

BEYOND KNOWLEDGE TO UNDERSTANDING

The process of theorizing is a basic procedure of inquiry and hence a core element in research. We construct theories about how the world works all the time as we explain things and come to understand them. Some theories are based on how knowledge is applied to help solve problems. This kind of theorizing involves explanation, which is a logical process that identifies causes and predicts effects. Explanation therefore helps us to come to know different things.

In other situations, theories are based on experience, which helps us understand more complex things. This kind of theorizing involves understanding, which is an adaptive process of human thinking and acting that is informed by our experiences and encounters. It is also a cognitive process whereby what we know shapes our interactions and transforms our awareness. In these instances, our intuition and intellect draw on real-life circumstances that serve as an experiential base that shapes our understanding and allows us to see and do things differently. The capacity to create understanding and thereby critique knowledge is central to visual arts practice, and artists are actively involved in these kinds of thoughtful research processes.

Debates about whether the goal of inquiry is to explain or to understand human behavior goes back at least to the 18th century. For early researchers, the intention was to explain human activity by applying the same strategies used to explain the workings of the natural world. This contrasted to the belief among others that a more worthwhile research purpose was to understand human agency—the capacity to make choices and to act on them. This required quite a different, more naturalistic approach to research. Despite the development of qualitative approaches to inquiry in the 20th century that took place in natural, real-world settings, the need to construct theories that explain phenomena is still assumed by many to be the primary goal of research. The premise is powerful because if a theory explains some phenomenon, then there is a high probability that we know what causes something to happen and the effects that will occur. Therefore, a theoretically robust causal explanation means that we can make predictions and this can have significant implications.

Consider the impact of a theory of learning that explains this important human capacity—we would know what causes learning, and therefore be able to recreate the conditions and predict with some confidence that learning would take place. Many researchers have been trying to do this for a long time. Yet the use of reductive methods to try to examine and explain the complex mechanisms of human thought and action continue to prove to be inadequate. Even a seasoned educational researcher such as Jerome Bruner ceased to ask the causal question, *How do children learn?* because no experimental studies could ever reveal answers in unequivocal causal terms. Later in his long career, Bruner (1996) asked a better research question: *How do children make meanings?* It was this complex question that took him out of the clinical setting and into the real world in order to understand the culture of learning.

If a primary purpose of research is to increase awareness of ourselves and the world we live in, then it seems plausible to argue that understanding is a viable outcome of inquiry. The possibility of gaining new understanding involves investigating issues that have personal and public relevance. Research of this kind is imaginative, systematic, and inclusive and includes drawing on all kinds of knowledge, experience, and reasoning. If a goal of any inquiry is to be able to act on the knowledge gained, then it is reasonable to expect that understanding is as significant as explanation as an outcome of research. If this is accepted, then this quest for understanding means individual and social transformation is a worthy human enterprise, for *to know* means to be able to think and act and to thereby change things.

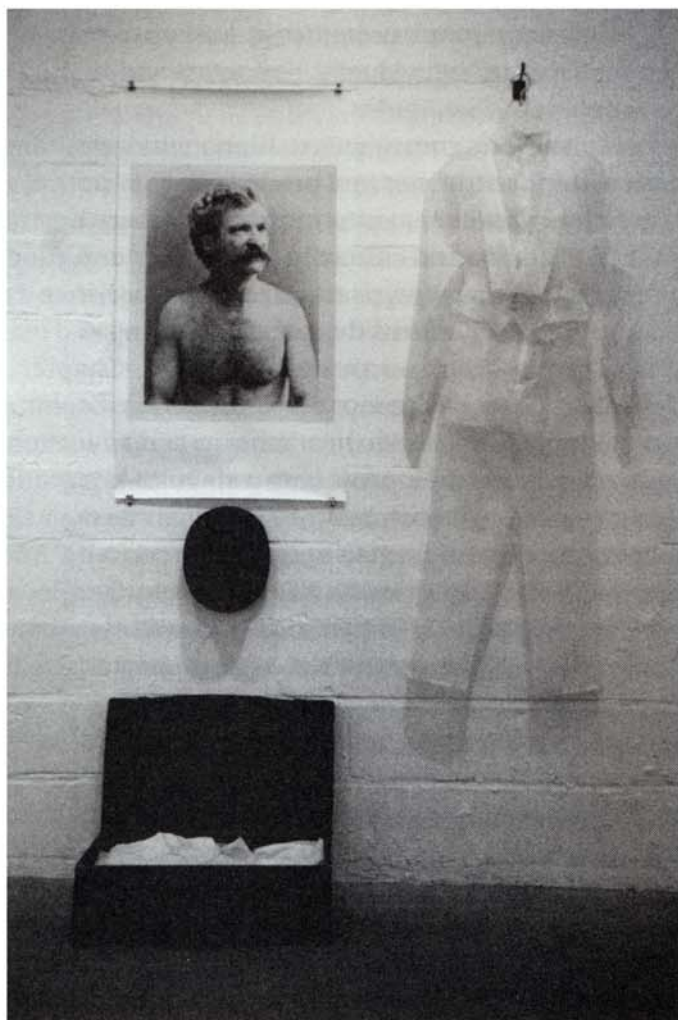
It can also be argued that the process of making art and interpreting art adds to our understanding as new ideas are presented that help us see in new ways. These creative insights have the potential to transform our understanding by expanding the various descriptive, explanatory, and immersive systems of knowledge that frame individual and community awareness. These forms of understanding are grounded in human experiences and interactions and yield outcomes that can be individually liberating and culturally enlightening.

My argument is that to appreciate how visual arts contributes to human understanding, there is a need to locate artistic research within the theories and practices that surround art making. It is from this central site of creative practice that other forms of inquiry emerge, such as critical and philosophical analysis, historical and cultural commentary, and educational experience. This notion is a far cry from the stereotype that sees art experience as a warm, fuzzy, and essentially private matter. Rather, it affirms that artistic thinking and making are cognitive processes, and this claim is taken up in more detail in Chapter 5. Furthermore, this asserts that the visual artist is not only adept at expression and communication but also plays a crucial role in cultural critique, historical inquiry, and educational development. Many artists these days do not confine their practice to a singular exploration of a signature style or particular focus on a recurrent theme, but they prefer to use their skill in methods and media to address broader questions of human and cultural concern. Anne Graham, for example, gives an indication of the issues artists take on when they locate aspects of their practice around creative investigations into historical and cultural themes.

Anne Graham's installation *Mark Twain's New Clothes* was part of a group show where the artists created work in response to a peculiar historical incident involving the celebrated American author and humorist, Mark Twain, which occurred in Newcastle on his visit to Australia in 1895. The artists involved in the exhibition, titled *New Adventures of Mark Twain: From Coalopolis to Metropolis*, were artist-scholars and authors who used an obscure historical moment as a pretext for critical reflection and creative interpretation. The imaginative and intellectual intensity of the ideas opened up by the artists in this exhibition cast a new light on art, culture, history, and the nature of research. I discuss this project in more detail in Chapter 8.

In her installation, Anne Graham takes on Twain (aka Samuel Clemens, aka Mr. Brown) and his many identities with a theoretical and imaginative relish. She strips him bare and hangs him out to dry. Graham lets us into Twain's world of fleeting finery and his witty world of multiple identities. She uses an ensemble of props that pose questions about his chameleon character, yet as she shows, these are relatively easy to see through. Graham constructs a visual analogy

about identity politics using the idea that clothing might cover things up, but in doing so it also reveals a truth. Analogies are a basic form of abstract representation that help viewers translate meaning by being shown an idea that is recognizable—in this case transparency—which is used to come to understand something that may be obscure—in Twain’s case, the reinvention of his identity. In this sense, Graham is using her art practice to bring a new understanding into play using a collection of related forms that are part of the imagery of Twain’s own story, but they may not have been fashioned quite like this before.



Anne Graham. *Mark Twain's New Clothes*
 1: *The Suit: I prefer to be clean in the matter of rainment—clean in a dirty world*

2: *The Hat*

3: *The Photograph*

4: *The Suitcase*

Dimensions variable. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

For my work in the exhibition I made the transparent white suit because it seemed to me he was always wearing a costume but it was also like the Emperor’s new clothes. He was always visible, and always on show. Then I found that beautiful photograph of him looking so wicked and wearing no clothes and you could see him as the humorous Twain, which is how he is mostly portrayed. In the later photographs you see the sadness as well, but my work is not really about that. It’s about the performance of Mark Twain, and the packaging of Mark Twain. The hat is there, because he used to wear black bowler hats with white suits, and I love bowler hats. And the hat is positioned to be more or less where you would put a hat if you were naked, standing in front of an audience. (Anne Graham, cited in Hill, 2007)