

Inventive Synergy: Studio-based Research Beyond Reflective Practice

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A studio-based doctoral research project is a peculiar two-pronged process, aimed towards an outcome of both artwork and writing. My own recently completed PhD *Ambivalent Belonging* is an in-depth investigation into the meaning of simultaneous cultural belonging and not belonging, from the point of view of personal experience. This paper will focus on the relationship between writing and practice as equal and different components of the thesis and on the inventive nature of its methodology, beyond commonly proposed models. I will discuss how I worked in synergy towards a successful outcome.

I consider the whole thesis, that is, studio work *and* writing, as an art project; and I regard this project as a complex mapping of several journeys in one, like a Deleuzian rhizome route system, a Situationist *dérive*, or a Benjaminian *flânerie*. I will come back to these terms. They suit not only the structuring of the research; they underpin important facets of its arguments as well. I consider theoretical referencing itself as a form of mapping, constructing a 'holding environment', through which thoughts and ideas move.

This research was undertaken from within a visual art perspective, rather than an investigation into visual art. Graeme Sullivan's *Art Practice as Research; Inquiry into the Visual Arts* (2005) is a recent study of existing and evolving methodologies and strategies for using art practice as research. It is now well accepted that art practice can constitute research along with a written component, but to work in synergy, writing and artwork must be capable of responding to each other and be autonomous; they move alongside each other as well as face each other, touch, depart and intertwine.

The task was to construct both parts of the thesis as a coherent whole; their levels and directions interconnected and in relation to the central question. In the straight linearity of a timeline there was nowhere to go except forward, but in this investigation into personal, lived experience, I was surrounded by myriad facets, and was by no means sure of any directions or routes.

How did an initial idea develop in multiple directions, through two distinct modes of expression, without turning into chaos?

Initially, I imagined the whole research process as circular. So rather than it being in front of me, as a task ahead, I saw myself as always already within it, wandering around, looking for

meanings. Thinking this way I could begin to map ideas, with routes in any direction, more like a web or net. Connecting wandering and meaning led to the writings of Michel de Certeau whose chapter 'Walking in the City' in *The Practice of Everyday Life* is rich in metaphors that are useful for understanding the possibilities and complexities of mapping and walking in relation to 'uttering' (1988: 98-99). I applied these tactics to my own investigation, so I had a lot of room to move in any direction. This was at first full of gaps and question marks and structural errors. Over time, it gave a sense of space and of being surrounded or held by the net of the research itself.

The lack of a clearly defined outer parameter was both problematic and helpful. Not knowing how wide or how far this questioning of lived experience might reach, I was nonetheless able to locate and connect ideas loosely, by following trains of thought and drawing mind maps. This non-linear research process was labour-intensive and slow, developing gradually through evolving connections through layers, holding now this, then that. Over time, an outer parameter gradually emerged from many small accumulating links between numerous fragments.

Eventually, the circular concept became limited, unevenly dense and no longer useful. Clusters were forming around questions and thoughts, unevenly filling out, taking shape. I became preoccupied with the material expression of ideas, and with the internal structure of writing.

Before writing, there is what is thought. I became practiced at following and noting down trains of thought, in response to reading, observing, experimental studio-work; and particularly by pursuing memories, even dreams. And although little of these notes may eventually be retained, it was crucial to have written the whole thought process.

How did I construct and apply an inventive methodology that embraced studio practice, theories and writing? What took place?

I investigated the proposed model for a methodology, in particular Donald Schon's *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1995). Initially developed for education research, the term 'reflective practice' appeared at once too broad' and in its explication by Schon, too narrow. I recognised its logic and value and yet realised that its proposed methods addressed only partially and intermittently what actually took place in my research. The reflective practitioner is a professional with a particular set of actions that are under investigation. They are reflected upon, then after writing down findings and ideas for improvements these plans are put into practice. This is once again reflected upon, etcetera. Finally, the sum of one's observations and conclusions becomes a report (Schon 1995).

My thesis does not aim for such an outcome. Its processes of research do alternate continually, but not in sequence, they can be partial and simultaneous. The alternating approach, suitable to classroom observation, does not equate studio research where making, reflecting, writing and reading overlap. These diverse modes of working do not follow the reflective practice model. They rather include searching for equivalents or echoes in philosophical discourse that may suggest ways of thinking that are layered, mobile and interconnected, and which can become

models for a creative methodology. Philosophical concepts can lead to deep insight and be used to underpin the structure of the research.

In the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Carolyn Ellis writes in her discussion of what she calls 'reflexive autoethnographic research' that she starts from the position that language is not transparent and that there is no single standard of truth. Rather than portraying facts it is to do with conveying meanings, attached to experiences (2000: 751). But I sense a gap between the desire to be understood and the refusal to become wholly transparent. Becoming eloquent means moving between these two: becoming clear about what is at stake, through questioning, visualising, and showing rather than explaining. Questioning is about being inventive and sensitive to nuance: tactics. It is about curiosity too; what else is at stake, how? Inventiveness becomes necessary when the methodology is not 'given'. But how does an *inventive* methodology apply to the project in a rhizomatic way, a *dérive* way or a *mêlée* way?

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of rhizomes is tempting and useful. These shallow horizontal connections are unstable, mazelike, ungrounded, and not deep-rooted. They are also problematic because once they are taken out of context they can acquire a utopian flavour. Deleuze and Guattari do not reject the importance of the taproot, but emphasize the tenacity and virulence of shallow rhizomatic interconnectedness, as a force in the world (1987: 6-12). As an important aspect of rhizomatic mapping, they refer to a 'plane of consistency', a surface that includes even that which does not usually belong or fit, including random fragments, and that is open to forming new and open-ended connections (Corner 1999: 245).

According to Situationist leader Guy Debord, a *dérive* is 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' in which one allows oneself to be 'drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters ...' and 'the taste for *dériving* tends to promote all sorts of new forms of labyrinths ...' (1958 unpagged). Jean Luc Nancy uses the term *mêlée*, which implies a 'crisscrossing, weaving, exchanging, sharing ... never a single thing' (2000: 150-151).

The contemplation of situations and experiences frequently lead me to forms of expression other than writing. But in reflective practice it seems that artwork becomes compared with fieldwork, resulting in writing that is an explanation of one's findings. My studio practice is not a conceptual equivalent to fieldwork and follows no regular alternating pattern. It could perhaps be argued that a final artwork or series of artefacts can function as an equivalent, but this does not resolve the question of their relationship with the written component. I was fortunate that the focus of my research, the experience of *ambivalence*, led to insights that translated across into the process of working towards a dual outcome. This enabled each mode to filter through and into the other, in my mind and in the work.

Walter Benjamin's notion of *flânerie* applies to many aspects of the investigation. His tactic of straying is applicable to labyrinths other than the city: to think of the thesis as a labyrinth, encourages 'wandering' as a *dérive* with the aim of seeing its premises and connections anew (Benjamin 1979: 298-99, Debord 1958). Benjamin differentiates between not finding one's way, which is banal, and 'losing oneself' which involves becoming attentive to details. He highlights the importance of his own remembered experience of the Paris metro tunnels, which he links to

his *flaneries* (1979: 298-99). This idea of tunnelling underground from platform to platform, surfacing here and there, is like following thoughts and memories and appears akin to Deleuzian rhizomes: all lines and plateaus.

Benjamin relates the past in an analytical way for the emotional responses to its places and events (Gilloch 1996). 'Reading oneself backwards' he calls memory (Sontag 1980: 115-16). Susan Buck-Morss writes, following Benjamin: 'whichever form they took, such images were the concrete, 'small, particular moments' in which the origins of the present could be found' (1991: 71). I have borrowed this method, tracing the experience of ambivalent belonging back through memories beyond migrancy, through adolescent city drifting, to childhood alienation, asking 'what led towards it; what took place that made it possible?' until ambivalence was found as a trace in infant memories. As these earliest recollections became understood within the context of the research they began to propel forward, enabling expression.

Experience, or 'what has been lived through' (Bruner 1986: 4) is my field of enquiry, so that reflection by necessity becomes self-reflection. Reflecting on memories is quite different from reflecting on practice in that there is nothing solid to work with. Only through my own articulation can memories become tangible. Memories are complex. Remembering well involves questioning; becoming attentive to finest nuances within layered mental images.

Collage, as a construction method, is relevant and useful, as it is to do with layers, as well as with a sense of composition, or narrative structure. Stories are necessary to give meaning to experience. Meaning runs through the *layers* of writing. Zygmunt Bauman, in *Culture as Praxis* (1999: 96), refers to Roland Barthes who proposes that meaning is 'an order with chaos on each side, but this order is essentially a division', and 'meaning is above all a cutting out of shapes' (Barthes 1968: 56-57). These theories helped me move my thinking beyond subjective interpretation, so that I could question my own understanding and keep it lively, open. It was all done from inside *and* outside disciplinary conventions.

The difficulty with these ways of working is the potential endlessness of multiplicities. As memories were under intense investigation, that which surfaced as relevant material was often embedded or entangled in other intense recollections. Here the role of the supervisor as attentive listener was invaluable.

'Once experience becomes coherently expressed it becomes a narrative', remarks Edward Bruner (1996: 3-4). I propose that it creates a framework, or holding space, for something that is being made clear. The idea of a holding environment is a psychoanalytic term, developed by Donald Winnicott. About *holding* Winnicott writes: '[this] goes for the physical holding of the intra-uterine life, and gradually widens in scope.... In the end, this concept can be extended to include the function of the family ...' (Winnicott 1986: 27). This theory, which strongly links to key aspects of my research into the experience of belonging, can itself be adapted, from the nurturing of an initial idea to eventually include the structure of the entire thesis. It is an example of the way in which theories that underpin my thoughts provide the structures and methodologies of the research.

How could studio-based research and reflective dissertation face each other, work together and be autonomous?

By conceiving of the whole thesis as an art project I stretched the idea of creative studio practice to include all aspects of the research. This led to the simultaneity of working as an uneven interchange; one or the other getting the overhand. A regular alternating rhythm was never sustained; working patterns always dissolved.

There were long periods during which I experienced writing and making as entirely interconnected; together, yet different, each involved in observations, dilemmas and responses, with differing perspectives in different locations. Both, as forms of uttering, are language. But I dislike thinking of artwork and writing as 'two different languages'. Connected through the central question of belonging, their separateness is in reality not so great; they are in dialogue with each other; they intersect.

The thesis is a complexity of accumulating and interacting fragments. It is about creating a transitional space that is 'creative because it is provisional and inconclusive' (Minsky 1998:59). The disadvantage perhaps is that it took a long time before the thesis became internally coherent enough to be read by anyone other than myself.

Free association thoughts lead to both studio experimentation and academic research, via word associations. These tend to continually shift their focus to different facets. How does writing inform making? Reading leads to thoughts that drift away from the text and that may eventually, or immediately, lead to material responses and vice versa.

Studio processes or methods and the subject of art research are not separate but infiltrate each other all the time, so theories are relevant in a multi-layered way. Writing, as a form of enquiry, is one important facet of the cluster of methods that together form the methodology. Instead of searching for theories that 'back up' my writing, I read around topics in relation to where my thinking had led me. I did this constantly. I copied quotes, later to rephrase or summarise.

Gregory Ulmer in *Heuretics* (1994) shows how connections can be made between widely diverse elements through their common aspect, which is their relationship to the research topic, so that these elements can respond to each other, become lively. Ulmer introduced me to the concept of *chora*. A complex and elusive Platonic idea, Ulmer describes *chora* as 'an inherently ambiguous space and always in the between position, in the middle' (1994: 65). I think of *chora* as a holding environment, a filter. How does this manifest in the thesis? Eventually all the different strands of the investigation accrue towards this space of ambivalence, in an evolving, organic process.

How does this artwork/writing function as articulate communication?

I validate questioning itself as an important aspect of a successful thesis. Questions that remain unanswered in writing may well be addressed more eloquently in artwork than could ever be achieved in words, while sensitivity to nuance in studio-work can be applied to the use of language as succinct as well as poetic metaphorical means of expression. Conceiving of the writing as artwork means turning writing into an object of desire that is in process of becoming.

I began an analytical editing process that included displacing and replacing fragments and sections, gradually strengthening relationships between these, defining themes and developing chapters. The difficulty with large quantities of writing is that editing is slow and chaotic at times. On the other hand, it can lead to depth of understanding as meaningful connections are formed. Eliminating excess was a strangely agonising process of letting go of attachments, which I made bearable by allowing these throw-outs to accrue in a *leftover* file. This process took more than a year and was followed by another six months of further condensing, eliminating, and recombining: becoming eloquent. At that time, the different voices that run through the text became clear enough to allow for play with and within the writing itself. I began to conceive of pages in a geographical sense as layered mappings in a linguistic installation.

The challenge is to make sense of fragmented aspects and form connections while keeping open the potentiality of ongoing change, in life, in the structure of the thesis and in the focus of the research, which argues for the validity of ambivalence.

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