Foundations of a Creative Curriculum

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Thinking it Through: Insights into Artistic Cognition

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*A history of innovation in art and design education has cultivated generations of creative individuals. What can we gain by reconnecting with these pioneers and their experimental strategies?*

The creative work of the artist and academic research may seem like unlikely companions, even contradictory. The artist works in an environment of apparent freedom and lack of boundaries, where seemingly anything goes, while the researcher appears hidebound by discipline and the imposed conventions of academia. Art invites unfinished thinking, whereas academic research seeks rigour in systematic and formalised knowledge. However, new ways of knowing are being explored in research which includes artistic modes of investigation, of thinking in, through and with art. (Borgdorff, 2010) This project is just such an investigation.

Introduced to Basic Design over 30 years ago through the art education strand of my B.Ed. its principles have formed the bedrock of my art and design teaching in Secondary, Further and Higher Education, including a period of teacher training. Together with workshop activities, my teaching has involved leading programmes on art and design history. It is this that set me on a quest to ‘learn what intellectual talk better informs the practical
sensitivities’ (Wilde 1999). As member of NSEAD and a sporadic member of NAFAE, I have enjoyed their informative journals and conferences. In 1998 I was invited to curate a retrospective exhibition for my art education and painting tutor, John Horwill (RCA, 1927-1997), which led me to the National Arts Education Archive at Bretton Hall. The resulting exhibition was accompanied by slides and exercises from John’s collection which, I felt, gave a way into understanding his paintings.

Alongside teaching I have maintained a studio practice, which includes the usual trips to galleries and visits to artists’ workspaces. The Art and Design Practice-based MA, at Leeds Met. Uni. 1993 saw the beginnings in my practice of putting together grids with collage. Drawing on experience gained from teaching, watching students make their way with their developing artwork, and accompanied by reflections on my own practice; the process of bringing together materials with ideas, of modifying, reviewing and revising, of juxtaposition and overlay, of moving stuff round the table or wall in increasing complexity, has permeated discussion with colleagues and students alike.

With its foundations in the experimental strategies of Bauhaus and 1960s Basic Design, my PhD project collagegrids: thinking it through, 2017 is a practice-led investigation into artistic cognition.

The thesis, that is, the doctoral statement, is presented in two volumes. The collagegrids artwork is articulated in Volume One. It comprises a series of images of pages selected from five journals, which, together with preliminary studies, is punctuated with images of the studio and shows the different states of the emerging artwork.
Volume Two contains the written exegesis. The introduction, which addresses questions of theory and practice, is followed by a Commentary on Volume One, four discussion chapters, a conclusion and appendix.

Discussion One is an historical survey discussion on collage and on grids; and leads to Discussion Two, Towards a Theory of Practice. The third Discussion, titled Thinking it Through deals with collagegrids thinking, and the fourth discusses models and Modelling Cognition.

The exegesis draws on contextual study to elucidate the constructive composition of collagegrids, and to situate its conceptual framework in a wider field. It provides a parallel text which offers insight into a broader field of practice.

This research project is guided by two primary commitments, 1) to take seriously the cognitive content of artwork and 2) to be determinedly practice-led. It investigates the interplay between collage and grids in collagegrids practice, interrogating the *through* of thinking through art.

The project is predicated on the idea that the visual arts is considered a field of knowledge and that an artwork is, first and foremost, a thinking process.

There are circumstances where the best or only way to shed light on a proposition, a principle, a material, a process or a function is to attempt to construct something, or to enact something, calculated to explore, embody or test it. *(Bruce Archer, RCA, 1995)*

Rather than conceived of as prior, where theory is put into practice, in this artistic research, theory comes after, and is the finding of practice. This, in the words of Josef Albers,
...does not follow the academic conception of ‘theory and practice’. It reverses this order and places practices before theory, which after all is the conclusion of practice. (Albers, Interaction of Colour, 1963)

In ‘Theory in the Education of the Fine Artist’ (IJADE 18:1 1999), Caroline Wilde argues that art has its own distinctive determinations over and above its representative content. She writes that in the making of the work, just as in its reading and reception, is the centrality of an acute sensitivity to the open, fluid interplay of materials with ideas, of artwork with meaning that is at the crux of art.

This project aims to get inside this process in order to ‘refine our understanding of art as thought’ (Macleod and Holdridge, Thinking through Art 2006). It is a ‘formalisation and concretisation of what already exists, but which is underdefined’. In Jeremiah Day’s words

What is needed is a bottom-up interrogation, not a top down, to preserve the place of becoming before being informed by contextual study. (Day, 2013)

To do this, I use the active documentation method of Nancy de Freitas (Freitas, 2002). My journals document the process of artwork, making concrete what already exists. In photographs and handwritten notes, the journals record the ‘complexity of overlap’ of practice, that is, the complex overlap of personal, theoretical and practical concerns and issues that arise in practice.

In practice, found and selected papers are coloured and cut, modified and assembled into new arrangements, composed through gestures of the hand as well as of the mind. The cut and stick composition, continually modified, worked over, extended and revised, emerges ‘through’ the working process.
The work of others comes to mind through associations provoked by the process. These include the flickering of Mondrian’s ‘Broadway Boogie Woogie’, Mark Bradford’s urban collages, the mark accumulations of Cy Twombly’s, Schwitters’ coloured compositions, John Cage’s notations, aerial photographs together with other links and connections.

In Herta Muller words...

The texts are laid out in from of me – they do not need to be recalled, imagined or searched for – they are simultaneously available – you push them round with your hand until you say to yourself; that’s how I want it.

And further,

Of course you know what you want, but the moment you do it, it becomes a chance act...and if it turns out to be a fortunate co-incidence then you’re satisfied and leave it be, even though you know that if it had been a day later or at a different time, everything would have been different.


Through the increasing complexity of bringing together, associating, linking and connecting, collagegrids becomes a compound of correlations, a simultaneous sequential of things and events, a composition (Vol 2, p.43).

On looking through my journals, what becomes evident is

The thinking that constitutes collagegrids is contingent, composite and inclusive, open to that which is aligned with personal concerns and projects.
Arising from juxtaposition, thinking is non-linear.

It is partial and fragmentary, and is

Open to a form of synesthetic interplay of non-verbal, pre-verbal and premonitory, where thinking draws on inner physiological contingencies of sensing and feeling,

Resulting in emergent composition.

This thinking is primarily associative and generative,
Not imposed or pre-supposed, the new composition emerges from the interplay of materials with ideas through a decision making process, through reflexive deliberation.

Drawing on 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century history, critical theory and philosophy, Discussion One explores the fields of collage and grids.

Presented as mutually exclusive or conflicting discourses in the history of art, grids and collage exist in parallel, each having their own discourse, strategies and associations.

However, far from being universally fixed, grids are shown to be contingently laid out according to the designer’s intention. And collage, rather than being arrived at by free floating chance, is aligned with the artist’s concerns and projects.
When focussed on process, the how of making, study shows artists engaging with materials and in the decision making of material handling, or thinking through practice. This calls for theory that asserts the primacy of practice.

To assert the primacy of practice is a refusal to accord primacy to language and this is what is maintained in relation to the emergence of self-consciousness (Archer, 2000:121).

Discussion Two, *Towards a Theory of Practice* seeks a way of understanding and theorising collagegrids, where practice is the object of study, not its social systems or the phenomenological self.

Following sociologist Margaret Archer, this research identifies aspects of human agency not defined by the socially structured situation, namely, that which is personal and individual to practice. In *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Archer rejects contemporary social theory that seeks to diminish human properties and powers and reclaims the personal in agency. She refutes Lyotard, ‘a self does not amount to much’ (Lyotard, 1984:15) and what she refers to as the ‘social imperialism and linguistic terrorism’ of postmodernism, arguing that postmodernism not only asserts the primacy of linguistic structure over agency, it ultimately seeks to dissolve the human subject entirely.

Instead of reinstating Enlightenment and Positivist Man with his incorporeal consciousness, ‘God’s eye view’ and ‘outsider’ standpoint promoting separation of humanity from the non-human or ‘natural’ world, Archer argues that human agents possess properties and powers, such as thinking, deliberating, believing, intending, loving and so forth, which are applicable to people but never to social structures or cultural systems (Archer 2003:2), which enable the individual to act ‘so rather than otherwise’ in situations guided by the person’s own concerns and projects. She points out that it is humans that have ideas and that social
structures do not. Archer proposes that structures and agency together determine society's trajectory, where the self is not universally given, but is contingently made (Archer 2000:23).

Archer defends 'that...which is indeed inner and private', but is better captured by conceptualising it as 'inner conversation', whose reporting has nothing to do with observational reports (Archer 2003:23). Not introspective, as in looking inwards, Archer rejects the observational model and replaces sight by hearing. The shift in position that takes place is one from a passive 'looking in' to active participation: of speaking, listening and responding (Archer 2003:54).

Predicated on an internal differentiation of the self, into the ‘Me’, my past, the ‘I’ of the immediate self, and the future ‘You’, parts converse with each other in reflexive deliberation (Archer 2003:71); dependent on temporality, and operating over different tracts of time. Courses of action are produced ‘through’ deliberation. They include planning, rehearsing, mulling-over, deciding, prioritising, imagining, clarifying and re-living, all of which constitute mental activities of internal conversation (Archer 2003:161).

Following Archer, all ideas begin life as thoughts, someone has to have them and unless they are publically shared they remain private. Ideas about inner conversation can be articulated, and are shared by publishing them (Archer, 2010).

Externalised, the open, fluid deliberations of practice are replaced by systems of chronologically documented thoughts, which aligned with personal concerns and projects are assembled into ideas.

The theorising effect extinguishes the ‘Me’, ‘I’ and ‘You’ of conversation rendering all internal thinking, that is the mode of production, into externalised formalised ideas, products which take on a life of their own, to take up their abode as new ‘theory’, contributing to the ‘Universal Library of Humankind’ that is knowledge.

Themes of grids and collage can be traced in this discussion of structure and agency, where grids assume the fixed structure of the inherited found, the coordinating features of alignment, and collage, the contingent, composite and inclusive, of intervention and change, which, crucially, is mediated through the internal conversation of human agency.
Discussion Three, *Thinking it Through*, explores courses of action produced through the deliberations of collagegrids. It adds collecting, selecting and distribution, those strategies of collage, and principles of linear and module alignment, of grids structuring to Archers list. It also adds the reflexivity of improvisation and interplay, of materials with thinking, that generates emergent relations of entities, though juxtaposition, alignment and overlay.

The notion of interplay describes a form or mode of relations between things and improvisation, it’s very fast version. Inherited from art school, where students are encouraged to engage in experimentation for its own sake, the idea that ‘play’ is central to imparting important theoretical discoveries was developed by Bauhaus teachers, including Itten, Klee, and Albers, who had more than casual ties with Froebel’s kindergarten teaching. Many Bauhaus and subsequent art school projects ‘appear to have been devised as more adult extensions and developments of Frobelian occupations’ (Lerner, 2005).

Bauhaus teaching includes exercises of tactile and sound perception, theatrical movement, compositional balance, volumes, statics, dynamics, and qualities of light, where ‘teachers and pupils together would construct the world’. Although presented as a set of controlled exercises, Itten noted, ‘the basic goal of my efforts to teach art had always been the development of the creative personality’ (Itten, *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus*, 1963).

The fluctuating osmotic exchange of human reflexive play, of materials with idea; of collage with grids; of structure with agency; of kinaesthetic with synesthetic; of non-discursive and discursive; of colour with line; of time with space, is the *through* of thinking *through* collagegrids.

My fourth discussion explores and tests theories of cognition. It introduces the materially anchored cognitive process of collagegrids to the linguistically based field of metaphor studies and cognitive science. This complicated process of emergent composition constructs simultaneously in the field of the material concrete as well as in the conceptual domain. Artwork constructs mental space. It constructs the person as much as the person constructs the artwork.

This project presents collagegrids composition as a fundamentally constructive way of world-making. It argues for a materially anchored thinking process, a non-linear logic of
association, where meaning lies in the links, alignments and connections made in the resolution of tension arising from the juxtaposition of difference.

The project articulates the back and forth movement of practice as reflexive deliberation. This primarily non-verbal mode of thinking brings together sensuous knowing with the world of conceptual knowledge in an interplay of the inherited found and contingent immediacy, activated by and mediated through the decision - making of human agency.

In conclusion, this project advances a mode of artistic exegesis which promotes intellectual talk, namely theory that addresses art’s distinctive determinations.

By reconnecting with these Bauhaus inspired innovative teachers and their experimental strategies we can engage in their pioneering practices in order to learn that intellectual talk which better informs practical sensitivities. We can generate intellectual conversation which not only preserves the place of becoming, but also promotes acute sensitivity to the thinking/making exchange that is, after all, at the crux of art.

There is still so much to be drawn into the present from these pioneers of the past. This research study constitutes a minor part of a very much wider project.

In the words of Bruno Latour

We have taken science for realist painting, imagining that it made an exact copy of the world. The sciences do something else entirely – paintings too, for that matter. Through successive stages they link us to an aligned, transformed, constructed world.


For the full PhD thesis by Eisner, Cilla (2017) Collagegrids: thinking it through, a practice-led investigation into artistic cognition. University of Lincoln, visit http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/27698/
References


