Bill Leslie

Aphorisms

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"He already knows all the hiding places in the apartment and returns to them as to a house where everything is sure to be just as it was. His heart pounds, he holds his breath. Here he is enclosed in the world of matter. It becomes immensely distinct, speechlessly obtrusive. In such manner does a man who is being hanged become aware of the reality of rope and wood."

Walter Benjamin

"It is by having hands that man is the most intelligent of animals"

Anaxagoras

The Hand

As both the thing I rely on every day to conceive and realise my work, and as the expression of my whole approach to research, the hand is probably the most important thing.

Creative practice is a kind of embodied philosophy.

If Anaxagoras was right that humans are intelligent because they have hands, then this gives us a clue that knowledge is not purely intellectual, but also inscribed in our daily bodily engagement with the stuff of the world. This is not something we should take for granted, it requires us to actively persist in our practical dealings with nature and culture. If, as artists, designers, architects and students, we use the process of making as a means of posing questions, then we are engaged in a type of embodied philosophy, discovering things for ourselves by getting our minds and our hands dirty.

Archaeologists

In talking about hands recently, Dean said, what about archaeologists? Their knowledge is largely centred on the handling of things. Digging them up, brushing them off, piecing them together; a means of gaining knowledge through the handling of material.

The Artefact

The artefact, unlike the artwork, is something which demands handling.

"What's the point of making metal look like plastic,
if you can't touch it to see it's not plastic?"

There was a Jeff Koons exhibition at the Serpentine years ago of inflatable pool toys – but all cast in iron and painted trompe l'oeil. There was extra security at the show and on entry you were told at length not to touch. But there was something about the work that begged you to touch it, everyone knew it. I read an article about a guy taking his three boys to it and how they were followed constantly by museum guards, the boys seeing this as a challenge to try to touch everything they could. How could you ask three young boys not to touch when the illusion is so startling? Perhaps that was the point, the whole thing was a tease. I touched the lobster, it was hard.

She only says one thing before they go in. ‘Don’t worry. You won’t get in any trouble.’

At what point does this become political?

Until recently I have never thought of my research, or the art I make, as political. It has always seemed more technical, arty and self-reflective. However, I am coming to see that as a practice, a way of going about the making of art, it may have unexpected political implications. It is a model for a type of engagement with the world, with material and technology that is very hands-on and practical, but equally thoughtful and uncompromising. It stands against the type of time, thought and expectations of globalised capitalism. It is in many ways inefficient; it asks questions without seeking defined or certain answers. It is unequivocal in the responsibility it assumes for what it does in its entirety. I undertake every part of it, and I take responsibility for each of these parts and for the work as a whole. Why hand-process film? Why get hold of a crappy old VHS camera? Why make objects by hand? Perhaps because the practical processes with which I work are all within my sphere of understanding and control (even when they run away from me). I do not let iPhoto create an effortlessly smooth slide-show of my work. I try to battle with the obstinate materiality of the media and materials that I choose to work with.

The approach to handling technology

One of the big discoveries of this project has been regarding the technology I use, or more precisely the way in which I use it. I had thought that the quality of the image produced by the various media I employ would be the central question of the research – how do the particular qualities of the media affect the viewer's grasping of the object it presents? This, I now realise as I am forming a deeper understanding of the specific nature of practical research, is not really a practical question. It is posed from a theoretical standpoint and could as easily be answered with reference to the work of others, centred as it is around the presentation of the final work. In practice what emerges as critical, is the process of making itself, within which the practical considerations of working with the technology become as important, if not more so, than consideration of the quality of the image. That the Phantom slow-motion camera requires so much light that it must be set always to a wide aperture and must be kept on a static tripod, conditions the way in which it can be worked with. Likewise, my wind-up 16mm camera can only shoot in thirty second bursts, and it has no viewfinder, so all focus settings must be set with a tape measure, creating a slower and very particular way of working. These working conditions become key to the generation of artistic ideas and of the type of laboratory-style conditions I aspire to. What happens to an object when shot on a specific camera, becomes much more a question of how the camera and object can be brought together in the studio. The question of how the image quality itself affects the look or feeling of the object, becomes more a question of the analysis of the resulting material.

The Rapid Results College

I see this from the train. A building backing onto the tracks. It makes me question. Does this constitute the new reality of education? In this market driven establishment is there any space to drift, to discover for yourself, to think? Is there anything left to learn which has not already been quantified? Is education now completely at the mercy of economics?

Working with other people has become a central feature and joy of this research; whether with workshop participants or undergraduates who help crew my shoots. Being amongst other people, laying bare the process of making; allowing the research questions to exist in the world for other people to hear and get involved with. These have been daunting but ultimately rewarding experiences. The openness and generosity of other people when you are open and generous toward them is striking. There seems to be something about the straightforwardness of the approach which allows people to engage with the work. This is not to suggest that it is simplistic, shallow or closed. Rather the premises are clear and the acknowledgement at each stage that the result is undecided and will be simply what is disclosed by the process, seems to allow for engagement.

The denigration of practice

It's surely true that, since Plato and his debasement of the perceptual world in favour of the reality of rationalised forms, Western society has prized the intellect over the senses. This can be seen acutely in education and academia where the practical subjects are seen inevitably as inferior to academic ones. The push to expand university education during the New Labour government could be interpreted as a symptom of this prejudice. The middle classes populating the Cabinet saw expanding university places as a way of spreading opportunity to those less well off. The present government's focus on apprenticeships reveals an old-fashioned Tory expectation that those of a 'lower class' should be given what is appropriate to their place in society. Of course, 'class' has been displaced with the idea of 'merit' but this is something of a misnomer given the impact that upbringing and social background is acknowledged to have on children's prospects. Is it possible then to conceive of a practical education that is not considered subordinate, that acknowledges the rigorous intellectual work that is required in practical activity?

Crawford describes intuition as an aptitude based on knowledge, experience and expertise. It is a kind of understanding born from hands-on contact with the world. Why do firefighters often leave the burning building moments before its collapse? When asked they cannot provide a rational explanation. It is the intuition amassed by daily dealing with similar complex situations. Were they to rationalise their decision-making in that moment, they would be dead. What this points to is the complexity of situations, where intellectual consideration, stepping back, will not provide the answer. Crawford describes this in relation to fixing old motorbikes. The intuition is in the handling of parts, knowing how this works with that. This kind of knowledge is manual in character, it is an embodied and worldly type of thinking and for Crawford it is tied up with technology; of wrestling with complex and contrary machines, which do not behave in the straightforward way explained in the manual. The old bike is worn and dirty; there are so many possible reasons for it to break down. This kind of difficulty has characterised our relationship with technology in the mechanical era and for my Grandfather's generation, tinkering with motors, fixing kitchen appliances, video recorders, were enlivening, if frequently frustrating, experiences. Intuitive technology by contrast does not require intuition at all. On the contrary a new type of technological user has been created, one that expects machines to operate effortlessly in their hands without the need for experience or knowledge. These technologies work by anticipating our needs and wants and providing choices which appear as we think of them. They structure a kind of stupidity. Intuition shifts from an empowering expertise born of difficulty to effortless edification.

Style is key here; there are no controlled tests; there is no set of procedures which will be run through in a systematic way. There is, however, a sense of experimentation, of setting up a series of tests, the outcomes of which are not predetermined. The terms of each experiment may be loosely conceived, but will amount to something like, ‘lets try using this technique with this set of objects and see what is revealed’. The material (usually film) which results can then be reviewed and discussed. Usually something interesting will appear and this can then be looked at in more detail at another shoot, or in the editing suite. Sometimes, it is what initially appears to be a failure, that turns out most interesting.

Open-ended testing can also exist within teaching practice, and as the project has progressed, I have begun to create workshops that explore modes of experiential learning and exploration. Some of the most revealing have been those where I have asked participants to work together without talking. What emerges is a type of interaction - with one another, with the materials, with the space – that is quite different in quality from workshops in which participants are allowed to speak. There is no planning, no negotiation before action. Communication happens through an intensity of eye contact and body movement, through making gestures, sometimes with materials or in relation to objects and the space. People learn about one another and what it is they are doing and creating together through the act of doing and making. Laughter is inevitable, a response perhaps to the awkwardness of the situation, but also due to the surprise felt when things occur that are not planned and appear to happen spontaneously. When bringing a particularly lively session to a close at Tate Modern one of the participants said, 'it feels like playtime is over!'

When the camera isn't locked-off, it can roam and becomes an active presence in the creation of the visual. It is the one doing the seeing and the moving; it has subjective presence. This point-of-view style shot is usually reserved for moments when the audience sees through a character's eyes and is thus brought back into the narrative structure of the film. In Hitchcock's films, the camera often sits at an awkward angle within the frame, just behind someone's head or too close beside them. It is no longer an objective outside aperture (the omnipotent view of the director) framing the action, nor is it narrativised as the 'view' of an individual character. These shots bring the camera into the world of the film, in amongst the characters and objects.

Shaky camera work

I shot a reel of colour 16mm as a test. I had bought the film months earlier but could not conceive of the right way to use it. Perhaps there was too much pressure because it had been paid for with a bursary, and I had a lot to shoot all in one go. I wanted to test the camera to make sure the exposure was good and so shot a bunch of footage of familiar objects (feeling somewhat uninspired). I had a friend with me to help with the exposure settings. He urged me to keep on and not give up. Because of this impetus, I was less careful than usual and shot much of the footage from fixed positions, but without a tripod. The resulting footage is frantically shaky and quite hard to watch. The whole thing seemed to have nothing to offer. But watching it back sometime later with Jo, she suggested that maybe it was precisely this that was the most interesting thing. The footage was obviously hand-held and yet not moving around or exploring the objects as you might expect. Why have a hand held shot and not take advantage of the fact? Why was it stuck in one position when clearly able to move? This was producing the feeling of frustration, of the footage not being good enough, not working. But in this seeming failure something potentially more interesting began to open up. Perhaps the interest lay precisely in this sense of frustration.

The locked-off camera

In a project that states the importance of the camera as active presence within the work, it might be assumed that the locked-off camera, (with its claim to objectivity; which effaces its presence in order to empower its perspective), would be best avoided. As it turns out, however, locked-off shots have been the most frequently used in my film shoots. To be active and present the camera does not have to move. Its presence allows for action to take place, for exploration to begin.

Quality

My research will be judged on the quality of its questioning, the method and the outcome. But this outcome itself may be dispersed, inconclusive, personal. It will be the bringing together of what has been found on the particular path that I and the research have taken.

'As artists we must learn to be comfortable with uncertainty', she tells her students. I imagine some look at her with an expression that says, 'Yeah sure, but what about the marking criteria?' It's a big ask, especially after seven years of secondary education. In the first lecture I attended as an undergraduate, the tutors tried to explain what 'theory' was and said we would never read or understand all of it, and that there were many different theories that all contradicted each other. This made no sense to me at all and it was more than a little frustrating. Surely there is a right answer to everything? There is an accepted way of doing things, that is therefore the best way. The uncertainty of even that moment was difficult. Learning slowly that there were strange and unconventional ways of doing things, and that these were worth pursuing because they were strange and unconventional, was at odds with everything I had taken as read before. Later in that course, the role of theory (and of university education) was spelled out to us. It was an attitude in which you learn how to question, not take anything for granted or at face value. How to question strikes me as something we must keep on learning.

Representation in film and photography studies is traditionally characterised with the opposition of the original and the reproduction. There is a tacit assumption in this language that one, the 'original', is superior, is the master to its copy. From this, springs a comparative language of lack, of loss, of inadequacy. The copy, as Derrida has said, is a copy precisely because of its difference. A perfect copy, indistinguishable from its original would cease to be a copy. Ginzburg says, "on the one hand the "representation" stands in for the reality that is represented, and so invokes absence; on the other hand, it makes that reality visible, and thus suggests presence." The representation is then simultaneously present and absent. It is a vehicle for transmitting something from the invisible beyond into our perception, whilst always already caught in an inevitable failure to bring the reality of that beyond into full awareness.

Apotheosis

Will my research have a 'highest point of development; a culmination or climax?' It seems now that it is more likely to spread out laterally, become a cloud of interconnecting parts, in themselves partial, in their sum incomplete.

Lateral Learning

In my job as a creative practitioner in a Special School, I was congratulated on my work by an Ofsted advisor and told that what I was doing, or offering to my students, was 'lateral learning', a term coined to deal in some way with the teaching of children whose learning does not progress in the way that a child attending a mainstream school would be expected to. Lateral learning is the repetition and reinforcing of something through multiple articulations. What this actually produces is a highly nuanced experiential understanding, rather, or as well as, or in support of, the rational, intellectual understanding. Why should this be a strategy confined to those with special needs?

Another metaphor

Dean says, 'It's as if your practical work and your writing are two planets orbiting one another but never touching, neither dominating the other. The writing circles the practice like some obscure particle that can only be described through allusion.'

Laterality and allusion

Is laterality a form of allusion? An acceptance that things cannot be adequately articulated in a singular way?

No event any longer comes to us without already
being shot through with explanation.

For Benjamin the storyteller was a dying breed, slowly being made irrelevant by the need for information to be readily verifiable. For him stories are best when they leave out explanation: when they are simple, paired down. In this way they enable endless interpretations. Thus, a story lives on beyond the telling, like the seeds sealed in the pyramids which may still germinate after thousands of years.

Irrational thoughts

We must all have had the experience that when staring at a problem the solution eludes us, but when occupied with something else, something manual or bodily like drawing or walking, the idea appears to us, as if it were the agent of its own making.

What is amazing about Kingston's Phantom slow-motion camera is that it is both high-tech and incredibly clunky. What I enjoy about it is that, like an old camera, it has quirks which have to be learned through experience. Initially frustrating, these make the job of working with the camera far more enjoyable. These restrictions also become the agents of creative exploration.

Coming down the river, or aspirations outstripping experience

One day at Dartington, where I was an MA student, I met a friend who was a tutor on the theatre course, walking in the grounds. He told me the students had been sent out to make site-specific performances and he was tracking them down to discuss what they were going to do. He shook his head and talked about the students' inability to get on with making the work. They spend hours discussing and then have precious little time for actual making. He said he had just been to see a group down by the river. When asked what they were planning, they said the only sure idea they had was that the performance would begin with them all coming down the river on a boat. When asked if they had a boat, they replied that they did not. Why is this such a common feature when working with young people? Perhaps it stems from a disconnection between expectation and experience born out of the education system. Young people especially, are much happier thinking about things, conceiving of plans and schemes, but yet are relatively inexperienced in the practicalities of realisation. For the more experienced maker of art or theatre or whatever, the practicalities born from their experience come first. They have learnt to conceive of ideas through their embodied experience and knowledge of the way things can be made manifest whether through their understanding of a certain material substance, of their physical possibilities as a performer, or the complexities of the institutional systems which allow and constrain production. The experienced maker starts with what they've got.

The imaginative space of the image

I met with Elizabeth Price. She talked about her collection of sculpture books and her love of looking at photographs of sculpture. She found that these images allowed time for the viewer to experience the objects without being distracted by the realities of the gallery, creating an imaginative space for the viewer.

Please Do Not Touch

I'm running a workshop at a gallery for teachers of children with special educational needs and disabilities. One of the things the gallery is keen for me to emphasise is that teachers need not worry about the behaviour of their students in the gallery. They can make as much noise as they like, they can make themselves at home, just as long as they don't touch anything!

Shopping Channel

Why is it so important that goods be handled during the sales pitch? Is it because without the presence of the hand we would not be able to gauge the true nature of the things on show?

Losing and gaining

When my Granny was getting old and beginning to suffer from dementia, I took her to see a friend's exhibition in Nottingham near where she lived. The work was a series of large messy sculptures made from roughly cut and bent bits of painted ply wood. My Granny was very taken with the show and as she went around, she touched everything. I had never known her do this before. Was it something about the quality of the work that asked to be touched? Or was it that she had simply forgotten the rules and was responding to the work in a way more natural than that afforded by convention?

Rothko

Years ago, I went to a big Mark Rothko exhibition. As I came into one of the rooms a toddler entered from the other side. It turned to see a huge red and black canvas taking up nearly the whole of one wall, floor to ceiling. It paused for a moment and then began running towards the painting hands outstretched. It was stopped, at the last moment by its mother who swept it from its feet less than a metre from the painting. As I continued around the exhibition, I noticed that the bottom foot of every painting was covered in small hand prints.

The invitation

Encountering a large white cube full of imposing modernist-style sculptures the boys wander around, looking distractedly. Only when enough enter the room does the first 'thing' happen. When someone inevitably touches, the tall sculpture at the back of the room wobbles, sways, the column is bendy. In this moment the invitation completely changes.

Time Motion

Time motion studies in the early twentieth century looked at the division of labour and the efficiency that could be attained by it. Rather than one skilled craftsperson creating a finished product in its entirety, the work could be separated into individual tasks, each performed by a different person who could mechanically repeat their job. The result increased productivity at the cost of deskilling and dehumanising the individual worker. The worker became an instrument, their body put to work in the service of a larger enterprise. Industrialisation understood the human body as a type of mechanism. This could be seen to stem from or parallel the tendency of western thought to separate body and mind. If we imagine that the mind of the craftsperson was actively engaged in putting his body to work in the service of their creation, then in the new industrial setting this mind could easily be replaced by the demands of the system.

Because we have hands

Anaxagoras said that man is the most intelligent of animals because he has hands. I take from this that it is the dexterity of our manual engagement with the world, rather than the size of our brains, that underpins our consciousness.

Contemporary neuroscience suggests that the body and brain are inseparable parts of the perceptual system. That consciousness is not located in the brain but throughout the whole body. In contrast to the idea that the mind steers the ship, processing and making sense of abstract sensory data and creating a representation of the world in the brain, this new model sees the perceptual system as dispersed, the senses interconnected and inseparable. Sight loses its place as the dominant sense and, with it, notions of detached intellection. Sight without bodily movement, touch and proprioception would be nothing more than patterns of light racing across the retina. It takes the whole body to situate these impressions within a world. For me this suggests that the idea of the philosopher sitting in isolation in order to contemplate reality is a nonsense. To pursue knowledge, we must be actively and sensuously engaged with the world.

Improvisation and innovation

In the Philosophy of Improvisation, Gary Peters, citing a business website, describes a shift within the culture of a particular organisation from one which prized its employees' improvisation to one which encouraged innovation. Within the new business culture, improvisation is seen as simply responding in the moment to various unexpected events and crises, and that the skills associated with improvisation were not pushing the company forward. Innovation by contrast was more intellectual, forward looking, it demanded that colleagues think beyond the immediate situation, creating their own futures. This, Peter's links to a Modernist Avant Garde conception of permanent revolution. What skills are lost in this relentless striving for future progress? Peters describes great improvisors, both in free jazz and improvised theatre as having great memories. Improvisation does not mean a constant pushing onwards, rather it requires a continual looping back, picking up on phrases and moments from earlier (in the improvisation itself, from history, from experience) and developing them into the continuing dialogue.

The prevailing of the eye

Sight has long been considered our dominant sense. This is the 'common sense' assumption. Our perception appears to us as visual, pictorial even. The other senses supplement this picture with other useful information. But this view makes some unwarranted assumptions about the functioning of our sense organs. Our eyes do not give us a picture of the world in any way like that of the 360-degree full colour high definition one we seem to experience. Our vision is patchy, only in focus at the centre, marked with veins and blind spots and mostly black and white. We might account for this by assuming that the brain must be the 'one' filling in the gaps in the picture, but then we have to ask, where is this picture and who would be looking at it?

Knowledge claims

As an undergraduate, I had an argument with a friend about the merits of learning and experience. My friend's conviction was that you could not claim knowledge of a place or a society without having been there. I felt that implicit in his statement was an arrogance about his own position which didn't seem warranted. How could he claim to know everything about France having been in Paris for a week? I think my annoyance was also partly founded on the position taken by many gap year students that they are more worldly and spiritual having spent a couple of months trekking around India, and that you could 'just tell' the people who had come straight from school as opposed to those who had swum in the phosphorescence off the Great Barrier Reef! That sort of self-congratulatory spirituality has always bothered me, especially often linked as it is to privilege. I rebutted my Parisian friend saying I thought reading a book about France might well tell you more about the country as a whole than seeing a bit of a city for a few days and claiming to 'know it'. In retrospect I was on the wrong side of the argument. What I was really arguing against was the idea that our limited experience gave us any claim to really 'know', anything about something as diverse and varied as a country. Ironically this was exactly the same point my friend was making, although he probably didn't know it either. It was Socrates great gift to the world that he knew nothing.

Embodied learning

I ran a workshop recently where the participants would shoot and develop their own film. I was asked to start the day with a warm up activity. This perplexed me for some time before the answer made itself clear to me in a moment fully formed. I took a reel of 16mm film I had shot, an early test. We would begin by projecting this film, then we would reel out the one hundred feet of celluloid across the space and tape it down. The participants would be given coloured pens and asked to draw and colour the film. After ten minutes we would hook it back up and project it again dragging the film across the room.

It is not so much a question of what has been learned here, more how it was learned. I could have explained the working of the machine, told them that the film is one hundred feet long, how it is composed of twenty-four frames a second each exposed in turn by the camera and then projected one by one in rapid succession giving the impression of movement. I could have explained that the marks and scratches on the screen were bits of dirt and damage as a result of the handling of the film. Instead participants watched the film being projected, they reeled it out, saw its physical length, the tiny frames that make up the moving image. They handled the celluloid strip and by drawing on it they interacted with the image itself, and then saw the marks they made projected again as a part of the moving picture. What they learned will have been far more valuable than an intellectualised run down of the 16mm process and, importantly, gave them tools with which to begin working on their own. This type of approach is by no means non-intellectual, instead it galvanises understanding and comprehension through bodily engagement and lived experience. The feeling at the end of this short activity was one of elation.

Filming a performance. Filming: a performance.

I made a film which was to be shown at an analogue film night. It had to be self-contained, a single reel which could be run through a projector. The reversal process I use creates film which can be projected – no need for professional reprinting – but I have no splicer or editing table. The single length of film had to be shot in one go, there would be no editing. I have a wind up 16mm camera which can only shoot in thirty second bursts. Between each shot the camera must be wound up, the focal length measured with a tape and set on the lens, the lighting adjusted, and aperture reset depending on the colour of the objects. The whole film was sketched out on paper as a complex sequence that had to be run through with no mistakes. Although there was no one to watch, it felt to me as though the filming process itself had become a performance: study plan, wind handle, move camera, set focus, set aperture, set object, start shooting, rush round, move object ….. start again. It took four takes. I kept making mistakes. On the third take I forgot the focus, it was the last shot. I'm sure the people next door could here me swearing.

Sensory training

In his preliminary course at the Bauhaus, and influenced by the German educational reform movement, Moholy-Nagy believed that the educating of the senses held the key to the progression of the artist. They would begin with exercise, massage and then by exploring form and material with their hands.

Improvising

I worked on a sculpture and performance workshop recently. The students spent the first half of the day in the studios and workshops making sculptures that might perform or could be performed with, the second in the film studio interacting with the things they had made. This second part surprised us. The students were not bringing finished works into the film studio and then presenting them, they were learning the possibilities of what they had made through interacting with them. The work was still being made and this type of playful improvisation to an imagined audience was an important part of that process.

Sound

It is notable at this stage in my research that there is no sound. This wouldn't be an issue were I just using photography, but sound seems so integral to the moving image. Perhaps this has been due to the style of filming I have employed and the media. The 16mm film has no sound, neither does the slow-motion camera, but more importantly I have been focused on the image and on the relationship of camera and object. As the objects don't tend to make noise in themselves, what has been left has been environmental fuzz, the occasional voice in the background or a noise from the corridor outside, and in tracking shots the electronic whirr of the mechanical slider. It seems to me that sound is not the issue here. The question of how sound affects our experience of sculpture in moving image, whilst related, is not the question at hand. This has been borne out in practice where the addition of a sound track has distracted from the main focus of the research.

Noises of times passed

Thinking about the lack of sound in my work, it occurs to me that what my silent film (titled Some of my sculptures move from left to right, which pictures a number of plaster sculptures gliding slowly across the screen) needed was precisely the sound of the mechanised slider which produced the movement. These immaculate enigmatic objects would no longer slide silently by but would appear as the result of the sound, a mechanistic whirring with a distinctive beginning and end. It would be funny, it would not match the perfect image. It would reveal the furious paddling of the swan. But the immaculate image is not matched by immaculate sound. The whir is there, but punctuated by noises from outside, my own breathing (those funny little intakes of breath I make through my nose when concentrating) and general gossiping with the students helping me out, strangers then, now all voices I know well. Something completely different is occurring in this sound. It is a record of something that once happened, something which feels dear to me despite the banality of the conversation. It marks a particular time and place, whereas the image is deliberately removed from any specifics in order to focus attention on the detail, surfaces and movement of the objects. Whilst the sound might be seen to offer more information – articulating something of film's ability to capture the past – it wrecks that focus, no longer allowing the sculptures to exist for themselves and dictating the banal reality of a particular situation, closing down possibilities for their experiencing and interpretation.

Because we have hands we made this film

I have begun a collaboration with a friend who is also an artist and works with video, performance and objects. Although she is more interested in questions around performance and less with the making of sculptures, there seemed lots of common ideas in our work. We started by messing around in front of the camera with whatever was lying around and then I began to make a series of very simple objects, beginning with wooden semi circles, which we could play with together. Much like many of my film shoots we brought the objects to the studio, set up the camera and a table top and began to play, letting the objects prompt our interactions. What is really striking about working collaboratively is the context the collaboration produces. I have worked with other people on film shoots before but always directing them to perform in particular ways and to do specific things. In collaboration you share responsibility for what happens and what is created. The performance of the work then becomes highly focused. The best moments were conducted in silence as we improvised with the material. Again, I am struck by the sense of performing and the heightened tension and focus it produces, despite there being no one there to watch.

Objects Made Backwards

The idea that the objects I make share some kind of common language, developed from a studio visit. When looking at the objects themselves Jo said that they seemed to express their purpose, they are all objects made backwards with the camera in mind, and this expectation permeates the sculptures themselves. They seem all to be asking to have 'stuff' done to them, they suggest a type of movement or a relation with the camera. The process of filming then becomes an enabling of these demands or affordances. This one wants to move like this; this one is roughly textured and demands close scrutiny by the camera; this one suggests a certain type of lighting; this one asks to move from side to side; this one wants to be held and caressed.

No masterplan

Adam's studio is like a bejewelled cave crossed with a garden shed. Work is everywhere – filling the walls and floor, packed in. The sculptures appear all to be in progress, and he works on them all – adding some colour here or attaching something there. I am immediately reminded of a film showing the walls and surfaces of Andre Breton's Paris apartment, covered with a jumble of art works and objects from different places and periods. Everything is flattened out in this accumulation, everything seems of equal importance, nothing is isolated. Unlike in the gallery, individual pieces are not self-sufficient, but rely on the whole for their meaning. Everything here is obliquely but matter-of-factly connected. Like the objects in Freud's consulting room they offer pathways for the imagination and it is possible to go in any direction.

Doodling

Steven Connor talks about doodling as a type of fidgeting, a method of image making which is always provisional, that develops through local decision-making and intuition rather than to a strategy or masterplan. Doodles appear like shy spiders in the corners of pages and spread out, occupying space, filling it up, as opposed to taking a direct line from one place to another. The adopting of this type of process – tactical more than strategic – concerned with small decisions that, taken as a whole, produce an amazing array of aesthetic questions – is a critical act in itself. This type of practice demands that we look to the work for answers and the process by which it is continually made - the myriad of small questions which propel it in many directions at once, occupying space.

For the future

Adam shows me a blob of plaster moulded onto a bendy tent pole. He has set a small piece of plastic piping into it. 'I've put that there so that something else might fit into it' he says; not 'something in particular', he has just left it open, an offering to the future, a question for another day.

Thinking through the body

The separation of body and mind causes us problems. Anaxagoras said that man is the most intelligent of animals because he has hands. This could be seen to instrumentalise the body. But in fact, by privileging the hand over the brain what this concept allows for is an understanding of what it is to be human based on our powers of physical exploration. To use the body is to think. They cannot be separated.

The frame as proscenium

The object sits in the middle of the frame, the camera effaces itself in the presentation of the supposedly clear and uncomplicated image. Then a hand comes in from the side, reaches into the frame, and it becomes a stage.

Having an idea is an excuse to start making something.

When asked to write something short about uncertainty in their practice, a student wrote ‘having an idea is an excuse for making something’, and this reminded me of a comment that was made after one of my presentations. Someone asked, ‘are your sculptures just excuses for filming?’

Thinking is making

My friend Jack says that he tries to encourage students to give themselves time for different types of activity which are important to the making process. He tells them that, 'thinking is making and looking is making'.

Following Harman, we can claim with some confidence that the representation is as much an object as that which it represents. Not that these objects are equal (equally real, equally massive, equally meaningful) but that they are equally objects. To claim that the representation is only a copy is to undermine its reality by suggesting that there is something more real which lies beneath or outside of it. The pictured sculpture then has its own distinct reality as an object, it coheres for us as a thing with both qualities and relations.

The endless object

I'm making lots of animated gifs. In a way they seem to crystalise much of the work I have been making on film. Their radically constricted timeframe allows for one thing to happen, a movement, an action, which is then repeated endlessly. Whereas with film you are always dealing with a fixed temporality - yes, you can watch the film again, but it inevitably has a beginning and end which structures our encounter with it - the endless repetition of the gif, especially in one where there is no discernible beginning or end, creates a sense of permanence, of objectness. The pictured sculpture seems entirely self-contained. It also exists as a discrete computer object which can be inserted into webpages, copied into emails, instant messages, or comments. Remove the background and there it is on the screen, unbounded by the film frame. A thing in itself.

The quasi-object creates the subject

In the game, the ball is the object which galvanises the players, but it is a quasi-object because without the players, without the game, it is nothing. It could not be what it is without them, it is not self-sufficient. Yet it is the ball which must be present in order for the players, as collective and individuals, to exist. The ball does not follow the players, the players follow the ball. Neither can exist without the other. When the ball comes to the player, the player becomes an I. When the ball is passed, the player becomes a part of the collective, undistinguished. Ball, players and game are all mutually reliant, one does not impose meaning upon the others. They are locked in a constitutive dynamic. Does this mirror the triangle, the sensuous elasticity I imagine, between me, the camera and the sculpture?

No surprises

The process of making objects is a strange one. Early on in this project I made some objects to film with the slow-motion camera. They were made with my experiences of working with the camera in mind. I wanted to throw them in the air so they appeared to float in space and so I decided to make small wooden constructions with no front or back, that could spin as they were thrown. The sculptures 'worked'. We threw them, they span around and in the resulting footage they seemed to float in space. In short, they were fit for the task and did what I expected. They were the result of my having previously explored the camera. In a way, they showcased the technology and my own understanding and expertise. The trouble was, having worked, they told me very little about what I was doing.

Excessive objects

If the process of filming, of playing with camera and object in the studio, is to be one of genuine discovery. It seems preferable that the objects I make be less functional, more abstruse and excessive. It is this excess that makes them a puzzle and unintended qualities lead to genuine discovery. Because of this the process of making and constructing objects to film has become intentionally less focussed on the final product. Objects which I do not fully understand, or ones which I have only an inkling of the ways in which they might be filmed, are desired. This makes the process of making and of filming more tentative, unsure and open to whim and unconscious intuitive processes. It requires a degree of confidence and trust in the process which can at times be difficult. The demand is for objects that exceed my grasp and understanding and have qualities which will only be revealed through the process of filming.

Performing the symbols

I have invited Rachel to run a day at the Tate Summer School, but she has put her back out and can't make it. A detailed plan arrives by email and I agree to run her workshop for her. The bit I am most nervous about is presenting her work and research - mostly printed material that has arrived in the post. She has sent three excerpts of writing and asked that the participants read them out. The first two are paragraphs describing some of her experiences, the third a text composed mainly of symbols sprawled across the page – commas and hyphens and zeros and ones. When I hand this out, the woman who has agreed to read it looks at me and the group as if to say, how on earth am I supposed to read this? The person next to her says, 'I'll do it with you' and they begin to study the pages quizzically when a third starts to 'sing' the text, pointing to the symbols on the page and making buzzing and clicking noises. The others follow suit and what emerges is a three-person performance. On reaching a page completely covered in zeros and ones, they again look around as if asking permission from the group to stop when a fourth person says, 'let's do it together' and the whole group begins to sing – oh sounds for the zeros and hum sounds for the ones, following the patterns on the page, using them to determine the sequence and lengths of the sounds. How did this happen? Firstly the participants had been working together for three days and were beginning to feel comfortable with one another, secondly having read the first two more conventional texts, the invitation to 'read' these symbols seemed obvious (although when Rachel performs these texts she understands them more as movements!), thirdly and perhaps most importantly, Rachel was not there, meaning that there was no authority to look to and ask whether we were doing it right. The participants had nothing but the text - itself an obscure object or collection of objects in the form of various pieces of punctuation – and one another to negotiate with. The performance was an activity of attentiveness, of listening to the page and to one another in order to discover a possible voicing. The result belonged equally to the performers, the situation and the text.

Distracted by the future

The objects I make are not self-sufficient. They are constantly being thrown open to the future. I am trying to concentrate on them, but I am distracted by what they will do and how they will look when in front of the camera.

Talking and making, making and talking

I have been inviting a student to join me in the studio. Initially the invitation was to film me making a clay sculpture and talking about the process. The idea being that a different vocabulary might be uncovered in the immediate relationship between the making and voicing of the work. In the event, and after two experiences running clay sessions with different groups as a way of fostering discussion, it seemed more appropriate to invite her to make something alongside me and to use the situation as a forum for dialogue. There is a different tone to these sessions than having face to face discussions. Our focus is downward, towards the things we are making and the conversation meanders, prompted by what is happening with the materials, jumping to relevant ideas and back again to the process of making. A while later a friend suggested that difficult conversations are often best held driving or walking, being side by side rather than facing one another. This idea of sharing space with each other and with the objects I make acknowledges the importance of space and time in the making process. Yes, one must be sensitive, attentive and open to possibility, but also prepared to spend time, as long as it takes. Creating the situation for making, whether modelling clay or bringing objects in front of the camera, time must be set aside. A panicky sense of not having enough is sure to spoil your state of mind and render you incapable of making anything. This reminds me of Rachel's description of attending the Bishopsgate Experimental Noise Theatre, a group who spend an hour a month together improvising with sound and objects. They set this time aside for no other purpose but to be together, to experiment and to see what can emerge.

Hovering hands

When screening some of my films for a Peer Session event, someone commented that there is the sense of hands continually hovering at the edges of the frame and that, even when the objects seem enigmatic and alone, the evidence of their having been made by hand points to the presence of the artist and an awareness of the camera as an active presence.

Conversation

Socrates refused to write. The delicate moment of understanding reached between interlocutors in conversation would be destroyed if written down.

Being present

Although they try to reduce their physical presence as far as possible, the analyst must be present for the patient to be able to listen to themselves. Their presence structures the encounter, their attention opens a space in which to explore together.

Trust

Jan suggests that my faith in responsive, intuitive making is akin to the analyst's trust in free association.

The use of photography, especially in the ephemeral performance practices of the 1970s, as linked to strategies of non-commercialism, is deeply inscribed in the background of my thinking. The image at once enables a document of a live action to be produced, and it also lives on to produce the action in the experience of the viewer. Photography in this period was important, why? Why not allow performances to exist as reports, or word of mouth? For all the anti-consumerist rhetoric and radical language surrounding the dematerialisation of the art object, these images were produced. As images they were commodifiable objects able to exist within structures of art world commerce. By delineating an action, or pointing to a set of actions or practices, they outline an object, carve it out as a discrete unit: the action or performance-as-thing expressed as a pictured object.

‘Hullo object!’ ‘I destroy you’ ‘I love you’

In Winnicott’s formulation of the relationship of infant to object, the move from relating to usage causes the object to become external to the psyche. This is an act of destruction. The internal object must be destroyed to make way for a life in an external reality. The survival of the object is an essential developmental stage without which the infant cannot properly establish themselves as an individual. But does this formulation – I destroy you. I love you! – have any use within the frame of art making? Well perhaps. Think of an object conceived but not yet made. We could discuss whether and to what extent this object ‘exists,’ but however this may be, it is something that is within the imagination, within the psyche. To realise this object as a thing in the world, to build it or craft it or perform it or render it, the object that existed in the imagination must be destroyed in the service of its realisation as a worldly thing. The object then exists in the hands as much as the mind, its creation a back-and-forth between experience, imagination and the unfolding or play that brings about an object in the world. Perhaps the object is then in a process of continual destruction from the beginning. A destruction which is generative, which enables creation.

What is an object?

In a discussion prompted by the question what is an object? A student said, 'If you think of an object and then make it as a representation of what you thought, are these separate objects? Is it separate because we can't always execute the object in exactly the way we were thinking of it? In the making, it becomes a different object from the one originally thought of. Does that mean the object originally thought of never existed because it only existed in your head?'

Is this a meme?

'What do you mean you don't know what a meme is?' a friend's teenaged son asked incredulously before launching into a lengthy explanation, with examples, that left me little the wiser. Then the same again, 'What do you mean you've never heard of memes?' a third year in a tutorial asked before launching into a lengthy explanation, which again left me confused and slightly embarrassed. I started asking people, 'Have you heard of memes?' and it turned out, with the exception of my parents, everyone I spoke to had. The meme was the name for a type of digital image. Something made for the internet to express or explore a simple idea. It had all the hallmarks of my own interests, it was democratic not technical, it could be done easily by anyone with a phone and an internet connection. So, I made some animated gifs, and titled them #isthisameme. I didn't feel I could really make any claims. The student said she thought they were memes. What qualified them seemed to be that they were immediate and funny; that they possessed a performative quality through their immediacy, and simple construction. They bore the marks of the process through which they were made. They also presented new opportunities for dissemination as they could be uploaded to Instagram and shared to other people's phones for impromptu exhibitions at gallery openings. In this respect digital technology allowed me to share what I was making and bring people into the process, offering new ways of engaging with and understanding my work and the processes which constitute it.

The Cave

‘Shadows only’ is how Plato describes experience articulated through the image of the cave. Prisoners chained to the floor staring at shadows cast on the wall in front of them by people carrying objects back and forth along a gangway in front of a fire. Despite the intention to undermine day to day reality, these shadows are shown to have life and reality in their own right, as perceptions and experiences which fill the engaged bodily experience of those who encounter them, and which create meaning. They are objects in themselves which press their presence and reality into the world. Why should it be assumed that they have nothing valuable to tell us because they are images?

Resist the urge to interpret

Perhaps this is the insight of Winnicott's that speaks most clearly to me. Surely the most delicate of analysts, Winnicott describes the interpretation as emerging through dialogue. It must come from the analysand, facilitated by the analyst. When making I am continually interpreting. How can this be switched off to allow the process to speak for and of itself?

Real teaching

My Grandad once told me that the best teachers were the ones that could teach kids things without them knowing it.

Against the yellow

I have asked the students to download my films, now re-formed as three second animated gifs, from my blog onto their phones and refilm them, thinking about the context in which the videos might exist. They headed out around campus and returned having put their phones, and my films, in various places – inside a microwave which acted like a theatre set with a reflective floor, held in front of their faces or against mirrors, and one simply placed on a yellow surface which matched the colour of the small revolving object on the phone screen. Despite its simplicity, or perhaps because of it, this film has stuck with me. The yellow object against the yellow background has opened up a new possibility. If images on screens can be wrapped back into the making process, can the objects themselves make an appearance alongside them? Suddenly the process is no longer one with the object at the start and the film at the end, it has become circular, looping back on itself in order to discover new possibilities and new ways of exploring objects and images, objects as images, images as objects, within a process with no discernible end.

The perfect host

The Eames had a concept of hosting. The perfect host anticipates the client's every need and desire. This plays two ways in my mind, on the one hand it seems oppressive, reducing free will, linked with critiques of consumerism. On the other, it is generous, sensitive and requires time, thought and appreciation of the other.

Perhaps hosting is an integral part of what I do as an artist, researcher, collaborator, teacher and facilitator. Perhaps all of these joined-up practices could be thought of as forms of facilitation, in which I enable the others with whom I work to become what they might be.

To respond to an object's affordances does not necessarily mean to do what is expected, what is appropriate or proper. We might respond to the cup and saucer as a drinking implement and its shape and size will afford a certain grasp, tilt and ease of use. We could also gently push the cup and saucer towards the edge of the table until it tips and eventually falls, responding instead to the pleasure of feeling its weight and the friction created by its contact with the table, playing with the moment that gravity seesaws the saucer over, sending both it, cup and liquid tumbling towards the floor.

DO IT ANYWAY

The instruction appeared, projected on the wall, and we looked at each other. We glanced at the table in front of us, covered in various sound making objects – glass jars full of lentils, plastic rulers, tin foil - and then looked at each other again. She reached forward and shoved a bunch of stuff off the table and on to the floor. We looked at each other, eyes widened. I up-ended the table and suddenly things had gone too far.

Things break

I have lost count of the number of delicate sculptures I have broken over the past few years. Sometimes deliberately – I have decided, or am suddenly gripped by the notion that destroying or breaking something on camera will be an interesting moment, but usually it's just through carelessness. Absorbed in the process, wrestling with inadequate equipment in a too small space, things fall over and snap, crack, smash. Sometimes this is caught on camera, often it is not. While I have written that the process of filming changes the object, brings out new and unexpected qualities, it is also the case that at times it literally changes them. This coupled with the necessity to get rid of stuff in order to make space means that many of the sculptures that appear in my films no longer exist, or at least not in the form they do on film. Those that remain are altered by the process of filming, relics of past experience. Whereas their counterparts on film remain vivid, lively and purposeful, the objects themselves, sitting on my shelves, scuffed, marked, glued back together, tell different stories of the times they spent with the camera.

‘This is a gallery!’

When the audience had arrived, the artists announced that if they wanted an event, they’d have to make one themselves and after hours of mayhem in which the police were called, a piano was smashed apart and reconstructed, a film was shot and edited, people bounced on trampolines and catapulted themselves across the room, it was an ICA trustee who brought it to a close in an instant shouting, ‘This is a gallery!’

The film runs out

Shooting 16mm you never quite know when the film will end. Often, in fact, you carry on shooting inadvertently, not having noticed the subtle change in tone from the celluloid running through the gate to the sprockets spinning empty. The change in sound is noticeable; missing it is usually caused by absorption in the moment of filming, an excitement that makes you careless. That excitement exists at times in all practice, including this writing. You have to run with it, even in the knowledge that what you are caught up in may not make the final cut. In the end the camera could have been pointed at countless other things, different choices could have been made, different lines drawn, words written. The work is never finished, the film just runs out.

What is intuition? It's an idea I come up against and use frequently but it has both positive and negative associations. I have heard it used as a way of closing down discussion, albeit unintentionally. When asked, for example, what was the rationale for such and such decision? It can be all too easy to cite intuition. It seems often to be used as shorthand for a type of thinking or making that is responsive, immediate and not pre-meditated. There are many merits to using this type of approach and I would think in many cases it is a practical necessity, but it should not preclude other types of practice, making or thinking. It's important to be honest about the role of uncertainty, chance and personal preference in making art. When asked early on at my first PhD presentation why I had made objects that looked the way they did, I could only answer 'whim?!'. This was true to an extent, though it did not articulate what, at the time, would have been a complex series of decision making (conscious or not) around the particular form and material of the objects; the influence of whatever I had been looking at or thinking about at the time, and the history of my own making which must have been present in the background when conceiving and working on the objects. This could perhaps be a working definition of intuition, the complex network of small decisions, the background of culture, personal experience, preference, engagement and enjoyment as well as current influences, ideas, readings, artworks or exhibitions. Whim works in a similar way, but is more fanciful, braver perhaps, describing that moment where you unburden yourself of the reasonable course and do something unexpected. My online dictionary describes whim as 'an odd or capricious notion or desire, a sudden of freakish fancy'. Compare that to the definition of intuition as a 'direct perception of truth, fact, etc., independent of any reasoning process.' Intuition would

certainly seem to have a more positive connotation, but, at least by this account a more problematic one. The current use of intuition has lost the religious association but retained a certain seriousness. What is notable in this definition is the passivity of the one who intuits. Whim on the other hand is an active form of decision making, if at times a foolhardy one. It might lead to the rejoinder, 'you've only yourself to blame'. In this way the current meaning of intuition when used in relation to making art has qualities of both whim and intuition. It is an attitude which is open to chance and fancy, but which also allows small decisions to be made without overbearing rationalisation or contemplation. It tends to be linked with practical dealings and the type of embodied thinking that is dictated by one's sensibility in the moment. It is a state of mind which I think most artists will recognise, where the broader questions and problems of the work are put aside in order to focus on the making of something in particular and in which ideas come to mind semi-automatically. What is important, it seems to me is that both the intuition and the whim provide the impetus for action which is so necessary for the development of practice. They are tools to be wielded.

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