understanding of the term, but practice as such, the production of plans and artefacts, is not synonymous to scientific inquiry. The British design theorist, Nigel Cross, formulates: "The whole point of doing research is to extract reliable knowledge from either the natural or the artificial world and to make that knowledge available to others in reusable form" [6]. Professor Ken Friedman says that: "Research is a way of asking questions" [7]. According to him, "neither practice nor reflective practice is itself seen as a research method" [8]. Rather, research asks questions in a systematic way and is the methodical search for knowledge. Critical thinking and systemic inquiry form the foundation of theory. Friedman explains: "Research offers us the tools that allow critical thinking and systemic inquiry to bring answers out of the field of action. It is theory and the models that theory provides through which we link what we know to what we do" [9].

According to my experience, the ambition for most researching practitioners is to find solutions to the problems that lie behind their research questions, not primarily to be accredited with titles. However, since the

concept of science stems from Latin *scientia*, which means knowledge, scientific methods that are developed to provide new knowledge, may well be the best tools for artists and designers to achieve their aims [10]. Comforting to those who regard science as contradictory to the creative processes of art and design, are the words of the late Professor of philosophy Paul Feyerabend who says in the introduction to his book *Against Method*, that: “the events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure [...] successful research does not obey general standards” [11]. Still, according to the Norwegian philosopher Hjørdis Nerheim, at least three criteria can be said to characterise science: precision, generality, and inter-subjectivity. The criteria of inter-subjectivity imply a language or codes that are commonly understood and shared within the scientific community [12]. Practitioners should understand and respect established disciplines and methodologies, but all the same be true to their particular competence, practice, and research questions, and seek research methods appropriate to their needs.

2. Practice-based Research Exemplified

2.1 Practical Problem

In 1997 the Building Committee of a local Roman Catholic church in Norway, asked me to lend them an art piece that I kept in my studio, as a preliminary embellishment until money could be raised and a new piece could be commissioned. Soon, a conflict broke out within the congregation about the preliminary embellishment. One third of the congregation refused to come to church before the artwork was removed. After three months of boycott, the priest gave in, and the artwork was removed. The situation was painful and embarrassing for everyone involved, and the question of embellishment was thereafter dismissed altogether.

Following the scheme in figure 1, the practical problem for me as a practitioner was the refusal of my artwork, which resulted in the loss of a commission. Besides, I experienced the uneasy feeling of not being informed about why and how the situation had escalated. I accepted that some people might become provoked by my work; what bothered me the most, was the nagging uncertainty of not being sure whether I had actually done something wrong. In order to avoid similar incidents to occur in future commissions, I needed to understand why the conflict arose. Besides, I needed arguments to defend my professional position and self-esteem.

2.2 Research Question

First, I began with analyzing the situation asking why things went wrong. There was a task that involved several people. Concretely, I was engaged by a building committee that included representatives from the user group, the congregation. In retrospect, it was obvious that these representatives hardly could speak on behalf of the complete congregation, which was a multicultural assembly with different understandings of theology and sprawling expectations towards art. Instead of trying to imagine what could possibly satisfy this local congregation, I changed focus to a more principal level, asking: what do ecclesiastical patrons expect artists to produce in our time?

I knew that the Roman Catholic Church had issued documents that treat art and design in ecclesiastical use [13]. However, the elaborate sentences in these documents sounded like mere verbosity, but for the allowance of “art of our own times” [14]. Instead of rereading these documents, I started a literary search embracing theological aesthetics and texts on ecclesiastical art in our time. Surprisingly, this inquiry led back to the Catholic documents and I realized that they might conceal more information than I had previously understood.

The foundations of the present directives in the Roman Catholic Church on art, which comprise both architecture and the fine arts, were laid down by the Second Vatican Council in 1963. The conciliar documents encourage contemporary artists to create art for the Church, given that the new artworks serve liturgy and worship, and are considered suitable by the Church. The question is what these normative statements mean in relation to art and design practice. Renewed literary inquiries revealed that there seemed to be no studies, which take the artists' perspective or discuss ecclesiastical norms in relation to future embellishing visual art specifically [15]. From this conclusion, arose the research question to be pursued: how can the Roman Catholic directives on art be understood through concepts useful for artists?

2.3 Research Problem

At this stage, I faced a research problem of how to find answers to my research question. The *Instruction* accompanying the conciliar text made me none the wiser than the text itself, but for a footnote explaining that in new church buildings, the Church expects to find "genuine Christian *modern* art" [16]. Combined with the demand for "art of our own times", modern seemed to mean contemporary. I thought that if the Church's directives on art in our time could be condensed into these four terms, then artists would have a basic set of guidelines that might help them provide what the Church requests. This thought became the hypothesis of the project. However, it remained to discuss what the terms genuine, Christian, and art indicated in the ecclesiastical context.

Theologians work with words producing texts, and artists and designers work with materials producing art. In church buildings theologians, artists and designers meet and have to collaborate in order to reach their common goal of providing new art and design for the liturgy. The challenge in an interdisciplinary encounter between a theoretical discipline like theology, and a making discipline like art or design, is to establish a dialogue that is based on equality between the two [17]. Since theologians have related to art and design and written about it, I decided that my contribution to the dialogue would be first, to read their texts in order to understand what they say, and second, to give them some feed-back from an art perspective.

Luckily, I found methodological role models for the research in a couple of theological dissertations that from a theological perspective have approached the fields of art and design [18]. I decided to reverse these studies, and likewise read theological texts from an art perspective. The sources for investigation were ecclesiastical documents containing normative statements on art: documents from the Second Vatican Council period, post-conciliar documents, and post-conciliar papal texts.

Methodologically, the research became one of understanding texts, i.e. hermeneutics. At the core of all interpretation lies the idea that there is more to understand than that which is obvious. Then, there are three fundamental principles in hermeneutics that demand consideration; first, the context in which the individual texts occur; second, the language used in the text, including the text's content and form; and third, the intention or the message of the text [19]. To understand the message of a text the reader has to consider the close relationship between text, author, and context. Very often a text builds upon previous texts that are necessary to know in order to understand the present one [20]. This is very much the case for the normative ecclesiastical documents. Therefore, background information, including a clarification of concepts and terminology, was required before the actual reading and understanding could start.

The terminology chosen in the dissertation was based on existing terminology found in relevant literature, combined with the needs and probable utility for artists and designers. The historical background information was

compiled from primary (Latin) and secondary literary sources. The prime consideration was to survey the theological attitudes and norms on art through history from the perspective of the contemporary artist, so that the present documents might become understandable. However, due to the demand of understanding the textual context, I decided to add some visual material and religious and cultural history that I personally found interesting and thought might shed light on the theme.

A presupposition in textual interpretation is that the text can be understood by the reader. I set the premise for my study that normative theological texts concerning art and design would be understandable for artists and designers, at least as a research task. My presupposition may be wrong, but if so, the theologian writers are shut in their own sphere, in a way that makes it necessary to ask why they should write these regulations in the first place. My argument is that if their efforts shall be meaningful, their directives somehow must communicate to those who produce the works that they try to regulate.

However, my theological supervisor strongly warned me of going beyond my professional competence. Instead of pretending to interpret or analyse the texts, which would imply an ambition of making proper theological or literary analyses of the theological texts treated, he advised me to simply read the sources from my professional stand. My reading held the modest aspiration of understanding the intention of these texts, what they mean in relation to art and artistic processes. The purpose of the reading was to find or identify the message and the meaning of the directives, in order to suggest terms and criteria that might represent “translations” of this meaning, which might be comprehensible and useful for artists in their practical work. The reading, therefore, was systematic; throughout the documents I discussed terms, looked for keywords, opposite concepts, positive and negative formulations, and also that which seemed to be omitted [22].

2.4 Research Answer

The reading of the normative documents on art showed that the Church is open and inviting towards artists and designers, provided that they respect the premises of Christian teaching. The research confirmed that to some extent the four terms of the hypothesis: genuine, Christian, modern, and art, in principle, may be taken to incorporate the desired characteristics of contemporary ecclesiastical art. However, the close reading revealed that the theological meaning of these terms seems to deviate from my suggested understanding of them.

First, the term genuine seems to associate to spirituality, rather than to a genuine attitude as such. Next, the term Christian seems to be a request for beauty. This finding was surprising – there were no indications of claims to form or content – the work should simply embody beauty, perhaps even in a sublime way. Since artists hardly speak of beauty, but rather use the term quality instead, this claim was something unexpected [23]. Interestingly, the reading revealed that in Christian contexts, beauty denotes not only good quality in artistic terms, but also the beauty of natural things that induce hope to the onlooker by simply being beautiful! This finding that theologians actually do not make a clear distinction between that which is naturally given and the humanly made beauty, is, from my point of view, an indication of the necessity of an interdisciplinary dialogue through which different positions can be clarified.

When it comes to the term modern, the reading revealed that it does not simply indicate contemporary as suggested, but rather points to the significance of the user, which is something quite different, and may have great implications for the production of new art and design works. One practical consequence of this understanding of the term is that the directives at the same time as they open for contemporary art and design, allow old variations to occur, depending on the congregation.

Finally, the term art indicates quality, not least in materials and craftsmanship, also this term deviating from a contemporary art perspective, which is less interested in craftsmanship than previous periods used to be (fig. 2) [24].

Findings in hermeneutic research aim at providing new knowledge that may expand the understanding of the treated topic. One hardly speaks of truth, but rather interest and relevance. This means that the research answers are provisional. I have voiced one artist's voice with

my preconceptions and background, others may explore the same sources from different angles – the hermeneutic process has no end [25].

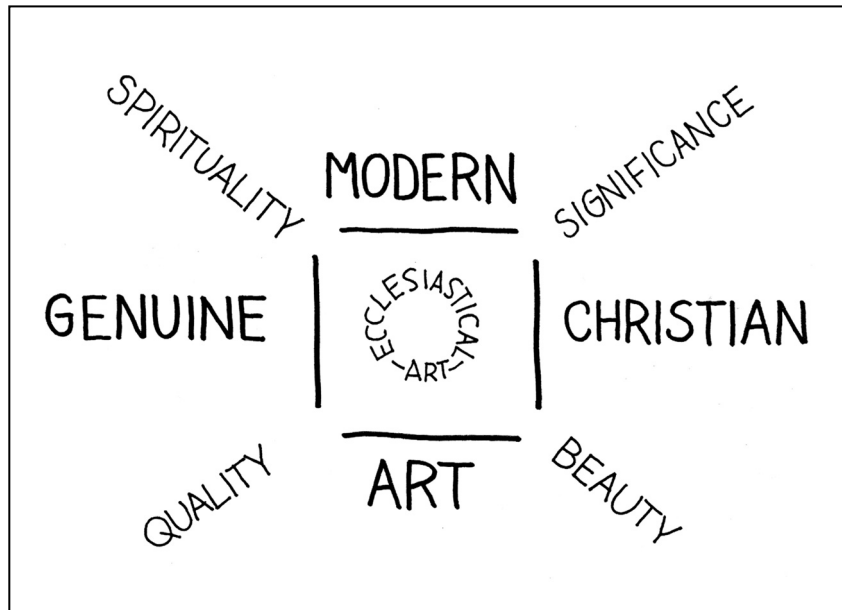


Fig. 2 Criteria for contemporary ecclesiastical art

3. Conclusions

Finally, the initial problem may be explained. The research revealed that the directives emphasize one aspect that I as a contemporary artist had underestimated: the artwork's significance for the user. The preliminary artwork failed in having significance for the traditionalists in the congregation, who in return refused it. More than that, even though they represented a minority, they executed their power and had the artwork removed. I learnt the following: a preliminary piece is understood as the final work, and the artist or designer alone bear the responsibility of their work, regardless of circumstances. Through my reading, I found cautious statements saying that in congregations without shared standards and tastes on art, one has to be extremely sensitive when introducing something new. The greater tensions, the more traditional one has to execute new works of arts or design. In the New Catholic Encyclopedia, issued in 2003 is said: "The creative act of the architect must recognize both the will and the needs of his patrons. In modern times the most common social impediment to the production of a significant ecclesiastical structure occurs when a patron refuses to allow the architect to express the identity of the congregation in and through the architect's own will to form. In such circumstances the architect is asked to relinquish his special abilities to create architectural form and instead act as a skillful transmitter of the congregation's collective will toward a form of established acceptability [...] The effort to make the architect's vision that of society reduces the educated artistic sensibility of the architect to a position of servitude to the less-educated sensibility of the congregation and pastor" [26].

Through the research process answers were found that helped me understand why the conflict had arisen. I personally acquired the knowledge I needed to restore my self-esteem and proceed professionally in my work. At a later occasion, I can refer to my studies, authoritatively voice my position, discuss and argue with a patron, and thereby be able to take precautions and avoid, or at least predict reactions, and be better equipped to meet and handle them. Research has for me been a problem-solving tool in my work as a practitioner.

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