

*Practice and theory – potentials, pitfalls and some suggestions  
in relation to moving forward sideways*

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*So, tell me about your PhD ...*

Although when I was doing my PhD it seemed to me that the emphasis of the project was shifting quite frequently, in the final analysis, at the very heart of the thing, what I was interested in actually remained relatively constant all the way through, although that's of course always only really evident with some (nominally terminal) degree of hindsight.

This core concern is perhaps best thought of as a longstanding curiosity about what Ernst termed 'the effects of a systematic putting out of place'.

Initially my intention had been to explore this idea through site-specific photography and image manipulation, although for a variety of reasons, some aesthetic, others more pragmatic, at the very beginning of the project (and with the blessing of my advisors) the medium of my explorations shifted quite suddenly back towards the production of the object-based sculpture which had predominated during the early years of my career.

I have always been fascinated by the possibilities of using found (or perhaps acquired) objects to make art, and the unexpected ways in which stuff can be fitted together. In many ways this project was simply an extension of that juxtapositional mode of thinking to encompass ideas and theories which could, in turn, be assembled into new forms to shed light upon the act of assembling objects together.

The key thinkers in relation to this project were Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, although the former was the subject of my primary engagement by a substantial margin. Briefly, I was using his later work as a means of understanding certain aspects of what I was doing as an artist, although what also happened was that as I was doing so his writings began to bring to visibility the very process of connecting with his ideas - it became a kind of meta-dialogue. Similarly, the consideration of the artwork in relation to his writing/thinking also yielded some small (and yet I would argue significant) insights into certain contemporary developments of his philosophy. These insights came directly out of the consideration of the artworks and what they had to say (or perhaps show) in relation to his writing.

What I found particularly attractive about Wittgenstein's philosophical practice was its potential to act as a springboard or touchstone in the development of my own understandings and applications of his thinking - they left a space for something to happen - I never felt as if I was being subsumed into his project, which I've felt was a danger with certain other thinkers at times.

There's also an interest in clarity in his work which was absolutely essential for me,

and really helped me to keep my writing grounded, so that I could describe what happened in the project with as much honesty and clarity as I could muster.

Fundamentally, mine was a PhD about what it means to be making assemblage sculpture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and about understanding and contextualizing my work in that medium as thoroughly as possible (an approach which Katy Macleod characterizes as ‘revealing a practice’). It was also a project that extended and transformed my artistic methods (which might be characterized as finding, assembling and reflecting, and thought of as broadly parallel to those of Levi-Strauss’ bricoleur) into research methods. Finally, it was an exercise in constructing a narrative, and in being prepared to be surprised.

*What did you conclude as part of your exploration into the relation between making and thinking? Were these two activities conflicted? And, if so, how did you maintain a balance? This is something that all PhD students and supervisors I know struggle with.*

I think that for me, there was very little conflict between making and thinking for the majority of the project. The only exception was a brief period around the middle of the project, where I got a little frustrated because I had hit a plateau with the making, and I felt as if it needed to ‘catch up’ with the thinking a little. I knew that the work needed to change and move into the final phase, but although I could see this ‘in the abstract’, it was difficult to see exactly what needed to happen in the practice for this shift to occur. To use an analogy of a maze, I could see my potential destination beyond the hedgerows, but I still had to work my way through the labyrinth to get to it.

The idea of a ‘potential destination’ is an interesting thing in itself. From about the halfway point onwards, I recall having a steadily growing sense of the overall ‘composition’ of the project, or put another way, what the philosophical armature that held it all together would be, but it was only during the writing up period that I finally became absolutely clear about what that ‘shape’ was – a series of ‘comings to light’ in which the consideration of an atypical example of a phenomena led to the recognition and re-evaluation of a hitherto neglected or habituated aspect of the area of investigation.

The process of developing the ‘shape’ of the project bore striking similarities to the making of a sculpture. In both instances there was a kind of slow coalescence, which was simultaneously exhilarating and scary, as at times I felt that I really didn’t ‘know’ what I was doing, so all that I could do was trust in the unfolding of a complex process, which would hopefully resolve into something sufficiently interesting and satisfying for me to feel that I have arrived somewhere and that it’s time to stop.

For me there was very little distinction between thinking and making. For much of my career most of my making has arisen from a quite slow and thoughtful consideration of the properties and potentials of my materials, so the kind of thinking that informed the research was really just an extension of these ‘bricolage’ methods to encompass philosophical and theoretical texts and ideas as well as physical materials. What I have learnt from this is I now know that I have just as much of a penchant for the later writings of Wittgenstein as I have for vintage construction toy components.

What I didn't anticipate was the way in which Wittgenstein (and Bakhtin, amongst others) connected with, informed, described and clarified the making and the contexts that it took place in, or the surprising ways in which the work spoke back to these texts. In a sense I was talking to myself all the time, both through the making and through the reading and writing.

I think Donald Schon provides a kind of simple model for that, with his distinctions between 'knowing-in-action', 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action', but what he didn't really equip me for was the way in which different parts of my research process could speak to each other. It was that ability for knowledge to cross disciplinary boundaries that really surprised and enthralled me.

Balancing the writing and the making largely took care of itself. Deadlines will do that for you!

*One could even argue that there were not two aspects in your project, but only one ... Do you think this is to do with the specifics of your project, with what you were researching or is your experience perhaps hinting at a deeper model for a relationship between disciplines?*

I find it very difficult to separate the thinking from the making, especially at a remove distance from the actual experience of doing the PhD, as I completed a couple of years ago. I also think there's a deeper problem there, which I want to delve into in a moment, with a view to suggesting a possible way forward.

To begin, one might argue that a contingently more useful way of separating out the activities which take place in this kind of project is by thinking of them in terms of writing and making (which of course both involve thinking). A great deal of the clarification of what I was doing and the way in which various aspects of the project fitted together came through the process of writing.

Richard Menary traces an interesting lineage for this idea to Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, amongst others, while Katy Macleod suggests more specifically that you can think of the relationship between writing and making in practice-based research as a kind of 'see-saw', in which alternating periods of writing and making serve to destabilize each other and drive the project forward, although I'd argue that things don't often parcel themselves up as neatly as Macleod would seem to suggest.

For me this is where Wittgenstein really comes into his own, as he suggests an approach (or stance) predicated on striving towards as much clarity as possible. What he gave me was an awareness of the unreliability of language, specifically in terms of how it can map (or fails to map) what happens in the studio or in the writing process. That's not to say that we can't say anything about anything, but rather that we need to exercise caution, and keep referring back to what's actually happening in the practice and measuring it against its description in the writing.

Because we can talk about writing, thinking and making as discrete activities which sound as if they occur in their own very particular and well-defined compartments, I suspect that the self-sufficiency of these terms can lead us to lose sight of the way in

which they're all in reality intertwined and interdependent in subtle and complex ways which are not always readily apparent.

It's a little like life drawing; you always have to keep on looking. The moment at which you assume you know how something works and put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) without making that continuous reference back to what you're looking at is the moment when you can end up writing *around* what you are doing, rather than about it. That's not to say that writing around something can't be productive, but quite often what's happening in art isn't necessarily what we (as makers) think is happening in it. Or there's more; there's the possibility of what you are doing talking back to the contextual and theoretical framework that you've built around it/through it, but sometimes you have to listen (or look) quite hard for that, sometimes these things come as more of a whisper than a shout.

I've also come to see the relevance of Stafford's work on visual analogy in relation to these matters, and in particular her emphasis on the necessity of a recognition of similarity within difference, which in turn can facilitate the making of connections both within the practice and within the broader compositional schema of the project as a whole. I would argue that there's a place for a specific process of examination and clarification both at the very beginning of the PhD process (and continuing throughout it) that draws very specifically on these sources, as they can both function as 'reminders' (in the Wittgensteinian and thus ordinary sense of the word) to look and then look again.

*Where I want to take our conversation next is towards reception. How was your PhD work received by artists?*

Interestingly, it had quite a varied reception. I think there were times when the fact that the work was part of a practice-based PhD functioned as a barrier to some faculty members in the institution I was studying in. I think there was an assumption that the work was somehow being 'propped up' by theory. That's a notion that's anathema to me – I think it's absolutely central to my conception of what a practice-based PhD is that theory (or philosophy) and artistic practice enter into a lively and robust dialogue where each is able to contribute to the research process on its own terms, so I was quite surprised by that criticism, though I suspect that it may have had more to do with a suspicion of the practice-based PhD in general than anything else.

Outside the institution the reaction from my colleagues in my studio group and elsewhere was very positive on the whole. For me it was always important for the work to be able to function both as primarily as an artwork and then as a component in a dialogic research process, and I think that was hopefully born out in its reception.

*I love the idea of writing as looking and I have been concerned myself with the modes of writing an artist might take, for you know there is not one way of writing a PhD (or anything else, for that matter, as you know from Wittgenstein). Do you agree with this? Do artists write—or should write—differently from academics, historians, or physicists?*

I think that in some ways we do write differently from academics in other disciplines,

but that's only to be expected. Every discipline has its conventions and stylistic idiosyncrasies, and I don't think that we're any different in that respect. That said, in terms of having a presence in academia at doctoral level, we're a relatively young discipline, and there's still some debate about the how (and why) artists should write/work at this level, and that's only to be expected. I'd argue that having such conversations is a sign of a healthy, reflexive research culture which is questioning its priorities on an ongoing basis, so long may they continue!

The final point I'd like to make also relates to this matter. I suspect that one of the key challenges of the practice-based PhD, and one which makes it a different kind of path from both the MFA and professional doctorates like the DArt is the emphasis on a contribution to knowledge which can be recognized as such from outside the field, and has value in broad academic terms. That's not to say that I think we should abandon the knowledge that is embedded in our discipline – far from it – we need to be diligent in its pursuit and extremely vocal in its promotion, as I think that the lessons that can be drawn from and though artistic enquiry are near limitless.

The practice-based PhD provides the perfect opportunity for artists to really show the epistemological value of these kinds of investigations, and the benefits that such an approach can bring, both to our discipline, and to the wider academic context.