

**Both kinds of research:
An example of linking 'recognised' research with an art practice**

Biography:

Dr Marie Sierra is currently Head of Sculpture and Spatial Practice at the Victorian College of the Arts. She has held numerous solo and group exhibitions within Australia and overseas, and won several grants and awards, including three Australia Council Grants. Marie was a longstanding Chair of the City of Melbourne's Public Art Committee, and is currently Deputy Chair of Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces' Board. She holds a Masters of Fine Art from the University of Tasmania, and PhD by thesis from RMIT's School of Architecture and Design, focussing on green design and the idea of nature.

Classic humanities research methodologies can reflect and describe not only written research, but also the structure of research performed in a studio practice or project based arts practice. For example, 'grounded' research, which facilitates the emergence of the theory from the data and therefore 'grounds' the theory in the data, as well as a so-called 'naturalistic' inquiry, are common to both studio and written forms of research practice. This paper examines arts practice research being actively integrated with 'traditional' humanities research, by reflecting on the PhD by thesis I completed in an area of design theory, while maintaining a practice as an artist.

I have a long-standing interest in nature as an idea, that is, the social construction of nature. One aspect of this interest forms the basis of my research as an artist, in the usual forms this takes in the studio and through the development of projects. The other aspect forms the basis of my research as a design writer, in the usual forms this takes in writing conference papers, book chapters and similar. The former is my main area of activity, and the latter is useful in that it produces output that complies with the narrow definitions of research held by DEST, while supporting and expanding my practice.

My written research focussed on the advertising of green appliances – literally, the advertising of appliances that had been through a process that somehow made them more ecologically friendly than they had been previously. While green appliance advertising sounds a most unappealing topic to an artist, my route to this particular area of study was guided by a set of ideas that had been recurring in my studio for some years. I had become frustrated with nature being portrayed as remote or romanticised, as this did not develop a workable and sustainable relationship to it. This concern formed my research project, which had two goals. First was to provide my art practice with a depth of understanding of the topic that interested me most, and second was to hone my research skills and use a new understanding of humanities research to produce outcomes that would be recognised by DEST. It seemed to me it was possible to serve both masters, and like musicians say of rhythm and blues or country and western, if one could be into

'both kinds' of music, one could also be into both kinds of research. Of course what I found is that they are, in many respects, indistinguishable in character and complexity, and can be used to support one another.

Background to the written research

In 2004 I completed a PhD by thesis, which focussed on how in advertising, nature is continually constructed as ideal and romantic. In science and humanities research, the requirement for 'original' research that a PhD entails is often described as like looking for a 'gap' in the discipline that has yet to be filled. While this hurdle is often more easily leapt with studio based practice and its inherent tendency to 'originality', for the thoroughly documented area of design theory, vigilance is required in establishing claims of originality. Subsequently, what started out as an exploration of nature as an idea, a topic that derived from and related to my art practice, over time became an exploration of nature's portrayal in relation to a very specific slice of design and advertising theory – that of the advertising of 'greened' whitegoods.

Like many artists reframing their studio or project based practice in the context of a research methodology, I explored the areas of action-based research and grounded research theory. As my thesis focussed on visual images, I thought there may be a way to link what I knew from years of practice and teaching art to the investigation of advertising imagery. The very act of interpretation of images, something as artists and designers we repeatedly undertake with a great deal of discernment and aplomb, is a honed skill that many of us take for granted. Through engaging with aspects of cultural theory that recognised interpretive analysis, where the interpretation of images and their context is a manifestation of grounded research, I found a link between what skills I had as an artist, and a methodology I required as a researcher.

Interpretive Analysis of Images

The interpretive analysis took its form as a postmodern critique of the underlying meanings of the advertisements, and of how these ads were indicative of a human relationship with nature that is mediated through ecodesign. The study particularly focused on the advertising of ecodesign in household appliances, which are normally purchased by the consumer only every few years, and are generally considered 'big ticket' items in the fit-out of a household. Some 160 images were collected and specifically catalogued. Hundreds more were examined and noted for their content and contemporary or historical context.

The fields of cultural, media and communication studies provided much of the background literature and informed the development of the study. Particularly critical to the research was the method of analysis of advertisements put forward in Leiss, Kline and Jhally's book *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-being*.¹ They advocate a hybrid approach, which combines the in-depth interpretive analysis typical of semiology, which is concerned with the construction of layers of meaning, with the more systematic and quantitative approach of content analysis, which provides the 'ability to relate this information to the sample as a whole in a rigorous manner, and to detect patterns of similarities and differences'.² The

research was located primarily within the practice of semiology, as it used single advertisements, analysed in depth by a single researcher, to achieve its aim. However, aspects of the study followed the method of content analysis, such as the collection of a group of advertisements (for appliances) from a particular medium (magazines/print media), coded along the lines of how they depict nature within a Romanticised paradigm (e.g., endangered, graceful, grand, oblique, powerful, violent). Due to the limitations of content analysis, which restrict its application to the surface or denotative meaning of advertisements, and the requirement to obtain agreement among several analysts in the codification of those surface meanings, the study engaged only some aspects of the content analysis approach.

The postpositivist perspective of determining meaning by inference, and the 'probabilistic and speculative' approach of a value-bound naturalistic inquiry was employed in the acknowledgment of the multiple and socially constructed environment in which advertisements carry meaning.³ While my study was not a historical survey, the modernist history of the electric home appliance was considered where appropriate in order to give context to 'how' and 'what' such products and their advertisement mean in contemporary culture.

Typical of postmodern critique, the empirical approach I employed was 'detailed, close-up, documentary, ethnographic, [including] historical readings of specific social situations and institutions'.⁴ The design of the study was emergent rather than predetermined, with an in-depth style of reportage facilitating the examination of the compounded references of individual advertisements. The sampling of advertisements was purposive (that is, not random or representative), facilitating the emergence of the theory from the data and therefore 'grounding' the theory in the data; the method of inquiry was naturalistic, with no *a priori* assumptions on the outcome. Like the 'smart bomb' analogy used by Lincoln and Guba to describe the human agent in the inquiry, on a mission to 'identify and wend its way to (purposefully sample) the target without having been precisely programmed to strike it', the data was sought and analysed inductively.⁵

As advertisements are a 'thick' blend of word and image, described by Denzin as 'visually and conceptually dense', they are a rich source of material for visual and textual analysis. They lend themselves to both realist and subversive readings, and multiple interpretations that preclude them from being read in an exclusively literal way.⁶ Indeed, authors such as Sut Jhally argue that contemporary advertisements can rarely be read literally.⁷ From the perspective of a qualitative researcher, Denzin notes that advertisements contribute to the structure of our perceived reality:

There is a double need for analyzing film and photography. First, everyday life is structured and given meaning by visual records including film photographs, and advertisements. How these representations structure reality demands analysis. Second, visual representations are interactional productions. . . . Visual representations of society are both methods of research and resources, or topics to be studied in their own right.⁸

The symbolic-interactionist approach about which Denzin writes extensively also contributed to the approach of the thesis. The relationship of people to objects is central to advertising and the creation of desire to purchase those objects. Denzin writes at length about the site of meaning in relation to objects, and how it comes into being through *social* interaction:

Integral to [the symbolic-interactionist] perspective is the view that the social world of human beings is not made up of objects that have intrinsic meaning. The meaning of objects lies in the actions that human beings take toward them. Human experience is such that the process of defining objects is ever-changing, subject to redefinitions, relocations, and realignments. The interactionist assumes that humans learn their basic symbols, their conceptions of self, and the definitions they attached to social objects through interaction with others.⁹

As ecodesign draws on the strength of community concern with the environment, and the ability of the individual consumer to act within that community in what they perceive as a meaningful way, the symbolic-interactionist approach provides a perspective on how people, communities and objects relate.

Designers who are seriously interested in greening their practice have much to gain by looking beyond the design, functionality, and usability of their products, into how their products contribute to meaning in the larger fabric of society, and how they influence behaviour. By familiarising themselves with the areas of marketing and advertising, they will have an improved understanding of the forces that surround their products which encourage – or discourage – the success of ecodesign products in the marketplace. Importantly, they will also gain an understanding of how their design relates to other forms of environmental management and understanding in domestic surroundings, and whether they encourage a continuation of green practices in the home.

My study examined advertising that appeals to the consumer's environmental conscience, and concluded that it generally reinforces a romantic ideal of nature, by engaging devices such as magic, metaphor, threat-and-remedy. Advertising for green appliances, like advertising for most of the green market, aims its appeal at the ethical dimension of the consumer, which is firmly at the core of the 'new' environmentalism.

My goal in undertaking the thesis was to understand this new environmentalism and research how nature develops as an idea, so as to strengthen my knowledge of the area central to my own practice as an artist. Through the specific research methodology of interpretive analysis and the support of object-social relationships that the symbolic-interactionist approach posits, I not only discovered an established foundation for examining how ecodesign may be able to make a real contribution to change in relation to the environment, but also what art that deals with environmental issues must acknowledge so as to avoid reconstituting a naïve and romanticised perspective. In order to be innovative, the knowledge base of ecodesign *and* art addressing environmental issues must be both broad and far-sighted.

¹ Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 1990, chapters 8 and 9.

² Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 1990, p. 218.

³ Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 30 and p. 37.

⁴ Denzin, 1989, p. 52.

⁵ Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 8 and pp. 39-43. Lincoln and Guba set out fourteen characteristics of naturalistic inquiry, many of which were employed in this study. For example, in this study the author operated as the primary data-gathering instrument, and from an engagement with tacit knowledge in examining the visual and textual aspects of the advertisements.

⁶ Denzin, 1989, pp. 220, 231.

⁷ See Jhally, 1998, for an expansion on the idea that contemporary ads cannot be read literally.

⁸ Denzin, 1989, p. 211.

⁹ Denzin, 1989, p. 5.

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