Interrupting the artist: Sartre and the topology of theory and practice

Clive Cazeaux

University of Wales Institute Cardiff, UK
ccazeaux@uwic.ac.uk

Abstract

How one understands the relation between theory and practice in art and design research can be influenced by one’s understanding of the relation between words and experience. A popular view, held by Schopenhauer, among others, is that words are inadequate to experience. The danger of this perspective is that it limits the possibilities for interaction between theory and practice or, worse still, makes the relation an antagonistic one. However, Sartre’s existentialism configures experience in terms of (what I call) a ‘topology of action’ which promotes equality between words and phenomena as ‘shapers’ of experience. When applied to the theory-practice debate, I argue, Sartre’s topology allows us to recognize how verbal descriptions of art (a) can stand alongside the physical gestures of the artist as ‘constructive interruptions’ in the development of an artwork, and (b) can bring new perspectives to bear on the theoretical framework employed by the practitioner in their research.

1. Introduction

The relation between theory and practice is one of the most actively debated subjects in contemporary art and design research and education. That this is the case should not surprise us since the subject opens onto fundamental questions regarding values in
education, definitions of subject areas, and concepts of knowledge, for example, the polarization of academic and artistic ability, the status of art and design as forms of knowledge, and philosophical rumination on the relation between thought and sensibility. One form of the theory-practice debate draws on all three areas and manages to reduce them to a single opposition: theory is done with \textit{words} whereas practice is done with \textit{stuff}, physical media, that is, paint, stone, film, video, sound, etc. As well as distinguishing activities according to their material (or immaterial) elements, the word-stuff opposition also suggests that different kinds of ability are involved. In relation to educational categories, there are those students who are ‘good with their hands’ (or eyes or ears) in contrast to those who succeed in grasping the abstract, intellectual operations performed in mathematics and the sciences. Furthermore, different kinds of experience are implied. With art practice, one is encountering ‘the stuff of the world’, ‘the stuff of life itself’, whereas words are echoes or vestiges of experience, dry, crackly leaves that have long since been drained of the sap’s vital force. The thinking here is that words, because of their generality, because they have to contain an indefinite number of similar situations, cannot possibly exhibit the vivacity or immediacy of the individual thing or moment. Schopenhauer makes this observation in \textit{The World as Will and Representation}: ‘Books do not take the place of experience’, he writes, ‘because concepts always remain universal, and do not reach down to the particular; yet it is precisely the particular that has to be dealt with in life’.1

These concerns are particularly pressing for those engaged in art and design research where one not only has to determine what constitutes a contribution to knowledge in the context of practice but also has to clarify what kind of theoretical framework is appropriate to the practice in question and, in addition, how the two should interact. Much of the debate around what qualifies as research for a Ph.D. in art or design, I suggest, is devoted to grappling with the question of how the ‘immediacies’ of visual practice should stand in relation to the ‘generalities’ of the theoretical in order for practice to be able to comply with the requirements set for verbal, objective knowledge, as demonstrated, for example, by a university’s Ph.D. regulations. Inevitably, these discussions look for ways in which the visual can borrow or import some aspects from the conceptual, such as the introduction of research methodologies from other subject
Interrupting the artist

areas, the requirement of a substantial written component, and the prediction of an outcome.

The danger of the ‘dry leaf’ perspective on verbal description is that it limits the scope of the interaction which can occur between theory and practice, threatening to make the relation either an antagonistic one or one where the theory is regarded as a mere appendage attached after the fact, after the ‘real’ practice, action or contribution to knowledge has taken place. For the ‘dry leaf’ perspective is just that: a perspective, one way of understanding what words and experiences are. In this chapter, I outline and support an alternative view, one where words and the flow or shape of experience are shown to be mutual aspects of the fundamental relations which root the human self in the world. This view is based on Sartre’s existentialist philosophy. Present in Sartre’s existentialism, I argue, is a ‘topological’ theory of action, that is to say, a theory which emphasizes the way actions shape, sculpt and, generally, give form to experience, where the action can be anything from a physical act (something one would normally associate with the word ‘action’) to producing a description of an experience (something one perhaps would not normally associate with the word). On this account, theory and practice are still recognized as distinct activities, and writing and theory are still seen as ‘interruptions’ in the flow of an artist’s practice. However, what is different, I maintain, is that these interruptions, from a Sartrean perspective, can be understood (a) as contributions to the materiality of the artist’s practice, and (b) as steps towards the location of that practice as a form of knowledge.

2. Sartre’s existentialism

Sartre’s existentialism radically rethinks the nature of the self and the self’s relation to the world. Whereas Platonic and Cartesian epistemologies assert that human beings have their innermost nature, including their moral being, determined in advance of experience by metaphysical essences (with Plato) or pure rationality (with Descartes), existentialism declares that the individual constructs themselves through action in the absence of an abiding, determinative moral agency. Sartre rejects outright the thesis that
we are defined and motivated by a priori concepts or essences: 'the act is everything. Behind the act there is neither potency nor “hexis” nor virtue’. Rather, it is only through active transformation of or engagement with the world, Sartre avows, that people and things acquire meanings. In this respect, Sartre can be regarded as developing Nietzsche’s nihilistic rejection of all previous conceptions or foundations of truth and identity. We believe that there are essences underlying and motivating every kind of thing, including the human being, Nietzsche argues, when in fact the notion of an essence or any state of being in itself is purely an anthropomorphic fiction: ‘we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers [and, by extension, selves]; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities’. If all previous conceptions of truth, i.e. those which assign truth a metaphysical or wholly rational origin, are rejected, then one is left with the situation where truth has to be made.

It is the role which action plays in Sartre’s philosophy and, more especially, the topological terms in which action is set, that makes his existentialism relevant to our concerns. For, in seeking to show how the self is made through action, a set of structural relations between self and world is invoked which promotes equality between words and phenomena as ‘shapers’ of experience. Sartre studies how an action makes a difference to a situation in such a way that that difference becomes an object of attention, something which represents a moment of distinction in what would otherwise be a continuous, undifferentiated flow of experience. This view of action is topological in the sense that acting, carrying out a gesture, making an impression on the world are events which rise above or drop below the flat line of inactivity. It is in terms of these ripples, bumps, crevices, and impressions, Sartre argues, that we must begin to construct our notions of meaning and personal identity.

I shall go into some detail here as Sartre’s reconfiguration of the self is central to the point I want to make in relation to art theory and practice. The subject, after Nietzsche, rather than being a distinct, self-contained entity, is shown to be something so intimately intertwined with the world that any clear-cut division is problematic; this is a
self that is very much in the world. Sartre’s response to this is to theorize the self as a ‘gap’ in the world. What is unique to consciousness, Sartre argues, is that it is the location of the perception of absence: it is only in consciousness that the impression of something not being the case can take place, for example, expecting to find thirty pounds in my wallet but finding only twenty, or waiting in a café for a friend who never turns up. As he states:

Every question in essence posits the possibility of a negative reply. In a question we question a being about its being or its way of being. This way of being or this being is veiled; there always remains the possibility that it may unveil itself as a Nothingness. But from the very fact that we presume that an Existent can always be revealed as nothing, every question supposes that we realize a nihilating withdrawal in relation to the given, which becomes a simple presentation, fluctuating between being and Nothingness.

It is essential therefore that the questioner have the permanent possibility of dissociating himself from the causal series which constitutes being and which can produce only being.4

It is the possibility of negation which disengages consciousness from the brute causal order of the world; ‘this cleavage is precisely nothingness’.5 A cleavage divides the present of consciousness from all its past, ‘not as a phenomenon which it experiences, [but] rather as a structure of consciousness which it is’.6 This rupture in the causal order of the world is the structure of consciousness for Sartre. The perception of absence or negation creates a gap in experience, and it is because of this rupture or interval that the subject is able to become aware of itself standing before a world. It also means that there can never be a moment when consciousness is identical with an abiding, substantive self which can influence or determine its actions; rather, consciousness only exists in the world as a gap or a nothingness between things.

This would seem to paint a bleak picture of our situation, but this is only because our conventional notion of subjectivity is being repudiated here. By defining subjectivity as a nothingness, Sartre is making the point that the self is constructed through its
engagement with the world, by dealing with whatever is brought before it as a bump or a rupture in the field of experience. In this regard, Sartre’s writing might be described as a philosophy of confrontation, not in an antagonistic or hostile sense but in the sense that we are made to reflect upon how we might face up to a situation and all its implications. The full force of the confrontation perhaps only becomes apparent when it is recognized that this reflection has to occur in the absence of the concept of a ‘true’ self, the concept which might otherwise reject certain possibilities on the grounds that we are a particular kind of person, inclined to act in certain ways.

What this topology of action brings to the theory-practice debate is a way of thinking which allows art theory and art practice to stand alongside each other as mutually supportive ‘interventions’ in the development of an artwork. On this account, both theory and practice can be understood as gestures which make a difference, make something stand out, rise above or drop below an otherwise undifferentiated field of experience. While we are probably accustomed to thinking of art practice as a form of action, it needs to be borne in mind that activity, i.e. activity in general, is being viewed here from a particular, existentialist perspective. With Sartre, we are theorizing the action as an event, a moment, a rupture, something which makes a difference where there was previously no difference at all, and which thereby allows the subject to orient itself in terms of the objects it encounters. Approaching the art-making process in these terms requires us to think about the way in which the work develops as a series of ruptures or saliences, for example, the effect of a brushstroke on an area of canvas, the prominence of a particular object in the viewfinder, the accentuation of certain qualities on a ceramic surface, the masking of those elements in a location which might interfere with a site-specific work.

In actual fact, this point is not terribly new. It is simply a means of talking about the focus of the artist’s attention, but with the recognition that ‘focus’ belongs to our family of topological terms denoting the concentration of attention, the bringing-together to a point. However, the location of focus is particularly important for the artist-as-researcher, for enrolment on a programme of research inevitably involves the statement of aims, objectives, and methodologies, i.e. a description of the particular aspects of art
which are to be the subject of research, and an account of why these aspects are being focused upon.

3. Sartre’s theory of description

The greater amount of work to be done, it would seem, lies with the question of how the theorization of art is accommodated within Sartre’s topology of action, especially when writing about art is, in comparison to making the stuff, such a sedate occupation. Also, the form of prose itself conceals the activity of writing: a linear flow of sentences and paragraphs, arguments and conclusions, cannot reflect or display the mental effort and torment which wrought them into being. However, as I indicate above, when action is discussed in a Sartrean context, we cannot simply fall back on the conventional notion of action as physical bodies moving in space. Instead, we are now considering it as the creation of a rupture or cleavage in the flow of experience.

Writing holds a position of special significance in Sartre’s philosophy precisely because it is one of the principal ways of rupturing or interrupting experience. And it is able to do this for the same reason that many people (including Schopenhauer) see it as being removed from life: writing involves the application of concepts to experience, of generalities to particularities. The distinction between generality and particularity is crucial, Sartre thinks, because it introduces a gap between consciousness and experience. He explores this dimension of writing at length in his novel *Nausea*. The book is a study of the non-identity between words and experience. The central character, Antoine Roquentin, is living in Bouville and trying to write a biography of the late eighteenth century political activist Monsieur de Rollebon. However, he gives up the project when the minutiae of his own life encroach on him with ever increasing detail and sublimity, and convince him of the futility of trying to represent experience. The written word, it seems to Roquentin, will always distance you from experience, will never allow you to be identical with the present. The novel’s first page outlines the diarist’s dilemma:
The best thing would be to write down everything that happens from day to day. To keep a diary in order to understand. To neglect no nuances or little details, even if they seem unimportant, and above all to classify them. I must say how I see this table, the street, people, my packet of tobacco, since these are the things which have changed. I must fix the exact extent and nature of this change.

For example, there is a cardboard box which contains my bottle of ink. I ought to try to say how I saw it before and how I —— it now. Well, it’s a parallelepiped rectangle standing out against — that’s silly, there’s nothing I can say about it. That’s what I must avoid: I mustn’t put strangeness where there’s nothing. I think that is the danger of keeping a diary: you exaggerate everything, you are on the look-out, and you continually search the truth. On the other hand, it is certain that from one moment to the next — and precisely in connexion with this box or any other object — I may recapture this impression of the day before yesterday. I must always be prepared, or else it might slip through my fingers again. I must never —— anything but note down carefully and in the greatest detail everything that happens.7

The ellipses – ‘how I —— it now’ and ‘I must never —— anything’ – are acknowledged in the text with the respective footnotes: ‘A word is missing here’ and ‘A word has been crossed out here (possibly “force” or “forge”), and another word has been written above it which is illegible’. By leaving these gaps, Sartre makes it apparent from the start that language introduces a specificity which is not present in experience. The crossings-out are important: ‘force’, an exertion of will or an impulse to change the state or position of an object; ‘forge’, on the one hand, to give shape to what was originally shapeless or, on the other, to copy, to fashion something which is inauthentic.

The task of verbal description, for Sartre, reflects the cognitive relationship between being-for-itself (être-pour-soi, human being) and being-in-itself (être-en-soi, the being of objects). Objects, Sartre asserts, exist in themselves; they belong to the in-itself. The being of objects is ‘full positivity’: ‘an immanence which cannot realize itself, an
affirmation which cannot affirm itself, an activity which cannot act, because it is glued to itself. This makes objects opaque for us. Objects resist us in the world, assert a counter-pressure against perception, because they never disclose themselves all at once. On this account, it is precisely because things are to some degree closed to us that we have consciousness at all; consciousness is the partial, sequential disclosedness of things. Experience is successive: a continuum in which aspects appear and disappear, in which appearances are revealed and then withdrawn. Impressions move on: the object is not present to me now in the exact same way it was a moment ago. If all impressions were present in one instance, Sartre comments, the objective ‘would dissolve in the subjective’. However, just as the appearance and disappearance of phenomena enable the perception of absence, so the application of general categories to particular experience puts experience at a distance, creates a phenomenological opening between writer and experience. As soon as Roquentin describes the bark of the tree-root as ‘black’, he feels ‘the word subside, empty itself of its meaning with an extraordinary speed. Black? The root was not black, it was not the black there was on that piece of wood – it was ... something else’. The perception that the generality of a word cannot capture the particularity of an object, that something is missing, thus appears, from Sartre’s position, as one of the crevices in our topology of action and, therefore, as an episode that is vital to the construction of subjectivity and objectivity.

Because of the gap between universal and particular, description alters the situation. As Sartre observes, writing gives order and significance to something which is ‘not yet there’:

When you are living, nothing happens. The settings change, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are never any beginnings. Days are tacked on without rhyme or reason, it is an endless, monotonous addition ... But when you tell about life, everything changes; only it’s a change nobody notices: the proof of that is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be such things as true stories; events take place one way and we recount them the opposite way. You appear to begin at the beginning: ‘It
was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was a solicitor’s clerk at Marommes.’
And in fact you have begun at the end.\textsuperscript{11}

Sartre is building on Heidegger here, in particular, the distinction he draws in \textit{Being and Time} between ‘readiness-to-hand’ (\textit{Zuhandenheit}) and ‘presence-at-hand’ (\textit{Vorhandenheit}).\textsuperscript{12}
The former denotes the state of busy, immersed occupation in which we deal with everyday activities, where objects are simply zones of interaction diffused into the greater backdrop of our routine intentions. For example, you walk across the zebra-crossing on your way to work but are not aware of the exact number of stripes. In contrast, ‘presence-at-hand’ refers to occasions when, for whatever reason, we are stopped in our tracks and what was formerly the mere furniture of existence stands out as a thing, \textit{against} a background, whose nature suddenly becomes of detached perceptual or conceptual interest. This, Sartre observes, is what writing does. Imposing a subject-predicate structure on otherwise diffuse interaction breaks (in Heidegger’s idiom) the ‘referential totality’ of equipment and elevates the thing so that it ‘announces itself afresh’.\textsuperscript{13}

A comment often made against the description of experience is that it introduces a specificity which was not present in the original experience; grammatical structure and conceptual boundaries impose a level of organization which is not in keeping with the lived moment. The sentence is a specific arrangement of two basic elements, a subject and a predicate, e.g. the sky is blue, in the face of a world that is otherwise indifferent and multifarious. From all that could be said at that moment, one selection, one slice across phenomena is made: the sky is blue. What had the character of a unique and particular experience is reduced or broken down into a set of general categories. In some sense, conceptualization does \textit{shoe-born} experience into categories which, in virtue of their generality, alter the shape of the experience, but it is wrong to be afraid of the metaphors of resistance and deformation which are implicit here. ‘Deformation’ is value-laden, and easily interpreted as an act of violence against experience by the concept. However, this sense arises solely because we have the misplaced ideal of a concept that should be identical to its object, that should fit or contain it perfectly. On the contrary, I assert, the sense of resistance which accompanies conceptualization
should be embraced since it is precisely this resculpting of experience which, according to Sartre, grants language its active, salience-creating capacity.

*Nausea* can be regarded as the diary of someone coming to terms with the realization that writing does not capture experience but, instead, disrupts experience, announces the existence of things, gives experience shape and form. Towards the end of the novel, Roquentin realises that the complete description of experience – when the word captures or contains the thing – is an impossibility and *it is the undecidability of description* which is ‘the key to [his] Existence, the key to [his] Nausea’.

How should or could he describe the tree-root: ‘snake or claw or root or vulture’s talon’, ‘a suction-pump’, its ‘hard, compact sea-lion skin’, its ‘oily, horny, stubborn look’; ‘knotty, inert, nameless’?

Similarly, when he looks at his hand spread out on the table, it seems to become first a ‘crab’, showing its ‘under-belly’, then a ‘fish’; his fingers become ‘paws’, then ‘claws’.

4. Topology, theory and practice

What is on offer from Sartre then is a new way of understanding the relationship between concepts and experience. Instead of the conventional model of concept and experience being mutually exclusive terms where the former is held to contain or reduce the latter, the concept is presented by Sartre as a rupture or an interruption in experience, the consequence of which is that an aspect of reality is raised up before the individual as an object, as something which helps to define the subjectivity of the individual. This theory of language, and the existentialism of which it is a part, can be very useful in the context of creative practice research, I aver, on two accounts. Firstly, rather than being regarded as separate and unrelated activities, theory and practice, from Sartre’s perspective, become parallel or congruent processes on account of the fact that they both create salience or assign prominence, that is to say, they are both processes whereby new objects of attention are brought before the viewer; it is just that the one does it through the application of words, while the other does it through the manipulation of art media.
Endnotes

4 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, op. cit., p. 23.
5 Ibid., p. 27.
6 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
8 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, op. cit., p. xli.
9 Ibid., p. xxxvii.
11 Ibid., pp. 61-63.
13 Ibid., §16, pp. 105-107.
15 Ibid., pp. 185-186.
16 Ibid., pp. 143-144.