

Make it, Show it, Say it, Change it all – The merits of four orders of creative practice

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Abstract

This conference paper explores the changing field of contemporary creative practices in order to assess what value(s) such practices could offer the wider economy. Starting point is Tony Golsby-Smiths’ notion of the ‘Fourth order Designer’ (2010, p. 260) and the complex global environment creative practitioners work in these days. His views are discussed in relation to the working strategies of creative practitioners, asking firstly if and how these ideas may translate to the practices of visual artists and secondly what impact they may have on art school education. Lastly it is discussed what such practices would contribute to the wider economy beyond the physical products of art and design.

The fourth order designer

Tony Golsby-Smith (2010) frames the four orders through which design practice and thinking have moved (after Buchanan, 2005, pp. 10-29) as:



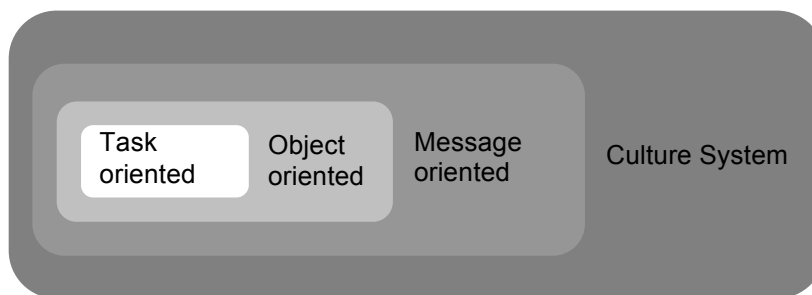
Figure 1, Golsby-Smith (2010, p. 260)

Golsby-Smiths’ distinction (after Buchanan, 2010, p.21) between the first ‘word/image’ (e.g. Communication - signs and words) and second order ‘object’ (e.g. Construction – things), suggests that for instance the field of graphic design would, in the creative process, need to relate to a context, which is narrower than that of, say, product design because of the differences in day-to-day use of the resulting products. An advertisement can, for instance, merely exist of non-physical objects like drawings or remain within a fixed context on physical objects such as a door sign, a magazine, etc. A designed object has a physical presence and it can travel and thereby change context. Also, he

follows the presumption that in product design context and communication are historically of more importance seen that production would usually be negotiated with more parties. I don't find this distinction between the first and second order credible or clear enough to maintain it, especially since graphic designers have historically played an important role in integrating corporate strategy and corporate culture in design and also because graphic design products do change context even if it is only the context around them that gets refurbished or renewed.

Four orders of creative practice reframed

Creative practices rather than design practices because I would prefer to include art practices. I will explain later why I think this is a good idea.



1) Task 'make it'	2) Object 'show it'	3) Message 'say it'	4) Culture System 'change it'
Design an object that contains, preserves and pours hot tea	Design a teapot to suit the visual culture of the present day	Communicate what a teapot ought to be	Make a plan to instigate a change in everyday rituals surrounding the production and consumption of tea
<i>Produce a teapot design</i>	<i>Restyle a teapot</i>	<i>Rethink what a teapot ought to communicate</i>	<i>Innovate and be held accountable for what will be</i>

The figure above is my attempt to reframe the distinctions between the four orders in a way that makes sense to me and that will allow me to clarify the value(s) of current day creative practices to you. To begin with, I would rather frame the first order as 'Task' oriented: the initial question the designer answers to. This question used to be rather precise, for instance to make a decorative ornamental advertisement for the local butcher shop or to design a durable chair and table to be used as school furniture. Over time however art and design have moved to the centre of our personal expression, distinction and sense of belonging in a globalizing world. Therefore, most design briefs are likely to not only list functional qualities, but also stylistic and communicative (brand) qualities. It is now expected of the creative professional to consider what is needed for the product to work well both in terms of consumer revenue and corporate reputation. As a result, a designer is not only expected to be a first order designer, considering the functional qualities of the design. The designer is also expected to be a second order designer and consider the style of the design and how it behaves itself in relation to the style of others, how distinctive or trendy it is. On top of that, the designer is

expected to be a third order designer, who considers the strategic impact of their design to the company he or she works for and the message they will be communicating through this design. Lastly, the designer is expected to consider the wider cultural environment in which their design will 'act'. Using an informed and preferably holistic and future proof perspective: *'Innovate and be held accountable for what will be the worldwide future of tea'*. This may be a slight exaggeration of the demands of fourth order design. But as you will understand, quite a bit more is asked from the designer than just 'a pretty cover'. The main task of the designer moves from producer to stylist, than to communicator and lastly to reformer, to change agent. Ultimately this change agent is asked to design for a global audience beyond budget or taste, beyond lifestyle options, addressing their very morale.

The Fourth Order and Artistic Practice

One wonders why visual artists are consistently excluded from the discussion about these shifts in the expectations around creative production. In research about creative cognition conducted by Nigel Cross and Kees Dorst, references or parallels to art and artists are also rare. If there are they are seen to be temporal and due to self-inflicted restrictions (Dorst, 2003/2006 p. 25) or due to their communal move towards the sciences in the future (Dorst, 2004 p.115). The boundaries between research departments can also explain why this debate remains mostly within the realms of design research. However, as visual artist and art school teacher I recognise similar shifts in the day-to-day practices of artists. Changing modes of orientation towards 'task', 'object', 'message' and 'culture system' are certainly not alien to art practice, they are at the heart of it. In my PhD research project 'The Strategic Studio' I frame different *key concerns* in artistic practice that align with characteristics of each of the four orders (Bosch, 2009).

Another possible reason to exclude artists in this discussion may include widespread assumptions about the freedom of the arts, which are traditionally encouraged by the arts community itself (Abbing, 2002, van Winkel, 2007). However this alleged 'freedom' has its constraints. Both design and art never truly start with a 'blank sheet of paper', and they rarely lack boundaries entirely. Instead I would argue that there is a certain 'wobble room' in which one could change the direction of the task, the product, the message and even the culture system.

Nowadays creative practices can differ from each other to the extent that the practice of a hairdresser differs from that of a lawyer. Furthermore, the boundaries between traditionally distinct disciplines have recently faded yet again. Where artists have been known to be involved in different trades before, there has been a time in which there was little acceptance of such practices within the arts community. In the past century there have been signs of renewed acceptance of artists who move

from one discipline into another. An example of this being forms of recognised hybridity in artistic practice (for instance Abbing, p.300).

There are two further reasons why I think we should include art in the debate about fourth order practices. Firstly, a lack of singularity of purpose is typical particularly in artistic practice. Even in the case of commissioned work, artists have historically been expected to 'deliver beyond brief'. Take for example the implicit expectations embedded in a church commission; artists were expected to communicate emotions and abstract notions like infinity, devotion, mercy and the almighty nature of God in their work. If today an artist decides to make a painting, this artist needs to partially disintegrate the idea of what a painting is in light of a complexity of historic and contemporary notions of painting. This does not just mean that the work becomes included in the world of physical objects. An extensive history of artistic endeavours bare propositions included in the current day discourse about and beyond painting. Now does that not sound rather 'fourth order' to you?

My last and most important reason is that the alleged freedom of the arts historically makes the frame of reference of artists as wide or narrow as suitable. The choice to use either the micro or macro environment, or both, in their work, make many artists great examples of change agents that may demonstrate both tactical strategizing towards nearby and known markets, as well as sensitivity to a wider context.

Should fourth order practice be normative?

This brings us to the question if fourth order practice should be normative. This is a topical issue in the art school I work for, Willem de Kooning University of Applied Sciences in Rotterdam, where we are moving toward delivering our education in the form of interdisciplinary projects. This innovation of the educational system aims to help our students meet the professional demands of all four orders. This does not only change the profile of our art school, but it also changes the profile of our prospect students. It demands a level of communicative and intellectual capacity that has not traditionally been amongst the selection criteria for an art school. Technical training has not entirely disappeared but it is sided with training of other competences like communicative and research skills. Moreover, it means our prospect students now effectively require a generalist profile rather than a specialist one. This changes the level of engagement between our students and teachers, and it changes what we look for in our teaching staff. In the Netherlands, art education is still part of Higher Professional Education rather than University; this is something we perhaps need to reconsider.

Creative practice for what it is worth

As a result of the above, it would be fair to state that fourth order creativity takes place within a complex environment where a multitude of expectations (both implicit and explicit) act upon the

creative practitioner. In order to accept the contributions a forth order creative would make, one would need to embrace the idea that these contributions move beyond products and therefore that the merits of a creative practise can no longer be understood through its products alone. Think for instance of the practices of Ai Wei Wei, Banksy and Daan Roosegaarde. Changes in the culture system, pushing innovation and creating shifts in our contemporary morale can be seen as other valuable merits. It is no surprise that valorisation of such ‘soft’ merits and contributions may confront the design world with some difficulties the art world is long since familiar with.

In light of debate around the special status of art practice, it would be worth asking if a complex corporate or organisational environment would be a necessary starting point for a fourth order creative to provide such values; isn’t the contemporary condition complex enough or is it too complex? Seen that the paper is never blank and there are always some boundaries, we channel our creative propositions in a world of possibilities. Hence it will depend on the ‘task’ or the initial question that instigates the creative process, what would be the most viable environment to start out from. As long as some ‘wiggle room’ is provided – we might just change it all at the kitchen table.

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