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Research or production? The problem of methodology in fine art.

I am going to start by describing the broader context of fine art, and the idea of methodology. Historically, artists have not needed to explain the way in which they worked. In fact they may have wanted to maintain a certain amount of secrecy or mystery in order to protect their social and commercial position. A successful contemporary artist only needs to produce and sell work – and in fact there is often a kind of pose of effortless, hiding the work that goes into the making, that serves to reinforce the sheer commodity fetishism sustaining contemporary art's high prices.

Statements by artists must always be taken with a pinch of salt. The 'true meaning' of their work is not to be found here. Instead. Such statements must be decoded and interpreted, as they are part of a carefully choreographed pose that is equal parts staged and authentic, deliberate and accidental, strategic and unconscious.

[Graw, isabelle (2009) High Price]

It is only with the assimilation of fine art into higher education, and particularly the absorption of specialised art schools into British universities, that the problem of articulating an appropriate methodology has emerged. The growth of research degrees in fine art practice over the last twenty years or so (since the 1990s) has meant reframing art practice as "research", making the case for artworks and practice itself as a kind of "new knowledge", and finding ways to fit the concept of "methodology" into the discourses of contemporary art.

The structures of university research degree committees, quality assurance, and national systems like the Research Excellence Framework all mean that this rather bureaucratic vocabulary has been overlaid on the process of making art, and anyone involved in HE must find a way to deal with it.

One of the problems, I think, is that this word “research” is probably not such a good word to describe a contemporary art practice. This is an old argument now, but perhaps “production” more accurately describes the activity of making something. I will come back to this point later on.

Research is what we have. And in fact many artists are involved in sophisticated research into art history, art theory, and the experience of art. Not to mention research into unrelated subjects and ideas that are used to form the basis of new artworks & exhibitions. Research-based practice is a kind of genre in itself.

A good example was the exhibition *Counter Investigations* by the group Forensic Architecture which took place at the ICA in London earlier this year. They describe their activities as

a form of investigative practice into state violence and human rights violations that traverses architectural, journalistic and legal fields, and shifts between critical reflections and tactical interventions.

Typically this would involve collating information from a large number of images found on social media, using satellite photographs and maps to help construct a 3D simulation of an attack or an event so that particular claims about what really happened might be supported or undermined. Their use of visual media and exhibition at this central London gallery places them in the art world. But their work has also been submitted as evidence to international criminal courts.

Aside from artists engaging specifically with research as subject matter, there has also been a lot of writing over the last twenty years or so which promotes the concept of “practice as research” in itself. This is most often based on the idea of experiential knowledge – knowledge that is experienced and “known” in the artist’s body (like knowing how to ride a bike, or knowing how to dance). This is sometimes also called “tacit knowledge”, which again suggests a kind of internalisation within the body.

These ideas have come about because making art is almost always a materially-based activity. So they are ways of turning a physical engagement with materials into a model of knowledge.

The models of an “emergent” or “subjective” methodology are similar (Barrett & Bolt 2007). The artist plays around with materials in the studio and gradually a systematic method is constructed from this activity. For me these kinds of well –meaning constructions (well-meaning because they are trying to preserve something of the amorphous material quality of art) don’t reflect the heavily theorised and often piercingly intellectual nature of contemporary art. They are also unsatisfactory in terms of describing specific approaches that might be of greater help to students and researchers trying to plan a particular project. How do you use a term like “emergent” to actually get something moving in the studio? It’s a description which doesn’t offer much guidance!

I understand why the argument for a subjective, practice-as-research methodology was made as academics in what were once art schools struggled to preserve the material nature of their disciplines. But for me, it recalls a bit too closely the Romantic stereotype of the artist as an inarticulate savant. Someone who has great skill and mastery but is unable to explain it. Or perhaps is afraid that an explanation will somehow destroy the magic.

The concept of the artist as some kind of asocial being, blessed with genius, waiting for divine inspiration and exempt from all normal rules of social intercourse. [Wolff, Janet (1981) *The Social Production of Art*]

Compare those efforts to promote a non-linguistic form of material knowledge with the sagging shelves of an art bookshop. The dense theoretical texts of October magazine, Afterall, e-flux. The hefty catalogues that come with every Documenta or biennale. The innumerable conferences, study days and dialogues around every major exhibition.

One of the best books on methodologies that could be of use to artists is Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies* (2001), which I’m sure many of you will be familiar with. It’s a clear and accessible introduction to some of the major ways of approaching visual material, including semiotics, content analysis, discourse analysis, audience studies and psychoanalytic frameworks. These really are some of the foundational discourses of contemporary art today. In fact, the critical and contextual studies lectures that we run for undergraduate fine art students in Norwich follow similar terrain: a mixture of Marx, Freud, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and so on – and it’s much the same at other institutions.

So perhaps these kinds of theorists might provide useful methodological models for fine art researchers? After all, it's what we're teaching the students.

The answer is “yes and no”. Yes, of course these are fascinating, useful and productive frameworks through which to study and unpack visual materials. But also “no”, because they do not give much guidance on how to actually proceed. They are better at analysing pre-existing visual material than suggesting how to create new works. This is the problem that I referred to earlier, of research or production.

The same problem arises when you look at the use of models borrowed from the social sciences – things like auto-ethnography, case studies, action research. Or tools like surveys and interviews. This is an early piece by the German conceptual artist Hans Haacke which borrows the form of a simple survey of museum visitors (MoMA Poll 1970). Many conceptual artists of this era used social science research techniques in their work. Partly it was a form of parody of the completely administered bureaucratic state. But also there was an interest in the idea that artworks might take a non-visual form of pure information – text, statistics, data. The exhibition that this piece was originally shown in was in fact called “Information”.

These are well-validated methods, designed to extract and order meaning from a pre-existing corpus, in order to build analytic models of reality. But they are of less use when you are starting with a blank slate, and are responsible for producing new visual material in the studio.

They do not reflect the way that fine art research is actually a kind of production. Another synonym for research that we have learned to use in recent decades is in fact “knowledge production”.

So there is the problem as I see it. There are plenty of methodological models out there, but (especially those that are borrowed from other disciplines) they tend to look outwards analytically at something rather than helping to look forward creatively. They are designed to study, quantify, describe a pre-existing part of reality. This is great if you are studying communities in Papua New Guinea, or primary school teachers in Hackney. But it doesn't help in the discipline of fine art, where researchers have to generate new artworks, objects and knowledge from scratch.

Let's stop for a minute to consider some of the reasons for defining methodologies at all, aside from the institutional requirements that I mentioned right at the start. What are methodologies for?

- Firstly I think, they guide the research process, tell us what to do and why it makes sense to do something in a certain way.
- This is because, secondly, they help to conceptualise the epistemological world we are operating within. Understanding, constructing, defining the epistemological world of the research is one of the key things that research students must do.
- This helps to thirdly, help others understand what we have done and why.
- And fourthly, they help to show proof of 'validity', that we haven't missed anything major in our work. This is especially important to PGRs coming up to submission and their viva.

So where might we look for examples of fine art methodologies that reflect art as a system of production rather than research?

To me it seems obvious that we should start by exploring the already-existing and incredibly rich discourses of art history, art theory and art criticism. Here is a massive body of experience and expertise that ought to be forming the basis for the academic study of fine art. So, rather than borrowing terminology and tools from other disciplines, artists ought to feel confident in finding useful methodologies closer to home.

This is what I have started to do myself, simply by considering the practices of well known artists, thinking about historical groupings and types of practice, and viewing them through the lens of methodology. There is a wealth of material to work with including critical writings and theory (which might describe abstract structures and

similarities), but also a huge number of interviews and first person statements from artists (which could describe their processes more directly).

For example, let's take the art historian Hal Foster's book "*Bad New Days*", published in 2015. Foster includes a large number of artists within this survey of recent practices, and he groups them into five broad tendencies:

- I. The abject. Artists working with aspects of the body in representation, often gross, with a psychological dimension and meant to affect the viewer's feeling directly.
- II. The archival. Rooted in historical material, often putting together new narratives to critique established epistemes, frequently with a melancholic air.
- III. Mimetic exacerbation. A parodic, accelerationist amplification of aspects of modern life, meant as a kind of indulgent satire.
- IV. Precarious. Temporary, transient, materially precarious works which summon up the spectacle of capitalism's forgotten dregs and failures.
- V. The actual. Foster uses this term to underline the real bodily presence of performance artists in the museum, and the recent resurgence of live art and avant-garde choreography in the circuits of the art world.

Typically the creation of this kind of taxonomy would be read just as a bit of contemporary criticism, or perhaps the "first draft of art history". But I hope you can see how each of these categories might equally be taken as a broad methodological approach – each containing epistemological assumptions, artistic precedents, models of practice and so on.

You could do the same with other broad tendencies within fine art: Site-specific art, Socially-engaged practice, Relational aesthetics, installation. How about reaching even further back – could you say that Impressionist painting was a methodological approach? There was a clear emphasis on contemporary subject matter and modern life among the bourgeoisie. An almost scientific approach to representation and colour based on the latest theories of optical mixing and colour contrasts. A belief in

painting wet on wet, in thickish layers, often outside the studio in the open air making use of actual daylight. The tenets of what came to be called impressionist painting cover technical methods, the scope of the subject matter, and define a modern world view in which the artists, subjects and pictures existed. Is that enough to be called a methodology? It's more tightly defined than some I've encountered!

As I started to think in this new way about already existing practices I also started to think about my students and other artists that I know. I tried to invent labels for some of the more common ways of working that I am familiar with...

Iterative practice; problem-focussed; experiential; untheorised/intuitive;
collaborative; derivative; conceptual; subjective/Romantic;
chaotic; political activist

Some of these labels sound a bit ungainly. But some also sound very familiar, simply as descriptions of how people go about making their artwork. In fact I think that the art world is already very comfortable with talking about methodologies. It's just that we tend not to use that particular technical terminology.

As in other disciplines, it is standard to use a mixture of approaches, taking a little bit from here and there depending on circumstances. Looking at the examples I have given and thinking about these possible definitions at a more granular level, it could seem that there is a different methodology for every artist. Is that a problem?

In fact this should alert us to something interesting: often, the methodology is the practice, or is the artwork itself.

Sometimes it is precisely the novel methodology that makes an artist interesting and attracts critical attention. Take for example the French conceptual painting group BMPT, active in the late 1960s. Daniel Buren, alongside Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni, set themselves simple parameters or rules which governed the making of their paintings. Stripes of a certain type, square brush strokes, or a small black circle at the centre of a canvas. Each artist stuck rigidly to their prescribed mark. Subjectivity was eliminated. Expression was eliminated. Instead, the social role of the artwork and its place was emphasised through its mode of installation and circulation. In a sense the paintings themselves were irrelevant. It was the approach, the methodology that was the important part.

More recently starting in the mid 1990s, the British artist Liam Gillick created an elaborate discourse around his minimalist structures, sometimes going as far as to write a whole novel that provides a context through which to view the objects. It is this open-ended dialogical discourse around the works which makes them interesting to critics and curators.

So the methodology can sometimes be disguised as part of the practice. There is not the separation that you might find in other disciplines between methodology, subject of investigation, and then some form of output. They can all be rolled together – the methodology might even be the most important aspect, as in some types of socially-engaged art where physical works are generated almost as an excuse to create new social situations and relationships.

To sum up then, for mostly institutional reasons within higher education, both research students and staff involved in fine art (and other creative disciplines) increasingly need to define their methodologies. There has been an effort to try and conceptualise material practices as a kind of experiential knowledge, and practice as research more generally. But often, when it comes to defining a methodology, inappropriate models are borrowed from the social sciences which are really designed to analyse data already out there in the world. These aren't helpful when it comes to working out how to proceed in the studio.

My suggestion is that we simply recognise the value and established validity of approaches described in the existing literature of art criticism and art history. We already use these terms. We understand them, and they carry with them particular epistemologies, politics and bodies of knowledge that we can make use of as researchers.