

What is Practice?

The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. However, neither of them alone bears the other. Artist and work are, each in themselves and in their mutual relations, through a third, namely through art, which is the first from which artist and artwork have their name.ⁱ

Artists and artworks are created within the practice of art. Emerging as an artist is to merge with practice to the point artist and practice are indistinguishable within the flows and cycles of material, method and daily ritual. Divergent practices form artists in unique ways but really fertile and fluent ones share some of the essential properties outlined in this paper.

So, what are these properties of practice that form truly great artists? In workshops and practical seminars, we will investigate some of them with the aim of transforming the practice that brought you to us so that at the completion of your studies you can go back out into the world and make an enormous difference.

To do this I need your assent to take on and work with some ideas and methods that may take time to absorb, that may feel counter intuitive or downright confusing. Also, I request your indulgence in advance a symbolic language invoking gods and demons long ago expelled from the modern world. What you'll learn sits outside many of the commonplace un-reflected upon assumptions our society works from. True art teaching is teaching how to think and act as artists. True learning is always attended by uncertainty and doubt. This module teaches how to think. What to make is up to you.

Unlearning and Learning

'As artists, we seek to restore our childlike perception: a more innocent state of wonder and appreciation not tethered to utility or survival.'ⁱⁱ

Learning is like opening door after door to mysterious rooms and passages in an old house stepping over thresholds into the unknown. Entering the most cavernous chambers requires a thoroughgoing shift within the learner that could be a new method of making, a novel process of thinking, a step change in worldview or mindset. These imaginative leaps often need us to make room by relinquishing something we already know. This is a long ride. There will be no closure, no point at which any answer will bring an end to our questioning. As Lou-Andreas Salome so concisely put it - "The further we walk toward the horizon, the further the horizon retreats."ⁱⁱⁱ

Artists are not well served by Western rationalism and its vicious separation of mind and nature, subject and object. My aim as new head of this MA is to make students the best artists they can be by unlearning some of the habits of separatist thinking, and reorient toward the world, become re-enchanted with the other. If we thrust aside the curtain of what we are told the world is and see the world as it presents itself to us, we *return to the things themselves*. And we realise that this vantage point - our own situation is just one amongst many. This allows us to differentiate, stand out from the great pool of experience, become aware of our own unique being in the world without tearing the fabric of experience. The relationship of wave to ocean is a useful way to think about this. As little waves and ripples rising and falling in the ocean we individuate, manifest, deploy our unique perspective without cutting ourselves off from the world we are reformulating in our practice. I find it helpful to think of practice as an ongoing doing I am embedded in, something greater and emanating from the world as much as something that emanates purely from me. The noted American psychologist Rollo May expressed this eloquently in his book *The Courage to Create*:

World is the pattern of meaningful relations in which a person exists and in the design of which he or she participates. It has objective reality, to be sure, but it is not simply that. World is interrelated with

the person at every moment. A continual dialectical process goes on between world and self and self and world; one implies the other, and neither can be understood if we omit the other. This is why one can never localize creativity as a subjective phenomenon; one can never study it simply in terms of what goes on within the person. The pole of world is an inseparable part of the creativity of an individual. What occurs is always a process, a doing — specifically a process interrelating the person and his or her world.^{iv}

We must make space for something very different to the linear, analytic thinking that we are taught at school and get in touch with something more akin to the con-fusion, the undivided unity of preverbal infants and the world. This is what William James called the ‘blooming buzz’^v of experience prior to naming things and therefore differentiating from them. Differentiation of self from the world is an unquestioned given, an assumption we all are inheritors of. Artists can’t function properly if their minds are enclosed in this prison of vision. The observer/observed dichotomy is too naïve to encompass what artists do. Art is not fundamentally about, it is a process of attuning, making explicit the inherent aesthesis or radiance of world, it is to fall in love with the other.

Making as Thinking

It is not the mind that imposes its forms on material objects, but rather the latter that give shape to the forms of thought.^{vi}

We need to unlearn the default assumption that we impregnate passive, inert matter with our subjective pattern or form, we need to turn to the materials themselves, to sensuous collaboration with tool and making method, so that we are one element within a practice or *praxis* generated by the interaction of artist, material, studio, process and tool. We need to dissolve our sense of self, retune to the greater part of the soul that is outside of the body.

Materials teach us practice through a continual process of material feedback and experimental method. As Tim Ingold puts it: *it is a question not of imposing preconceived forms on inert matter but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated. Practitioners, I contend, are wanderers, wayfarers, whose skill lies in their ability to find the grain of the world’s becoming and to follow its course while bending it to their evolving purpose.*^{vii}

Ingold turns normative Western ways of thinking about authorship on their head. To see that matter, stuff has agency and affective potential is to acknowledge that humans are ontologically isomorphic, i.e. on the same plane of being as not-us, different in degree not kind. It is to lower ourselves into intimacy with the materials and processes we work with and within. Tacit knowledge, (knowing how) as distinct from factual knowledge (knowing that) is learnt through doing, through the involvement of our body in the processes and methods of making. We can feel thankful we do not have to do all the work of making meaning. Material and method, tool and technique, other art and artists teach us how to make art. Our bodies are our point of view on the world. Our bodies are entangled in the apparatus of studio, tools, materials, processes and methods. It is a slightly ironic hitch that much of what I am trying to say here won’t make much sense to someone who has not experienced for themselves what I am talking about.

Paying Attention

When was the last time you looked at anything, solely, and concentratedly, and for its own sake? ... We find we are not very good at looking.^{viii}

A truly resonant artistic voice arises when we learn to pay attention. We acquire the creative habits engendered by a default sense of wonder and encounter things that take our breath away, no matter how small or humble. Art practice is an ongoing inquiry into a world that encompasses one’s own situation as part of the question. Is it not obvious that I am part of

the world of the other as much as the other is part of mine? The observer includes themselves in the observed.

The archetypal psychology of James Hillman celebrates a forgotten apprehension of beauty. The foundations of the way we see the world in our contemporary culture stem largely from the legacy of Descartes who split mind and matter into unconnected substances and of Galileo who removed subjectivity from the field of scientific enquiry. Our subjective self retreated from a world now considered purely objective, dead, mechanical. Beauty removed from the world outside our heads became a trivial matter of subjective taste. We have not gotten over this. Beauty for many only lurks as a fascist obsession with order and appearance, a cosmetic charade, demoted to the merely pretty. Hillman takes us back to our premodern forebears for whom beauty was intrinsic to the world they experienced as an enchanted cosmos – beauty as a flaring out, an immanent beckoning of things, the ground of existence and encounter. For Hillman, Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty gathers the threads of the world into a comprehensible whole that enfolds both the perceiver and the perceived. Only through her can the world *flame out, like shining from shook foil*^x. Only through her luminance can we apprehend the raw data, the outpouring aesthesis through our senses - the radiant face of the world calling us.

Attention becomes a superpower when we hone it through practice to become our default, so we notice what may only be a flicker in our peripheral vision or a sonic shift on entering a room. Artists for James Hillman *view the ordinary with the extraordinary eye of divine enhancement*.^x This needs us to be radically open and non-judgmental to what we encounter, let that which is before you speak before you slap a label on it; apprehend it beyond commonly held notions or categories that stifle perception.

A hiss of in-taken breath, we are pulled up short, arrested in the flow of daily events, something has pierced us. Wounded by a beauty that rivets us to the spot we transmute the everyday from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Like the medieval mystics in their quest to purify and empty themselves into worthy abodes for God, we empty ourselves to allow the world to flow into us and us to flow out into the world – become radically diffuse, eccentric, outside ourselves, at one with the world, here and there simultaneously, free from an impervious sense of self. There are techniques and methods for doing this some of which we will do in a set of Creative Cognitive Exercises. When out and about I habitually play little tricks like looking only at the negative space, at the ground rather than the figure, focusing on silhouettes particularly at dawn and dusk, using windows, edges, sharp boundaries to frame and define a view or ignoring an object in the centre of my field of view while paying total attention to what I can detect at the periphery. Reality is only as strange as you make it. And it needs to be if we are to do the job of artists, make art that pulls the rug, ruptures the normal, jolts us into life by configuring the world anew.

Active Passivity

We tend to think of the artist's work as the output. The real work of the artist is a way of being in the world.^{xi}

The reflective awareness of one's own first-person experience is crucial to making art. An artist's habits of reflection and perception determine the rigor and quality of their practice. Situating this in daily habits of practice is key to endurance, as is reflection, consciously thinking about what you are doing. The more you consciously do this the more it will become an unconscious habit and the better it will get. Part of this is knowing when to stop pushing, to reflect or to be in a state of waiting or letting be, as Luce Irigaray put it: 'letting be is as important as mastering. Our tradition has encouraged us to be effective, to make or fabricate but not to let be born or let be'^{xii}. This does not mean we stop being artists. We are artists walking to work or waiting at the bus stop. While in a state of latency,

receptivity we can recognise something remarkable and meaningful in the pattern of grime on the crazed Perspex bus stop wind shield drawing our attention within our random thoughts bubbling up

Practice as Ritual

For surely the humanist programme is not enough, social protest and political concern, the exploration of self-expression and the full exploitation of the materials, the reaction of one school or movement to another school or movement, to say nothing of the drive for fame, career, and money, are not satisfactory anchors of the mind's intention in the making of art. Beauty cannot enter art unless the mind in the work is anchored beyond itself so that in some way the finished work reflects the sacred and the doing of the work, ritual.¹

We can home our habits and rhythms of practice in ritual, our rites of making and preparation, how we divide our days and nights, stages of latency, gathering material, studio organising, stacking work ready for the van in the morning. Our psycho-somatic idiosyncrasies, gestures, muscular memories, autonomic tics, repetitive behaviors become markers of our rituals of practice. Going with this, going with the flow makes us the artists we are.

A Material Space of Radiance

The imagination has no limits. The physical world does. The work exists in both.^{xiii}

"Bodies move past themselves, entering a space that is always receiving them to communicate and commingle in the physicality of the world. To be in this world is to be ever entering a material space of radiance."^{xiv} Andrew Mitchell in his study, *Heidegger among the Sculptors*^{xv} brilliantly unpacks Heidegger's fascination with sculptors and sculpture; profoundly resonant with that thinker's upending of philosophy's imprisonment in ratiocination and dissociation from the world of doing and things.

Art practice sensitises us to our own worldly embodiment and attunes us to the embodiment of bodies in the world operating under the same physics of gravity, compression and tension as us. As we scale up, we find mass increasing faster than surface which is why if we humans were scaled up ten times, we would need six massive pillar like legs and would barely be able to move or breathe, we would in fact not be in any sense human. If we dive down into the world of pond microbes, we find that they are buffeted around in the minute molecular motion of the surrounding water. Art practice, and particularly sculptural practice makes us realise how utterly contingently things are the way they are. It affords a glimpse of other physical realities situated on time and length scales from the ghostly flicker of the quantum realm to the largest structures of observable universe. It highlights the remarkable fact that our human bodies exist near the midpoint of all this.

Working with sheets and sections of wood and metal requires a performative drawing in space with the body, the arc of the reach of the arms - vectors irradiate the confines of the studio workshop. This is a full body experience of clenched muscles, pushing from the gut, feet gripping the ground like tree roots, shoulders burning with lactic acid after hours of pushing 8 by 4 boards through the table saw. Proprioception is our bodies sense of itself which extends, flows through our tools and materials. Hammer, bench saw, and all the other paraphernalia of our studios become our extended body. Kinesthesia is the sculptural sense of weight, mass, movement. It is the vertigo, the ecstatic carnality, the obdurate resistance of matter. Practicing art is indeed to be in a material space of radiance.

Flow

The sky is me, not in my head, not out there as an object.

Tim Ingold^{xvi}

For Ingold practicing is knotting the net of the world, a knotting through which flows of material, method and discourse converge and reroute. These knottings and unknottings encode a geometry of relations in a network that stretches, knot by knot all the way to the horizon. Plotting or fixing something stable enough to name is not easy, for where do you draw a definitive boundary? This net we are knotting within shimmers, and undulates with vectors and pulses of agency and energy, endlessly deforming and reforming its fabric.

When the powerful current of practice in full flow moves faster than our conscious understanding, we enter a state of flow. Largely outside our control, this is the outcome of daily commitment to practice that includes perceptual and reflective acumen.

Practice in flow is not subject to the tick-tock of the relentless clock or *kronos*, the one-way time we experience within our mechanized and synchronized civilization. The ideology of progress, of continual growing forward into something better cannot tolerate regress, art's dwelling in those moments of beauty or fortuitous coincidence (confluence) that stand outside the linear time that the artist, to make art, steps out of.

In flow we are offered an immensity between tick and tock, the clock stops draining our all-too-short lives from us. We enter *kairos*, that opportune stasis where the *Moirai* hold their breath in suspense and we remember that all our scurrying around in linear time is not all we were born for.

In flow we drop anchor outside ourselves, our centre is flung far into the greater otherness reverberating with primordial and undivided *jouissance*, shaking us like rag dolls, weaving us into shadowy echelons of artistry curving off to immemorial past and future, outside time, right here with us in this moment, the eternal now.

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